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Friday, October 19, 2001, at 6:39 PM ET

architecture

Renzo Piano's California Adventure

Part I: Los Angeles.

By Witold Rybczynski

Wednesday, October 15, 2008, at 6:50 AM ET

Click [here](#) to read a slide-show essay on Renzo Piano's addition to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

books

A Dolphin or a Lonely Transvestite?

How best to talk about English in English.

By Christine Kenneally
Monday, October 13, 2008, at 7:32 AM ET

In the first nine pages of Henry Hitchings' [The Secret Life of Words: How English Became English](#), words can see. (They are "witnesses.") They are containers (with fossils in them). Language is a combination of earth and artifact. (It allows us to do archeology.) It is both abstract and communal. (It is a "social energy.") English is an object of trade. (It was "imported.") It is an animal. (It has a "pedigree.") It is a human professional. (It has a "career.") It is a space ("a place of strange meetings"). English vocabulary is a building (it has architecture), and English has sex, lots of it—it's not just "promiscuous"; it's a "whore."

Hitchings is an excellent writer, and if the list looks excessive when pulled from the page, it's only because English is a dizzying and manifold thing. In this year's many other books about the language, including John McWhorter's [Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue](#), Mark Abley's [The Prodigal Tongue](#), and David Crystal's [By Hook or by Crook](#), English is variously described as weird, kinky, oceanic, or a supernova. In Roy Blount Jr.'s [Alphabet Juice](#) and Ammon Shea's [Reading the OED: One Man, One Year, 21,730 Pages](#), its immensity is discussed with some degree of rapture. Overall, English is portrayed as either language triumphant or the scrappy linguistic underdog who came out on top.

Of course, you can't talk about 1,500 years of codified sound waves without using some kind of analogy, but is it helpful to call English a mallard or a dolphin or a lonely transvestite? What's the best way to talk about English in English?

There's a lot to be said for the geographical analogies commonly invoked to describe any language—map, artifact, fossil. Perhaps more than any other tongue, English has been decisively shaped by the series of intense geopolitical events that mark its short but vivid history. In its first 600 years, English was the language of the invaded; later, it became a language of invasion. English began in 449 when marauding Saxons, Angles, Jutes, and Frisians sailed from their homeland (now Denmark, northern Germany, southern Norway, and Sweden) to invade a small island in the North Sea. The tribes settled there, replacing the land's Celtic languages with their own. The word *English* itself comes from *Anglisc*, the dialect of the Angles.

Twice more, English was profoundly shaped by bloody incursions. At the end of the eighth century, one horrible raid kicked off years of violent Viking assaults, followed by a less bloody period of Norse influence when a Danish king also became king of England. Later, in 1066, Norman invaders trounced the locals in a single grim battle. Both Vikings and Normans (who spoke French but were originally Scandinavian), left a lasting mark on the language. In addition to about 2,000

words we still use today, including the pronouns *they* and *their*, contact with the Vikings also pushed English away from its syntactic roots. Suffixes that indicated who did what to whom began to be dropped in favor of set word order.

The Norman rule also brought many linguistic changes, introducing words like *fortress*, *conflict*, *siege*, *assault*, *armor*, and *war*, as well as the rather practical idea of a surname. Of course, Latin had a huge impact on English, too, both via French and directly. Many Latin words to do with scholarship and religion have entered English over hundreds of years, but even in the earliest days of the language, the founding tribes brought about 300 Latin loans with them to England, mostly day-to-day words that became *street*, *wall*, *cheese*, and *wine*, for instance. The layering of loans into English means it now often has three terms for the one thing. Hitchings explains that the Anglo-Saxon term is often neutral or vernacular, the French term is considered sophisticated, and the Latin or Greek term may connote a more clinical or scientific view. Compare *fire*, *flame*, *conflagration*; *go*, *depart*, *exit*; *dead*, *deceased*, *defunct*.

Biological analogies may be even better than geographical ones—and it's no wonder the metaphors move swiftly from animal to promiscuous beast. English may be the most hybrid language in the world, having absorbed genes from at least 350 other languages. While no language without loan words exists, fewer than one-quarter of English words today, says Hitchings, come from the founding Germanic tongue. English has at least 100 loans from languages like Urdu and Malay as well as rarer but widespread incursions like *chimpanzee* from Tshiluba, a West African language.

English-as-biology is one of the best analogies because it provides a coherent way to talk about the family relationships English has with other languages. You could even see English itself as a group of closely related species. There are so many varieties of English in the world that experts say it is correct to talk not of English but of Englishes or Global English.

But it's hard to resist the urge to pick a particular kind of animal as the perfect emblem for English. McWhorter says it's a dolphin among deer. He calls German, Dutch, Yiddish, Danish, and other close English relatives antelopes, springbok, and kudu. English has evolved so far away from the basic language body plan, he says, that it swims underwater and echolocates. McWhorter himself strays far from English-language dogma, which says that, first, our language is special because of its openness to new words and, second, that the displaced Celts had little to no impact on English. He argues that English grammar, thanks to the pre-English inhabitants of Britain, is what really makes it unique. Welsh and English are two of very few languages in the world that use something like *-ing* as a habitual way of marking present tense, not to mention a fairly unusual use of *do*, as in "Why does English use *do* in questions?" It can be no coincidence, says McWhorter, that these two languages

coexisted for hundreds of years in England and both have these highly unusual features.

Abley says English is a mallard because the common duck's indiscriminate interbreeding threatens indigenous duck breeds all over the world. In the same way, modern English infiltrates diverse languages everywhere. Today, English is spoken by billions of people all over the globe. Mandarin may have more native speakers, and Spanish and Hindi-Urdu have about the same number, but English claims a special distinction: It is so popular among language learners that there are more speakers of English as a second language than there are native speakers. English is now the language of urbanization and globalization.

You could as easily call English a whale for its size. Hitchings says there were about 50,000 English words 1,000 years ago. Now there are at least three-quarters of a million. Though the inflation began when English was spoken only in England, it continued apace when English began its migration across the world. It occurred via trade and during the Crusades, when words from Arabic like *dragoman*, *algebra*, *crimson*, and *cotton* entered the language. It continued in an extraordinary period of linguistic plasticity following the Renaissance: Between 1500 and 1600, approximately 39 of every 100 words in the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* entered the language. English expanded symbiotically with the British Empire, which, at its height, covered more than one-quarter of the planet's surface. The slave trade left its mark, too. Hitchings says that *honkie*, *hip*, and possibly *OK* come from Wolof, which was originally spoken in Senegal, Mauritania, and Gambia. English ballooned again by at least 90,000 words in the 20th century, a period characterized by many scientific advancements and not coincidentally turning up words like *robot*, from the Czech noun *robot*, meaning forced labor.

In the end, geographical and biological analogies are underwritten by political and social ones. In explaining English, writers inevitably find themselves defending it against something and proclaiming it a winner—whether an imperial victor, or the underdog that has come out on top. English chauvinism has been around for at least 450 years. Historically, the self-appointed defenders of the language consider it a gift to be treasured by other cultures as well as something that native speakers should protect from loan words and cherish—by adhering strictly to its grammatical rules. (Don't use double negatives, etc.) Linguists like David Crystal have written many tracts defending the everyday-Joe user of English against this kind of snotty prescriptivism. But the old triumphalism about English has, to some extent, been replaced by a new triumphalism, a swaggering pride in how down-and-dirty it is.

Either way, the complicated reality of English today is obscured by simple storytelling in which it is the only main character. For example, the accelerating decline of languages all over the world is typically attributed to the global dominance of English. Yet

linguist David Graddol says that the loss of linguistic diversity in the world began even before English became a powerhouse. According to Graddol, "the entire world language system is restructuring," and English should be viewed as a player in this scenario, not the cause of it. Indeed, there is evidence that the widespread use of English actually boosts the growth of other languages. As English becomes a basic skill shared by all, the competitive edge it used to offer is lost, and other languages must be learned to gain an advantage. Finally, even though the global spread of a single language is an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of all language, English may ultimately be just the first instance of this: Mandarin and Spanish are beginning to dominate in different regions, and Arabic is currently the world's fastest-growing tongue.

So does it make sense to get excited about English at all? Yes, and if you don't believe me, watch *The Wire*, if you haven't already. No book I've read in years comes close to the HBO series for the sense of exuberance it gave me about the English language. *The Wire's* rendering of English in the Baltimore ghetto inspired more conversations about language with nonlinguists than I have ever had. In their best moments, this group of books achieve what the dialogue on *The Wire* did in every episode: They crack the tight seal between the thoughts you have and the words you choose to express them. At their most inspired, they convey the immensity of the animal in space and time, giving you not just the idea but the feeling that English is not really your language; you are merely its speaker.

bushisms

Bushism of the Day

By Jacob Weisberg

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 4:00 PM ET

"Anyone engaging in illegal financial transactions will be caught and persecuted."—Washington, D.C., Sept. 19, 2008

Click [here](#) to see video of Bush's comments. The Bushism is at 4:56.

Got a Bushism? Send it to bushisms@slate.com. For more, see "[The Complete Bushisms](#)."

chatterbox

Dubya, Stoned

Why Oliver Stone had to bowdlerize our president's life story.

By Timothy Noah

Friday, October 17, 2008, at 7:18 AM ET

There's a misapprehension abroad that [W.](#) is an Oliver Stone movie about George W. Bush. That gets it exactly backward. The life and presidency of George W. Bush were an Oliver Stone movie well before the director of [JFK](#) and [Wall Street](#) arrived on the scene. *W.* merely records that unassailable fact.

If this claim strikes you as tendentious, consider the following scene in *W.*: Late at night, a drunken 26-year-old Dubya is seen driving home with his 15-year-old brother Marvin. The two have been out carousing. Parking his car outside his parents' house, Dubya smashes into some metal trash cans. A light goes on upstairs. As the two brothers stagger inside, their stern-faced father is waiting for them.

Poppy (shouting): I've had enough of your crap!

Dubya (raising his fists): Let's go *mano a mano*. Right here, right now!

Could there be a more hackneyed example of Stone's penchant for musky histrionics? But it really happened. In the 1999 biography [First Son: George W. Bush and the Bush Family Dynasty](#), former *Dallas Morning News* reporter Bill Minutaglio writes:

He'd been drunk, and he was out driving with his fifteen-year-old brother, Marvin. After he had rammed through the garbage cans with his car and walked in the front door of the house ... he was ready, if it was going to be that way, to fight his father. He was from Houston, Texas, he was beery, he had no real career, it was late, and for most of his life he, more than anyone in the family, had been measured against his father, his grandfather, the Bush legacy. That night, he'd stood in front of his father, in the den, and asked his father if he was ready to fight: "I hear you're looking for me. You want to go *mano a mano* right here?"

In the *New York Post*, Reed Tucker [fact-checked](#) various scenes in *W.* Such truth-squadding is a standard journalistic genre (*Slate's* version is called "[Life and Art](#)") intended, in nearly every case, to expose the preposterous liberties that filmmakers, playwrights, and novelists take when they dramatize real-life events. Some liberties do crop up here and there in *W.* In one Cabinet-meeting scene, Condoleezza Rice (mimicked to comic

perfection by Thandie Newton), while trying to buck up the president's spirits about his threadbare "coalition of the willing," tells him that Morocco has pledged to send thousands of monkeys to Iraq. This is [based on](#) a report in a Morocco weekly that was picked up by the United Press International wire service but never confirmed. The purported monkeys were trained to detonate mines. Even if Morocco really pledged to send these detonating monkeys, the *Post's* Tucker points out that none ever showed up in Iraq. A few other howlers that [populated an early draft](#) of the *W.* script ended up on the cutting-room floor.

But most of Tucker's truth-squadding of the film's more ludicrous details reveals them to be true—a remarkable finding in a newspaper as conservative as the *Post*. That's my impression, too. Indeed, a few dramatic details in the film that struck me as cheap shots against our [unloved president](#) turn out, on inspection, to be either true or more plausible than I'd previously believed. Late in the film, Laura Bush tries to cheer up Dubya by offering to buy tickets to see "your favorite play." That turns out to be *Cats*. Oh, please, I thought. But wouldn't you know it, Dubya confessed to Frank Bruni of the *New York Times* that he adored *Cats*, and Bruni cruelly shoehorned that fact into his 2002 book, [Ambling Into History: The Unlikely Odyssey of George W. Bush](#). I rolled my eyes at a scene in which Vice President Dick Cheney argues in a Cabinet meeting that the United States *must* depose Saddam Hussein because Iraq possesses the world's third-largest oil reserves. Asked for his exit strategy, Cheney says, "There is no exit. We stay." Spare me the Halliburton-conspiracy mongering, I thought. There is no documentation that Cheney thought this, much less said this. But among those who have little trouble believing Cheney *would* say such a thing, I've since learned, is former White House press secretary Scott McClellan. I'd somehow missed this nugget about Cheney, Iraq, and oil in McClellan's much-publicized confessional 2008 memoir, [What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception](#):

Cheney was also heavily involved in economic and energy policy. He might well have viewed the removal of Saddam Hussein as an opportunity to give America more influence over Iraq's oil reserves, thereby benefiting our national and economic security.

Granted, this is speculation, not fact. But Alan Greenspan, in a September 2007 interview, [told Bob Woodward of the Washington Post](#) that before the war, he'd advised Cheney and others in the Bush White House that deposing Saddam Hussein was "essential" to "protect the oil supplies of the world." In Greenspan's 2007 memoir, [The Age of Turbulence: Adventures in a New World](#), he complained that it was "politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil." As for the proposition that the United States intended from the beginning to maintain a military presence around Iraq's oil fields forever, Jim Holt made that case

surprisingly well in an October 2007 essay for the *London Review of Books* titled, "[It's the Oil.](#)"

More than once, I noticed while watching *W.* that Stone and his screenwriter, Stanley Weiser, omitted details that make George W. Bush's story *more* Stone-like, not less. On the day after his 40th birthday, Dubya is shown suffering from a dreadful hangover; before the day is out, he will resolve never to drink again. That's true. His wife, Laura Bush, says sympathetically of his desire to quit drinking, "Everyone knows you're trying." But, in fact, Laura took a much more active role than that. According to her biographer, Ann Gerhart of the *Washington Post*, [Dubya himself](#) says Laura threatened divorce with the camera-ready words "Me or Jim Beam." (For the record, [Laura denies it.](#)) *That's not in the movie!* In another scene, Bush directs everyone in the Oval Office to pause for a prayer. But we don't see Bush speechwriter David Frum, who is Jewish, turning pale when a White House staffer says to his boss, Michael Gerson, "Missed you at Bible study." Frum has [written](#) that he found it "disconcerting" that "attendance at Bible study was, if not compulsory, not quite un compulsory, either."

Some Stone-friendly episodes are bypassed altogether. One bizarre scene [related](#) by Barton Gellman of the *Washington Post* in his new book, [Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency](#), has warring administration factions racing to the hospital bed of a barely conscious Attorney General John Ashcroft. One faction urges him to sign his name to an illegal domestic wiretap plan; the other urges him not to. (He didn't, but the plan was implemented, anyway). Government dysfunction doesn't get more like the Marx Bros. than that. It's not in the movie.

W. portrays President Bush as a none-too-bright narcissist full of misplaced resentment because he doesn't measure up to his pedigree. But the movie doesn't include the most disturbing example I know of Bush's narcissism and resentment. That would be the [passage](#) in a 1999 *Talk* magazine profile by conservative writer Tucker Carlson in which Bush, then governor of Texas, mimics contemptuously the desperate pleas of Karla Faye Tucker—a murderer on death row—that Bush spare her life:

In the week before [Karla Faye Tucker's] execution, Bush says, Bianca Jagger and a number of other protesters came to Austin to demand clemency for Tucker. "Did you meet with any of them?" I ask.

Bush whips around and stares at me. "No, I didn't meet with any of them," he snaps, as though I've just asked the dumbest, most offensive question ever posed. "I didn't meet with Larry King either when he came down for it. I watched his interview with [Karla Faye Tucker], though. He asked her real difficult

questions, like 'What would you say to Governor Bush?'"

"What was her answer?" I wonder.

"Please," Bush whimpers, his lips pursed in mock desperation, "don't kill me."

Sometimes I marvel at the fact that Bush was able to get himself elected president—or even keep his job as governor—after making such a shocking statement. When the piece appeared, Bush quickly denied he'd said it, but he was very unconvincing. ("He just misunderstood how serious that was. ... I think he misinterpreted my feelings. I know he did.") The press, as I've written before, stopped repeating the story not because it's untrue but [simply because it seemed too ugly.](#)

I suspect Stone felt the same way. *W.* is the rare Oliver Stone film that had to *tone down* the historical record because the truth was too lurid. How the hell do you tell the uncensored story of a guy like George W. Bush? No one would believe it.

chatterbox

National Review Crackup!

Mayhem at a conservative magazine.

By Timothy Noah

Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 7:15 PM ET

If you doubt that John McCain's impending defeat has the right in full-fledged crackup mode, maybe you haven't logged onto *National Review Online* this week.

As recently as Sept. 24, NRO demonstrated that it had a mind of its own by publishing "[Palin Problem](#)," a column in which Kathleen Parker urged Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin to give up her vice-presidential nomination on the grounds that she is "out of her league." Granted, the column doesn't originate at NRO; it was syndicated by the Washington Post Writers Group. Still, it did NRO credit to run the thing at all.

Now, however, the magazine appears to be embroiled in a family feud of a sort. Its founder's son, Christopher Buckley, had been writing the magazine's back-page feature. This week, however, Buckley the Younger [endorsed Barack Obama](#) for president. That isn't particularly shocking. Unlike WFB (as the father was known in *National Review*), CTB—the "T" is for "Taylor"—has never been a "movement" conservative. He's a humor writer and *littérateur* who tends to lean conservative when he leans at all, which is seldom. Moreover, as CTB points out, even WFB, who *was* a movement conservative—the movement being WFB's own creation—crossed the aisle on

occasion, supporting Sen. Joe Lieberman (now returning the favor by supporting John McCain for president) and even [Rep. Allard Lowenstein](#), the liberal Democrat best-known for starting the Dump Johnson movement in 1967. Nonetheless, CTB's endorsement stirred resentment from *National Review* readers—700 angry e-mails, [according to CTB](#); 100, [according to National Review editor Rich Lowry](#)—and CTB felt "the only decent thing to do would be to offer to resign my column there." This offer "was accepted—rather briskly!—by Rich Lowry," CTB writes. (CTB published both his [endorsement of BHO](#) and the [column about his resignation](#) in [the Daily Beast](#), Tina Brown's new Web aggregator.)

Lowry, or "RL" (he doesn't have a middle initial I can find quickly on the Web), [seems to feel](#) CTB is overdramatizing the situation:

Over the weekend, Chris wrote us a jaunty e-mail with the subject line "A Sincere Offer," in which he offered to resign his column on *NR*'s back page and said that if we accepted, there "would be no hard feelings, only warmest regards and understanding." We took the offer sincerely. Chris had done us the favor of writing the column beginning seven issues ago on a "trial basis" (his words), while our regular back-page columnist, Mark Steyn, was on hiatus. Now, Mark is back to writing again, and—I'm delighted to say—will be on *NR*'s back-page in the new issue.

Let's review the bidding. CTB says he offered to resign from *NR*, and that RL was so eager to accept that CTB felt he'd been "effectively fatwahed"—if not by the magazine itself then by its subscribers and the larger conservative movement, for which CTB has acquired a distaste. ("I didn't leave the Republican party. It left me.") WFB, CTB doesn't need to add, was himself a bit disenchanted with the conservative movement's direction during his last years.

Meanwhile, RL, on *NRO*, says there was nothing to resign from because it was a temporary gig and the guy he was subbing for was now back in the saddle. The writer, Steyn, had been otherwise engaged [defending himself against hate speech charges in Canada](#) over a *Maclean's* article that predicted dire consequences from Muslim immigration throughout Europe. On Oct. 10, Steyn [beat the rap](#) (his article was found not to "rise ... to the level of hatred and contempt," which sounds to me like a backhanded insult; click [here](#) for the decision) and was therefore once again available to write for *NR*'s back page.

CTB disputes this. "Last spring, Rich asked me if I would take over the Steyn column because Steyn was 'giving it up,'" CTB e-mailed me. "I said okay. That's it in a nutshell. The notion that I was temping is simply not accurate."

WTF?

If all this makes *NR* seem a tad dysfunctional, get a load of [this posting](#) on *NRO* by Andy McCarthy, alleging that Barack Obama didn't write *Dreams From My Father*. The book, McCarthy writes, was in fact written by the former Weather Underground bomb-thrower Bill Ayers. The logic of this argument, which is accompanied by a remarkable dearth of evidence, is founded on the patently false conceit that Ayers' 2001 memoir, *Fugitive Days*, was well-written. Excuse me, but this is a book that begins with the words, "Memory is a motherfucker." It [goes downhill from there](#).

[*Author's note:* CTB's message arrived after I initially filed this column. I added it after checking my e-mail at 10:45 p.m.]

chatterbox

Firm Hand at the Tiller

John McCain on the economy.

By Timothy Noah

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 11:27 AM ET

Adviser Says McCain Has Tax Cuts in Mind

—*Wall Street Journal* [headline](#), Oct. 13, 2008

No New Economic Policy Is Expected From McCain

—*New York Times* [headline](#), Oct. 13, 2008

corrections

Corrections

Friday, October 17, 2008, at 7:17 AM ET

In the Oct. 16 "[How They Do It](#)," Alexandra Starr misspelled the name Jimmy Rabbitte, a character from the novel *The Commitments*.

In an Oct. 15 "[Trailhead](#)" post, Abby Callard wrote that Barack Obama said in Pennsylvania that some Americans "cling to their guns and religion." Obama was speaking at an event in San Francisco.

In the Oct. 10 "[Politics](#)," David S. Tanenhaus misspelled the name Al Santoli.

In the Oct. 8 "[Swingers](#)," Jacob Leibenluft incorrectly stated that John Kerry won a South Omaha, Neb., precinct in 2004 by five votes. George W. Bush won the precinct by five votes.

*If you believe you have found an inaccuracy in a **Slate** story, please send an e-mail to corrections@slate.com, and we will investigate. General comments should be [posted](#) in "The Fray," our reader discussion forum.*

culturebox

Bush on Film

Hollywood's eight-year romance with the 43rd president.

By Elbert Ventura

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 6:57 AM ET

Click [here](#) for a video slide show on *Bush at the movies*.

Oliver Stone's *W.* is that rarest of spectacles: a fiction film depicting a sitting president. By [one count](#), there had been only two movies depicting a current head of state before Bush came to office: *Mission to Moscow* (1943), featuring FDR, and *PT-109* (1963), which placed JFK at the center of his own war epic. But whatever reluctance Hollywood had about rendering the president disappeared when Bush came to Washington. Stone's *W.* represents the culmination of a fascinating cycle of movies and television shows that star, in one way or another, the 43rd president.

The general intent of these depictions has been to cut Bush down to size, but there's an argument to be made that pop culture has not been up to the task of representing this president's momentous tenure. Our image of Bush via the movies has been stunted—he's a goofball, a bumbler, an amiable frat boy. In the days before 9/11, Iraq, and Katrina, that irreverent caricature may have sufficed. But just this summer we were subjected to the sight of Harold and Kumar toking up giddily with *W.*—this from a movie with the word [Guantanamo](#) in its title. As the weight of his eight years becomes fully felt in the slumping present, the question needs to be asked: Is Bush the buffoon the best Hollywood can do?

Click [here](#) for a video slide show on *Bush at the movies*.

day to day

CNN's Useless Graphs

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 5:32 PM ET

Thursday, Oct. 16, 2008

Politics: Graphing Uncommitted Voters

If you watched the presidential debates on CNN, you probably noticed the uncommitted-voter graph lines at the bottom of your TV screen. Emily Bazelon explains why these lines are basically useless. [Listen](#) to the segment.

Tuesday, Oct. 14, 2008

Politics: How the Candidates Can Win the Next Debate

Is the final debate destined to be boring? John Dickerson discusses how the two presidential candidates can infuse some spice into the upcoming event and come out on top. It's not easy to attack your rival and get away with it, he tells Madeleine Brand. [Listen](#) to the segment.

dear prudence

Mr. Right Is Never Wrong

My genius boyfriend wins every argument, and I'm sick of it.

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 6:57 AM ET

Get "Dear Prudence" delivered to your inbox each week; click [here](#) to sign up. Please send your questions for publication to prudence@slate.com. (Questions may be edited.)

Dear Prudence,

My boyfriend and I are both in our early 20s and have been dating for three years. We have a really strong relationship in almost every way, and I can't imagine being with anyone else. But here's the rub: My boyfriend is a genius. In so many ways, I love this about him. He challenges me to think about things, I am constantly learning, and he is always honest and rational. Unfortunately, these last two qualities have caused a bit of strain. I consider myself a very intelligent person also—nowhere near his level, but I've always felt confident academically. This sometimes takes a hit when I am around him. I rarely win arguments because I simply can't keep up with him. In matters of politics or world issues, this can be frustrating, but it doesn't really raise my ire. However, sometimes his argumentative style and calculating rationale are applied to our relationship. In many situations, I feel as though I am the one who has to compromise because he always wins the argument. I know my positions are reasonable, but I just can't articulate them as well as he does. I have talked to my boyfriend about this, but I think he has a hard time seeing my point of view—that though my feelings may not

always be logical or rational, they are still valid. Am I being unreasonable for wanting a little bit of slack, or should I just accept that I'm dating Dr. Manhattan and let it go?

—In Love With a Super Computer

Dear In Love,

Did you conclude on your own that your boyfriend is a genius, or is this one of the things he had to articulate to poor, dumb you? I don't know what his IQ is, but his emotional intelligence comes in somewhere around "dolt." I'll take your word that you're dating a virtual Einstein, but take mine that he's an arrogant twit who's got you confusing bullying for brilliance. It's also possible he has some kind of disorder that leaves him unable to process the feelings of others. If so, he should be seeking help, or else he is destined to go through life alienating co-workers, friends, and loved ones like you. Actually, you might want to examine why you have spent three years being told by Mr. Spock that what you say has no validity because it lacks rationality. Mr. Spock and Dr. Manhattan are effective characters because while they seem human, their lack of emotion and empathy means they aren't quite. So give your mastermind a copy of [*Emotional Intelligence*](#) and tell him it's about a subject in which he's deficient, but it's important for the two of you that he learn.

—Prudie

[*Dear Prudence Video: Clingy Boyfriend*](#)

Dear Prudence,

I'm a 29-year-old attorney for a technology company. Over the summer, my company hired a receptionist, "Sara," a 20-year-old student at a local university. As the summer came to an end, we had been chatting more and more, and we finally went on a date. I feel a very strong connection with her. We both suffer from the same rare intestinal disease, can talk about it freely with each other, and have surprisingly similar religious and family backgrounds. Not exactly romantic stuff, but it has made getting to know her and talking to her very comfortable. But in addition to our difference in age and disparity in education, I have been married once before. My ex-wife had been cheating on me for years, and it took many, many months for me to get back on my feet. I have been very up front with Sara about my past, my age, and everything else (all of which she had already found out through office gossip anyway). She claims that none of it bothers her and she really wants to keep seeing me. I worry that I'm possibly too old for her. Is this just an awful idea for both of us? If it is, I want to be able to break it off cleanly and wish her luck before things get serious.

—Pursue or Quit

Dear Pursue,

I don't think I've ever read a better description of kismet than: "We both suffer from the same rare intestinal disease." But it sounds as if there is more to your connection than just being able to compare cramps. Nine years is a significant but certainly not disqualifying age difference. It's just that it's starker when one of you is still living at the dorm and the other is launched on a career and already has been through a marriage. There is no reason not to date Sara, but it's probably you, more than she, who needs to be careful. She may potentially have serious feelings for you, or she may just be enjoying her first fling with a truly adult man (think of the stir you'll cause when you pick her up at college). But you sound emotionally vulnerable having just gotten over a crushing romantic failure. You want to see Sara and she wants to see you—so go with your gut (just keep a bottle of Maalox handy) and, for now, guard your heart.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence,

My husband and his family are remarkably unsentimental. He would love to get rid of most of the family heirlooms I have because they are "clutter," though he did get upset a few years ago when his mother cleaned out a closet by throwing away all of the paintings he made in his college days (he's very talented). In our decade of marriage, the only thing I've ever heard him say he wanted from his mother's collection of antique furniture is the eye-catching dining room table he grew up with. We just found out my mother-in-law, without saying anything to my husband, gave it to someone in her apartment building. When we found out over the phone, we managed to stay calm, and I quietly told her that it was the only thing my husband ever wanted from her house. I'm pretty sure he's told her before, but she got upset and said he hadn't. It's the kind of thing we could never afford to buy ourselves, and it has always meant a lot to my husband. He and I are working on letting go of the table as just a big chunk of wood, but is it too much to go to the neighbor, explain that my mother-in-law didn't check with us, and request the table back?

—Boiling Mad

Dear Boiling,

First, look at this from your mother-in-law's perspective. You're "pretty sure" your husband maybe said something to his mother at some point about the table. That's not exactly declaring: "Mom, if you ever decide to get rid of the table, I would love to have it because it's very special to me." No wonder your mother-in-law is embarrassed and on the defensive. So you two need to back down, apologize for jumping on her, and explain that you realize you never made clear how you felt about the table. At that point, it would be much better if she were able to go to the neighbor and explain the mix-up, apologize, and ask for the table back. (Your mother-in-law must have very fond feelings for her neighbor if she's willing to give away an antique table.) If she doesn't want to do it but is not too embarrassed to give you the

neighbor's name, then you two should call and explain, offering to make restitution for the inconvenience this has caused. Only a jerk would refuse to return the table under those circumstances, but be prepared that the world is full of them.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence,

I am an office manager for a business of almost five dozen people. I'm also an executive assistant and supervise 10 other administrative professionals. I have been told frequently that I am a very efficient worker who learns quickly and is organized. I try to help people when I can, but that is becoming my problem. My colleagues have increasingly been leaning on me for a multitude of so-called "crises," and I am becoming resentful. I have to learn how to put the ball back in their court without offending anyone. For instance, if the copier jams, or a printer is out of ink, or the temperature in the office is too hot or too cold, or the mail hasn't been delivered yet, or we need a new stapler, or someone's computer is on the fritz, there seems to be an attitude of "Jane can fix it!" How do I politely tell my colleagues that I can't fix everything, and perhaps they should try to help themselves, without seeming like an obstructionist?

—Bombarded

Dear Bombarded,

Since you're the office manager, I wish you had made clear which of these duties does not fall under your purview. If an employee needs a new stapler, unless there is someone else handling the stapler portfolio, asking you sounds like a reasonable request. But clearly you have to get the other administrative people to take some of this load. Talk to the boss in charge of administration about the need to better apportion these tasks, then set up some training sessions for the other assistants on how to maintain the office equipment or where to go to order supplies. Then send out a notice to everyone about whom to ask when they have a specific problem. But be aware that the curse of being efficient at running the office is that people are going to come to you when they run into an office jam.

—Prudie

election scorecard
Give and Take

Colorado and Florida become slightly less pro-Obama.
Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 3:42 PM ET

everyday economics

How the Bailout Auction Should Work

How much should the Treasury pay for distressed assets that nobody else wants? A Bils-Kremer auction could set a fair price.

By Steven E. Landsburg

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 3:43 PM ET

The Bush administration, which is changing its bailout plans every day, now intends to buy stakes in major American banks and perhaps guarantee their loans, but it's *also* [still proceeding with Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson's original idea](#), which is to buy up a bunch of assets that nobody else wants. The big question about those distressed assets is: What price should Treasury pay for them?

You might reasonably say that the fair price for an asset nobody wants is zero. But bailout proponents tell us that these assets are plenty valuable; it's just that nobody's stepping up to buy them because it's hard to borrow right now. So how do you set a fair price for an asset that nobody else is bidding on?

Last week I couldn't have answered that question. Today, thanks to a conversation with my [University of Rochester colleague Mark Bils](#), I can. Bils proposes to adapt an auction scheme designed (in an entirely different, currently irrelevant context) by [Harvard professor Michael Kremer](#).

Here's (roughly) how a "Bils-Kremer" auction would work: First, put 10 similar distressed assets (such as a series of [collateralized debt obligations](#)) up for auction. At the close of the auction, the Treasury pays the winning bids for nine of these properties. The 10th property (chosen randomly) gets sold to the winning bidder.

The advantage of a Bils-Kremer auction is that the Treasury buys assets and recapitalizes the firms holding those assets while paying only what some private bidder thought each property was worth. Now repeat with 10 more properties. And so on. Under this plan, nine-tenths of the liquidity comes from the Treasury, but ten-tenths of the price setting comes from the assessments of private investors with the incentive to bid judiciously. In other words, the prices can reasonably be considered fair.

You'd have to worry about auction-rigging, in which leading bidders collude to bid high, but there are ways to discourage that—say, with a sealed-bid auction in which the winner pays not his own bid but the fourth highest. (This need not depress the sale prices, because people bid higher in such auctions.) To rig that auction, you'd need the top four bidders to collaborate. If you're still worried, change "fourth highest" to "eighth highest."

Even with legislation in place, nobody (including the Treasury) seems to know how the Treasury will be setting asset prices. The Bils-Kremer auction could work.

explainer

What's With All the "Quinnipiac University" Polls?

How an obscure school in Connecticut turned into a major opinion research center.

By Juliet Lapidos

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 6:05 PM ET

A [Quinnipiac University poll](#) released Tuesday found Obama ahead in four battleground states: Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. These results were published on Pollster.com, by the [Associated Press](#), and in the [Denver Post](#), among other news outlets. How does an obscure university in Connecticut maintain a major national polling service?

Easy access to a willing labor pool. The grunt work of surveys—conducting telephone interviews—is performed primarily by Q-Pac students on work-study, or those who major in a subject that dovetails with polling, like political science, communications, or psychology. For their efforts, the students are compensated \$9.50 an hour. Then a small team of experts ([mostly former journalists](#)) analyze the survey results and communicate them to the press. The university foots the whole bill, funding the center like an academic department.

Quinnipiac started conducting local surveys in 1988 as an outgrowth of a marketing class. In 1994, the university hired a CBS News election-night analyst to expand the relatively casual polling services into a full-time operation. It did this, at least in part, to make a name for itself. (And the "Q-Poll," as it's called by those in the know, does attract publicity. A [2007 New York Times article](#) on the university's basketball coach noted that Quinnipiac is "best known for its polling institute.") Q-Pac started polling New Jersey in 1996 and Pennsylvania in 2002; now it partners with the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* to conduct surveys in swing states. (The two papers donate money to a scholarship fund for journalism students rather than paying for services directly.)

Quinnipiac wasn't the first university to get in on the survey game. Marist College (of [Marist poll](#) fame) in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., started enlisting students to conduct polls on local elections in the late 1970s and national ones in the 1980s. At the time, much of the opinion research on elections came from the campaigns, so the media cottoned to Marist as a source of independent information. The Marist poll, unlike the Q-Poll, taps

into funding sources outside the college. (Trivia: John Lahey, the current president of Quinnipiac who presided over the creation of Q-Pac's survey operations, was actually vice president at Marist beforehand.)

It's not uncommon for schools to have polling operations. Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa., has an [Institute of Public Opinion](#) that conducts political surveys. And at dozens of colleges, students engage in less glamorous survey work—like telephone research for the state health department or the DMV—principally as an educational opportunity. Polling isn't exclusive to little-known schools, either. There's a [Princeton University Survey Research Center](#), which was founded with a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Got a question about today's news? [Ask the Explainer](#).

Explainer thanks Scott Keeter of the Pew Research Center, Lee Miringoff of the Marist Institute for Public Opinion, and Doug Schwartz of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute.

explainer

\$596 Trillion!

How can the derivatives market be worth more than the world's total financial assets?

By Jacob Leibenluft

Wednesday, October 15, 2008, at 4:18 PM ET

Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin [issued a call on Tuesday](#) for regulation of the "over the counter" derivatives market, which has an estimated size of about \$596 trillion. By contrast, the value of the world's financial assets—including all stock, bonds, and bank deposits—was pegged at [\\$167 trillion](#) last year by McKinsey. How can the derivatives market be larger than the entire world's financial wealth?

Because the same assets might be involved in several different derivatives. A [derivative](#) is a financial instrument whose value depends on something else—a share of stock, an interest rate, a foreign currency, or a barrel of oil, for example. One kind of derivative might be a contract that allows you to buy oil at a given price six months from now. But since we don't yet know how the price of oil will change, the value of that contract can be very hard to estimate. (In contrast, it's relatively easy to add together the value of every share being traded on the stock market.)

As a result, financial experts have to make an educated guess about the total amount at stake in all these contracts. One method simply adds up the value of the assets the derivatives are

based on. In other words, if my contract allows me to buy 50 barrels of oil and the current price is \$100, its "notional value" is said to be \$5,000—since that's the value of the assets from which my contract derives. If you make that same calculation for every derivative and add those numbers together, you get [something around \\$596 trillion](#)—the "notional value" of the world's over-the-counter derivatives at the end of 2007, according to the Bank of International Settlements. ("Over the counter" derivatives refer to contracts that are negotiated between two parties rather than through an exchange.)

But the "notional value" isn't usually a very good representation of what a contract might really be worth to the parties involved, or how much risk they are taking. (And it isn't easily compared with other measures of financial wealth—after all, owning the right to buy \$5,000 worth of oil isn't the same as actually owning \$5,000 of oil.) Within that \$596 trillion are derivatives that effectively relate to the same assets—if you have a contract to buy euros in January and I have one to buy euros in April, we may end up buying the same currency, but its notional value will get counted twice. Moreover, in many instances, the "notional amount" is just a benchmark that never even changes hands—as in the case of the [interest-rate swap](#), by far the most common type of derivative. Likewise, because derivatives are often used to hedge risks, there's a good probability that many contracts in the system essentially cancel one another out.

An alternative way to measure the size of the derivatives market is to calculate the instruments' market value—which refers to how much they would be worth if the contracts had to be settled today. Gross market value of all outstanding derivatives was \$14.5 trillion at the end of 2007, less than one-fortieth of the \$596 trillion estimate. (That number shrinks to about \$3.3 trillion once you take into account contracts that directly offset one another.)

Still, the concept of "notional value" is not entirely irrelevant. For one, growth in the notional value of all derivatives—which has gone up about fourfold in the last five years—does give a reasonable indication of how fast the market is expanding. And for credit default swaps, a derivative [at the center of the current financial crisis](#), the growth has been especially large—with the total notional amount rising from just \$2.69 trillion in 2003 to \$54.6 trillion this year.

Got a question about today's news? [Ask the Explainer](#).

Explainer thanks Karsten von Kleist and Carlos Mallo of the Bank of International Settlements, Richard Metcalfe of the International Swaps and Derivatives Association, Kevin Mukri of the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, and Rene Stulz of Ohio State University.

explainer

Was Columbus Struck by Lightning?

What kept the *Santa María* from having its mainmast shivered?

By Michael Shollar

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 6:25 PM ET

Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas [516 years ago](#) this month. For five weeks in 1492, the mainmast of his *Santa María* was the tallest point on the Atlantic Ocean. Weren't the wooden ships of the Age of Exploration susceptible to lightning strikes?

Absolutely. Tall ships did get struck by lightning quite often, but just because a ship is struck by lightning doesn't mean it will be completely destroyed. In 1852, British inventor Sir William Snow Harris published the first systematic study of lightning strikes on wooden ships. He collected data from [235 strikes on British navy vessels](#) from 1793 to 1839. The damage typically consisted of "shivering" or splintering of the mainmast: Long shards of wood flew in every direction, sometimes wounding a sailor or knocking him off the deck. Sails and rigging might catch fire, requiring officers and crew to smother the flames with the aid of the rain and wind. None of the ships in Harris' sample was recorded as being totally obliterated, and the vast majority were repaired by their crews and continued sailing.

More terrifying for the sailors was the possibility of individual harm. According to Harris, a sailor on an 1802 voyage who hid from a lightning strike near the mainmast was burned through [five layers of clothes](#). A Mr. R. Mawgridge sent [his account](#) of a 1696 lightning strike on the galley *Trumbull* to the Royal Society. The bolt first struck the deck, knocking down two sailors (one of them "had one Side of him stupefied for three Days") before traveling below. Mawgridge wrote that when the bolt traveled through his cabin, "a great weighty Nail was started out of said Ceiling, and fell over my Head, and lay upon my Pillow, and I thought my Head with the *Lightning* had been in a Flash of Fire." The bolt exited through a wall, eventually burning the hair off of the head of a gunner and blistering his feet.

By the time Harris published his observations, protective lighting rods—sometimes called Franklin's "[thunder rods](#)"—had been around for a full century. But lightning protection for sailing vessels was primitive, including prayers and the running of a length of chain from a mast to the waterline. If the chain did not connect with the ocean, [dangerous electrical explosions](#) could result. In 1820, Harris devised an improved method by affixing copper directly to the mast and running it through the ship into the water. The captain of the *Beagle*—the ship on which Charles Darwin made his famous voyage in the 1830s—was an early adopter. Despite being struck by lightning at least twice (surrounding the ship with a "[blaze of fire](#)"), the ship was

unharmful. Even with success stories such as this, the British navy resisted fitting ships with state-of-the-art lightning protection until 1847.

Fortunately for modern explorers, [large metal boats](#) offer excellent protection from lightning strikes. Bolts continue to be a [problem](#), though, for wooden and fiberglass boats. Lightning protection systems for these vessels, still using variations of Harris' method, offer only partial protection, and some boaters fear they [only attract more lightning](#). The most dangerous boats in a storm are small, mastless boats, especially when the operator is [holding a fishing rod](#).

For his part, Columbus managed to avoid bad weather for half of his voyages to the New World. On his final return, he twice jury-rigged a mast after it broke in four places during a storm on the Atlantic.

Got a question about today's news? [Ask the Explainer](#).

faith-based

A Monastic Kind of Life

How Catholic religious communities are trying to attract young people again.

By Harold Fickett

Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 7:33 AM ET

The Catholic Church has always seen the contemplative life as the "Air Force" in its spiritual struggle, as the Rev. David Toups of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops commented—a conduit of spiritual power. Though the number of young people entering monasteries, convents, and the priesthood has drastically dropped from the mid-20th century, some new approaches to religious vocations have inspired some young people in America to embrace this idea, replenishing several of the older religious orders and filling new ones. One such community with a young population, nestled in the Ozarks, is a place that could symbolize Catholicism's true hope for renewal in our time. Founded in 1999, the Clear Creek Monastery has grown from 13 to 30 monks who are intent on building a community that will "last for a thousand years." Clear Creek is also part of the "reform of the reform," a rethinking of Vatican II that has led a number of religious orders—such as the [Dominican Sisters in Nashville](#), the [Sisters for Life in New York](#), and Benedict Groeschel's [Franciscan Friars of the Renewal](#)—to rediscover their original mission and flourish.

The growth in these orders provides a striking contrast to the continuing decline in Catholic monastic and religious life generally. In 1965, there were twice as many religious priests and brothers as today. There are just one-third as many nuns.

According to Sister Mary Bendyna, executive director of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, the average monk is in his early 70s, the average nun in her mid-70s. The mission of many orders has become simply caring for their aging populations as they sell properties and consolidate with others.

The Vatican II document dealing with monasticism, *Perfectae caritatis*, counseled both "a constant return to the sources" of the Christian life and "their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time." Issued in October 1965, this re-examination of the religious life came as the cultural revolution of the 1960s began its magical mystery tour. It was received with wild and contradictory enthusiasms by a restive population of monks and nuns. Many of the large Catholic families of the World War II generation sought spiritual favor—or simply status—by giving one of their children to the church. These donated priests, nuns, and monks often wanted to leave or instead sought to accommodate the religious life's demands to their personal ambitions. For a time, the life of Catholic religious orders became about social justice issues, psychological issues, peace studies, interreligious dialogue, the ecology movement—everything and anything, seemingly, except the central proposition: that one can know a loving God and be transformed.

The Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Los Angeles are the most famous example of the combustible combination of the times and the dissatisfaction of many religious. In 1966, humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers led a series of "encounter sessions" with the sisters, urging them to seek personal fulfillment. Within the next several years, the order nearly vanished. In many orders at the time, the vow of chastity was widely ignored.

Russell Hittinger, the Warren professor of Catholic studies at the University of Tulsa, admits that many of those who entered religious life before Vatican II simply did not have a calling. Those who truly have a call to monasticism—or other forms of the religious life—begin by falling in love with the pursuit of holiness, as did the monks of Clear Creek.

The Clear Creek story goes back to the University of Kansas. In the early 1970s, six young men who would become founding monks of Clear Creek were students in the Pearson College Integrated Humanities Program. Literally hundreds of Pearson's students became Catholic converts, inspired by professor John Senior, who conceived of a contemplative monastery close to the Lawrence campus. After he learned of a traditional Benedictine monastery in Fontgombault, France, he sent two young men off on a scouting mission with an instruction: "Bring back an abbot." These American students, and the others who soon followed, went to France thinking they would soon return to establish a monastery, bringing renewal to American Catholicism and society. But the demands of monastic life and obedience soon revealed this to be youthful presumption.

In 1999, a full 25 years after leaving for France, six of the original University of Kansas students, along with seven fellow monks, returned to America to start Clear Creek, establishing the first foundation for men of the Benedictine Congregation of Solesmes in America. On a 1,200-acre tract of land once owned by an infamous moonshiner, the Clear Creek monks use the old Latin rites both for Mass and the daily offices. Indeed, a return to traditional practices is a common element among those religious orders experiencing renewal. Many young nuns, for example, [choose to wear a traditional habit](#) even when their older religious sisters choose modest secular fashions.

Scores of families have purchased land nearby to raise their families in the shadow of the monastery, where they often join the monks in their liturgical celebrations. These families tend to be the crunchiest of the Crunchy Cons, into home schooling, the "local foods, local markets" movement, and sustainable farming. This growing community is one of the surest signs of Clear Creek's importance. This follows the classic spiritual pattern: Saints traipse off into the wilderness, and the world eventually follows, unbidden, as with the Cistercians, who turned the swamps and fens of Europe into arable land and saw communities spring up around them.

The emergence of Clear Creek and other growing monastic communities suggests there will always be young people who ask whether their devotion to God should take precedence over their own personal ambitions and even the natural desire for a family. (The A&E special [God or the Girl](#) was an insightful documentary about this.) Today's young people, who have grown up in a highly commercialized and manipulated landscape, are particularly eager to connect with a more authentic way of living. Far from being pressured into pursuing religious vocations, they find their families often protest, feeling they are losing their children to a life that's too isolated.

But after the first heady period of romance comes a long and difficult obedience, as every monk or nun eventually recognizes. Fidelity can result in humility, though, which is the deepest source of the beauty to be seen at Clear Creek and other monastic foundations. From its rich liturgical rites to the pastoral details of its life as a working farm, as the monks raise sheep, make furniture, tend their orchard, and care for a huge vegetable garden, Clear Creek is what a monastery is meant to be—a sign of paradise.

Father Anderson says, "We were only a bunch of bums, but by becoming nothing, you can be a part of something great."

fighting words

Vote for Obama

McCain lacks the character and temperament to be president. And Palin is simply a disgrace.

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 10:44 AM ET

I used to nod wisely when people said: "Let's discuss issues rather than personalities." It seemed so obvious that in politics an issue was an issue and a personality was a personality, and that the more one could separate the two, the more serious one was. After all, in a debate on serious issues, any mention of the opponent's personality would be *ad hominem* at best and at worst would stoop as low as *ad feminam*.

At my old English boarding school, we had a sporting saying that one should "tackle the ball and not the man." I carried on echoing this sort of unexamined nonsense for quite some time—in fact, until the New Hampshire primary of 1992, when it hit me very forcibly that the "personality" of one of the candidates was itself an "issue." In later years, I had little cause to revise my view that Bill Clinton's abysmal character was such as to be a "game changer" in itself, at least as important as his claim to be a "new Democrat." To summarize what little I learned from all this: A candidate may well change his or her position on, say, universal health care or Bosnia. But he or she cannot change the fact—if it happens to be a fact—that he or she is a pathological liar, or a dimwit, or a proud ignoramus. And even in the short run, this must and will tell.

On "the issues" in these closing weeks, there really isn't a very sharp or highly noticeable distinction to be made between the two nominees, and their "debates" have been cramped and boring affairs as a result. But the difference in character and temperament has become plainer by the day, and there is no decent way of avoiding the fact. [Last week's so-called town-hall event](#) showed Sen. John McCain to be someone suffering from an increasingly obvious and embarrassing deficit, both cognitive and physical. And the only public events that have so far featured his absurd choice of running mate have shown her to be a deceiving and unscrupulous woman utterly unversed in any of the needful political discourses but easily trained to utter preposterous lies and to appeal to the basest element of her audience. McCain occasionally remembers to stress matters like honor and to disown innuendoes and slanders, but this only makes him look both more senile and more cynical, since it cannot (can it?) be other than his wish and design that he has engaged a deputy who does the innuendoes and slanders for him.

I suppose it could be said, as Michael Gerson has alleged, that the Obama campaign's choice of the word *erratic* to describe McCain is also an insinuation. But really, it's only a euphemism. Anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear had to feel sorry for the old lion on his last outing and wish that he could be taken somewhere soothing and restful before the night was out. The train-wreck sentences, the whistlings in the pipes, the alarming

and bewildered handhold phrases—"My friends"—to get him through the next 10 seconds. I haven't felt such pity for anyone since the late Adm. James Stockdale humiliated himself as Ross Perot's running mate. And I am sorry to have to say it, but Stockdale had also distinguished himself in America's most disastrous and shameful war, and it didn't qualify him then and it doesn't qualify McCain now.

The most insulting thing that a politician can do is to compel you to ask yourself: "What does he take me for?" Precisely this question is provoked by the selection of Gov. Sarah Palin. I wrote not long ago that it was not right to condescend to her just because of her provincial roots or her piety, let alone her slight flirtatiousness, but really her conduct since then has been a national disgrace. It turns out that none of her early claims to political courage was founded in fact, and it further turns out that some of the untested rumors about her—her vindictiveness in local quarrels, her bizarre religious and political affiliations—were very well-founded, indeed. Moreover, given the nasty and lowly task of stirring up the whack-job fringe of the party's right wing and of recycling patent falsehoods about Obama's position on Afghanistan, she has drawn upon the only talent that she apparently possesses.

It therefore seems to me that the Republican Party has invited not just defeat but discredit this year, and that both its nominees for the highest offices in the land should be decisively repudiated, along with any senators, congressmen, and governors who endorse them.

I used to call myself a single-issue voter on the essential question of defending civilization against its terrorist enemies and their totalitarian protectors, and on that "issue" I hope I can continue to expose and oppose any ambiguity. Obama is greatly overrated in my opinion, but the Obama-Biden ticket is not a capitulationist one, even if it does accept the support of the surrender faction, and it does show some signs of being able and willing to profit from experience. With McCain, the "experience" is subject to sharply diminishing returns, as is the rest of him, and with Palin the very word itself is a sick joke. One only wishes that the election could be over now and a proper and dignified verdict rendered, so as to spare democracy and civility the degradation to which they look like being subjected in the remaining days of a low, dishonest campaign.

foreigners In Name Alone

North Korea may be off the terror blacklist, but little has changed.

By Anne Applebaum

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 7:47 PM ET

PANMUNJOM, Korean demilitarized zone—Step out of the bus, walk across the courtyard, stop in front of the low-built, blue-painted buildings. Here, in the Joint Security Area—a neutral space between North and South Korea that's been under U.N. jurisdiction since the 1953 armistice—is one of the world's weirdest scenes. About 100 yards ahead, North Korean soldiers [are watching from a balcony](#), expressionless: Walk toward them, and you've defected. Directly behind, equally expressionless [South Korean soldiers in dark sunglasses](#) stand with their arms at their sides, fists curled: If someone walks toward them, they may shoot.

No less odd a scene is played out inside the blue buildings, where a negotiating table has stood, for 50 years, exactly along the line that marks the border. On one side of the table, you are in the south; on the other, you are in the north. Most people step over the line for an uneasy minute just to see what it feels like "over there." Then, spooked by the invisible border, they move back to the other side a bit too quickly. After this little ritual takes place, the American officer conducting the tour leads a longer excursion into the demilitarized zone. He points out "Freedom Village," the superprofitable model village on the southern side (the villagers make a killing selling ginseng and don't pay taxes), and "Propaganda Village" in the north (most of its shiny new buildings are empty).

He also points out the spot where, in 1976, North Korean soldiers attacked American soldiers who had gone into the northern reaches of the demilitarized zone to trim a tree and murdered two of them with an ax. Three days later, a U.S. infantry company accompanied by 20 utility helicopters, seven Cobra attack helicopters, and B-52 bombers backed up by an aircraft carrier swept in and cut down the tree. Very quickly, it becomes clear that Panmunjom, with its odd rituals and strange traditions, is not just a cliché but a piece of 1950s Cold War kitsch, a weird time warp as surreal as North Korea itself.

This isn't a new revelation, of course; Panmunjom has been a monument to the creepiness of North Korea for more than five decades. But in the week when the Bush administration announced its [decision](#) to remove North Korea from its list of "terrorist" nations, it's worth focusing again on the strange, ritualistic nature of the relationship between North Korea and the outside world: In its way, after all, the administration's announcement was strange and ritualistic, too.

For the record, North Korea has sold missile technology to Syria and Libya, has assassinated diplomats, and has kidnapped Japanese and South Korean citizens and refuses to give a full accounting of their fate. North Korea also keeps untold numbers of its own citizens in [concentration camps](#), which are direct copies of those built by Stalin, and knowingly starves many of its citizens to death as well. By any normal definition, North Korea is still a "terrorist" state, and everyone knows it. The

administration's decision was thus not a recognition of any change in North Korean behavior. It was, rather, a negotiated exchange of one set of words for another: We withdraw *terrorist*—and, in exchange, they offer a "promise," once again, to dismantle their nuclear facilities. Ritual favors were bestowed as well: Presumably as a sign of the respect in which they hold him, the U.S. official negotiating these terms was, on his last visit to the north, ceremonially allowed to travel by car through Panmunjom instead of being forced to fly in from Beijing.

There may, of course, eventually be more "real" elements to the deal. There is probably more aid money in the offing, though no one really believes it will go to those who are once again starving. There is talk of more advanced verification systems as well, though it's widely assumed the North Koreans will again try to cheat. Still, how this White House, which so long opposed any negotiations with North Korea, rationalizes these talks to itself is anyone's guess. Perhaps this is some kind of holding pattern. Maybe they think the almost-invisible dictator, Kim Jong-il, is really dead. Or maybe they fear that Pyongyang will otherwise detonate another surprise nuclear device on, say, the day of the U.S. elections.

What this cannot possibly be is a genuine negotiation, by which I mean one whose ultimate outcome will be the actual dismantling of North Korea's nuclear program or the actual warming of relations between north and south. Such a negotiation, based on genuine trust, real verification procedures, and actual cooperation is possible only with a regime that understands the concept of trust, procedures, and cooperation—a regime, in other words, very different from the one currently in power—in whatever terms it is officially defined.

hot document

Gitmo Torture Tips

Dos and don'ts of "degradation tactics."

By Bonnie Goldstein

Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 4:15 PM ET

From: Bonnie Goldstein

Posted Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 4:15 PM ET



A recently obtained four-page guide describing approved "tactics and techniques" to "break" detainees held at Guantanamo Bay (see below and the following three pages) [repeats verbatim](#) the official language describing survival resistance and escape training by the U.S. Navy. The 2002 Gitmo guidelines describe

intimidation methods long favored by enemies we once judged less civilized than ourselves. These include "degradation" ("the insult slap is used to shock and intimidate," Page 2); "physical debilitation" (the five approved "stress positions," Pages 2 and 3); "isolation and monopolization of perception" (specifically, "hooding," Page 3); and "demonstrated omnipotence" (i.e., "manhandling" and "placing a detainee forcibly against a ... wall").

No matter what method a questioner chooses, "interrogation safety" is a priority. When engaged, for example, in the "forceful removal of detainee's clothing ... to demonstrate the omnipotence of the captor" the interrogator's "[t]earing motions shall be downward to prevent pulling the detainee off balance." Insult slaps "will be initiated no more than 12-14 inches (or one shoulder width) from the detainee's face" (Page 2). When shoving a detainee up against a wall, the "interrogator must ensure the wall is smooth, firm, and free of projections" (Page 4). Mind that stucco!

An intriguing typo/Freudian slip is the inadvertent omission of the word "NOT" from the following sentence: "IT IS CRITICAL INTERROGATORS DO CROSS THE LINE WHEN UTILIZING THE TACTICS DESCRIBED" (see below).

Thanks to the [National Security Archive](#) and <http://www.torturingdemocracy.org/> for [posting the document](#).

Please send Hot Document ideas to documents@slate.com.

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University in Mainz, chalked up the loss to "the mortgage of National Socialism."

In late 2007 and early 2008, I traveled around Europe studying how various countries deal with immigration. As in the United States, anti-immigrant sentiment is on the rise in the Continent (and is likely to intensify as countries' economies contract). But there is wide variation within that broader unease with foreigners. Ireland allows noncitizens to vote in some European and all local elections and even provides them the opportunity to *run* for local political positions. Austria, meanwhile, is so zealous in hunting down illegal residents that school kids have gone into hiding to evade deportation. There is, however, a common thread running through the different policies: Nations' recent pasts have a huge impact on how their governments deal with foreigners today.

In particular, Western European countries' guilt about their World War II-era records can prod governments to be more lenient with outsiders. This is particularly true in Germany, where a little more than six decades ago, the government spearheaded the slaughter of approximately 12 million people, most because of their ethnicities. Some government immigration initiatives are explicitly aimed at making amends. Starting in the 1990s, for example, Germany took in around 200,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union.

Of course, just because there is a moral imperative to *appear* open to foreigners doesn't mean that Germans are genuinely comfortable with outsiders. Indeed, many Germans believe that ethnicity, rather than citizenship, culture, or a sense of allegiance, dictates whether someone is part of the *deutsch* community. The queasiness with diversity and vigorous political correctness coexist uneasily and can make for disjunctive state policies.

Consider how Germany grants asylum. Asylum seekers the world over have to demonstrate that they face persecution in their country of origin because of their race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinions. (Immigrants, in contrast, can pick up stakes for the sake of work or love—for virtually any reason.) For decades after World War II, Germany had some of the most liberal asylum laws on the planet. After being deluged with applications from Eastern Europe and the Balkans in the 1990s, however, the government toughened up the requirements. Asylum seekers who passed through a "safe" third country—and all of Germany's neighbors were deemed safe—no longer qualified. (Click [here](#) for more on how asylum works.)

Men and women arriving from the former Yugoslavia were, for the most part, denied asylum and were instead granted "tolerated" status, or *Duldung*. This is essentially a temporary deportation waiver that must be renewed every six months. There were approximately 175,000 *Duldungen* in Germany in 2006; they were granted state assistance but could not work and

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how they do it Europe Deals With Immigration

As Spain's economy cools, what happens to the millions of recent immigrants?

By Alexandra Starr

Friday, October 17, 2008, at 7:17 AM ET

From: Alexandra Starr

Subject: Germany: History's Long Shadow

Posted Monday, October 13, 2008, at 1:20 PM ET

BERLIN, Germany—"Turks are nice!" declared posters plastered all over the Berlin subways during the 1980s. There are no touchy-feely directives on the walls today, but political correctness is still pervasive here. The Holocaust casts a long shadow in this country, and part of the atonement is an unspoken rule against bashing the country's 7.8 million residents of foreign descent.

Hesse state Premier Ronald Koch pushed the boundaries a little too far when he ran for re-election at the end of January 2008. When two young toughs from Greece and Turkey viciously attacked a pensioner on the Munich subway in December 2007, Koch railed against "criminal young foreigners" on the campaign trail. That rallying cry probably wouldn't have doomed his chances in the Netherlands or Austria, two countries with an immigrant population that looks pretty similar to Germany's. In the economic boom years of the 1960s and early '70s, the three European nations imported "guest workers." While the expectation was that these migrants would eventually return home, many remained. These workers and their children and grandchildren, however, have not had an easy time integrating into their adopted countries.

In places like Rotterdam and Vienna, politicians who advocate cracking down on immigrants often perform well at the polls. Koch's rabble-rousing, in contrast, helped kill what had been a hefty lead. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Jürgen Falter, a professor of political science at Johannes Gutenberg

were required to live in state-run housing complexes. In other words, they resided in Germany, but they were not by any measure members of German society.

In 2007, reforms allowed around 40,000 "tolerated" asylum seekers to change to temporary residency status. (Those who qualified had to have been living in the country for a minimum of eight years or at least six if they had kids.) They were given two years to find employment and learn German or face expulsion. Given that few speak the language and that none have been working legally during their years in Germany, it's safe to assume that many will eventually be shipped back home.

It's not just with asylum seekers that Germany displays a "yes—but" attitude. In 2004, when 10 countries—including Poland and the Czech Republic—joined the European Union, their residents were supposed to be granted the right to live and work in the 15 existing member states. (Click [here](#) to see the 12 countries that have joined the European Union since 2004.) That right had been granted to residents of the [EU 15](#). But most of Old Europe pushed back and imposed curbs on Eastern bloc citizens' right to work. Germany, along with Austria, was one of the most vociferous in advocating for the work curbs and has announced it will keep them in place until 2011, the maximum period allowed.

Ostensibly, Germany has laid out the welcome mat for a specific kind of immigrant: highly skilled workers, generally in the sciences or high-tech fields. In 2005, in an effort to lure non-EU residents, the government announced that qualifying workers would be granted immediate permanent residency. The salary these men and women had to be offered was so high, though, that barely more than 1,000 non-EU workers took advantage of the offer.

Hundreds of thousands of foreigners pour into Germany every year, but nearly as many leave: In 2006, the so-called "net migration" was 75,000 people. Most of the newcomers arrive through family reunification. Turks received about one-quarter of those visas in 2006, and the majority of the permits go to young women (and some men) who are to be married to German Turkish residents. By some estimates, as many as half of German Turks have sought spouses abroad. This gets to the nub of Germany's most profound social problem: The guest workers who arrived in the country during the postwar boom years never really integrated. If they felt a sense of belonging, it is safe to assume that most would find their spouses in Germany rather than looking to their ancestral homeland.

The tradition of importing spouses perpetuates the community's isolation. It means that the growing pains of integration—learning a new language, adapting to a different culture—persist through successive generations. Kids from these homes oftentimes aren't exposed to German until they start kindergarten, by which time many are as old as 6. At the age of

10 (or 12 in Berlin), students of Turkish descent are often diverted into trade schools, or *Hauptschulen*, and train for jobs that are rapidly disappearing. Turkish unemployment rates are generally double the national average.

The German government has adopted policies to help Turks already living in Germany to integrate. (Turks account for 2.5 million of Germany's 82 million residents.) In 1999, the country scrapped its policy of awarding citizenship at birth only to people who had at least one German parent. This, of course, meant virtually no guest workers or their descendants could qualify. Now a child who is born to a mother or father who has lived legally in the country for a minimum of eight years is a German citizen until the age of 23. At that point, because Germany does not permit dual citizenship, the young people must choose which passport to carry. In part because of the restrictions, only one-third renounced German citizenship.

Germany also clamped down on the practice of importing spouses. Now foreigners wishing to emigrate from countries like Turkey and Morocco have to demonstrate some proficiency in German, and they must be over 16. This has already had an impact: Visa applications from Turkey dropped by about one-third after the law went into effect in 2007. Those would-be spouses who do make the cut will be helped to acclimatize to their new home: Since 2005, the German government has provided language and orientation classes, which are compulsory for immigrants who speak little German and come from countries that require visas for entry.

While some of these changes, like the citizenship provisions, are aimed at making Turks feel they have a stake in German society, a feeling of rejection is pervasive in the Muslim community. Partially in defiance, some younger Turks have become more religious. There are signs that pockets of Islamic radicalism have taken root. Three of the terrorists who participated in the 9/11 attacks—including one of the masterminds, Mohamed Atta—spent time in Germany.

The tensions on the other side of the Atlantic hold a cautionary tale for the United States. The comprehensive immigration bill that died in the Senate last year included a guest-worker program. Germany demonstrates the perils of that model. At the very least, countries should select workers they would be happy to have stick around after their contracts run out. Because many will. And as uncomfortable as it might be to acknowledge that these workers may become permanent members of society, it is much more difficult to grapple with a growing and alienated community decades after the program that brought them over "temporarily" has been scrapped.

From: Alexandra Starr
Subject: Austria: Collective Amnesia?
Posted Monday, October 13, 2008, at 1:20 PM ET

VIENNA, Austria—In the fall of 2007, Arigona Zogaj became such a well-known figure in Austria that people referred to the 15-year-old by her first name. Her prominence wasn't due to a hit record or a modeling triumph—some of the more common reasons teenagers become famous. It was because she defied the Austrian government.

Instead of complying with a deportation order that would have sent the ethnic Albanian back to Kosovo, Arigona went into hiding. She subsequently appeared in a video that was broadcast on national television in which she threatened to commit suicide if she was forced out of the country she had called home for five years. The public rallied around the teenager, and eventually she was permitted to stay, albeit on a temporary basis: In December 2007, an Austrian court ruled that Arigona will have to leave the country when she finishes high school.

Arigona may have received outsized attention, but the hard-line approach the government brought to her case is not unusual. A little more than a year ago, I met a Chechen woman in Vienna whose 10-year-old son was forcibly removed from his elementary school by the police after the family's asylum application was denied.

As you might infer from those examples, Austria has some of the toughest immigration laws in Europe. The country's rules for entry are a Russian doll of quotas. The federal government caps the number of non-EU citizens who can move to Austria every year. (In 2006, the limit was 7,000 people—that figure included both skilled professionals and immigrants wishing to join family members already living in the country.) Then the nine provincial governments set limits on the number of foreigners who can live in their geographic regions.

Of course, because Austria is part of the European Union, most Western Europeans have the right to work and live there. However, residents of [12 countries that joined the European Union in 2004 and 2007](#)—including Poland, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Romania—have been barred from seeking employment in Austria. The Austrian and German governments were particularly insistent on the work curbs, and both countries announced they will maintain them for the maximum period allowed, until 2011.

The idea, of course, is to ensure that Eastern Europeans willing to work for lower wages will not flood the Austrian job market. There is also a law explicitly aimed at reserving jobs for Austrians: Foreign nationals (aside from most Western

Europeans) cannot make up more than 9 percent of the country's work force. That figure is a little lower than the proportion of foreigners in the country's population: About 10 percent of Austria's 8.2 million residents are citizens of another country. The majority hail from the former Yugoslavia and Turkey. (Often they are former "guest workers" or their descendants; Austria recruited workers from those regions in the 1960s and '70s.)

Perhaps because it is so difficult to settle in Austria as an immigrant, the country has attracted a lot of [asylum seekers](#). To be sure, many of the petitioners legitimately faced persecution in their home country because of their race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion (the criterion they have to meet in order qualify as asylees). But the fact that outsiders are pretty much barred from entering Austria unless they are highly skilled workers or are related to someone already in the country creates incentives to embellish. Right now, Austria has a backlog of more than 30,000 asylum applications. When their stories fail to convince, authorities are strict about sending people packing, as the Zogaj case illustrates.

The policies may look unduly strict, even callous. But the fact that the government is tough on outsiders helps maintain support for a very generous social safety net. Austrians have access to free medical care, virtually free secondary education, and four months' paid parental leave for each child. Those benefits are expensive, and, fairly or not, when recipients share an ethnic and cultural background, citizens are less likely to complain that their high taxes are bankrolling freeloaders.

Of course, sometimes countries open the door to immigrants in part to *fund* expensive public programs. An influx of foreigners can help even out the ratio of workers to retirees, which can reduce pressure to raise taxes or cut programs. But Austria hasn't been under so much pressure to allow in more potential taxpayers, in part because a lot of Austrians who would have collected benefits died during World War II.

That period of Austria's history—or, more precisely, how Austrians interpret it—affects the country's approach to outsiders in a less tangible way. From 1938 to 1945, the country was part of the Third Reich. Hitler received a hero's welcome when he marched triumphantly into Vienna, and many residents embraced his virulent anti-Semitism. Hitler was born in Austria, and compatriots from the land of his birth—such as Amon Göth (who was portrayed by Ralph Fiennes in *Schindler's List*)—enthusiastically participated in the Holocaust. Nevertheless, in 1943, the Allies' so-called Moscow Declaration described Austria as "the first free country to fall victim to Hitlerite aggression." That wording was intended, in part, to assure Austrians they would be treated fairly after the war and to discourage them from holding out until the bitter end. Austrians seized on the "first victim" appellation after the war; successive

governments avoided fully acknowledging the country's Nazi past or compensating Austria's Jewish victims.

In other countries, a sense of history has pushed governments to be more open to outsiders. For example, [German politicians are, for the most part, careful to avoid publicly excoriating immigrants](#). Without Austria's collective amnesia, the aggressive pursuit of unsuccessful asylum seekers might engender a sense of déjà vu. A more forthright appraisal of the recent past might also have checked the rise of right-wing politician Jörg Haider, who died in a car crash this weekend. In Germany, far-right leaders have not gained much traction, no doubt in part because German voters know all too well where that ideology can lead. Haider's "Austria First!" slogan, in contrast, garnered enough support in the 1999 election to allow his party to join the ruling coalition government. Appalled EU member states slapped sanctions on Austria, which were lifted seven months later, in part because the rebuke was hardening pro-Haider sentiment. Elections held last month showed that Haider still found favor among many Austrian voters: The two far right parties captured 29 percent of the vote.

That outcome was chalked up in part to the parties' strong anti-foreigner platform, a position that is becoming a vote-winner across the continent. In April 2008, Silvio Berlusconi reclaimed the prime ministership of Italy in part by advocating a crackdown on foreigners, and last year, anti-immigrant politicians scored victories in Switzerland and Denmark. Britain's Conservative Party has also found that pushing for curbs on immigration scores high in opinion polls. Austria isn't a cutting-edge place—you can still find royalists in Vienna, for example. But when it comes to dealing with immigrants, the Austrian blueprint may not be an outlier in Europe for much longer.

From: Alexandra Starr

Subject: Failure To Integrate in the Netherlands

Posted Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 7:37 AM ET

AMSTERDAM, Netherlands—When Dutch politician Geert Wilders announced in November 2007 that he was releasing a film about the Quran, the government girded itself for potential catastrophe. Wilders, who sports a bleached-blond bouffant hairdo, has likened the Quran to *Mein Kampf* and called for it to be banned. His film was sure to offend Muslim sensibilities—and the Dutch had already experienced, in a visceral way, what a provocative film about the Muslim faith can unleash.

Four years ago, a radical Dutch-Moroccan murdered filmmaker Theo van Gogh after he released a short documentary criticizing the treatment of women under Islam. Pinned to van Gogh's chest with a knife was a letter threatening the filmmaker's collaborator, [Ayaan Hirsi Ali](#). Wilders received his own share of "you're next" warnings; both he and Ali have been under heavy police protection ever since.

Van Gogh's brutal killing prodded a fundamental change in the Netherlands' immigration laws. It came just two years after another convulsive event—the murder of populist politician Pim Fortuyn, who had advocated halting all immigration into the Netherlands. It was the first political assassination in Holland in more than 300 years, and it deeply shook Dutch society. Conservative parties were swept into power in the national election immediately after the killing of Fortuyn. The vicious attack on van Gogh bolstered the government's mandate to crack down—and former Minister for Immigration and Integration Rita Verdonk (popularly known as "Iron Rita") made the most of the opportunity.

Declaring the days of "cozy tea drinking" with Muslim groups to be over, Verdonk ushered in a series of reforms that stanch immigration from Morocco and Turkey. Holland had imported workers from those countries in the 1960s and early '70s, and although the guest-worker program was discontinued in the mid-1970s, family reunification and, more recently, marriages between Dutch residents and people from their ancestral homelands sustained the migratory flow. Approximately 10 percent of Holland's 16.4 million inhabitants have non-Western roots, and about 1 million of these residents are Muslim.

Verdonk didn't explicitly slam the door on people from countries with large Muslim populations. But since March 2006, immigrants from the developing world—essentially, outside of Europe, the United States, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, and Australia—have been required to sit for a Dutch-language test and a culture exam. The culture component includes a video featuring nudity and homosexuality. Presumably, most people watching the film keep their cool even if what they see offends their religious sensibilities. The language test, however, proved to be a real hurdle for many aspiring Dutch residents. Visa applications dropped by one-third, and about one-tenth of the people who sit for the exam flunk it. According to Dutch government statistics, immigration from Turkey and Morocco has declined by 60 percent since 2003.

Those figures could soon creep back upward, however: This summer, a district court in the Netherlands held that men and women seeking to move to Holland to be reunited with family did not have to sit for the exam because the authorizing legislation did not explicitly mention it in the clause referring to family reunification. That means the target of Verdonk's initiative—the spouses of guest workers and their descendants—will no longer have to demonstrate minimum proficiency in

Dutch in order to move to the Netherlands. Groups like Human Rights Watch lauded the decision. But even Dutch citizens who don't share Verdonk's politics can see the rationale. When Verdonk pointed out that there were some 600,000 people living in the Netherlands who didn't speak Dutch, no one needed to be told whom she was referring to. Senay Ozdemir, editor of a magazine for Muslim women, points out that the isolation many young brides from Turkey and Morocco experience makes it hard for them to adjust to Dutch society. "These women oftentimes have an idealized vision of what their lives will be like in Holland," she says. "They heard other stories about Europe and the Netherlands, that they would be free and live in a rich way." The reality of being cordoned off in immigrant neighborhoods and being largely dependent on their spouses can come as a shock—and, of course, makes the women particularly vulnerable to abuse.

One impact of Verdonk's reforms over the last two years has been to change the profile of immigrants to the Netherlands. The country is now a net exporter of people. Of the 117,000 people who settled in the country in 2007, the majority were either returning Dutch citizens or citizens of countries like Poland, Germany, and Bulgaria. As EU citizens, these men and women have an automatic right to live in Holland, although Bulgarians do not, as yet, have permission to work there.

Verdonk's approach didn't just change the profile of foreigners settling in the Netherlands—it also had an effect on immigrants who had been living in the country for decades. In particular, there are signs that the anti-immigrant tone behind the new laws polarized some citizens of foreign descent. At the Vrije University in Amsterdam, I met a number of students who wore head scarves even though their mothers did not. One woman who did not cover her head told me that her younger sister had elected to do so after anti-Muslim rhetoric reached a crescendo two years ago. Abdou Menebhi, chairman of Emcemo, a Moroccan interest group in Amsterdam, said it was common for second- and third-generation immigrants to embrace an Islamic identity in a way their parents hadn't. "They are experiencing a crisis of identity," he said. "And they are more willing than their parents to react to the prejudice they feel."

Their parents found a society governed by a more laissez faire ethos. For most of the last half-century, there was a taboo on criticizing people of a different ethnic origin. That had a lot to do with a guilty national conscience: About three-quarters of Holland's Jews died in the Holocaust, one of the highest percentages in Western Europe. That painful reckoning was one reason the Dutch instituted liberal laws not only regarding rights for women and gays but also in accepting foreigners.

The statute of limitations on World War II guilt appears to have run out after the murders of Fortuyn and van Gogh. Still, the Dutch didn't embrace some of Verdonk's more extreme ideas, like banning the speaking of foreign languages on the street.

Verdonk was forced to give up her Cabinet post in February 2007 when her party fared poorly in national elections and the fraught rhetoric around immigration died down in the aftermath. Wilders' video was not as provocative as he'd led people to believe. The grand mufti of Syria had warned of "war and bloodshed" if the Quran were defaced on-screen. Wilders avoided doing so explicitly. There were no significant disturbances on the streets of the Netherlands to protest his work. For the time being, at least, the Dutch appear to have achieved an uneasy truce over immigration.

Nonetheless, the legacy of the Netherlands' guest-worker program has made for a riven society. Across Europe—and the United States—immigrants often live in self-contained worlds. But here their isolation is particularly jarring.

The Jan Galenstraat neighborhood is just 20 minutes away from the center of Amsterdam, but it feels very far from the tony restaurants and *gezellig* homes most visitors associate with the nation's most-visited city. Drab brown high-rises stand behind tall gates. Few pedestrians walk the streets. What is most striking, however, are the gray satellite dishes that hang from virtually every balcony. This ubiquitous appendage has earned these neighborhoods the moniker "satellite cities." The dishes receive programming from Morocco and Turkey, allowing expatriates to feel they are still connected to their homelands even as they live a continent away.

From: Alexandra Starr

Subject: Poland: New Opportunities

Posted Wednesday, October 15, 2008, at 6:53 AM ET

WARSAW, Poland—An odd commercial appeared on Polish TV in early 2008. It ostensibly shows English actor John Cleese rehearsing a pitch on behalf of a Polish bank. But once he hears the specifics of the offer, he trashes the script and insists on signing up for a loan for himself. The director demurs; Cleese lacks Polish citizenship and so cannot qualify. The British icon counters that he loves pirogi and speaks Polish. As proof, the actor yells out "*Guten Morgen!*"—revealing he has mistaken German for Polish.

It's not hard to see why this spot (which is almost entirely in English with Polish subtitles) would appeal. For the last four years, Poles have served as one of the British press's favorite whipping boys. When Poland joined the European Union in 2004, the United Kingdom was just one of three countries, along with Ireland and Sweden, that granted Poles and other new EU members the right to work. The British government estimated that about 15,000 Poles would move to England to work every

year. Instead, a total of about 1 million have spent time in the United Kingdom. And while there are signs that they buoyed the economy, they also depressed wages in low-skill sectors, and some British parents have groused about Poles crowding their kids' schools. Against that backdrop, the sight of a *Brit* dying to join a club only Poles can, and looking like a rube in the process, must bring a frisson of satisfaction.

When it comes to migration, Poland occupies an unusual position. While most Western European countries are figuring out how to handle the arrival of foreigners, Poland has dealt with the opposite quandary: By some estimates, 2 million of its 38 million citizens have worked abroad in the last four years. Some were gone for short stints, and there are signs that many who left for longer periods are returning, but nonetheless, their absence has left a hole back home. Thousands of Polish doctors have decamped, which means the queues at Polish health clinics are growing. The iconic "Polish plumber" was deployed in a French anti-EU ad campaign, but the term has gained currency in Britain as well, in part because, well, there *are* a lot of Polish handymen in the country. Households in Warsaw would love to catch sight of one. Poles complain that it's impossible to find a trained electrician or building contractor, and if you do snag one, prices are sky-high.

Still, when I visited the Polish capital and the industrial town of Lodz in late February, I didn't see a country in crisis. Warsaw's skyline is dotted with cranes, testifying to a building craze. The country is co-hosting the 2012 European soccer championships, and a massive renovation of sports complexes, roads, and tourist facilities is under way. The economy grew more than 6 percent in 2007. The fact that Poles can legally work in a handful of European countries has helped slash unemployment at home: While one-fifth of Poles were out of work four years ago, the current unemployment rate is about half that.

I lived in London for from early 2007 to spring 2008, and after reading a slew of negative stories about the Polish influx, I figured people in the mother country would be distraught that so many of their compatriots had headed for the exits. But the Poles I met weren't particularly perturbed. As several people pointed out to me, there is a long tradition of Poles pulling up stakes. Two of the country's greatest luminaries, Marie Curie and Frédéric Chopin, established themselves in Paris. Poles moved by the hundreds of thousands to the United States—that's why there are 9 million Polish-Americans today.

The recent migration of Poles to Britain was not the first time they established a toehold there. After World War II, Polish military men who had fought alongside the Allies remained on the island. London housed a government-in-exile until the collapse of the Polish Communist government in 1990. Some of the descendants of this diaspora have done extremely well: British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, for example, is the grandson of a Polish veteran.

The Poles who joined this exile community in Britain more recently went looking for better-paid work. But that wasn't the only incentive. As Ania Heasley, the Polish-born director of a London recruiting agency, explained, many Poles who came of age during the Communist years felt they had been denied a way of life that was rightfully theirs. "There is a feeling that we had helped the Allies during the war and that if peace treaties had been negotiated differently, we would never have been a part of the Eastern bloc," she told me. "There was a longing for a better lifestyle, one that should have been ours in the first place."

To be sure, most of the departees are too young to have searing memories of the war and the Communist aftermath. A British Home Office report found that 40 percent of the Poles in Britain are under 25. For this crew, Britain's appeal may be its more progressive culture. "If someone is gay in England, it's not a big deal," Marta Rudnicka, a winsome 21-year-old university student in Lodz told me in impeccable English. "Here, the former education minister wanted it taught in schools that homosexuality is immoral. And most people didn't protest." Rudnicka plans to leave Poland when she finishes her degree. As she points out, she could work in a bar in England and be assured of supporting herself, while in Poland she might struggle to scrape by on a teacher's salary.

The economics, however, no longer make a move across the continent as enticing. In 2004, the exchange rate was seven zlotys to the pound; currently, it is a little more than four. The expatriates are taking notice, and some are heading back to Poland. They aren't the only ones moving: Workers from farther east, particularly Ukraine, are arriving in Poland.

For now, Poland still sends out more people than it pulls in. But the experiences of Spain and Ireland show that countries that traditionally exported workers can become immigration magnets in just a few years. As the European Union expands, the Polish plumber could be retired as the all-purpose "cheap worker" stereotype. Perhaps the Bulgarian tradesman will take his place. Maybe one day John Cleese will appear in an ad where he is desperate to be accepted as a native of Sofia.

From: Alexandra Starr
Subject: Ireland Transformed

Posted Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 6:59 AM ET

DUBLIN, Ireland—In 2007, Irish writer Roddy Doyle published a short-story collection that serves as a sequel to his novel *The Commitments*. [For](#) those unfamiliar with the earlier book and film, it follows the trajectory of Jimmy Rabbitte*, a Dubliner bent on managing a great rock 'n' roll band. His group is on the

verge of breakout success when ego clashes lead to the group's disintegration.

In Doyle's most recent installment, *The Deportees*, the now 36-year-old father of three decides to assemble a new band. Except this time Rabbitte has an unusual search criteria: He wants the musicians and singers to be non-Irish.

There is no way Doyle would have penned a story about a Dublin-based Nigerian-Romanian-Polish-Spanish band in 1987, when *The Commitments* first appeared. Nor, for that matter, would he have been able to reintroduce Rabbitte in the forum he did: The short story was one of several Doyle serialized in *Metro Eireann*, Ireland's multicultural newspaper. In the 1980s, *Metro Eireann* didn't exist. Immigrants in Ireland didn't exist, either, for the most part. At that point, Ireland had a homogenous population and a stagnant economy. As Doyle recalls in the preface to his latest collection, 20 years ago you didn't ask people what they did for a living because the answer might be "nothing."

Fast-forward two decades. Walloping economic growth made the so-called Celtic Tiger one of the richest countries on the continent and an immigration magnet. After centuries of emigration—particularly to Great Britain and the United States—Ireland has attracted thousands of newcomers. While the economy has cooled, foreigners have not, for the most part, headed for the exits: Approximately 10 percent of the country's 4.1 million residents are now foreign-born. The diversity of this group becomes apparent as you stroll around Dublin: Filipino restaurants stand next to Polish grocery stores and African hair-braiding salons.

The ethnic potpourri can be explained by Ireland's immigration laws. Before the enlargement of the European Union four years ago, the Irish government allowed businesses to hire workers from around the globe with few restrictions. More than 100,000 people arrived from approximately 150 different countries between 2000 and 2004. Ireland was one of just three EU countries to allow citizens of the [new member states](#) to work within its borders. (The others were Great Britain and Sweden.) Since then, the government has encouraged businesses to fill low-skill jobs with citizens from the new EU member states. According to 2006 statistics (the most recent available), about 70,000 Poles have successfully landed work in Ireland. The third-largest group of foreigners—after British and Polish—are Africans. There are about 50,000 Africans in Ireland, and many of them arrived as [asylum seekers](#).

This almost-overnight transformation to multiculturalism seems to have left Irish residents dazed. In some Dublin schools, more than 50 percent of the student body is now foreign-born. This has, understandably, engendered tension. According to a 2006 report by the Irish-based Economic and Social Research Institute, more than one-third of immigrants reported being

insulted, threatened, or harassed in public because of their ethnic origin.

Still, many of the immigrants I encountered said they had felt mostly welcomed. One Nigerian described how a group of Irish men he met at a bar insisted he spend the evening with them rather than drum on the street, as he'd intended to. When he told them he stood to make 30 euros from his busking, they gave him the cash and bought him a pint of Guinness.

More significant than the anecdotes, of course, are government policies that promote immigrants' integration. Noncitizens who have lived in the country for a minimum of six months, for example, are eligible to vote—even *run*—in local elections. The policy, which was adopted in 1972, was not crafted with an eye toward enfranchising immigrants but rather as a way to show up Northern Ireland. In the North, laws restricting voting rights had the effect of disenfranchising Catholics. This rankled predominately Catholic Ireland, and using residency as the basis for the right to vote was a way to set the country apart from its northern neighbor.

Still, even if they weren't the intended beneficiaries, the law gives immigrants a say in their local communities. And some have taken advantage of the opportunity. In 2007, Rotimi Adebari, a Nigerian refugee who arrived in Ireland in 2000, became the mayor of Portlaoise, a commuter town outside Dublin, even though he's not an Irish citizen.

Since his election, Adebari has become something of a national celebrity. When we met up in Dublin, well-wishers constantly intercepted him. His years in Ireland were not uniformly smooth, however. Despite a university degree and years of job experience in marketing, he couldn't get hired when he first arrived. The turning point, he recounted, came when he was interviewing for a job. His interviewers mentioned they were looking to hire "a local."

Adebari took this as a cue to detail his volunteer work in Portlaoise. It was a long list—he had served as head of a volunteer cleaning crew and had founded and run a support group for the unemployed. "I walked out of that interview feeling tall," he recalled.

When he received a rejection letter a few weeks later, he realized that he would never meet the interviewers' definition of a local. "People had not come to terms with the fact that the country had changed," he says. "And I knew I had to go out and educate people to help change that." His contribution, Adebari decided, would be to start a cultural-training practice.

His ties to the community may not have impressed his would-be employer, but the connections he made prodded him into politics. Friends from his volunteer work encouraged him to run,

Adebari says. Some even accompanied him when he knocked on doors in Portlaoise during the campaign.

It is somewhat ironic that Adebari has become one of the most prominent faces of the New Ireland, because if he had delayed his arrival in Ireland by just a few years, he wouldn't have been allowed to stay. Until 2004, Ireland granted citizenship to all children born within its borders. This is, of course, the U.S. practice. Ireland's policy was more expansive than the U.S. constitutional guarantee because the Irish government allowed parents of citizen-children to legally remain in the country as caretakers. Adebari's asylum application was denied, but because he and his wife had a child after arriving in Portlaoise, the family was permitted to stay. (Adebari and his wife are now the parents of four children, two Irish-born.) Word of the Irish arrangement spread, which is one reason the number of people seeking asylum there skyrocketed from a few hundred in the early 1990s to a more than 11,000 in 2002. Ireland was at that point the only European country to offer citizenship by virtue of birth. But frustrations that this was being exploited led almost 80 percent of voters to revoke the provision in a 2004 national referendum.

There have been efforts to revoke the practice of granting citizenship to all children born in the United States. A bill introduced in Congress in 2007 would limit citizenship to children born to citizens or legal immigrants. It attracted nearly 100 co-sponsors, but the right stems from the 14th Amendment, so a constitutional amendment would be required to revoke the provision. In other words, an Irish-style referendum wouldn't be sufficient.

Bryan Fanning, a senior lecturer at University College Dublin and editor of the book *Immigration and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland*, recalls that although he spoke out against the referendum in 2004, he now sees the outcome as almost inevitable. As the country comes to grips with diversity, elements of the social contract are being renegotiated. Noncitizens' right to vote is not under attack, however, and it could provide a tool for protecting immigrants' interests.

"It wasn't designed to be inclusionary, but there is a real opportunity there," Fanning explains. "Political parties want immigrant votes." That will necessarily keep anti-immigrant rhetoric to a minimum. And while Irish politicians aren't going to embark on a Jimmy Rabbitte-type diversity drive when they look for candidates for the 2009 local elections, Fanning anticipates that more foreigners will start running for office. Mayor Adebari could be a harbinger of things to come.

Correction, Oct. 16, 2008: This article originally misspelled the name of Jimmy Rabbitte, a character from the novel *The Commitments*. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

From: Alexandra Starr

Subject: Spain Cools to Immigration

Posted Friday, October 17, 2008, at 7:08 AM ET

MADRID, Spain—It wasn't so long ago that Spain was considered one of the most immigrant-friendly countries in the world. In 2005, the nation's European neighbors looked askance when the Spanish government instituted an amnesty program that granted residency papers to more than 500,000 foreigners. It was a potential first step to acquiring Spanish citizenship and, by extension, an EU passport. That wasn't the only chance non-EU citizens had to settle in the country through legal channels: The government has also allowed businesses to recruit for so-called hard-to-fill positions—ranging from medical technician to domestic worker—by hiring abroad. Last year, more than 200,000 foreigners arrived in Spain this way. Upon arrival, newcomers both legal and illegal could access Spain's health care system at no cost by registering at the local town hall.

Immigrants can still access the state safety net, but now that the economy has cooled, opportunities to settle in the country legally are becoming scarce. With unemployment now topping 10 percent, Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero announced this summer that the government would offer two lump unemployment checks to out-of-work foreigners if they agreed to leave the country and pledged not to return for at least three years. The initiative permitting overseas recruiting, meanwhile, looks likely to be phased out: Labor Minister Celestino Corbacho said in September that the number of work visas granted would "get close to zero."

Perhaps it was inevitable that the Spanish government would become more apprehensive about its newfound multiculturalism. The country has undergone a bewildering transformation: In the past decade, the immigrant population spiked to nearly 4 million, or 10 percent of the country's total population of 40 million. That is almost as high as the proportion of foreign-born residents in the United States, where immigrants comprise 12.5 percent of the population. Unlike the United States or European countries like Austria and Germany, Spain has little experience of absorbing outsiders. Traditionally, people *left* the country rather than settled there.

It was a mix of economics, politics, and Spain's colonial past that helped attract the masses. The economy took off in the 1990s, spawning millions of low-wage, low-skill jobs in construction, hotels, and domestic work in Spaniards' homes. Until three years ago, most newcomers arrived in the country without permission to stay. Even so, the vast majority found jobs building homes, waiting tables, cleaning houses, and looking after old people.

The numbers of illegal immigrants grew to the point where governments—both conservative and socialist—resorted to granting amnesties. Prime Minister Zapatero introduced the biggest in 2005, granting residency papers to about 600,000 illegal immigrants. He swore it was the last of its kind. But in 2007, Zapatero laid the groundwork for more men and women to move to Spain when he successfully pushed through legislation that will allow the descendants of Spaniards who fled the country during the dictatorship of Gen. Francisco Franco to acquire citizenship.

There was little backlash against this "law of return," perhaps because the would-be beneficiaries have a recent genealogical link to the mother country. Those men and women tend to be at the top of the immigrant hierarchy in Spain. Indeed, the fact that many immigrants hail from Latin America—they accounted for nearly half the people who qualified for amnesty in 2005—has eased Spain's transition to being a country of immigration. They generally speak Spanish, practice Catholicism, and usually don't look very different from their hosts.

Still, even a shared ethnicity with a swath of the new residents hasn't been sufficient to override Spaniards' anxieties. Part of the unease can be traced to the threat of terrorism. In January 2008, for example, the police detained 14 alleged al-Qaida operatives who were charged with planning suicide attacks in Barcelona. The arrests revived memories of the bombs Islamic fundamentalists detonated on Madrid commuter trains on March 11, 2004, killing almost 200 people.

The real turning point, however, was not the specter of violence but the financial downturn. While Zapatero's Socialist Party triumphed in the March 2008 general election despite a sputtering economy, the Conservative Party showed gains in some working-class regions that have traditionally been socialist territory. The conservatives' promise of reducing immigration appealed to Spaniards who felt most economically vulnerable—and put the socialists under increasing pressure to demonstrate they have a handle on the flow of immigrants. The cash-to-leave offer came a few months later.

Even before the election wake-up call, Zapatero had taken some highly publicized steps to curb illegal immigration. If there is an iconic image of outsiders arriving in Spain, it is Africans on battered boats, or *pateras*, washing up on the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago located off the northwestern coast of Africa. According to Spain's National Institute of Statistics, just 1 percent of the country's newcomers arrived this way. Nevertheless, the government launched a high-profile campaign to patrol the coast and has signed agreements with several African countries allowing migrants who are captured en route to be returned home. The policies have had an impact: The number of African migrants arriving in the Canary Islands fell from 13,000 in the first seven months of 2006 to 6,000 in the same period a year later. The government also stanching the flow

of Latin American immigration by requiring visitors from countries like Bolivia and Ecuador to apply for visas. (The idea is to ferret out those who plan to work illegally in Spain before they arrive.)

In addition to cracking down on illicit entry, the government created pathways for more immigrants to come to Spain legally, principally by expanding businesses' prerogative to hire abroad. Until three years ago, immigration was theoretically controlled by strict quotas. So, for example, in 2004, hotels, restaurants, and bars were permitted to employ 3,280 immigrants through legal channels. (The following year, 70,000 workers from those sectors applied for amnesty, which gives a sense of how many men and women were hired under the table.) The Zapatero government figured that providing businesses with more flexibility would have the effect of reducing the number of people who arrived clandestinely, so it increased the quantity of workers that could be hired from outside the country to the point where 234,457 foreigners arrived through the program in 2007. That's almost seven times as many as were permitted to enter legally three years earlier. Now, of course, the government has hinted that path will be closed off.

The Spanish government has argued that its recent steps are motivated by pragmatism rather than any anti-foreigner animus. Jobs are no longer plentiful, and in that environment immigration should be discouraged and unemployed non-Spaniards enticed to pack their bags. The underlying premise of the government's rationale—namely, that immigration should closely mirror the job market—hints at some of the problems the country may have in the years ahead. While some immigrants will probably take advantage of the government's offer to return home, most will stay. And Spaniards have almost no experience harboring a large immigrant population when the economy is anything less than white-hot.

There are signs that the integration process may not be smooth. Even when the economy was on sounder footing, many of the immigrants I spoke with in Spain said they felt alienated from their new home. That was true even when they spoke the language and had acquired Spanish citizenship. The comment of one Ecuadorian woman I met seems prescient in retrospect, given the government's emphasis on reducing the number of foreigners in the country as the economy contracts. "Immigrants here aren't seen as people," she said. "They are viewed as instruments of work."

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Asylum policy is broadly governed by the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The convention, which was adopted in 1951 to deal with the masses of displaced people following World War II, established that men and women who had "well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" could seek asylum. Those granted asylum cannot be returned to their countries of origin and must be granted the right to work.

The convention does not cover people who may have moved because of poor economic prospects, wars, or natural disasters. And while countries that have signed onto the convention have agreed to honor its principles, they establish their own laws to implement it. So, for example, many Western European countries now deny asylum to people who can prove they faced persecution at home but passed through "safe third countries" en route to their final destination. This is to clamp down on "asylum shopping," where asylees allegedly attempt to settle in countries that provide the best economic prospects or the most generous social benefits.

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The "EU 10" that joined the European Union in 2004 are: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. (Romania and Bulgaria joined in 2007.)

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The "EU 15" are: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

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human nature

Safe, Legal, and Boring

Can Obama take the politics out of abortion?

By William Saletan

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 12:41 AM ET

Something new finally happened in this boring series of presidential debates. The word [abortion](#) came up.

Go ahead, search the transcripts of the [first](#) and [second](#) McCain-Obama debates. While you're at it, check out the [vice-presidential debate](#). You won't find it.

Why not? Because when life really sucks—when your 401(k) is in the toilet, your health-insurance premiums are doubling, and your country is bleeding billions of dollars it doesn't have in places you never heard of—social issues are a luxury you can't afford. If you're a hard-core pro-lifer, abortion will always be your issue. But if you just don't like abortion, or you don't like politicians meddling in it, you probably have some other issue in this election that's bothering you more.

That's why neither John McCain nor Barack Obama brought up abortion tonight. The moderator, Bob Schieffer, did. And each candidate tried to turn it into his kind of issue.

McCain has been trying to make the election a referendum on character: Country first, Obama pals around with terrorists, yada yada yada. How does abortion fit that mold? By exposing Obama as an extremist. Here's McCain's key passage tonight:

Sen. Obama, as a member of the Illinois State Senate, voted in the judiciary committee against a law that would provide immediate medical attention to a child born of a failed abortion. He voted against that. ... Then there was another bill before the Senate judiciary committee in the state of Illinois not that long ago, where he voted against a ban on partial-birth abortion, one of the late-term abortion, a really—one of the bad procedures, a terrible. ... I don't know how you align yourself with the extreme aspect of the pro-abortion movement in America. ... It was clear-cut votes that Sen. Obama voted, I think, in direct contradiction to the feelings and views of mainstream America.

Bad. Terrible. Extreme. Clear-cut. Feelings. Mainstream America. This is the way McCain, Sarah Palin, and George W. Bush talk: There's honor and evil, good guys and bad guys. We fight for the good side. Our opponents don't. They're extreme.

Obama argued that "women, in consultation with their families, their doctors, their religious advisers, are in the best position to make this decision." But his key passage was very different from McCain's:

This is an issue that—look, it divides us. And in some ways, it may be difficult to—to reconcile the two views. But there surely is some common ground when both those who believe in choice and those who are opposed to abortion can come together and say, "We should try to prevent unintended pregnancies by providing appropriate education to our youth, communicating that sexuality is sacred and that they should not be engaged in cavalier activity, and providing options for adoption, and helping single mothers if they want to choose to keep the baby." Those are all things that we put in the Democratic platform for the first time this year, and I think that's where we can find some common ground, because nobody's pro-abortion. I think it's always a tragic situation. We should try to reduce these circumstances.

Common ground. Prevent. Options. Help. Reduce. These are defusing and calming words. They fit Obama's personality. But more than that, they're pragmatic. They convey action, progress, solution. Obama has been talking about abortion this way all along, when the subject comes up. He doesn't like us-and-them language. He doesn't like fights. Even on this issue—one of the nastiest, angriest, most polarizing topics in modern politics—he looks for a course most of us can agree on. He tries to turn even moral issues into technical issues.

The issues that have dominated this election are fundamentally technical: How do we stabilize the financial system and revive the economy? How do we get out of Iraq without triggering a collapse? How do we get affordable energy fast? The surge, the bailout, offshore drilling—they're all technical. They're not about opposing values. They're about what will or won't work.

Obama's doing quite nicely in this environment. He's steady, practical, poised, boring. He's a technician. So Schieffer pops a question about abortion, probably hoping to start a fight. McCain does his part. What does Obama do? He technifies it.

Will a technical approach to abortion satisfy the country? The election hardly hangs on that question. But in the long run, the abortion debate itself probably does. Look at the home page of the [National Right to Life Committee](#), and you'll see the kind of character-focused, us-or-them rhetoric that has pervaded the McCain campaign and the pro-life movement. Meanwhile, I've been reading a [booklet](#) issued by NARAL Pro-Choice America. It's a handbook for politicians and activists on how to talk about abortion. The last time I wrote about one of these pro-choice message booklets, it was called "[Who Decides](#)," and the remainder of the phrase was "us or them." This one is different. Its message is "Prevention First." Look at the [Democratic platform](#), and you'll see the same language, aimed at reducing unintended pregnancies—and therefore abortions—by voluntary means. The pro-life movement is betting on McCain-style combat. The pro-choice movement is betting on Obama-style pragmatism.

I think the pro-choicers have picked the wiser course. We're a pragmatic country. What disgusts most people about abortion as a political issue is that on that topic, unlike economics or foreign policy, nothing ever seems to be accomplished. It's the same damned debate, election after election, with each side trying to scare you about the other. If only it were more like economics, where you can actually have growth—or maybe like energy, where you can develop a new source or a new technology. If Obama can make abortion more like those issues and couple it with a record of material progress in the form of fewer procedures, he'll take much of the political heat out of it. He might even make it boring. Wouldn't that be great?

human nature

Miss Conceptions, Confirmed

A presidential aspirant who got rid of his daughter's pregnancy.

By William Saletan

Wednesday, October 15, 2008, at 7:55 AM ET

jurisprudence

Nuts About ACORN

Believing in vote fraud may be dangerous to a democracy's health.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 7:16 PM ET

Last night's presidential debate didn't rise to full-frontal bodice-ripper status until John McCain insisted, "[W]e need to know the full extent of Sen. Obama's relationship with ACORN, who is now on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy." Obama probably shouldn't have [guffawed](#). But it was hard not to. He was probably thinking, "*Destroying the fabric of democracy???*" Even for McCain that was a little bit of breathless chest-heaving.

As far as "gotcha" stunts go, the right-wing feeding frenzy over the vile [vote-fraud treachery of ACORN](#) has yet to yield much fruit. Investigations are indeed under way. But then, they are always under way this time of the year—and as the indefatigable [Brad Friedman points out](#), so what? Evidence of voter-registration wrongdoing is no more a sign of widespread, Obama-sanctioned vote fraud than evidence of minorities being misled and intimidated on Election Day is a sign of official, McCain-sanctioned vote suppression. What's the real point of turning voter-registration shenanigans into "one of the greatest frauds in voter history"? The object here is not criminal indictments. It's to undermine voter confidence in the elections system as a whole. John McCain wants to build a better bogeyman, and he needs your help to do it.

ACORN stands for Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. It's a 30-year-old nonprofit that organizes on behalf of poor urban minorities, and it has registered 1.3 million new voters this year. There's no denying that the organization's system of paying workers \$8 an hour to gather voter registrations creates screwy incentives. Encyclopedia Brown could have cracked that mystery. That's why ACORN is either obligated by law or opts voluntarily to turn over all its voter-registration cards suggesting that Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and the entire starting lineup of the Dallas Cowboys just registered to vote in Nevada. That GOP elections officials started screaming "gotcha" when those registrations were turned

in is the real fraud here. Jump back, Encyclopedia Brown! There is wrongdoing afoot in low-paying voter-registrationland.

Last week, media attention focused on a "raid" on ACORN offices in Las Vegas in which voter registration documents that had mostly been [voluntarily turned over](#) were dramatically seized by force. Right-wing screeching over nefarious doings in Ohio (where [Freddie Johnson of Cleveland](#) testified that ACORN encouraged him to sign 73 voter-registration forms—all in his own name) overlooks the fact that all 73 registrations would still have allowed Freddie to vote just once. The connection between wrongful voter registration and actual polling-place vote fraud is the stuff of GOP mythology. As Rick Hasen has [demonstrated, here at Slate](#) and elsewhere, even if Mr. Mouse is registered to vote, he still needs to show up at his polling place, provide a fake ID, and risk a felony conviction to do so.

Large-scale, coordinated vote stealing [doesn't happen](#). The incentives—unlike the incentives for registration fraud—just aren't there. In an interview [this week with Salon](#), Lorraine Minnite of Barnard College, who has studied vote fraud systematically, noted that "between 2002 to 2005 only one person was found guilty of registration fraud. Twenty others were found guilty of voting while ineligible and five were guilty of voting more than once. That's 26 criminal voters." *Twenty-six* criminal voters despite the fact that U.S. attorneys, like [David Iglesias in New Mexico](#), were fired for searching high and low for vote-fraud cases to prosecute and [coming up empty](#). *Twenty-six* criminal voters despite the fact that five days before the 2006 election, then-interim U.S. Attorney Bradley Schlozman exuberantly (and futilely) indicted four ACORN workers, even when Justice Department policy barred such prosecutions in the days before elections. RNC General Counsel Sean Cairncross has [said he is unaware](#) of a single improper vote cast because of bad cards submitted in the course of a voter-registration effort. Republican campaign consultant Royal Masset [says](#), "[I]n-person voter fraud is nonexistent. It doesn't happen, and ... makes no sense because who's going to take the risk of going to jail on something so blatant that maybe changes one vote?"

There is no such thing as vote fraud. The [think tank](#) created to peddle the epidemic has evaporated. A handful of cases have been prosecuted. Then why is Sarah Palin shooting off e-mails contending that "we can't allow leftist groups like ACORN to steal this election?" Why is former Sen. John Danforth [announcing](#), all statesmanlike, that the whole 2008 election "has been tainted?" Why is Ted Olson, the Republican National Lawyers Association lawyer of the year, [claiming that](#) "[ACORN] acknowledged having to get rid of a thousand people or more who were participating in voter fraud efforts." These people know the difference between registration fraud and vote fraud. Why continue to suggest they are the same thing?

Consider the fact that, as the [Brennan Center reported recently](#), "[E]lection officials across the country are routinely striking millions of voters from the rolls through a process that is shrouded in secrecy, prone to error, and vulnerable to manipulation." Consider the recent *New York Times* review of state records and Social Security records, which concluded that "[t]ens of thousands of eligible voters in at least six swing states have been removed from the rolls or have been blocked from registering in ways that appear to violate federal law." Consider the case, [now on appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court](#), in which 200,000 new Ohio voters stand to be bounced off the rolls because, through no fault of their own, their names don't match error-riddled state databases. Consider the [indictment this week](#) of former Republican official James Tobin for his 2002 role in jamming Democratic get-out-the-vote calls. Consider the much-ballyhooed Republican challenge to the eligibility of 6,000 Native American and student [voters in Montana](#) that backfired first in court, then with the [abrupt resignation](#) this week of the official who spearheaded the effort.

Nobody is suggesting the Democratic get-out-the-vote efforts are perfect. But the suggestion that Barack Obama, through ACORN, is systematically working to get Huey, Dewey, and Louie to steal elections, and that therefore minorities and people of color should be disenfranchised, is cynical beyond belief. Consider the fliers and robo-calls designed to spread false information and threats to Hispanic and African-American voters. (According to the *Philadelphia Daily News*, [fliers in minority neighborhoods](#) warned residents that undercover cops would be lurking around the polls on Election Day, arresting anyone with "outstanding arrest warrants or who have unpaid traffic tickets.") There is wholly implausible vote stealing, and then there is the vote stealing that actually happens. You want to get all crazy-paranoid? I'd worry more about the people who want to rough up their fellow citizen at the polls than people who want to risk jail time for voting twice.

In the end, all roads lead back to John Paul Stevens. He wrote the plurality opinion in last term's [Crawford v. Marion County](#), which upheld Indiana's restrictive voter-ID law. Stevens understood that there is no such thing as polling-place vote fraud, conceding that "[t]he record contains no evidence of any such fraud actually occurring in Indiana at any time in its history." But, continued Stevens, in the manner of someone rationally discussing the likelihood of UFO sightings, "flagrant examples of such fraud in other parts of the country have been documented throughout this nation's history." Like, um, an 1868 mayoral election in New York City, he notes, and a single 2004 incident from Washington. Stevens was more worried about shaky "voter confidence" in elections than actual voting. The message that went out from on high was clear: undermine voter confidence. Even if it's irrational and hysterical and tinged with the worst kinds of racism, keep telling the voters the system is busted.

Each time they spread the word that Democrats (especially poor and minority Democrats) are poised to steal an election, John McCain and his overheated friends deliberately undermine voter confidence. That is the point. It encourages citizens to accede to ever-harsher voter-verification laws—even if they are not needed. It musters support for voter purges that are [increasingly draconian](#). Insist often enough that the other side is cheating, and you may even encourage partisans to take matters into their own hands, leading to the worst forms of polling-place vigilantism—from a [cross burning in Louisiana](#) on the eve of a 2006 mayoral election to the hiring of intimidating partisan "[poll watchers](#)" to volunteer at inner-city polling places. When McCain goes after ACORN, he's really just asking you to join him in believing that the system is broken. And if you choose to overheat along with McCain, the Supreme Court promises to sign off on any measure that might calm you down later. John McCain might want to be a little more careful about accusing Obama, ACORN, or anyone else, of "destroying the fabric of democracy." In so doing, he's either deliberately or unconsciously encouraging his own supporters to grab a handful of the stuff and start ripping.

jurisprudence

Skategate

Sarah Palin could teach Alberto Gonzales a thing or two about avoiding political scandal.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Saturday, October 11, 2008, at 7:18 PM ET

Friday night saw the demise of Sarah Palin's dreaded "Troopergate," scandal with the release of a lengthy [legislative report](#) finding that the Governor had "abused her power by violating [Alaska Statute 39.52.110](#) (a) of the Alaska Executive Branch Ethics Act. The ethics rule provides that "each public officer holds office as a public trust, and any effort to benefit a personal or financial interest through official action is a violation of that trust." The report concluded that "(Palin) knowingly, as the term is defined in the above cited statutes, permitted Todd Palin to use the governor's office and the resources of the governor's office, including state employees, to continue to contact subordinate state employees in an effort to find some way to get trooper (Mike) Wooten fired." (Wooten was Palin's brother-in-law, embroiled in a nasty split with her sister). But the report goes on to conclude that Palin's dismissal of Alaska's public safety commissioner, Walt Monegan, "was a proper and lawful exercise of her constitutional and statutory authority to hire and fire executive branch department heads."

Ultimately, Monegan served at Palin's pleasure. If she could fire him for refusing to wear a light-up reindeer tie, she could fire him for almost anything. Thus the Troopergate report giveth, and the Troopergate report taketh away: Palin broke the state ethics

laws but ultimately committed no crime. The state legislature might still vote to sanction her but it's unlikely to happen and cannot happen before the election. And if all that sounds familiar it's because it echoes Attorney General Michael Mukasey, who—in declining to prosecute Justice Department officials who broke the civil service laws by hiring based on partisan criteria — [announced in August](#) that "not every wrong, or even every violation of the law, is a crime." Sometimes the embarrassment is punishment enough.

Just ask poor Alberto Gonzales. How is it that firing folks willy-nilly in last year's U.S. attorney firing scandal, left him [disgraced](#), [unemployable](#), and the subject of [ominous future investigations](#), while Sarah Palin will skate right past Troopergate like a hockey mom in lipstick? How can it be that Gonzales' life is ruined because his subordinates fired their subordinates for selfish partisan reasons, whereas Palin will chug on unaffected, and maybe right on into the vice president's office? You're thinking that it's because she has better highlights. But the truth is that Sarah Palin is smarter than Alberto Gonzales. Way. And she could teach the poor guy a thing or two about picking your way through a firing scandal. For starters:

1. *Don't testify.* When asked to testify about the U.S. attorney firings, poor Al Gonzales cooperated. Then he cooperated again. And then (sigh) again. Each such episode was [more excruciating](#) than its predecessor. The [lies piled up](#). But still he soldiered on. Whereas Palin, who had initially agreed to cooperate with the investigation, saying "I'm happy to comply," promptly refused to do so. Sure it [looked terrible](#). And yes the state attorney general's office was chided in yesterday's report for its "failure to substantially comply with [an] August 6, 2008 written request to Governor Sarah Palin for information about the case in the form of emails." But so what? Better to be suspected obstructive, elusive and guilty, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.

2. *Disparage and discredit the investigation immediately.* Sarah Palin looked like she was up against the wall. After all, the Troopergate report was commissioned, unanimously, last summer by a state legislative panel consisting of 10 Republicans and four Democrats. That's what makes her claim that the whole thing was a partisan liberal witch hunt such a deft piece of political jujitsu. By repeating, endlessly, that the entire inquiry was "illegal and unconstitutional" as well as a "smear," Palin managed to discredit a completely bipartisan inquiry. It took Gonzales, on the other hand,

weeks to figure out that Democrats were actually to blame for seeing misconduct in his decision to fire people for partisan reasons. Instead of blaming his tormentors, he initially acceded to their authority. Huge mistake. By the time he got around to having [his boss denounce](#) the whole scandal as a "partisan fishing expedition aimed at honorable public servants," the hook had already been firmly lodged in his mouth and all the flopping around in the world couldn't have changed that.

3. *Run for higher office during your scandal and take key witnesses with you on the road:* Related to No. 1, above. When Sarah Palin's husband, Todd, was [subpoenaed](#) to testify about his own role in Troopergate, his lawyer responded with a [three-page letter](#) laying out the reasons he wouldn't cooperate, the crowning jewel being the claim that Todd Palin would find testifying "unduly burdensome" in light of his many "scheduling obligations over the next two months" as his wife was running for office. Chutzpah, thy name is Todd. The best response to political scandal? Seek higher office. The act of doing so instantly transforms any investigation into a partisan enterprise, see No. 2, above. If Gov. Palin could have advised Gonzales to run for, say governor, at the height of the U.S. attorney scandal, perhaps bringing [Monica Goodling](#) and [Kyle Sampson](#) on the road for Slurpee runs, the explosive [inspector general's report](#) that came out late last month would have consisted of 300+ blank pages. By staying at his job for months and making his witnesses available to investigators, Gonzales dug his own grave.

4. *Don't rough up the help. That's what Todd is for.* The most devastating findings in the IG's report were that Gonzales was napping at the switch at Justice, letting unqualified underlings abuse others with impunity. But Sarah Palin did a much better job in contracting out her thuggery. While it's true that both Palin and Gonzales were savvy enough to remain at arm's length throughout the sordid firing process, Palin picked a much better hooligan. As the Troopergate report concludes, Palin mainly confined her official wrongdoing to condoning her husband's ham-fisted, but unofficial, efforts to intimidate Monegan. How is it that Palin isn't on the hook

for her husband's bad acts, while Gonzo is left holding the bag for Kyle Sampson's shenanigans? Palin's hired hand had no official title. Better yet, he was the wind beneath her wings. The Troopergate report reflects that while Todd Palin spent approximately half his time in the governor's office—at a conference table (he had no desk)—making calls on his own phone line, he had no real job. It was, as [Time magazine describes it today](#), "a shadow office, the informal Department of Getting Mike Wooten Fired." The enduring lesson for Alberto Gonzales? Next time, don't give Kyle Sampson a desk.

5. *Never stop blaming the victim.* Both Palin and Gonzales provided crazily shifting justifications for the firings initiated by their subordinates. Gonzales, for instance, first swore the U.S. attorneys were sacked for "job-performance reasons" that were "related to policy, priorities and management." Later the claim became that New Mexico's David Iglesias was an "absentee landlord" and California's Carol Lam was sacked for "not prosecuting more firearms and border smuggling cases." That's because "not a loyal Bushie" would have sounded terrible. Ditto for Sarah Palin, who alternately claimed that Walt Monegan was fired for his efforts "[to seek federal money](#) for investigating and prosecuting sexual assault cases" and/or "[egregious insubordination](#)" and/or "[budget issues](#) and failure to fill trooper vacancies." Neither Gonzales nor Palin ever mustered up a truly credible complaint about the people they sought to fire. But Gonzales never quite had the stomach to press the point. (It didn't help that most of the fired U.S. attorneys had sterling evaluations). Credit Palin with going down fighting. Even as it became clear that her husband and subordinates were happy to break the law and exert pressure on Monegan, she has continued to insist—as her [campaign did just last night](#)—that even though they did nothing wrong, "the Palins were completely justified in their concern regarding Trooper Wooten given his violent and rogue behavior." In other words, Palin subordinates' illegal, impermissible and repeated contacts with subordinates, were somehow not illegal because trooper Wooten was a really bad guy.

So, let this be a lesson to those of you in high office with dreams of firing others for personal or political gain. It's not what you do

but the way that you do it. Anyone can fire an employee who serves at their pleasure. But it takes a special cocktail of panache, spin, deceit, and denial to completely bungle the job, and still skate away unharmed.

jurisprudence

Bringing Guantanamo Home

The lawlessness abroad was never very far from home.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Saturday, October 11, 2008, at 7:32 AM ET

What happens at Gitmo stays at Gitmo. That was always the hope. When the Bush administration fenced off a dusty little patch of lawlessness in Cuba, the idea was that breaking the law abroad would somehow preclude us from breaking it at home. But last week revealed, yet again, that the worst of Guantanamo was always destined to spill over into the United States. Gitmo's lawlessness is now our own.

The prison camp was created to construct a "legal black hole," a place where U.S. and international human rights law would go to die. The case of 17 Uighurs (pronounced WEE-gurs)—Chinese Muslims from western China's Xinjiang region—is one of the blackest chapters of the story. The Uighurs fled Chinese persecution (including forced abortion and banishment) and settled in Afghanistan, then moved on to Pakistan in 2001 to escape bombing raids. There they were turned over by local villagers to American authorities for bounty. They were transferred to Guantanamo more than six years ago but cleared for release in 2004. The U.S. government credibly fears they will be tortured if returned to China, and since no other country will take them, they have remained for all this time at Gitmo. Indeed, reports have it that some still remain in solitary confinement there.

In September, an appeals court found that one of the Uighurs, Huzaifa Parhat, had been labeled an "enemy combatant" and was subject to indefinite detention based on "bare assertions." The Bush administration has now conceded that none of the Uighurs are enemy combatants. Early last week, a federal judge in Washington ordered, for the first time since the start of the "war on terror," that all 17 Uighurs be freed immediately into the care of American supporters. When Bush administration officials protested that the detainees should not be set loose on American soil, Judge Ricardo Urbina excoriated them for the fact that they had grabbed the Uighurs; failed to charge them; presented no reliable evidence against them; and, to add insult to injury, said Urbina, "the Government has stymied its own efforts to resettle the Petitioners by insisting, until recently, that they were enemy combatants." These Uighurs didn't just stream into Guantanamo Bay off a Carnival Cruise. There were brought there in error,

held in error, and now, to remedy that error, they will stay there even longer. As Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote in a landmark Supreme Court decision about the rights of detainees this past summer, "the costs of delay can no longer be borne by those who are held in custody."

Except, evidently, they will be. The Justice Department managed to halt the ruling, repeating discredited claims that the Uighurs associated with terrorists and squawking about the perils of bringing Guantanamo home to Washington. But in truth, Guantanamo has been in Washington for some time. Newly released military documents prove that two American citizens held for years as "enemy combatants" at Navy brigs in Virginia and South Carolina had been interrogated and incarcerated according to the Guantanamo rules, not U.S. law. According to e-mails that surfaced last week, Yaser Esam Hamdi and Jose Padilla were interrogated by the CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency for months and years in the early part of the war on terror and deprived of light, correspondence, and human contact as their nervous interrogators worried for their sanity.

As has so often been the case when illegal conduct was authorized at Guantanamo, it was military officials who pushed back. Career military personnel were the first to cry foul at prisoner abuse and biased prosecutions at the base. And last week's documents indicate they were openly dubious about what one described as "the 'lash-up' between GTMO and Charleston" when it came to American citizens detained in the United States. Jonathan Hafetz of the ACLU's National Security Project explains that while we may only now be officially discovering that interrogation policy had spread from Guantanamo to the United States, the wall between what was constitutional here and there was never insurmountable: "For years the administration defended its detention and treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo by asserting that the Constitution did not apply because it was outside the United States. But the documents show the administration was meanwhile secretly trying to create a lawless enclave within the country where the Constitution clearly applied."

Both presidential candidates have called for the closure of Guantanamo, and when that happens, the remaining prisoners will likely be brought to this country for prosecution, detention, or deportation. Either way, in the next few years, Guantanamo will be coming home. And once these prisoners go on trial here, we will have to stop thinking of them as "them." It will be harder for the media and for the rest of us to tune out nameless men behind barbed wire when they become real people with stories and families and names. As was inevitable from the get-go, what happened in secret for six years at Guantanamo Bay will come to redefine America in some ways. And that's why it's a fitting coda for the whole Gitmo fiasco that former "enemy combatants" who had no connection to terror or terrorism may soon take up residence in our own backyards.

A version of this column appears in this week's Newsweek.

low concept The Barack Obama Crank-Call Generator

Slate's presidential election soundboards.

By Christopher Beam, Andy Bouve, and Jim Festante
Friday, October 17, 2008, at 10:59 AM ET

If you live in a swing state, you're probably getting deluged with phone calls. Volunteers, staffers, even candidates themselves—or at least recordings of them—are hassling you at all times of day and night.

Here's your chance to join in on the fun.

If you were around in the early days of the Internet, you may have discovered the joy of soundboards—grids of buttons that play different phrases, usually spoken by a celebrity. The basic idea: You call someone up and use the soundboard to simulate your end of the conversation. The best soundboard, hands down, featured [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) and produced some prank calls that [rose to the level of art](#).

Just in time for the election, *Slate* presents the next generation of crank-call technology: the John McCain and Barack Obama soundboards. Just call up a friend, enemy, pizza place, or rival campaign press office and use the sound effects below. For some, it's easiest to hold the receiver up to a computer speaker. Others prefer to use Skype or some other VOIP program. If you choose the latter technique, you can adjust your computer's sound controls to play the recordings directly into the phone line, which makes for crisper sound.

Here's how you might get started. When someone picks up, you could click "Good morning." After they respond, click "I'm John McCain." After that, you might try, "How are you, sir?" or "Is that a pizza place?" From there, you could tell them about your "clear record of bipartisanship," take umbrage ("Those kind of remarks are very hurtful"), assure them you will capture Osama Bin Laden, and much, much more!

low concept His First Name Isn't Joe. He's Not a Licensed Plumber.

What else is "Joe the Plumber" hiding from the American people?

By Josh Levin
Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 6:52 PM ET

A check of state and local licensing agencies in Ohio and Michigan shows no plumbing licenses under Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher's name, or even misspellings of his name.

—*Toledo Blade*, "['Joe the plumber' isn't licensed](#)," Oct. 16, 2008

"Joe the Plumber's" name appears on Ohio voter registration rolls with a slight misspelling—as Wurzelbacher, not Wurzelbacher. And that sort of data-entry error might be enough—were Joe a new registrant—to have him disqualified from voting in Ohio, Florida, or Wisconsin this year, depending on the outcome of ongoing litigation.

—Politico, "[Purging Joe the plumber?](#)" Oct. 16, 2008

A series of receipts uncovered today reveal that Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher launched his career in the home of former Weather Underground leader William Ayers. In 1995, Ayers contacted Wurzelbacher, then still an apprentice plumber, to fix a leaky faucet in his Hyde Park home. After earning high marks from the one-time domestic terrorist, "Joe the Plumber" built a thriving practice with Ayers' referrals to the Trinity United Church of Christ and the Chicago chapter of al-Qaida.

—Bloomberg News, Oct. 17, 2008

Samuel J. Wurzelbacher today admitted responsibility for [the mysterious bulge in President George W. Bush's back](#) during 2004's first presidential debate. "I was feeding him lines," Wurzelbacher confessed to a group of reporters outside a Toledo plumbing-supply store. "Everyone thinks it was Karl Rove talking into that earpiece, but he had a pinochle game with Ahmed Chalabi on Friday nights."

—*USA Today*, Oct. 22, 2008

Prototypes for Palm Beach County's infamous butterfly ballot have been found in the tool belt of Samuel "Joe the Plumber" Wurzelbacher. The shocking discovery was made on Thursday as part of a weeklong Department of Justice investigation into alleged voter fraud perpetrated by Mr. Wurzelbacher. A search of Florida records indicates that the celebrity plumber voted 537 separate times in the 2000 presidential election. "There's nothing we could've done—you can spell Wurzelbacher too many different ways," said former Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris.

—*USA Today*, Oct. 23, 2008

A DNA test has confirmed that "Joe the Plumber," the everyvoter who rose to fame thanks to repeated mentions in last week's presidential debate, is the father of Sarah Palin's 6-month-old son, Trig. In the highest-rated episode in the history

of [Maury](#), the Alaska governor confronted blue-collar Ohioan Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher for failing to acknowledge paternity. Upon hearing that he was, in fact, the father, Wurzelbacher stormed off the stage without comment, as Palin repeatedly shouted, "I told you! I told you!" while wagging her right index finger at the studio audience.

—*New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2008

The White House Plumbers—the team of operatives that perpetrated the Watergate break-in on behalf of President Richard Nixon—were the brainchild of Samuel J. Wurzelbacher, according to new reporting by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. A source identified only as "Deep Basin Wrench" tells the veteran *Washington Post* reporters that Wurzelbacher had it out for the Democratic Party. Also, he's a Muslim.

—Associated Press, Nov. 1, 2008

map the candidates

19 Days To Go

Obama is fundraising in New York and stumping in New Hampshire. McCain is in Pennsylvania.

By E.J. Kalafarski and Chadwick Matlin

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 12:17 PM ET

moneybox

Fear Factor

How anxiety and terror are making the financial catastrophe worse than it needs to be.

By Daniel Gross

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 10:25 AM ET

The technology that transmits odors and fragrances digitally is still in the very early stages of development. But on Monday, Oct. 6, the whiff of fear emanating from the television was overwhelming. James Cramer—CNBC star, ex-hedge-fund manager, and mascot of the 1990s tech boom and the recent bull market—was throwing up his hands. "There's always a bull market somewhere" has long been one of his signature lines. But Cramer admitted to the *Today* show's Ann Curry that "somewhere" was now nowhere to be found. "Whatever money you may need for the next five years, please take it out of the stock market right now, this week," he pleaded. "I do not believe that you should risk those assets in the stock markets."

In the ensuing days, many investors—professional and amateur alike—took Cramer's advice. As a series of global convulsions shook markets from New York to Tokyo and all points in between, the stock markets plummeted, with the S&P ending the week down 18.2 percent and down 42.5 percent for the year.

Amid a broad-based, expanding credit crunch and rising concern about fundamental economic weakness, no sector or region was immune. "The U.S. and advanced economies' financial systems are now headed toward a near-term systemic financial meltdown," says [Nouriel Roubini](#), professor of economics at New York University and a longtime bear who has been vindicated in spades. There have been, and are, plenty of reasons for investors to freak out: the failure of banks; the demise of institutions like Lehman Bros.; the necessity for repeated, spastic government interventions. Nearly every economic indicator in the past few weeks, from auto sales to employment, has been negative.

The stock of General Motors sunk to its lowest level since 1950.

Banks are refusing to lend to one another. The traditional safe havens of investment, such as municipal bonds and money-market funds, have buckled. The trumpets of leadership are so uncertain, they sound like kazoos.

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," Franklin Delano Roosevelt proclaimed at his first inauguration in March 1933, amid the worst prolonged financial crisis in the nation's history. Yes, the banking system was a shambles and unemployment stood at 25 percent. But conditions would certainly improve over time, and a change in attitude would help. In recent weeks, as the comparison between today's financial crisis and the Great Depression has grown commonplace, it's become clear that fear itself is Wall Street's greatest fear. "Anxiety can feed anxiety," as President Bush put it. We see it manifested in many ways: in the plunging Dow, in spiking interest rates, in James Cramer's frenzied pleas, in the shellshocked silence of traders on the 5:01 p.m. New Haven-line train out of Grand Central Terminal.

Markets, we are told, continually process available information to spit out accurate gauges of reality in the form of prices. That's the theory. The reality: Markets are frequently inefficient, and dominated by humans, with all their frailties. "The view that people in finance are rational is wrong," says [Alex Edmans](#), a Wharton School of Business economist who studies behavioral finance. "They're susceptible to emotion just like anyone." In recent weeks, the emotions they have been expressing include anxiety, panic, rage, and resignation. In the Depression, skittish investors would cause runs on the bank by lining up on the sidewalk to withdraw cash. In the past several weeks, we've witnessed a 24/7 digital run on financial institutions as investors, banks, corporations, borrowers, and lenders worry that their assets simply aren't safe. This panic has shown similar dynamics to previous ones. But because of the rapid shift in the structure of the global financial system, it's also completely different. As a result, the amount of selling and declines are far greater than would be warranted by the erosion in the fundamentals. Call it the fear factor.

Remember irrational exuberance—the sense that stocks can only go up? The folly of the 1990s dot-com bubble was repeated in this decade's housing and credit bubble. Since house prices had never fallen, the thinking went, they wouldn't fall in the future, which made it safe to buy—or lend—at any level. When we're all convinced a trend can move in only one direction, it tends to do so, which is how bubbles inflate. It's a natural human tendency to extrapolate forward from existing trends. But the dynamic also works in the opposite direction. We go swiftly from thinking nothing bad can happen to knowing that only bad things do.

Back in 2002, in the wake of the dot-com crash, the sentiment meter on the technology sector did a 180-degree shift. Apple's stock was trading for below the level of cash on its books, ascribing a value of zero to its brands and products compared with several billion at the height of the boom. The same shift has taken place in the past year in the stock market. In the spring of 2007, the Dow was aloft, interest rates were low, corporate profits were high, and the global economy was enjoying its sixth year of growth—everything that could go right was going right for investors. Oil was the only blot on this beautiful landscape. Now the canvas looks like a Jackson Pollock painting, chaotic and splattered with violent streaks. Oil, which fell to \$80 per barrel in early October, is now the only bright spot. At a time when any bad outcome seems possible—Iceland nationalizing its banking sector, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac failing—other bad outcomes become inevitable. GM going bankrupt? The entire banking system going down? Sure, why not? In the markets, where credibility is all that separates many companies from failure, that can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If all the banks, student loans, and credit-card companies that had extended credit to you demanded payment now, would you be able to make good?

Although the drama is playing out in the global stock markets, the most severe trauma has been in the vast credit markets. Credit comes from the Latin *credo*, meaning belief. In recent months, lenders' collective dark-night-of-the-soul has evolved into full-fledged agnosticism. Investors don't trust banks, banks don't trust borrowers, mortgage companies don't trust home buyers. Around the world, lines of credit are being pulled or frozen. Interest rates, at root, are a reflection of the faith people have that they will get paid back. The greater the doubt, the higher the interest rate.

The most telling indicators of fear are the arcane data points followed by central bankers—the TED spread (the gap between the interest rate on Treasury bills and the rates American banks demand in return for lending money in the global markets) or LIBOR (the London Interbank Offered Rate), the rate at which banks lend to one another. A year ago, when credit markets first seized up, all these metrics spiked. But in recent months, they've soared to record levels. If the 2007 spikes looked like the Adirondacks, the readings today look like the Himalayas.

Several psychological factors are at work. The failure of household names such as Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Lehman Bros., and AIG saps confidence. "If you feel you can't trust the institutions, it's a trigger for anxiety," says psychologist Paul Slovic, co-founder of Decision Research. After the dot-com bubble burst, he found investors were still optimistic that investing in the stock market would enable them to meet their long-term goals. But in a survey that asked the same question on Sept. 29, the day the House of Representatives voted down the bailout package, respondents were deeply pessimistic about the short term.

Panic in a downturn, much like overconfidence during good times, is a form of social contagion, says Dr. Robert Leahy, professor of psychology at Weill Cornell Medical College. "People just begin listening to each other, and they feed off the bad news, just as they fed off the overly positive good news about housing prices going up four years ago," Leahy says. Next, confirmation bias, the process through which people blow fresh negative developments out of proportion, sets in.

When things start to head south, investors turn to the asset classes or sectors that have been doing well recently, or that tend to do well in bear markets. But this time, the shelters have been blown over by the storm—energy stocks, commodities, emerging market stocks, gold. For decades, money-market funds, which invest in high-quality short-term debt, have been the safest place to stow cash this side of the mattress. But the \$3.6 trillion industry was rocked in September when a fund run by industry pioneer Reserve Management "broke the buck"—i.e., the value of its holdings fell below a dollar a share. The news started a run on money-market funds that required federal intervention. Fear then began hitting the market for highly rated municipal bonds, traditionally the safest, most boring place to stow money.

It's not all in our heads, though. For in the last few months, there have been plenty of good reasons to worry about the health of Main Street and Wall Street. Jobs fell by 159,000 in September, the ninth straight month of losses. Auto sales fell by 26 percent. Retailers from J.C. Penney to Nordstrom reported disappointing September sales and began dialing back expectations for the vital Christmas season. The sudden freezing of credit, on top of the poor fundamentals, has killed confidence. In the week from Sept. 18-25, 79 percent of consumers interviewed for the University of Michigan consumer-confidence survey expected a bad economic year, up from 57 percent earlier in the month.

During good times, economists note the presence of a "wealth effect." Higher home or stock values make people feel more financially secure. Now, as home prices continue to fall—down 9.5 percent in September 2008 from the year before—and 401(k)s wither, we're seeing what might be dubbed a "poverty effect." "The heightened financial turmoil that we have experienced of late may well lengthen the period of weak

economic performance and further increase the risks to growth," Federal Reserve Chairman Benjamin Bernanke somberly told the National Association for Business Economics in Washington on Oct. 7, a day when the Dow fell 508 points.

Time was, a few well-placed words from the Federal Reserve chairman could bring a market panic to a halt. In the 1990s, global markets had an ironclad faith in the ability of Fed chief Alan Greenspan and his cohorts in the Clinton administration to work their way through economic crises. Bernanke gets no such benefit of the doubt. He and his fellow economic firemen—Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, Bush, and congressional leaders—have taken bold, decisive action, as they continually remind us. It just hasn't been working for the past year. The bailouts, starting with Bear Stearns in March, and growing in size and frequency (nationalizing Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, throwing a lifeline to AIG, guaranteeing money-market funds, the \$700 billion bailout), seem to only have begat more panic. Why? Since the first measures didn't work, investors fear that the most recent one won't, either. We keep taking injections to fend off the fever. But each time, a larger dosage lasts for a shorter time. Will the latest booster shot—the plan announced Friday, Oct. 10, for the government to take direct stakes in banks—prove to be an effective inoculation?

The protestations from on high are that, underneath the disaster, the fundamentals are still strong, that we'll work through this because we're Americans. "Fellow citizens," Bush fumbled Friday, "we can solve this crisis—and we will." Unfortunately, his reassurances seem about as calming as the scene from *Airplane* in which the flight attendant urges everyone to remain calm while all hell breaks loose. We have no Churchills today, and our financial leaders all seem to have fled to a bunker. On CNBC, Tyler Mathisen practically begged a name-brand CEO—anyone—to come on the air and speak to the American people.

For now, we have to seek solace in small positive signs: decent earnings from IBM, a week going by without a major financial institution failing. The most crucial indicator of an end to the rising fear may be, counterintuitively, more of it. Students of bubbles note that investor sentiment is always most bullish when a market is about to hit a top and most bearish just when it's about to bottom. (*Business Week's* 1979 cover story on the "Death of Equities" signaled the start of a long-running stock-market boom.) But when there's nobody left to lose confidence, when Jim Cramer, the ultimate stock guy, throws in the towel and urges people not to buy stocks again until 2013, that sure smells like capitulation.

A version of this article appears in this week's Newsweek.

movies

Lame-Duck Soup

Oliver Stone's cinematic portrait of George W. Bush.

By Dana Stevens

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 5:26 PM ET

Oliver Stone's *W.* (Lionsgate) sounds on paper like the worst idea of the director's career, if only because of the timing of the movie's release. The George W. Bush of late 2008 isn't just a lame duck, he's a really *lame* lame duck. Present in the campaign only as a negative example for both parties, the president has nearly disappeared as an object of popular opprobrium or late-night satire. Our disgust with him is so omnipresent that it's gotten tedious. As late as 2007, it was still possible to marvel at Bush's bottomless gift for malapropism and mediocrity. These days, when you come across a recent statement by the president, your first response is more like, "He's still talking?"

The nation's advanced stage of Bush fatigue would seem to make the 43rd president a poor target for Stone's ever-present tone of fevered moral outrage. But what's surprising about *W.* is the tone that it does manage to strike, which is both lighter-hearted and fairer-minded than you might expect. Neither satire nor biopic, the film is a kind of secular pageant, enacting with dogged literality the well-known stations of the cross of Bush's life: the 40th-birthday hangover-turned-religious-conversion! The near-asphyxiation by pretzel! Mission accomplished! "Is our children learning?" The moments scroll up the screen like the song titles on one of those greatest-hits collections advertised on TV. The movie is done in the broad strokes and primary colors that are Stone's trademark—lest you've forgotten *JFK*, this is not a filmmaker of nuance—but the net effect is both satisfying and strangely cathartic to watch.

W. is at heart the story of Bush's Oedipal struggle, his lifelong resentment of and identification with his WASPy, upstanding, unsatisfiable father (beautifully played by James Cromwell). Indeed, the movie reads Bush the younger's entire political career as an attempt to avenge Bush *père's* loss to Clinton in 1992—a psychodramatic interpretation that, according to some sources, is not that far off base. Beginning with an early scene in which the college-age W (Josh Brolin) calls his father from jail in a bloodstained Yale sweatshirt, the movie's chief conflict is not between Bush and his advisers or even Bush and himself (the story of W's internal struggles would be more of a one-reeler) but between this charming, energetic, directionless man and his remote paternal ideal.

There's little that's news at this point in the George Bush bio, so I'll leave the movie to surprise you where it can. Its hectic temporal structure, which crosscuts between Bush's pre-presidential days and the run-up to the Iraq war, is generally legible, though a framing device in which Bush imagines himself alone in the Texas Rangers baseball stadium is

predictable and overly symbolic. Many of the performances are fascinating in a wax-museum way, simply by virtue of the actors' resemblance to their Bushworld prototypes. (Rob Corddry as Ari Fleischer is one such visual joke, too quickly thrown away.) Thandie Newton nails Condoleezza Rice's nasal drone and stiff posture with frightening perfection, but her role as written never rises above the level of political caricature (though she does milk a big laugh from her memorably dry delivery of the single word *amen*).

But a few of the actors, particularly the superb Brolin, go beyond impersonation to plumb the depths of some notoriously unplumbable public figures. Richard Dreyfuss can scarcely conceal his delight at getting to play Dick Cheney, the administration's great mythic villain; he literally lurks in doorways during Cabinet meetings, shoulders hunched and jaw askew, muttering apocalyptic pronouncements straight out of *Dr. Strangelove*. Dreyfuss' interpretation would seem over-the-top were it not for the fact that (as Timothy Noah documents [here](#)), Cheney apparently *did* lurk around saying stuff like this. All I know is, whenever Dreyfuss sidled on-screen, I was awash with glee. Watching these well-known actors get trotted out one by one in the Halloween costumes of the Bush Cabinet becomes a kind of parlor game: Whom would you cast as Colin Powell? Why, Jeffrey Wright, of course! (Wright, as always, is fantastic, almost too good for the part he's in; he could be starring in a separate, tragic film about a hero's self-betrayal.)

My enjoyment of this film hovered perilously close to camp at times. Stone's musical choices lay it on particularly thick: He accompanies a party scene during Bush's drinking years with the Freddy Fender song "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights" and scores the fall of Baghdad to the marchlike rhythm of "The Yellow Rose of Texas." But if Stone's portrait of George Bush is laid on with a trowel, maybe it's because God seems to have engineered the real Bush's life with a similarly crude sense of irony. *W.* is a case of biographer and subject being perfectly matched: You really don't want a Bush biopic directed by Jean-Luc Godard (though Robert Altman could have done something interesting with it if he were still around). Like Tina Fey's Sarah Palin, Stone's George Bush gets his best lines straight from the source. This movie was scripted by screenwriter Stanley Weiser (*Wall Street*) but was ghostwritten by history itself.

music box

Learning by Ear

The many moods of John Adams.

By Nathan Heller

Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 5:35 PM ET

Listeners hoping to find out what kind of composer John Adams

is are unlikely to get much help from John Adams. In his new memoir, *Hallelujah Junction*, Adams writes that composition is "fundamentally intuitive," but it is also, he says, a "rational" process that "takes time and effort." He was early on attracted to music that "embraced pulsation and repetition." He was also repelled by that music's "tiresomely uniform surfaces." Harmony, more than melody or rhythm, is the "DNA" of a composer's style—except Adams' style, which has rhythmic, "dance-like roots." In the classical-music world, Adams is seen as a sort of late-career Picasso: a star, a standby, a one-man manufactory of brilliant, audience-friendly work. *Hallelujah Junction* doesn't overturn these perceptions, but it adds a surprising hue of restlessness and uncertainty to the portrait. One of America's most accessible living composers turns out to be one of the hardest to pin down.

Adams leads the first generation of post-*Sgt. Pepper* classical innovators. A lot of lore hangs on this cultural fact. As a student in the '60s and early '70s, the story goes, Adams was spinning dizzily between 12-tone-tinged [serialism](#) and the [chance music](#) of the avant-garde. Meanwhile, he was absorbing innovative '60s rock in a way that would, a decade later, help him discover his unique "voice"—one that abandoned obscure forms for late-Romantic largesse and the toe-tapping appeal of pop and jazz. If you enjoy the *Magical Mystery Tour* but can't see the point of 12-tone music, this is exactly the sort of self-discovery story you want to hear.

It's an incomplete one, though, as his memoir attests. Adams finds his musical "[voice](#)" on Page 88 of *Hallelujah Junction*. In the ensuing 230 pages, that voice is recalibrated or significantly transformed at least five times. Ultimately, he looks less like someone who's sailed a still and steady course than an artist who's spent his career bending, swaying, and carefully rebalancing to surf inclement waves.

Adams came of age at a time when being an American composer—and a popular one—was no longer frontier territory. Gershwin, Copland, Bernstein, and Barber set the archetype so firmly that the pubescent Adams staved off loneliness by inventing an imaginary hero in their mold, a local "New Hampshire composer" called Bruce Craigmore (a name ripe for a flannel-wear label somewhere). Maestro Craigmore eventually went the way of all fantasies, but Adams' musical interests did not. He gained virtuosity on the clarinet, his father's instrument; finagled the best available education in theory and conducting; fomented various wiseass insurrections against his teachers; and, rakishly, named "my libido" his prized possession in the school yearbook. The editors, less rakishly, assumed John Adams' libido was an instrument.

Harvard, where he landed in the fall of 1965, should have borne these talents to fruition. Its composition program was first-rate. Adams shone as a clarinetist and conductor and discovered a careerlong interest in electronic music. But he reports being

more musically stimulated by rock-saturated "parties of pot, scotch whiskey, and unfiltered Lucky Strikes" than by classroom technique; his only full-length composition in college was an academic requirement. By the spring of his senior year, classmates were storming Harvard's administrative building, buffeted by hostile policemen, and Adams was abusing pharmaceuticals to ensure he'd fail his draft-board exams. In 1971, after a short, halfhearted fling with graduate school, he left New England and Kerouac-ed it to San Francisco, where he eventually took a teaching job and, six years later at the age of 30, heard the premiere of what he describes as his first mature composition, a piano piece called *Phrygian Gates*.

The cycling, modal atmospheric of *Phrygian Gates* were a slap in the face to the work of his 20s, work that at one point incorporated the sound of flies on dog poo. Where those efforts were conceptual (or aspiring in that direction), this was sensual. Where Adams' previous approaches denied the ear's expectations, this music rode them.

When he lucked into his first symphonic commission, he tried to carry the aesthetic of *Phrygian Gates* over to the orchestra and chorus. The result was revelatory. "The premiere of *Harmonium* ... took almost everyone, including its composer, by surprise," he writes. When oscillating textures and sustained harmonies like those in *Phrygian Gates* are scored out for a Mahler-type ensemble, the result isn't just an expansion of the same idea. It's almost a different music:

This became the quintessential early-Adams sound: long brass crescendos and braided suspensions over a chattering orchestra, rhythmic counterpoint struck through with syncopation. It's a musical language that's eloquent on its immediate terms—sonorous, majestic, and kinetic—and it made Adams' career. Later, that buoyant, multitextured quality would flavor even his smaller-scale work, like the 1998 two-piano piece *Hallelujah Junction*. (Compare this with the piano sound of *Phrygian Gates*, before he'd wrestled out his symphonic style.)

And yet *was* this his sound? Over the next couple of years, Adams wrote the supertoosome *Grand Pianola Music*, which he describes as " 'Hammerklavier' head-to-head with Liberace cocktails" and which some of his friends described as "absolute shit." (The piece was inspired by watching pianist Rudolf Serkin while on acid.) Then an aloof, hourlong electronic piece. Then *Harmonielehre*, a lush symphony dressed in chromatic harmony (think Wagner). Then his first opera, *Nixon in China*, which was none of these things. *Nixon* won a Grammy, an Emmy, and a *Great Performances* spot, and it made Adams famous:

The underlying style here—the clipped, rhythmic chugging with abrupt, often stepwise shifts in harmony—is high Minimalism, an idiom most famously pioneered by Philip Glass and one that anchored Adams through these first years of experimentation. At its worst, Minimalism of this sort can sound like the soundtrack

to a *Nova* documentary about sun spots. Adams, at his best, set its high watermark. The style attracted him, he says, partly for its scale and openness; it also (though Adams doesn't spell this out) tends to change harmonies in a way, and at a pace, similar to a lot of the popular music he heard in college. Minimalism was Adams' lodestar until the early '90s. Then he abandoned it.

Trying to describe Adams' "voice" from that point is like trying to get a very fast bug under a jar. His second opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, a dreamlike, macabre piece about Palestinian hijackers, gave way to the *Chamber Symphony*, which is a Bronx cheer in the face of *Phrygian Gates*' broad consonance:

From here, he wrote for musicians playing simultaneously in different tempos. He composed an ill-received [pop musical](#) about an "earthquake/romance" in Los Angeles. He collaborated on a multimedia [nativity oratorio](#) with a "Hispanic flavor"—and then an opera set at the A-bomb test site (which opens [at the Met](#) this week). Adams' 2003 *Dharma at Big Sur* was a raga-influenced concerto for a six-stringed electric violin over an orchestra playing on a nonstandard scale. (Imagine jimmying with your piano such that the white keys are ever so slightly displaced from their usual pitches.) This elaborate gambit crashed and burned at the premiere. Still, Adams thinks he was maybe onto something. He'd used quarter-tone ensemble—a different kind of nonstandard-tuning arrangement—a year earlier in his 9/11 memorial, *On the Transmigration of Souls*. That piece, whose delicate score uses recorded city sounds, a libretto of found text, and a trumpet quoting Charles Ives, comes at the listener with chilling intimacy:

Adams says he vacillates between loving *On the Transmigration* and finding it "a dud." Readers of his memoir will get the sense he vacillates a lot about his work—and, in an equal and opposite way, about his audience. He is deeply attentive to listeners' reactions, reveling in "audience excitement." Yet he also suggests that innovative music must meet with audience *resistance* "before eventually being understood and appreciated." At one point, he knocks "the musical amateur" whose interests end at Bach and Mozart. At another, he knocks "listeners overburdened with good taste." Probably, readers should not overburden themselves trying to puzzle this one out.

Fickleness is often defensive. New classical music lies at the bottom of a canyon carved by hundreds of years of effluence. The risk of getting lost or buried in the landscape is acute. The trouble isn't that the art has atrophied since Bach or Mozart. The trouble is it's grown. In 1770, there was effectively one style of contemporary "high" music in the West; by the 1930s, composers as different as Schönberg, Gershwin, and Rachmaninoff were vying for the American concert hall. What classical music *is*—and what, if anything, that distinction preserves—gets even fuzzier in an age of high-concept rock and avant-garde jazz. What does a classical composer do that no one else does?

That question is the backbone of *Hallelujah Junction*. And it's a testament to the nuance and candor of Adams' memoir that the book never settles on an answer. (The closest he comes is a deeply weird conclusion urging listeners to take some "hints from evolutionary science" and resist seeing music as teleological "progress.") Instead, we find an artist hunting for the golden thread to seal a restive, uncertain career. "The 'next' piece ought to be the 'best piece,' the living proof that the disparate elements of my musical language ... have once and for all come together in a single statement of confident, unblemished perfection," he writes. "But that is never the case." In the end, it is the looming sense that Adams *hasn't* found his voice—not quite, not yet—that makes this book so gripping and his art so real.

other magazines

Beautiful Minds

Malcolm Gladwell on the two types of geniuses.

By David Sessions

Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 4:18 PM ET

The New Yorker, Oct. 20

A [profile](#) of the all-but-ignored Joe Biden reveals his hesitations about accepting Obama's invitation to join the Democratic ticket. (He insisted Obama choose him for his legislative experience, not his demographic pull.) Biden says that he and Obama tend to think well of other senators—including John McCain, a friend of Biden—and refrain from questioning their motives. Biden says he'd model his vice presidency after Lyndon B. Johnson, who the writer notes "tried to remain something of a Senate man." ... An [article](#) by Malcolm Gladwell compares two different creative types: the young genius who emerges fully formed and the "late bloomer" whose artistic goals are so elusive that they require decades of practice to develop. Gladwell says the latter category flies in the face of conventional ideas about genius and creativity. Yet it describes writers like Ben Fountain, a successful lawyer who abandoned his career to write fiction, and painters like Cezanne.

New York, Oct. 20

An [article](#) finds that Wasilla, Alaska, is nothing like the "microcosm of America" Sarah Palin describes. The formerly desolate town of 10,000 is now marked with traces of Palin's governance (fast food and strip malls) and evidence of her unexpected rise to fame (churches that kick out press visitors). A number of Wasillans don't like Palin citing their town as her "experience," and some question her insistence that she "didn't blink" when maybe she should have. ... A [review](#) of Oliver Stone's *W.* draws parallels between Stone and his subject, George W. Bush: "Though on opposite sides of the culture war,

Bush and Stone were, fundamentally, questioners of the same authority—their fathers." Bush was forced to run his father's 1992 campaign, and the loss—which was attributed to his father's weakness—stung him. Similarly, Stone was "propelled out of his adolescence by a prodigiously talented, prodigiously damaged seeker."

Weekly Standard, Oct. 20

An [article](#) attempts to nail down Barack Obama's foreign policy ethos. His escalation procedure—diplomacy, more diplomacy, economic sanctions, then maybe a few strikes—bears a strong resemblance to Bill Clinton's. The exception is Afghanistan: Obama supports a "fundamental redeployment from an open-ended commitment in Iraq to an open-ended commitment in Afghanistan." ... An [article](#) presented as a lecture on Obamanomics from "Weekly Standard U" divides Obama's economic plans into three divisions: "the not-so-bad, the bad, and the really, really bad." The less terrible: Obama's advisers are decent, and the markets would benefit from his cool temperament. The bad: "Obamanomics equals higher taxes, more government spending, a larger deficit, a more complicated tax code, increased regulation, a slowdown in global economic integration, and the resurrection of the labor unions."

Newsweek, Oct. 20

The [cover story](#), written by Fareed Zakaria, sees the "silver lining" of the economic crisis: "This crisis has—dramatically, vengefully—forced the United States to confront the bad habits it has developed over the past few decades." According to one economist, the country has "demanded lots of government but refused to pay for it"—and as the old saying goes, "there is no free lunch." The collapse has been a "wake-up call from Hell" to both citizens and government, insisting that we confront our collective debt. ... Twin profiles of presidential campaign managers [Steve Schmidt](#) and [David Axelrod](#) compare their approaches. Schmidt is credited with shaping up Arnold Schwarzenegger's bully image and solidifying his 2006 reelection and with forcing McCain to stick to a script. Axelrod famously taught an Indiana congresswoman "the value of going negative" and, despite perceptions, has been a staunch proponent of negative campaigning.

The Nation, Oct. 27

An [article](#) wonders if the Democrats' aggressive outreach to evangelicals will actually bear fruit: "[It] may counter the right-wing myth that Democrats are anti-religion, at least among progressively inclined believers, but it's unclear whether they will shift enough religious voters to alter the electoral map." Evangelicals have been more "persuadable" in this campaign than in 2004, but they were gravitating toward John McCain even before he picked Sarah Palin. Still, the few remaining undecideds may be a crucial gain for Obama. ... A [piece](#) dissects

Obama's health care plan and wonders how many of its proposals are realistic. Of chief concern are his plan to make insurance companies accept all applicants and his lack of specifics on making Medicare sustainable. His approach is "calculated not to arouse opposition from private industry," but it may not be "bold" enough to address the health care system's crippling problems.

poem

"Spring Comes to Ohio"

By Joseph Campana

Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 7:24 AM ET

Click the arrow on the audio player to hear Joseph Campana read this poem.

The first gesture is despair
because the snowdrops
have fled and the cold
came back anyway. You
are far from your love
and you will be nothing
but the space between
the hand and what it is
accustomed to grasping.
The first gesture is cold
but the rain still comes
down and like the rain
you lean your head down
on someone's shoulder
because it is too heavy for
you to carry by yourself.
Outside the boys are like
flowers and the flowers
are like boys because they
don't give what they say.
All the evening flowers
are coffins bursting with
possibility. Why not pick
one, why not let your
sorrow sink into the dirt
where it will die? The first
gesture is the hope that it
will die before you will
or that you will learn to
read it like a book. Come
read, come to the flower
beds and the mowed-down
fields where the heads of
yellow soldiers burst in
the grass. If anyone ever

gave you something, that
gesture of fading beauty
was the first sign that
the price of generosity
is the flower that would
rather not be ripped from
its heart. Come read all
the flowers: they were
printed here just for you.
Come read your heart
which has shriveled
into a flower receding
before night. If the sun
ever will come back here
the first thing you'll do is
reach right out to touch it.

politics

Track the Presidential Polls on Your iPhone

Introducing *Slate's* Poll Tracker '08: all the data you crave about the presidential race.

Friday, October 17, 2008, at 7:16 AM ET

If you're a political junkie like we're political junkies, you have a problem. You can track the McCain-Obama polls only at your computer. If you go to a ballgame, or a meeting, or your daughter's wedding, you enter a politics vacuum, cut off from the data you crave.

No longer. Today *Slate* introduces Poll Tracker '08, an application that delivers comprehensive up-to-the-minute data about the presidential election to your iPhone, iPhone 3G, or iPod touch. Using data from Pollster.com, the Poll Tracker '08 delivers the latest McCain and Obama polling numbers for every state, graphs historical polling trends, and charts voting patterns in previous elections. Poll Tracker '08 allows you to sort states by how contested they are, how fresh their poll data is, or how heavily they lean to McCain or Obama.

You can download Poll Tracker '08 on the iPhone App Store. It costs just 99 cents, a small price to pay for satisfying your craving for data anytime, anywhere. **Get it on the [App Store](#).**

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politics

Calm and Steady Wins the Race

McCain did well in the final debate, but not well enough to matter.

By John Dickerson

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 1:13 AM ET

At the third and final presidential debate, the candidates finally got around to addressing America's most pressing question: What does Joe Wurzelbacher want? Wurzelbacher, a plumber, was captured on [video](#) over the weekend at a rally discussing tax policy with Barack Obama. McCain used the exchange as a jumping-off point for his charge that Obama's tax plan would hurt small-business owners like Joe—forever to be known as "Joe the Plumber" (which infuriates [Bob the Builder](#)). This set off an arms race in which both candidates tried to wrap their arms around Joe. McCain and Obama both addressed Joe so often in talking about their tax and health care plans that the debate may as well have been held next to the breakfront in his living room.

As it was, McCain and Obama sat at a desk with moderator Bob Schieffer, which at first made it look as if they were applying for a joint loan application. (*Sorry gentlemen, only one of you can rent the big white house.*) It was a tense debate in which McCain, behind in the polls and with less than three weeks before Election Day, tried to find some way to halt Obama's momentum. He did well, but it wasn't good enough. Obama was calm, in control, and won the debate.

McCain has been portraying himself as a fighter in recent days, and he came to the debate spoiling for one. From his first mention of Joe the Plumber, he went after Obama's plan to redistribute wealth through the tax code, and pressed his charge that he would press hidden fines on small-business owners who didn't sign up for health insurance. He talked about Obama's connections to unrepentant terrorist William Ayers and ACORN. He ineffectively shorthanded his own policy ideas, but McCain was nevertheless able to fully articulate Obama's votes on abortion as a state legislator in Illinois. Even the arrows in the eagle above both candidates were pointed at Obama.

McCain had some strong moments, such as when he distanced himself from President Bush and when he stood up for the majority of his supporters at his rallies. But his attacks came like out of a Gatling gun. He wasn't particularly mean, but his approach had a scattered feel to it. None of the many shots felt like they did any real damage. At times he was downright

snippy, needling Obama about his lack of travel in the southern hemisphere and rolling his eyes at an Obama answer.

Obama was nearly flawless in beating back the two hardest attacks. He explained his relationship with William Ayers and the community organization ACORN in measured tones that offered no hint of slipperiness. When he discussed his votes on abortion, he also made a compelling case for why he had voted against a bill that would have mandated medical care to a child born from a botched abortion. (A law was already in place that did so.)

McCain effectively highlighted the philosophical differences with Obama on taxes and government spending, but often, he was in such a hurry that his tendency to use shorthand undermined his case. He rattled off policies in bullet points—skipping from taxes to trade and back again. He interjected thoughts as they occurred to him on the fly. McCain's biggest flaw may have been that he did nothing to link to the message of his new stump speech: that he would be a fighter in Washington for regular people. McCain used the word *fighter* about 15 times in his speeches before the debate. He didn't mention the word once in the debate. If that's his closing argument, he should have let the 40 million or so people watching in on it.

McCain needed to court undecided voters by walking them carefully through the thought process that leads to their decision to vote for him. Obama was far better at doing that, laying out the specific points of his plan with the kind of detail Hillary Clinton used to offer in her debates. He also had the stylistic points down, talking to the camera when addressing voters. When McCain talked about special-needs children, Obama interjected to point out that such assistance didn't square with McCain's promise to cut spending across the board. The two then engaged in another round of philosophical discussion, but the point Obama scored was appearing as master of the material.

Where Obama was weakest was in responding to McCain's charge about Obama supporter and Georgia Rep. John Lewis. The civil rights hero had said McCain's campaign reminded him of segregationist George Wallace. Obama could have said something big and shown some of that capacity for healing and bridge building that he talks about. Instead he ducked the question at first and didn't address Lewis' remarks. It felt tiny. Pressed, Obama said he didn't agree with Lewis' categorization. Obama also ducked—as he has so many times before—getting specific about the budget he will inherit. He boasted about offering spending cuts to pay for his new proposals, but that does nothing to address the budget problems that he's inheriting that will require sacrifice. He was helped by McCain's nutty pledge to balance the budget in four years. Given the size of the deficit, military commitments, the rising cost of health care, and McCain's tax-cut promises, that claim is simply unrealistic.

With 19 days of campaigning before Election Day, John McCain has no more big chances to change the dynamic of the race. He didn't get what he needed at Hofstra University, and Barack Obama did nothing to offer him an opportunity. The third and final debate offered no new fuel for Republicans trying to raise doubts about Obama. In fact, his performance seemed to confirm what McCain told a voter at one of his town-hall meetings last week: You don't have to be scared about Obama.

politics

The GOP's Bill Ayers?

The McCain campaign has its own questionable connections to bombers and assassins.

By A.L. Bardach

Wednesday, October 15, 2008, at 3:40 PM ET

The campaign of John McCain has made much of Barack Obama's relationship with Weather Underground bomber-turned-university professor Bill Ayers, whom Republicans call an "unrepentant terrorist." Indeed, the [Obama-Ayers connection](#) has become a centerpiece of the McCain-Palin campaign. V.P. nominee Sarah Palin mentions Ayers in practically every public appearance, and John McCain has all but promised to bring up Ayers in tonight's debate.

McCain's campaign, however, has its own questionable connections to terrorists. Since John F. Kennedy's failed Bay of Pigs invasion, Florida's Cuban-Americans have been regarded as a reliable Republican voting block. And from 1960 until Sept. 11, 2001, some exile hard-liners in Miami endorsed a double standard on terrorism in which anti-Castro militants and bombers were judged to be "freedom fighters," regardless of the civilian deaths and collateral damage they caused in Cuba and the United States, as well as elsewhere. While the Cuban-American community has undergone dramatic changes—with the majority now supporting dialogue with Cuba and an end to restrictions on travel and remittances—hard-liners still control the major levers of power in Miami. Such is their clout in turning out reliable voters that McCain dropped his stance of 2000, when he said he would support normalizing relations with Cuba even under Fidel Castro. (["I'd be willing to do the same thing we did with—with Vietnam."](#)) McCain has allied his campaign with the Cuban Liberty Council, an uncompromising anti-Castro group that has all but dictated policy to George W. Bush. Two of the council's most prominent members, media personality Ninoska Perez-Castellon and her husband, Roberto Martin Perez, have been among McCain's most dedicated campaigners and champions in Miami.

As a result, McCain's campaign and advisers find themselves allied with and/or supporting militants who have committed acts that any reasonable observer would define as terrorism. On July

20, while campaigning for McCain in Miami and just prior to speaking at a McCain event, Sen. Joe Lieberman met with the wife of convicted serial bomber Eduardo Arocena and promised to pursue a presidential pardon on his behalf. Arocena is the founder of the notorious Cuban exile militant group Omega 7, renowned for a string of bombings from 1975 to 1983. Arocena was convicted of the 1980 murder of a Cuban diplomat in Manhattan. In 1983, Arocena was arrested and charged with 42 counts pertaining to conspiracy, explosives, firearms, and destruction of foreign government property within the United States. He [is currently serving a life sentence](#) in federal prison in Indiana. His targets included:

- Madison Square Garden (he blew up an adjacent store);
- JFK airport (Arocena's group planted a suitcase bomb intended for a TWA flight to Los Angeles—in protest of the airline's flights to Cuba. The plane would have exploded if not for the fact that the bomb went off on the tarmac prior to being loaded);
- Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center (causing damage to three levels of the theater and halting the performance of a music group from Cuba);
- the ticket office of the Soviet airline Aeroflot;
- and a church.

He also attempted to assassinate the Cuban ambassador to the United Nations.

Arocena was also convicted of the 1979 murder of New Jersey resident Eulalio José Negrín. The 37-year-old Negrín, who advocated diplomacy with Cuba, was machine-gunned down as he stepped into his car, dying in the arms of his 13-year-old son.

Nevertheless, Lieberman, who at the time was McCain's first choice for vice president and is said to top McCain's list for secretary of state, was [caught on video](#) promising Miriam Arocena he would petition Washington to grant a pardon to her husband. "It's my responsibility; it's my responsibility. I will carry [the pardon request] back. I will carry it back," Lieberman told Arocena just before addressing a group at a McCain event. "I think of you like you were my family. ... I'll bring it back. I'll do my best."

Queried on the matter, a Lieberman spokesman demurred, telling the AP, "Sen. Lieberman does not intervene in criminal proceedings including requests for pardons. The correspondence was merely forwarded without any comment, endorsement or support whatsoever."

Another vocal champion of an Arocena pardon is CLC member Roberto Martin Perez, who [narrates a McCain commercial about Castro that has played in South Florida](#). His wife, radio host Ninoska Perez-Castellon, says that the McCain campaign has queried them about making a television spot as well.

Miami attorney Alfredo Duran, Bay of Pigs veteran and a leader of the Cuban Committee for Democracy, explains the GOP strategy: "They think that the Arocena campaign will energize a certain segment of the ultra-conservative exile community that will deliver for McCain and the Republican Party."

Arocena is not the only militant who's received help from McCain's team. In September, McCain announced he was choosing [Lincoln Diaz-Balart](#), a Republican congressman from Miami, as his senior adviser and spokesman on Latin America. Rep. Diaz-Balart is a [fierce hard-liner on Cuba](#), advocating, at various times, a blockade of the island, even military action if needed, to unseat Fidel Castro (his former uncle, once married to Diaz-Balart's aunt). He, too, has been a supporter of certain kinds of terrorists who have struck on American soil. Since 2000, Diaz-Balart and his colleague Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen have lobbied for and helped win the release of several convicted exile terrorists from U.S. prisons. Among the most notorious were Omega 7 members Jose Dionisio Suarez Esquivel and Virgilio Paz Romero, both [convicted for their roles in the 1976 assassination of Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier](#) and his American colleague Ronni Moffitt with a car bomb in Washington, D.C. According to four agents I interviewed, the FBI also suspects the pair were involved in other bombings and attacks. (Suarez is known by the nickname "*Charco de Sangre*"—Pool of Blood.)

Diaz-Balart also pushed for the release of Valentin Hernandez, who gunned down Miami resident and Cuban émigré Luciano Nieves in February 1975 for speaking out in support of a dialogue with Cuba. Nieves was ambushed by Hernandez in a hospital parking lot in Miami after visiting his 11-year-old son. Hernandez also went on to kill a former president of the Bay of Pigs Association in an internecine feud. Hernandez was captured in Puerto Rico in 1977 and sentenced to life in prison. Today, Hernandez is living freely in Florida.

Nor has McCain's senior adviser Diaz-Balart ever wavered in seeking "due process" for legendary bombers and would-be Castro assassins Luis Posada Carriles and Orlando Bosch. Both were charged with the [bombing of a Cuban airliner in 1976](#), killing all 73 civilian passengers—the first act of airline terrorism in the Americas. In 2005, when I asked him about those who died—many of them teenage athletes—Bosch responded, "We were at war with Castro, and in war, everything is valid."

After serving nine years, Posada "escaped" from prison in Caracas, Venezuela, thanks to a bribe paid to the warden. Posada gives effusive thanks in his memoir, *Los Caminos del Guerrero*, to at least two members of the Cuban Liberty Council for their help in resettling him during his early fugitive days. After serving 11 years, Bosch won an acquittal (following death threats to several judges hearing the case). However, [hundreds of pages of memorandum of the FBI, CIA, and State Department](#),

[released by the National Security Archives](#), leave no doubt that U.S. authorities fully concurred with Venezuelan, Trinidadian, and Cuban intelligence that the two men had masterminded the airplane bombing.

Former Attorney General Richard Thornburgh described Bosch, who spent four years in federal prison for firing a bazooka into a Polish freighter bound for Havana in Miami's harbor, as an "unreformed terrorist" and recommended immediate deportation when he showed up in Miami in 1988. But there were political considerations in Miami. Ros-Lehtinen, then running for Congress and now the Republican leader of the House foreign-affairs committee, lauded Bosch as a hero and a patriot. After she personally lobbied then-President George Bush (with her campaign manager Jeb Bush at a meeting noted in the Miami media), Bush overruled the FBI and the Justice and State departments, and Bosch was granted U.S. residency.

In 1998, I interviewed Luis Posada in Aruba for an investigative series for the *New York Times* in which he claimed to have orchestrated numerous attacks on both civilian and military targets during his 50-year war to topple Castro. Most notably, Posada took credit for masterminding the 1997 bombings of Cuban hotels that killed an Italian vacationer and wounded 11 others.

Posada made his last failed attempt to eliminate Fidel Castro at the Ibero-America Summit in Panama in November 2000. After his trial and conviction in 2004, Diaz-Balart (along with his brother, Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, and Ros-Lehtinen), wrote at least two letters on official U.S. Congress stationery to Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso seeking the release of Posada and his collaborators. "We ask respectfully that you pardon Luis Posada Carriles, Guillermo Novo Sampol, Pedro Crispin Remon and Gaspar Jimenez Escobedo," went one missive. On Aug. 24, 2004, Posada and his fellow conspirators—all with colorful rap sheets—received a last-minute pardon from the outgoing Moscoso.

Posada's supporters tell me that he had been quietly assured by several Miami exile leaders that he would be allowed to live free in the United States like Bosch. While still a fugitive, Posada [slipped into Miami in 2005](#). But following international outrage over his release, a federal grand jury was impaneled in Newark, N.J., in January 2006 to hear evidence against Posada for the Havana hotel bombings. FBI investigators testified that Posada had smuggled plastic explosives in shampoo bottles and shoes into Cuba a few weeks prior to the bombings. At the cost of millions of dollars, dozens of witnesses have testified to the grand jury over two and a half years. On Sept. 19 and 20, 2007, two witnesses, compelled to turn state's evidence, offered damning evidence implicating Posada and his confederates. (Disclosure: [The New York Times and I were subpoenaed in the matter](#) but have not appeared before the grand jury, citing First Amendment protections.)

But election year politics seem to have interfered with the case. One of the attorneys representing Posada's comrades in the case told me that the defendants received target letters last year and were warned by the FBI that they would be indicted by the end of 2007. Now he says it is certain nothing will happen because of the 2008 elections and the damage that could be done to the McCain ticket, the Diaz-Balarts, and Ros-Lehtinen. Another Posada attorney told me that he had been assured that Posada's case "is being handled at the highest levels" of the Justice Department.

In the meantime, [Posada has resettled in Miami](#). In November 2007, the Big Five Club, an elite watering hole for Miami's movers and shakers, [hosted an art show and fundraiser](#) to benefit Posada and his comrade-in-arms, Letelier assassin José Dionisio Suárez. On May 2, 2008, there was another gala fundraiser in honor of Luis Posada at the Big Five Club. Lincoln Diaz-Balart and Ros-Lehtinen were both invited.

A few months earlier, a relaxed and expansive Posada attended a tribute for a well-known Cuban dissident. Just a few feet away from him, amid the ding of clinking glasses, were Reps. Lincoln Diaz-Balart and Ros-Lehtinen. Should McCain-Palin prevail in November, those pesky, pending indictments against Posada are very likely to get tossed.

politics

McCain's Mission? Impossible.

Wednesday's debate may be his last chance to win this race.

By John Dickerson

Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 7:32 PM ET

To get a sense of what John McCain is going through on the eve of the last presidential debate with 20 days before Election Day and Barack Obama leading in the polls, I decided to put some pressure on myself: I delayed working on this story until 45 minutes before my deadline. To approximate the string of people in McCain's ear offering advice, I turned on Fox News and Rush Limbaugh. [Be the happy warrior!](#) Attack! Talk about Ayers! Don't mention Ayers! [Fire your campaign staff!](#) ACORN! I then put Wagner on my iTunes.

I'm finding it very hard to concentrate. If we're all lucky, I may just give up and end this piece right here.

OK, maybe not.

I'm sure McCain finds it hard to concentrate, too. He is tough and likes challenging situations. But for McCain, Wednesday's debate comes with a degree of difficulty perhaps beyond the

capacity of human achievement. That sounds like the obligatory hyperbole required to create false drama for the debate (so that we might justify our hyperbole after the debate is over). But after doing the tabulations, this is where I come down.

Wednesday night is McCain's last big chance to reach a wide national audience without the media filter. Obama is ahead in the national and state polls. By [Pollster.com's](#) tabulation, Obama is comfortably ahead in states that would give him 256 electoral votes. By that measure, he needs only 14 more electoral votes to win. Obama is ahead in polls in states like Wisconsin, Minnesota, and New Mexico, which could give him that magic number. And the picture looks no better nationally: As John Harwood of the *New York Times* [noted recently](#), only Ronald Reagan in 1980 came back from the deficit McCain faces. This isn't to say that McCain can't come back. It's just that the weather looks really bad for him.

After the debate, there will be only 19 days left to campaign. After about Oct. 21st—13 days before Election Day—there will be more states to go to than there will be days left to go to them. Without a big debate moment, McCain might be able to dismantle his opponent through advertisements, local media, visits to battleground states, and luck in the news cycle. But that would require a level of precise execution his campaign has not yet shown. Given that unlikelihood, the debate is a big opportunity.

Of course, McCain could just present himself as a nice guy and hope for the best. Sure, there are ways he could win, but they are increasingly fantastical—and they are all out of McCain's hands: All those new Democrats that have been registering in battleground states could stay home on Election Day. There could be a news development, like the discovery of Bush's DUI charge late in 2000 or the Osama Bin Laden tape that surfaced late in 2004, that knocks the race on its ear. A huge bout of buyer's remorse could kick in after it appears that Obama has the race locked up.

If McCain wants to take his destiny into his own hands, he has to knock Obama back. The problem for McCain is that pulling off an effective attack in a debate is like making a soufflé in a highway median. (The honking alone makes it very difficult.) It's hard to be aggressive in a debate because the format is so regulated and the risk of coming off as a brute is so high.

And, historically, the candidate who goes negative in a debate almost always comes off poorly. Bob Dole may have secured Gerald Ford's defeat when, in the 1976 vice-presidential debate, he got nasty and blamed Democrats for a string of wars. Jimmy Carter looked cold and snippy in 1980 next to Ronald Reagan. Lloyd Bentsen was the only candidate who successfully got off an attack line with his crack about his friend Jack Kennedy in his 1988 vice-presidential debate against Dan Quayle.

Even if McCain could overcome history and avoid Obama's effort to portray him as intemperate and erratic, he also has to overcome his recent ineffectiveness. According to the most recent *Washington Post/ABC poll*, as McCain has increased his attacks on Obama, two poll numbers have also increased: McCain's negatives and Obama's positives. Voters now give Obama the edge on leadership for the first time in the election, and they consider McCain the riskier choice.

Obama is hardly invincible. He has dodged questions, for example, by giving unrealistic answers about how his priorities would shift given the current economic crisis. He has also been [less than candid](#) about his thinking on Iraq in light of developments in the last few months. He has overstated his abilities as a [bipartisan deal-maker](#) and [truth-teller](#). ([And his campaign isn't terribly transparent](#).) It's hard to see, though, how McCain could take advantage of these issues in a way that changes the dynamic of the race.

McCain's other challenge is that Obama is not his only target. He's got to do something to improve his lot with voters who care about the economy. Despite "suspending his campaign" to assist in forming a financial rescue package (or perhaps because of it), McCain continues to trail his opponent badly [when voters are asked to evaluate the candidates on the economy](#).

As the two candidates head into the debate, both have unveiled new programs aimed at helping regular Americans in a financial pinch. McCain has also offered a new pitch about character: He's a fighter. The message is actually a cleaner version of his acceptance speech. (Perhaps the editors were barred from the room this time.) It's also the message Hillary Clinton offered at the end of her campaign—but Clinton was far more effective in explaining how she was going to fight on behalf of the middle class.

McCain never really explains why his ability to fight, to buck his party, or to do unpopular things is going to improve anyone's life. Yes, he's been tested more, and endured more in life, than Barack Obama. But voters want to know: How's that help *me*? McCain has got one more night to make the case.

politics

Sit Down and Shut Up

How Bob Schieffer can make this year's final debate interesting.

By Jeff Greenfield

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 4:58 PM ET

When I listen to the complaints that follow just about every presidential debate, I'm reminded of the well-worn joke about

the Jewish mother who buys her son two shirts. When he shows up at dinner wearing one, she says: "What's the matter? You didn't like the other one?"

If the debate features "issues" questions, as did the "town-hall meeting" format moderated by NBC's Tom Brokaw last week, it's boring and predictable. If the moderators focus on political or "process" questions, as ABC's Charles Gibson and George Stephanopoulos did during the primary season, it's slammed as trivial. Time limits? Stilted. No time limits? The candidates filibustered.

So widespread is the discontent that some people are getting desperate. In Indiana's highly competitive Ninth Congressional District, Republican Party Chairman Larry Shickles [actually proposed](#) last week that the candidates be hooked up to lie detectors for their scheduled Oct. 21 debate. The Republican and Libertarian candidates said yes while the Democratic incumbent had no comment. Thankfully, debate organizers passed.

I confess that I'm drawn to Shickles' idea, not just because it tracks closely with my own notion of slipping sodium pentathol into the candidates' drinking glasses. It's out of frustration: I have my own longstanding yet universally ignored ideas for better debates. (How about a few topics that no spinmeister could possibly anticipate, like a math question: "A train leaves New York heading west at 8 miles an hour; another train leaves Chicago heading east at 75 mph. How much should Amtrak subsidize them?" Or how about a question that would offer genuine insight into a candidate's philosophy: "Do you like the designated hitter rule?")

Fortunately, there's one last chance this year to see if a presidential debate can really work without resorting to such radical notions. Even more fortunately, my CBS colleague Bob Schieffer has a format that offers a real chance for something both more enlightening and entertaining than what we've seen so far.

So what are the elements that would make this debate work?

The "Knights of the Round Table" format is better.

Barack Obama, John McCain, and Schieffer will be seated at a table. This is far preferable to the podium format, for both heat and light. It's much harder to deliver well-worn talking points when you're sitting right next to your opponent and a moderator than when you're at a podium, which invites bloviation. It permits Schieffer to look into a candidate's eyes from just a foot or two away and press him for an answer. And, counterintuitive though it may be, it actually can encourage sharper confrontations.

One of the toughest exchanges in a presidential debate occurred around just such a table, shortly before the critical 1984 New York primary, with Walter Mondale, Gary Hart, and Jesse Jackson seated at a circular table while Dan Rather moderated. Mondale asked Hart: "Why do you run those ads that suggest that I'm out trying to kill kids when you know better? I'm a person who believes in peace. ... I think you ought to pull those ads down tonight." Retorted Hart: "Why have you questioned my commitment to arms control and civil rights when you know that I have just as much commitment to both of those as you do?" (It was left to Jackson to urge the two to focus on issues rather than "this rat-a-tat-tat.") This kind of close-in format will also enable Schieffer to tap into the second element that makes for a good debate:

Force the candidates to confront each other with their core arguments.

In the first presidential debate, moderator Jim Lehrer repeatedly asked the candidates to talk directly to each other, but both repeatedly sidestepped the invitation. The round-table format makes that a much harder offer to refuse. Picture Schieffer turning to McCain and saying: "Your ads suggest Senator Obama is unfit for the presidency because he consorts with a 'domestic terrorist.' Please tell us—and Obama—what about that association disqualifies him?" Or imagine a question to Obama that asks: "You repeatedly predicted that the surge in Iraq would not work—and over time, you've steadily altered your view of its success. In view of all the reports that show dramatic change for the better, will you now say directly to Senator McCain, 'On the matter of the surge, you were right and I was wrong?'"

Quite apart from format, such an approach suggests a third element critical for a good debate:

Encourage the moderator to be assertive, even aggressive, without time limits.

Some of the best political debates I've seen were moderated by veteran New York newsman [Gabe Pressman](#). On the Sunday before an election, Pressman would sit down in an informal setting, armed only with a stopwatch to ensure roughly equal time. There were no time limits, no rigidly structured turn-taking, and if Pressman wasn't satisfied with an answer, he'd ask the question again. Schieffer has already indicated his intention to push for more specific answers ... and this intention will be of particular significance if he is willing to adopt a more provocative role:

If there's an elephant in the room, ask about it.

It's always safe for a moderator to confine himself to "issue" questions, but the result is often a joint recitation of masticated chunks of phrases. Some of the best debate questions are of a

very different sort. When CNN's Bernard Shaw asked Michael Dukakis in 1988 if he would favor "[an irrevocable death penalty for the killer](#)" if his wife were raped and murdered, Dukakis' ice-water chilly response was a perfect entry into who he was. Another candidate—Bill Clinton or Mario Cuomo, for instance—might have said: "I'd want to kill the bastard myself. But suppose in my rage I wound up going after the wrong person?" That same year, ABC's Peter Jennings began an earlier debate by asking Dukakis to respond to the idea that he was passionless. The candidate's answer was ... passionless.

This coming debate is ripe for such "impolite" inquiries:

"Senator McCain, one of your conservative Republican colleagues in the Senate, Thad Cochran, [said](#) about you, 'The thought of his being president sends a cold chill down my spine.' The former executive director of the Arizona Republican Party said, 'Do I trust him with the button? No.' These folks on your side of the aisle aren't talking about political disputes—they're saying you don't have the temperament to be president. Shouldn't that bother voters?"

"Senator Obama, you spent 20 years in a church whose pastor—a pastor you repeatedly embraced and praised—called America inherently racist, embraced Louis Farrakhan, and spread paranoid tales about the government creating AIDS. You worked—a lot more closely than you originally described—with a man who tried to blow up federal buildings and to this day calls himself revolutionary. Why are you comfortable associating yourself with people with such a hostile view of the country you want to lead?"

And finally, if all else fails ...

Take the Phil Donahue "sayonara" route.

In 1992, Bill Clinton and former California Gov. Jerry Brown met on *The Phil Donahue Show* for a debate. Donahue introduced the contenders—and then left the stage, leaving the candidates, as "Coffee Talk's" Linda Richman might have put it, to "talk amongst yourselves." It was one of the more bracing political debates, especially when Clinton, angered by Brown's attack on Hillary Clinton's law firm work, put a finger in Brown's face and told him, "You ought to be ashamed." The only more satisfying event would have been for Clinton to punch Brown to the floor—thus depriving analysts of their favorite cliché cop-out: "There were no knockdowns."

press box

A McCain Victory Survival Kit

A just-in-case guide for reporters just in case Obama collapses.

By Jack Shafer
Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 5:34 PM ET

With *Politico* Editor-in-Chief John F. Harris [predicting](#) not just a Barack Obama win but a possible Lyndon Baines Johnson-size blowout that reduces Republicans to a token presence in Congress, the 2008 election looks to be over.

Don't accuse Harris of wishing Obama into the White House. He's a hard-news guy's hard-news guy who has hand-sifted the polls, performed the Electoral College calculus in his sleep, debriefed his reporters, and consulted every practitioner of the campaign dark arts there is. He may have captured Washington's conventional wisdom, but more often than not the conventional wisdom is right.

An Obama victory will have a million chroniclers, but how can a reporter hedge the conventional wisdom on the long shot that John McCain—the comeback geezer—climbs that ladder with a load of bricks on his back one more time and wins in November?

Over the last week, the press has actually started to hedge the Obama-landslide predictions with pieces about the so-called "Bradley effect" ([CNN](#), [Washington Post](#), [New York Times](#), [Agence France-Presse](#), and elsewhere). Named after former Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, who lost the California governor race after leading in the polls, the effect holds that voters lie to pre-election pollsters about their intentions to vote for African-American candidates.

Although some dispute the presence of a Bradley effect in the Bradley campaign (see this [pollster](#) who worked that election), the effect will be one of the biggest angles if McCain wins. Smart political reporters will have already secured election-night reservations with Bradley-effect experts, but here are angles and sources for other indemnification-minded journalists to pursue:

McCain's Michigan Miracle. The McCain campaign retreated from Michigan earlier this month when polls showed it was impossible for him to win there. According to the Quinipiac University [poll](#), McCain was behind only 48 percent to 44 percent in September, with a sampling error of plus or minus 2.7 percentage points. But after McCain ditched the Water Winter Wonderland at the beginning of [October](#), he fell seriously behind Obama—54-38. Could the new Obama margin be soft? If Obama and the Democrats take Michigan for granted, might that not depress turnout and give the state to McCain? If voters take an Obama victory for granted, might they give the ballot box a bye? *Emergency sources to contact: Michigan Republicans, [Sarah Palin](#), [Sean Oxendine](#), and David Gergen.*

The Economy Boomerang. The wiggly economy helps explain some of the recent Obama surge. But what if the massive intervention of government into markets this week, which has pushed stock exchanges upward, quiets voters' nerves? McCain just changed his [stump speech](#) to accentuate those new positives. *Emergency sources to contact: [Jim Cramer](#), [Alan Greenspan](#), [James Carville](#), and David Gergen.*

New Voter No-Shows. The number of registered Democrats is up 5 percent from 2004, says the [Associated Press](#), and the GOP has lost 2 percent of its registered voters. The Democrats enjoy a big margin in swing states, completely out-registering the GOP, the [Telegraph](#) reports. If the new voters vote in the same percentage as new voters did in 2004, Obama's prospects are good. But getting new voters to the polling stations is harder than getting seasoned ones there. How many new voters who won't actually vote are reflected in the polls? *Emergency sources to contact: [Peter Nadulli](#), [Alan I. Abramowitz](#), [Henry Brady](#) (presidential voting-patterns scholars), and David Gergen.*

Corollary: The Undecideds Weren't Really Undecided. They were really for McCain. *Emergency sources to contact: the Gallup Poll's [Jeff Jones](#), [Scott Keeter](#) at Pew, the [Mystery Pollster](#), [Mark Blumenthal](#), and David Gergen.*

The Curse of Bob Shrum. Campaign consultant Robert Shrum has never put one of his clients into the White House (Dick Gephardt, Michael Dukakis, Bob Kerrey, Al Gore, John Kerry). Why? Because of a "curse." Is the curse strong enough to turn his [prediction](#) of an Obama victory into a defeat? *Emergency sources to contact: [Shrum](#), [Mickey Kaus](#), [Joe Klein](#), palm readers, Ouija boards, and David Gergen.*

The Obama Bubble. The dot-coms turned out to be a speculative bubble. Oil turned out to be a bubble. Real estate turned out to be a bubble. The stock market turned out to be a bubble. What if all that Obama support is really a bubble, and his November collapse is really a puncture? What if the nation contracts Obama fatigue? *Emergency sources to contact: [Daniel Gross](#), [Slate](#) writer and author of [Pop: Why Bubbles Are Great for the Economy](#); [James Pethokoukis](#); [Charles Krauthammer](#); and David Gergen.*

National Security, Domestic Security, and Other October Surprises ... A dirty bomb detonates in a swing-state stadium during an NFL game. A Predator missile whacks Osama Bin Laden. Osama Bin Laden whacks New York City. [Rezko](#) drops a dime on Obama. Iran tests a bomb. U.S. hostages are taken in Syria. Israel attacks Iran. Jihadists who have seen *Dr. Strangelove* 15 or 16 times topple Pakistan. *Emergency sources to contact: [Peter Bergen](#), [Arianna Huffington](#), [Daniel Benjamin](#), [Henry Kissinger](#), [John Kerry](#), and David Gergen—if he's not too busy.*

Many thanks to *Slate's* Chris Wilson, who did everything but write this piece for me. I worship Wilson but suspect he's cheating on me with David Gergen. Send Gergen sightings to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. CNN sightings don't count. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate's* readers' forum; in a future article; or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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recycled

Baby-Sitting the Economy

The baby-sitting co-op that went bust teaches us something that could save the world.

By Paul Krugman

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 11:24 AM ET

Paul Krugman, who won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences today for his work on international trade patterns, was the lead economics columnist for Slate from the magazine's launch in 1996 to 1999, when he became a columnist for the New York Times. His "Dismal Science" column covered everything from puzzling economics of ticket scalping to the tenacity of supply-side economics in presidential campaigns. One particular favorite, which was included in Slate's 10th-anniversary anthology, is "Baby-Sitting the Economy," a column about what a failed baby-sitting cooperative in Washington, D.C., can teach us about a global economic crisis. The article is reprinted below.

Twenty years ago I read a story that changed my life. I think about that story often; it helps me to stay calm in the face of crisis, to remain hopeful in times of depression, and to resist the pull of fatalism and pessimism. At this gloomy moment, when Asia's woes seem to threaten the world economy as a whole, the lessons of that inspirational tale are more important than ever.

The story is told in an article titled "Monetary Theory and the Great Capitol Hill Baby-Sitting Co-op Crisis." Joan and Richard Sweeney published it in the *Journal of Money, Credit, and Banking* in 1978. I've used their story in two of my books, *Peddling Prosperity* and *The Accidental Theorist*, but it bears retelling, this time with an Asian twist.

The Sweeneys tell the story of—you guessed it—a baby-sitting co-op, one to which they belonged in the early 1970s. Such co-ops are quite common: A group of people (in this case about 150 young couples with congressional connections) agrees to baby-sit for one another, obviating the need for cash payments to adolescents. It's a mutually beneficial arrangement: A couple that already has children around may find that watching another couple's kids for an evening is not that much of an additional burden, certainly compared with the benefit of receiving the same service some other evening. But there must be a system for making sure each couple does its fair share.

The Capitol Hill co-op adopted one fairly natural solution. It issued scrip—pieces of paper equivalent to one hour of baby-sitting time. Baby sitters would receive the appropriate number of coupons directly from the baby sitters. This made the system self-enforcing: Over time, each couple would automatically do as much baby-sitting as it received in return. As long as the people were reliable—and these young professionals certainly were—what could go wrong?

Well, it turned out that there was a small technical problem. Think about the coupon holdings of a typical couple. During periods when it had few occasions to go out, a couple would probably try to build up a reserve—then run that reserve down when the occasions arose. There would be an averaging out of these demands. One couple would be going out when another was staying at home. But since many couples would be holding reserves of coupons at any given time, the co-op needed to have a fairly large amount of scrip in circulation.

Now what happened in the Sweeneys' co-op was that, for complicated reasons involving the collection and use of dues (paid in scrip), the number of coupons in circulation became quite low. As a result, most couples were anxious to add to their reserves by baby-sitting, reluctant to run them down by going out. But one couple's decision to go out was another's chance to baby-sit; so it became difficult to earn coupons. Knowing this, couples became even more reluctant to use their reserves except on special occasions, reducing baby-sitting opportunities still further.

In short, the co-op had fallen into a recession.

Since most of the co-op's members were lawyers, it was difficult to convince them the problem was monetary. They tried to legislate recovery—passing a rule requiring each couple to go out at least twice a month. But eventually the economists prevailed. More coupons were issued, couples became more willing to go out, opportunities to baby-sit multiplied, and everyone was happy. Eventually, of course, the co-op issued too much scrip, leading to different problems ...

If you think this is a silly story, a waste of your time, shame on you. What the Capitol Hill Baby-Sitting Co-op experienced was

a real recession. Its story tells you more about what economic slumps are and why they happen than you will get from reading 500 pages of William Greider and a year's worth of *Wall Street Journal* editorials. And if you are willing to really wrap your mind around the co-op's story, to play with it and draw out its implications, it will change the way you think about the world.

For example, suppose that the U.S. stock market was to crash, threatening to undermine consumer confidence. Would this inevitably mean a disastrous recession? Think of it this way: When consumer confidence declines, it is as if, for some reason, the typical member of the co-op had become less willing to go out, more anxious to accumulate coupons for a rainy day. This could indeed lead to a slump—but need not if the management were alert and responded by simply issuing more coupons. That is exactly what our head coupon issuer Alan Greenspan did in 1987—and what I believe he would do again. So as I said at the beginning, the story of the baby-sitting co-op helps me to remain calm in the face of crisis.

Or suppose Greenspan did not respond quickly enough and that the economy did indeed fall into a slump. Don't panic. Even if the head coupon issuer has fallen temporarily behind the curve, he can still ordinarily turn the situation around by issuing more coupons—that is, with a vigorous monetary expansion like the ones that ended the recessions of 1981-82 and 1990-91. So as I said, the story of the baby-sitting co-op helps me remain hopeful in times of depression.

Above all, the story of the co-op tells you that economic slumps are not punishments for our sins, pains that we are fated to suffer. The Capitol Hill co-op did not get into trouble because its members were bad, inefficient baby sitters; its troubles did not reveal the fundamental flaws of "Capitol Hill values" or "crony baby-sittingism." It had a technical problem—too many people chasing too little scrip—which could be, and was, solved with a little clear thinking. And so, as I said, the co-op's story helps me to resist the pull of fatalism and pessimism.

But if it's all so easy, how can a large part of the world be in the mess it's in? How, for example, can Japan be stuck in a seemingly intractable slump—one that it does not seem able to get out of simply by printing coupons? Well, if we extend the co-op's story a little bit, it is not hard to generate something that looks a lot like Japan's problems—and to see the outline of a solution.

First, we have to imagine a co-op the members of which realized there was an unnecessary inconvenience in their system. There would be occasions when a couple found itself needing to go out several times in a row, which would cause it to run out of coupons—and therefore be unable to get its babies sat—even though it was entirely willing to do lots of compensatory baby-sitting at a later date. To resolve this problem, the co-op allowed members to *borrow* extra coupons from the management in

times of need—repaying with the coupons received from [subsequent baby-sitting](#). To prevent members from abusing this privilege, however, the management would probably need to impose some penalty—requiring borrowers to repay more coupons than they borrowed.

Under this new system, couples would hold smaller reserves of coupons than before, knowing they could borrow more if necessary. The co-op's officers would, however, have acquired a new tool of management. If members of the co-op reported it was easy to find baby sitters and hard to find opportunities to baby-sit, the terms under which members could borrow coupons could be made more favorable, encouraging more people to go out. If baby sitters were scarce, those terms could be worsened, encouraging people to go out less.

In other words, this more sophisticated co-op would have a central bank that could stimulate a depressed economy by reducing the interest rate and cool off an overheated one by raising it.

But what about Japan—where the economy slumps despite interest rates having fallen almost to zero? Has the baby-sitting metaphor finally found a situation it cannot handle?

Well, imagine there is a seasonality in the demand and supply for baby-sitting. During the winter, when it's cold and dark, couples don't want to go out much but are quite willing to stay home and look after other people's children—thereby accumulating points they can use on balmy summer evenings. If this seasonality isn't too pronounced, the co-op could still keep the supply and demand for baby-sitting in balance by charging low interest rates in the winter months, higher rates in the summer. But suppose that the seasonality is very strong indeed. Then in the winter, even at a zero interest rate, there will be more couples seeking opportunities to baby-sit than there are couples going out, which will mean that baby-sitting opportunities will be hard to find, which means that couples seeking to build up reserves for summer fun will be even less willing to use those points in the winter, meaning even fewer opportunities to baby-sit ... and the co-op will slide into a recession even at a zero interest rate.

And this is the winter of Japan's discontent. Perhaps because of its aging population, perhaps also because of a general nervousness about the future, the Japanese public does not appear willing to spend enough to use the economy's capacity, even at a zero interest rate. Japan, say the economists, has fallen into the dread "liquidity trap." Well, what you have just read is an infantile explanation of what a liquidity trap is and how it can happen. And once you understand that this is what has gone wrong, the answer to Japan's problems is, of course, [quite obvious](#).

So the story of the baby-sitting co-op is not a mere amusement. If people would only take it seriously—if they could only understand that when great economic issues are at stake, whimsical parables are not a waste of time but the key to enlightenment—it is a story that could save the world.

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We could move the story a bit closer to the way real economies work by imagining that couples could borrow and lend coupons; the interest rate in this infant capital market would then play the role that the "discount rate" of the co-op management plays in the text.

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Well, maybe not so obvious. The basic problem with the winter co-op is that people want to save the credit they earn from baby-sitting in the winter to use in the summer, even at a zero interest rate. But in the aggregate, the co-op's members *can't* save up winter baby-sitting for summer use. So individual efforts to do so end up producing nothing but a winter slump.

The answer is to make it clear that points earned in the winter will be devalued if held until the summer—say, to make five hours of baby-sitting credit earned in the winter melt into only four hours by summer. This will encourage people to use their baby-sitting hours sooner and hence create more baby-sitting opportunities. You might be tempted to think there is something unfair about this—that it means expropriating people's savings. But the reality is that the co-op as a whole *cannot* bank winter baby-sitting for summer use, so it is actually distorting members' incentives to allow them to trade winter hours for summer hours on a one-for-one basis.

But what in the nonbaby-sitting economy corresponds to our coupons that melt in the summer? The answer is that an economy that is in a liquidity trap needs expected inflation—that is, it needs to convince people that the yen they are tempted to hoard will buy less a month or a year from now than they do today.

The diagnosis that Japan is in a liquidity trap—and proposals for inflation as a way out of this trap—has been widely publicized in the last few months. But they have had to contend with a deep-seated prejudice that stable prices are always desirable, that to promote inflation is to cheat the public out of its just reward for saving to create perverse and dangerous incentives. Indeed, some economists and commentators have tried to claim that despite all appearances, Japan is *not* in a liquidity trap, perhaps even that such a thing can't really happen. But the extended baby-sitting story tells us it can—and that inflation is actually the economically correct way out.

Science

Well, Excuuuuuse Meee!

Why humans are so quick to take offense, and what that means for the presidential campaign.

By Emily Yoffe

Friday, October 17, 2008, at 7:19 AM ET

"No man lives without jostling and being jostled; in all ways he has to elbow himself through the world, giving and receiving offense."—Thomas Carlyle

Rarely has it been thought that the way to show you deserve to be the most powerful person on earth is to demonstrate you're also the touchiest. This presidential campaign has been an offense fest. From the indignation over a fashion writer's observation about Hillary Clinton's [cleavage](#), to the outraged response to the infamous Obama *New Yorker* [cover](#), to the histrionics over "[lipstick on a pig](#)," taking offense has been a political leitmotif. *Slate*'s John Dickerson [observed](#) that umbrage is this year's hottest campaign tactic. And we can assume it will reach an operatic crescendo in these final weeks before Election Day.

It's often the pettiest-seeming things that drive people mad. Or worse. Jostling our way through the world can have violent consequences. A significant percentage of murders occur between acquaintances with the flash point being a [trivial insult](#). Sometimes it seems we live in a culture devoted to retribution on behalf of the thin-skinned—just think of university speech codes. Comedian Larry David even [celebrates](#) his skill at giving and taking offense on his television show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

Feeling affronted has global implications: Islamic organizations and countries seek to [ban speech](#) anywhere they decide is insulting to Islam, asserting that a perceived insult can justify a deadly response.

Study the topic of "taking offense" and you realize people are like tuning forks, ready to vibrate with indignation. So why do humans seem equipped with a thrumming tabulator, incessantly calculating whether we are getting proper due and deference?

We like to think we go through life as rational beings. Much of economic theory is based on the notion that humans make rational choices (which may mean that economists don't get out much). In 1982, some economists came up with a little game to study negotiating strategies. The results showed that rationality is subservient to more powerful drives—and demonstrated why human beings so easily conclude they are being wronged. The idea of the "[ultimatum game](#)" is simple. Player A is given 20 \$1 bills and told that, in order to keep any of the money, A must share it with Player B. If B accepts A's offer, they both pocket whatever they've agreed to. If B rejects the offer, they both get nothing. Economists naturally expected the players to do the rational thing: A would offer the lowest possible amount—\$1; and B, knowing \$1 was more than zero, would accept. Ha!

In the years the game has been played, it's been found that almost half the A's immediately offer to split the money—an offer B's accept. When A offers \$9 or even \$8, B usually says yes. But when A's offer drops to \$7, about half the B's walk away. The lower A's offer, the more likely the B's are to turn their backs on a few free dollars in favor of a more satisfying outcome: punishing the person who offended their sense of fairness. This impulse is not illogical; it is essential. In [Descartes' Error](#), neurologist Antonio Damasio shows that humans who behave purely rationally are brain-damaged. Patients who have suffered injury to the areas in the brain that control emotion, but who retain their intellectual abilities, end up acting in socially aberrant ways.

Since the 1990s, building on the work of [E.O. Wilson](#), father of sociobiology, a disparate band of researchers, from psychologists to zoologists, have been [studying](#) the origin and expression of moral emotions—our instinctive feelings of right and wrong. They say Homo sapiens did not invent morality; instead, we come equipped with it. Yes, we have to teach our children accepted rules of conduct and proper character. But Marc Hauser, a professor of psychology at Harvard, argues that they are readily able to learn because a moral template is already there, just as linguists believe children quickly pick up speech because they are born with intrinsic language-learning ability.

A paradox of human life is that the evolutionary forces that have made us cooperative and empathetic are the same ones that have made us prickly and explosive. Jonathan Haidt, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia, is a leading theorist in the field of moral psychology. He says the paired emotions of gratitude and vengeance helped us become the ultrasocial, ultrasuccessful species that we are. Gratitude allows us to expand our social network and recruit new allies; vengeance makes sure our new friends don't take advantage of us.

You could say our lives as social beings are ruled by the three R's: respect—the sense that proper deference has been paid to our status, reputation—the carefully maintained perception of our qualities, and reciprocity—the belief that our actions are responded to fairly. In other words, high school may be the most perfect recapitulation of the evolutionary pressures that shaped us as a species. Or politics. In a [Washington Post](#) article about John McCain's legendary temper, McCain acknowledged, "I've been known to forget occasionally the discretion expected of a person of my many years and station when I believe I've been *accorded a lack of respect I did not deserve*" (italics added).

For centuries, humans have believed that behaving morally required us to transcend our natures. According to 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, we are solitary savages; 18th-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw us as solitary nobles. They were both wrong, say the new theorists. If being solitary was our essential condition, writes Emory University primatologist Frans de Waal in [Primates and Philosophers](#), then solitary confinement would not be the most extreme punishment available short of the death penalty. De Waal writes: "[D]escended from highly social ancestors—a long line of monkeys and apes—we have been group-living forever. Free and equal people never existed. Humans started out—if a starting point is discernible at all—as interdependent, bonded, and unequal."

Evolutionary biologist Dario Maestriperi calls the ability of macaque monkeys to monitor and maintain their social stature "Macachiavellian intelligence." Falling down in the social order can be deadly, he [writes](#). The lowest macaques live on the edge of the group's territory, where they are bait for predators; they eat leftovers after the more powerful have had their fill; they have furtive sex when the dominants aren't looking. He argues it was the need to be ever vigilant to social nuance that was a driving force behind the leap in intelligence humans made.

It takes huge amounts of cognitive computing power just to keep track of who's doing what to whom and what that means to you. Back in the day, oh, 70,000 or so years ago, we couldn't just offload all this data processing to Facebook's algorithms. Around that time, some scholars think, the greatest advance in the ability to keep tabs on social standing happened: Humans acquired language.

Haidt writes in [The Happiness Hypothesis](#) about the theory that language allowed humans to replace grooming with gossip. "[O]nce people began gossiping, there was a runaway competition to master the arts of social manipulation, relationship aggression, and reputation management, all of which require yet more brain power." In other words, we may be less man-the-toolmaker, than man-the-offense-taker.

At a comedy club I was at once, a mild-looking woman stepped up to the mike and opened with "It's a good thing I don't own a

gun, because I would shoot everybody." She got a laugh because everyone understood the desire to respond to daily insults—a rude store clerk, an aggressive driver, a disparaging co-worker—with extreme prejudice.

Paul Bloom writes in *Descartes' Baby* of the successful social animal, "It has to live in stable groups, and must be able to recognize distinct individuals, monitor those individuals' behavior, keep track of the cheaters, and adjust its own behaviors later on so as to punish them." This ability to judge how fairly others are behaving emerges well before humans master language. This [study](#) in *Nature* by Yale psychologists J. Kiley Hamlin, Karen Wynn, and Bloom found that groups of 6-month- and 10-month-old babies watching a film could not only distinguish between characters that either helped or hindered a wooden character that was stuck, but that virtually all the babies, when given the chance, reached for the helper, not the hinderer. (Watch a video [here](#).)

Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, directors of the [Center for Evolutionary Psychology](#) at UC-Santa Barbara, have done experiments showing that when people play a game of logic—they are given a set of abstract rules and asked to select the correct cards based on the rules—most players can't figure it out. But when the rules are restated—they are told the game is about detecting violations of the legal drinking age, and the cards represent people at a bar—the majority of players can quickly solve the problem. Experiments such as this, writes neuropsychologist Michael Gazzaniga in *Human*, show that we have a finely developed ability to detect those who cheat in social exchanges.

Being on the alert for scoundrels is exhausting, and confronting those who violate social rules is potentially dangerous. But humans feel compelled to do it because without vigilance, fairness and cooperation break down. Gazzaniga cites experiments that show that individuals who take the risk of punishing cheaters enhance their own reputation within a group. (Here's a real-life [example](#).)

Humans' sense of indignation is not just limited to violations against us. Even if you're able-bodied, think of how offended you feel when you see another able-bodied person pull into a handicapped parking spot. Most of us will just walk on, quietly irate, but a few will yell at the driver. These moral enforcers are vital to society. Frans de Waal writes that experiments with macaques show that if you remove the individuals who perform this policing function, hostilities increase among the entire band.

According to researchers, calibrating our responses to social interactions usually occurs below our conscious awareness. Yale psychologist John Bargh says getting on with life would be unmanageable if we didn't have a constantly running, under-the-surface sense of how to respond to situations. In his experiments, [Bargh](#) has shown that many of our social judgments and actions

are automatic, and after the fact our brains make up a justification. [For example](#), he and colleagues flashed synonyms for rudeness or politeness at two groups of subjects at speeds faster than could be consciously registered. Later, the subjects were deliberately left to wait, ignored while the person who conducted the experiment engaged in a conversation. The people primed by the rude words interrupted at a rate more than three times that of the people primed for politeness.

We also are subject to a powerful need to mirror others. Bloom writes that this emerges on the first day of life—stick out your tongue at a newborn, and the infant is likely to stick its out in response. This imitative impulse lays the groundwork for empathy. But it also means that when someone confronts us with a nasty tone, we can end up mimicking it without even meaning to.

Across cultures, the traditional moral disciplinarian has been religion. Many of the researchers studying the origins of human moral emotions and behaviors say religion does not create morality; it is building on pre-existing patterns. University of Cambridge scientist Robert Hinde notes in *Why Gods Persist* that every human society has a code of conduct, and that code is usually "legitimated, purveyed, and stabilised by the religious system." Both Hinde and Haidt warn of the dangers of believing that new research on evolutionary morality means science has made religion obsolete. Haidt [writes](#) that natural selection must have "favored the success of individuals and groups that found ways (genetic or cultural or both) to use these gods to their advantage, for example as commitment devices that enhanced cooperation, trust, and mutual aid."

Most religions offer precepts that seek to dampen our touchy, selfish side. Confucius was asked, "Is there one word that can serve as a principle of conduct for life?" He replied, "It is the word 'shu'—reciprocity." Leviticus says, "Love your fellow as yourself." And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke the Golden Rule: "So in everything do unto others what you would have them do to you." But a recurring source of offense is that while people can easily live with the fact that they fall short on "doing unto others," they often find it intolerable when others are not properly doing unto them.

Humans have superb abilities to evaluate the defects of everyone else. The glitch, Haidt says, is that we're blind to our own flaws. He points out that Jesus used this very metaphor when he said, "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." Haidt says we think that our perception of events is the objective truth, while everyone else's version is deluded by their self-interest.

It is at the intersection between the urge for cooperation and desire for self-interest that we experience so much internal turmoil and external conflict. Observing how others handle this

balance has a great deal to do with how we judge their trustworthiness and their fitness. The presidential candidates present us with two stark leadership approaches: the cool, slow-to-anger reserve of Barack Obama; and the aggressive, man-of-honor style of John McCain. People instinctively weigh whether a leader who's laid back makes them worry that he won't stand up to enemies. And they consider that a hot-headed leader may be intimidating to foes, but that he also might create more of them.

Since the rest of us don't have a legion of advisers trying to help us calibrate our response to daily hostilities, is there a way for us to turn off the radar that's constantly scanning for offense? Not really. Being tuned in to the social clues around us is necessary. What we can work at is dialing down our response. Haidt advises that being aware of the forces that shaped and shape us can help us from letting them get the better of us.

"Once we're angry, irritated, we become prosecutors, and our reasoning gets hijacked by our need to build our own case," he says. So he suggests we can stop the prosecution by making even a small gesture of conciliation. We don't have to acknowledge we are wholly in the wrong, but changing our tone, conceding we shouldn't have said something, or said it in such a way, can trigger the reciprocity impulse in our opponent.

Some researchers recommend that when it comes to feeling offended, we could benefit from becoming a little bit Buddhist. Stephanie Preston, head of the University of Michigan's Ecological Neuroscience Lab, says: "The more attached you are to your sense of self, the more you see forces trying to attack that self. If you have a more Buddhist view, and are less attached to self, you are less likely to see offense."

Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron illustrates this in her book [Comfortable With Uncertainty](#). She retells the parable of a man in a boat enjoying the serenity of the river at dusk. He sees another boat coming his way and is glad that someone else is sharing his pleasure. Then he realizes the other boat is heading toward him. He starts yelling to the boatman to turn aside, but the vessel just keeps coming faster and faster. "By this time he's standing up in his boat, screaming and shaking his fist, and then the boat smashes right into him. He sees that it's an empty boat. This is the classic story of our whole life situation. There are a lot of empty boats out there."

Emily Yoffe received research support for this article from a [Templeton-Cambridge journalism fellowship in science and religion](#).

slate v

Damned Spot: History of Negativity

A daily video from *Slate V*

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 3:35 PM ET

slate v

From the First to the Last Debate in Four Minutes

A daily video from *Slate V*

Wednesday, October 15, 2008, at 12:37 PM ET

slate v

Dear Prudence: Clingy Boyfriend

A daily video from *Slate V*

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 11:49 AM ET

sports nut

It's the Thinking Man's Game, Stupid

What's with all the dumb baseball commentary on television?

By Ben Mathis-Lilley

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 11:35 AM ET

During the baseball playoffs, the best place to see comprehensive highlights of all the games is ESPN's *Baseball Tonight*. Just make sure to watch with the sound off, lest lead analyst John Kruk pulverize the parts of your brain responsible for logical reasoning. Kruk is a champion of the indefensible, the nonsensical, and the utterly pointless who once called [Placido Polanco the toughest out in the American League](#) (he isn't) and said that [Brett Myers' arrest for hitting his wife in the face](#) would "propel him to stand up and be the ace of [the Phillies'] staff" (it didn't, which is probably a good thing). Last week, Kruk's *SportsCenter* segment on the Tampa Bay Rays concluded with the meaningful observation that they are "a special team that can do special things."

This would all be more shocking if Kruk wasn't on a baseball broadcast, where such statements are the coin of the realm. While ESPN is the most egregious offender, the pre- and post-game shows on TBS and Fox aren't much better. TBS's cacophonously uninformative production features former pros Dennis Eckersley, Harold Reynolds, and Cal Ripken Jr. yelling excitedly at one another for a half hour, like a better-natured but equally unintelligible version of *Crossfire*. Meanwhile, Fox lead analyst Kevin Kennedy summed up the Dodgers' Game 2 NLCS loss to the Phillies by observing that the team "went away from good pitches," urging them to include more good pitches in their

Game 3 plan. And Kennedy is a markedly *better* analyst than his colleague Mark Grace.

It's telling that pretty much every football show on television is brainier than today's baseball fodder. Kruk's ESPN colleague Ron Jaworski is the best example of the comparatively happy state of football TV. Not content to provide commentary on *SportsCenter* and *Monday Night Football*, for which he's the main color man, Jaworski headlines [NFL Matchup](#), a show in which he sometimes spends up to five minutes excitedly explaining a single play. Two weeks ago, for example, he pointed out that a Steelers left guard had failed to block an Eagles linebacker because he'd blitzed in single file behind a teammate, shielding himself from the guard's view—the kind of detail that someone who'd never played the game would never notice. Compare this with player-turned-analyst Eric Young's scouting report on C.C. Sabathia from a recent *Baseball Tonight*. "He can dominate with the inside fastball as well as the outside fastball," Young said, over video of Sabathia throwing a curveball.

Jaworski is good at his job, but he's not one-of-a-kind. There's a similarly microscopic show on the NFL Network called *Playbook*, and even more conventional highlights-and-punditry programs like *Inside the NFL* and *Football Night in America* feature smart breakdowns from the likes of ex-Ravens coach Brian Billicch and former Bengals wide receiver Cris Collinsworth.

Why is there more intelligence on display in a week of football shows than in a year of *Baseball Tonight*? I put the question to a few TV producers who've worked on football shows. "Like most things, it's basically that a few people—Collinsworth, Jaws—are just smarter and work harder than anyone else," said one producer who's worked on *Inside the NFL*. That might sound like a tautology—football shows are better because they have better talent—until one considers the sheer size of the football-industrial complex, which supports regular coverage on three different networks and a full-time cable channel. *Baseball Tonight* might rotate between four or five analysts in a season; that's about one-third of the number of commentators who show up on a single episode of *Football Night in America*. [There are so many guys on TV talking about football](#) that some of them are bound to be smart. (Although [some of them are bound to be Emmitt Smith](#).) And with so many fans, football shows can afford to devote screen time to relatively esoteric subjects that will appeal to the die-hards. With [baseball's playoff games routinely rated lower than regular-season football](#), producers have obviously decided to appeal to the dreaded "casual fan."

There are some savvy baseball analysts. *Baseball Tonight* employs several experts with actual expertise: Hall of Fame writer Peter Gammons, lovably excitable reporter Tim Kurkjian, and ESPN.com regulars Buster Olney and Jayson Stark all make occasional appearances. While none would be classified as a

stathead, they've all done enough homework to be conversant with the latest thinking on the game. In one segment that ran before the playoffs began, for example, Gammons mentioned that several teams keep advanced defensive stats that indicate that the Rays' Carl Crawford is far and away the league's best left fielder. But such moments of researched insight are the exception on ESPN's baseball broadcasts.

It isn't simply a matter of ESPN mismanaging its personnel. When I raised the matter with Brian Powell from the Web site [Awful Announcing](#), who subjects himself to more TV sports commentary than any other man alive, he made the simple but important observation that a strikeout isn't as visually interesting as a murderous safety blitz, especially when it's replayed five times. That's why football is so much more popular than baseball in the first place, of course; it has more action, and that action is more easily captured on television. It doesn't help that recent advances in understanding baseball are more related to top-down analysis—how to compare players to one another and predict how they'll perform—than they are to moment-to-moment gameplay. In baseball, a breakdown of a single at-bat often boils down to "first he threw the ball to the left, then he threw the ball to the right." There are certainly interesting points to be made about game strategy, but those kinds of discussions—whether to bunt or pinch-hit, how to deploy a left-handed reliever—tend to be handled best by in-game color commentators, who can take advantage of the game's languorous pace to unspool the various possibilities. (The game's pacing cuts both ways, allowing Joe Morgan to be as expansively dumb as, for example, the Mets' color team of Ron Darling and Keith Hernandez is expansively insightful.)

Nevertheless, I'm convinced that there's room in the market for a smarter show about the national pastime. My imaginary show would ignore the axiom that the highlight is king—frankly, I don't think most fans will really miss those clips of a guy hitting a ball followed by a clip of a ball landing in the stands. (Unless a guy catches it in his beer or while holding his kid or something—everyone loves that stuff!) Instead, my show would take a cue from sites like *Baseball Prospectus* and *Hardball Times* and put crucial decisions in context. Consider BP's [observation](#) that the Angels-Red Sox series turned on three characteristically bold base-running decisions by the Angels that all turned out badly, which they used to illustrate the point that Mike Scioscia's managerial style has not kept up with the particular skills of his roster. Or their [breakdown](#) of the Phillies-Dodgers NLCS, which observed that the Phils' decision to bat Chase Utley and Ryan Howard in succession will allow Joe Torre to use his left-handed specialist, Joe Beimel, against both of them in key spots. It isn't as if this kind of analysis can't be put together on short notice—you just need analysts who aren't John Kruk.

swingers

Obama vs. McCain vs. Gay Marriage

In California, the presidential race is taking a back seat to gay marriage.

By Farhad Manjoo

Wednesday, October 15, 2008, at 4:00 PM ET

No one doubts that Barack Obama will win California by a [double-digit margin](#) this year. In some northern counties, he may well hit 90 percent. Yet politics in this nonswing blue state still defy prediction. California's 2008 ballot is a thicket of closely contested, closely watched social issues. And on some of the biggest questions, blue voters—in one case, the very same voters that Obama is counting on—look ready to swing red.

Among other state initiatives, Californians will vote on a measure to ban gay marriage; to require parental notification for abortions for minors; and to institute a program of rehabilitation, rather than incarceration, for nonviolent drug offenders. Even the beasts have a stake in the election: [Proposition 2](#) requires that cows, pigs, chickens, and other farm animals "be allowed, for the majority of the day, to fully extend their limbs or wings, lie down, stand up and turn around." (The *New York Times* has [come out in favor](#) of the measure, while a number of local papers, including the *Los Angeles Times*, oppose it on grounds that it'll damage the state's huge agriculture industry.) In surveys, [a large majority](#) of voters say they'll pull the lever in the animals' favor.

But on the question of whether human beings will be allowed to lie down and extend their limbs with whomever they please, Californians are much more uncertain. In 2000, residents [voted overwhelmingly](#) to ban same-sex marriage. The state Supreme Court struck down that initiative this spring, saying such a ban required a change to the state constitution, and gay couples up and down the coast have been marrying ever since. Now comes Proposition 8, which would enshrine a ban on same-sex marriage into the California Constitution.

[Early polls](#) showed the measure tanking. Liberals were buoyed: Not only were they going to win the White House; they would also see their neighbors repudiate the 2000 vote and embrace an unmistakably libertine (if not strictly "liberal") social policy. But over the last month, proponents of Proposition 8 have pulled in more campaign cash ([40 percent](#) of it from Mormons) and launched an [aggressive TV ad campaign](#). Now the anti-gay-marriage measure looks [likely to pass](#). Says Yvette Martinez, political director of [No on 8](#): "I think maybe we got a little complacent."

There's an interesting demographic wrinkle to the debate over Proposition 8. Obama has come out [against the measure](#)—but his supporters are another matter. The Democrat is expected to bring a surge of black and Latino voters to the polls on Election

Day. This [spells trouble](#) for gay marriage; in [some surveys](#) (PDF), minority voters have expressed much greater support for banning same-sex marriage than have whites. Chip White, a spokesman for the [pro-Proposition 8 campaign](#), stopped short of saying that Obama's presence on the ballot will help the measure. But he did point out that the campaign plans a big push in minority communities, especially through churches and other religious networks. "Traditional marriage initiatives have historically been supported by African-Americans," he says. "We think this one will be no different."

Martinez of the anti-Proposition 8 campaign, meanwhile, says that her side has also begun to tap minority communities, and several prominent black ministers as well as [La Opinión](#), the large Spanish-language Los Angeles daily, oppose the gay-marriage ban. Still, Martinez concedes, minority voters could be a problem. "We think these communities have to hear our message a little stronger," she says.

Late last month, the Proposition 8 campaign hit on what seems to be its most effective argument against gay marriage: that if the court's ruling stands, kindergartners will be "indoctrinated" into the gay lifestyle. They've pushed the message in a couple of [goofily creative TV ads](#) now blanketing the airwaves. The more outrageous spot features a girl who comes home from school to show her mother a book her teacher has given her—[King & King](#), a fairy tale about a young prince who doesn't show much interest in getting together with a princess. "I learned how a prince can marry a prince and I can marry a princess!" the girl in the ad tells her mother. An announcer declares that under California law, schools are required to teach kids about marriage, and that even if parents object, "teaching children about gay marriage will happen here unless we pass Proposition 8." The Proposition 8 slogan: "Protect Our Children. Restore Marriage."

The first time I saw these ads, I thought Proposition 8 was sunk: Is this the best the anti-gay marriage side can muster? An obviously tangential ["Think of the children!"](#) campaign? What's more, the ad is [misleading](#): Although state law offers [health-education guidelines](#) for school districts to follow, it does not mandate a curriculum, and it [explicitly allows](#) parents to pull children out of any health classes they may find objectionable. In the summer, when the Proposition 8 campaign attempted to add language about schools teaching gay marriage on the statewide ballot pamphlet, a Sacramento Court found the claim ["false and misleading."](#)

But then, last week, a school in San Francisco arranged for a class of first graders to [take a field trip to City Hall](#) to toss rose petals and blow bubbles at their lesbian teacher's wedding. The trip, which has set conservative blogs on fire, seemed tailor-made to prop up the anti-gay marriage side's argument—San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, whose cocky stand on the issue [doesn't play well](#) in other parts of the state, even officiated

at the wedding. In May, Newsom told a cheering crowd of supporters that gay marriage is going to be legal "[whether you like it or not](#)," a quote that has ended up in ads by people who don't like it. Now the Proposition 8 campaign has a concrete example of schoolkids being forced to hew to San Francisco's gay agenda, and they're sure to pummel voters with that message in the days before the election.

From afar, California is often seen as a liberal haven. Sure, Bill Clinton won the state [by 14 points](#) in 1992, and ever since, the state's electoral horde—55 votes, 20 percent of the threshold necessary to win the White House—have been a lock for Democrats. Yet between 1952 and 1988, the Golden State burned [bright red](#), voting for a Democratic presidential candidate only once (Lyndon Johnson in 1964). Nixon and Reagan—homestate boys—won handily, and in 1988, George H.W. Bush [eked out a respectable margin](#). And voters here have a history of passing conservative ballot initiatives. Yes, we've legalized medical marijuana and funded stem cell research; but we have also [severely restricted property taxes](#), denied [medical services to illegal immigrants](#), prohibited [affirmative action at public universities](#), and forced sex offenders to [wear GPS tracking devices](#). Californians have twice rejected measures to require minors to inform their parents before seeking abortions, but polls suggest that the proposal will [pass this year](#).

At least 11,000 same-sex couples have gotten married in California since the summer, and now many are [rushing to get hitched](#) before their fellow citizens close the door for good. Slots for gay weddings at San Francisco City Hall are booked through the election. Ceremonies take place every Friday. Whether those marriages will still be legal if Proposition 8 passes is a matter of intense legal debate. But for now, at least, watching the brides and grooms stream out of the rotunda is a wonderful way to spend the afternoon.

swingers

It's the Little Things

In the New Mexico presidential race, no town is too small to matter.

By Jacob Leibenluft

Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 6:29 PM ET

STEINS, N.M.—There is no sign of political life in Steins, where I start my tour of New Mexico. In fact there is no sign of life at all: [Steins is a ghost town](#). Even worse, it's a ghost town that has effectively been reghosted—it appears to have once been open to tourists but has since been fenced off from any possible trespassers.

That's about the only way a place can be ignored by the presidential campaign in New Mexico. My swing-state tour began in New Mexico's southwest corner, at the first exit off the interstate, and ended at its northeast edge. All along my route, I found that there was almost no place too small to matter. Barack Obama's operation has set up shop in towns like [Hatch](#), [Chama](#), and Aztec that outpopulate Steins by only a few thousand. It's not hard to see why. In 2000, Gore won the state by [a margin of 366 votes](#). By comparison, 2004 was a landslide for Bush, who carried New Mexico's five electoral votes with an [edge of 5,988 ballots](#). Campaigns in New Mexico have gotten used to thinking in small numbers.

Southern New Mexico presents the ultimate challenge to a campaign that is counting on its ground game: It's got a lot of ground and not many people. New Mexico's 2nd Congressional District—which covers the southern half of the state—is bigger than Pennsylvania. It's very rural and very conservative. When I arrive in the town of Deming, another 80 miles down the road, the local Luna County Democratic Party chairman, Fred Williams, tells me that his county—unlike many others in southern New Mexico—has a substantial Democratic registration advantage. But when it comes to presidential and congressional races, many of those voters lean GOP. (The county, which is heavily agricultural and nearly 60 percent Hispanic, went to Bush by 824 votes in 2004.) This year, Williams thinks the challenge is winning over older Democratic women who helped carry the county for Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary but tell him "they still are not completely comfortable supporting Obama."

SOMEWHERE ON INTERSTATE 10—With two competitive House races, an open Senate seat, and the state's electoral votes up for grabs, I've heard approximately 267 campaign ads on the radio before even making my first night's stop in Las Cruces. The prize for Most Obscure Reference goes to Rep. Steve Pearce, the Republican candidate for Senate who currently represents southern New Mexico in Congress. His ad attacks his opponent as "breathtakingly liberal" for failing to condemn a French city for naming a street after the murderer of an American police officer. (I'm confused, too, although I think the ad is referring to [this](#).) NRA ads warning about the implications of an Obama administration for gun rights are nearly ubiquitous. And the Obama campaign seems to be fighting for the same turf, running [a spot](#) featuring the head of the American Hunters and Shooters Association vouching for the Illinois senator.

LAS CRUCES—As southern New Mexico goes, Las Cruces is about as liberal as it gets. It's home to New Mexico State University, as well as a growing community of East Coast transplants who have moved here for the weather. But for a good example of New Mexico's ideological diversity, consider this: Santa Fe, in the northern part of the state, was one of the first cities in the country to [pass a living-wage ordinance](#). Las Cruces, on the other hand, doesn't yet have curbside recycling. I learn

this while attending a neighborhood meeting hosted by the Las Cruces mayor when Phil Washburn asks him when the city will finally get its act together and start collecting his bottles and cans.

Washburn—who works for the university's Campus Crusade for Christ—is a veteran swing-state voter. In 2004, when he was living in Ohio, he voted for Bush. But he's not so sure this time around. "McCain is somewhat old politics, and we definitely need a change," Washburn says as he holds his baby daughter. "Obama is a great orator. ... But I don't want to be told what I want to hear. I want to hear where you are going to take the country."

ALBUQUERQUE—When I pass through town in late September, I find that many New Mexican political leaders are a little hesitant to talk to an out-of-town reporter. The reason: Nobody wants to become the next Fernando C. de Baca.

When I arrived in New Mexico, C. de Baca was still chairman of the Republican Party in Bernalillo County, which includes Albuquerque and accounts for a little less than a third of the state's population. By the time I left Albuquerque, he had resigned. His downfall was the result of an [interview](#) he had given earlier that month to a BBC reporter doing his own tour of the state. "The truth is that Hispanics came here as conquerors," he said. "African-Americans came here as slaves. ... Hispanics consider themselves above blacks. They won't vote for a black president."

C. de Baca's remarks are eventually condemned by just about everyone in the state's political establishment, and after a week of controversy, he finally resigns. But the one-time chairman isn't the first person to question how New Mexico's unique demographic composition will affect the state's political fortunes. (Indeed, Republicans [ask where the outrage was](#) when a Clinton-supporting state senator said in the spring she didn't know a single Hispanic over 50 who would vote for Obama.) State Sen. Rod Adair, a Republican from Roswell who is a demographer in his day job, points out that New Mexico is one of the most unusual states in the nation "demographically" (he should know), meaning [its makeup](#) diverges the most from the U.S. population as a whole. (Hawaii is probably the only state any weirder.) About 44 percent of its population—and 37 percent of the eligible voters—are Hispanic, and almost 10 percent are Native American.

When New Mexico gets national coverage, the question of who will win the Hispanic vote often gets the bulk of the attention. But thinking about a "Hispanic vote" in New Mexico doesn't make all that much sense. Many Hispanic families in the northern part of the state have lived there since long before New Mexico joined the union, and according to University of New Mexico professor Gabriel Sanchez, they tend to identify themselves as being of Spanish origin; by contrast, southern

New Mexicans are far more likely to call themselves Mexican-Americans. (These Latino voters are also different than their counterparts nationwide: Compared with other states with large Hispanic populations, [fewer New Mexicans were born outside the United States](#). [PDF]) Hispanics in the north have voted overwhelmingly for Democratic presidential candidates since FDR. In the south and in Albuquerque—as in Luna County—they may register as Democrats but consider voting Republican at the top of the ticket.

Still, the demographics of New Mexico present a challenge for McCain. The Native American population tends to vote overwhelmingly for Democrats. That means McCain has to win a sizable percentage of Hispanics across the state—probably at least 40 percent—to stand a shot at carrying New Mexico. Recent poll numbers aren't promising: [An Albuquerque Journal survey](#) showed just 21 percent of likely Hispanic voters going for McCain, compared to 62 percent for Obama. Likewise, McCain probably [needs to keep Obama's margin of victory small](#) in the fast-growing Albuquerque metro region—another problem area according to the *Journal* poll, which showed Obama up 51 percent to 34 percent. (Among all likely voters, *Journal* polling [shows Obama up five points](#).)

The weeklong brouhaha surrounding C. de Baca may fade from memory by Election Day, but it probably didn't help in either matter. In downtown Bernalillo, a few miles north of Albuquerque, Democrat Kenneth Estrada tells me that Hispanic voters don't want to be told they are racist. "He has got a lot of Spanish people angry about that," Estrada says as he sits outside a corner store. "It was a very racial remark—very stupid."

SANTA FE—The mariachi band has been playing in the parking lot of PC's Restaurant for about an hour now, and it is starting to look bored. The rest of us are asking two questions: When will Caroline Kennedy show up? And where's the rest of the crowd?

In the Obama campaign's defense, the event was scheduled at the last minute. Kennedy was slated to appear at only a few private fundraisers—and many of the press reports about her visit erroneously said the event wasn't open to the public. By the time Kennedy makes her very brief remarks, the parking lot still isn't very full, but Obama staffers gamely insist they are happy with the turnout of 175 or so.

The campaign's concerns about turnout run deeper. The Democrats start with a huge advantage in northern New Mexico—but will they show up? Kerry won 65 percent of the vote in nearby Rio Arriba County, for example, but turnout was only 60 percent—less than it had been for the 2002 elections and [significantly lower than in the Republican strongholds](#) in the south and east. Hector Balderas, an up-and-coming Democrat who was elected state auditor in 2006, says that the key to winning the state may lie in just getting a few tiny communities in the north to come out and vote. (Balderas knows what he is

talking about. He comes from Wagon Mound, population 369.) And compared with the Kerry campaign, which according to Balderas sent organizers to his part of the state just days before the election, the Obama campaign seems to be doing a better job of creating connections with the voters here. Obama himself has [visited Espanola](#) in Rio Arriba County, and his campaign has established a presence in smaller towns. "It sends a message that he's not forgetting rural, northern New Mexico," Balderas says. "That's what Hispanics like. That's how you earn their loyalty."

SPRINGER—The population of Colfax County, County Commissioner Bill Conley tells me, is "14,000, give or take one or two." As Conley describes it, it mirrors the first counties I drove through when I entered the state—Democrats outnumber Republicans, but they don't always stick to the party line. "They are very conservative on the issues," Conley says. "A lot of these people are ranchers—they want less government, they resent more regulation."

Colfax County has a notable distinction: It is the only county to vote for the statewide winner, going blue in 2000 before shifting red in 2004. Conley, a Republican running for his second term this year, takes a certain pride in that. "I carried 52 percent of the vote, and [Bush] carried 51 percent. So I always joke about who carried who," he says. This year, Conley sounds confident about his own re-election campaign. But in a presidential race that has already seen Obama up by [a little](#) in statewide polls, Obama up by [a lot](#), McCain up by [a little](#), and now Obama back up by a few points, Conley's not placing any bets on the outcome. "It's going to be a close race, and I can't tell you what the outcome is going to be," Conley says. "My feeling—when I'm out there—is it could go either way."

Forty miles down the road, as I drive through Raton—the last real stop before Colorado—it's not hard to understand why Conley thinks he'll see another close election. Raton has field offices for both parties. It also has fewer than 8,000 people. But in New Mexico, history suggests that's territory worth fighting over.

swingers

Have I Got the Candidate for You!

How the real-estate market could turn Florida for Obama.

By Emily Yoffe

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 5:14 PM ET

TAMPA, Fla.—Driving central Florida's foreclosure road is to see economic anxiety made concrete: miles and miles of concrete. Along the Interstate 4 corridor, aquatically named housing developments (*Bays, Beaches, Points, Isles, Vistas*) pile

up, one twisting cul-de-sac after another bristling with "For Sale" signs.

It may not be selling, but this is among the most coveted political real estate in the country. And it is creating anxiety for the presidential campaign of John McCain. After two consecutive Bush victories—the president won notoriously in 2000 by 537 votes and comfortably in 2004 by 380,978 votes—Florida was expected to stay in the Republican column in 2008. As the national and global economies have deteriorated, however, Barack Obama's prospects in Florida have improved. The latest polls show him up almost four percentage points, a dramatic reversal of McCain's more-than-six-point lead just a month ago.

Whether Obama can make his lead last till Election Day is a question not even a Tampa real-estate speculator would venture to answer. But on the theory that Florida real-estate agents are at least as in touch with the state's political mood as Florida political consultants, I decided to tour the landscape with Lynn Mooney, 63, a Realtor who has been selling in the Tampa area for 24 years.

Realtors are trained to be optimists, so Mooney puts a good face on the fact that her income has dropped 75 percent from a high of \$200,000 before the 2005 crash to \$50,000 now. Because she doesn't trust any Democrat to let her keep much of what's left, she's voting for McCain, but not enthusiastically. She thinks he has run his campaign like "a spoiled brat misbehaving for attention." Once a Bush fan, she is no longer ("The economy didn't just happen, it has been a problem for three years—*hello!*") and now is disenchanted with all politicians.

Still, Mooney says that Realtors tend to be believers in free markets and small government, so they naturally trend Republican. But "this year may be different," she says. "I am seeing more and more Obama pins on fiscally conservative people."

Richard Scher, a professor of political science at the University of Florida, confirms that without the growing economic fears, I wouldn't be talking to him about how Florida will go because McCain would have taken it out of play. "The mood in Florida is very different from 2000 and 2004," he says. "Then we were a confident, wealthy state. Now we're broke. I've been here 30 years, and I haven't seen Floridians this anxious in a long time." He says older people are worried about their pensions and 401(k)s, and his students are wondering if there will be jobs for them when they graduate.

Back to real estate: True to form, Mooney has arranged for me to see some very attractive properties. "We should go by some waterfront property," she says. "There's a development that's just gorgeous—every other house there is in foreclosure. We could

look at the senior housing market. That started the boom, and now it's dead." According to the Mortgage Bankers Association, in the second quarter of this year, 6 percent of Florida's residential mortgage loans were in foreclosure, leading the nation.

Mooney blames everyone (although, like most Realtors, not Realtors) for this mess. "Both parties were enablers, everybody was an enabler. I fault everyone, not just the government." She cites the unscrupulous lenders who pushed people to purchase homes beyond their means and the economists who said the housing market would float like helium.

But most of all, she blames it on a source politicians generally don't mention: average Americans. She blames the buyers who treated their houses as if they were ATMs, withdrawing cash from the mortgages they piled up. "People today don't ever expect to pay off anything. Houses, cars, anything." She blames the regular folks who decided they had a little Donald Trump in them and became real-estate "investors"—buying multiple properties to flip for quick profits.

We drive to Sun City Center, an age-restricted "active adult" community where residents who've lost their driver's licenses can cruise the highway in golf carts. We stop in front of a foreclosed home that is listed for \$140,000; the couple who owned it owe almost \$300,000 on it. "They took out loans against it and went on vacations and bought clothes and cars," she explains. Then the mortgages adjusted, and they walked away. It's a story she can repeat for mile after mile.

The I-4 corridor is to political consultants what Gettysburg is to Civil War buffs—a slice of land where battles can be forever studied and re-enacted. Running from Tampa on the Gulf Coast through the theme parks of Orlando to the Atlantic beaches of Daytona, this is where more than 40 percent of the state's voters live. Of them, 20 percent are independents with the rest almost evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans.

If Florida is a swing state, then this is its "swing corridor," says Susan MacManus, a professor of political science at the University of South Florida. "It's the most predictive of how the state will go." To win Florida's 27 electoral votes, Scher says, Obama must both turn out his voters in Florida's big urban counties and capture the hearts of the people along I-4 who have trouble making up their minds. "That's where the dynamic is," he says. "If Obama gets them, he wins."

(Keep in mind that in Florida every group is touted as the one that could tip the state: blacks, Hispanics, Jews, retirees, white women, young people. Hey, if it's as close as it was in 2000, this could be the year of the felon. To the consternation of some in his party, last year Republican Gov. Charlie Crist [made it legal](#) for ex-convicts to vote, and since then [about 120,000](#) have had their voting rights restored. As University of Florida economist

David Denslow observes, "Most felons are not Republicans. If they are, they've retired to Bermuda.")

In modern Florida history Democrats have always maintained a voter-registration edge over Republicans, but many of these Democrats are conservatives who have helped put successive popular Republican governors—Jeb Bush and Charlie Crist—in office and have no trouble crossing party lines to cast a presidential vote. But Democrats are hoping a [vast voter-registration effort](#) this year, which has widened the Democratic advantage to more than 500,000 so far, will produce new Democratic voters who will actually vote for the Democrat. It looks promising. As the *Washington Post* points out, as of Sept. 1, more new Florida voters registered as independents (155,000) than as Republicans (129,000), and newly registered Democrats exceeded both of those combined (316,000).

After my tour with Mooney, I decide to check the multiple-listing service, so to speak: I meet for breakfast with a group of Realtors at the Greater Tampa Association of Realtors headquarters. The association has 7,518 members; since the bust of 2005, it's shed nearly 500—people who found the professional optimism of Realtors no match for reality. Two-thirds of Floridians aren't from Florida, and, like good Floridians, most of my breakfast mates are originally from someplace else. This transience is another factor that makes Florida's voters so hard to pin down. Stanley Smith, a professor of economics at the University of Florida, estimates that almost 20 percent of this year's Florida voters will be new voters—either they've arrived since the last presidential election, or they've become old enough to vote.

Sandy Streit, who's in her 50s, is a registered Democrat and former Hillary Clinton supporter. After Clinton withdrew, she took a long look at McCain because she thought of him as a moderate. His choice of Sarah Palin pushed her decisively to Obama: "It's not difficult anymore. Let's vote." But Jo Easton, who'd rather not reveal her age, a registered Democrat and also a former Clinton supporter, is worried about Obama's lack of experience and is voting for McCain. "I want someone who will keep my home safe," she says, and by that she's not just talking real estate. "I think McCain would push the button. I don't think Obama would." Pamela Terrell, 53, is a black woman who was also a Clinton supporter. It took her a while to warm up to Obama, but now she's convinced: "He's shown exemplary character, attitude, confidence."

My totally random Realtor sample showed conclusively why the state remains a tossup: four for McCain, three for Obama, and one undecided.

Obama's strategy to turn this state back to the Democratic column for the first time since Bill Clinton won in 1996 is to never leave Florida voters alone for a second. He's going to spend almost \$40 million here; McCain's campaign is [spending](#)

[\\$25 million](#)—many millions of which it thought it would be able to spend elsewhere. Obama has about 50 field offices; [John Kerry had 14](#) in 2004. In the first week of October, Obama [poured \\$2.8 million](#) into television advertising in the state; McCain spent \$623,000. During my time in Tampa, I didn't see a single McCain television spot. But watching back-to-back episodes of *What Not To Wear* left the impression the show was sponsored by the Obama health care plan.

A [New York Times](#) reporter found that, over the course of two weeks of visits to the candidates' field offices across the state, there were consistently more volunteers at Obama's than McCain's. The day I dropped by Obama's Tampa office, a warren of rooms in a building on the edge of downtown, people were streaming in. "Do you want to do 'woman to woman' calls?" a young man asked an older woman who came through the door. In one room was a group of people hunched over laptops doing data entry. In another were women on the phone—presumably to other women.

A few miles away was McCain's office. In the parlance of real estate, it was magnificent: hi ceils, rvr vu. From the phone bank, one could see where the Hillsborough River meets Tampa Bay. But there were no volunteers on the phones to admire the view.

Both the Realtor and the political scientist believe that it's McCain's and Obama's job to convince Florida voters that they can stop the roof from caving in. "Unless we get real estate moving again," says Lynn Mooney, "it doesn't matter who's in office." Or, as Richard Scher puts it: "The whole state floats on real estate. The winner will inspire confidence about fixing the real-estate collapse."

In other words, the winner in Florida may well be the candidate who offers the best answer to a simple question: What do I have to do to get you in this house today?

technology

The 18 Things You Need for Your Computer

My favorite programs and Web services.

By Farhad Manjoo

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 4:54 PM ET

A few months ago, I downloaded [RescueTime](#), a hardworking little program that monitors everything I do on my computer. Its ostensible purpose is productivity: By cataloging my pursuits—how much time I spend on every application, how long I linger at every Web site—RescueTime aims to shame me into procrastinating less. During the last three months, for instance,

I've logged 34 hours on *Slate*. Thirty-four hours! Not that *Slate* isn't fun, but I could have read *Anna Karenina* in that time. Curses, "Explainer"!

So far, RescueTime hasn't increased my productivity one iota, but its reports are still illuminating. Since July 21, when I installed the app, I've spent 727 hours on my desktop computer. That's 30 full days out of just 87—one-third of my life whiled away at the screen. It's a wonder that I haven't developed pressure sores.

What I've found most fascinating is the rundown of which programs I use most often. It's a huge list, actually, and one that I thought might be fun to share. Here's what I'm betting: Lots of people have questions about the best way to go about managing their e-mail, organizing their appointments, searching for files on their computer, or any number of other common tasks. I have questions for *Slate*'s readers, too: Am I using the right apps? Is there something better?

Here, then, is the software I use most often, along with brief explanations for why I prefer a particular program. Maybe you'll learn something—and if I'm using something lame, [send me an e-mail](#) or [post to "The Fray"](#) and let me know. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate*'s readers' forum; in a future article; or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise.)

[Mozilla Firefox, Version 3](#). There is much to dislike about Firefox—it crashes often, it hogs your computer's memory and processing power—but I've found it to be the most flexible Web browser for my needs. In particular, I'm taken with its huge [library of add-on programs](#), helpful little apps that increase the browser's functionality. The add-ons I use regularly include: [Foxmarks](#), which synchronizes my bookmarks across different computers; [Tab Mix Plus](#), which lets me save sets of tabs even if I shut down the browser; [Scrapbook](#), which saves Web pages to my local machine; [Mouse Gestures](#), which lets me navigate the Web by flicking the mouse forward or backward; and [Ad-Block Plus](#), which does just what its name suggests.

[Gmail](#). I'm an e-mail archiver; for as long as I've been using e-mail, I've tried to save every nonspam message I've sent and received. Desktop e-mail programs like Microsoft Outlook couldn't handle my archiving obsession; they didn't work well when overloaded with thousands of messages, and I'd always have to worry about transferring my huge cache of mail every time I got a new computer. Gmail, with its enormous storage capacity and fast, intuitive interface, is an archiver's dream.

[Google Calendar/Outlook](#). I store all my appointments on Google's online calendar app, which is everything a digital calendar should be—easy to use and available everywhere. Unfortunately, my iPhone can only sync its calendar with Microsoft Outlook, so I also run Outlook, and I keep it mirrored with my online calendar through [Google's handy Sync app](#).

Google Reader. If you read a lot of blogs, this is a must-have: Load Reader with your regular sites, then check them all on one page. I also dig its share function, which lets you publicize your favorite posts.

Trillian. Think of it as a universal remote for instant-messaging programs. It connects to several IM services—AIM, Yahoo, MSN, ICQ—allowing you to chat with all your pals from a single interface.

TextPad. Programmers and Web designers use text editing apps to write computer code, but I use this program for all my reporting notes. I keep one file—scratchpad.txt—in which I write down *everything*: notes on every phone call I make, story ideas, to-do lists, grocery lists, and a lot more. (I save the file every day, adding a date to the filename so that if I ever lose one version, I can always go back to yesterday's.) This is the easiest way I've found to keep track of what's going on in my life: TextPad beats Windows' built-in Notepad text editor because it offers a number of keyboard shortcuts and a very powerful search function that lets me find phone numbers and names from years ago. Plus, because the file is just text, it's very small—I can easily transfer it to different computers, and I can open it on any machine, including my iPhone.

Google Desktop. A search engine for your computer, this lets you find obscure files and e-mails strewn about your machine. It's particularly helpful for Windows users. (The Mac OS's built-in Spotlight feature does the same thing.) I use it mainly for launching programs—rather than find iTunes from the start menu, I can use a shortcut key to bring up Google Desktop, then type I-T-U ... and before I'm finished typing, the iTunes icon pops up. The app also provides useful alerts from other Google services, including Gmail—a little notification pops up when you've got new mail.

Alert Thingy. This desktop app sends you alerts from several online social-networking tools—Twitter, [FriendFeed](#), Flickr, and [soon](#) others. This saves you from loading a Web page to check on each of these services—when you get new Twitters from your friends, they pop up in a little window at the bottom of your screen. You can also send out messages through Alert Thingy, which saves another trip to Twitter.

GrandCentral. This service gives you a single phone number that connects all your phones. When someone calls your GrandCentral number, all your phones (home, work, cell, Skype, etc.) ring—or, depending on rules you can set for the caller or the time of day, a certain subset of the phones ring. It's a great way to manage your voice mail, too—you can have different greetings for different calls, and you can access all your messages through a simple Web interface. The one downside: GrandCentral was purchased by Google in 2007, and it's now limiting the number of new registrations.

Skype. As a journalist, I often need to record my phone calls. When someone calls my GrandCentral number, I answer through Skype (you've got to pay for a [Skype phone number](#) to do this; it costs \$60 a year). I've also installed a Skype add-on app called [PowerGramo](#) to record all my Skype calls. The quality of the recordings is exceptional.

Mint. This is a wonderful Web app for tracking your finances. Tell Mint your bank account and credit card numbers, and it downloads all your statements and categorizes your purchases. It doesn't have as many features as desktop apps like Quicken, but it does seem to identify your purchases more accurately, and because it's online, it enables you to check in on your balance sheet from work and home. Beware: Mint will calculate your "net worth," and sometimes that's not pretty.

Vuze. In this instance, it's probably best not to describe every last detail of what I do on my computer. But if you're looking for a good program for downloading files on BitTorrent peer-to-peer file-trading networks, Vuze is the way to go.

Spybot Search & Destroy. Run this Windows-only [spyware](#) detector a couple of times to rid your machine of harmful programs that may have installed themselves on your machine without your knowledge. Then, leave Spybot to run in the background—it stays mostly silent, popping up with warning messages only when an app is trying to change your computer's deeper settings. If you give it the go-ahead, Spybot will swat the errant program down.

Synergy. This app has one narrow purpose: It lets you control multiple computers with a single keyboard and mouse. Say you occasionally run your laptop next to your desktop—move your mouse to the edge of your desktop screen, and suddenly the pointer shows up on your laptop screen. It's like magic—especially since it works between platforms (you can move your mouse from your Mac to your PC).

iTunes. Apple's music software takes way too long to load, but I've found few alternatives that do as good a job at handling a big stash of music. Have you?

Picasa. This photo management program works much like Apple's iPhoto, but it's faster, less prone to crashing, has more features, and is available on Windows (but not on Macs). Plus, it's free.

Microsoft Office 2003. I use Word to write my articles and Excel to track some of my finances. I find them to be much faster and more stable than Web-based productivity apps (like [Google Docs](#)) or open-source alternatives like [OpenOffice](#).

That's my list—now [show me yours!](#)

television

Paris Hilton's *My New BFF*

Warhol would be proud.

By Troy Patterson

Wednesday, October 15, 2008, at 7:51 PM ET

Paris Hilton's *My New BFF* (MTV, Tuesdays at 10 p.m.) is a ladies-in-waiting game show, a bubble-gum farce, a boot camp for red-carpet wannabes, a princess fantasy about princess fantasies, an insidiously snappy production. Therein, Miss Hilton, whose life's achievement has been to advance empty fame as performance art, holds auditions for a new pal. Thus, the program sparkles with a certain structural purity. Though contestants are expected to demonstrate the traditional attributes of a desirable friend (trust, loyalty, deftness with malicious gossip), the winner will have proven her mastery of pseudo-celebrity in itself and will be rewarded with a touch of what one aspirant, Natasha, calls "celebrityism," as in, "Being Paris' friend would definitely mean instant celebrityism. I'm over just walking into a room and people wondering, 'Who is *that*?' OK, well, now it's like you gotta know who I am."

There is nothing to say in response to a sentiment so merrily craven but to gasp a Warhol-esque *wow*. The competitors have candidly been asked to perform the self-objectification and personality fabrication that are often just reality-show subtext. They demonstrate their worthiness as hangers-on by hanging out, and the program is giddy with their efforts. It's like watching children play—instead of house—*Entourage*. And Natasha is hardly alone in her entertainingly bizarre sense of self. Consider the thoughts of Baje—pronounced "beige"—on why her position on the show was at risk after her sluggish performance in the "Party Like Paris" challenge, a kind of Ironman competition of going out. "There are two reasons I can be up for elimination," Baje said. "One, I wasn't gonna partay, and another thing can be cuz I'm a bitch."

Or ponder Lauren's response to the question of why she and Paris are meant to be "besties": "I think we have a similar bone structure." Well, if your coffee dates are going to be documented in *Us Weekly*, that does have a certain logic to it. Lauren spent a lot of time during the "Party Like Paris" challenge—during its eight-hour nightclub crawl, before its sunrise yacht trip—flirting with guys. Inadvertently revealing that her name-dropping skills need polishing, she disclosed to one, a little anxiously, "Paris Hilton. We're kicking it with Paris Hilton. Just lettin' you know." The gentleman, proving himself well-schooled in contemporary etiquette, did not fumble in finding the most correct reply: "That's tight."

Hilton narrates the episodes from a perch on an overstuffed chaise longue, her hairdo and wardrobe echoing old Hollywood sirens, her face tilted to its best angle with something like machine precision. She steps down from that throne to appear in the main action quite often, but the camera never lingers too long on her, lest she start looking dull.

What does she want from a "friend"? You have "to look hot in any situation"—hence the "Freestyle Posing" challenge, which asked the competitors to look like paparazzi-ready glamourpusses while riding a roller coaster. You must, like any true courtier, be skilled in flattery: There's a bit where the prospective friends make toasts to Paris and her mother over country-club mimosas, and the best of those speeches sound like the valedictorian's address at the Brown-Nose Vocational Academy. You've got to have confidence in your confidante: BFF's answer to a trust fall is a mandatory makeover. You must, above all, work it. "Working it," says Paris, not at all kidding, "is a skill that takes time and effort to perfect."

Thus far, contestants have been eliminated for partying too hard, for failing to party hard enough, for social climbing in a club by dawdling at the DJ booth, for various other betrayals of the Parisian ideal. They were brushed off in the argot of a catty text message: "TTYN"—talk to you never. That is an air-kiss of a kiss-off, delivered by the glossed lips of a show with a pleasantly phony smile always in position.

The Big Sort

How To Really Get To Know Voters

Forget simple demographics. They're defined by their values.

By Bill Bishop

Wednesday, October 15, 2008, at 12:32 PM ET

the chat room

My People, Your People

"Big Sort" blogger Bill Bishop takes questions about political segregation and voter clusters.

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 1:39 PM ET

Slate's "Big Sort" blogger, Bill Bishop, was online on Washingtonpost.com to chat with readers about political sorting, the [tendency of many Americans](#) to live among like-minded neighbors, creating counties and states that become more consistent in their voting patterns. An unedited transcript of the chat follows.

Bill Bishop: Okay, here we go. Bill Bishop here from muggy Austin, Texas.....

Arlington, Va.: I didn't see any possible explanations for the lack of culturally creative men in your "[Where Are All the Good Men](#)" post yesterday on *Slate*. Why do you think there are fewer of them? Do you think contemporary society sends messages that creativity is not masculine? Finally, can you elaborate on the political implications of this gender imbalance in creativity?

Bill Bishop: This is a good question and I don't have a good answer. First, I think we need to make sure of the way we're defining "creativity." Ray and Anderson, I think, are talking about creativity in a different way from, say, Richard Florida. Richard's "creative class" are people who are literally making new stuff—music, computer programs, chips, games, literature.

Ray and Anderson are describing people who are creating new cultural forms or norms. These are people who, for example, are choosing to seek out deep relationships rather than power.

Now, why are women more prone to be "creative" in that way? I've flipped back through *The Cultural Creatives* and I don't see that Ray and Anderson have an answer either.....

Slate's Fact-Checking Department in Palo Alto, Calif.: A fair number of marketers, including political marketers, clearly have taken to heart the lesson that traditional demographics don't work anymore, and they're trying out microtargeting based on things like purchasing data. (That guy who bought a Hummer and a Jet Ski probably won't vote Obama.) But it seems to me that your assessment that Obama "essentially copied the Bush approach" is dead wrong.

Obama's done Bush one better; he's mastered social network marketing, where the customer becomes the salesman. Obama's success has hinged on the fruition of the Dean strategy—get a million \$200 donations. That happened because thousands of average citizens were persuaded to become advocates. See, for instance, [the experience of FiveThirtyEight.com's Sean Quinn in Toledo, Ohio](#).

Bill Bishop: Where Obama has directly copied Bush is in the neighbor to neighbor approach to campaigning—in making the campaign about support for a community rather than simply support for a candidate.

I think you're right, that what Obama added to this is the net component, especially in fundraising. But the organizing techniques are straight from Bush.

Cleveland: Do you find the sort to be more pronounced among Democrats than Republicans? This may sound counterintuitive, but if 30 percent of America is 85 percent Democrat and 70 percent of America is 65 percent Republican, that would lead to a roughly equal split overall. At the same time, more than half of all Democrats would come from areas where Republicans barely existed. Although more than 90 percent of Republicans would come from areas where Republicans dominate, those areas would not completely lack Democrats in the way the Democrat-dominated areas are devoid of Republicans.

Bill Bishop: What Bob found was that the sort was more pronounced among Republicans—that, for example, when people moved from a bright red county they were very likely to go to another dark red county. Those moving from dark blue counties were not as likely to move to other blue counties.

Across a range of measures, it appeared that Rs were growing more "sorted" and more partisan than Ds. [Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson](#) make that point in their book *Off Center*.

Alexandria, Va.: Could the Virginia Senate race be affecting the tilt of the state in the presidential race? Mark Warner's popularity seems pretty strong, and it seems to me that Jim Gilmore is just playing to the base and turning off moderates. I wonder if Tom Davis as a candidate would have resulted in a redder tilt right now. Any thoughts?

Bill Bishop: Which way will the coattails tug in this election? I don't know. I suspect Virginia will be decided more by who's moved into the state over the last four to eight years than by who's on the ballot. Bob Cushing is running some of those numbers now. So keep tuned to *Slate*.

One story that has been overlooked, however, is a calculation done by the *Dallas Morning News* after the primary. The paper found that voters in precincts where Obama won by large margins were MORE likely to skip the rest of the ballot. In landslide Obama precincts in Texas, people were more likely to vote only on the presidential line. It's made me wonder if increased turnout for Obama will spread down ballot.

You are looking at this from another direction and it's a good question.....

Ukiah, Calif.: Do you see this trend of sorting reversing? If so, under what set of circumstances do you think that could happen?

Bill Bishop: I don't see people in my heavily D neighborhood moving to, say, Lubbock. So I don't think the lifestyle sorting

will reverse. There are too many advantages to living around those with similar tastes. (For one, you are more likely to see the kinds of foods you want in the grocery, the books you want at the bookstore, the movies you like at the cinema.)

What will change is how these lifestyle preferences are aligned with political party. Sooner or later issues will arise that don't have a natural home with either party. I thought health care was one of these issues. After all, Wal-Mart and the Services Employees union have teamed up on this one—an unlikely pairing to say the least.

Or, a new generation will have different sensibilities. One chapter in *The Big Sort* is devoted to the "emerging church," kids who are very Biblically oriented, but less concerned with Boomer notions of right and wrong. These were the most interesting folks I met in my reporting. And the most inspiring.

Fountain, Colo.: With the increase polarization between urban (Democrat) and semi-rural/rural populations (Republican) do you see a greater potential for the emergence of a more moderate (less polarizing) third-party?

Bill Bishop: I'm not enough of a political theorist to know when a viable third party can emerge. The split between rural and urban is of particular concern to me. (My wife and I edit [The Daily Yonder](#), which is devoted to rural life.) The misunderstanding between rural and urban America is particularly unhealthy.

Washington: I ended up buying a house in Washington when I would have preferred to live in an affordable suburb with a white picket fence and sidewalk. One major issue I had was that when I'd visit co-workers for dinner parties in Fairfax or Loudon Counties, I'd hear comments like—and all of these are 100 percent real—"You live in D.C.? It's too *dark* for me over there!" Or "aren't you afraid of someone 'confusing you' in Dupont Circle?" Or "How can you stand living with so many people? I don't want to see anyone on my street or anyone from my back yard. My favorite time is August when I know I won't have to see anyone else on my block." Comments that either were directly racist or just too weird to be a part of. People who were normal in the office were filled with anger and hatred at their own parties.

The problem was that it wasn't just one or two cranks who talked like that after a few beers at a BBQ, it was everyone we met in Manassas or Chantilly or Reston. I never met a single normal person there. The people we met in the distant suburbs feared their neighbors. The close-in suburban towns like Chevy Chase, Bethesda and Old-Town were just way out of our price range. So

we bought in Washington and we put up with people being more left-wing than us, if just to escape the people who joked about beating up gay people. It's not that I don't want to be around differing opinions, it's that the people we met espoused violence and conspiracy theories!

Bill Bishop: Yep. It's hard to find the place that values diversity these days. That's the big sort—and one my wife and I are struggling with. We are convinced that our social lives were more diverse when we lived in a town of 3,500 than now, when we live in our hip neighborhood in a city of 1.8 million.

A Minnesota Republican told me that you could tell the difference between an R neighborhood and a D neighborhood by measuring the distance between people. Just as you say.

And now the distance is more than geographic, it's psychic, too.

And, yes, the conspiracies. Now we are worried what MIGHT happen in the election, who might steal the vote. My wife calls these "pre-spiracies."

Chicago: I think your assessment that the red regions may be the driver here is dead-on. I'm a Northeastern over-educated elite, and now I live in another blue city. Sadly, I'm a lot more partisan than I used to be. But that's almost entirely a reaction to the venom directed at me, and others like me, from the right. For example, I had no idea I was a "liberal" until pundits and commentators I don't even know started calling me that. There's a whole discourse going on out there about how evil I am that I'm barely even privy to. All that's left for me is to try to not take it personally and make the best of my life that I can. Thanks.

Bill Bishop: Very interesting.....And I know exactly what you're talking about.

There is a lot of research on group interaction—most of which is not encouraging. The natural tendency is for groups to dislike one another, for no other reason than that they are different.

I do think a lot of this distrust would tone down if we had real life acquaintances with different opinions. (Hearing all that stuff on the radio and television does sour the stomach.) But that rarely happens—doesn't happen so much except at work.

Harrisburg, Pa.: I will grant that New England, New York and the West Coast have become bluer—Chris Shays remains the only Republican congressman from New England, and Vermont (once the most Republican state in the country) even has an independent progressive senator. I'll also grant that the Deep South has become redder. But isn't this election changing that, as

it seems now the whole country is becoming bluer? Obama is competitive in Virginia, North Carolina, Florida, Indiana, New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada and Montana. Those are red states that, at least in this election, have become "purple" states.

Bill Bishop: The big sort is mostly about how we're clustering in communities defined by lifestyle, education and economy. This has been going on for the past 30 years. During that time we've elected Rs and Ds to the presidency. Some of those elections have been landslides. This may be one of those.

Yes, right now the whole country is shifting Democratic, but the underlying differences remain. My guess is these differences will reappear in a very familiar kind of partisan wrangling in Congress next year. The only difference will be that, for the time being, there will be fewer Republicans.

The lifestyle split remains. We've just run some numbers here at dailyyonder.com that show widening economic disparities by county—in other words the economic divisions are growing from place to place. Austin, Texas, booms while part of my home state of Kentucky fall into a deep hole of depression, premature death and prescription drug abuse.

My neighbors are moving to Republican areas and Republicans are moving into central Austin. The divisions remain.

It's interesting that both Obama and McCain entered the campaign as post partisan candidates. And now.....

Lenexa, Kan.: Do you believe the combination of the political sorting effect on America and the electoral college system exaggerates voter disenfranchisement? For instance, Kansas electoral votes have not gone to a Democrat since Johnson, and McCain is expected to take the state by 20 points or so. Strongly held states tend to be ignored by presidential campaigns, as only the electoral race matters in the end.

Bill Bishop: I know what you mean. There haven't been a lot of visits from the campaigns here in Texas.

I don't know how it would play out if the electoral college disappeared. Others probably have better guesses. If Kansas or Texas were less sorted, then both would be getting attention now and that's not a function of the electoral college.

Do others out there have thoughts? I know people have strong opinions on the electoral college, but I don't.....

Washington: Are there any communities you came across that were anomalies? Urban and conservative, or rural and liberal?

Or better yet, quite balanced and heterogeneous? Also, what do you foresee as the future? Will we ever sort back?

Bill Bishop: Our unit of measurement is the county because it's the only political boundary that's stable from decade to decade. When Bob Cushing runs the presidential election numbers at the county level, he finds that two thirds have grown less competitive since 1976.

So, one third are mixed. Dave Leip at the uselectionsatlas.org website tells us that Vigo County, Indiana, is one of the most competitive counties. That's Terra Haute.

There are some interesting exceptions in Colorado. Some of those ritzy ski counties are both rural and VERY blue. I was just out on the Western Slope of Colorado and the folks there were saying immigration from California (and elsewhere) was changing the politics of the region, making it more mixed. People in Bend, Oregon, told me the same thing.

So that kind of mixing is going on constantly. Still, it seems to me the sorting continues because that's the way we want to live. What will change will be how these lifestyle preferences line up with political party. Or, in the future, DON'T line up.

Baltimore: I have never lived in a "swing" state. Any chance that the electoral college will be scrapped and we will move to direct election of the president in my lifetime? I am 45. I think the electoral college system has many pernicious effects on our system (why should I vote in my state, for example?) and has outlived its utility in a more modern world. Thanks.

Bill Bishop: More electoral college opinion..... Everybody weigh in...

I think there is some work also that the electoral college only matters in EXTREMELY close elections. A few % point win and the EC doesn't matter.

Oviedo, Fla.: I'll see your theory and raise you ... Alaska. Hear me out: I did my master's research there in '88 and studied the state in depth. There are extreme hippies (grow their own veggie food, wearing hide garments they make, off the grid) and also a military presence and big oil. Call it "Guns 'n Granola." Many of these people and their subsets occupy similar space. Snow machiners and hunters near cabins where unmarried parents are home-schooling kids by lamp-light in Marxism. Maybe the "sort" would be withdrawing from the main world, not the political skew, but I have seen this and it lives. Sarah Palin is just part of it ... trust me, she has neighbors who commune.

Bill Bishop: Like Austin in the 1970s—rednecks and hippies found weed together!! And for a while there was this kind of kicker nirvana. Or, at least, that's the story.....

I like the notion. When you have to create your own culture and your own fun, maybe these lifestyle differences disappear.

Our solution might be a retreat to rural Texas.....

Philadelphia: What a difference a bad president makes. Remember Karl Rove telling us just a few short years ago that a "permanent Republican majority lasting generations" was on it's way?

Bill Bishop: We know now that neither party is permanent.

What is long-lasting is how we've divided by our own beliefs and cultural preferences. That's a heck of a lot more permanent than what Karl had in mind.....

Austin, Texas: How does public education fit into all of this? One of the reasons I'm a big believer in public schools is that for all their faults, they at least provide young people a chance to get to know people different from themselves. I realize that some private/parochial schools also value diversity, but at least in my experience here in the South, most don't. And one of the big reasons parents send their kids to private schools is so that they won't be exposed to "those people." (However you define "those people.")

Bill Bishop: A friend, Ian McDonald, describes this as the lack of shared experiences in our lives. We don't have 'em. When more people went to public schools, there was that shared experience. Ditto with the morning paper and the nightly news. And the war and the Depression.

Now, not much. Maybe this is another reason for a program of national service.....

New York: Living in Tribeca for more than 20 years, we have seen a diverse neighborhood move to the wealthy, white stroller-set, and it is difficult to take the homogeneous nature of it because stores, etc., cater to this ilk. Diversity is an excellent for growth on so many levels

Bill Bishop: Yes, monocultures die, just as you're saying.

What we have with the sort is GREATER diversity across the

country. Places really are different from one another.

At the same time, we have more conformity in the communities where we live. Not so much fun.....

Boston: I think that the biggest problem is that people don't know how to argue politely (I'm too young to know if this is a new phenomena or not). Having discussions with people of opposing views are fantastic, if you don't start screaming and are well-informed or willing to admit that you don't know much about a subject. Why can't more people do this, I wonder?

Bill Bishop: Diana Mutz wrote a great book on this, called *Hearing the Other Side*.

She suggests that we might have to relearn how to have disagreements.

At the same time, marketing people tell me that Americans are less willing to accept compromise these days. We want our eggs cooked just the way we want them—and now we applying this consumer attitude to politics and democracy.

Only democracy doesn't work that way, does it.....

Princeton, N.J.: Look I'm a Ph.D. in math and I live in liberal la-la land. I am part of the problem. I just can't imagine having conservative friends. The point is that they simply are factually and mathematically wrong in so many issues that it would be like walking on glass to be around them. Most of the conservatives I know use faith-based reasoning—I don't mean just religious faith, but faith in almost anything.

For example you can show conservative physicians that large malpractice payments have no correlation with high malpractice premiums. You can show them that the premiums do (anti) correlate with interest rates. You can show them that the total amount of money involved in the high settlements is peanuts. They will not contradict any of your data, but they will just nod their heads and say "but everybody knows the high premiums are caused by the enormous settlements." This scene is repeated over and over again with tax policy, evolution, health-care financing, Social Security, etc., etc., etc. It's just too much to bear.

Bill Bishop: This is the hard part

Bearing is part of the job. Democracy is all about getting along, *listening to* those who we think are dead wrong. Or, at least, it's about giving politicians the authority to cobble together deals

with people we find too much to bear.

We have to do one or the other—listen ourselves or give our pols enough leash to do their jobs.....And, I agree with you, it hurts.

New Jersey: A question I've been trying to figure out—there are dozens of books by liberals trying to "figure out" conservatives, their issues, their mindsets, how best to reach out to them (e.g. Thomas Frank). But there seems to be a complete lack of interest in liberals on the part of conservatives. Why aren't they trying to research my mindset, or trying to figure out what draws me to liberalism? I can't figure out the disparity—it shows up on Web sites also, where liberals try to imagine the conservative mindset, but conservatives never spend any time at all on figuring out liberals.

Bill Bishop: This is a great question. And one I don't have the answer to.

Probably because liberals have been on a bit of a losing streak. I think the new books by Mickey Edwards and Ross Douthat are probably the first wave of many of the kind of books you are describing.

If Obama wins big, there'll be plenty!!

Bill Bishop: Thanks to all. Now I'm off for my noontime PB&J and a walk around my neighborhood overrun with Obama signs!!

take care,

bb

the good word

Epic Win

Goodbye, *schadenfreude*; hello, *fail*.

By Christopher Beam

Wednesday, October 15, 2008, at 11:55 AM ET

When Ben Bernanke and Henry Paulson testified before the Senate banking committee last month about Paulson's proposed bailout bill, a demonstrator in the audience held up an 8.5-by-11 piece of paper with [one word scrawled on it in block letters](#): "FAIL." Earlier in September, Sarah Palin's interview with

Charlie Gibson was [dubbed by some](#) bloggers an "epic fail." *Grist* magazine [invoked](#) the phrase when John McCain told a Maine TV reporter that Sarah Palin "knows more about energy than probably anyone else in the United States." And just last week on the *Atlantic's* Web site, Ta-Nehisi Coates found the theory that Bill Ayers ghost-wrote Barack Obama's memoir so "desperate" he [called](#) it an "Epic Fail."

What's with all the failing lately? Why *fail* instead of *failure*? Why *FAIL* instead of *fail*? And why, for that matter, does it have to be "epic"?

It's nearly impossible to pinpoint the first reference, given how common the verb *fail* is, but online commenters suggest it started with a 1998 Neo Geo arcade game called [Blazing Star](#). (References to the *fail* meme go [as far back as 2003](#).) Of all the game's obvious draws—among them [fast-paced action, disco music, and anime-style cut scenes](#)—its staying power comes from its wonderfully terrible Japanese-to-English translations. If you beat a level, the screen flashes with the words: "You beat it! Your skill is great!" If you lose, you are mocked: "You fail it! Your skill is not enough! See you next time! Bye bye!"

Normally, this sort of game would vanish into the cultural ether. But in the [lulz](#)-obsessed echo chamber of online message boards—*lulz* being the questionable pleasure of hurting someone's feelings on the Web—"You fail it" became the shorthand way to gloat about any humiliation, major or minor. "It" could be anything, from getting a joke to executing a basic mental task. For example, if you told me, "Hey, I liked your article in *Salon* today," I could say, "You fail it." Convention dictates that I could also add, in parentheses, "(it being reading the titles of publications)." The phrase was soon shortened to *fail*—or, thanks to the caps-is-always-funnier school of Web writing, *FAIL*. People started pasting the word in block letters over photos of shameful screw-ups, and a meme was born.

The fail meme hit the big time this year with the May launch of [Failblog](#), an assiduous chronicler of humiliation and a guide to the taxonomy of *fail*. The most basic *fails*—a truck getting [sideswiped](#) by an oncoming train, say, or a National Anthem singer [falling down](#) on the ice—are usually the most boring, as obvious as a clip from *America's Funniest Home Videos*. Another easy laugh is the translation *fail*, such as the unfortunately named "[Universidad de Moron](#)." This is the same genre of *fail* that spawned [Engrish](#), an entire site devoted to poor English translations of Asian languages, not to mention the fail meme itself. A notch above those are unintentional-contradiction *fails*, like "[seedless](#)" sunflower seeds or a [door](#) with two signs on it: "Welcome" and "Keep Out." Architectural *fails* have the added misfortune of being semipermanent, such as the [handicapped ramp that leads the disabled to a set of stairs](#) or the second-story door that [opens out onto nothing](#). Even more embarrassing are simple information *fails*, like the brochure that invites students to "[Study Spanish in Mexico](#)" with photos of the

Egyptian pyramids. These *fails* often expose deep ignorance: One woman [thinks her sprinkler makes a rainbow](#) because of toxins in the water and air.

The highest form of *fail*—the *epic fail*—involves not just catastrophic failure but hubris as well. Not just coming in second in a bike race but doing so because you [fell off your bike](#) after prematurely raising your arms in victory. Totaling your pickup not because the brakes failed but because you were [trying to ride on the windshield](#). Not just destroying your fish tank but doing it while [trying to film yourself lifting weights](#).

Why has *fail* become so popular? It may simply be that people are thrilled to finally have a way to express their *schadenfreude* out loud. *Schadenfreude*, after all, is what you feel when someone else executes a fail. But the *fail* meme also changes our experience of *schadenfreude*. What was once a quiet pleasure-taking is now a public—and competitive—sport.

It's no wonder, then, that the *fail* meme gained wider currency with the advent of the financial crisis. Some observers [relished](#) watching wealthier-than-God investment bankers get their comeuppance. It helped that the two events occurred at the same time—Google searches for *fail* [surged](#) in early 2008, around the same time the mortgage crisis started to [pick up steam](#). And the ubiquity of phrases like "failed mortgages" and "bank failures" seemed to echo the popular meme, which may have helped usher the term out of [4chan boards](#) and onto blogs. It's rare that an Internet fad finds such a suitable mainstream vehicle for its dissemination. It's as if [LOLcats](#) coincided with a global outbreak of some feline adorability virus. The financial crisis also fits neatly into the Internet's tendency toward overstatement. (Worst. Subprime mortgage crisis. Ever.) Only this time, it's not an exaggeration.

Most Internet memes have the lifespan of fruit flies. But there's evidence to suggest *fail* is here to stay. For one thing, it's easier to say than *failure*. (Need for brevity might explain why, in Webspeak, the opposite of *fail* is not *success* but *win*.) And there's a proud tradition in English of chopping off the endings of words for convenience. Between Old and Middle English, many nouns stopped being declined, says Anatoly Liberman, an [etymologist](#) at the University of Minnesota. Likewise, while Romance languages still conjugate their verbs, English keeps it relatively simple: *I speak, you speak, we speak*, etc. It's also common for verbs to become nouns, Liberman points out. You can *lock* a door, but it also has a *lock*. You can *bike*, but you can also own a *bike*. There was great fuss a century ago among readers of the British magazine *Notes and Queries* when it used the word *meet* to refer to a sporting event. It's not surprising that *failure* would eventually spawn *fail*.

It wouldn't be the first word to owe its ascendance to the Internet. The exclamation *w00t*—[an interjection expressing joy](#)—gained mainstream recognition when Merriam-Webster

[crowned it](#) Word of the Year in 2007. The phrase [pwned](#), a perversion of *owned* used by online gamers, made it into an episode of *South Park*—not quite the *OED* but still authoritative—and enjoys broad ironic usage. And of course, *Google* is no longer just a noun.

Unlike those words, though, *fail* has the luxury of pre-existing forms. It already exists as a noun in the phrase "without fail." It's therefore likely to gain quicker entry into most people's lexicon than, say, a word that includes digits.

In other words, *fail* will win.

the green lantern

The Overflowing Box of Veggies

My CSA gives me more food than I can eat ... is that bad?

By Jacob Leibenluft

Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 7:30 AM ET

This fall, I bought a share in a CSA [["community-supported agriculture,"](#) a kind of farm co-op] for a few hundred bucks. Every week, I get a box of whatever produce the local farmer is currently harvesting. Here's the problem: It's nice to get fresh vegetables, but I often don't know what to do with the full haul—and end up throwing a good chunk of it in the trash. If I can't eat my share, is a CSA still an environmentally sound choice?

It may not sound very attractive to buy a share in anything just now. But with the advent of the local food craze, CSAs have been officially confirmed as an Important New Trend via [a front-page story in the New York Times](#). (As the article points out, CSA participation is still pretty low: Only 1,500 CSA farms now exist across the country, with membership in each ranging from a few hundred to a couple thousand.) The idea is pretty simple: By making an upfront investment in a local farm, consumers can give the farmer a guaranteed customer base and the money he or she needs to operate. In return, participants don't have to spend time searching for fresh fruits and vegetables every week.

Food is responsible for as much as 20 percent of our energy use, a huge percentage of agricultural emissions (think of all those cows and their methane), and a sizable proportion of our solid waste. CSA advocates point to several reasons why buying a share in a local farm may help minimize that impact. The most obvious one is that shipping produce locally saves quite a bit of gas and reduces the amount of packaging you need. Buying from a farm you know can also help you keep tabs on whether its

practices—from the fertilizer it uses to what it does with animal waste—are eco-conscious and sustainable.

These claims aren't all cut-and-dried. Concerns about the impact of transporting food may be somewhat overblown: As the Lantern has [noted before](#), a [recent study](#) estimates that just 11 percent of the greenhouse gas emissions associated with food comes from getting it from point A to point B. Meanwhile, it can be more energy-intensive to grow a crop locally if the weather or the terrain isn't well-suited to it. And if consumers are making lots of extra trips in their car to pick up local food, that could well minimize some of its advantages. (Along those lines, research out of Iowa State University suggests that [CSAs that deliver produce fewer emissions](#) (PDF) than those where members do their own pickups.)

Fair enough. But for crops that aren't obviously ill-suited to the local environment, the Lantern sticks to his general principle: All else being equal, the more you know about how something is produced, the more likely it is to be environmentally friendly. In that respect, it's a major improvement to get your food from a CSA.

But any advantages of CSA produce might go out the window if you don't actually eat what you buy. A [limited body of research](#) (PDF) surrounding these farm shares suggests that food waste is a big problem: Many participants report receiving too many fruits and vegetables that they don't want or don't know how to cook. (Of course, the problem of waste is by no means limited to CSA members: Estimates suggest Americans [may waste 27 percent of the food they buy](#).) When uneaten food goes in the trash, not only have all the energy and resource inputs been wasted, but that material will be left to decompose—and release methane—in a landfill. If you are going to join a CSA for environmental reasons, you should do so with a strategy for your extras. Ideally, figure out a way to donate your unused vegetables to a food bank or give them to friends. At the very least, make sure you're composting whatever goes bad. (Likewise, you should look for a CSA that proactively addresses the problem by actually asking whether you want that surplus.)

Even if you are wasting a little extra with the CSA, your membership may have other more subtle benefits for the environment. To start with, what you eat is at least as important as where it comes from—and being a member of a CSA allows you to pre-emptively devote much of your food budget to meals that are more eco-friendly, featuring less packaging, less processing, and (most crucially) less meat.

By investing your money upfront in a local farm, as opposed to simply buying local food, you're also helping to ensure that local farmers stay solvent. As a CSA shareholder, you assume some of their risk: If there's a drought, you'll get less food for your money; if the harvest is good, you'll get a share of the surplus. (Of course, the problem here is that many consumers don't need

that bumper-crop bonus, so they may end up subsidizing the farm's losses without sharing much in its gains.) Either way, CSA membership supports the very existence of small farms in your area—and the possibility that you, or any of your neighbors, can buy local produce in the future.

Is there an environmental quandary that's been keeping you up at night? Send it to ask.the.lantern@gmail.com, and check this space every Tuesday.

today's business press

Googling a Comeback

By Bernhard Warner and Matthew Yeomans
Friday, October 17, 2008, at 7:03 AM ET

today's papers

Black Gold Down

By Daniel Politi
Friday, October 17, 2008, at 6:26 AM ET

The [Los Angeles Times](#) and [New York Times](#) lead with, while the [Wall Street Journal](#) fronts, the continuing downward spiral of oil prices, which dropped below \$70 a barrel for the [first time in 14 months](#). Some predict oil could fall to [as low as \\$50 a barrel](#) before the end of the year, although that seems unlikely, considering that OPEC has called for an emergency meeting next week. The [LAT](#) cites an analyst who says OPEC would like prices to stabilize around \$70 a barrel, though the [NYT](#) and [WSJ](#) say \$80 a barrel is [more likely](#). Regardless, either number is quite a change from a few months ago, when some were predicting oil prices would reach \$200 a barrel next year.

[USA Today](#) leads with a look at how the recent increase in mortgage rates could put in doubt whether the housing market will [improve in the near future](#). Home buyers have been encouraged by the drop in prices but could be turned off by the higher interest rates. This week, the average interest rate on a 30-year, fixed-rate mortgage soared to 6.46 percent, which essentially amounts to a half-point increase from last week and represents the "biggest weekly jump since 1987." Many are blaming the bailout plan for the jump, although some say it's just temporary and insist rates should drop once the markets calm down a bit. The [Washington Post](#) leads with a look at how ["countless companies"](#) are adjusting to the credit crisis and what some predict will be a long recession by cutting spending, postponing expansion plans, and looking for "cash-rich partners." The general lack of credit means that hundreds of companies could default on their debt obligations over the next year.

U.S. consumers can certainly feel the oil-price plunge in their wallets as the average gallon of gas is now more than \$1 cheaper than it was during its [summer peak](#). Unless something drastic happens, the decline in oil prices would roughly be equivalent to a multibillion-dollar stimulus package for the economy. The *WSJ* talks to one analyst who says that if prices stabilize at around \$80 a barrel, it would [essentially amount to](#) "a \$275 billion stimulus package to the U.S. economy." So does that mean SUVs will be making a comeback? Not likely. In fact, few predict the plunge would do much stimulating to the beleaguered economy simply because consumers are likely to use any money they save at the pump to pay bills and prop up battered savings accounts rather than buy new things. Still, as the *LAT* highlights, any business that [depends on petroleum](#), such as taxis, will most definitely be helped by this plunge.

The drop in oil prices is largely the result of a decrease in demand as economies around the world slow down. U.S. oil demand, for example, is down about 9 percent from a year ago. The *WSJ* deftly highlights that demand doesn't tell the whole story and attributes at least some of the decline to [hedge funds](#) that had been responsible for much of the speculation in the oil markets and are now being hit hard by the credit crisis. The *NYT* [warns](#) that while we may be celebrating the decline now, previous plunges have translated into a decreased investment in oil production.

The *WSJ* leads its world-wide newsbox with a look at how [presidential election polls](#) don't tell a uniform story. The paper's headline, "Surveys Split on Who Has Lead in Presidential Race," isn't quite accurate, since Barack Obama leads all of them. The question is by how much. Some polls say Obama has a 14-point lead, while others put his lead within the margin of error and say John McCain has increased his standing in the last few days. The differences mostly have to do with how each poll counts likely voters. Those that give Obama the widest leads assume there will be a big increase in Democratic voters, as well as a huge hike in the number of young voters. The surveys that show a tight race assume there won't be a big change in the party affiliation of voters this year.

Even if all the polls don't tell the same story, the campaigns are still using them to [formulate their strategies](#) for the last couple of weeks (18 days!) before E-Day. McCain's campaign is cutting back on the number of states it is hoping to win and is increasing its focus on states that President Bush won in 2004. The only state that voted Democratic in 2004 that the Republican campaign still hopes to win is Pennsylvania, although even that seems highly unlikely. For his part, Obama is focusing on a number of Republican states, and his campaign said it will increase efforts in West Virginia, which Bush won by a wide margin.

The *LAT* fronts a look at how Obama is betting big on Florida—five "of his most senior operatives" will spend the remaining

days of the [campaign in the Sunshine State](#). The campaign believes it has added enough Democratic voters to the rolls to win the state but must now focus on getting them all to the polls. Florida Republicans are struggling to keep up. "Obviously, we're not used to being outspent," the state's former GOP chairman said. "This is new. Now we're getting a sense for how the other side has felt."

For its part, the *WP* off-leads a piece about the campaign under the headline "Virginia Is Unexpected Battleground." Unexpected? Maybe if you haven't picked up a paper in a while. Regardless, the story does provide an interesting look at how the McCain campaign is [woefully unprepared](#) for a ground fight in a state that hasn't voted for a Democrat since Lyndon B. Johnson.

Everybody has a story about Joe the Plumber, who became the most sought-after voice on the campaign trail after being mentioned more than two dozen times at the debate Wednesday. But fame has a price. Reporters quickly found out that Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher owes Ohio \$1,182 in back taxes and that he doesn't [have a plumber's license](#). Wurzelbacher insists he doesn't need one because his boss in the two-man operation does, but others [aren't so sure](#). His local plumbing union, which has endorsed Obama, is mad at Joe, saying that he falsely represents himself as a union member.

It also turns out that Joe would probably not be hurt by Obama's tax plan and would very likely get a tax cut, although the amount might be greater [under McCain's plan](#). Even if (Joe made it clear yesterday that it was a big *if*) he does buy the business from his boss, Al Newell, the company reported sales this year of \$100,000, reports [the WSJ](#). "Al runs his business out of the garage that's behind his house," a union official [tells the LAT](#). "It's small." ("Does our heart go out to Al Newell for this intrusion?" asks the *LAT* in its front-page piece. "Yes, it does.") Even if he does manage to turn the small operation into a \$280,000-a-year business (hey, fame has its benefits), he'd have to pay a mere \$900 more in taxes, [according to the WSJ](#). "I'm kind of like Britney Spears having a headache," Wurzelbacher said yesterday. "Everybody wants to know about it."

The *WSJ* points out that the Bush administration wants a military jury to reconsider its decision to [release Osama Bin Laden's former driver](#) on Dec. 31. Prosecutors have filed a motion saying that the military judge had no authority to credit Salim Hamdan for the time he served before the trial. Without this credit, Hamdan could face an extra five years of incarceration. One of Hamdan's lawyers thinks this is just "an effort to postpone the release date into a new administration."

The *NYT* notes that the major banks passed a "[grim milestone](#)" yesterday as all of the combined profits they "earned in recent years have vanished." While more banks report huge losses, it seems increasingly likely that they'll choose to keep any money they get from the government, at least in the short term, instead

of using it to get the credit markets moving again, as the Treasury hopes. Most bank executives aren't talking on the record, but the chief executive of Merrill Lynch says that "at least for the next quarter, it's just going to be a cushion."

British Prime Minister [Gordon Brown](#) is enjoying his status as world financial leader. He writes an op-ed piece in the *Post* today and calls for "the boldest of global cooperation" to deal with "the first financial crisis of this new global age." And governments can't afford to just deal with the current crisis, they must "tackle the root causes" and come together to "rebuild our fractured international financial system."

Financial guru [Warren Buffett](#) writes an op-ed piece in the *NYT* and says that he's been busy buying American stocks in his personal account in which he used to hold only U.S. government bonds. "A simple rule dictates my buying," he writes. "Be fearful when others are greedy, and be greedy when others are fearful."

For whatever it's worth, the *WP*'s editorial page [endorses Obama](#) today, calling him "the right man for a perilous moment." Expect endorsement season to bring about yet another cavalcade of commentary about whether newspapers should be endorsing candidates in the first place, as there will inevitably be countless howls from readers who will say this proves the paper was in the tank for Obama all along. TP is already yawning.

today's papers

Close Encounters of the Third Kind

By Daniel Politi

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 6:43 AM ET

In the third and final debate of the presidential campaign, John McCain went on the offensive. Sitting next to each other, McCain and Barack Obama "engaged in their most intense confrontation of the campaign," [says the *Washington Post*](#). While discussing a wide range of issues, including the economy, judicial appointments, abortion, and trade, the candidates had a debate that "was by far the most spirited and combative of their encounters this fall," [says the *New York Times*](#). When asked about the negative tone of the campaign, "Each man blamed the other," notes the *Wall Street Journal*, which also points out that, at the very least, voters got a clear view of the stark differences between the candidates' [views on taxes and health care](#). While many agree it was McCain's best debate performance, few think the Republican managed to deliver a game-changer. "There was no single moment that was likely to reverberate in the minds of American voters and change the course of an election that has moved dramatically toward Obama in the last several weeks," says the *Los Angeles Times*, which mixes it up a bit by leading with its [analysis piece](#) and stuffing the blow-by-blow.

[USA Today](#) goes high with the debate but devotes the traditional lead spot to, while the *WSJ* banners, the [seesawing stock market](#) that went deeply in the red yesterday and [all but wiped out](#) the gains from Monday's huge rally amid growing fears of a deep recession. The Dow Jones industrial average plunged 733 points, or 7.9 percent, which marked its largest percentage drop since 1987. Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke added his bit to the general uncertainty by declaring that even if the financial markets stabilize, a "broader economic recovery will not happen right away."

It may have been their last encounter, but the real star of the night wasn't either of the presidential candidates—it was a plumber from Ohio, Joe Wurzelbacher. Joe's name came up a total of 26 times during the debate, according to the [LAT's count](#). Joe the Plumber met Obama in Ohio this week. He told him he has been saving to buy his company and fears that the Democrat's economic plan would increase his taxes. McCain seized on the encounter to criticize Obama's tax plan and say that the Democrat wants to wage "class warfare." Joe the Plumber quickly became a stand-in to discuss their differences in economic policy.

Obama once again tried to link McCain to President Bush, but this time the Republican candidate was ready and responded with what "may have been the single most memorable line of the debates," says the *WP*. "Senator Obama, I am not President Bush," McCain said. "If you wanted to run against President Bush, you should have run four years ago."

After being silent on the issue in the previous debate, McCain finally brought up Obama's relationship with William Ayers, which had become a staple of his campaign. McCain also brought up Obama's connections to a community organizing group, ACORN, which has been accused of voter-registration fraud. That was the point when McCain [lost the upper hand](#) he had gained in the first part of the debate, says the *NYT*'s Patrick Healy. When McCain grew angry over Ayers, he "was no longer gaining ground by showing command on the top issue for voters, the economy; he was turning tetchy over a 1960s radical," Healy writes.

While McCain was "far more energetic and focused" during much of the debate, he "was not helped by television, and particularly not by the networks' frequent use of the split screen," notes the *LAT*. McCain often looked angry, while Obama kept up the "amused detachment" look that he "perfected in debates this year." The *NYT* points out that at times it seemed McCain "was veering from one hot button to another," trying to get some sort of memorable reaction [from his opponent](#). But Obama didn't bite and was clearly more comfortable playing defense, "chuckling aloud at several of McCain's ripostes as though to dismiss them as laughable," [USAT points out](#). Of course, that had its downsides, and the *NYT*'s [Alessandra Stanley](#) says that Obama was also "flat and dispassionate."

The WP's [Dan Balz](#) talks to Democratic strategists who said Obama "had done what he needed to do by staying calm in the face of McCain's criticisms." For their part, Republicans praised McCain's performance but still recognized that he faces a daunting challenge before Election Day. *Slate's* [John Dickerson](#) says that while McCain "did well ... it wasn't good enough," and Obama ultimately won the debate.

And what about Joe the Plumber? He quickly became the most sought-after person in the country by television producers and reporters who rushed to talk to "America's newly minted folk hero," as the *LAT* puts it. "It's pretty surreal, man, my name being mentioned in a presidential campaign," [he told the Associated Press](#). (Can't get enough of Joe? The exchange that started everything is available [here](#), and an interview he did with CBS News after the debate is [here](#).)

While the candidates sprint to the finish line, it's becoming clearer every day that the winner will become president in the middle of a deep economic slump. A day after the government announced its plan to buy an equity stake in banks across the country, new economic data were released that revealed retail sales plunged 1.2 percent in September. It marked the third straight monthly decline and the largest in three years. Financial analysts seized on this number to say that not only is the economy in a recession but also that it "will be steeper than many of us had feared," as one economist [tells the LAT](#). Americans are being much more cautious with their money, and some think holiday spending this year will reach its lowest level in nearly 20 years. The *WSJ* says [the new data](#) "suggest the U.S. economy is poised to fall into its deepest recession since the early 1980s."

The huge sell-off in Wall Street appears to be a sign that investors don't think any kind of government bailout plan can save the economy. Stock markets around the world continued the downward spiral today. "Investors are recognizing that the financial crisis is not the fundamental problem," [notes the NYT](#). "It has merely amplified economic ailments that are now intensifying: vanishing paychecks, falling home prices and diminished spending." Meanwhile, amid all the uncertainty, the rate the banks charge one another for loans has barely moved and remains higher [than it was last week](#).

Everyone says Bernanke strongly hinted that a new round of interest-rate cuts could be on the way, but it's unclear whether it would even matter that much. The *LAT* emphasizes the fresh signs of an economic slump might push Congress to [act quickly](#) to pass a new stimulus plan that would put money in the hands of ordinary Americans. But while key lawmakers agree something must be done, it's far from certain they'll be able to reach a compromise before the next administration.

The *WSJ* fronts an interesting interview with Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. Chairwoman Sheila Bair that shows there are

disagreements within the upper echelons of the administration on how to best carry out the bailout plan. Bair said she doesn't understand why the government hasn't been more aggressive in coming out with a plan to [prevent foreclosures](#). "Why there's been such a political focus on making sure we're not unduly helping borrowers but then we're providing all this massive assistance at the institutional level, I don't understand it," she said. "It's been a frustration for me."

The *NYT's* [Gail Collins](#) gets a bit nostalgic about the last debate. "For the last two years, dedicated voters have practically lived with Barack Obama and John McCain," she writes. "We've watched three dozen debates!" Those who have been paying attention realize that neither one "is everything we were hoping for when this all began." But that doesn't matter to the candidates who now just want to reach the "people who have managed to completely ignore nearly two years of news," says Collins. "In the end, it's always all about the ones who play hard to get."

today's papers Reality Check

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, October 15, 2008, at 6:43 AM ET

USA Today leads and the *Wall Street Journal* banners the [lukewarm reaction](#) from the markets to the Bush administration's plan to [buy an equity stake](#) in some of the country's largest banks. On the day when the program, which President Bush described as "limited and temporary," was announced, the Dow Jones industrial average fell slightly and credit markets thawed a bit. The *Washington Post* leads with a look at the anger that was seeping out of [community banks](#) yesterday as executives were eager to say they don't need the help and resent the fact that the government will rescue those who made bad decisions. The reaction suggests the government will have to do some arm-twisting to persuade banks to participate. Although the program is officially voluntary, Treasury officials were quick to say they won't be shy about trying to persuade certain banks to apply for government money.

The *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* both lead with inhouse presidential election polls that show Barack Obama's lead among likely voters has widened to nine percentage points and 14 [percentage points](#), respectively. The *LAT* highlights that Obama's increased lead is partly due to a [shift among independent voters](#), who used to lean heavily toward McCain but now prefer the Democratic nominee by five points. McCain's choice of running mate has something to do with this change, as 31 percent of independents say they're less likely to vote for the Republican ticket because of Sarah Palin.

In a front-page piece, the *NYT* points out that after Monday's party, when the stock market had one of its biggest rallies in history, investors had to face "[a sober reality](#)" yesterday as they couldn't escape the widely held feeling that a deep recession "may be unavoidable." The *WSJ* points out that, even as [credit started flowing](#) yesterday, it was at a snail's pace and it could be months before "money flows freely again." Even when credit markets do eventually recover, it may be too late for some companies. So while financial shares soared, many other companies saw their stocks decrease in value.

The *LAT* points out that by deciding which banks should get a chunk of the \$125 billion that will be available to banks and thrifts across the country, the government could end up deciding which banks will die and which banks [survive](#). "The natural course of Darwinian banking has been interrupted by this plan," a financial analyst said. The *WP* specifies that when Treasury officials decide who should get help, they will [ignore pleas](#) from institutions that are doing relatively well and those that are on extremely thin ice. Instead, the Treasury will focus on those that are in the middle and could realistically benefit from cheap money from the government.

Even if, as the *WP* suggests, community banks will be pressured to take government money, they're unlikely to face the same level of arm-twisting as the executives of the nine big financial institutions did on Monday. The *WSJ* and *NYT* both front narrative pieces on what took place at Monday's meeting, where top bank executives were told to sign a piece of paper agreeing to [sell shares to the government](#). The executives were shocked, as many expected that the meeting would simply be a briefing about new measures the government would take to ease the crisis. While there were a few protests from banks that insisted they didn't need the money, everyone [quickly agreed](#) to go along with the plan. "It was a take it or take it offer," a source tells the *NYT*. "Everyone knew there was only one answer."

Few think the banks have anything to complain about. Compared with the European plans, the U.S. program is highly favorable toward banks, as Treasury officials didn't want it to seem punitive in any way and emphasized that the government shares wouldn't carry voting rights. Under the British plan, for example, banks can't pay shareholder dividends until the government has been paid back; in the United States, banks can still pay dividends but [can't increase the amount without approval](#). Some are also criticizing the U.S. program because it doesn't impose any requirements on the banks to use the government money to [increase lending](#).

In other news, the *WP* reveals on Page One that the White House [issued classified memos](#) in 2003 and 2004 that broadly endorsed the CIA's use of harsh interrogation techniques on al-Qaida suspects. CIA officials repeatedly asked the White House for a written document, which shows how the agency was concerned that top administration officials might plead ignorance if the

techniques became public. "The question was whether we had enough 'top cover,'" a former CIA lawyer said. Beyond the general terms, it's unclear what exactly was in these memos, since the *WP* couldn't get anyone to describe their contents because they're still classified.

Echoing the *WP*'s poll from earlier this week, the *NYT*'s survey emphasizes that McCain's attacks against Obama [seem to have backfired](#), as the majority of voters say the Republican is waging a negative campaign and spending more time attacking than discussing the issues. A majority also say they're not bothered by Obama's background and past associations. But many voters are bothered by Palin's presence on the Republican ticket. The *NYT* says her unfavorable rating now stands at 41 percent, and the *LAT* reports that a mere 43 percent of voters say she is [qualified to be president](#), while 76 percent see Joe Biden as qualified. Meanwhile, a new day brings even more signs that the current environment would make it difficult for any Republican to win the election. The *LAT* reports that only 10 percent of voters feel the country is going in the right direction, while the *NYT* says more than 8-in-10 Americans don't "trust the government to do what is right."

The *WSJ* notes that new polls show Obama has widened his lead [in four battle-ground states](#). The Democratic nominee now has double-digit leads in Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, and a nine-point lead in Colorado.

McCain issued a new plan to deal with the downturn in the economy a day after his Democratic rival put forward [his own proposal](#). The move means that "both presidential candidates will head into their final debate Wednesday night armed with fresh plans to ease middle-class burdens," [notes the WP](#). Unsurprisingly, McCain's \$52 billion plan includes several new tax cuts, including a temporary reduction on capital gains. And while their plans have many key differences, the two candidates do [agree on a few issues](#). Like Obama, McCain also proposed eliminating income taxes on unemployment benefits. For his part, Obama endorsed McCain's idea of waiving tax rules that force seniors to withdraw money from their retirement accounts.

The *NYT* goes inside with a package of stories about how [Obama's race](#) might play a factor in the election. The candidates rarely talk about the issue, which is more often "whispered, internalized or masked by discussions of culture or religion," and there's little question that Obama's race will help bring out black voters in several key states. But will it hurt him with white voters? Much of it has been said before, but the *NYT*'s Adam Nossiter talks to people in the South and some of the reactions to Obama's [biracial background](#) are particularly shocking. While it might not be surprising that these sentiments exist, it is slightly amazing that some seem to have no qualms about expressing their feelings ("He's other. It's in the Bible. Come as one. Don't create other breeds.") on the record.

Just because Bush's time in office is running out doesn't mean his administration doesn't want to go out with a bang. The *WSJ* notes inside that administration officials are quickly moving to rewrite a large number of federal rules to protect companies that comply with government regulations from [product-safety lawsuits](#). Whether the effort succeeds largely depends on whether the Supreme Court sides with the administration in a pre-emption case it will hear next month. And while it might be tempting to think a future administration could simply undo these new rules, the truth is that it can take a while to amend federal rules.

The *LAT* fronts a look at the "most comprehensive map of the heavens ever produced," which was completed this year. After years of work, a team of scientists created a [three-dimensional model](#) of the universe "that allows an observer to travel, as if by rocket ship," to places that are "billions of light-years away." The model includes 217 million objects, including 800,000 galaxies and 100,000 quasars. Among other things, it confirms the existence of dark energy and shows that the universe is really flat. "You see a fuzzy blob and you know it's another galaxy like ours, and it's never been seen before," one astronomer who worked on the project said. "It just sends a chill down your spine."

today's papers Take On Me

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 6:42 AM ET

The U.S. government is officially switching gears. In news that almost all the papers banner across the front page, the Treasury Department will be announcing that the U.S. government plans to invest up to \$250 billion in the nation's banks in a move that will effectively translate into a partial nationalization of the financial institutions that take federal money. In addition, the government would provide insurance on all deposits in noninterest-bearing accounts and insure certain types of bank debt. The *New York Times* calls it the Treasury Department's "[boldest move yet](#)" to deal with the financial crisis. The *Wall Street Journal* does the best job of summarizing that [the move](#) "intertwines the banking sector with the federal government for years to come and gives taxpayers a direct stake in the future of American finance, including any possible losses." *USA Today* points out that Europe's moves to [prop up banks](#) across the pond "set the pattern for the U.S. plan" because if the Bush administration failed to act "in a similar fashion, investors might have moved money abroad to seek safety."

The move represents a dramatic shift for Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, who had previously opposed the idea of taking

equity stakes in banks. The *Los Angeles Times* specifies that while the government still [plans to go ahead](#) with its plan to buy toxic securities, "the new strategy is likely to move that into a secondary position." The new program will be divided into two parts. First, the government will devote \$125 billion to buy a minority stake in nine of the nation's top financial institutions and then make the other \$125 billion available to thousands of banks and thrifts across the country. Executives from the nine big banks met with Paulson yesterday and while some weren't happy with the plan, they all agreed to participate. The *Washington Post* says Paulson told the executives they needed to agree to it [for the good of the American economy](#), illustrating that while "officially the program was voluntary, the banks had little choice in the matter."

By pretty much forcing the nine big financial institutions to take government money, officials wanted to make sure there would be [no stigma associated](#) with receiving the funds, which would have made the entire plan useless. The *WSJ* and *USAT* have the [full list](#) of the nine banks that will now be partially owned by taxpayers: Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, Merrill Lynch, Citigroup, Wells Fargo, Bank of New York Mellon, and State Street.

The amount of money each bank will get won't be uniform—the *WSJ* has the [specific numbers](#)—but essentially the Treasury will buy up to \$25 billion in preferred stock in each of the financial institutions. The stock each bank issues "will pay special dividends, at a 5 percent interest rate that will be increased to 9 percent after five years," [the NYT details](#). The government also added a provision that would allow taxpayers to benefit if the stock value of the financial institutions increases.

The *NYT* notes that while financial institutions that accept government money [won't be required](#) to eliminate dividends or fire their chief executives, they will "be held to strict restrictions on compensation." But the *WSJ* [isn't impressed](#) and notes that the restrictions "are relatively weak compared with what congressional Democrats had wanted." Key Democratic lawmakers emphasized yesterday that they fully expect the government to impose strict limits on compensation, signaling that a failure to do so could put in doubt whether Congress releases more of the \$700 billion after Treasury officials [burn through the first installment](#).

The *LAT* says that some in the banking industry "reacted with alarm" when details of the plan began appearing in news reports and they predicted the government would soon hear from hundreds of angry banks that were [left out of the first phase of the program](#). "This worked in Sweden, where you have about 14 banks," one "industry insider" said, adding that it's little surprise that Paulson, a Wall Street insider, would choose to pump up big New York financial institutions first. "It's like picking your kids," he said. The *WP* notes that there is a risk the banks will [use the government money](#) "to bolster their balance sheets"

instead of increasing lending, but regulators will apparently pressure the financial institutions not to let that happen.

One key question that the *WSJ* and *WP* highlight: What took so long? The *WSJ* points out that executives at [some of the leading banks](#) "pitched such a plan at various points earlier this summer" but they were summarily rebuffed by government officials who were convinced that purchasing toxic assets was the way to go. The *WP* points out that Rep. Spenser Bachus, R-Ala., was [one of the first](#) lawmakers to propose a similar idea last month at a Capitol Hill meeting. Several key Democrats expressed support, but Treasury officials weren't having any of it. "I do believe they had this one plan, and they were saying 'This is it,'" Bachus said.

If there's a clear winner in all this, it's the [British government](#). Of course, that could all change if the rescue plans that are taking shape around the world fail. But as of now, Prime Minister Gordon Brown went, in a matter of days, from lame duck to global leader as the plan he announced last week to inject billions into British banks was quickly taken up by European leaders and now the United States. "He's the cat who got the cream," a British historian [tells the WP](#). "It was a gift from heaven for him to have this crisis in his field of expertise."

For their part, investors are cheering. News that European leaders were planning to prop up banks, coupled with anticipation for a new U.S. program, sent stock prices soaring yesterday. The Dow Jones industrial average ended [more than 900 points higher](#), the largest point gain in history, for an 11 percent gain, the biggest since 1933. As the *WSJ* highlights in its front page, history has shown that these quick gains [can be short-lived](#), which is why no one was ready to say that yesterday marked a turning point in the ongoing crisis.

Speaking of history, the *NYT* notes that [while the new program marks](#) "an exceptional step" it is not "an unprecedented one." Yes, it's true that it would mark the biggest intervention in the markets since the Great Depression, but the government has often inserted itself in the economy during times of great need. And just like in the past, many think the government will quickly get out of the way when conditions stabilize. While U.S. culture values free-market capitalism above all, "Ideology is a luxury good in times of crisis," as one historian puts it.

Meanwhile, the presidential candidates want voters to know they take their economic concerns seriously. Yesterday, Barack Obama unveiled a new set of expensive proposals to [deal with the financial crisis](#). Among other things, Obama's new plan would give a tax credit for employers that create new jobs, create a 90-day foreclosure moratorium for homeowners who are making an effort to keep up with payments, and eliminate income taxes on [unemployment benefits](#). The price tag of Obama's stimulus plan now stands at \$175 billion, including the \$60 billion that the moves outlined yesterday would cost. Obama's met with congressional leaders to discuss the proposal,

and there are hints that Congress might consider a new stimulus package right after the election, but no one is ready to commit to anything since President Bush could easily veto it.

After some confusing statements from John McCain's campaign about whether the Republican would offer new proposals for the economy, aides yesterday said that McCain would outline them today but gave no hint as to what they might be. In the meantime, the *LAT* fronts a look at how McCain unveiled "[a feisty new campaign speech](#)" yesterday that did little to convince Republicans their candidate is moving in the right direction. Republicans disagree on what McCain needs to do to change things around as some urge him to be more aggressive in questioning Obama's character while others think he should focus on the economy. Yesterday, McCain largely avoided raising the character questions that have dominated his campaign lately and mostly focused on his promise to change Washington.

The *NYT* goes inside with a report by a Czech research institute that says [Milan Kundera](#), one of the most famous Eastern European writers, told police about a spy when he was a young man. According to the report, 21-year-old Kundera informed local police about a guest in a student dorm. The man was promptly arrested and sentenced to 22 years in prison. The usually reclusive Kundera immediately denied the claims and called them "pure lies."

After eight years under Bush's leadership, the Republican Party "is a mess and a fraud," writes the *WP*'s [Eugene Robinson](#). While Robinson disagrees with the Republican economic philosophy, he still respects "its integrity," which is something this administration can't say since it went against so many of its own stated ideals in the past few years. Now, it isn't clear what the Republican Party wants to achieve besides power. "When a political party reaches the point of lurching incoherence, the most effective cure is a good, long spell in the wilderness."

today's papers

Come Together, Right Now

By Daniel Politi

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 6:42 AM ET

After weeks of disagreement over the need for a unified response to the financial crisis, major European leaders agreed on a coordinated plan that would inject public money [into troubled banks](#) and temporarily guarantee bank debt in an effort to get credit flowing again. In addition, European countries agreed to relax so-called mark-to-market accounting rules that require banks to price assets to [current market prices](#). Australia and New Zealand also joined the fray and announced that they were guaranteeing all bank deposits. "With the newly decisive

moves, other major nations are catching up to or surpassing the United States in sculpting a response to the crisis," [declares](#) the [Washington Post](#). [USA Today](#) notes that the [European announcement](#) "may increase pressure on the United States to take further actions to bolster its major banks."

Many questions remain, starting from the fact that the leaders of the 15 countries that use the euro didn't say how much their plan would cost. The price tag will begin to take shape this week, as countries announce details of how the program will be implemented in their own nations. Despite these uncertainties, investors reacted optimistically and stock markets [soared today](#). Although it would be premature to think that this marks "a definitive shift in sentiment," the [positive reaction](#) was "seen as a potential hope that the markets may at least stop their free fall," says the [New York Times](#). Over the past weeks, many had argued that the differences within Europe made a unified response nearly impossible and since "few details of the programs were disclosed, just how similar the plans are was unclear Sunday night," [notes](#) the [Los Angeles Times](#). Still, the [Wall Street Journal](#) [points out](#) that "the broad contours of a global response are taking shape: Developed countries are investing directly into the banking system, acting to insure bank deposits, guarantee certain bank debt and in some cases nationalize banks."

Despite all the talk of coordination, it's important to emphasize that the measures agreed to by European leaders were mostly an outline that will allow countries to make decisions [at the national level](#). "In that regard, the outcome was similar to an agreement reached Saturday in Washington by finance ministers of the Group of Seven industrial nations," [notes](#) the [WP](#). But by issuing a joint commitment to prop up banks, European leaders hope to increase confidence in the financial sector to "allow markets to start functioning again," as German Chancellor Angela Merkel said.

The governments of Italy, France, Germany, and Austria could be [among the first](#) to announce specifics of their plans today. The [WSJ](#) gets word that Germany is finalizing a plan that [could involve](#) up to 400 billion euros in taxpayer money, which would mostly be used to guarantee bank debt, "but with up to 100 billion euros earmarked for taking government stakes in banks," says the paper. In addition, both the [WP](#) and [WSJ](#) highlight reports that the British government is [preparing to unveil a plan](#) that could give it majority stake in two of the country's largest banks. Morning reports reveal the British government will provide [up to \\$63 billion](#) to prop up three of the country's largest banks. The deal could leave taxpayers owning as much as 57 percent of the Royal Bank of Scotland and 43.5 percent of Lloyds TSB and the Halifax Bank of Scotland, which are in the process of merging.

Meanwhile, in the United States, government officials are still trying to work out how best to implement the \$700 billion bailout plan. It's already clear that at least part of that money will

be used to inject capital directly into banks. The move would be similar to European efforts, but that doesn't mean the United States is ready to pick up on [all the policy prescriptions](#) that are being outlined across the pond. The [NYT](#) [highlights](#) that so far the U.S. government has "been reluctant to guarantee bank loans to other banks out of concern that it could give banks a competitive advantage over other financial institutions." The Treasury is expected to announce details of its program this week, "and it could be up and running shortly," [says the WSJ](#).

In related news, the [NYT](#) fronts word that the Bush administration assured a big Japanese bank that its investment in Morgan Stanley [would be protected](#) even if the United States decided to inject capital into the financial institution. The [NYT](#) says the move "could set an important precedent" as the government seeks to reassure foreign investors that their money is safe while it finalizes details on a rescue package. Even as Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson has said that it doesn't look like Morgan Stanley will need fresh capital from the government, officials "privately hinted" that the government would help back Morgan Stanley if needed, "suggesting that he does not want to repeat the troubles that resulted from allowing Lehman Brothers to go bankrupt," notes the [NYT](#).

The [NYT](#) and [WSJ](#) go inside with looks at how one of the reasons why stocks have been dropping so precipitously is that big investors and executives have been facing [margin calls](#), which is when those who bought shares with borrowed cash must sell in order to pay back the money. This dynamic, in which investors are being forced to sell at such a bad time, is part of the reason why many are reluctant to jump into the market despite the availability of what would appear to be good bargains.

So should investors rush to snap up these bargains now? It's little surprise that no one can say for sure. The [LAT](#)'s Tom Petruno says that the big question now is how much the credit crisis will [affect corporate earnings](#). Going off current earnings estimates, many stocks do indeed look like good deals. But with the looming threat of a deep recession and no historical precedent for the current credit crisis, trying to guess how individual companies will fare in the future is more challenging than usual. "You're flying blind," an investment officer tells the [LAT](#).

As the presidential candidates prepare for their final debate on Wednesday, and with a little more than three weeks until voters head to the polls, things aren't looking good for John McCain. The [WP](#) goes across the top of Page One with a new poll that shows Barack Obama leading 53 percent to 43 percent [among likely voters](#). Significantly, voters gave Obama an 11-point advantage in tax policy as well as a 14-point lead when asked who is the stronger leader. Attempts by the McCain campaign to raise doubts about Obama in recent weeks appear to have backfired, and he is now viewed more negatively than his Democratic counterpart as a mere 35 percent of voters say McCain is dealing with the issues, compared with 68 percent

who said the same thing about Obama. Adding to his troubles, McCain has to deal with "an unprecedented grim view of the country overall" that has 90 percent of Americans saying that the country is headed in the wrong direction, "the worst rating in polls dating to 1973," notes the *Post*.

The *NYT* takes a look at historical precedent to say that it's likely McCain has fallen too far behind [to catch up](#). Of course, that's not to say it's impossible but, rather, that if it does happen it would probably be as a result of a mistake by Obama or some sort of national-security crisis and not anything McCain could do to help himself. History has shown that at this stage in the race, most voters have already made up their minds, making large swings extremely unlikely. And in McCain's case, such a swing seems even less likely, since undecided voters usually choose to punish the party in power during tough times.

The *LAT* and *WSJ* both say McCain's campaign is considering issuing [new economic proposals](#) to convince voters that he is the best candidate to handle the current crisis. Both papers cite Sen. Lindsey Graham's saying that the candidate is considering [new tax cuts](#) "to make sure that we can get the economy jump-started." But the *NYT* talks to members of McCain's campaign who say they don't know why Graham said that. They emphasize that the candidate isn't going to [issue any new proposals this week](#) unless circumstances change. That doesn't mean McCain is giving up. Dropping in on volunteers yesterday, McCain said he plans to "whip his you-know-what in this debate."

A week after the *NYT*'s [William Kristol](#) pressed McCain to go on the offensive about Obama's relationship with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, he now thinks it's time to play nice. Kristol says McCain needs to "fire his campaign" and go back to "running as a cheerful, open and accessible candidate." The Republican should drop his attack ads and try to sell voters on the idea that the country needs a tested leader in a time of crisis. "The McCain campaign, once merely problematic, is now close to being out-and-out dysfunctional," writes Kristol. "Its combination of strategic incoherence and operational incompetence has become toxic."

today's papers New World Order

By Justin Peters

Sunday, October 12, 2008, at 3:35 AM ET

All the papers lead with financial features. The *New York Times* leads with [another look](#) at the Bush administration's new plan to sidestep the economic bailout package passed last week by Congress and, instead, emphasize an intervention that would directly invest government capital in American banks. The

Washington Post leads [news](#) that while leaders from more than 20 countries have endorsed a coordinated response to the global financial slump, they have refrained from offering any specifics on what such a response might entail. The *Los Angeles Times* [leads](#) with a think piece on what the government's response to the financial crisis says about the future of capitalism in America. The striking first line: "Are we witnessing the erosion of capitalism, or its salvation?"

As all the papers reported yesterday, the administration's new economic rescue plan is tantamount to a partial nationalization of the banking industry. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson had initially resisted the idea, but last week's market turmoil helped change his mind. The U.S. is not the only nation to resort to drastic measures—Iceland assumed control of its major banks last week, while Great Britain plans a capital infusion scheme similar to the Bush plan. As the *Post* notes, however, the markets may well require a much more forceful show of international solidarity before they rebound. "You need specific, concrete steps, not a list of principles that are obvious and everyone can easily agree to," said one IMF economist.

Unsurprisingly, the front pages are plastered with various other financial stories. The *WP* reports on how many small local banks are enjoying increased [business](#) in the wake of many large competitors' collapses. The *NYT* fronts an article polling various contrarians on whether now is the time to buy stocks. "This is the opportunity of a lifetime," maintained one fund manager. The *LAT* fronts articles on America's troubled [credit unions](#) and on how some [Russian spendthrifts](#) are willfully ignoring the bad economic news: "There's something unique about Russian life," said one man. "You enjoy today as much as you can and don't think about tomorrow." A [Russian reversal](#) for the post-capitalist age, I guess.

Everybody reports that the U.S. will remove North Korea from its list of nations that sponsor terrorism. The decision came after North Korea agreed to shutter a disputed plutonium plant and allow inspectors to return to work. In return for allowing inspectors back into its main nuclear facility at Yongbyon, North Korea reserves the right to veto inspections of other sites across the country. Presidential candidate John McCain slammed the deal, as did former Ambassador John Bolton and others. Still, as one nonproliferation expert noted, "Every agreement you ever have with the North Koreans always contains certain ambiguities, and that ends up being the basis for which you have the next round of talks."

In a somewhat melodramatic letter ("Senator McCain and Governor Palin are playing with fire, and if they are not careful, that fire will consume us all..."), Rep. John Lewis excoriated the McCain campaign yesterday for "sowing the seeds of hatred and division." The *Post* goes below the fold with a [story](#) about how, despite the proclaimed wishes of both candidates, race has become an issue in the presidential campaign. But will it be an

issue on Nov. 5? "If we don't win this election, I don't think it's going to be because of race. We spend a lot of time talking about a lot of things. That's not one we spend a lot of time talking about," said Obama campaign manager David Axelrod.

A *NYT* Week in Review story [examines](#) the so-called "Bradley effect" (named for former L.A. mayor Tom Bradley, who underperformed his polling in an unsuccessful gubernatorial race, an outcome that some attributed to latent racism among voters) before concluding that it is impossible to know whether this will impact Barack Obama's vote totals. The *Post* runs [a similar story](#), although a bit more skeptical about whether the Bradley effect is at work in this election. All of the papers continue to remain silent on the [Shawn Bradley](#) effect, however.

The *NYT* fronts a no-kidding [story](#) saying that the events of the past week have some Republican leaders feeling concerned about John McCain's chances. The *LAT*, for its part, writes that the financial crisis has convinced many longtime Republicans to support Obama.

The *Post* offleads a feature on [the perils of childbirth](#) in Sierra Leone, slugged with an arresting photograph of a newborn child and his mother, who will soon be dead. One out of eight Sierra Leonean mothers die in childbirth—an outcome, the article claims, that is fundamentally due to "life in poor countries: Governments don't provide enough decent hospitals or doctors; families can't afford medications."

The *NYT* fronts a long [article](#) about corruption in America's missile defense program, wherein about \$350 million was wasted on unnecessary and doomed projects promoted by unscrupulous employees. "[D]efense procurement has disintegrated into an incestuous relationship between the military, politicians and contractors," says the lawyer for one of the Defense Department employees charged with corruption.

"**The creeping rot**": The *LAT* fronts [an excellent feature](#) about Darrel J. Vandeveld, [a former prosecutor](#) at Guantanamo Bay and "self-described conformist" who went from "true believer to someone who felt truly deceived" regarding the fairness of the trials being held there. Vandeveld resigned last month, charging that detainees were systemically being denied due process; his claims, if they could up, could conceivably affect all pending cases at Gitmo. "I don't know how else the creeping rot of the commissions and the politics that fostered and continued to surround them could be exposed to the curative powers of the sunlight," said Vandeveld.

today's papers
Worst. Week. Ever.

By Jesse Stanchak
Saturday, October 11, 2008, at 6:03 AM ET

The Dow Jones Industrial Average had its most volatile day ever Friday, oscillating more than 1,000 points before ending up 128 points down, capping the worst week in the Dow's 112-year history. The index lost 18.2 percent of its value between the opening bell Monday and closing bell Friday. Amid the panic, some very somber discussions are being held and all the papers lead with some kind of reaction to the bad news.

The *Washington Post* leads with Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and the finance ministers from six other wealthy nations vowing to take "[all necessary steps](#)" to deal with the burgeoning financial crisis. The *Los Angeles Times* leads (at least online) with Paulson coming out of that meeting and saying the U.S. government would [buy nonvoting stakes in financial institutions](#), as part of an ongoing attempt to restore market liquidity. The *New York Times* leads with a double billing of the [international cooperation announcement](#) and word of [possible merger talks](#) between General Motors and Chrysler. The *Wall Street Journal* [devotes](#) the top half of its front page to summing up Friday's manic market activity; it tops its world-wide newsbox with both presidential candidates issuing [new economic proposals](#) in light of the crisis.

Paulson said the money the government would invest in banks would be part of the \$700 billion bailout that passed Congress earlier this month. The *LAT* says the move was widely hailed by economists as being a better idea than simply buying up bad mortgages. The *WP* says the plan could be seen as a recanting of the government's decision to allow Lehman Brothers to fail last month. The *NYT* emphasizes that while the nations have agreed to some broad principles for rescuing the financial sector, the agreement is purposefully vague about what these nationals will actually do. The paper adds that a British proposal providing for coordinated guarantees of lending between banks was rejected.

Amid the chaos, it was revealed that General Motors and Chrysler are in tentative talks about a possible merger. Both companies have been hurt by rising gas prices, falling consumer spending, and tightening credit. GM has been burning through its cash reserves at the rate of about \$1 billion a month. If the two companies combined, the resulting manufacturer would be America's largest automaker and could even rival Toyota Motor Company in size. The *NYT*'s reporting is a little opaque—neither party is officially willing to discuss the talks yet—but the piece makes it very clear that the deal is still in its delicate, early stages. The *WSJ* [goes so far](#) as to say the talks are on ice right now because of the faltering economy. The *NYT* says that if the deal with GM doesn't happen, Chrysler's owners will most likely try to merge with a foreign car company.

The *WP* [fronts](#) a different look at the global crisis, focusing on nonprofits that used to rely on the largess of people who made

their living on Wall Street. Private groups and individuals sent more aid abroad than the U.S. government last year, but now many charitable organizations are bracing for a change of fortune in the year ahead.

The *WP* looks at Japan's "lost decade" of economic growth during the 1990s, [searching](#) for clues as to how a recession in the U.S. might pan out. The paper's analysis is that conditions in Japan seemed much worse than they actually were and aspects of the country actually flourished during the downturn—so maybe things here in America won't be so bad. Not the most reassuring article ever, but *TP* will take what it can get.

An Alaskan legislative investigator concluded that Gov. Sarah Palin [abused her power](#) when she pressured officials to fire a state trooper who happened to be her former brother-in-law, according to the *NYT*. The *WP* is quick to [point out](#), however, that the same report also finds that Palin acted appropriately when she fired Public Safety Commissioner Walter Monegan, even though she did so in part because he refused to fire the trooper. The *NYT* says that in any case, the report is something of a mcguffin from a legal stand point, since the Republican-led legislature is unlikely to censure Palin or take any other disciplinary action.

The Connecticut Supreme Court [ruled](#) that homosexuals have a constitutional right to marry, reports the *NYT*. Friday's 4-3 decision struck down the state's civil-union law, finding that it violated the Constitution's equal protection clause. The [majority opinion](#) argued, in somewhat poetic language, that attempts to create a separate class of unions for gay citizens were akin to laws that "relegated blacks to separate but supposedly equal public facilities." The ruling will take effect Oct. 28, and the state's governor has said the state will not contest it any further, meaning that Connecticut will begin issuing marriage licenses on that day.

Under the fold, the *NYT* [writes](#) that the Chinese government will soon allow farmers to sell land-use rights, amounting to the nation's biggest economic overhaul in years. The hope is that the change will infuse rural areas with capital while at the same time increasing farm productivity.

A few weeks ago the *WP* [declared](#) the McCain/Palin ticket had forever altered presidential campaigning by making it a two-person affair. Gone were the days of running mates splitting up to cover more ground: Palin was being used for crossover appeal with working-class independent voters and McCain liked "having Palin along," the paper said at the time. [That's all over now](#). The *WP* is now reporting that since her debate performance earlier this month, Palin has taken on a more traditional role in the campaign. The paper now says she travels independently of McCain, speaks chiefly to heavily partisan crowds and lards her speeches with direct attacks against her opponents— just like every other VP nominee ever.

A former Finnish president [won](#) the Nobel Peace Prize for his decades of work to promote peace through diplomacy, says the *NYT* inside.

The economy in Spain has gotten so rough that the *WSJ* [reports](#) some Spanish debt collectors have taken to wearing top hats and tuxedos in order to stage showy, humiliating requests for repayment.

How are average folks in America coping with the crunch? By [selling their possessions on e-Bay](#), of course. The *WP* has all the wince-inducing details.

The *LAT* takes you inside [North Korea's international film festival](#).

twitterbox

New GOP Ticket: McCain and Joe the Plumber

The latest from *Slate's* presidential-debate Twitter feed.

Wednesday, October 15, 2008, at 9:32 PM ET

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war stories

The Afghanistan Test

Petraeus' and NATO's new strategy is much closer to Obama's than McCain's. By Fred Kaplan

Thursday, October 16, 2008, at 5:54 PM ET

The final presidential debate didn't touch on foreign policy, but two events this week involving Afghanistan bolster the impression, gained from [earlier debates](#), that Barack Obama has a grip on reality while John McCain does not.

First, today's [Washington Post](#) reports that NATO officials have directed their commanders in Afghanistan to reduce their reliance on air strikes in order to avoid killing civilians. In skirmishes where air strikes are needed to defeat Taliban insurgents, commanders are even instructed to *consider* a "tactical withdrawal" instead if civilians are in the area.

Of the roughly 1,400 Afghan civilians killed so far this year, 395 have been casualties of Western air strikes—killings that, though unintended, have intensified anti-Americanism, tarnished President Hamid Karzai's government (by dint of association), and boosted support for the Taliban. In a counterinsurgency campaign, which is aimed primarily at the hearts and minds of the local population, the consequences are not just tragic for the victims and their families but disastrous for the goals of the war.

In August 2007, at a campaign rally in New Hampshire, Obama cited these civilian casualties as his reason for wanting to send at least two more combat brigades to Afghanistan. "We've got to get the job done there," he said, "and that requires us to have enough troops so that we're not just air raiding villages and killing civilians, which is causing enormous problems there."

Earlier this month, on Fox News and in the vice-presidential debate, Republican Gov. Sarah Palin [took that statement wildly out of context](#), saying of Obama, "Some of the comments he's made about Afghanistan, what we are doing there, 'just air raiding villages and killing civilians'—that's reckless" and should "disqualify" him to be commander in chief. (The fact that Palin repeated the remark suggests that it had McCain's imprimatur.)

Judging from their order this week to the commanders on the ground, NATO's top officials endorse the position of Obama.

The week's second telling event, also reported in [today's Post](#), is that Gen. David Petraeus has launched his long-awaited reassessment of U.S. strategy in the Middle East and South Asia, viewing the war in Afghanistan as one part of a broader, regional approach. (On Oct. 31, Petraeus is scheduled to take over U.S. Central Command, which entails all American troops in those areas.)

The strategic review, which involves more than 100 advisers working in six task forces, will focus on two issues in particular, the *Post* reports: reconciliation of moderate Taliban insurgents with the Afghan government (or at least with the fight against al-Qaida) and diplomatic initiatives with neighboring countries toward the ultimate goal of weakening jihadist forces in Pakistan.

One of the scholars whom Petraeus has consulted at some length in his review is Ahmed Rashid, the brilliant Pakistani journalist and author of [Taliban](#) and [Descent Into Chaos: The United](#)

[States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia](#), which are widely regarded as the best books on the subject.

In the current issue of *Foreign Affairs* (not yet online), Rashid and Barnett Rubin, a professor at New York University and another prominent specialist on the region, write that the crises in Afghanistan and Pakistan can be resolved only through a "grand bargain," which offers political inclusion to as many reconcilable Taliban insurgents as possible—in exchange for their cooperation against al-Qaida—and diplomatic initiatives designed to stabilize Afghanistan and address the legitimate sources of Pakistan's insecurity. These initiatives, the authors emphasize, must be taken in cooperation with China and Saudi Arabia—heavy investors in Pakistan—and with a contract group to be formed by the U.N. Security Council.

This concept seems consistent with the approach that Petraeus would like to take, if he can find a concrete path.

Neither presidential candidate has outlined such a broad strategic plan for dealing with Afghanistan or Pakistan. Both have overemphasized military solutions, which Rashid and Rubin say are necessary but not sufficient to solve the problems at hand. But Obama has at least embraced diplomacy as an essential tool for dealing with security problems in general. In the first two debates, he also recognized that Afghanistan could not be settled without cooperation from Pakistan.

McCain, on the other hand, has said that Petraeus will win in Afghanistan simply by using the same strategy that he employed as commander of U.S. forces in Iraq. (Petraeus himself dismissed this notion in an [Oct. 8 speech at the Heritage Foundation](#), noting, "The biggest lesson of counterinsurgency is that every situation is unique.")

To the extent that McCain favors diplomacy, he wants to conduct it through a League of Democracy, which he envisions as an organization of nations, apart from the United Nations, that share democratic values and institutions. The idea sounds good, except that even democratic nations disagree on policy (see the Iraq war) and that most security issues these days cannot be divided along the lines of democracies vs. authoritarians. Specifically, neither China nor Saudi Arabia—two nations that Rashid and Rubin say are vital to solving the Pakistan problems—would belong to McCain's league.

Obama may need to take a few more steps along the road that he's been following. McCain is just daydreaming.

what's up, doc?

Prozac on the Playground

The dangers of off-label use of psychiatric medications in children.

By Sydney Spiesel

Wednesday, October 15, 2008, at 1:13 PM ET

Problem: We are now more aware of emotional illness in children and much more likely to diagnose and treat conditions like attention deficit disorders. But as difficult and expensive as it is to test new medications on adults, it's even harder to do the testing on children. Many treatments applied to children reflect "off-label" use of medications that have been specifically approved for adults—but not for kids. When the FDA grants a license to a new prescription medication, it lists its permitted uses ("indications") and the patients for whom it is intended (including their age range), usually reflecting the population it was tested on—children with strep throat, women with breast cancer. If a drug company even mentions a use not specifically approved, it has violated FDA rules and can be fined or otherwise punished. However, once a drug has received FDA approval, physicians are free to use it for applications or populations for which it was not formally approved. After (usually adult) FDA approval has been obtained, manufacturers often don't bother with expensive testing that would allow them to request a label extension for use in kids, since they'll have the (off-label) market, anyway. Off-label use accounts for somewhere between half and three-quarters of all medications used in children and is also commonly used for [adult treatment](#). Pediatricians are often uncomfortable with this practice, but they consider it the lesser of two evils when confronting an illness with effective adult treatment but nothing for children. Most medications behave similarly in children and adults, but that rule has exceptions, as we sometimes discover too late. Aspirin can lead to a horribly dangerous liver and brain disease in children or teens. Tetracycline, a common antibiotic, can damage the teeth of children under 8 years old. The problem is particularly troublesome when it comes to prescribing psychiatric medications to kids, which is increasingly common.

New research: A [recent paper](#) critically examined off-label use of medications for children, paying special attention to psychiatric drugs. These medicines are now used a lot because the perceived need is so great and there are so few alternatives. Because of the huge shortage of mental-health workers experienced in working with children, pediatricians and pediatric nurse practitioners are often called on to pick up the slack. Unfortunately, few have the time or the training to use psychotherapy to treat mental-health problems. They are frequently forced to fall back on medication use, often a more familiar and comfortable style of treatment. Insurance companies prefer using medication to treat these problems because it is less labor-intensive and, therefore, less expensive than psychotherapy. Anyway, they are inclined to be suspicious of treatments based on talking and thinking.

Most of the drugs used today to treat mental-health conditions have been available for a relatively short time, so we don't yet know as much as we ought to about long-term safety profiles for both adults and young people. These medications include SSRI antidepressants like Prozac as well as drugs targeting severe mental disorders like psychosis. Some medications formerly used to treat seizure disorders have also been found to be helpful for patients with mood disorders, like bipolar illness. An estimated one out of about 20 children suffers from attention deficit disorder, and many, many of these kids are being treated with medications. Even bed-wetting is sometimes treated with medications. And many of the medications used to treat these conditions might have different side-effect profiles in children than in adults.

We are seeing children with these problems much more than we used to (probably simply because parents and doctors are more sensitive to the symptoms), but, for the most part, we are limited to treating them with off-label medications. Questions have been raised about possible [side effects](#), but the need for treatment seems great, so there is a sense that we must just muddle through, hoping no bad surprises appear.

Conclusion: The authors of the paper point out that there is one thing we should certainly be doing as we use these off-label medications: We must closely monitor children receiving these drugs, especially focusing on questions of safety and effectiveness. For some medicines, this means doing laboratory tests looking for evidence of known side effects. In addition, we should be looking at the more subtle signs of effectiveness: Is the patient's school performance improving? Are things better in their social development? Is the child continuing to take the medication? (Nonadherence is sometimes a clue that a treatment is ineffective.) This kind of follow-up is likely to tell us a lot about whether a treatment is safe and effective, even for drugs that are prescribed off-label. Even better would be the kind of organized, thought-out multicenter testing that is applied to drugs used for cancer chemotherapy in children. Alas, that kind of evaluation for mental-health drugs seems very far away, indeed.

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Off-label use doesn't just apply to kids—and it is sometimes of great economic importance. For instance, a medication used for a certain cancer treatment is also effective for an eye problem of the elderly—a type of macular degeneration. When the drug is sold in little-bitty bottles for eye use under one brand name, it is

staggeringly expensive. It is, however, much cheaper when an ophthalmologist draws tiny amounts from a big bottle of a virtually identical (but differently named and much less expensive) product made by the same company for cancer treatment.

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Some side effects related to the use of mental-health medications represent special risks for young people. For example, a rare but dangerous kind of liver damage associated with the concomitant use of several different medications is much more common in children than in adults. Doctors are now given highlighted warnings to be alert for suicidal behavior that can occur in young people (adults, too) soon after they are started on antidepressants—perhaps because the medicine can energize a patient and stimulate action before the drug acts to decrease the depression and impulse to suicide.

xx factor xxtra Michelle and Me

The trials of being an Obama biographer.

By Liza Mundy

Tuesday, October 14, 2008, at 3:19 PM ET

Reporting political profiles is like giving birth: You forget how painful it is until you go through it again. And the minute you do, you think, "Somebody make it stop now." The begging for access, the plaintive calls to sources, the "no comments," the lunches with people who manage not to say anything, and did I mention the begging for access? As a feature writer, I thought I'd achieved nadirs of debasement doing profiles of Hillary Clinton (who never talked to me) and Al Gore (who finally did). But now I realize I never knew what reporting pain was until I set out to write a journalistic biography of Michelle Obama.

How hard was it? How uncooperative was the Obama campaign? I am so glad you asked! Here's an example: Back in June, the *New York Times* ran a [front-page piece](#) about Michelle Obama. A few months earlier, she had made her now-famous comment about how this election was the first time in her adult life that she'd been really proud of her country and become the target of a vast Internet conspiracy to portray her as anti-patriotic and full of racial animus. The *Times* piece was about the

campaign's efforts to soften her image, and in it, Michelle expressed astonishment at the vitriol directed her way, venturing that anyone who spent time with her would know that's not what she is about. "I will walk anyone through my life," she declared.

As it happened, that very day I was in Chicago trying to get people to walk me through what they knew of her life, and the campaign was making it extremely difficult. Among the contacts I tried to make was Michelle's first cousin once removed Capers Funnye Jr., whose mother was the sister of Michelle's paternal grandfather. Funnye is a friendly man with his own story, a convert to Judaism who became a rabbi. I'd called earlier to ask him about the Robinson family history, and when he didn't call back, I'd driven to his Chicago synagogue. He opened the door and, when I told him who I was, looked regretful. He loves to talk, but he'd checked with the campaign, and they had asked him not to give an extended interview.

Around the same time, I called a pastor on Chicago's South Side who knew Michelle. "I was instructed by the campaign to let them know when you called me," he said, explaining that he received an advance message asking him not to discuss Michelle with any book author because they were "not ready for people who knew Michelle to talk about her."

Why should you care about one writer's shaggy-dog story? In one sense, none of this is tragic; every reporter knows that being denied access to the usual contacts means you dig harder and turn up new voices. But you should care if you are expecting an Obama presidency to achieve new levels of transparency. Obama, if elected, may well bring many changes to Washington, but unusually open access to the media—and, by extension, the public—is not necessarily going to be one of them.

It's true that in this presidential campaign, it is the McCain-Palin camp that has been most vigorous in fomenting disdain of the press, denying access to reporters and encouraging the notion that the media is a "filter" that distorts the truth rather than a collection of individuals trying to ferret it out. But the Obama campaign is not above thwarting scrutiny. In June, the [campaign told reporters](#) Obama was going to Chicago when he was really meeting elsewhere with Hillary Clinton. Off flew the campaign plane, with the press corps in it, prompting a letter of protest from bureau chiefs. It seems to me that the Obama campaign also hopes voters will eschew the media middle man and get their information "directly" from the campaign Web site. Or from Obama's own books. Go ahead if you want to. Just keep in mind that Obama misremembers the year when he met Michelle and the date of her father's death. There is some virtue, it could be argued, in seeking other sources.

Campaigns are, of course, entitled to deny access to the principals; they do have to choose whom to favor. And I understand that the campaign in general and Michelle in particular have been buffeted by malicious rumors. But there is

something, I don't know, unsporting in the willingness to silence outside sources who are eager to talk. And something counterproductive, one would think, in a crouch this defensive: The people being discouraged were those most likely to say nice things. And in any case, here's the bottom line: You don't get to tell the *Times* how you are willing to walk anyone through your life if, in fact, you aren't.

To begin at the beginning: In 2007, I wrote an analysis of Barack Obama's political rise for the *Washington Post*. During that reporting, I interviewed Michelle and her brother, Craig Robinson, at a time when they were not being closely controlled. Both sessions were rich in material that could be useful in painting a portrait of her. I've always been interested in public women who are polarizing, and—whatever people might say about the relevance of spouses—felt that a woman who is one of her husband's closest advisers merits examination. When a Simon & Schuster editor called to ask if I'd be interested in writing a campaign bio of Michelle, I said yes.

I also was moved by the American narrative she embodies. She is the descendant of slaves in South Carolina. Her grandfather moved to Chicago during the Great Migration. Her childhood neighborhood was transformed by white flight; one of her first experiences as a young girl would have been watching white people move away as her own family advanced. She attended Princeton during the height of the debate over affirmative action; I'd been there at roughly the same time. So, I e-mailed the officials I'd dealt with for my earlier profile and told them I hoped they would cooperate. After a couple of exchanges, her communications director, Katie McCormick Lelyveld, called to say the campaign would not.

At first, I thought that this was just part of the familiar birthing hell. Campaigns often say they will not cooperate, so you have to keep going back, writing e-mails and buttonholing. I'd been through this with the profile on Barack: The campaign had promised an interview with him and then backed away, and not until I tracked him down after a Senate hearing and reminded him of the promise did they end up giving me 20 minutes.

This time, I went to hear Michelle speak in Chicago and sought out Lelyveld. I tried to persuade her of my intent to write a fair, straightforward book, arguing that this was the perfect opportunity for the campaign to present an accurate picture of Michelle straight-up. Lelyveld replied that they were very busy and said they didn't think there was enough time to do a good book before the election. I asked her not to shut down access to sources I called.

Because that's how political reporting works: When you call sources who are close to the subject, the drill is that they check to see if it's OK to talk. Almost immediately, evidence suggested the answer they were getting was "no." I e-mailed an administrator for a group Michelle is on the board of, who

responded to say: "I am in London. ... Do you want to wait until I get back to Chicago or talk on the phone from here?" I e-mailed back to say either was fine. I got back a message markedly different in tone from the first. "I think I will need to wait on this," it said. "When I get back, I am leaving town again and have much work to do in between." My further e-mails to her went unanswered.

And that, pretty much, is how it went. I tracked down a cousin in Florida who would be glad to talk until, suddenly, he wouldn't. I e-mailed Craig Robinson, head basketball coach at Oregon State. He responded promptly, saying, "I'm happy to help out." Lelyveld put the kibosh on an interview.

Over the summer, the campaign brought on a number of Washington hands. Each time, I contacted the staffer, hoping that at some point one veteran would say: Um, why aren't we cooperating? No such luck. Usually, there was no reply.

Eventually, I convinced myself that I had to get through to Michelle. So, I went to see her speak in Pontiac, Mich., at a groovy downtown music venue called the Crofoot. Before I went, I wrote a letter to Michelle, including articles I'd written, which, I hoped, would show her I was a fair reporter with experience, among other things, in writing about race. After the speech, hemmed in by audience members who wanted to shake her hand, I had to clamber over chairs to deliver the envelope to an official. A couple of days later, leaving my house on an errand, I had the wild notion that Michelle would respond. So, I instructed my children to be very, very polite if she called.

"Mom," said my 10-year-old son, looking at me gravely, "Michelle Obama is not going to call."

It got worse, at least from my point of view. Thanks to Google alert, I learned that before the event in Pontiac, the campaign had called the editor of a local women's publication, offering Michelle for an interview. The editor wrote a piece that said talking to her was just like talking to her girlfriend.

Because the Obama campaign does give access to Michelle Obama. They give access to celebrity magazines like *Us Weekly* and *People*, which tilt toward that coveted female audience; to publications that do the same thing on a local scale; and to TV shows like *The View* and *Access Hollywood*. Why not me, too? Maybe somebody in the campaign disliked me. But it seems likely that at this juncture the campaign prefers to keep at arm's length reporters working in an extended print medium, in which lots of ancillary characters will be interviewed whose comments cannot be controlled. It also may be that Michelle Obama plans to write her own book someday and wants the field clear.

Right about now, I imagine, my poor book editor is clutching her hair, thinking: Dear God, how did I end up with an author who is

driving down [her own Amazon numbers](#)? So, let me hasten to say that when the going gets tough, the tough cry and gnash their teeth and rend their garments and then go out and start obtaining yearbooks. I called high-school and college and law-school classmates; neighbors; lawyers; people who worked with Michelle Obama at the nonprofit she directed, Public Allies. If you place enough phone calls, some people who knew your subject well at one point, and who are not closely in touch now, will call back. And some people who have been instructed not to talk will, anyway, because they want publicity, because they like her and want to say why, or because they consider it a public service.

So, in the end, I talked to enough people to write a biography I found interesting and enjoyed doing. And because the campaign did not cough up the same 12 people they usually make available, there are new voices in it. The point, however, is that the campaign made writing a book about Michelle Obama harder, I would argue, than it should have. In an Obama administration, we the press will have our work cut out for us.

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Pro-Life and Pro-Obama

Women who are giving up on the GOP.

By Melinda Henneberger

Monday, October 13, 2008, at 11:54 AM ET

Marlene Turnbach is a pro-life Democrat from Hazelton, Pa., who twice voted for George W. Bush over abortion. As she told me a couple of years ago when I interviewed her for a [book](#) on women voters, "Bush won because all my friends who are Democrats voted for him and put abortion over everything else." Though only about 13 percent of those likely to turn out at the polls are true single-issue pro-life voters, I met a surprising number of women, most of them Catholic, who said that they did *not* expect the Democratic Party to switch its basic position on *Roe v. Wade* but nonetheless felt increasingly marginalized and unwelcome in the party as dissenters from party orthodoxy on that one issue.

And now? Not so much. With the economy in freefall, abortion opponents afraid even to peek at their third-quarter 401(k) statements suddenly see their way around this obstacle on their road home to the Democrats. In Turnbach's state, where one-third of all voters are Catholic (and six in 10 Catholics describe themselves as pro-life), pro-choice Barack Obama is nonetheless ahead of John McCain, who opposes abortion rights, by 12 points in one poll and 14 in another. At a [rally](#) in Johnstown, Pa., on Saturday, Sarah Palin all but pleaded with pro-life voters to give her party one more chance to deliver on 35 years of pro-life promises: "In times like these with wars and financial crisis, I

know that it may be easy to forget even as deep and abiding a concern as the right to life, and it seems that our opponent kind of hopes you will forget that." Yet when I checked back in with Turnbach and others, it was clear that for them social issues are off the table, at least for now.

It isn't that Turnbach's stand on abortion has shifted any, she says. But her view of the Republican Party's commitment to seeing *Roe* overturned has: "Even if McCain does get in, he's not going to *do* anything" that would lead to a reversal of *Roe*. The legality of abortion "is not going to change," she's concluded, "and I really don't think it should *be* an issue" in this presidential race.

Like others who told me they had based their vote on the single issue of abortion the last two times around, Turnbach's says her '08 calculus takes other matters—like the economy, the economy and the economy—into account: "McCain was on my nerves the other night, prancing around" at the debate in Nashville, she says, while Obama strikes her as "level-headed, intelligent, and someone who doesn't fly off the handle; I like him." Age is another strike against McCain in her view: "McCain is so *old*," says Turnbach, who is retired. "If he passed away, we'd have someone so inexperienced it's scary." Most of her pro-life friends who went for Bush in 2000 and 2004 are also Obama grandmamas now, she says, including one who is really sweating the switch but "doesn't think McCain is mentally stable."

In the past, I've tried to make the case that Democrats could pick up some votes just by being less insulting to people who disagree with them—on abortion and more generally. Mostly, the response has been "screw you, dumb troll, and what do you mean we're insulting?" (That's the PG-rated version.) Last year, I [argued in an op-ed](#) in the *New York Times* that the Democratic Party could win back some pro-life voters with a more tolerant attitude towards those who break with party orthodoxy on abortion. Contrary to the exciting headline on the piece, I never argued that "Pro-Choice Is a Bad Choice for Democrats" but, instead, said it shouldn't be the only possible choice for Democrats in good standing. But now, the whole argument has effectively been put on hold in a time of crisis.

Most of the women I talked to who voted for Bush over abortion and are supporting Obama this time didn't want their names used because they didn't want to be thought of as defectors, particularly at church. In some cases, they fear being barred from receiving communion; Doug Kmiec, the conservative pro-life law professor, was denied the sacrament this summer after he [announced](#) in *Slate* that he was for Obama.

Even Turnbach's friend Nancy Gilgannon, a pro-life Pennsylvania Democrat who voted for Bush and *is* voting for McCain this year, says that abortion has nothing to do with her decision this time around. Two years ago, she told me she blamed her church for Bush's election—and felt she'd been

conned into voting for him: "It was the church's fault ... I talked to several priests and they all said, 'There's only one issue in this election.' I said, 'What about the poor, and Social Security?' And they said, 'There is only one issue.' Oh, it was hard to push that button for Bush; I think I was just used, and that's what really grinds me."

Now what she says is "I never did like George Bush, and he's turned out to be a disaster I contributed to." Still, she's voting Republican again this year because the lesson she takes from the failures of the Bush presidency is that experience in national politics is everything. And McCain has more of it. "George Bush didn't have enough experience, and look what happened. Obama has two years in the Senate and two years campaigning," and that's not enough, especially given "the mess we're in now." Gilgannon, who is a retired college professor, voted for Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary, and also influencing her is the feeling that Obama treated Hillary and Bill Clinton poorly: "He made the Clintons out to be racists, and that didn't sit well with me; he really threw her in the garbage can."

Another friend of Gilgannon and Turnbach who voted for Bush twice, Liz Tarone, says the last eight years have convinced her that abortion and other social issues should be off the table for good. She went for Bush last time because she couldn't stomach John Kerry, but she now thinks "Iraq will go down as the worst political decision of the century, worse than Vietnam." She doesn't like either Obama or McCain. So she plans not to vote for president this year (though she will turn out to vote "against every incumbent on the ballot"). These days, just the mention of abortion or gay marriage by a politician makes her want to scream: In the middle of the worst economic crisis since the Depression, she says, "I don't want to hear about questions for which there are no answers."

After 35 years of fighting over Roe, even some of the most convinced combatants are ready for a cease-fire.

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