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

architecture

Bringing Brutal Back

Can restoring Paul Rudolph's signature building rescue the architect's reputation as well?

By Witold Rybczynski

Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 7:02 AM ET

The newly refurbished and expanded Art and Architecture Building at Yale is a reminder of the important role that fashion

plays in the fortunes of architects. When the A&A Building was built in 1963, its architect, [Paul Rudolph](#), was the profession's golden boy. His meteoric rise had begun in Florida in the 1950s with a string of delicate Modernist houses, ingeniously adapted to the subtropical climate. These had led to larger commissions, notably a high school in Sarasota and an [art center](#) at Wellesley College. At only 40, Rudolph was made chairman of Yale's architecture department, and then, five years later, came the widely acclaimed A&A, which propelled him into the front rank of the postwar generation's emerging architectural stars.

Rudolph acknowledged that the A&A was influenced by Le Corbusier, who had pioneered an expressive architectural style using bare concrete, generally referred to as [brutalism](#). But the building also had American roots, namely Frank Lloyd Wright's famous [Larkin Building](#) in Buffalo, N.Y. An odd mixture, but Rudolph pulled it off and gave it his own spin, with walls of rough striated concrete that resembled corduroy. The resulting composition of vast, pinwheeling forms produced a lyrical monumentalism unmatched by any of his contemporaries.

Yet by the time of his death in 1997, Rudolph was all but forgotten. What happened? In a word, taste—changing taste. By the 1970s, Postmodernism had introduced wit and irony to architecture, neither of which interested the serious Rudolph, whose brand of heroic monumentalism now struck many people—and many potential clients—as bombastic. (It is also true that his inventive buildings often had functional problems—the proverbial leaky roofs.) Commissions eventually dried up, at least in the United States, although he continued to build in Asia. He was regularly passed over for the Pritzker Prize, which went instead to contemporaries such as I.M. Pei and Kevin Roche. Although by then Rudolph had moved away from concrete and brutalism, he was ever tied to that style by the A&A, which also suffered from neglect. Disliked by students and faculty, badly damaged in a mysterious fire in 1969, insensitively altered, and poorly maintained, it remained an ill-kempt, embarrassing reminder of a stalled talent.

According to Robert A.M. Stern, dean of architecture at Yale, the A&A "was not a loved building, and frankly, in my opinion, it would have been torn down if that weren't so expensive." It was Stern who championed the restoration of the building (now Paul Rudolph Hall), which was overseen by architect Charles Gwathmey, once a student of Rudolph's. The restored building is definitely of its time. It's a little self-conscious, has an extremely limited palette of materials—there is really too much concrete—and the bright-orange carpeting is a bit much. But the interlocking spaces, the inventive use of natural light, and the ever-changing levels (there are said to be 37 of them in the 10-story building) are marvelous. The splendid result reaffirms Rudolph as one of the most original architectural talents of his generation.

With improved mechanical systems—and double glazing—the environmental shortcomings of the original building have been rectified, and it's possible to appreciate the A&A as a place of learning. One of Rudolph's charming ideas was to scatter plaster casts of architectural fragments throughout the building—a medieval figure in the lobby, part of the Acropolis frieze in the fire stair, a large Roman statue of the goddess Minerva in one of the studios. The resulting "architectural" atmosphere is in contrast to the bland, corporate interiors of the art history department, which is located in a new adjoining wing. Gwathmey had the unenviable task of adding on to Rudolph's building, and he did not rise to the occasion. The ill-conceived zinc, limestone, and glass [addition](#) appears timid and strikes me as neither an extension of Rudolph's rough aesthetic, nor a successful foil. Or maybe it's just a matter of taste.

books

Of Ants and Men

Compare the two civilizations, and who wins?

By Christine Kenneally

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 10:44 AM ET

If you took a planet and a handful of genes, you could pose some great questions about human nature and then run experiments to answer them. Instead of asking how much altruism, cooperation, creativity, or any other human trait is hard-wired, you could adjust the wiring yourself. First, you would work out how tightly behaviors and abilities could be programmed into the genome. Then you would create many societies with starkly different predispositions and compare their progress. In one country, you might have a population with genetic sex differences that are so profound that males and females are different social castes. In another, you might loosen genetic control over sexual traits and liberate behavior from sexual identity; an elastic gender gap would prevail, and citizens would be highly responsive to cultural influences. How do the two fare? You could build a group whose social classes have a biological basis, with extreme physical and cognitive/mental differences between socioeconomic levels, and contrast them with a group that is much more physically homogenous. Who is happiest? Or create a highly aggressive, individualistic band of humans and pit them against superefficient drones who are biologically incapable of internecine conflict. Which civilization is more robust? Which colonizes other lands? Who lasts longest?

In lieu of another planet, consider the ant. In an advanced ant city, thousands of individuals work closely together to create a functioning colony in which there is a balance of cooperation and conflict. Some ant societies feature spectacular architecture and climate control. The most remarkable ant species have agriculture: They farm fungus and even domesticate other

insects as livestock. In fact, at its height, ant civilization is remarkably like ours. A key contrast is that their society emerges from the hard-wired decision-making of thousands of efficient little biological robots, whereas ours is, at least partly, conscious and intentional. Despite this seemingly massive difference, it appears you can go a long way without a mind.

In *The Superorganism: The Beauty, Elegance, and Strangeness of Insect Societies*, Bert Holldobler and E.O. Wilson survey the last 15 years of myrmecological research. Picking up where their Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Ants* left off, *The Superorganism* is a completely wonderful book. It is packed with astonishing findings and beautiful illustrations, and, happily, it also contains enough information about ant civilization to set up a few ants-vs.-humans scenarios. Let us skip lightly over the fact that to compare ants and humans is to pit thousands of species against just one. Rather, let's start with the idea that we begin the contest evenly matched—at 6.6 billion humans and approximately 5 million billion ants, humans and ants have roughly the same biomass. What if a global disaster struck? Who would come out on top?

We won't be able to declare one species smarter or better—each is wildly successful in its own niche, and at any rate, that would make as much sense as saying one is better-looking than the other. Still, we can wonder about how robust life is at such extreme ends of the genes-mind spectrum. What if, for example, you hammered the Earth with a volcano or a big rock from space? Who would survive? Or think about that classic of speculative fiction—mass sterility. Imagine that both ants' and humans' biological clocks sputter and stop, and reproduction just doesn't work as it used to. Is life as we know it over? Perhaps a mysterious plague has moved unnoticed among us until one morning we awake and 70 percent of both populations has disappeared? Could civilization recover? Either one?

Ants in general have been around for more than 100 million years, and the most socially sophisticated species evolved 8 million to 12 million years ago. In that whole time span, the Earth has suffered many explosive events. The worst occurred 65 million years ago, when a meteor strike caused the end not just of the dinosaurs but of 75 percent of all species at the time. In terms of immediate global catastrophe and drastic long-term climate change, the next-most-awful event was a volcanic eruption 27 million years ago in what is now southwestern Colorado. As far as modern humans are concerned, two more important blasts occurred: a volcanic eruption in Indonesia 74,000 years ago and an exploding comet above North America 12,500 years ago that set the entire continent on fire. The Indonesian eruption almost wiped out the human species, and the meteor may have decimated the humans who lived on the continent at the time. Still, nothing on the scale of any of these explosions has occurred in the last 10,000 years as modern human civilization has gotten up and running. Essentially, we remain untested, while ants from the most primitive to the most

social have survived all events. By default, ants must be declared the winner.

How have they coped with all the apocalyptic broiling? Ants are remarkably physically resilient. They live in virtually any habitat possible, and they can withstand radioactivity that would kill humans instantly. It must also help that they live mostly underground. They can easily retreat if the outside world gets too hot. Most importantly, ants are untroubled by the sophisticated decision-making apparatus that humans have. In the case of many ant species, the individual ant is going to make and remake the same small set of decisions every day, whether that day is the same as the one before or that day is the day a supervolcano erupts. Because of this, ants also deal efficiently with problems that might haunt us: If they stumble across a dead nest-mate, their first response is to pick the body up, take it outside, and literally throw it on the garbage heap.

In *The Children of Men*, P.D. James vividly imagined a world that was suddenly struck by infertility. Men and women are still able to go through the motions of reproduction, but babies do not result. It's a straightforward end-of-the-world problem, and even though many scientists are now actively engaged in finessing human cloning, we aren't there yet. Until then, global infertility would mean curtains for us. Ants might struggle on a little longer. When a virgin queen leafcutter ant leaves her birth colony, she has an afternoon's dalliance with a number of males and then goes on to found a civilization of her own. Even though the odds are against her success (in one study, 12 of 13,300 new colonies made it to the three-month-mark), she may go on to produce hundreds of millions of offspring. All of this follows from her one big day out. Ant queens hang onto millions of male sperm cells and can use them for up to 10 years, long after the father has died. So even if sex no longer produced offspring, any one ant civilization might continue to thrive. Ants win again, at least for the short term.

The ant queen is queen of reproduction only. Once she gets her society going, she doesn't in any sense rule over her subjects. In fact, though it looks highly stratified (think class-obsessed Victorian England or the Indian caste system) as well as highly productive, no one is in charge of leafcutter civilization. After joining a caste, each ant follows a simple set of algorithms in order to make decisions. Their concern is always what is in front of them—the piece of food, the foreign ant, the wilting fungus, the enticing pheromone cloud. Out of the accumulation of all these tiny decisions emerges "megalopolis" architecture and industry. Ants excavate tons of dirt, going meters underground to create thousands of compartments. In many compartments, they tend fungus gardens, protecting their crop against disease and theft as carefully as any human farmer. Near their nests, they herd sap-feeding insects like cattle and harvest their sugar-rich droppings. No one ant plans this—or even thinks about it. Instead, the accumulation of their many small, quick decisions builds what Holldobler and Wilson call a superorganism, a smart

animal made up of many differently smart animals. So real is the super-ant that it's subject to its own kind of evolutionary pressure, distinct from the pressure on any one ant.

Humans form superorganisms, too. Many enjoyable discoveries in [cognitive science](#) over the past few decades concern the way that a [larger human intelligence](#) can arise from the actions of many people. We know now that many individual decisions are made unconsciously, that even [crowds](#) make decisions, and that other weird phenomena exist in the collective mind like a language that is contained by a population of speakers, not the mind of any one speaker. Many evolutionary theorists also argue that human groups are subject to their own form of natural selection. But we are not the Borg—or ants, for that matter. Indeed, it is more or less the same thing to say that humans are individuals, humans can learn, and humans have minds. To be fair to ants, Holldobler and Wilson say ants possess primitive minds, making decisions about what to do next based on their experiences of what has happened before. Humans, however, extend the benefit of experience not just over their entire lifetimes but also back through the lifetimes of many human societies. Humans build knowledge outside the genome and learn in real time, which is why in the face of a global plague, humans might do better than ants.

If there is an avian-flu outbreak or an equivalent insect epidemic, like the one that's currently wiping out North America's honeybee population, humans will find ways to amplify their immunity rapidly. Assuming that after the initial hit, a decent portion of survivors are doctors, biologists, and engineers (and it's not all poets and bankers), we'll have the predictive and planning tools of epidemiology and other public-health aids as well as the lessons of medicine at our disposal. We may communicate remotely to keep infected people in quarantine, and we'll find some way to dispose of the ones who didn't make it. The problem for ants is that when civilization is hard-wired, civilians aren't very nimble—even if their civilization is particularly industrious and sophisticated. In contrast, humans are cognitive scavengers, pulling together ideas from other places and other times and even using other animals, like ants, to test their theories and design their responses. For once, ants lose and humans win.

Of course, life doesn't care which of us wins, as long as some of us do. While humans and ants are fundamentally different kinds of biological machines, both are designed to solve the same problem: staying alive. But a problem remains. It's been said that modern human civilization is itself an extinction event, causing up to 30 percent of all species to disappear by the middle of this century. If we ourselves go extinct, a huge burst in biodiversity will result. In contrast, if ants vanished, the effect on the biosphere would be catastrophic. Many plant species would die, as would entire habitats, like all of the rainforests. In short order, all the animals that depend on all of those plants would

disappear, too. Ants may well be the most important animals on Earth. Which means that if the ants lose, we all lose.

bushisms

Bushism of the Day

By Jacob Weisberg

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 4:48 PM ET

"I've been in the Bible every day since I've been the president."—Washington, D.C., Nov. 12, 2008

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

bushisms

Bushism of the Day

By Jacob Weisberg

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 2:42 PM ET

"He was a great father before politics, a great father during politics, and a great father after politics."—On his father, George H.W. Bush, Washington, D.C., Nov. 12, 2008

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

corrections

Corrections

Friday, December 5, 2008, at 6:49 AM ET

In the Dec. 3 "[Explainer](#)," Christopher Beam mistakenly wrote that members of Chabad-Lubavitch wear long side curls, or *payos*. They keep that hair short.

Due to an editing error, a Nov. 26 "[Sports Nut](#)" mistakenly stated that Disney once owned an NFL franchise. It was an NHL franchise.

In the Nov. 25 "[Green Lantern](#)," Jacob Leibenluft originally misstated the relationship between the emissions produced by Caltrain and those produced by a sedan. The train generates less than half as many greenhouse-gas emissions or particulate matter per passenger mile as a sedan, not less than twice as much.

In a Nov. 25 "[Politics](#)," John Dickerson originally and incorrectly said that African-American voters had killed Proposition 8. The issue in question was whether black support helped pass the measure that reversed the California Supreme Court decision allowing gay marriage.

In the Nov. 24 "[Technology](#)," Farhad Manjoo originally misstated the date when Skype launched. It was 2003, not 2005.

In the Nov. 22 "[Moneybox](#)," Daniel Gross misidentified Hoover's Treasury secretary as Paul Mellon. It was Andrew Mellon.

In the Nov. 21 "[Explainer](#)," Juliet Lapidus misspelled the name of artist Georgia O'Keeffe.

In the Nov. 20 "[Human Nature](#)," William Saletan originally wrote that an ovary transplant had been performed in England. Actually, although the patient lived in and gave birth in England, the transplant was performed in the United States.

*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.*

culture gabfest

The Culture Gabfest, Love Me for Who I Am Edition

Listen to *Slate's* show about the week in culture.

By Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner
Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 1:21 PM ET

Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 22 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program [here](#), or you can subscribe to the Culture Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking [here](#).

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss *Milk*, Beyoncé, and Black Friday.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

The official [Milk Web site](#).
Dana Stevens' [review of Milk](#).
Dennis Lim's [analysis](#) of whether *Milk* could have helped defeat California's Proposition 8 if it had been released earlier.
Beyoncé's new album, [I Am ... Sasha Fierce](#).
Beyoncé's video for the song "[Single Ladies](#)."
Beyoncé's video for the song "[If I Were a Boy](#)."
Jonah Weiner's piece on [Beyoncé's odd new alter ego, Sasha Fierce](#).
David Carr's *New York Times* [analysis](#) of Black Friday.

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: James Lipton's *Inside the Actor's Studio* [interview with Paul Newman](#).
Julia's pick: Norman Rush's novel [Mating](#).
Stephen's pick: Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s [Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man](#).

You can reach the Culture Gabfest at culturefest@slate.com.

Posted on Dec. 3 by Amanda Aronczyk at 1:15 p.m.

Nov. 19, 2008

Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 21 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program [here](#), or you can subscribe to the Culture Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking [here](#).

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss the Malcolm Gladwell phenomenon, Michelle Obama's role as first lady and mom-in-chief, and the post-Obama buzz kill of Prop 8.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

Malcolm Gladwell's latest book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*. Jason Zengerle's article on Malcolm Gladwell in *New York magazine*.

A *Slate* "Book Club" about *Outliers*.

Rebecca Traister's article on the "momification" of Michelle Obama in *Salon*.

Slate's [article](#) on the Obama marriage.

Slate's "XX Factor" [blog post](#) on Michelle, Hillary Clinton, and Sarah Palin.

The Michelle Obama [biography](#) that played at the DNC.

A *Slate* [article](#) comparing the fight over gay marriage with the civil rights movement.

[Background info](#) on Prop 8.

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: David Garland's *Evening Music* show on WNYC.

Julia's pick: Beyoncé's latest songs, "[Single Ladies](#)" and "[If I Were a Boy](#)."

Stephen's pick: Charles Mingus' *Mingus Plays Piano*.

You can reach the Culture Gabfest at culturefest@slate.com.

Posted on Nov. 19 by Amanda Aronczyk at 11:45 a.m.

Nov. 6, 2008

Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 20 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program [here](#), or you can subscribe to the weekly Culture Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking [here](#).

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss Obama, Obama, and Obama. What happened with the election, how the media covered it, and what lies ahead for culture under future President Barack Obama.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

President-elect Barack Obama's [election-night speech](#) in Chicago.

Kevin Phillips on the "Southern strategy" in his book, *The Emerging Republican Majority*.

How CNN's [holograms](#) work.

CNN's [bio](#) for John King.

Troy Patterson's *Slate* piece on [the television coverage of election night](#).

The New York Times' [interactive election results](#).

The FiveThirtyEight [Web site](#).

Walt Whitman's [preface](#) to *Leaves of Grass*.

David Simon's HBO [series](#) *The Wire*.

The Bernie Mac [film](#) *Soul Men*.

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: The Giorgio Morandi [survey](#) at the Met. If you don't live in New York, check out *Slate*'s [slide-show essay](#) on the exhibition.

Julia's pick: Timothy Crouse's book, *The Boys on the Bus*.

Stephen's picks: The Donovan song "[Catch the Wind](#)" and Paul Berman's book *A Tale of Two Utopias*.

You can reach the Culture Gabfest at culturefest@slate.com.

Posted by Amanda Aronczyk on Nov. 6, 2008 at 12:14 p.m.

dear prudence Career Suicide

My boss keeps "joking" about killing herself. How can I intervene?

Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 6:54 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:

I work in a small company of about 30 employees. My co-workers and I don't know what to do about our boss. Our company is in serious financial trouble. I make up the entire accounts payable/receivable department, and if it hadn't been for a big check we received from a company that owed us, we wouldn't have been able to send out our last payroll checks. I'm really worried about our boss' suicide "jokes." She frequently will jokingly ask me or another of my co-workers for a gun or a knife. She even crawled onto the windowsill in my office and had her bottom half hanging out until I grabbed her and pulled her back in. I told her recently that I was not going to take these questions as jokes anymore and that the next time she mentioned a gun or knife, I was going to call the suicide hot line. Her response was to walk over to my phone and say sarcastically, "Sure, let's do it now! I'll dial, you talk." She later came back and said, "I hope you know I'm never serious about that." One co-worker suggested we try to convince her brother to admit her to a psychiatric ward. But unfortunately she is the sole decision-maker regarding practically everything we do, so without her, I

don't even know how we'd be able to run on a day-to-day basis. What should I do?

—Concerned Employee

Dear Concerned,

A lot of people these days are feeling as if they need to be talked in from the ledge. However, if this is no longer a metaphor and you are bodily pulling your boss in from an open window, then you've got a crisis that's more than economic. I talked to Dr. Richard McKeon, a suicide prevention expert at the federal [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#). He said the fact that your boss dismisses this talk as a "joke" doesn't mean that she's not seriously contemplating taking her own life. He said the majority of people who commit suicide discuss it first. Many also make what look like half-hearted attempts, but these can be a way of getting used to the idea of the real thing. So your boss is on an alarming trajectory. She needs to get a suicide risk assessment from a qualified mental health professional. Maybe she needs immediate hospitalization, or perhaps medication and therapy would allow her to better function through this crisis. Your co-worker is right—you need to enlist her family. If they won't take action, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, [1-800-273-TALK](#). Explain your situation, and they will refer you to help in your area. It also sounds like it's time for all of you to face the painful reality that no matter what your boss's condition, it looks as if the company might be terminal.

—Prudie

[*Dear Prudence Video: Unwilling Other Woman*](#)

Dear Prudence,

Earlier this year, a person in my husband's family stole money from me. It wasn't a large amount of money, but I still felt rather violated, and so did my husband. I have a hunch about who did it, although all of the family members present at the time, of course, said they did not do it. After it happened, I approached the entire family and told them how hurt I was and how I could no longer trust any of them. Well, the holidays are approaching, and that means spending time with both of our families again. My husband is telling me to just get over this and stop holding a grudge, but I'm still very hurt. I do love his family, but how can I put something as big as this aside and put on a happy face when I just don't feel it in my heart?

—Robbed

Dear Robbed,

I'm afraid family gatherings aren't Agatha Christie novels in which you can get everyone into the drawing room and interrogate the suspects one by one: "And you, Aunt Myrna, you said you were getting more punch, but I distinctly saw you take a

route that brought you in the vicinity of my purse, which was nowhere near the punch bowl!" You say you think you know who did it. So unless there was a familywide conspiracy to lighten your wallet, it's unclear why you can no longer trust all the other people who honestly responded to your grilling by denying they were the culprit. Your husband is right; you must let this go—completely and now. Since your family may harbor a pickpocket, at your next holiday gathering, leave your wallet in your car's glove compartment. And however tempting it may be, do not wear a fanny pack to Christmas dinner.

—Prudie

Dear Prudie,

I'm a woman in my early 20s afflicted with severe acne. It has gotten worse rather than better as I've grown older and has shown no significant response to treatment. I lack the resources to pursue further treatment and have accepted my condition and the social limitations it imposes. Often people "reach out" to me and remind me that "it could be worse"—mentioning friends who remain cheerful despite cancer or being in a wheelchair. In addition, strangers approach me in the street to share miracle cures or to ask me if I've tried this or that treatment. At other times, they compliment my eyes or my clothes. I find these experiences to be extremely painful and humiliating and am often at a loss for words. Keep in mind that I do not broadcast the pain my acne causes me; I try to dress, behave, and interact in a "normal" manner. I'm introverted, but that is a result of the immense stigma and humiliation associated with my condition. Naturally, I ignore negative reactions to my acne, but what is an appropriate way to respond to the unsolicited pity and "cheering up" of would-be Samaritans?

—Painfully Aware

Dear Painfully,

I wouldn't come up to you on the street to discuss your skin, but I'm glad you've written to me because I'm one of those people who wants to tell you there is no reason for you to walk around with acne so disfiguring that strangers do approach you with advice. You need a new dermatologist right away. Call your nearest medical school or teaching hospital and ask for recommendations of dermatologists who have a special interest in acne. There are many treatments available, and just because what you've tried so far didn't work, that doesn't mean another regimen won't succeed. Although insurance varies, treatment of acne should be covered by many policies. If you lack insurance, discuss a payment plan with your new doctor. This is an investment in your happiness and mental health that you must make. You may even be eligible for a clinical trial, which would mean you aren't charged for your treatment. As for what to do in the meantime when people talk to you about this: If they offer treatment advice, thank them and say you're getting medical care. If they tell you how much worse it could be, agree there are many people who courageously face terrible illness, then change

the subject. And if they compliment you on your eyes or clothes, smile and say, "Thanks."

—Prudie

Dear Prudie,

I'm 28 and childless, as are my closest friends. The only one in our small group to have a child so far is my older sister. We all love my niece dearly and think of her as our baby. The problem is, my sister expects us to be there for everything involving her child. She hasn't made an effort to befriend other mothers; she just expects us to join her for whatever they do. While I love them both, I have no desire to watch Big Bird sing and dance onstage. (Yes, she actually requested my presence at a live production of *Sesame Street*.) My niece is 4, and so far all of her birthday parties have consisted of about 15 adults and no other children. Last year I pointed out how odd this seemed, and my sister said she just didn't have room for a bunch of kids at her house. I told her maybe there would be more room if all of her friends weren't there instead. She blew me off. So my question is, am I off base in thinking this is not normal? Am I a horrible auntie if I stop participating in these things? She's told me it's my obligation to go to my niece's birthday parties, and one is coming up next month. Is this true? At what point does this change?

—Sesamed Out

Dear Sesamed,

In exchange for the delirious joys of parenthood—the hugs, the smiles, the exultations of "I love you, Mommy!"—one must endure *Sesame Street Live* and other cultural assaults. Obviously, in your capacity as loving auntie you will want to take your niece to an occasional event or join your sister for an outing, but you are not obligated to have your social calendar revolve around the needs of a 4-year-old. You were right to bring this up with your sister once, but since she didn't respond, and nothing has changed in the year since, you have to have a more serious talk with her. There is something off if she considers having "a bunch of kids" to the house an imposition. Gently probe what's going on with her, and tell her you're concerned that by this point she—and her daughter—haven't found a group of friends. If your niece is not in nursery school, she should be. It would help her make connections with other children and your sister with other mothers. And as for the endless rounds of socializing your sister demands, start learning to say, "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I have other plans."

—Prudie

Photograph of Prudie by Teresa Castracane.

dispatches

How (Not) To Find a Pirate in the Strait of Malacca

The pirate's shopping list: machete, face mask, long bamboo pole, and hooked knife.

By Kelly McEvers

Friday, December 5, 2008, at 6:54 AM ET

From: Kelly McEvers

Subject: The Island of the Ex-Pirates

Posted Monday, December 1, 2008, at 11:00 AM ET

BATAM, Indonesia—It's not like there's a playbook on how to find a pirate. So what do you do? You start by heading to a region that's famous for piracy: the Strait of Malacca, a narrow channel tucked between Malaysia and Indonesia.

This probably would be a forgotten corner of the world if it weren't the sole waterway connecting the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea—and, eventually, the Pacific Ocean.

Every year some 70,000 ships pass through the Strait of Malacca. That's about two-thirds of the world's sea traffic, much of it crude-oil shipments heading from the Middle East to China and Japan.

Big foreign ships have been cruising through here for hundreds of years. So have pirates. That's because the strait is surrounded by hundreds of tiny islands populated by some of the poorest people in the world.

It's this contrast that has drawn me to the Strait of Malacca. I want to find a real pirate, not some Hollywood goofball wearing too much eye makeup. I want to know what it's like to be poor and to think the only way you can survive is to rob a ship. How hard could it be for me to find such a person?

My first contact is a local newspaper journalist named Iqbal. He has agreed to take me to a place he calls "the island of the ex-pirates." We're joined by another reporter, Arman, who will help translate.

We head to one of the main boat-taxi ports in the region. We walk down a long gangway that's propped up on stilts over murky, smelly water. We see row after row of *pancong*, the Malay word for long, thin wooden boats with outboard motors and brightly colored tarps to keep out the tropical rain.

This is what we'll take to the island of the ex-pirates.

The ride takes 15 minutes and costs about \$1 per person. There's quite a bit of chop, but the boat sits low and its pointed bow easily cuts through the waves. Still, Arman gets spooked.

Out on the water, dozens of islands appear on the horizon, tiny footnotes to some ancient volcano. One sticks out from the rest: Singapore, the booming city-state. With its skyscrapers and Ferris wheels and malls and jet planes, it looks like a floating party from the future.

The rest of the islands are stuck in the past. Hilly and verdant, they have the look of so many islands in so many places along the equator: slow and sleepy and completely unaware of their own beauty.

We reach the island of the ex-pirates and disembark onto a gangway even more rickety than before. We head up to the main open-air market, much of which is also on stilts. Our contact, the ex-pirate, sends a message that he's not yet ready to meet. We should wait for him at the market.

We pass rambutans and mangosteens and dozens of kinds of fish piled up on the ground for sale, and we squeeze into a crowded cafe that at one time was painted baby blue. We take a table near the water.

Arman orders tea and the local specialty, *prata*, a crispy egg-and-potato pancake served with rich curry sauce on the side. A generous piece of galangal wallows in the sauce.

Iqbal says he thinks we'll have no trouble meeting pirates. They'll be proud to talk to an American, he says, proud to show us their stuff.

If all goes well, he says, we could be done in a few days. The ex-pirates will introduce us to current pirates, then we will choose one we like, follow him around, and be on our way.

I take a deep breath and let the curried steam fill my lungs. I look out onto the water—out to all the lush little islands dotting the view. I love my life, I think. Especially when it comes this easily.

Our man, Anto, strides into the cafe. He's strong and sturdy and talking on the phone. His shirt is unbuttoned down to the navel. He orders us up to his house with a wave of an arm. The house is just down the block. Word has it Anto owns half the market.

Situated on a couch in his sparse front room, Anto says modern-day Indonesian piracy started back in the '60s—and it all started on this island. The real name of the island is Belakang Padang; the words indicate the precise location in Indonesia. But never mind all that. Let's call it B.P.

Back in the day, Anto says, people came to B.P. from all over Indonesia looking for work. It was the closest they could get to booming Singapore and still be in Indonesia. B.P. was the land of opportunity.

At the time, Anto and his friends were just a bunch of young thieves. They would sneak out of their parents' houses at night to pull small jobs on the island. They eventually graduated to stealing motorbikes from Singapore and ferrying them back to B.P. at night.

At one point, they realized there was booty to be had on the water. Just next to B.P. is a waterway called Philip Channel, which is a section of the Malacca Strait. The channel is narrow and rocky and perilous, which means big ships have to slow down here.

Seeing this pattern, Anto and his friends started outfitting their own *pancung* with machetes and long bamboo poles with a hook fixed to one end. They would wait for a night with no moon, drive up behind a big ship, hook the ship with the bamboo poles, and climb up the side.

Once on deck, they would wave their knives at the captain and order him to give them the cashbox.

"We never hurt anybody," Anto assures us. This, I later learn, is what all pirates say. "We just showed them our machetes with one hand, and told them to be quiet with the other. They always did what we told them."

Afterward, the group—roughly seven or eight guys—would split the spoils and head to "happy-happy," which basically means booze and girls. It didn't take long to spend the takings. So a night or two later, it was back to sea again.

Anto says these days security is tighter than when he was a pirate. International attention to piracy in these waters has brought authorities from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore together to fight the problem.

But, Anto says, the underpaid local police aren't so diligent. They'd prefer to get a cut from the pirates' takings than to put pirates in jail and take home meager salaries.

I ask Anto whether we can meet some active pirates. He says he knows a few, but they're hard to contact. They come around only when there's an "operation" planned. Otherwise, they're hiding out on remote islands.

Anto promises he'll put the word out on my behalf, that he'll call a friend who knows a friend who knows a friend. And then he'll call us.

I leave thinking he actually will call.

From: Kelly McEvers

Subject: Mr. Black

Posted Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 12:01 PM ET

BATAM, Indonesia—I spend the next three days meeting people who have no idea how to find pirates. On the fourth day, I wake up and realize I have nothing scheduled for the day, no solid plan.

I send a text message to Iqbal, the newspaper reporter who has been helping me. "Anto has disappeared," he writes. Anto is the shady ex-pirate we met a few days before. Iqbal promises to find me another ex-pirate, but he says it will take some time.

It takes a whole day before Iqbal calls to say he's found another ex-pirate. I practically run down to the hotel parking lot and jump into his car.

The ex-pirate has agreed to meet us in the back room of a recording studio owned by one of Iqbal's friends. He wears a black leather jacket and gold chains. He smokes pack after pack of Indonesian clove cigarettes and drinks sweet black tea.

He asks me to call him Mr. Black. He says the nickname is a description of his face, which is dark from too much time in the sun out at sea. He doesn't want me to know his real name.

Mr. Black says local boys become pirates for one reason: Singapore. Seeing those skyscrapers—that prosperity—just a few miles away is too tempting for a young Indonesian living on a poor island.

"In other parts of the world, poor people don't know what they're missing," Mr. Black says through my interpreter, Arman. "Here, it's right across the water. And it's why they become pirates."

Mr. Black could spend all night telling pirate stories from back in the day. I listen, even though what I really want is a pirate from *right now*. Still, I learn a lot about the business from Mr. Black. Like the Italian sailor who cried like a baby when Mr. Black snuck onto his vessel. The night his partner fell from the bamboo ladder as he was inching up the side of a cargo ship and was lost at sea for an hour. The Korean captains who always put up a fight.

Mr. Black says his group of pirates worked only on nights with no moon. That way they could stay hidden from the navy. He says they could rob three or four ships in a night, sometimes making tens of thousands of dollars. Then they would blow their money on "happy-happy."

"We had so much money, we would wash our feet with beer!" Mr. Black says. "But," he adds, wagging a finger, "what we didn't understand is that pirates never get rich."

"Why?"

"We enjoy too much!"

Mr. Black says that after a really big haul, his group would go to Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, book rooms at five-star hotels, hire half a dozen girls for each guy. When all the money was gone, they'd come back to the islands and start all over again.

It all came to an end when Mr. Black was arrested and did three months in jail for robbing an Indonesian ship. After that, he decided to go legit. He changed his name and got a job hawking food at a popular tourist site. He eventually started his own printing business.

Listening to him, I can't help wishing he had a son or a nephew who's still a pirate.

I try to tread more slowly with Mr. Black than I did with Anto, [our first ex-pirate](#). Instead of asking him outright if he knows any active pirates, I say, "When you meet young guys who are still working as pirates, what advice do you give them?"

"I tell them to stop," Mr. Black replies. "I tell them there are only two ways a pirate's life can end: jail or death."

I try to keep him talking about these "young guys." At one point, I hear Mr. Black say the word *nephew* in Indonesian.

"They just won't listen to me," he says. "They won't give it up, no matter how much I tell them to quit."

By now, I know he's talking about his nephew. We talk for another half-hour before I politely ask whether I can meet this nephew. At first Mr. Black says that would be impossible. But then he says he'll think it over.

I thank him and ask for his phone number. Iqbal and Arman squirm, worried that I've offended Mr. Black. But this guy is clearly a sucker for the ladies. He gives me his number and says he'll do what he can to help.

Back in the car, I can't help it. I give Arman a high-five.

At the hotel I think about how bipolar this has been. One minute I'm dying of boredom; the next I'm totally high. Right now, I can just picture it all unfolding. The conflict between the pirate and his uncle. The scene at the seedy disco, planning the next attack while prostitutes serve us beer. The moonless night out at sea.

I wake up the next morning thinking I'm finally on a roll. I send a text message to Mr. Black, and he immediately messages back.

"Are you happy?" he writes.

"I am only happy if I meet you again," I write back. I'm still in bed, in my nightgown.

"I am free," he writes. "Try to call."

I do, but he says he's busy. He says he'll call me later. Maybe tonight. Maybe tomorrow.

The next day I get a "How are you?" from Mr. Black. I text him back, but I get no response. I call an hour later, and he says he might come to my hotel tonight and meet me for a drink.

As the day passes, I want to call him again, just to confirm that we will meet. But I figure I should probably wait. I reckon it's like dating. Except with a pirate.

A tropical storm blows in, and I open the window of my hotel room to the cool, damp air. It rains and rains, and I wait and wait and wait.

I've been here more than one week.

The next day, I go through what has become a routine to pass the time. Clean the room, make tea, go to aerobics, watch movies, try to read.

I wonder if I'm being lulled into complacency or if my patience with Mr. Black will eventually pay off. I have no way of knowing which instinct is right. One thing I do know: I've spent way too much time in this hotel.

I start checking moon cycles online. I learn that the moon is waning, and in a week it will be gone from the sky. This means the time for a pirate operation is approaching. I want to get excited about this. But I'm wary of the letdown if I fail to meet Mr. Black's nephew.

Mr. Black calls and promises—"100 percent!"—that we will meet tonight. I shouldn't believe him, but I do. It's the beginning of a bad relationship.

From: Kelly McEvers
Subject: Happy-Happy

Posted Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 7:02 AM ET

BATAM, Indonesia—Mr. Black, the ex-pirate, doesn't exactly speak English. And I don't exactly speak Indonesian. The words we know in each other's languages are pretty basic. *Eat, sorry, please, like, call, night, walk.*

I try to call my interpreter, Arman, but his phone is off or out of battery power or out of credit. Here [I've been waiting to meet Mr. Black for days](#), and when I finally do, I can't translate everything he says.

Mr. Black and I are strolling up to the second level of a shopping mall, heading toward the food court. He waves to a gaggle of guys sitting and drinking coffee and avocado shakes at a place called Godiva.

It takes me a minute to realize that one of these guys is Anto, [the first ex-pirate I met](#)—the guy who's been blowing me off for more than a week.

"I'm sorry, Kelly!" Anto says when he recognizes me. He speaks quite a bit of English. "I told you I was busy. I was busy with this!"

No problem, I say.

"But you should be happy now," he says. "You are sitting with all the pirates!"

Slowly it unfolds that the guys at the table are Yon, a notorious pirate just released from prison in Malaysia for hijacking a ship; Adi Bulldog, Anto's brother, who runs a crime syndicate; Jack, another pirate who recently did jail time in China; and some young guys who look like up-and-comers.

This could be exactly what I've worked toward all these days. Now where the hell is Arman?

Before I can ask too many questions, the guys invite me to go for "happy-happy." This is what pirates do with the money they make robbing cargo ships.

We pile into Anto's flashy SUV, and Mr. Black acts like I'm his date. Only *he* can open my door or offer me a french fry.

We drive up to an enormous nightclub called Pacific that looks like a beached cruise ship. We're waved through security and park in the back.

Inside, the belly of the ship is an eerie, unfinished concrete shell. There are rooms and hallways that haven't seen humans in years. I imagine myself locked in one of these rooms without food. After all, pirates have been known to kidnap people for ransom. I try to call Arman, but still no answer.

We take the back elevator to the top, the VIP section. I steal away to call Iqbal, the local reporter who's been trying to help me meet pirates. I tell him where I am, just in case something happens, and I beg him to try to find Arman.

Inside the VIP room we position ourselves on vinyl couches in front of a huge flat-screen TV and four smaller screens that list song choices. The songs on the list are old and out of date. "Feelings" and "My Way" are big favorites.

Anto starts queuing up songs with English lyrics. I know what this means.

First up is "Hotel California." Anto hands me the microphone. On the big screen are bizarre images meant to illustrate the song: shots from an old schoolhouse in Utah, fuzzy photographs of Jesus.

This is not the last time I will sing "Hotel California" tonight.

The music switches to Indonesian love songs, but still no Arman. I convince myself that even though I can't conduct elaborate conversations with these guys, I have to stay on. This is an important element of a pirate's life. This is why they never get rich.

Mr. Black sits next to me, trying to convince me to drink wine or whiskey, but I say no. Everyone else is having water and Coke.

Then Anto stands up and looks my way.

"Breaking news, Kelly! I'm sorry, but now we would like to take drugs!"

OK, I say. No problem.

"We like ecstasy. Would you like to join?"

No thanks, I tell him. I know exactly what he means when he says "ecstasy." Big, chalky, blue-green things that are some weird mix of speed, heroin, and hallucinogens.

"You sure it's OK?" Anto asks.

Go right ahead.

The guys line up in front of Yon, who distributes the pills. They really want me to have one. One guy puts a pill on top of my notebook. Every time he catches my eye, he points to the pill.

He finally realizes I'm not going to take it. So he pops it into his mouth instead. The music changes from Bee Gees karaoke to anonymous techno, and the pirates dance and dance and dance.

After a while, the lights go down, and Anto and his "girlfriend" tastefully slow-dance. Everybody is polite, offering to buy me things. But they're wary when I try to ask about what they do for a living.

Mr. Black puts my phone, pen, and glasses on top of a Kleenex so they won't get dirty. I notice he's slightly different from the others. He hasn't been taking pills.

I wonder whether he normally hangs out with these guys or if he's just doing it for my benefit. After all, he quit the pirate business and went legit.

Mr. Black watches me, too. He always checks to make sure I'm OK, even when he gets up to dance or take a phone call.

I start to understand that tonight might be his way of testing me, to see if he can trust me. I figure I should focus all my energy on Mr. Black so he'll introduce me to his nephew, the real pirate. I imagine the nephew as younger, more businesslike, and more forthcoming than these 50-year-olds.

I resolve to stay on as long as Mr. Black wants. I start dancing and finally accept his offer of a whiskey. Or two.

Hours later, Arman finally calls. By now the ex-pirates are too far gone for any kind of talk. I tell him to forget it for tonight. Mr. Black offers me a ride home.

Mr. Black drives an old white Indonesian-made truck with the steering wheel on the right side and rollbars out back. On the dashboard is sickly sweet air freshener set on some kind of time release.

Later, Mr. Black lights up a joint and offers me some. I tell him I don't smoke, but he won't let up. I finally take the joint and pretend to inhale.

"Maybe you give me some memory?" he asks in English.

"Sure," I say tentatively. "A photo?"

"Photos are for schoolboys," he says. "But a kiss is for a real man."

I tell him this will not be possible. But then I wonder if I could use a kiss as leverage. Something like, "I'll let you kiss me if you let me meet your nephew." After all, I think, it would only be on the cheek.

I look over at Mr. Black's lips and am disgusted with myself for thinking I could let him kiss me.

What is my problem? I think. Will I do anything to meet a real pirate?

I tell Mr. Black to drive me home.

From: Kelly McEvers
Subject: The Real Pirate
Posted Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 7:22 AM ET

BATAM, Indonesia—My [relationship with Mr. Black](#), the ex-pirate with a nephew who's a real pirate, ends in breakup. He's too cagey, I'm too pushy. By the end, we're not only furious with each other; we're no longer speaking.

At this point, I've been stuck here in the northwest islands of Indonesia for nearly three weeks, and I've made no real progress toward meeting a pirate. The morning this hits me, I start to pack my bags. I'm ready to go home.

I check my e-mail one last time and see a message from a French academic I'd written to many weeks before.

This guy has done extensive field research on pirates in the Strait of Malacca, and I'd been hoping to hear from him while I was here in the islands. Today, the day I believe is my last day, he decides to write. I open the message.

"I've been on holiday for two weeks," he writes. "Sorry for getting back to you so late. Do you still need pirate contacts?"

Sure, I say. He sends me the names and numbers of two ex-pirates with strong connections to the current pirate syndicate.

More ex-pirates? I groan. But I figure I might as well try.

Something tells me the French guy's ex-pirates are different than the old-timers I met. The new guys still work as boat-taxi drivers around the islands. This is a common job for real pirates.

The French guy also puts me in touch with a sailor named Edi who's done legitimate work at sea and speaks some English. He'll help translate.

I call Edi, and 15 minutes later, he meets me in the hotel lobby. We call the two ex-pirates and arrange a meeting for later that afternoon.

The two men don't want me to publish their names, so let's call them Andi and Joni. We meet them in a hotel just a few blocks from mine.

From the moment I see them, I'm certain these guys are different from the other ex-pirates. They're scruffy, very dark-skinned, and they chain smoke. There's no artifice in the way they speak, no guile. I nearly squeal with delight when one of them burps.

We order coffee and juice, and I tell them I'm looking for a real pirate. They say the only way to meet one is to pay for it. Apparently the French academic and a group of European journalists paid Andi and Joni to put on masks and pretend they were pirates for a film documentary.

I tell them that's not going to work for me. I want a real pirate.

"I'm sorry," Andi says. "This will be very difficult." I've heard this sentence many times before.

I tell him I can't pay someone for talking to me. What I *can* do is pay for meals and travel expenses. Andi and Joni laugh and click their tongues.

"It's not enough," Edi translates. "Everything here takes money. This is Indonesia."

I tell them it's all I have to offer. I say it's really important.

"Why?" Andi asks. "Being a pirate is normal here."

"Americans have the wrong view of pirates," I say. "They think you are Johnny Depp or that you are helping terrorists."

The latter is a common claim made by American and Japanese officials—especially when they want to send their own navy patrols here to the Strait of Malacca. The Indonesian government has fiercely resisted outside involvement. Instead, they prefer to work with the Singaporean and Malaysian navies.

"I want to know the truth about pirates," I say. "About the way they live, about the reasons they turn to piracy to survive."

Edi translates. After a few hours of negotiating, Andi and Joni agree to go and look for a pirate. They say they have one in mind, but he's on a remote island. They say they need money for gas.

I give them about \$50—with full knowledge that I may never see them again.

The next day, Edi and the boys are supposed to call by 10 a.m. By noon, I figure Andi and Joni have either run off with the money, failed to find a pirate, or, worse, found one but couldn't convince him to talk.

At 12:30, Edi calls from the lobby.

"We are here!"

"Who is here?" I ask.

"Me," he says. "With the guys."

"What guys?"

"Andi and Joni. And the one."

"He is here?" I say.

"Yes. He's here."

"And he's a real one?" I ask. "A real pirate?"

"Yes, Kelly, he is the real one."

It slowly dawns on me. After nearly a month of asking and waiting, he's here.

"What's his name?"

His name is Agus.

There is nothing romantic about Agus. He slouches a little when he walks up to shake my hand, crams his hands into his pockets as he steps into the hotel elevator. In my room, he sits politely near the window and refuses when I offer him a cold drink. His voice is soft and low.

He grew up in an Indonesian farming village more than 1,000 miles away from these islands. There, he made about \$7 a day

raising cocoa, but it wasn't enough to feed his wife, three kids, parents, and siblings.

"Then I met a man in my village who was successful," Agus tells me. "He owned a shop and his wife wore a lot of gold. I tried to stay close to him and ask him how he made so much money. After some time, he told me that he had been a pirate."

The shopkeeper told Agus to come to the islands and try his luck. He told Agus to start by working as a boat-taxi driver and slowly try to get introduced to pirates. Agus followed his advice. He joined a pirate group about four years ago.

He says he goes out on about six "operations" a year. The ideal night is one with no moon. Agus and his gang wear masks and black clothes. They fashion a long pole out of bamboo and fix a hook to the end of it.

They ride out in *pancung*, long wooden canoes with outboard motors, or in speedboats, depending how far they have to go.

Their destination is the Philip Channel, a small portion of the Strait of Malacca. It's a shallow and rocky waterway where international cargo ships have to slow down to pass.

Agus and the boys go out looking for prime targets. They call it "shopping."

"We do it in a team of seven," Agus says. They swing the bamboo pole up the side of the ship and hook it on.

"Then we climb up the pole to the ship. Two of us go to the bridge to catch the captain. The others stay and guard the crew. Sometimes the captain fights back. So we have to hit him and tie him up with rope. Then we tell him to give us all the money in the safe."

I ask Agus whether he's ever hurt anyone. One navy captain told me some pirates cut off captains' hands if they don't cooperate. Agus looks at me and shrugs.

"We only hit captains," he says. "That scares them enough to give us all their money."

If Agus and his partners manage to steal the money from the safe, each one can clear about \$600 or \$700.

"Sometimes we fail and come home with no money. But we still have to pay for the fuel. So we end up in debt."

I ask Agus to take me out in a boat and show me how it's done. I figure, like everyone else I've met here, he'll say no, it's "too difficult."

But not Agus. He thinks about it for a minute. Then he says OK.

From: Kelly McEvers

Subject: Out at Sea

Posted Friday, December 5, 2008, at 6:54 AM ET

BATAM, Indonesia—Here in Indonesia, it's pretty normal to believe in magic. Especially if you're doing one of the most dangerous jobs in the world.

Agus, the pirate, always visits a magician before an "operation." He brings the magician sugar, milk, and coffee as payment.

The magician's house is built on rickety, wooden stilts, the sole structure on a tiny island that's hours from any major town. It takes two cars and three boats to reach it.

Inside, there's a lot of yelling. The magician is hard of hearing and, his wife says, he has been sick. So sick he thought he was going to die.

Now he sits on the floor wearing a traditional Malay sarong and a fezlike cap. He waves a knobby hand at us to sit down. Closer in, I can see that he is blind.

Agus tells the magician he's planning to rob a big international cargo ship. He needs help staying hidden from the Indonesian navy. Agus has already been questioned by the navy once before. Now he wants to be extra careful.

The old man takes a bottle of water, shakes it, and puts it in his armpit. He mumbles to himself, then whispers into the bottle.

The whispers get louder and louder. At the end, he blows a big gust of air into the bottle and quickly caps it before his words can escape. The magician tells Agus that if he pours this water around the edges of his boat, it will make the boat invisible.

"OK," Agus says in English. "OK."

The magician repeats the same procedure with the second bottle of water. This one, he says, is for Agus' face.

It will make Agus invisible.

After this, the old man seems tired. We say goodbye and hurry back to our boat taxi. It's covered in centipedes. We push out of

the thick mud with bamboo poles until the water's deep enough to start the filthy engine.

Back in town, Agus says he'll show me how he robs ships. We head to a row of small shops to buy supplies: a \$10 machete, a face mask, a long bamboo pole, and a hooked knife.

On the edge of town, we climb down into another narrow, wooden boat with an outboard motor. This one's bigger than the centipede taxi. It's dark now, and we can see what must be thousands of lights out on the water. Some of them are tiny islands. Most of them are boats.

We steal out toward the Strait of Malacca. It is one of the most heavily trafficked waterways in the world. Seventy thousand ships pass through here each year. No wonder there's piracy.

Agus says it's too dangerous to take me with him on a real pirate operation. But he promises to record a future one for me on his mobile phone.

We pull up to a light tower that's about 20 feet tall. That's less than half as high as a cargo ship would be. The plan is for Agus to climb the tower as if he were robbing it.

He lashes the knife to the end of the bamboo stick. Then he swings the stick up to the top of the tower, hooks it on, and climbs up.

"I want to stop this work," he says, panting, when he comes back down. "It's dangerous out at sea. People have accidents, people die. I have a dream that one day I will make so much money I can quit this work and stop everything. But until then, what else can I do?"

Back on land, we walk to Agus' neighborhood, a slum set back a few hundred yards from the town square. Agus rents two tiny rooms in the house of a family from Sulawesi, a far-away Indonesian province. People flock here from such provinces looking for work and wealth. They rarely find either.

Agus' rooms are on the second story of the house, up a wooden ladder. The first room is completely bare, except for a blue plastic gas can. The second room has a mattress on the floor; a pink, oscillating fan next to the mattress; a broken-down dresser; and a pile of dirty clothes.

Agus sends one of the village kids to buy some water. He asks me for the two bucks to pay for it. We sit on the floor and talk.

Like so many Indonesians, Agus came here to get rich. He had a friend back in his village who'd made money here as a pirate. He told Agus to try his luck.

So Agus and his wife decided he would come here, make a nice chunk of money, then go home to buy some land or open a small shop.

That was eight years ago.

The problem, Agus explains, is that you just can't make enough money being a pirate. Sure, you might make thousands of dollars on one successful operation, but you might also lose money if you buy the fuel and supplies but then end up with nothing.

Needless to say, this has strained relations with the wife.

"Now my wife has managed to work for herself and make good money as a nurse," Agus tells me. "But I'm still doing this bad job and not making much money. For this reason, I feel ashamed. I cannot go back home with nothing. So I have to stay here."

Another reason Agus has a hard time saving money is "happy-happy." This roughly translates to booze and girls. But it's also an unwritten code among pirates: If you make money, you share the happy-happy with your buddies who might not have been as lucky as you.

The next night, Agus' friend is celebrating. He has just made a couple of hundred bucks stealing crude from an oil tanker and reselling it. He has invited us along.

Tonight, the happy-happy is a case of beer and a troupe of disco girls who travel from island to island and charge men to dance with them. The troupe assembles in the town square and blares techno music.

The girls wear jeans and white T-shirts and wait on folding chairs for partners. Agus points to the tallest one.

"See her? That's my girlfriend. Her name is Yuna."

Pretty soon Agus has spent his last \$5 to be with Yuna. He doesn't touch her. He just closes his eyes, throws his head back, and dances and dances.

In the three days that I've known him, it's the first time I've seen Agus smile a real smile. I wave goodbye and take my final boat taxi away from the island.

Since that night Agus says he's been on two pirate operations. One was a success. He made nearly \$1,000, a huge amount of money in Indonesia.

The other was not. There were too many navy boats out that night.

I called Agus a few times and asked about the recording he told me he'd make on his mobile phone. He kept promising to do it.

The last time I talked to him, though, he admitted he'd had to pawn the phone. Because, he said, he was broke. Again.

dispatches

Going Home to Guatemala

The aftermath of an immigration raid.

By Eliza Barclay

Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 10:27 AM ET

SAN MIGUEL DUEÑAS, Guatemala—One year ago, Freddy Granados said goodbye to his wife, Hilda Gil, and their two small children here in a shack tucked between volcanoes and coffee plantations. With job prospects in Dueñas grim even for Granados, a skilled baker, he departed on the standard illegal-border-crossing odyssey of poor Latin Americans chasing *el sueño Americano*.

Five months later, on May 12, 2008, Granados rose early and left the small apartment he shared with five other Guatemalan men to report for work on the cow-skinning line at the Agriprocessors kosher meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa. That day, he and the 389 other illegal immigrants who arrived for the early shift fell prey to an expansive immigration crackdown, called "military-style" by a local priest. To make arrests at a plant with around 800 employees, the U.S. government dispatched 900 immigration agents and two helicopters. It was the second-largest workplace immigration raid in U.S. history, and it cost taxpayers \$5.2 million, according to an October report by the [Des Moines Register](#).

Within eight days, about 300 of the workers, including Granados, were coerced into pleading guilty to charges of identity theft and misuse of Social Security numbers, according to a court interpreter, Erik Camayd-Freixas, who penned a searing [account](#) of the trials. Granados was then sent to federal prison in Louisiana, where he served a five-month sentence before being deported back to Guatemala.

In the last two years, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a division of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, has begun to deploy the workplace raid with greater force. During that period, work-site enforcement arrests increased 41 percent from 3,667 to 5,173, while criminal arrests (mostly involving business owners, managers, or human-resource employees) increased 34 percent from 716 to 1,101.

But beginning with the Postville raid, ICE devised a way to use identity-theft laws to criminalize immigrants for working. Identity-theft laws are intended to prosecute people who steal identities to defraud others of money and property, not for people who use false papers to get a job. In the majority of the Postville cases, according to Camayd-Freixas, the immigrants were unaware that the Social Security number they were using belonged to a real person.

Entering the country outside the ports of entry and without proper documentation is certainly a crime, but a civil trial and quick deportation should be sufficient punishment. After months of lawyers, human-rights activists, and even some members of Congress kicking up a fuss over the application of identity-theft laws to immigrants, the Supreme Court recently [agreed to hear a case on the issue](#).

"It's very unfair what they're doing," Granados told me over the phone recently, his voice squeezed by tears. "We're not criminals. We're workers." Granados was deported on Oct. 11, and he arrived home three days later. He says he is deeply pained by his experience and particularly by the treatment he received in the federal prison.

Granados said one of his lowest moments came when he spoke to his wife in July to tell her that he was in jail and would not be sending any more money. (According to Granados, federal prison officials did not let him communicate with his family for three months after the raid, nor did he ever receive his personal belongings from Postville.) Word of the raid had reached Dueñas, but Gil knew nothing of Granados' whereabouts and was gravely worried.

I met Gil in early October through her neighbor Mirna Jerez and a string of other women whose husbands and sons once worked in the Postville plant. In Dueñas, the summer brought a shared suffering for the women—the end of the remittances sent every 15 days from Postville. Most women had received about \$265 a month from their husbands—enough to cover the electricity bill, keep an extended family nourished, and buy school supplies for the children. "These months have been very difficult," Gil, a timorous 32-year-old with a soft, round face, told me.

The women were perplexed by the charges; none of their husbands were troublemakers. They had gone to the United States for no other reason than to make life a little easier for their families in the shanties.

For the men, the process seemed even more opaque. "We didn't have any options," Granados recalled. "The only option was to plead guilty for stealing, when we never stole anything."

Prosecutors in the fast-tracked trials told the arrested workers that if they did not plead guilty, they could receive as much as a

10-year sentence. Such a possibility was inconceivable for Granados, with Gil and the small children at home in Dueñas depending on him.

By early October, Gil and the other women knew their men would be arriving home soon. But the prospect was a bittersweet one. Though Gil missed her husband, she knew he would be returning to a more difficult life in Guatemala than the one he left a year earlier. Fuel prices were up, and the price of a pound of beans had doubled from 40 cents to 80 cents. A global financial crisis would mean nothing good for a small, poor country like Guatemala.

Although it is little comfort to Granados, news that Agriprocessors had also suffered from the raid recently reached Dueñas. On Oct. 31, ICE arrested Agriprocessors CEO Aaron Rubashkin on allegations of harboring undocumented workers for financial gain and aiding and abetting workers in stealing identities. A few days later, Agriprocessors filed for bankruptcy, having lost half its work force and having suffered a massive PR disaster.

If President-elect Barack Obama manages to move swiftly on [immigration reform](#), the Postville raid may go down in history as a low point in using enforcement to try to fix a broken immigration system. But ICE may not be finished with its large-scale raids. At least a few members of the U.S. Congress, including Joe Baca, a Democrat from California, have called on President George Bush to put a stop to them.

"Enforcement alone, no matter how well formulated or funded, is doomed to fail," Baca wrote in a letter to Bush in October. "We cannot deport our way out of this problem."

explainer

Depth in Venice

How will the city's underwater dam work?

By Jacob Leibenluft

Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 6:49 PM ET

Venice experienced [its biggest flood in 22 years](#) earlier this week. But the city is already building an [underwater dam](#) to prevent future floods. How can an underwater system stop Venice from flooding?

With giant steel barriers, or "gates," that rise from the sea floor. When the city's water level is normal, the [78 hinged gates](#)—generally about 20 meters wide, 4 meters thick, and up to 30 meters long—will rest horizontally at the bottom of the ocean, filled with water. But when flooding is expected, the gates will

fill with compressed air. This causes them to rise—picture half of an opening drawbridge—until they break the surface of the water. The gates don't necessarily come to a 90-degree angle with the seabed, but they're still high enough to keep out rising waters. (The gates—set up in rows at three different inlets—are close enough to one another to prevent much water from passing between them.) It should take about 30 minutes for the gates to rise and another 15 minutes for them to go back down to the sea floor. (To see graphics and videos showing how the system will work, click [here](#).)

Venice first began planning a barrier to protect against waters after a massive 1966 flood that stranded residents, damaged several historic buildings, and left 5,000 people homeless. But the project faced several challenges. First, the barriers couldn't block the flow of water between the Adriatic Sea and [Venice's lagoon](#) under normal conditions—particularly crucial because the city's canals double as its sewer system. Additionally, aesthetic concerns dictated that the barriers could not be visible from the city. Although an underwater system was first proposed in the early 1970s, it wasn't until 2003 that the eventual design—dubbed [MOSE](#), an acronym that doubles as the Italian for *Moses*—got the [final go-ahead](#). It's now set to start operating in 2014.

The project has been surrounded with controversy since it was first conceived. Environmentalists have [argued](#) that the gates will need to be up too often, disturbing a fragile ecosystem that relies on tidal flows. Some critics also estimate that global warming [will push sea levels so high](#) that MOSE won't be effective. As a result, one team of engineers has proposed [another ambitious project](#): pumping sea water into aquifers below the city to raise its ground level several inches.

When MOSE is finished, Venice will not be the only city with moving flood barriers—similar systems now operate to protect London and several Dutch cities, albeit with gates that are far more visible.

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

Explainer thanks Rafael Bras of University of California-Irvine, Jane da Mosto of the Venice in Peril Fund, John Keahey, and Elena Zambardi of the Consorzio Venezia Nuova.

explainer

What Were Orthodox Jews Doing in Mumbai?

Making better Jews.

By Christopher Beam

Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 7:08 PM ET

Six of the people killed during last week's terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India, died in [Nariman House](#), the local headquarters of the Orthodox Jewish group [Chabad-Lubavitch](#). What was a group of Orthodox Jews doing in India?

Helping Jews be better Jews. [Sometimes](#) called "[ultra-orthodox](#)" due to their penchant for traditional hats, beards, not to mention their strict adherence to Talmudic teachings, Lubavitchers like those based at Nariman House try to get Jews—Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox—to be more devout.* To that end, they set up shop in far-flung parts of the world to offer hard-to-find services like kosher meals, synagogue services, and classes on Jewish thought, mysticism, and law. (Gavriel Holtzberg, the rabbi killed in Mumbai, was also a certified kosher butcher.) Some of their services, however, are nonreligious. They provide workspace, Internet access, day care, and, in the case of Nariman House, hotel rooms. Visitors to the Mumbai center tend to be Jewish business travelers, backpackers, and members of the [Indian Jewish community](#), but non-Jews are also welcome. Most of the services are free, although donations are accepted.

Outreach serves a messianic purpose, too. Since its founding in Russia in the 18th century, the Chabad movement has had seven *rebbe*s—Yiddish for rabbi. The most recent of them, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, preached that there was cosmic significance in getting Jews to be more observant. Every time a Jew performs a *mitzvah*, a religious act such as lighting the Shabbat candles or wearing *tefillin*, he or she hastens the arrival of the *moshiah*, or Messiah, and brings the day of redemption that much closer. (There are a total of [613 mitzvahs](#).) Non-Jews can also hasten the Messiah's arrival by following the seven [Noahide Laws](#) laid out in the Torah. That said, Lubavitchers aren't interested in converting people to Judaism. The movement became controversial after Schneerson's death in 1994, when some members of the sect argued that Schneerson himself was the *moshiah*. However, most Lubavitchers believe he has not yet arrived.

In order to reach the most Jews possible, the movement went global. The Lubavitch community is based in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y. (If a man with a beard approaches you in the New York subway and asks, "Are you Jewish?" he's probably Chabad-Lubavitch.) But after succeeding his father-in-law as *rebbe* in the 1950s, Schneerson started sending missionaries, or *shluchim*, around the world. They now have more than 900 centers everywhere from Morocco to Bangkok to Shanghai. Passover services in Nepal attracted more than 1,500 people this year.

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

Explainer thanks Rabbi Yonah Blum, Samuel Heilman of Queens College, and David Rotbard.

Correction, Dec. 4, 2008: This article originally stated that Lubavitchers wear long side curls, or payos. They keep that hair short. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

explainer

Bear Naked

Why is it so hard to tell boy polar bears from girl polar bears?

By Juliet Lapidus

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 6:38 PM ET

Various news sources reported last week that handlers at Kushiro Municipal Zoo in northern Japan tried, and failed, to mate two polar bears before realizing that [both Tsuyoshi and Kurumi are female](#). Tsuyoshi had been misidentified as a male three months after birth, and it took zookeepers six months (looking for signs of amorous activity while the two lived together) to recognize their mistake. A representative from the zoo, Masako Inoue, noted that it's not uncommon to mistake a polar bear's gender. Why is it so difficult to distinguish boy polar bears from girl polar bears?

Because they're so furry. The polar bear penis is similar to a dog's: It is nublike, with a baculum (a bone) that extends when the animal is excited. But long hairs cover polar bears' reproductive organs, making it hard to determine gender by sight alone. (Even scientists who observe polar bears having sex may find that fur obscures the penis.) Males do have slightly longer hair than females at the tip of their penile "sheaths" (skin that surrounds the penis). And females, in turn, have long vulvar hairs underneath their tails. But unless a polar bear is anaesthetized, zookeepers can't get close enough to make out these differences.

A slightly more reliable, but still visual, way to determine the sex of a polar bear is to watch it pee. If urine seems to be coming from the belly area, it might be a male; from the tail, a female. (The would-be breeders at Kushiro Municipal Zoo first suspected they were dealing with two animals of the same gender upon [noticing that they urinated in the same way](#).) A zookeeper can also check for urine spotting—if the belly-area hair gets wet, probably a male; if the tail-area hair does, a female. But these methods aren't foolproof. Some polar bears—of both sexes—squat when they pee, so it's hard to tell where the urine's coming from. And bears are often wet from swimming, which makes the spotting technique rather difficult.

You might assume a manual check performed while the animal's anaesthetized would do the trick every time—but it doesn't. A poorly trained handler might lift up the tail, not see the vulva

(which is quite small if the animal's not in heat), and quickly conclude that the bear is a male without turning it over to feel around for the penis. Or he might mistake an unprotracted penis for a bellybutton (polar bears have outies) and conclude that it's a female. Checks are often done when the bear is young and its genitalia, including the baculum, are still small.

Tsuyoshi isn't the only polar bear experiencing gender trouble: Another zoo adopted a bear it thought was Tsuyoshi's brother—but it's [actually her sister](#). In 1999, the Wildlife Society Bulletin published a paper on using genetics to verify the gender of polar bears. The authors found that, after a harvest in the southern Beaufort, Chukchi, and Bering seas of Alaska by native hunters, "sex was incorrectly determined" for 19 of 139 bears.

Verifying gender isn't usually so difficult with mammals—in fact, it's not hard at all with other, shorter-haired bears. But zookeepers and researchers have trouble with birds, which have a [cloaca](#), or multipurpose opening, rather than gendered genitals. Some rodents can also be problematic.

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

Explainer thanks Donald Moore of the Smithsonian National Zoological Park.

explainer

Google's Blind Spots

Can governments get Google Earth to obscure images of sensitive locations?

By Nina Shen Rastogi

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 8:52 PM ET

The 10 gunmen who terrorized Mumbai last week [used Google Earth to plot their attacks](#), according to statements made by the sole captured terrorist. The attackers targeted public areas whose locations were already available on printed maps, but can a government ask Google to exclude images of more sensitive areas from Google Earth?

It can try. Google doesn't automatically exclude photos of locations that might represent a security risk, such as nuclear facilities or the homes of political VIPs. But it has fielded requests to do so in the past—as in 2007, for example, when British troops discovered that [insurgents in Basra](#) had been printing out detailed Google Earth images of U.K. military bases. In response, Google [replaced its satellite shots](#) of Basra with an earlier set of photos, taken before the war began. A Google spokeswoman told the Explainer that this is the only image alteration the company has made due to a governmental request. (She [denied reports](#) that Google had agreed to distort

images of certain Indian locations in 2007 but acknowledges that the company did have conversations with government officials.)

Sometimes, what may look like an alteration is actually the result of a lackluster data set. Google Earth—which also provides the "satellite view" images for Google Maps—gets all its images from third-party sources—primarily commercial satellite image providers like [DigitalGlobe](#) and [GeoEye](#), but also [local municipalities](#) and governmental agencies. (A copyright line with source information can be seen at the bottom of any Google Earth image. The latest version of Google Earth also offers time stamps when available.) Google says its goal is to have the sharpest, most up-to-date photos possible, but it has to work with what its providers can offer—currently, Google Earth has high-resolution images of just 30 percent of the earth's land surface. So a blurry image—or a blurry square in a large, composite image—might simply mean that Google doesn't yet have a clearer shot of the area in question.

Some locations seen on Google Earth, however, do appear to have been altered: See, for example, [the Naval Observatory in Washington, D.C.](#), home of the vice president, where everything within the road encircling the Observatory is blurrier than everything surrounding it. Or [Soesterberg Air Base](#) and [Huis Ten Bosch Palace](#) in the Netherlands, which are represented by choppy pixels. Such instances occur because governments can, in certain cases, exert control over Google's third-party image providers. Most of the very high-resolution images on Google Earth are actually aerial photos, not satellite photos; that means they've been taken from within a nation's airspace and are therefore subject to that nation's rules and regulations. For example, when the Geological Survey wanted to fly over Washington, D.C., to take photos in 2005, it had to [promise the Secret Service](#) that it would delete or edit anything that might "jeopardize national security."

Google says that it takes a variety of factors into consideration when it decides which images to use on Google Earth—sometimes it will choose an older, low-res photo rather than a newer, doctored one; in other cases, the usefulness of a high-resolution image outweighs the fact that it has a blurry spot.

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

Explainer thanks Stefan Geens of Ogle Earth, Kate Hurowitz of Google, and Frank Taylor of Google Earth Blog.

fighting words

Our Friends in Bombay

We must stand by our most important ally.

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 11:15 AM ET

It's in human nature to mention any personal connection when offering solidarity, so I shall just briefly say that on my first visit to India, in 1980, I stayed at the Taj Mahal in Bombay, visited the "Gateway of India" and took a boat to [Elephanta Island](#), toured the magnificent railway station, had my first *diwali* festival at Juhu beach, and paced the amazing corniche that was still known by some—after its dazzling string of lights—as "Queen Victoria's necklace." Wonderful though some of the 19th-century British architecture can be, Bombay is quintessentially an Indian achievement, and an achievement of all its peoples from the Portuguese-speaking Catholic Goans to the Zoroastrian Parsis. (The Jewish [disciples of Rabbi Schneerson](#) may be relatively recent arrivals, but there have been Baghdad Jews in Bombay since records were kept, and Jews in India since before Christ, and not until this week has a Jewish place in India been attacked for its own sake, so to speak.)

When Salman Rushdie wrote, in [The Moor's Last Sigh](#) in 1995, that "those who hated India, those who sought to ruin it, would need to ruin Bombay," he was alluding to the Hindu chauvinists who had tried to exert their own monopoly in the city and who had [forcibly renamed it](#)—after a Hindu goddess—Mumbai. We all now collude with this, in the same way that most newspapers and TV stations do the Burmese junta's work for it by using the [fake name](#) Myanmar. (Bombay's hospital and stock exchange, both targets of terrorists, are still called by their right name by most people, just as Bollywood retains its "B.")

This may seem like a detail, but it isn't, because what's at stake is the whole concept of a cosmopolitan city open to its own citizens and to the world—a city on the model of Sarajevo or London or Beirut or Manhattan. There is, of course, a reason they attract the ire and loathing of the religious fanatics. To the pure and godly, the very existence of such places is a profanity. In a smaller way, the same is true of the Islamabad Marriott hotel, where I also used to stay. It was a meeting point and crossroads for foreigners. It had a bar where the Pakistani prohibition rules did not apply. Its dining rooms and public spaces featured stylish Asian women who showed their faces. And so it had to be [immolated](#), like any other Sodom or Gomorrah.

I hope I am not alone in finding the statements about Bombay from our politicians to be anemic and insipid, and the media coverage of the disastrous and criminal attack too parochially focused on the fate of visiting or resident Americans. India is emerging in many ways as our most important ally. It is a strong regional counterweight to Russia and China. Not to romanticize it overmuch, it is a huge and officially secular federal democracy that is based, like the United States, on ethnic and confessional pluralism. Its political and economic and literary echelons speak

English better than most of us do. Its parliament in New Delhi—the unbelievably diverse and dignified [Lok Sabha](#)—was [viciously attacked](#) by Islamist gangsters and nearly destroyed in December 2001, a date which ought to have made more Americans pay more attention rather than less. Since then, Bombay has been assaulted multiple times and the Indian Embassy in Afghanistan blown up with the fairly obvious cross-border collusion of the same Pakistani forces who are [helping in the rebirth of the Taliban](#).

It would be good to hear from the president and the president-elect that we regard attacks on the fabric and society of India with very particular seriousness, as assaults on a close friend that was battling al-Qaida long before we were. In response, it should be emphasized, our military and financial and nuclear and counterinsurgency cooperation with New Delhi will not be given a lower profile but a very much higher one. The people of India need to hear this from us, as do the enemies of India, who are our sworn enemies, too.

The inevitable question arises: Did our nominal ally Pakistan have a hand in this atrocity? In one sense, to ask the question is to answer it. Whether we refer to al-Qaida "proper," or to any of the armed Kashmiri formations that have lately been mentioned, we find some pre-existing connection to Pakistan's [Inter-Services Intelligence](#) agency, or ISI. Another conceivable [suspect](#), the former Bombay crime lord [Dawood Ibrahim](#), wanted by the Indian authorities on suspicion of blowing up the Bombay stock exchange and killing 300 civilians in 1993, has long been a fugitive from justice living safely in Pakistan's main port of Karachi. Not a bad place from which to organize an amphibious assault team that acted as if it had been trained by serious military professionals.

Contrasted with the gruesome efficiency and premeditation of the murder tactics is the pathetic amateurism and cynicism of the propaganda side. In my boyhood geography lessons I learned that the Deccan is a plateau and plain, not [a region or an identity](#). It is part of India's deep interior; its very diverse inhabitants would not in any case arrive in Bombay by high-speed boat! It's rather encouraging in a way that this is the best the jihadists can do by way of a fake cover story, but perhaps there will again be enough Western saps—as with the attacks on the United States and Britain and Turkey and Tunisia—to claim that none of this would have happened if not for the foreign policy of Bush and Blair. (I do not hold my breath, but as of the time of writing, this moronic faction has—amazingly—not yet been heard from.) An impressive thing about India is the way in which it has almost as many Muslim citizens, who live with greater prospects of peace and prosperity, as does Pakistan. This comity and integration is one of the many targets of the suicide killers, and it is another reason why firm, warm solidarity with India is the most pressing need of the present hour.

foreigners

Yes, We Have No *Monedas*!

Inside the world's most annoying economic crisis.

By Joe Keohane

Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 6:58 AM ET

It was no surprise that the cab driver tried to rip us off. We're in Buenos Aires, Argentina, after all, and we'd made the rookie error of requesting a vague destination instead of giving a precise address—naturally he interpreted this as a license to take us from La Boca to the Plaza de Mayo by way of southern Nicaragua. What we hadn't expected was the predicament the driver found himself in when it came time to pay. The fare had come to 14 pesos and 6 centavos. I proffered a 20-peso note (worth about \$6.70), and he handed back 50 centavos, suggesting that I was going to be shorted 44 centavos. Then he realized that continuing on this course would require him to give me two 2-peso notes and a 1-peso coin. He sighed dramatically and gave me three 2-peso notes instead. Factoring in the 50 centavos he had already handed over, this effectively reduced the fare to 13.50 pesos, which, for reasons I'll get to in a moment, is actually more than 14.50 pesos.

Welcome to the world's strangest economic crisis. Argentina in general—and Buenos Aires in particular—is presently in the grip of a *moneda*, or coin, shortage. Everywhere you look, there are signs reading, "NO HAY MONEDAS." As a result, vendors here are more likely to decline to sell you something than to cough up any of their increasingly precious coins in change. I've tried to buy a 2-peso candy bar with a 5-peso note only to be refused, suggesting that the 2-peso sale is worth less to the vendor than the 1-peso coin he would be forced to give me in change. When my wife went to buy a 10-trip subway pass, which retails for 9 pesos, she offered a 20-peso note and received 12 pesos in bills as change. This is commonplace—a daily, if not hourly, occurrence. It's taken for granted that the peso coin is more valuable than the 2-peso note.

No one can say what's causing this absurd situation. The government accuses Argentines of hoarding coins, which is true, at least to some extent. When even the most insignificant purchase requires the same order of planning and precision as a long-range missile strike, you can hardly blame people for keeping a jar of *monedas* safe at home. The people, in turn, fault the government for not minting enough coins. In fact, the nation's central bank has produced a record number of *monedas* this year, and the problem has gotten even worse. Everyone blames the bus companies, whose buses accept only *monedas*. (Buenos Aires' 140-plus bus routes are run by a number of separate, private companies.) These companies, exploiting a loophole in the law, run side businesses that will exchange

clients' bills for *monedas* for a 3 percent service fee. This is legal, but the business community also routinely complains of being forced into the clutches of a thriving *moneda* black market—run by the local mob, or the bus companies, or both—in which coins sell for a premium of between 5 percent and 10 percent. The bus companies steadfastly deny any involvement in this racket, but their claims were undercut by the discovery of a hoard of 13 million coins, amounting to 5 million pesos, in one company's warehouse this October.

Those coins were confiscated, but the 5 million pesos were returned to the company—in bills—which could be seen as a fine of sorts. The government has also passed laws requiring banks to provide customers with 100 pesos' worth of change on demand. (The banks ignored this because, they said, their precious *monedas* would then wind up on the black market.) The government recently lowered that figure to 20 pesos (which the banks still ignore) and demanded that the bus lines adopt a pass system, like the subway's, to keep more change in circulation. (All this did was create a stalemate over who would pay for the new equipment.)

The history of Argentina in the last 100 years is a story of great potential overwhelmed by a genius for acts of pointless economic self-destruction, but even for the Argentines, this is an exasperating state of affairs. The economy is still growing at a robust clip of around 8 percent year over year, but out-of-control inflation, estimated by independent analysts to be around 25 percent, has effectively devalued the currency, making it ironic that coins have become such an obsession. But an obsession they are, worthy of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges' story "[The Zahir](#)," about a man driven mad by contemplating a single coin.

Nowadays, without exact change, *porteños* also spend their days haunted by the specter of metal money. They are casually shortchanged by waiters or pushed to buy more produce in order to bring the total closer to a figure that won't require the vendor to provide change. People with a keen strategic sense maintain a well-diversified hoard of coins and painstakingly build alliances with local shopkeepers or bank tellers, conspicuously proffering coins for one purchase or deposit in the hopes of being indulged when they're short of change at some point in the future. Street musicians, like one we talked to in the San Telmo neighborhood, have to preface their performances by announcing that they have change, or they risk starving to death. Subway employees are occasionally forced to wave commuters through because they are out of coins.

Stranger still, change mania doesn't end at coins. The *moneda* shortage has produced a rising disinclination to provide change at all, even in bill form, at least not without histrionic sighs and eye-rolling. Last night, for instance, in a very crowded bar, I handed the waitress a 100-peso note to pay a 20-peso bill, and I was made to wait 30 minutes for change. The 2-peso note is thrown around with a contemptuous disregard usually reserved

for metal money, at least in countries where less money isn't occasionally worth more than more money. But 5s and 10s are harder to come by, because they're actually worth something. In many cases, they're more worth more than 20s, because you can buy things with them, which isn't always true with a 20. In some cases, 5s and 10s are effectively worth more than 100s—which, unless you want to take out the equivalent of \$20 at a time, are pretty much the only bills ATMs here dispense. Save for large purchases, 100-peso notes are functionally useless—imagine trying to trade a bar of platinum bullion for a sandwich and a coffee. In several instances, I've found myself buying an expensive lunch, costing, say, 60 pesos, just to break a 100 into more useful constituent parts so I can buy something I need, like beer.

Until someone figures out how to solve the crisis, money, at least money of a certain form, will remain like the painted lanes on the grand chaotic avenues of Buenos Aires: merely a set of loose guidelines to be interpreted by the individual, depending on the circumstances. It's exasperating, but there are signs of hope. Every once in a while, something happens that suggests the cosmos has decided to intervene and even things out. Last week, at the ferry terminal, I handed a cashier a 10-peso note for a 10.50 tab. He just shrugged and took it without a word of complaint. Not without a twinge of guilt, I wordlessly returned a precious 50-centavo coin to my hoard. A hoard I plan to release, in one spectacular all-*moneda* purchase, the day I leave the country. Perhaps from a balcony, like Eva Perón.

foreigners

Moscow's Empire of Dust

For all Russia's imperial ambitions, its thuggish political system is totally unattractive.

By Anne Applebaum

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 9:25 PM ET

"*Nyet! Nyet!*" That's what a Russian bodyguard [told](#) a reporter for McClatchy newspapers when the latter asked the former to comment on an incident that took place on the *Admiral Chabanenko*, a Russian destroyer carrying Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, which had docked off the Venezuelan coast last week. Following the pomp, circumstance, and 21-gun salute that are mandatory at such meetings, there had, it seems, been a bit of a misunderstanding. As Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez boarded the vessel, his beefy bodyguards had tried to follow him up the gangplank. They were stopped, however, by their equally beefy Russian counterparts. The Venezuelans, who presumably spoke no Russian, tried to push their way through. The Russians, who presumably spoke no Spanish, fought back.

It was all over quickly. "Everything is fine," said a Russian official afterward. And indeed it was. The rest of Medvedev's visit to Latin America proceeded smoothly. During his trip to Venezuela, Medvedev reportedly added a couple of passenger planes to the \$4.4 billion worth of military hardware Russia has sold to Venezuela since 2005. In [Cuba](#), Medvedev met the ailing Fidel Castro and went sightseeing with his brother Raúl. On Dec. 1, Russian ships began exercising in the Caribbean. But there were more than weapons and armies at stake in this visit. As Chávez himself [said](#) in September, the whole show was designed to send "a message to the empire": Russia is back, and it can play the imperial game just as well as the United States.

And yet—the lingering image of those thuggish bodyguards, shouting at one another in mutually incomprehensible slang, remains weirdly appropriate. For the truth is that Medvedev was in Cuba and Venezuela last week in part because he wouldn't get that warm a welcome in Tblisi or Kiev, let alone Warsaw or Prague—and also because Russian foreign policy, at the moment, is based on a strange paradox. On the one hand, the Russians have returned to the language, the iconography, and even the historiography of imperialism. With every passing year, the anniversary of the end of World War II—and the moment of the Soviet Union's greatest imperial triumph—is celebrated more elaborately. Soviet songs and symbols are back; [threats to deploy nuclear missiles](#) are frequent; and Russian leaders pointedly refer to themselves as "global players."

But at the same time, the Russian political system is uniquely unattractive in the one sphere of influence that the Russians have always cared about most: Europe. There are, it is true, Russian-speaking minorities across the eastern half of the Continent that rely on Russia for financing and political support. There are also extremely powerful business lobbies across the Continent, notably in Italy and Germany, that can be counted on to praise Russia's leaders, whatever they do. But the Russian political system—based on crony capitalism, democratic rituals without democracy itself, heavy media controls, omnipresent criminality—isn't itself of interest to anyone, and the Russians have trouble creating an empire around it. During the Cold War, there really were European (and American) Communists who really did admire the Soviet Union and whose support really could be manipulated for Soviet ends. By contrast, I'm not aware of a single popular movement in any European country—east or west—that is currently calling for a greater economic role for a Russian-style oligarchy or more Russian thugs of the sort who were lurking on the gangplank of the *Admiral Chabanenko* last week.

Some dictatorships to the east are more amenable, of course: Many of the regimes of central Asia do indeed operate on something like a Russian model, some without the elaborate democratic facade. But influence in those countries doesn't give the Russian ruling class the sense of importance it craves, nor the domestic legitimacy it needs to survive. Hence Medvedev's

need to travel somewhat farther afield. Venezuela and Cuba may not be as significant as Germany or Georgia from the Russian point of view, but the image of Russians in Cuba evokes a certain nostalgia. At the very least, it proves that Medvedev, like his Soviet predecessors, can play games in America's own backyard.

One only hopes President Obama will have the good sense to ignore the whole affair, as President Bush has apparently done. In fact, the best way for the United States to deal with this particular Russian escapade is to treat it like the public relations exercise that it was designed to be. Let Russian ships practice all they want in the Caribbean; let Russian and Venezuelan thugs fight it out at the top of the gangplank; let Medvedev spend as much time with Chávez and the Castros as he desires. Their friendship will last only as long as the high oil price holds out, anyway. A Russian visit to Venezuela isn't a Cuban missile crisis, even if it's supposed to remind us of one—just as Medvedev isn't Khrushchev and Castro isn't quite what he was 50 years ago. History repeats itself, as [Marx himself once said](#)—the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.

foreigners

The Mumbai Terrorists' Other Target

How they hoped to destabilize Pakistan.

By Daniel Benjamin

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 5:02 PM ET

Mumbai will stand as the most consequential terrorist attack since 9/11. Its eventual strategic implications could be devastating, because it could further destabilize Pakistan and accelerate that failing state's collapse into a failed one.

The origins of the attack remain unclear: We know little about the gunmen. Of those identified, all but one are dead. It is difficult to imagine that as few as 10 terrorists—the number cited in most reports—carried out this attack or that they did so without extensive local logistical support and sophisticated planning. Most attention is focused on the outlawed but tolerated Pakistan-based group Lashkar-e-Tayyba, a group that Osama Bin Laden reportedly helped establish in the late 1980s to fight against the Indian presence in Kashmir and that was nurtured for most of its existence by the ISI, Pakistan's military intelligence agency. The group has been linked to the 2001 attack on the Indian parliament, which nearly sparked a war with Pakistan, and the 2005 London Tube bombings. Although the Pakistani government under both Gen. Pervez Musharraf and President Asif Ali Zardari have condemned the group, the possibility that current or former ISI personnel might be involved cannot be ruled out.

What is clear is that whoever planned the attack had an incisive understanding of how to destroy the limited progress that had been made to reduce Pakistani-Indian tensions and to undermine the new Pakistani civilian government's efforts to defeat the Islamist radicalism that is consuming the state. Shortly before the U.S. presidential election, I [argued](#) that there was a big opening for jihadists to make an enormous impact with an action that could be traced to Pakistan, thus inviting retaliation against that country. Political backlash against such retaliation might render the new civilian government incapable of cooperating with the United States against terror and would accelerate the fraying of Pakistan, where extremists often operate in the open.

The planners of the Mumbai slaughter obviously saw this opportunity. The bloodshed in India's financial hub was calculated to outrage not just Indians, who constituted the large majority of those murdered, but also, it appears, the key partners in what the jihadists call the Crusader Alliance To Destroy Islam—Americans, Britons, and Israelis. It is plausible that the two luxury hotels were targeted in order to ensure American and British victims, and anecdotal information suggests that terrorists tried to identify hotel guests of these nationalities. The fact that the local Chabad House was hit indicates that Jews and Israel were also targets. In short, this was an attack that aimed at making a mark in the global jihad, not just another battle in the historic back-and-forth between the subcontinental neighbors.

The wholesale killing of Indians in one of their great cities serves key goals for the terrorists. Even if the Indians conclude that the Pakistani government did not sanction the attack, Indian anger at Islamabad's inability to control its territory and keep it from being a base for terrorists will raise tensions, rendering it impossible to make progress in the talks on Kashmir, the disputed region that has been at the heart of the Indo-Pakistani conflict for 60 years. Indians and Pakistanis have been through plenty of close calls, including in 1999, when Pakistan's failed Kargil incursion brought them close to a nuclear exchange, and in 2001, after the attack on the Indian parliament. But even if they don't go to the brink now—and the possibility of miscalculation is always present in South Asia—the cost in lost progress at improving relations will be high.

To the radicals of Lashkar-e-Tayyba, as well as to al-Qaida, Kashmir is a core grievance on which there can be no compromise. Any effort that prevents progress on the issue and delays normalization between Pakistan and India is worth the energy. From the terrorists' perspective, there are other benefits, too: Indians now will become more suspicious of their 130-million-strong Muslim minority, tension that may win the terrorists adherents among this huge—and increasingly restive—community. The unraveling of social peace in India is among the worst nightmares that country could face.

There are too many dead in Mumbai to be glib about anyone else being a "real victim" of this terror. But it is nonetheless true that

Pakistan was also a target of the attackers. This episode, much like the killing of Benazir Bhutto, was meant to eviscerate the movement to stabilize this failing state and put it on a course toward moderation.

Indeed, part of the motivation may have been to retaliate against the Zardari government for its efforts to rein in ISI. The relatively new chief of the army staff, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani—himself a former head of ISI—who had been close to Benazir Bhutto, recently replaced the head of ISI, and Zardari had ordered a part of the agency that dealt with domestic intelligence closed. (None of this rules out the possibility that elements within ISI, operating on their own, had a hand in Mumbai. It has been a symptom of Pakistan's dysfunction that the government has often had little control over ISI—hence the embarrassment that came earlier this year when the U.S. intelligence community confirmed Indian accusations that the agency was behind the bombing of the Indian Embassy in Kabul.)

The Pakistanis will pay a price, too, if the resulting tensions between Islamabad and New Delhi lead to military redeployments along the countries' long border, as [Kayani has warned](#). That will draw troops away from the counterinsurgency efforts to roll back the Pakistani Taliban and other radical groups in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the North West Frontier Province—a setback for the United States, which is urging Pakistan to get more serious about its rebels, and for Afghanistan, which must deal with cross-border infiltration. It will also reconfirm the Pakistani army's instinctive belief that it exists to confront India, not strengthen a state in disarray. The less pressure on al-Qaida and other extremists in the FATA, the more danger the United States will face.

All this will make it harder for Pakistan to pull itself back from state failure, which is where it is headed despite the efforts of the new government. Under pressure from the Indian government—which is taking heat for its initially ineffective response to the attack—and the United States, Pakistan will look more and more like that other great disappointment at counterterrorism, the Palestinian Authority. Too weak to meet the demands of its neighbors and friends, it will continue to lose credibility and find itself in an ever-deeper crisis. Demilitarizing groups like Lashkar-e-Tayyba—which has armed thousands over the years and has hundreds of thousands of supporters—has long been in the "too-hard-to-do category" for Islamabad. That hasn't changed, except now the United States and India will, understandably, demand it more loudly.

gabfest

The Team Obama Gabfest

Listen to *Slate's* review of the week in politics.

By Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz
Friday, December 5, 2008, at 11:21 AM ET

Listen to the Gabfest for Dec. 5 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program [here](#), or you can subscribe to the weekly Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking [here](#).

Emily Bazelon, David Plotz, and Hanna Rosin, sitting in for John Dickerson, talk politics. This week, Team Obama strengthens its identity, terrorism strikes India, and the Big Three automakers return to Capitol Hill.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

President-elect Barack Obama officially [announced his foreign-policy team](#), including [Sen. Hillary Clinton](#) as his nominee for [secretary of state](#).

Arizona [Gov. Janet Napolitano](#), Obama's pick to lead the Department of Homeland Security, was the subject of [an offhand comment](#) by Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell. He said Napolitano was perfect for the job because she had "no life." Napolitano is not married and does not have children.

Hanna also discussed the announcement of Obama's economic team. Several are noted for [having strong personalities](#). Many are also [considered Washington insiders](#), so Emily wondered [just how different the Obama administration's policies](#) would be.

The trio discussed the [terrorist attacks in India](#). David said the response to the attacks by citizens in India was twofold: First, [outrage at the government response](#), and second, anger at [the involvement of Pakistanis](#).

Automakers [returned to Capitol Hill this week](#) in hopes of receiving as much as \$38 billion in government loans. So far, their efforts have not been successful. However, union officials say [they will consider making concessions](#).

Emily encourages everyone to see the movie [Slumdog Millionaire](#).

Hanna predicts that people will be talking about the [vote by conservative Episcopalians](#) to create a new branch of the church.

David chatters about the controversy surrounding an article in *Women's Wear Daily* that discussed [what Michelle Obama should wear](#) when she moves into the White House. It was illustrated with [a number of fashion designers' sketches](#) showing very light-skinned women. The team wonders why it is so

difficult for designers to draw a black woman in designer clothes.

The e-mail address for the Political Gabfest is gabfest@slate.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.)

Posted on Dec. 5 by Dale Willman at 11:30 a.m.

Nov. 26, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for Nov. 26 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program [here](#), or you can subscribe to the weekly Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking [here](#).

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week, they discuss Barack Obama's Cabinet appointments, the financial bailout and other economic woes, and the Obamas' choice of school for their daughters.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

The Obama transition team officially announced the [top slots](#) on its economic team, and the [stock market rallied](#) on the news.

Emily says that given the difficult economic situation facing the incoming administration, the transition is taking too long. The others disagree, however, with John saying the transition is [moving forward at a breakneck pace](#), while David says [time is needed](#) to make certain that the right people are put in place.

John says that Obama [performed well](#) in his first news conferences since the election. He says Obama's answers to [questions posed by reporters](#) are full of detail and clearly show that he is listening.

The Obamas have chosen [Sidwell Friends School](#) in Washington, D.C., for their daughters. It is John's alma mater. It's also where Chelsea Clinton went to school, along with many other famous children, prompting John to suggest that the school is a good location for high-profile children because it is used to dealing with the significant security concerns these students present.

The Obamas have named family friend [Desiree Rogers](#) as the [White House social secretary](#). She will be the first African-American to hold that position.

Emily chatters about [the trial of Lori Drew](#), a woman charged in connection with the death of 13-year-old [Megan Meier](#).

David talks about a short film, [The Civil War in Four Minutes](#). The video was produced by the [Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum](#) and is [now available online](#). David says it is well worth watching.

The show closes with a discussion of a new program in New Haven, Conn., in which owners of hybrid cars can get stickers [allowing them to park for free](#) at meters throughout the city.

The e-mail address for the Political Gabfest is gabfest@slate.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.)

Posted on Nov. 26 by Dale Willman at 12:06 p.m.

Nov. 21, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for Nov. 21 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program [here](#), or you can subscribe to the weekly Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking [here](#).

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week, the Obama administration begins to take shape, politicians jockey for position, and the Big Three automakers come to Washington.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

Among the people mentioned as potential Cabinet members are [Sen. Hillary Clinton](#) and Arizona Gov. [Janet Napolitano](#). Media reports indicate that former Senate Majority Leader [Tom Daschle](#) has been selected to become the next [Health and Human Services](#) secretary.

The group discusses what it calls the [endless speculation](#) over Obama's Cabinet.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the possible nomination of [Eric Holder](#) as attorney general. One potential pitfall for such a nomination is [Holder's involvement](#) in Bill Clinton's pardon of [Marc Rich](#).

John mentions the so-called "[Team of Rivals](#)" approach to forming a Cabinet.

John talks about how [President Bush's approval ratings](#) continue to be low, even after the election. He says this is not helping the "[Republican brand](#)."

Alaska Sen. [Ted Stevens is out](#), losing a squeaker to Anchorage Mayor Mark Begich. His loss [came the same week](#) as his 85th birthday.

California Democratic [Rep. Henry A. Waxman](#) has been voted [the incoming chairman of the House energy and commerce committee](#), ousting [Rep. John Dingell](#) of Michigan.

Former Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney made headlines this week with his *New York Times* op-ed, "[Let Detroit Go Bankrupt](#)."

Emily chatters about a federal court ruling involving five Algerian detainees at Guantanamo Bay. The judge, an appointee of [President George H.W. Bush](#), ruled that [the five men have been held unlawfully](#) and should be released.

David discusses the [real estate frenzy in Washington, D.C.](#), brought on by the inauguration. Many D.C.-area residents are [renting out their homes and apartments for huge amounts](#) to people hoping to visit the capital for the festivities. By some estimates, [as many as 4 million people](#) are expected to descend on Washington.

John talks about the resurrection of photographs from *Life* magazine. The [photos are now being made available](#) through [Google](#). Among them are several of [former NBC correspondent Nancy Dickerson](#), John's mother.

The e-mail address for the Political Gabfest is gabfest@slate.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.)

Posted on Nov. 21 by Dale Willman at 10:30 a.m.

Nov. 14, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for Nov. 14 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program [here](#), or you can subscribe to the weekly Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking [here](#).

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week, the election, how Barack Obama will fare as president, and the future of Sarah Palin.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

President-elect Barack Obama has the [highest approval rating](#) going into office of any president over the past 25 years. Outgoing President George W Bush, meanwhile, has the [lowest approval rating](#) of any president since the beginning of such polls.

It appears that the cautious tone of [Obama's Nov. 4 acceptance speech](#) was an attempt to tamp down expectations.

A major question for Obama will be whether he should [behave like former President Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#) and work fast to capitalize on his current popularity or whether he should move more cautiously. John says he favors a [bold approach](#), similar to what Obama promised in the campaign. But he says [Obama's bold rhetoric](#) does not match the more [mainstream policies](#) he is championing. John says Obama will be able to make some early choices that will be popular, including reversing current policies on the [State Children's Health Insurance Program](#) and [stem cells](#).

The group discusses how to [talk to children](#) about the Obama victory and its place in the racial history of the United States.

Since the election, Sarah Palin has been [talking a great deal about the campaign](#) and her role in it, perhaps in an attempt to [rehabilitate her public image](#). Emily says the visibility campaign may be an effort to become the national spokeswoman of the conservative wing of the Republican Party.

David says *Slate* has received many inquiries following last week's request for a Gabfest sponsor. He also chatters about a *New York Times* story that says more and more women are [opting to give birth at home](#).

Emily talks about a Supreme Court argument on whether forensic scientists working for police labs [can be required to testify](#) in court about their findings in criminal cases.

John chatters about a [2004 interview](#) in which Obama discussed his views on religion. John says the interview occurred at a time when Obama did not yet have all the filters in place that now prevent him from speaking candidly.

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Posted on Nov. 14 by Dale Willman at 10:30 a.m.

Nov. 7, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for Nov. 7 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program [here](#), or you can subscribe to the weekly Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking [here](#).

John Dickerson, David Plotz, and Emily Bazelon talk politics. This week, what happened, what's next, and what will become of Sarah Palin?

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

This election is significant for many reasons, among them that the [voter turnout was the largest](#) in 44 years.

[Exit polls](#) turned out to be pretty accurate predictors of the final results.

[Voter turnout](#) in the District of Columbia was huge but caused few voting glitches.

John discusses Barack Obama's [final campaign rally](#) in Manassas, Va., which drew as many as 100,000 people. At the end of that speech, Obama told the story of how, months earlier, during a visit to South Carolina, [one woman helped motivate him](#) by shouting out, "[Fired up, ready to go!](#)" That moment, he says, shows how one person can make a difference. The phrase itself became a rallying cry for the Obama campaign.

John also talks about Rahm Emanuel's [appointment as Obama's chief of staff](#). He says it shows Obama quickly moving from election mode into governing mode. The group also discusses the baggage Emanuel could bring to the Obama White House. [He is known for being ruthless](#) and is often described as having "sharp elbows."

One major question lingering after the election concerns the fate of Sarah Palin. Some Palin supporters say she is now being blamed for McCain's loss. *Newsweek* reported that [McCain-campaign insiders are complaining](#) that Palin spent thousands of dollars more than previously disclosed buying clothes for herself and her husband.

David chatters about Curtis Sittenfeld's novel [American Wife](#), which is inspired by the life of first lady Laura Bush.

Emily talks about the passage of [Proposition 8](#) in California, a constitutional amendment that bans same-sex marriage in the state. A number of [lawsuits have already been filed](#) in an effort to overturn the measure.

John chatters about the [holograms](#) CNN used during its election-night coverage.

The e-mail address for the Political Gabfest is gabfest@slate.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.)

Posted on Nov. 7 by Dale Willman at 11:55 a.m.

hot document

Inaugural Housing Madness

In Washington, D.C., suddenly everybody's a landlord.

By Bonnie Goldstein

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 3:00 PM ET

From: Bonnie Goldstein

Posted Monday, December 1, 2008, at 3:00 PM ET

Notwithstanding the limited availability of [tickets](#), the swearing-in of President Barack Obama on Jan. 20 is expected to draw as many as [5 million visitors](#) to Washington, D.C., during inauguration week. That's more than eight times the [local population](#). With hotel rooms [scarce](#) and [expensive](#), city residents are scrambling to [rent out](#) their homes, sofas, or driveways to total strangers. One three-bedroom house in Virginia reportedly leased for \$57,000, and Web sites have popped up hawking house rentals as far afield as [Glen Burnie, Md.](#) (a Baltimore suburb [29 miles](#) north of the capital). At the moment, Craigslist.org lists more than [1,000 classified ads](#) for "sublets and temporary" housing with the keyword "inauguration."

Recognizing that it would be impossible to enforce the usual [licensing regulations](#) for these housing arrangements, D.C. Mayor [Adrian Fenty](#) last month issued an [executive order](#) temporarily waiving such restrictions during the second half of January (see Pages 3 and 4). The D.C. Department of Consumer Affairs posted a [sample lease agreement](#) that ad hoc landlords might offer temporary tenants (below and on Page 2).

Still available: an "[architect's home](#)" with flat-screen TV and stocked bar on the city's swank Embassy Row (\$50,000) or a more modestly priced four-bedroom row house in "centrally located" Dupont Circle ([\\$25,000](#)). Too steep? [This couple](#) will share an efficiency apartment (bring your own sleeping bag) with "whomever can bring the best party favors."

Send Hot Document ideas to documents@slate.com.

Posted Monday, December 1, 2008, at 3:00 PM ET

Posted Monday, December 1, 2008, at 3:00 PM ET

Posted Monday, December 1, 2008, at 3:00 PM ET

human nature

White Men Can't Jump?

Race, genes, and sports.

By William Saletan

Friday, December 5, 2008, at 7:30 AM ET

A few days ago, I wrote about a [test](#), now being [marketed in the United States](#), that predicts whether your toddler has more potential as a power athlete or as an endurance athlete. The test examines [ACTN3](#), a gene that affects fast generation of muscular force. Fray poster Andrea Freiboden [isn't impressed](#). "What a lot of crap. Just look at the race of the athlete," she [writes](#):

Generally, people of West African origin have more fast twitch muscles which allow intense bursts of power. This is why running backs,

defensive linemen, and receivers are almost all black. We don't need any expensive test. All you have to do is look at the physique. Blacks in basketball are lean and muscularly [sic] hard. Whites have softer muscles, which is why white basketball players have to rely more on skill than blacks who have the advantage of skill + great speed/strength.

Oy. I've been through this wringer [before](#). It's true that some racial averages differ in part for biological reasons. It's also true that that is one of them. But Freiboden is exactly wrong. Race is a [less, not more](#), reliable gauge of physical characteristics than genes are. In fact, that's one of the chief consolations of nontherapeutic genetic testing: No matter how inaccurate genes are as a predictor of this or that ability, they're more accurate than predictions based on race. And the sooner we get past judging by race, the better.

ACTN3 has two key variants: R and X. To [recap](#):

Roughly speaking, the more copies of the R variant you have, as opposed to the X variant, the more likely you are to excel at sports requiring power or speed. (You can be RR, RX, or XX.) The testing company, Atlas Sports Genetics, cites studies that [support](#) this pattern. A 2003 [analysis](#) of hundreds of athletes who had represented Australia at international meets found that 53 percent of the male competitors in sprinting or power events were RR—nearly twice the prevalence of this genotype in a less-athletic population sample. None of the 35 female sprinters were XX. Nor were any of the 25 male Olympic sprinters. Subsequent studies show the same basic pattern in [Finland](#), [Greece](#), and [Russia](#).

Few genes are known to be decisive in determining life outcomes. Nutrition, training, and other genes matter. But the evidence that this gene significantly influences athletic ability is strong.

Now look at the frequency of the R and X variants in different populations. According to data published [seven years ago](#) in [Human Molecular Genetics](#), the relative frequency of the X allele is 0.52 in Asians, 0.42 in whites, 0.27 in African-Americans, and 0.16 in Africans. If you break out the data [further](#), the frequency of the XX genotype is 0.25 in Asians, 0.20 in European whites, 0.13 in African-Americans, and 0.01 in African Bantu. Conversely, the frequency of RR (the genotype for speed and power) is 0.25 in Asians, 0.36 in European whites, 0.60 in African-Americans, and 0.81 in African Bantu. Among Asians, you can expect to find one RR for every XX. Among whites, you can expect nearly two RRs for every XX. Among

African-Americans, you can expect more than four RRs for every XX.

So, yes, all other things being equal, you can expect this gene to cause Africans and African-Americans to be disproportionately represented at the highest levels of speed and power sports. And you can expect the opposite for Asians. But contrary to Freiboden's claim, you can't expect what we actually find in, say, basketball. Five years ago, [77 percent](#) of NBA players were black; only 21 percent were white. According to a study reported last year, black players earned [83 percent](#) of the league's court time. Now contrast that with genetic and population data. Compared with whites, black Americans aren't even twice as likely to be RR, and they're more than half as likely to be XX. Furthermore, among American men aged 20 to 35, there are about [five times as many whites](#) as blacks. In sum, blacks are about twice as dominant in the NBA as ACTN3 alone would predict. Something else must be going on: culture, resources, differential treatment, other genes ... you name it.

Basketball has lots of confounding factors. It favors height, stamina, and court vision in addition to speed. So, let's look at a sport where explosive force alone is decisive: sprinting. Several years ago, Jon Entine, the author of [Taboo](#), summarized the [data](#):

There are no sprinters of note from Asia, even with more than 50 percent of the world's population, a Confucian and Tao tradition of discipline, and an authoritarian sports system in place in the most populous country, China. No white sprinter can be found on the list of 100-meter sprinters; the best time by a white, 10 seconds, ranks more than 200th on the all-time list. ... All of the 32 finalists in the last four Olympic men's 100-meter races are of West African descent. The likelihood of that happening based on population numbers alone—blacks from that region, now living around the globe, represent approximately 8 percent of the world's population—is 0.00000000000000000000000000000001 percent.

Note the distinction: *West* Africans dominate sprinting. *East* Africans do better at [distance](#) running. So already, the evidence points beyond race toward a more precise category: population. And with ACTN3, we're beginning to advance from population comparisons toward the salient level of analysis: genes. Remember, as we noted about ACTN3 in general, differences at the elite level probably exceed differences among the rest of us. But they're still real.

I've had my share of arguments with people who deny that race is biologically meaningful. Many of them are dedicated to the proposition that all humans are created equal, not just in the

sense of moral worth or treating each person on his merits, but literally, in the sense that no genetically based difference can be admitted in average ability between populations. That kind of egalitarian literalism—I call it [liberal creationism](#)—becomes harder and harder to sustain in the face of evidence such as the data on ACTN3.

On the other hand, those of us who accept such differences must understand them accurately and [describe them responsibly](#). As Fray poster Njuzu [puts it](#), "Race is a very inexact and unreliable proxy for genetics." Race is [not a causal unit](#). There's no such thing as having fast-twitch muscle fiber because you're black. The causal unit is a gene, or a network of genes, or a network of genes and environmental factors. Being black only makes you more likely to have a genetic variant that makes you more likely to have extra fast-twitch fiber. That's a lot of "likelies," not certainties. And you can eliminate part of the uncertainty by testing for ACTN3, which takes you past the crudeness of race to the relative precision of genetics. I'm not exactly thrilled about a world in which kids' futures are projected from being RR or XX. But it's a hell of a lot better than a world in which they're projected from being black or white.

(Now playing at the [Human Nature blog](#): 1. [The myth of morning-after pills](#). 2. [In praise of lethal rationing](#). 3. [Armed robotry](#).)

human nature

Leave This Child Behind

Sports, segregation, and environmental eugenics.

By William Saletan

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 7:59 AM ET

"Little Ones Get Test for Sports Gene," says the [headline](#) in Sunday's *New York Times*. The article describes a test, now being [marketed in the United States](#), that predicts whether your toddler has more potential as a power athlete or as an endurance athlete. Critics fret that the test will bring back the bad old days of eugenics. The company behind the test says they're wrong. I think the answer is more complicated. We're not drifting back toward an old peril. We're drifting forward toward a new one.

[Eugenics](#) was crude and brutal. It regulated survival and procreation. If the government decided you were unfit to breed, it could sterilize or kill you. The notion was that some families were better than others—and that these hereditary differences, not subsequent environmental factors, determined a child's prospects.

The new mentality assumes the opposite: Good heredity isn't enough. Without proper nurture, nature's gifts will be wasted.

We have to find the kids with the best genes and focus our resources on developing their talents. This isn't regulation of heredity. It's regulation of environments. I'd call it environmental eugenics, or envireugenics.

The test featured in the *Times* focuses on a gene called ACTN3, which affects fast generation of muscular force. Roughly speaking, the more copies of the R variant you have, as opposed to the X variant, the more likely you are to excel at sports requiring power or speed. (You can be RR, RX, or XX.) The testing company, Atlas Sports Genetics, cites studies that [support](#) this pattern. A 2003 [analysis](#) of hundreds of athletes who had represented Australia at international meets found that 53 percent of the male competitors in sprinting or power events were RR—nearly twice the prevalence of this genotype in a less-athletic population sample. None of the 35 female sprinters were XX. Nor were any of the 25 male Olympic sprinters. Subsequent studies show the same basic pattern in [Finland](#), [Greece](#), and [Russia](#). You can find XX athletes who defy the trend: one in [Spain](#), a few more in Russia. But the data are pretty depressing.

Misha Angrist, a genetic expert at Duke University, points out that ACTN3 testing isn't new. An American company, 23andMe, "has been doing it for a year," he [writes](#), and "it's been available via Australia for four years." That's true. But sometimes, the important changes in a technology aren't in the tool itself. They're in how it's understood or used.

Five years ago, when the test went commercial in Australia, the company that made the announcement, Genetic Technologies Limited, [stipulated](#) that it "could also lead to future treatment applications in certain muscle diseases." Today, that therapeutic fig leaf is gone. ACTN3 variation "may contribute to whether you are a sprinter or a marathoner," 23andMe [tells customers](#), but it "does not cause any health effects."

What hadn't changed, until now, was the personal nature of the test. In its 2003 announcement, Genetic Technologies [said](#) the test could "maximize the potential of an athlete in their chosen sport, by helping to identify the event in which they are most likely to be successful, and also allowing the design of the optimal training program." The sport was assumed to have been chosen before the test; the chooser was an adult. 23andMe was even [more emphatic](#) about individual autonomy.

In the hands of Atlas Sports Genetics, that personal orientation is giving way. "Finding any great Olympic champion normally takes years to determine," says the company's [home page](#). "What if we knew a part of the answer when we were born?" Atlas President Kevin Reilly warns the *Times* that "if you wait until high school or college to find out if you have a good athlete on your hands, by then it will be too late. We need to identify these kids from 1 and up, so we can give the parents some guidelines on where to go from there." The test is no longer for adults. It's

for kids. The decisions will be made not by them but by their parents, who need "guidelines" to steer them.

What's the point of all this steering? National greatness. Atlas' [business partner](#) in the new test is [Epic Athletic Performance](#), a company founded by former college coach [Boyd Epley](#). According to the *Times*, Atlas plans to direct its clients to Epic, and "Mr. Epley's goal is to build a system in the United States more like those in China and Russia, which select very young children to be athletes." In his own words, Epley argues, "This is how we could stay competitive with the rest of the world."

Well, yes: We could match China's output by matching its methods. But that would mean thinking more like a collective. Collectivism was at the core of American eugenics, not to mention German National Socialism. What made these movements so dangerous wasn't just heredity worship or perfectionism but the centralization of the perfectionist enterprise under the control of the state.

Envireugenics is less dangerous. It spreads through culture, not coercion. It doesn't employ murder or sterilization. Instead, it relies on segregation. If your kid is RR, he goes here; if he's XX, he goes there. We don't tell you whether you can have a baby. We just tell you whether your baby belongs on the track team, the chess team, or the assembly line.

What's really disturbing about this idea, in the case of ACTN3, is that it isn't crazy. The data make a strong case that being XX really does lock you out of success at the highest levels of sprinting and power sports. From an individual standpoint, that doesn't much matter: You can run track, play pickup basketball, and live happily ever after. But from your country's standpoint, putting you on the track team is a waste. We need that slot for an RR kid, and we need a genetic test to find him.

That's what worries me about Atlas Sports Genetics. It's not just selling a test. It's selling a mentality.

(Now playing at the [Human Nature blog](#): 1) *The world is [fat](#).* 2) *The cost of [getting old](#).* 3) *Resurrecting [extinct species](#).*)

jurisprudence

The Early Brief Gets the Worm

Liberal groups are ceding a key way to influence the Supreme Court.

By Adam Chandler

Friday, December 5, 2008, at 6:55 AM ET

In its last term, the U.S. Supreme Court heard fewer cases than it has in any single term in more than 50 years. This means that

getting your case heard at the high court is about 10 times harder than getting into Harvard. How do you up your odds? Just as a recommendation letter from a well-placed alum gets attention from an admissions office, a supportive brief from an advocacy group, sent to the court at the stage when it's deciding whether to take a case, flags a case for the justices.

Each year, parties that have lost in the lower courts file about 9,000 petitions for a writ of certiorari (cert for short) in which they beg the court to hear them. The Supreme Court has nearly complete discretion over which cases it will take. Last term, [only 69](#) cert petitions resulted in arguments before the justices. The lucky few were more likely to have gotten a helping hand from a friend-of-the-court brief, filed by an outside group with an interest in the case's outcome. Influence, in this sense, is all about timing. Amicus briefs, as they're known, tend to pile up on both sides of a case once the court takes it, all competing for the justices' attention. But the amicus briefs filed *before* the court grants cert are much rarer, and, accordingly, more influential. Yet this is a tool that liberal groups often fail to use.

The private groups and advocacy organizations that most frequently urge the court to take a case are overwhelmingly pro-business, anti-regulatory, and ideologically conservative. For liberal groups to cede the cert-stage battleground is to forfeit a key phase of the war. When left-leaning groups ignore an opportunity to tell the court to hear the cases most likely to be decided in their favor, they are doing their causes a disservice.

Here are the numbers: Between May 2004 and August 2007, nearly 1,000 [private organizations](#) filed cert-stage briefs. Only a few make it a habit—just 16 groups filed eight or more early-bird briefs a piece. Ten of those top amici serve business interests and conservative causes. They include the [Products Liability Advisory Council](#), the [Pacific Legal Foundation](#), and the [National Association of Manufacturers](#). And the king of the amici, the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#), filed 55 briefs over the period studied, or about 17 each year.

Among the top 16 cert-stage amicus filers, the [National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers](#) is the only one that might be considered a liberal interest group. It ranked second to the Chamber of Commerce with 33 briefs. The [American Civil Liberties Union](#) tallied just two cert-stage amicus briefs during the three years under review.

Meanwhile, the right-leaning major players pushed the Supreme Court to take some of its biggest recent cases, including cases on [school desegregation plans](#) in Seattle and Louisville, [punitive damage limitations](#) in tobacco cases, and the constitutionality of [denying federal funds to universities](#) over the military's policy toward gays. In all, the conservative groups in the top 16 succeeded in getting the cases they were pushing heard between 20 percent and 40 percent of the time. That's compared to the sub-1 percent success rate of the average petition.

It's safe to presume that many of the petitions these groups threw their weight behind might have been granted without them. Still, empirical studies show a link between filing a cert-stage amicus brief and getting a case heard. In a 1988 [study](#), political science professors Greg Caldeira and Jack Wright of Ohio State University controlled for the "full array" of well-known influences on the court's decision to hear a case—like a split in the lower courts or the participation of the U.S. solicitor general—and found that early-bird amicus briefs "substantially increase" the likelihood that a case will make the court's docket. The chief deputy clerk of the court has even [said](#) that amicus briefs are one of four explicit factors the court weighs in deciding whether to grant a case. (The others are the Supreme Court's jurisdiction to hear the case, lower-court conflicts, and the presence of competing petitions on the disputed legal issue.)

If early-bird amicus briefs can alter the character of the Supreme Court's docket, why don't liberal groups come up with more of them? Pro-business groups may have more money to pay for the briefs (which, after all, lawyers are paid to write). Perhaps the [rise of specialized Supreme Court practices](#) in major law firms means that more lawyers are on the lookout for work that will benefit their big-business clientele. It is likely, too, that the conservative groups want to get as many cases as they can before this Supreme Court because it's increasingly viewed as not just conservative, but [business-friendly](#).

The ACLU has made an "organizational decision not to file cert-stage amicus briefs, except in extraordinary circumstances," according to Legal Director Steven Shapiro, as an "allocation-of-resources decision." Instead, the ACLU files amicus briefs in 12 to 15 cases a year once the court is deciding between the parties (as opposed to deciding whether to take case). But by that point, [research](#) suggests, the briefs' influence is diminished.

Some liberal groups may be trying to keep a low profile on cases that matter to them but that they think they'll lose (though Shapiro says that's not the ACLU's thinking). If that's the concern, should liberal advocates focus on filing briefs in *opposition* to cert to keep the current Supreme Court away from the cases they see as stinkers? In fact, only one brief of 270 filed by the top 16 amici opposed the taking of a case. And perhaps that's because such a strategy is ill-advised. The Caldeira and Wright study shows that the chances of a case being heard by the court increase with the number of amicus briefs filed, *whether or not* they recommend or discourage granting the case. In fact, amicus briefs in opposition to cert significantly *increase* the chances a case will be granted cert. The content of the briefs appears to matter much less than their presence.

But that's no justification for liberal groups to sit on their hands. They can find areas of law in which this Supreme Court (in particular, [Justice Kennedy](#)) is likely to side with them. See recent decisions on [immigration](#), the [death penalty](#), the [environment](#), and [gay rights](#). Even in less-friendly territory, they

can find petitions presenting questions and fact patterns more favorable to their side and then tell the court why those cases would be better vehicles to decide an issue than cases being pushed by their conservative counterparts. (The National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers used this move in the famous case on criminal sentencing, *U.S. v. Booker*.)

The point is that if liberal groups must play defense, they should play smart defense. Staying silent on the sidelines, we know, just doesn't work. A case is won or lost on the merits, but a cause may be lost long before.

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Only private organizations representing some constituency or legal interest were included in this review. Excluded groups include the United States; individual states and cities; ad hoc groups of professors, elected government officials, scientists, and citizens; state attorneys general and district attorneys; governments of foreign countries; and individual citizens.

jurisprudence

Lori Drew Is a Meanie

The problem with prosecuting cyber-bullying.

By Emily Bazelon

Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 6:33 PM ET

As a matter of law, the verdict against Lori Drew in the MySpace suicide case is fairly indefensible. A U.S. attorney in Los Angeles went after a misdeed in Missouri—when state and federal prosecutors there didn't think Drew's actions constituted a crime—with a crazy-broad reading of a statute written to punish computer hacking. [Just about every single](#) law professor and editorial writer to weigh in has condemned the prosecutorial overreaching. But the failure to make a valid case against Drew begs a larger question: Is there a better way to go after cyber-bullying? Or is this the kind of troublemaking, however nefarious, the government shouldn't try to punish?

Drew is the mother from hell who famously tried to defend her own teenage daughter against rumor-mongering on the Internet by creating the MySpace persona of fictional 16-year-old Josh Evans, then using that persona to fire off personal e-mail attacks

(or sometimes spurring a young woman she worked with to do that). Twenty minutes after "Josh" sent 13-year-old Megan Meier, Drew's daughter's erstwhile friend, the message "the world would be a better place without you," Megan hanged herself in her bedroom.

Someone other than Drew apparently sent that last dreadful e-mail. Even if she had, it seems wrong to say she caused Megan's death. We're talking about an adolescent who must have been vulnerable and volatile and who was taking antidepressants. But the local sheriff's department's dismissal of Drew's MySpace foray as merely "rude" and "immature" doesn't seem proportionate, either. Drew was an [adult who secretly entered](#) a teenage world and made it more dangerous. A girl in that world died. The formulation that makes sense to me is that Drew at least contributed to Megan's suicide. So did the abstract verbal brutality of e-mail and the humiliation and shunning made possible by MySpace. But the vacuum cleaner that would cleanse the Web of its pseudonymous nastiness would also suck up a lot of free speech. Freedom often doesn't go with niceness.

The problems with the California case against Drew started with the poor fit between her wrongdoing and the law used to punish her. The federal Computer Fraud and Abuse Act makes it a crime to intentionally access "a computer without authorization." So what does that mean—is it a crime to hack past a password or a firewall? Or merely to violate a terms-of-service contract like the one MySpace users agree to?

In 2003, George Washington University law professor Orin Kerr [wrote](#) a prescient law-review article arguing for the former, narrower interpretation. The legislative history for the CFAA indicates that Congress wasn't trying to prosecute any or every breach of contract. Would lawmakers really want to go after people, even potentially, for giving a fake name to register for a Web site, for example (dressed up as the bad act of giving "false and misleading information")? Nor, for that matter, does it look as if Congress intended to base prison time on the MySpace contractual provision that bars use of the site that "harasses or advocates harassment of another person" or that is "abusive, threatening, obscene, defamatory, or libelous." It's one thing for MySpace to kick someone out for acting like a troll or even for the troll's target to sue her. It's another thing entirely to throw the weight of the government behind a criminal investigation and conviction for what usually just amounts to mischief in cyber-contracts.

In the Lori Drew prosecution, the theory was that Drew was on the hook for setting up the fake profile, then using it to inflict emotional distress. Three of the four counts against Drew were for "unauthorized access" of MySpace simply because Drew violated the MySpace terms of service to which she agreed, according to Los Angeles U.S. Attorney Thomas O'Brien's dubious interpretation. The jury didn't think the prosecutors proved the emotional distress and so dismissed the fourth count.

And they knocked down the other charges from felonies to misdemeanors. But they did buy the idea that Drew "intentionally" broke the law, even though all that seems to mean is that she clicked "I agree" in response to a long series of legalistic paragraphs that [just about nobody really reads](#). It's hard to imagine even these misdemeanor convictions standing up on appeal.

Kerr joined Drew's defense team, and his [post](#) last Friday on the Volokh Conspiracy blog gets at how just how ludicrous it is to imagine every breach of a Web site's terms of service as a federal crime. (Kerr: By visiting the Volokh Conspiracy, you agree that your middle name is not Ralph and that you're "super nice." You lied? Gotcha.) Of course, prosecutors aren't really going to investigate all the criminals Kerr just created with the terms of service in his post. But this is not a road we want to take even one baby step down. As Andrew Grossman [argues](#) for the Heritage Foundation, laws that make it seem as if "everyone is a criminal" are generally a bad idea. Most of the time, they're unenforceable, and then every once in a while, they're used to scapegoat someone like Lori Drew.

What about a law written expressly to address cyber-bullying? Such a statute could presumably direct prosecutors to go after only the worst of the Internet meanies. Or, then again, maybe not. A proposed bill before Congress is far broader. It targets anyone who uses "electronic means" to transmit "in interstate or foreign commerce any communication, with the intent to coerce, intimidate, harass, or cause substantial emotional distress to a person." The penalty is a fine or imprisonment for up to two years.

Missouri, where Meier lived, has already [passed](#) a cyber-bullying law. The Missouri statute extends the state's bar on phone harassment to computers. The problem with the analogy is that the computer context is more dangerous to free speech: On the phone, you talk to one other person. On MySpace or any other Web site, you broadcast to as many people as read you. [Other states have passed laws](#) giving schools more authority to address cyber-bullying. That sounds better, but it could get schools too involved in disciplining students for the IMs and posts they write from home.

All of this takes us back to earlier battles over prosecuting hate speech. As Eugene Volokh [points out](#) on his ever-vigilant blog, the cyber-bullying bill before Congress is a classic example of a law that's unconstitutional because it's overly broad. The Supreme Court has held that the First Amendment protects "outrageous" speech—from civil as well as criminal liability—even if it "recklessly, knowingly, or purposefully causes 'severe emotional distress,' when it's about a public figure." Volokh adds, "Many, though not all, lower courts have held the same whenever the statement is on a matter of public concern, even about a private figure."

That doesn't mean that a cyber-bullying statute as applied to a Lori Drew-like horror show would be unconstitutional; "Josh's" trashing of Megan was hardly a matter of public concern. But even if a better drafter could come up with a narrower law, since when do we want the government to go after bullies when the only weapon they wield is words? Other countries have experimented with prosecuting hate speech; they don't think their civil traditions are strong enough to withstand, for example, ethnically based calls to violence. But that's not a direction American law has ever taken. And wild and woolly though it may be, the Internet doesn't really call for rethinking our affection for the First Amendment. Cyber-bullying is scary. For some kids, MySpace isn't a safe place. But criminal convictions aren't the best way to clean up the neighborhood.

lifehacking

Drinking Coffee in the Shower

Your responses to the quest for the perfect morning routine.

By Michael Agger

Friday, December 5, 2008, at 11:57 AM ET

The responses to my first Lifehacking column, "[Quest for the Perfect Morning Routine](#)," turned up a gem. Mason Currey—writer, editor, [caffeinated snack expert](#)—maintains a blog called "[Daily Routines](#)," where he compiles "how writers, artists, and other interesting people organize their days." Mothers who write will sympathize with [Alice Munro](#):

As a young author taking care of three small children, Munro learned to write in the slivers of time she had, churning out stories during children's nap times, in between feedings, as dinners baked in the oven. It took her nearly twenty years to put together the stories for her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, published in 1968 when Munro was thirty-seven.—[The Atlantic](#), Dec. 14, 2001

[Immanuel Kant](#) relied on a servant to kick-start him:

His daily schedule then looked something like this. He got up at 5:00 A.M. His servant Martin Lampe, who worked for him from at least 1762 until 1802, would wake him. The old soldier was under orders to be persistent, so that Kant would not sleep longer. Kant was proud that he never got up even half an hour late, even though he found it hard to get up early. It appears that during his early years, he did sleep in at times. After getting up, Kant would drink one or two cups of tea—weak tea.

With that, he smoked a pipe of tobacco. The time he needed for smoking it "was devoted to meditation."—Manfred Kuehn, [Kant: A Biography](#)

I will stop quoting from Mason's gleanings and urge you to visit [his site](#). Don't miss the [P.G. Wodehouse entry](#).

Many of you kindly noted that *Slate* was part of your morning routine, though mostly in the service of avoiding so-called real work. The motive force that trumped all others—that woke the dead—was the bagel. Without the promise of this breakfast staple, half the world would go missing. The women of [Jezebel](#) took the occasion to [reveal their difficulties](#) in the shower/coffee-making department, but that kind of fits with their punk-recluse style. They should try the lifehack of one reader who advises drinking coffee *in the shower*.

Cats were another big theme. Our feline friends help us get out of bed with a considered choice of sitting location, but after that service has been rendered, they can require a lot of work. One reader must sing a song to her cat—"He's a Bad Cat," to the tune of "Our House" by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young—every morning while getting the paper.

The recent economic collapse has left some readers with a longer morning than they would ideally prefer. Under normal circumstances, greeting the sun with the Lifetime morning lineup of *Golden Girls* and *Frasier* might not be such a bad thing. But a few of you discovered that situation comedy of excellent vintage can dull the day when viewed day after day after day.

Take heart, then, that a morning routine takes a lifetime to perfect. The most humane and finely tuned routines came from old folks. I will leave you with the beautiful routine of a reader's 87-year-old grandmother:

Rising at a leisurely 8 or 9, she puts on her dressing gown and pads into the kitchen. Sets to brew her little 2 cup Krups and gets a grapefruit out of the fridge. Puts half a muffin in the oven to warm and goes and gets the paper from the driveway. Sets up the paper on the wooden paper racks made by her now deceased husband and brings her half a grapefruit with her half a banana to the table with her always black coffee. Begins perusing the headlines and at some point remembers the half a muffin or scone or cinnamon roll in the oven. Half a grapefruit, half a banana, half a muffin, half a pot of coffee. One-side of a conversation. Evidence of over 50 years of shared life with someone.

moneybox

The Detroit Delusion

The enormous gap between the Big Three's self-image and reality.

By Daniel Gross

Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 6:11 PM ET

Here we go again. The CEOs of General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler are headed back to Washington to ask for congressional help. But this time, they're driving instead of flying their corporate jets. And this time, they've submitted [detailed business plans](#) describing how they would use some \$34 billion in taxpayer loans to tide them over for the next few years. Ford CEO Alan Mulally has made a [video](#).

The substantive plans and down-to-earth-travel will be hailed as signs that the industry has recognized reality. But an air of fantasy hovers over this whole discussion. All these efforts—especially in the cases of GM and Chrysler—are geared toward avoiding Chapter 11 filings. As the plans note (here's [Chrysler's](#) and here's [GM's](#)), there's good reason for automakers to want to avoid bankruptcy filings. A filing would have lots of immediate negative effects on suppliers and dealers. And bankruptcy court isn't the best place to iron out the grand bargain among management, labor, suppliers, government, and creditors to shrink the industry.

But it almost doesn't matter whether the Big Three file for Chapter 11 protection. To a large degree, the markets are treating the auto companies as if they're already in bankruptcy.

In a typical bankruptcy, stock is wiped out, and creditors—bondholders, employees, suppliers—wind up getting a fraction of what they're owed over time. Chrysler, which is majority-owned by the private-equity firm Cerberus, doesn't have a market value per se. But as has been [reported](#), Daimler, which owns about 20 percent of Chrysler, earlier this fall "reduced the carrying amount of its equity investment in Chrysler at September 30, 2008 to zero." Translation: The German automaker doesn't think its share in the automaker is worth much. Ford has a [market capitalization of nearly \\$7 billion](#), and GM has a [market capitalization of about \\$3 billion](#). But in GM's case, given the amount of cash it has on hand and the size of its assets, \$3 billion is effectively zero, too.

Bondholders, too, are treating the Big Three as dead firms walking. Bondholders of the Big Three are highly, highly dubious. GM's [bonds](#) that mature in 2011 trade at a highly distressed 29 cents on the dollar. Buy today, and you get an annual yield of 87 percent if you (and the company) hold on for

25 months. This [bond](#) issued by Ford Motor Credit, which matures in about a year, is trading at 46 cents on the dollar.

Who can blame bond investors for being so glum? In their proposals, Ford and GM reinforce the sense that debt holders should not expect to get paid in full—even with a bailout. Should it get the help, GM pledges it will pay suppliers in full but that it "plans to engage current lenders, bond holders and its unions to negotiate the needed changes." In other words, creditors of all kinds will have to take a big haircut, much as they do in bankruptcy proceedings. For its part, Chrysler notes that it has run through about \$6.9 billion in cash in the second half of 2008 and is down to its last \$2.5 billion. The company said it needs a "\$7 billion secured working capital bridge loan by December 31, 2008" in order to make it through the first quarter of 2009. Without it, who knows?

Yet while GM and Chrysler appear to exhibit many of the symptoms of bankrupt companies—miniscule stock values, distressed bonds, explicit statements that creditors won't be paid in full, and an admission that they're running out of cash—many of those in and around the Big Three act as if the industry has suffered mere flesh wounds. The CEOs of Ford and GM have said they'd be willing to accept \$1 salaries in exchange for the bailout. (Chrysler's CEO, Robert Nardelli, who made a pile while running Home Depot, is already a dollar-a-year man.) I'm curious as to what they think their salaries might be six months hence should the companies be forced into Chapter 11. And it's tough to imagine any scenario whereby a bankrupt GM, under the control of its creditors, would retain CEO Rick Wagoner.

The United Auto Workers union is also slowly coming to grips with the fact that its historic role as the guarantor of high wages, pensions, and benefits is likely a thing of the past. UAW President Ron Gettelfinger [said](#) Wednesday the union might be open to renegotiating contracts and forgoing contributions to its health care trust and, as the Associated Press reported, "that the union will suspend the jobs bank, in which laid-off workers are paid up to 95 percent of their salaries while not working, but he did not give specifics or a timetable of when the program will end." Um, how about yesterday? It's one thing for a union to ask management to pay for no-work jobs. It's quite another for a union to ask taxpayers to pay for them. Asking for federal help without loudly killing the jobs bank immediately is about as tone-deaf as asking for a bailout after having alit from a corporate jet.

The sad fact is that the U.S. auto industry has essentially failed. Even if car sales come roaring back from their current anemic pace next year, there's no guarantee the Big Three will return to health, that they'll be able to stay current on debt payments and raise capital from tough-minded investors. The executives and union leaders speak as if the bailout money is simply needed to tide them over until the sun comes back out. Exuding and instilling such confidence is a big part of their jobs. But

increasingly, it seems that the federal funding they're requesting is necessary to help manage failure, not to stave it off.

moneybox

Who's the World's Worst Banker?

I would nominate this guy. Who would you pick?

By Daniel Gross

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 6:27 PM ET

In the past couple of years, the entire global lending industry has covered itself in shame. Virtually every banker was suckered by the credit and housing bubble. But who made the sorriest choices? Who forced shareholders and the public to bear the highest financial cost? Who, in short, is the Worst Banker in the World?

There's no dearth of candidates. Richard Fuld of Lehman Bros. and James Cayne of Bear Stearns presided over the remarkably disruptive failures of their respective firms. But Bear and Lehman weren't banks, properly speaking: They were hedge funds lashed to investment banks. And their demises didn't require much of a public bailout. The failures of AIG, Fannie Mae, and Freddie Mac necessitated massive bailouts, but they weren't exactly banks, either. Iceland's bankers have effectively brought their entire country to ruin. But since Iceland's population is a mere 300,000, they're off the hook. In an interview Monday, Nobel laureate Paul Krugman nominated the gang that ran Citigroup into the ground. But Citi was so big it took three CEOs—Sandy Weill, Chuck Prince, and Vikram Pandit—to bring it to the brink of disaster.

No, my nominee is someone whose name may not be familiar to American audiences. He's Fred Goodwin, who until October served as CEO of the Royal Bank of Scotland. Goodwin (here's the Wikipedia [entry](#) about him) took the helm of RBS in 2000 and proceeded to turn it into an international powerhouse. Known as "Fred the Shred" for his willingness to cut costs—and jobs—he emerged as Britain's leading banker. He was even [knighted in 2004](#) for services to banking. But the bank, which this summer was Britain's largest, is now neither Royal nor Scottish nor much of a bank. RBS's slogan is "Make it happen." A review of the record shows that Goodwin indeed made it happen. He aced every requirement for a hubristic CEO.

Let's review the record.

Carrying off mergers and acquisitions and calling them growth?

Yes. After buying British bank Natwest for about 26.4 billion pounds in 2000, Goodwin used RBS's cash and high-flying stock as a currency for more deals. Among the biggest was the \$10.3

billion purchase of Charter One Financial, a Cleveland-based bank, in 2004, thus expanding the bank's footprint in the Rust Belt.

Ill-advised, history-making, massive merger precisely at the top? Yep. In November 2007, RBS and its partners, Fortis and Banco Santander, completed their acquisition of Dutch bank ABN Amro. As proud adviser Merrill Lynch [noted](#), the \$101 billion deal was "the world's largest bank takeover and one of the most complex M&A transactions ever." And it closed almost precisely when the air started to come out of the global lending bubble.

Massive commitment of capital to investment banking, trading in funky securities, and poor credit controls? Yes, yes, and yes. As this excellent Bloomberg [postmortem](#) notes, by June 2008, RBS had become Europe's largest lender. "Under Goodwin's tutelage, RBS also became Europe's biggest backer of leveraged buyouts," reporter Simon Clark notes. Goodwin also jacked up the bank's trading, "boosting derivatives assets 44 percent to 483 billion pounds in the first half of 2008," which was greater than the bank's net deposits. "Meanwhile, its reserves of Tier 1 capital, a measure of financial strength and the vital reserve set aside to cover losses, was the lowest among its U.K. rivals at the start of 2008." In other words, Goodwin designed a house that would teeter when the slightest ill wind began to blow.

Building an expensive, self-indulgent new headquarters building just in time for the collapse? Right-o. In 2006, RBS started construction on a [huge new headquarters](#) in Stamford, Conn., which would house its expanding U.S. investment banking and trading operations. The centerpiece of the 12-story, [\\$500 million](#) building is one of the largest trading floors in the world. It should be ready for occupancy (or, given recent job cuts, partial occupancy) next year.

Telling shareholders you don't need more capital, and then raising it—and then having that capital lose value rapidly? Yep. In February 2008, Goodwin said, "There are no plans for any inorganic capital raisings or anything of the sort." But in June, RBS [sold](#) 12.3 billion pounds (about \$20 billion) in shares at 200 pence per share, which was a significant discount to the then-market price. By October, as [this chart shows](#), the stock was slumping.

And finally: Dump problems on fellow citizens by messing things up so badly the bank has to be nationalized? Bingo. With the stock continuing to slip, RBS staged another rights offering, giving brutalized shareholders an opportunity to add to their sharply discounted holdings at a sharp discount—in this case at 65.5 pence per share. But shareholders passed, and the government last Friday had to step in as buyer of last resort, ponying up 20 billion pounds and assuming an ownership stake of about 60 percent. (The *Guardian* [tells](#) the grim tale.)

The result? RBS's stock (here's a [two-year chart](#)) has lost 91 percent of its value since March 2007 and retains value thanks only to massive government intervention. A job well-done, Sir Fred!

Disagree with our conclusion? Send your nominations and supporting arguments for Worst Banker in the World to moneybox@slate.com.

movies

Cadillac Records

Great music, great acting, and a new way to look at biopics.

By Dana Stevens

Friday, December 5, 2008, at 12:40 PM ET

Watching the scrappy, passionate *Cadillac Records* (Sony) only a week after the wondrous *Milk*, I found myself musing: What if we tried to be kinder to the biopic? It's a genre that takes so much flak for being literal-minded, stodgy, and predictable. Yet in recent years, movies based on the real lives of public figures have also provided a place for superb work by actors (and sometimes directors as well). What if we regarded biopics in the same way we do jazz standards: a familiar, generic framework that each artist makes his or her own through improvisation? After all, no one asks why Ella Fitzgerald is singing that corny old "How High the Moon" again. We listen to what she does with the song.

Cadillac Records is a good place to start with this rethinking of the biopic, since it's all about what one group of seminal black American musicians did with popular song. The film isn't so much about the biography of any one person as it is about the life of a record label: Chess Records, the Chicago blues label owned by Polish immigrant Leonard Chess (Adrien Brody), that launched the careers of Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, Etta James, and other great "crossover" artists from the postwar years when blues begat rhythm and blues, which begat rock 'n' roll.

Chess runs a nightclub on Chicago's South Side, but after hearing the electrified Delta blues of Muddy Waters (Jeffrey Wright), a transplanted Mississippi sharecropper, he decides to devote himself to recording and distributing "race records." Chess is a complicated, at times unethical boss: He loves his musicians dearly but also fosters an unhealthy paternalism by distributing favors and Cadillacs in place of royalties, and he's not above tossing around payola to get his recordings on the air. Muddy soon becomes a hot blues singer with a sky-high pompadour, a pink guitar, and all the women he wants—which, it seems, is quite a few.

Cadillac Records isn't exactly big enough to be called sprawling, but as the subplots multiply, it does feel scattered. Muddy's protégé, the needy and volatile harmonica player Little Walter (Columbus Short), is in love with Muddy's loyal wife, Geneva (Gabrielle Union). Muddy also has a musical nemesis, Howlin' Wolf (Eamonn Walker), a giant, bass-voiced bluesman who loves to needle him about his financial dependence on Chess. And then, out of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, in walks Etta James (Beyoncé Knowles), a smack-addicted blues singer who claims to be the illegitimate child of pool player Minnesota Fats and who wastes no time in getting under Leonard Chess' skin.

One of the strengths of *Cadillac Records*, written and directed by Darnell Martin, is that it's a movie about music by someone who genuinely seems to enjoy listening to music. We see many performances in their entirety, most notably those by the two real-life musicians in the cast, Mos Def and Beyoncé Knowles. Mos Def is devilishly charming as Chuck Berry. His loose-limbed, physically antic performance captures the boyish, dirty-minded energy of early rock 'n' roll, and his snide appraisal of "Surfin' USA" (a note-for-note rip-off of his own "Sweet Little Sixteen," for which Berry sued the Beach Boys and won) is worth more than a hundred solemn disquisitions on the white appropriation of black music.

As for Beyoncé—oh my goodness. She hasn't yet understood what it is to be an ensemble actor; she always seems to be revolving by herself on a dais. But what a resplendent dais it is. Here, as in *Dreamgirls*, Beyoncé's conscious display of vocal virtuosity becomes a part of the character she's playing. Every one of Etta's songs is delivered with the subtext, "Watch me while I nail this song." And as calculated as her display of vulnerability may be, damned if we can stop watching. Jeffrey Wright is just the opposite: an actor so generous to his fellow castmates that even when, as here, he's the best thing in the movie, he still blends seamlessly into the story. These radically different acting styles—the quiet craftsman and the tempestuous diva—might seem to belong in two separate movies. But if you go back to the biopic-as-jazz-standard model I mentioned above, you could think of them as two soloists—[Billie Holiday and Coleman Hawkins](#), say—each doing their own thing with the song.

movies

Battle of the Foreheads

Frost/Nixon reviewed.

By Dana Stevens

Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 6:56 PM ET

Frost/Nixon (Universal), Ron Howard's adaptation of Peter

Morgan's play about the historic 1977 television interviews between the glib British journalist and the disgraced ex-president, might have punched up its box-office appeal by renaming itself *Frost vs. Nixon*. Taking its cues from *Rocky* rather than *All the President's Men*, Morgan's compact, satisfying drama presents presidential interviewing as a gladiatorial event. Howard's camera looks on with almost unseemly intimacy as these two intelligent, neurotic, thoroughly self-obsessed men duck, feint, and jab at each other in an attempt, respectively, to get at the truth and to tell as little of it as possible.

Nixon sat with Frost for a total of 28 hours of interviews, but as per their contractual agreement, it was only in the last two days that they approached the heart of the matter: the Watergate burglary and the ensuing cover-up. (This portion of the real Nixon/Frost interviews has just been [released on DVD](#).) Frost's background as a lightweight celebrity journalist in the United Kingdom, along with his decidedly un-American proposal to pay Nixon for an interview, left the former president and his handlers convinced that this was a reputation-saving puff piece in the making. Instead, after letting Nixon hedge and pontificate his way through the first few interviews, Frost nailed him to the wall on Watergate, eliciting the closest thing Nixon would ever make to a confession of wrongdoing—not to mention the more chilling moment in which the former president made the now-famous assertion, "When the president does it, that means it's not illegal."

Frost/Nixon tells the story not only of this journalistic rumble in the jungle, but of the months of power-jockeying, fund-raising, and test prep that went into it. Peter Morgan, who wrote *The Queen* and *The Last King of Scotland* as well as the British TV drama *The Deal*, has made a specialty out of imagining what powerful political figures (Queen Elizabeth, Tony Blair, Idi Amin) are like behind closed doors, and while his plots tend to be heavy on symbolism (that slaughtered stag in *The Queen* came in awfully handy), his dialogue shows a keen political intelligence.

Really, though, *Frost/Nixon*'s best reason for existence is to preserve the two acting showcases at its center. Frank Langella re-creates his Tony Award-winning role as Nixon. It's a strange beast of a performance: Langella, a solid, lumbering man, doesn't especially resemble the rodentlike Nixon, nor does he impersonate that famous voice with Rich Little-esque accuracy. But Langella feels his way into the black hole of Nixon's inner life so fearlessly that you worry for the actor's sanity. His Nixon is less a shrew than a wounded bear, pitiable and yet formidable. Michael Sheen, who also originated his role onstage, gives a less showy but equally fine performance as the ambitious, insecure, compulsively charming David Frost. He manages to show how overmatched Frost was in those early interviews (when sinking down in his chair as Langella dominates him, Sheen looks like

Dan Quayle in the 1988 debates) while making his ninth-inning rally seem both plausible and exhilarating.

To prep him on the details of Nixon's life and career, Frost hires a research team: political journalist Bob Zelnick (Oliver Platt) and Nixon-obsessed author James Reston (Sam Rockwell). This Laurel and Hardy-like pair watches from the sidelines as Frost screws up repeatedly during the taping, too self-satisfied to learn from his mistakes but careerist enough to realize that he's sinking fast. The scene in which Frost finally buckles down and dedicates himself to the preparation process is thrilling if, like me, you're a sucker for a good riffling-through-the-archives montage. (*All the President's Men* and *Shattered Glass* both had great ones.)

Frost/Nixon's emotional climax is, in my view, the script's weakest moment. On the eve of those last two crucial interviews, Nixon makes a drunken late-night phone call to Frost in his hotel room and feeds him the oldest line in the serial-killer-vs.-cop playbook: Deep down, you and me, we're the same. Langella makes the most of this booze-sodden monologue, but its central premise—that Nixon and Frost shared an insecurity about social class that fueled their drive to succeed—seems more British than American: Wasn't Nixon's persecution complex far too vast to be reduced to class anxiety? If our 37th president has proved such an enduring subject for on-screen fictions (see Mark Feeney's 2004 book, *Nixon at the Movies*), it's precisely because we can never finally fathom his bottomless pathologies. If we did, we wouldn't have Nixon to kick around anymore.

music box

What's an 808?

A drum machine's journey from obscurity to ubiquity.

By Chris Richards

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 12:10 PM ET

The title of Kanye West's stark new album, *808s & Heartbreak*, doesn't mark the rapper's foray into numerology. The title refers to the Roland TR-808, a drum machine whose indelible thump has bullied its way into nearly every chapter of hip-hop history.

If you've stopped at a nightclub or a traffic light in the past 20 years, you know the 808. Its unmistakable kick drum comes pummeling out of club speakers and car stereos with a distinct, low-frequency boom that rattles the kidneys as much as the eardrums. After a 28-year journey through the subterranea of electro, techno, and regional hip-hop, the 808 has achieved an influential presence in today's popscape—almost by accident.

The TR-808 was never intended for life in the spotlight or even a place on professional recordings. Roland introduced the machine in 1980 as a behind-the-scenes tool for rock musicians who wanted to record inexpensive demos when a living, breathing drummer wasn't on hand. Users could create a beat by tap-tap-tapping on the machine's trigger pads or by programming their own sequenced drum patterns.

The 808 was easy to use, but the percussive sounds that came spurting out of the machine felt artificial and bizarre. The snare drum was a harsh slap. The high-hat was a synthetic swoosh. The kick drum was a blunt, unforgiving thud that didn't come close to resembling the sound of an actual drum. Unlike competing models that used digital sampling to replicate the timbre of acoustic drums, the 808 was unconcerned with approximating real life, instead offering an otherworldly vocabulary of tones that most pop musicians deemed unusable.

As a result, the 808 was a commercial flop. Its main rival, the Linn LM-1, was the first drum machine to utilize digital sampling, offering a sound so crisp that session drummers began fretting over their imminent obsolescence. And perhaps with good reason—the machine soon began showing up on pop tunes. It was the ideal beat machine for a sexy young control freak like Prince, who the LM-1 on his 1981 album [Controversy](#).

But the LM-1 wasn't cheap—it retailed for about \$5,000. The 808, by contrast, sold for just \$1,000, putting it within reach of an emerging DJ from the South Bronx who was planning a trip to deep space on a limited budget. His name was Afrika Bambaataa, and his 1982 masterstroke "Planet Rock" is widely believed to be the first hip-hop single to .

The song would become hip-hop's sonic Magna Carta. Bambaataa pushed the 808's resonant kicks to the fore and put a premium on the speaker-rattling bass frequencies that would eventually become a fixture in all strands of hip-hop.

Soon enough, the 808 could be heard rumbling beneath the raps of Run-DMC, LL Cool J, and the Beastie Boys. The drum machine even appeared on a couple of mainstream pop hits, including Marvin Gaye's "[Sexual Healing](#)" and Phil Collins' "[One More Night](#)." But most pop acts continued to ignore it. Linn extended its dominance with the LinnDrum, the successor to the M-1, while Oberheim's DMX, a model that also used digital sampling, surged in popularity with Madonna's "Holiday" and Herbie Hancock's "Rockit." New Order's "Blue Monday" shows how the DMX's kick .

808s started collecting dust. Roland took it out of production in 1984, banishing the 808 to pawn shop purgatory. Though hip-hop would continue to rely on the machine for beats throughout the '80s, its influence was otherwise limited to the regional fringes of pop music.

In 1983, a young Detroit producer named Juan Atkins recorded the visionary jam "Clear" with his group Cybotron, a tune that would and make it a tool of the trade for fellow techno pioneers Kevin Saunderson and Derrick May.

Meanwhile, producers in South Florida got their hands on the 808 just in time for hip-hop's puberty, creating the über-lewd, über-loud woofer-spasms of Miami bass. The 808 kick became an essential component of MC A.D.E.'s "[Bass Rock Express](#)" and 2 Live Crew's 1986 anthem "Throw the D," whose kicks take on an .

This was music designed for club systems and car speakers, where underground hip-hop would flourish across the South during the 1990s. Even on subpar car systems, the 808's unmistakable boom could be heard blocks away, making it a remarkably effective publicist.

Throughout the late '80s and deep into the '90s, New York maintained its hold as hip-hop's power center. Numerous producers fell under the spell of sampling and swarmed around the E-mu SP-1200, a machine capable of both processing samples and programming beats. But down South, the 808 maintained a foothold. "All the rap records we grew up on back in the day was all 808 kits," crunk architect Lil Jon [told](#) *Remix* magazine in 2005. "In the South, we ain't never really let that shit go."

The 21st century found Southern rap moving from the margins to the mainstream, and the 808 began to enjoy new pop cachet. It figured prominently in the beat (and sometimes even in the lyrics) of OutKast's 2003 chart-topper "[The Way You Move](#)," Beyoncé's "[Deja Vu](#)," numerous riotous crunk singles, and like "Tell Me When To Go" by Oakland rapper E-40.

All of a sudden, the 808 sound was in demand. Various so-called clone units have tried to replicate the 808's circuitry at a cheaper price, while sample libraries have proliferated on the Web, putting the 808 sound in the hands of home-studio producers and bedroom beatsmiths the world over. (Most producers will tell you, however, that the 808's superpowers are compromised unless taken directly from the source.)

Today the 808 stands as hip-hop's answer to rock's [Stratocaster](#)—an iconic instrument that's changed the way we hear music. And while no one's burned one to a crisp onstage, its praises have been sung in the lyrics of Lil Wayne, Kelis, T.I.—even Britney Spears. ("You got my heart beating like an 808," she cooed on 2007's "Break the Ice.")

West, however, pays more than just lip service to his beat box of choice—his new album is full of thick, resonant 808 brawn. In a recent [MTV interview](#), one of the album's producers, Mike Dean, said West wanted to move away from "typical hip-hop

beats"—as if employing hip-hop's most venerated rhythm machine were some kind of risk.

Then again, despite the role the machine has played throughout hip-hop history, the 808 has never lost its outsider's mystique. And West, to his credit, manages to make the machine's artificial throb .

The chorus is particularly striking, not for West's gooeey, auto-tuned refrain, but for the sound of two hands (presumably Kanye's) clapping slightly out of sync with 808 tremors below. Somehow, it's the clapping hands that feel unnatural, not the track's familiar electronic pulse. Having adopted the 808's heartbeat as our own, it's hard to tell what sounds fake and what sounds real.

music box

Kanye West Throws a Pity Party

Is *808s and Heartbreak* his most vulnerable album or his most arrogant?

By Jonah Weiner

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 12:10 PM ET

What is it about Kanye West's self-love that annoys people so deeply? No other rapper is taken to task as frequently and as fervently for crimes of the ego. Even West's fans, on message boards and in comments sections, often separate his work, which they adore, from his self-regard, which they tolerate with varying degrees of amusement and irritation. This is hard to figure. Complaining about a rapper's outsized ego is a bit like complaining about a professional bicyclist's outsized calves or a clown's outsized pants: They're part of the job description.

Part of the answer lies, it seems, in one of West's most human-scale traits: the way he'll undercut his arrogance with evidence of the self-doubts gnawing beneath. When Lil' Wayne calls himself the best rapper alive or T.I. anoints himself, simply, *king*, they are imperious about it. When West argues for his greatness, he often does so with a needy whine: ranting [onstage](#) and [off](#) at awards shows about perceived snubs; using his blog to [attack](#) an *Entertainment Weekly* reviewer who gave West's recent tour a mere B+ rating. Other times, in his songs, he'll spike brags about his wealth with lyrics that [reveal](#) the feelings of inadequacy driving his materialism, or toast his commercial success while acknowledging the pangs of artistic [guilt](#) that have accompanied it. These gestures make West's art more complex but expose something unattractive about him, too, so that, in his bigheaded moments, we can't help but see the little man trembling behind the curtain.

West wrote his new album, *808s and Heartbreak*, in the wake of two severe emotional upheavals—the November 2007 death of his mother, Donda, and the bitter flameout of his six-year relationship with onetime fiancée Alexis Phifer. Unsurprisingly, the album is bleak. Throughout, West jettisons rapping and, with it, goofy wisecracks for drastically [Auto-Tuned](#) singing; whereas R&B star T-Pain has used the same software to create a sense of rippling, otherworldly pleasure in his vocals, West moans like the dying host of some digital parasite. The chill extends to the music itself. The album's backbone is the cold thud-and-snap of the [TR-808 drum machine](#); gone are the jubilant soul samples and bubbly conga beats that West has made his production signature.

On the surface, this stripped-down, haunted album promises a paean to vulnerability—in other words, all self-doubt, no arrogance. Ironically, though, *808s and Heartbreak* is the least vulnerable thing West has released. It's a spiteful breakup album in which he plays the mostly blameless victim, a nasty feast of wound-licking and backbiting, and a claustrophobic pity party that brooks hardly any self-reflection.

In interviews leading up to the album's release, West said that "heartbreak" was his nickname for the Auto-Tuned burbles, cracks, and splinters in his voice—*808s and Heartbreak* refers, respectively, to the beats and the bleats. Indeed, it often seems as if West thought making a moving album would be as simple as flipping a "sad" switch. On past songs such as "Drive Slow," "Gone," and "Roses," West proved he was capable of wringing emotional truths from concise vignettes, telling details, and knotty wordplay. Here, as a narrator of pain and spite, he's frequently imprecise, banal, and unevocative: "Life's just not fair"; "I don't love you no more"; "Will I ever love again?" The lyrics can suggest an emo kid scribbling grievances in third-period English class.

The cumulative effect of West's warbled gripes is deadening. Perhaps the biggest problem is that he doesn't make for a very sympathetic protagonist here nor a compellingly *unsympathetic* one. He's consumed by revenge—it turns out his ex-girlfriend, not his mother, is the album's real muse—and he comes off throughout the LP like a self-dramatizing brat. "The coldest story ever told ... He lost his soul to a woman so heartless," he sings on "Heartless." In his earlier work, West played a conflicted womanizer—now, he's a wild-eyed demonizer. On "Robocop" and "Paranoid," he describes his ex as a mentally unstable control freak with the nerve to ask where West goes at night and—when that doesn't work—to check his cell phone for clues. "Why are you so paranoid?" he needles with a mean little chuckle, as though he isn't the one complaining about being watched.

This is a nasty streak that West first revealed in two of three videos he shot for "Flashing Lights," a single from his last album—and, not coincidentally, a song about getting caught

cheating. The [first](#) video is a slow striptease with a gruesome climax: A voluptuous femme fatale undresses to her lingerie, struts over to a red sports car, opens the trunk to reveal a bound and gagged West, and plunges a shovel into him six times. In the [second](#) video, the violence flips around. We follow a day in the life of a pampered, beautiful party girl who worships at the altar of "shoes and cars." She wakes up at 2:30 p.m. in a fancy loft, enjoys a mimosa, gets to the hard work of choosing an outfit, heads out, gets embarrassingly drunk, and—it's strongly suggested—is sexually assaulted in a dark alley. There's a sense that the attack is the penalty for the girl's flighty, sheltered narcissism—the Stanley-Blanche rape scene from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, reimagined by a fuming frat boy. Much of *808s and Heartbreak* seems to operate according to similarly queasy ethics.

There are moments when we see the triumph this album could have been. Whenever West's singing revs up to near-rap speeds, the album gains a much-needed dynamism, and his production is frequently marvelous—it's impressive how well he pulls off his chilly electro makeover. On "Amazing," a click-clacking beat interlocks tensely with a lurching piano figure; on the hushed "Street Lights," the central motif is a distorted synthesizer that suggests a weeping robot mosquito. There are occasional flashes of West's old self-examination: "My friend showed me pictures of his kids," he announces on "Welcome to Heartbreak," "and all I could show him was pictures of my cribs." The slang word for home—*crib*—rubs poignantly against West's lamented childlessness. It's a classic Kanye-ism, a brag that twists elegantly into its opposite. And there are flashes of his old charms, too: "How could you be so Dr. Evil?" he asks his lover after some unnamed betrayal. It's one of the few moments when he lets a breeze blow. Then it's back to the torture chamber.

my goodness

My Goodness

Introducing an advice column by Patty and Sandy Stonesifer about how to make the world better.

By Sandy Stonesifer

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 2:40 PM ET

I spent my final semester of college panicked. I was worried that I wouldn't be able to reconcile my hope to do good in the world with my desire to eat something other than ramen. I've since realized that I'm not alone: Most of us—and not just the recent college grads—struggle to find ways to help others without ruining our own lives. Given my student loans, can I really afford to work for that African aid group? Should I take a high-paying job and make larger charitable donations? Or earn less and volunteer my time? Will joining a group on Facebook actually change anything in Darfur? Should I give money to NPR because I listen to it while I get ready for work, or make

my charitable giving decisions based on the world's biggest needs? Each of these problems requires us to balance our nobler desires with the day-to-day realities of our lives.

Whenever I grapple with questions like these, I always end up turning to my mom—Patty Stonesifer, former CEO of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Sometimes I take her advice, and sometimes I don't, but I always value her opinion. With decreasing time and money to give, increasing world need, and a lack of licensed philanthropy counselors, we thought *Slate* readers might find my mom helpful, too. We've been talking about these issues around the kitchen table for years, and this January we're moving that conversation to *Slate*. We'll be co-writing "My Goodness," a weekly advice column where we'll answer reader questions about how to do good in the world—or, at least, how to try to do better.

We need your help to get started. Can you please send your real-life do-gooding dilemmas? What are your hopes, your constraints, your motivations? Be sure you tell us in as much detail as you can. Send it all to ask.my.goodness@gmail.com and check back in the new year for our answers.

In our ongoing effort to do better ourselves, we're donating 25 percent of the proceeds from this column to ONE.org—an organization committed to raising public awareness about the issues of global poverty, hunger, and disease and the efforts to fight such problems in the world's poorest countries.

other magazines

Vanity Fey

Maureen Dowd on Tina Fey's rise.

By Kara Hodge

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 12:48 PM ET

Vanity Fair, January 2009

Maureen Dowd pens the [cover story](#) on Tina Fey, who "started as a writer and performer with a bad short haircut in Chicago improv" before "catapulting ... into red-hot territory" with the creation of her NBC series *30 Rock* and her uncanny impersonations of Sarah Palin. Fey, who "is a rules girl" with "a German work ethic," spills on her high school years and her marriage, which is "borderline boring—in a good way." She also reveals that a scar on her cheek was "the result of a violent cutting attack by a stranger when Fey was five." ... A [feature](#) unveils a mother's undercover efforts to overturn her son's murder conviction. After the trial, Doreen Giuliano struck up a relationship with one of the jurors to see if she could catch him saying something incriminating on tape; "based on the evidence

secretly gathered by his mother ... [Giuliano's son] may very well be entitled to a new trial."

Newsweek, Dec. 8

In the [cover story](#), Fareed Zakaria calls for a "grand strategy" from President-elect Barack Obama to realign U.S. foreign policy with the "ideals ... of the world's major powers." Facing "competition for resources like oil, food, commodities and water; climate change; continued terrorist threats; and demographic shifts," the United States should strive to stay on good terms with other nations, particularly the rising world powers in the East, Zakaria argues. Obama, already a "global symbol," has a unique but narrow opportunity to influence the emerging new world order. ... A [feature](#) explains "why even the very rich are cutting back on conspicuous consumption." The "luxury shame" that has led some of the wealthiest Americans to eschew showy spending is forcing high-end retailers to rebrand their merchandise to entice holiday shoppers. ... Another [article](#) refutes the pervasive but ill-fitting comparisons of Michelle Obama to former first lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

The New Yorker, Dec. 8

A [feature](#) follows a police commander in Pashmul, a dangerous region in southern Afghanistan inhabited by the Pashtun majority and policed by the Hazara ethnic minority under the guidance of NATO forces. "[D]eploying Hazaras in this region is a risky move," especially because the landscape of orchards and vineyards make Pashmul "ideal terrain for an insurgency." The Hazaras, though disciplined, "behaved more like a paramilitary group than like a professional police team" as they attempted a Taliban ambush. But they are more conscientious than their Pashtun predecessors in the police force. ... A [profile](#) of Naomi Klein dubs the journalist and activist "the most visible and influential figure on the American left." In her latest book, *The Shock Doctrine*, Klein, "the descendant of embittered ex-Communists," argues that capitalism is "harmful to everyone except the richest of the rich."

Weekly Standard, Dec. 8

A [feature](#) delves into Columbia University's plans for expansion into neighboring Manhattanville, a controversial project that could only be accomplished in "the through-the-looking-glass world of New York eminent domain law." The university wants to construct a \$7 billion development "of glittering glass high-rises." Columbia or public agencies own most of the property already, but to drive out the two remaining property owners, the state would need to invoke eminent domain on the university's behalf, citing "blighted" conditions in the area. Ironically, "Columbia is responsible for nearly all of the decrepitude in the Manhattanville neighborhood" but will most likely gain control of the private owners' "pristine" buildings. ... An [article](#) pinpoints the "watery version of the Cyclops' island home, a

place without law" off the Somali coast, where pirate attacks "have more than tripled—to 92—in the last year." The author argues for squelching piracy on the shore before terrorists join in the attacks.

New York, Dec. 8

The [cover story](#) finds Lehman Bros. CEO Richard Fuld with his head on the chopping block and wonders whether or not he deserves the blame for the company's demise. After Fuld's many years serving as "the face of the firm" while President Joe Gregory handled "day-to-day" issues, the board told Fuld to force Gregory out or cede his own position. As the company started going under, Gregory's successor, Herbert McDade, "was calling most of the shots," but now it's Fuld who "attends to details of the bankruptcy." ... A [feature](#) shows how a family of undocumented Mexican immigrants lives in the "so-called sanctuary city" of New York. In tough economic times, "they serve as handy scapegoats when anxiety runs high" and struggle "to keep quiet ... [in order] to stay to work another day."

poem

"Haydn Leaves London"

August 1795

By Rita Dove

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 8:18 AM ET

Click the arrow on the audio player to hear Rita Dove read this poem. You can also [download](#) the recording or [subscribe](#) to Slate's Poetry Podcast on iTunes.

I work too slowly for their appetites.
I am a plow horse, not a steed; and though
the plow horse cultivates the very grain that gilds
their substantial guts, they will thrill to any chase,
lay down a tidy fortune and their good name
on the odds of a new upstart darling.

The first trip, I took up Pleyel's unspoken dare
and promised a new piece every evening
for the length of the concert series.
Intrigue fuels the coldest ambitions;
the daily newspapers thickened
with judgments on the drummed-up duel
between the maestro and his student of yore.
What was I thinking? I am old enough to value,
now and then, an evening spent with starlight—
not one twittering fan or lacy dewlap obscuring
my sidelong glance—yet I came back

to these noisome vapors, this fog-scalded moon,
fat and smoking, in its lonely dominion.
The black Thames pushes on. I close my eyes
and feel it, a bass string plucked at intervals,
dragging our bilge out to the turgid sea—
a drone that thrums the blood, that agitates
for more and more. ...

Well, it is done.

I bore down for half a dozen occasions,
wrote a four-part canon to a faithful dog,
wheedled a few graceful tunes
from Salomon's orchestra, that bloated fraternity
of whines and whistles—and now I can return
to my drowsy Vienna, wreathed in green
and ever turning, turning just slowly enough
to keep the sun soft on her face.

politics

Bush's Holiday Movie

He should go see *Frost/Nixon* for a pick-me-up.

By John Dickerson

Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 6:56 PM ET

How alike are Richard Nixon and George Bush? This was the question debated at the screening of the movie *Frost/Nixon* in Washington this week. Director Ron Howard, historian Robert Dallek, and author James Reston, who was a researcher for Frost at the time he taped the debates, all thought the movie was very relevant to the present-day occupant of the Oval Office. Fox News' Chris Wallace [objected](#). During the question-and-answer period, he argued that Bush was not like Nixon because even if you accept the notion that they abused their power in similar ways, Bush did so to defend the country. Nixon was only trying to save his own skin.

This is a fascinating discussion and one worth pondering—but it's beside the point. Or, more accurately, it's beside the point of the film. *Nixon/Frost* is not really about Nixon's abuses of power. It's about a superstar interviewer and a tortured ex-president. If there's any message in this great movie for President Bush, it's that he should take comfort: Nixon was only slightly more unpopular at the end of his presidency as Bush is now, and yet in the movie he comes across as relatively sympathetic. Perhaps Bush can look forward to a similar upgrade from history. Or at least from Hollywood.

Nixon seems sympathetic because we see him in lonely, human moments. The sympathy comes from the power of the close-up, something one of the film's characters muses on in a different

context. James Reston, who is also a character in the film, tries to explain why the Frost interview was so powerful. He attributes much of it to the emotional resonance of the television close-up. When viewers in 1977 watched Nixon's face change as he talked about the absolute power of the presidency, it brought to life the madness that they had, until then, only read about.

In the film, the close-ups of Frank Langella's masterful acting take us inside the roiling hollow that was Nixon and makes him seem tragic, limited, constantly straining against himself. We watch him delude himself as he plots his return to the political spotlight. We see him reduced to retelling unmoving anecdotes to bored conventioners. He is a sad sack, so droopy and feckless that it's hard to believe he could have done much wrong.

In a pivotal scene, which turns out to be fictional, Nixon calls Frost late at night and launches into a rambling assault on those who have tried to keep him down his whole life. He imagines that Frost suffered the same abuse. His demons are almost visible as he speaks. It's not pretty, but it's more pathetic than anything else. His inferiority complex was so huge it could be sculpted on Mount Rushmore.

In another scene at the end of the movie, Nixon confides to Frost that he envies Frost's ability to interact with other people so easily. Maybe you should have been the politician, and I should have been the hard-nosed interviewer, Nixon suggests. The movie doesn't show us much of Nixon as an especially craven and manipulative liar. We only *hear* about the bad stuff he did. And James Reston—in the movie, at least—is certainly exercised by Nixon's crimes. But to use a writing cliché, it's too much telling and not enough showing.

The result is that a viewer's level of sympathy for Nixon can be leavened only by a viewer's sense of history. If you have a bright memory of Nixon's smallness of spirit, his cruelty to others, and his disregard for the Constitution, then the movie's portrayal probably won't change your view. But if you have a more forgiving sense of history or think Nixon's acts pale in comparison with Bush's, then the 37th president isn't going to seem so bad. Viewers under 40 may watch this crippled Nixon and, depending on their views of history and psychology, cut him some slack.

As luck or fate would have it, a host of new Nixon tapes were released this week, reminding us about the disgraced ex-president. Perhaps you should [listen](#) to [them](#) before watching the film. Without a seeing or hearing a dramatic moment of Nixon at the height of his madness, it's possible for viewers of *Frost/Nixon* to accept Nixon's claim in the interviews that if he made mistakes, they were of the "heart and not the head." And if that's a plausible defense for Nixon, some viewers may think that it could be one for Bush as well. (In fact, that is the argument Wallace was making for Bush.)

But even if you accept that Bush's heart was in the right place, it doesn't amount to a defense of Bush. It's still possible to conclude that he was so blinded or reckless that his acts were criminal. We don't begrudge the policeman who tries to protect us, but when he opens fire while driving at 100 miles per hour through suburban streets, his good intentions don't matter.

At any rate, trying too hard to see present-day relevance in *Nixon/Frost* obscures an otherwise good film. The acting is spectacular, and the tension makes it feel like a boxing movie. There are only a few clunky moments. (When the director cuts from the piano playing at Frost's birthday party to Nixon playing the piano, you may want to duck.)

As a reporter, I was squirming in my seat watching Nixon play out all the tricks politicians use to get through an interview. He pretended to misunderstand the question. He made up facts. He launched into discursive anecdotes. As Frost slumped in his chair, I was slumping right there with him. At times I wanted to throw him a lifeline.

And that, in the end, is this film's best lesson for the present day. It remains very difficult to get a president, or former president, to talk about wrongdoing. Whatever your view of Bush's motivations or culpability, we can all agree he hasn't talked much.

There are some signs that Bush is opening up a tiny bit. In [a recent interview](#) with Charlie Gibson, Bush said he regretted that the intelligence about Iraq had not been better. Though this was not an admission of his own culpability in acting on that intelligence, or ignoring intelligence that contradicted his war aims, it represents progress: There was a time when Bush was unable to discuss mistakes at all. Whether it's the kind of progress Nixon made—progress that eventually led to his admissions in the Frost interviews—is something we'll probably have to wait a few years to find out.

politics

Center-What?

Saying America is "center-right" isn't just wrong. It's meaningless.

By Christopher Beam

Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 5:35 PM ET

Since the election, conservatives have consoled themselves with the idea that Obama may have won, but America is still a "center-right nation." But the phrase is tossed around with little evidence—possibly because there is none. Even if there were evidence, the term is so muddled as to be meaningless.

Defenders of the center-right maxim usually cite the statistic that more Americans identify themselves as conservative (38 percent, according to the [most recent study by the Pew Research Center](#)) than liberal (21 percent) or moderate (36 percent). But that's just what people *think* they are. In practice, the labels aren't clear-cut. Many self-identified conservatives support social safety nets, for example, while many liberals support coastal drilling. Meanwhile, not everyone agrees on the definitions of *liberal* and *conservative*, so self-identification means little. It's not unlike *middle-class*. Since there's no clear definition, almost [everyone think they're middle-class](#).

"You can go down the list of social measures ... and come up with different kinds of characterizations," says Andrew Kohut of Pew Research. For example, most people say they oppose government intervention into private matters. But they support the idea of a social safety net, such as food stamps, which is nothing if not the government intervening to prevent or fix some individual problem. And they support such policies even if it means the government has to go into debt. This makes it ridiculously easy for partisans to cherry-pick data to support their favorite characterization.

Center-righters also cite recent presidential history: Just look at the streak of Republican presidents in the last 30 years, they say. Five of the last seven presidents have been Republican. And until Obama's victory, no Democrat had won more than 51 percent of the popular vote since Lyndon Johnson.

What this ignores, though, is that while Republicans have dominated the executive branch, Democrats dominated the House and Senate for all but six of the 40 years before the GOP takeover in 1994. You can also re-spin the "recent presidents" numbers. If you start counting in 1960 and count Barack Obama, then five of the last 10 candidates elected president are Democrats. Ta-da!

Another commonly cited piece of evidence is campaign strategy: Obama had to "tack to the center" and "court independents" in order to beat McCain. Without capitulating on FISA, embracing gun rights, and turning hawkish on Pakistan and Afghanistan, the center-righters argue, Obama would not have won. It's an odd argument, though, when the Republican nominee was also considered "moderate" (more on that later) and appears to have lost at least in part because on some crucial issues, he wasn't moderate enough—on health care, for example, McCain maintained a staunchly market-oriented approach.

At the same time, Obama did not tack right on the major issues. What he said about Iraq on Election Day was the same thing he said about Iraq when he announced his candidacy. His support for free trade with extra protections for labor and the environment didn't change, either. Of course, he left things purposefully vague so as to appeal to the broadest possible audience. But he was nowhere near "center-right." Yes, Obama

won by courting independents. But he didn't go to them so much as they came to him.

Another defense of the C.R.-bomb is to compare the United States with other countries, especially European ones. After all, we're more religious, our unions are weaker, and we tend to favor free markets over government control. But as Ramesh Ponnuru [points out](#) on *National Review's* The Corner, "If that's all it means to say 'center right' ... we could probably go through a long period of political domination by liberals and still qualify." Even if we are center-right by global standards, that has little bearing on whom we elect.

If anything, though, evidence suggests the country is heading leftward. Americans voted more Democratic in 2008 than in 2004, and more so in 2006 than in 2002. Plus, there's less stigma attached to the "liberal" label. Young people are [almost as likely](#) to identify themselves as liberal (27 percent) as they are conservative (30 percent), as opposed to middle-aged Americans, who are half as likely to (19 percent to 41 percent).

And most important, the proportion of Americans who favor government help for people who can't care for themselves has increased steadily in the last 12 years, from 57 percent in 1994 to 69 percent in 2007, according to a [2007 Pew survey](#). At the same time, conservatives have changed their views on any number of social issues. As Hoover Institution fellow Tod Lindberg [pointed out](#) recently in the *Washington Post*: "In 1980, having a teenage daughter who was pregnant out of wedlock would have ruled you out for the No. 2 spot on the Democratic ticket. This year, it turned out to be a humanizing addition to the conservative vice presidential nominee's résumé."

Still, let's forget all this and pretend that the evidence of America's center-rightness is rock-solid. We are a center-right nation. We are then left with the task of defining what that means.

The answer? It means nothing. What makes someone a righty or lefty? Self-identification is out—as we have seen, a self-styled liberal can hold conservative views and vice versa. Is it policy? That's not entirely clear, either. Foreign intervention is associated with neocons, but many conservatives favor restraint when it comes to invading other countries. Protectionism is pegged as liberal, but it's a conservative policy in the sense of *conserving* the existing order. School vouchers are considered conservative, but many liberals, including Obama, support them. It certainly isn't about party. Republicans no longer have a monopoly on fiscal restraint, and polls show that Americans [trust](#) Democrats more to handle the economy.

In other words, even if the country *were* center-right, it isn't necessarily good news for the GOP.

So why does the center-right meme persist? Good marketing, mostly. After the 1970s, *liberal* became something of a [slur](#), associated as it was with love-ins, bra-burning, and moral equivalence. Even people who supported big government avoided the word. At the same time, conservatism became equated with responsibility and economic growth. Even today, a full quarter of Democrats [identify themselves](#) as conservative, according to Pew. In other words, Americans call themselves conservative more because of the residual backlash against 1960s and '70s social upheaval than because of their real-world beliefs.

"Center-right" also survives because Bush is at least partly responsible for Obama's victory. Sure, many Americans undoubtedly voted for Obama because they like his plans for taxes or withdrawal from Iraq or health care. But others voted for him because he's a Democrat and Bush isn't.

Take the economy: Obama polled well not because he knew more about economics but because people [blamed Bush for the meltdown](#). Republicans can therefore chalk his victory up to the economy, without acknowledging the ideological shifts that might have helped Obama win even if the credit markets hadn't collapsed. Complicating things further are Bush's [spendthrift ways](#), which many conservatives have [watched with fury](#). If it's fiscal conservatism America wants, electing a Republican is no longer a sure fix.

Ironically, the fate of the center-right debate may depend on Obama. If more bailouts drive up the deficit as the country falls deeper into recession, Americans may sour on the idea of rescue liberalism. (Right now [more than half](#) support bailing out Detroit.) Same if Obama pulls out of Iraq and the country sinks back into chaos. Or if he devotes massive resources to reforming health care, only to have prices skyrocket and hospital lines snake around the block.

On the other hand, liberalism could become more popular if Obama succeeds. Just as the "conservative" label still benefits from Reagan's perceived success, the "liberal" label could benefit from a successful Obama administration. For now, the future of liberalism—as well as that of center-rightism—rests on Obama's shoulders.

politics

Change They Can Litigate

The fringe movement to keep Barack Obama from becoming president.

By David Weigel

Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 4:25 PM ET

If you want to stop Barack Obama from becoming president, there's still time. But you have to act *right now*. Go to [RallyCongress.com](#), and you can be the 126,000th-odd American to demand "proof of citizenship" from the president-elect. Follow the instructions at [WeMustBeHeard.com](#), and you can join a sit-in outside the Supreme Court of the United States, starting at 8 a.m. Friday, as the justices decide whether to consider a suit filed by a [professional poker player](#) that challenges the presidential eligibility of Obama, John McCain, and Socialist Workers candidate Roger Calero.

Can't make it to Washington, D.C.? Too bad—you missed your chance to FedEx a [letter to the justices for only \\$10](#), sponsored by the venerable right-wing site (and Chuck Norris [column outlet](#)) WorldNetDaily. "There is grave, widespread and rapidly growing concern throughout the American public," writes WND Editor Joseph Farah, "that this constitutional requirement is being overlooked and enforcement neglected by state and federal election authorities."

Widespread? Rapidly growing? Who are these people? They're engaging in a new American political tradition: the quadrennial early-winter attempt to overturn presidential results by any means necessary.

It started, as all election madness seemed to, in 2000. As soon as it became clear that Al Gore had won the popular vote but might lose Florida's electoral votes, [some liberal writers](#) and activists argued for a constitutional path to victory: convince three Electoral College voters pledged to George W. Bush to switch their votes to Gore. The challenges lasted past the December Electoral College vote and into the January 2001 certification ceremony before a joint session of Congress, [when members of the Congressional Black Caucus objected to the vote](#). They got nowhere because they needed a sponsor from the Senate to make it official. In 2005—after Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* made the 2001 protest famous—Sen. Barbara Boxer of California objected to the Ohio vote count, and the chambers divided for debate. Bush won anyway.

If you thought Barack Obama's clear rout over John McCain meant we'd be spared a third Electoral College melodrama—well, think again. This time, the argument is not over votes. It's over Obama's citizenship.

Thanks to the increased simplicity of online organizing and coverage in talk radio and fringe political Web sites, the citizenship crusaders have grown numerous enough to irritate people at every level of the presidential vote certification process. According to [the Christian Science Monitor](#), the people questioning Obama's citizenship are hitting electors as hard as the Gore activists ever did. Go to [AmericaMustKnow.com](#), and you, too, can contact one of the 538 electors at his or her home address after you read up on the latest doomed lawsuit.

How did the citizenship rumor get started? Ironically, it began when the Obama campaign tried to debunk some *other* conspiracies. After Obama locked up the nomination in early June, low-level talk radio and blog chatter [peddled rumors](#) that Obama's real middle name was Muhammad, that his father was not really Barack Obama, and that he was not really born in Hawaii. The campaign [released a facsimile](#) of Obama's certificate of live birth. Requested from the state in 2007, the certificate reported that Obama was, indeed, born in Honolulu at 7:24 p.m. on Aug. 4, 1961.

The certificate was a bullet that didn't put down the horse. Why, skeptics asked, release a new form from Hawaii instead of the original paper that Obama's parents got in 1961—the one that Obama found in a box of his dad's knickknacks in *Dreams From My Father*? They quickly came up with an explanation: The certificate was forged. Anonymous digital image experts with handles like [Techdude](#) and [Polarik](#) sprung from the woodwork to prove (shades of [Rathergate](#)!) that pixels, spacing, and indentation on the form indicated that the Obama campaign had created the certificate with Adobe Photoshop. The [state of Hawaii's official statement](#) that the certificate was legitimate didn't make a dent—after all, who is Registrar of Vital Statistics Alvin Onaka to argue with Techdude?

This "forgery" became an article of faith in the Obama conspiracy community. When a Hillary Clinton supporter [found a birth announcement](#) for Obama from the Aug. 13, 1961, edition of the *Honolulu Advertiser*, the theorists were unbowed: After all, the Obama family could have phoned that in from Kenya. When Pennsylvania lawyer Philip J. Berg filed the first birth-related injunction against Obama this August, asking that Obama be ruled "ineligible to run for United States Office of the President," he alleged that the certificate had been proved a forgery by the "extensive Forensic testing" of anonymous experts and claimed that Obama's campaign had simply inserted his name over that of his half-sister, Maya. That would have been quite a trick, as Maya Soetoro-Ng was [actually born](#) in Indonesia.

Berg's involvement in the movement—and his self-promotion, which has included a radio interview with Michael Savage and a full-page ad in the *Washington Times*—is probably a net loss for all concerned. Berg's last big lawsuits were filed in [2003](#) and [2004](#) on behalf of [9/11 skeptics](#) that sought to uncover the Bush administration's complicity in the attacks. "There's been many fires in many buildings before, and even after," Berg said in a [2007 interview](#). "Concrete and steel buildings do not fall down from fires." Berg did not respond to my request for an interview, but if you call his office, you can press "2" for more information on "the 9/11 case."

None of that stopped Berg from stoking the conspiracy theorists. On Oct. 16, an Anabaptist minister named Ron McRae [called Sarah Hussein Obama](#), the president-elect's 86-year-old paternal

step-grandmother, at her home in Kenya. Two translators were on the line when McRae asked if the elder Obama was "present" when the president-elect was born. One of the translators says "yes." McRae contacted Berg and gave him a partial transcript of the call with a signed affidavit. He opted not to include the rest of the call, in which he asks the question more directly—"Was he born in Mombassa?"—and the translators, finally understanding him, tell him repeatedly that the president-elect was born in Hawaii.

The Hawaiian documentation, the 1961 newspaper announcement, the phony evidence from Sarah Obama—all of that aside, the idea that Obama wasn't born in Honolulu goes against everything we know about his rather well-documented life. Barack Obama Sr. came to America [as part of a 1959 program](#) for Kenyan students—he did not return home until 1965, years after he left his wife and son. Ann Dunham [was three months pregnant when she married Obama Sr.](#) and 18 years old when she gave birth. There is no record of Dunham ever traveling to Kenya, much less the year after the Mau Mau rebellion ended, when she was pregnant and when she had no disposable income to speak of. "Ann's mother would have gone ballistic if her daughter had even mentioned traveling to Kenya in the final stages of pregnancy," says David Mendell, author of the biography *Obama: From Promise to Power*.

Reached by phone, Ron McRae doesn't claim to know when or how Dunham got to Kenya, only that she gave birth in a Third World country because "she didn't want to take a chance on that flight back" and that "everyone in Kenya" knows this. If so, they've kept it a pretty solid secret from the international reporters who've visited the country since Obama rose to prominence. But the story is good enough for Gary Kreep, the conservative head of the [United States Justice Foundation](#), who filed suit against Obama on behalf of Alan Keyes, the unstoppable fringe candidate who was on the ballot in California on the American Independent Party ticket. "If he's got nothing to hide," says Kreep, "why not give us access?"

That's the same argument made by Bob Schultz, the founder of the [paleoconservative We the People Foundation for Constitutional Education](#). On Monday and Wednesday, Schultz gave the Obama conspiracy its biggest burst of attention—at least since [Rush Limbaugh speculated](#) that this was the real reason Obama visited his dying grandmother—by [purchasing full-page ads](#) in the *Chicago Tribune*. In the "open letters" to Obama, Schultz asserts that Obama's certificate of live birth is "forged," that his "grandmother is record[ed] on tape saying she attended your birth in Kenya," and that Obama would have lost his citizenship anyway when Ann Dunham married her second, Indonesian husband, Lolo Soetoro. (Lou Dobbs would be delighted to discover that the 14th Amendment can be nullified so easily.)

Schultz has asked Obama to allow forensic investigators to inspect Obama's files in Hawaii's Department of State. "Have one guy go in and do his thing," explains Schultz. "Have another guy go in, do his thing, put the certificate back in the envelope. These are scientists. They should all come to the same conclusion."

If Obama doesn't submit to the investigation—and so far, Obama and Democratic National Committee lawyers have ignored or waited for dismissal of the lawsuits and complaints—Schultz will go ahead and send packages of the key anti-Obama complaints to every Electoral College voter. "They're going to be warned that if they go ahead and cast their votes for Mr. Obama, then they've committed treason to the Constitution," Schultz told me on Wednesday.

Schultz, like every Obama-citizenship skeptic, is watching the Supreme Court on Friday and Monday to see whether it will decide to hear Leo Donofrio's lawsuit. "They should at least delay the Electoral College vote," suggests Schultz. More likely, the justices will consider the lawsuit—which [claims](#) that Obama Sr. made his son a dual citizen of the British Empire and thus ineligible for the presidency—frivolous, decide that Donofrio lacked the standing to sue Obama anyway, and move on.

How much further will the fight to de-certify Obama go? It won't stop if the Electoral College votes for Obama, as the skeptics will try to get a congressman or senator to officially challenge the result. Rep. Chris Cannon of Utah was [willing to believe](#) that Bill Ayers wrote *Dreams From My Father*, so the skeptics might have a chance.

And if every vote certification goes off without a hitch and Obama is inaugurated on Jan. 20? Gary Kreep is ready for that.

"When Obama starts signing executive orders and legislation," Kreep says, "I'll be filing lawsuits unless and until he proves he's an American citizen. Some judge, someday, is going to want this proved on the merits. You can run, but you can't hide."

politics

Meet the Press

Can Obama give the media more of what it wants by giving cable TV less?

By John Dickerson

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 7:35 PM ET

After holding four press conferences on four consecutive business days, Barack Obama took today off. (On the fifth day, as it is written, he rested. ...) For those of us who dissect his every word, a day without a press conference poses a challenge.

The solution is to turn our attention from figuring out what it means when he does speak to figuring out what it means when he does not.

Since winning the election, Obama has sought the right balance between saying too much and too little. He's saying, "Help is coming, we're on our way." But since he can't actually do anything yet, he's quick to point out that "there is just one president at a time."

This is good training for the balancing act he'll face in office. He is the third president to govern during what I'll call the news hyper-cycle, which demands a presidential response to nearly every incremental development. The questions for Obama and his aides are two: How often does he respond to the demand? And can he do anything to lessen that demand?

Obama's predecessors took different approaches. Bill Clinton and his team wanted the president's positions conveyed in almost every news story. They turned the White House into a 24-hour newsroom and believed that a president's influence increases when he looks thoroughly involved. An administration must try to make news to keep the power of the bully pulpit alive. If it doesn't, it cedes ground to political opponents, members of Congress, and, most troubling of all, pundits.

George Bush took the opposite approach. He embraced a diminished public posture. He tried to stick to the message of the day, repeating familiar arguments and viewing sideline debates or events in the news as distractions. The administration consciously did not try to "play" in every story.

Clinton's approach could seem scattershot, and Bush's could seem out of touch. "The Clintons were like day traders," says former Bush counselor Dan Bartlett. "We were more like long-term investors. Neither worked perfectly. In our case it showed discipline, but we were sometimes too rigid and missed opportunities to get the president's message across because it wasn't blocked out on the calendar."

Which route will Obama choose? During the final days of the campaign, he [threw out a tantalizing idea](#). Politicians should stay off of Fox, CNN, and MSNBC. "The job of an elected official—whether it's a president or a council member—is to solve problems, deliver for the people, don't spend all your time bickering, stay off the cable news shows," he said.

This will seem like a fabulous idea to anyone who has watched the daily bickerfests on cable news and felt the accompanying compression of their soul. Since cable news survives, in part, on the manufacture and distribution of phony developments, a wise president and his team will refrain from weighing in on fake issues, which can distract them from their true purpose and

diminish their standing with the public. Why is he talking about *this*?

Cable bookers tend to like politicians who say outrageous things. Limiting cable appearances might allow the players involved to behave in a more civil fashion. It could also lower the blood pressure of viewers. Remove the overdramatization of debates on television, and maybe voters will be a little more patient. (Though, to be fair, many voters [do seem pretty patient](#) right now about what Obama can achieve.)

There's no evidence from Obama's aides that they're actually planning to stay off cable or that the president will ask his allies to abstain. There's probably no real way to enforce the rule. White House aides could limit their appearances, but there would still be people claiming to speak for the administration. Plus, cable news does serve a valuable purpose: It delivers information first, at times brilliantly. A wise president and his team will know when to blanket the cable shows.

Obama's "stay off cable" pledge may have been one of those from the campaign that [we're not supposed to hold him to](#). Regardless, it does raise a legitimate point: He faces enormous challenges in a news environment that is highly impatient.

Obama has said he'll experiment like FDR. Unlike FDR, however, Obama must contend with dawn-to-dawn coverage. If Obama takes FDR-style risks and occasionally makes FDR-style mistakes, it will lead to sky-is-falling coverage. He's said he'll admit mistakes. FDR did, too, but [wasn't so great at it](#). More than 60 years later, the news environment is even less friendly to that kind of candor.

The other approach is to saturate the airwaves with high-value content. That's what Obama has been doing with his multiple press conferences. He fills the vacuum, which means there is less room for idle speculation, uninformed theories, and opinions from political strategists you've never heard of. There is one major flaw to this strategy, of course: The president can't give a press conference every day. Nor will he always have big news to offer, as he has with his Cabinet appointments. If he can't block out a news conference with his own news, it leaves him open to questions about any old thing. That would be great—and also risky.

During the campaign, Obama was disciplined and focused. His team didn't whipsaw after every news development and kept the candidate sequestered from the press. It was the [key to their success](#). Now he's set a record for accessibility. He's given press conferences and a string of high-profile interviews. (He'll be on *Meet the Press* this weekend.) He seems to know, and his aides confirm, that this level of accessibility creates a beneficial level of trust and transparency.

If Obama is going to speak more regularly to the press, experiment, and admit mistakes, maybe we owe him more than the usual hair-trigger response. So maybe he should get a do-over or some wiggle room for his answer in the last press conference when he suggested that a reporter who asked him to square his past criticisms of Hillary Clinton's foreign policy with his current praise for her as secretary of state was merely "having fun." To laugh off the question diminishes a candidate whose words people valued so highly. He also asked voters to view him as the kind of politician who didn't play the game of saying overheated things just for political effect. And to claim, as he did, that his criticisms of Clinton were uttered in the heat of the moment is also silly—unless he was talking about a several-months-long moment.

In the spirit of this new age, however, I am willing to give him a mulligan until his next press conference, when he'll have the chance to explain what he meant. If, in time, his promises of transparency and candor turn out to be phony, then the wiggle room should disappear. We can note his deficiencies as we did during the campaign, when he claimed to be [campaigning on the high road](#), [telling hard truths](#), [keeping his pledges](#), and [offering financial transparency](#).

For now, however, if he says something off-key, he should get a chance to clean it up. America may not be able to rid itself of the hyper-cable-news environment, but we can all try to be less hyper.

politics

Detroit Breakdown

How the Big Three's lost clout in Washington may actually help the auto industry.

By Brian Ladd

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 6:38 PM ET

Who says America's Big Three automakers are lumbering, bureaucratic relics incapable of reading the public mood? Just last month, their CEOs traveled to Washington on their corporate jets. (At least partly because of that decision, they returned home with no federal largesse and hardly any public sympathy.) For this week's visit, at least two of the CEOs [plan to drive](#)—and the third, Chrysler's Robert Nardelli, says he won't be taking a private jet.

Still, it's unlikely the Big Three will receive a very warm reception in Washington, even if they do succeed in winning \$25 billion in loans. Public and congressional sentiment is arrayed against them. Their best friend, Rep. John Dingell, [has just been deposed](#) from his committee chairmanship. For now, Detroit's political clout seems to be gone.

It may be the best thing that's happened to the industry in decades.

Since at least the 1960s, Washington has restrained some of Detroit's worst impulses. And when Washington has allowed Detroit to have its way—in other words, when Detroit has enjoyed its greatest clout—the consequences have not been good for either the industry or the nation.

Over the past 60 years, Congress has been steadfast in its support of the auto industry. After World War II, when General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler made peace with the mammoth United Auto Workers union, congressional friends of business, labor, and consumers stood united in their allegiance to the welfare of the industry. In 1956, the federal government rewarded the nation's largest industry with its largest-ever public-works project: the interstate highway system.

A few years later, as critics began to blame the industry for increasing accidents and pollution, Detroit offered no concessions. In the early 1960s, GM's cover-up of the Chevrolet Corvair's safety defects was merely the worst example of the industry's refusal to take the most basic steps to make crashes less likely or less deadly. The carmakers had decided that "safety doesn't sell," and there was little sign that the free market would do much about the rising highway death toll.

Finally, with public concern rising, Washington decided to intervene. Congressional hearings, and Ralph Nader's sensational 1965 book *Unsafe at Any Speed*, helped rally support for the passage of the 1966 National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act, which authorized the government to mandate a long list of safety improvements—things we have long since taken for granted, like seat belts, collapsible steering columns, and padded dashboards.

At the same time, visibly worsening air pollution set off another clash between Washington and Detroit. First the state of California and then the federal government pressed for limits on automotive emissions. The carmakers insisted that the technology was not available and that they would be ruined by mandatory pollution controls. But when the mandates were set, they managed to comply.

Perhaps the auto industry eventually would have come around to the idea that it was bad business to keep killing its customers and poisoning their air. But it was Washington that forced Detroit to address its problems, insisting on rules that would permit cars to keep on choking and killing people, if only at a slower rate.

Soon afterward came the first oil shock in 1973, when gas lines and angry motorists forced politicians to confront the specter of dwindling oil supplies. Washington responded in 1975 with the Corporate Average Fuel Economy rules. Once again, Detroit

argued that the goals were impossible and that they would drive the carmakers to bankruptcy. Once again, they were wrong. By the time of the second oil shock in 1979, they were well on their way to building the more-fuel-efficient vehicles that their customers actually wanted—thanks to Washington.

But that was the end of an era of strict regulation. During the 1980s and 1990s, most proposals for new rules—notably stricter fuel-economy standards—died in Washington. The carmakers grew accustomed to getting their way on Capitol Hill, aided by the United Auto Workers and by lawmakers from both parties. Most prominent among them was the powerful chairman of the House energy and commerce committee, Democratic Rep. John Dingell of Michigan. He was far from alone, however, in echoing Detroit's arguments that Americans wanted bigger automobiles and that Washington should not interfere. By the 1990s, those big automobiles were mostly SUVs—an entire class of vehicle promoted by Washington's failures. Most of the safety, pollution, and fuel-economy regulations applied more weakly, if at all, to vehicles classified as "light trucks," and Detroit designed the new SUVs to roar through those gaping loopholes.

In an era of low fuel prices, Detroit had once again found a winning formula. Emissions increased somewhat, fuel consumption soared, and the highway death toll once again inched upward. But the politicians declined to interfere. Perhaps it would have been better if they had: The SUV boom depended on cheap oil, and when oil prices shot up, Detroit was in big trouble.

Which brings us to late 2008, with fleets of unsold SUVs foundering in a sea of red ink and the Big Three no longer so welcome in the halls of Congress. When the CEOs were asked last month about mistakes they had made, Nardelli was the only one to offer any kind of *mea culpa*. "The mistake Chrysler probably made during that period is that we were responding to the customer who wanted bigger, more expansive, higher horsepower vehicles to go with their second homes, their boats, their trailers," [he explained](#). "And we chased that consumer demand up. Lesson learned for us."

The lesson, apparently, was that short-term consumer demand is a poor guide to long-term strategy. The carmakers—and their customers—may sometimes need a firm hand to restrain their most destructive impulses. It's generally a bad idea to expect members of Congress or occupants of the White House to think past the next election. But Washington has done a better job than Detroit of looking after the auto industry's long-term interests.

politics In Praise of Patronage

The executive branch needs more of it, not less.

By Paul Musgrave

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 1:35 PM ET

When the *Washington Post* [reported](#) that political appointees throughout the Bush administration were being converted into civil servants, a practice known as "burrowing," liberals were furious. Senate Democrats [called for](#) a halt to the practice. Bloggers such as Matthew Yglesias (semi-seriously) [suggested that](#) "we'll have the top layer of the civil service filled with industry shills," while those at TPMuckraker vowed to "[see what we can find out](#)." Their concern is that civil-service protections, ostensibly designed to insulate the bureaucracy from political influence, will instead safeguard the political appointees of a deeply unpopular lame-duck administration.

It's a valid concern—but in this case, it's misplaced. President-elect Barack Obama will find it easier to replace the Oval Office draperies than to replace officials who supposedly work for him. What the executive branch needs is more patronage, not less.

Despite all of the talk of the resurgence of the imperial presidency, contemporary presidents actually have surprisingly modest powers when it comes to staffing the government. For most of American history, presidents enjoyed much greater power to hire and fire federal employees, from Cabinet secretaries to rural postmasters. True, many of those officials were subject to Senate confirmation, and the realities of politics have always made dismissing officials a dangerous business. Nonetheless, the president could remove many officeholders at will. (As Huey Long and the first Mayor Daley could attest, state and local executives long enjoyed even broader patronage powers.)

The textbook version of American history holds that patronage (or the "spoils system") was a wicked tradition that led to the assassination of President James Garfield by a disappointed job seeker and the consequent passage under the Chester Arthur administration of the [Pendleton Act](#), which created the modern and efficient civil service that we enjoy today.

But [Arthur biographer](#) Zachary Karabell makes plain that the textbooks are wrong. Although Arthur (himself a product of the patronage machine of the New York Republican Party, who had only become Garfield's running mate to placate the base) supported the Pendleton Act, the real catalyst was the GOP's disastrous losses in the 1882 midterm elections. With Congress about to pass into Democratic hands, the GOP resurrected the Pendleton civil-service reforms during the lame-duck session in order to protect the tens of thousands of *Republican* patronage appointees in federal service.

It's true that civil service reforms did yield an approximation of the ideal of impartial competence. But the Great Depression and World War II proved that a civil service adapted to routine was incapable of managing large-scale innovation, necessitating the emergence of the so-called "[dollar-a-year](#)" [men](#)—former industry executives who oversaw war production and manpower efforts.

Yet during the past 60 years, it has been the civil service (viewed as professional and technocratic) and not political appointees (seen as corrupt or unqualified) that has gained the upper hand in public opinion. In 1976, the Supreme Court somewhat hysterically [compared](#) the patronage tactics of the Cook County Democratic machine to those of the Nazis. More recently, political appointees have been blamed for the failure of the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina, the mismanagement of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, a slew of scandals and investigations in the Justice Department, and various other misadventures during the last eight years. Indeed, many senior officials in the federal government would view the very term *political* as pejorative.

On its merits, though, it's hard to justify the mixed system that has evolved since the Pendleton Act's passage. The vast majority of federal employees, from the lowliest clerk to very senior managers, are civil service appointments. The president names only a handful of executive branch policymakers and senior managers directly, with or without Senate confirmation. The oft-cited figure of 7,000 is misleading and includes purely nominal positions, such as the 55 members of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, nearly 100 U.S. marshals appointed in "consultation" with senators, and dozens of ambassadors who will, by nearly inviolate custom, be members of the career Foreign Service. Many other positions will be filled from a pool of career senior civil-service executives. The structure of the executive branch personnel system, in other words, militates against rapid and fundamental change.

In a democracy, however, sometimes rapid and fundamental change is both necessary and sustained by the popular will. (Think of the New Deal—or the Reagan Revolution, if you prefer.) If the president can't make such changes directly in the agencies, then he will attempt to go outside the system by making the White House staff responsible for policy management. Having members of the White House staff, who are remote from the departments and entirely dependent on the president's favor for their influence, in charge of operations is the worst of all possible worlds. But given the inflexibility of civil service rules and the difficulty of navigating the Senate confirmation process, it's no surprise that presidents often resort to the creation of yet another "czar"—or the legal-because-we-say-it-is "[recess appointment](#)"—to fill government ranks.

Making more positions open to political appointees (and a greater proportion of those to positions that wouldn't require

Senate confirmation) would place greater responsibility on the president and his agency heads. Short of shrinking the government and its responsibilities, there is no alternative if the link between voters' choice of president and the president's management of the government is to be preserved.

[Many academics](#) seem to yearn for a British-style impartial civil service. But that would be incompatible with American traditions and, as viewers of [Yes, Minister](#) know, the impartiality of the senior British civil servant is a bit of a myth. And were we to follow the technocratic idea to its ultimate end, relying too heavily on experience would argue for the abolishment of presidential appointments for all but the most senior government officials. At the same time, Obama's decision to keep Robert Gates as secretary of defense shows that presidents know the value of experience.

Of course, there is next to no chance that either Congress would allow, or the administration would argue for, more political appointees in the executive branch. Opening up the bureaucracy to outsiders would be a threat to Congress' prerogatives and, more important, to key constituencies that have established relationships with bureaucrats. And no administration really wants to have greater flexibility in installing "inexperienced" officials who, although potentially more skillful than the civil servants they would lead, might also fail—and thereby present the administration's critics with an easy target.

Too bad. The "hope" and "change" that Barack Obama promised for the 21st century may have to be delivered by a 19th-century institution.

politics

The Uncampaign

Barack Obama wants you to forget he was ever a candidate.

By Christopher Beam

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 8:54 PM ET

Barack Obama's first job as president-elect: to make people forget the campaign. More specifically, to make people forget all the mean things he said about his soon-to-be colleagues. More specifically still, to make people forget some, but not all, of the things he said. And to make sure people understand the context of the things they do remember.

No one said governing would be easy.

After Obama unveiled his national-security team today, [a reporter asked](#) how he could pick Hillary Clinton for secretary of state after everything he said about her during the Democratic

primary. After all, it feels like just yesterday that he [reduced](#) her foreign-policy experience to sipping tea in ambassadors' mansions. Now she is suddenly qualified to be the country's top diplomat?

Obama swatted the question away. "I know this is fun for the press to stir up whatever quotes were generated during the course of the campaign," he said, as if the quotes themselves emanated from a mysterious but powerful quote generator whose workings are unrelated to anything he actually said. Obama went on to say reporters should look at statements made "outside of the heat of a campaign," that he and Hillary share a worldview, and that she'll make an "outstanding" secretary of state.

It's clear that Obama thinks Clinton is qualified—her appointment says as much. Obama even said so during the campaign, albeit jokingly: Responding to a debate question about all the former Clinton advisers on his campaign, Obama [quipped](#), "Hillary, I'm looking forward to you advising me as well." But then how do we know whether a statement was sincere or whether it was just something said *in flagrante campaigno*?

It's hard to say. But this we do know: If both attacker and attacked agree that they're over it, then it's hard for the rest of us to care. Just as the politics of a campaign encourage discord, the politics of governing—at least initially—encourage harmony.

All former presidential candidates have a slew of statements they'd rather forget. Joe Biden probably wishes he hadn't described Obama as [unready to lead the country](#). Hillary no doubt wishes she hadn't [suggested](#) that Obama hadn't crossed "the commander in chief threshold." (She later backtracked and said that although he hadn't crossed it *yet*, he somehow would by Election Day.) And Obama may regret slamming Hillary for her vote to designate Iran's Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organization, now that she may one day represent him in talks with Iran.

Inconvenient quotes aren't just about people—they're about policy, too. In a June [interview](#) with *Fortune*, Obama acknowledged that previous characterizations of NAFTA as "devastating" and "a big mistake" may have been "overheated and amplified." Now, in the midst of recession, the political cost of adjusting NAFTA at all looks [rather high](#). Obama also pledged to repeal the Bush tax cuts before they expired in 2011. But advisers have recently [signaled](#) that he may let them expire on schedule, since raising taxes (or rescinding tax cuts, if you prefer) risks damaging an already ailing economy.

But then there are some statements the candidates *want* you to remember. In the last few primary debates, Obama went out of his way to praise Clinton. He then [lauded](#) her in his June 4 victory speech, even before she had conceded: "She's a leader who inspires millions of Americans with her strength, her

courage, and her commitment to the causes that brought us here tonight." When criticizing McCain, he always made sure to praise his military service. (Sometimes he did so [a little too pointedly](#).) At the same time, when criticizing Bush's Iraq policy, Obama was careful not to blame the military itself. He reserved animus for Rumsfeld and left Gates alone.

It's easy to see Obama's rhetorical shifts—and those of his colleagues—as typical weathervane politicking. Of *course* Obama is going to embrace Hillary Clinton now that he needs her, and vice versa. And it's tempting to say that candidates want the public to discount anything negative they said and believe all the positive stuff.

But the contradictions say less about a shift in Obama's thinking than about the artificial distinctions made during a presidential campaign. In the primary, Obama and Clinton struggled to exaggerate their differences. Obama's desire to sit down with unfriendly foreign leaders wasn't just inadvisable, it was ["irresponsible" and "naive,"](#) according to Clinton. Clinton's vote for the Iraq war wasn't an understandable mistake made by [77 percent of senators](#) but a [cardinal sin](#), according to Obama. These fulminations clouded the fact that on most issues, Clinton and Obama's stances were near-identical, give or take a health care mandate. In the general election, too, Obama and McCain painted each other as polar opposites on withdrawal from Iraq, when in fact their stances [weren't all that different](#).

Plus, papering over past statements is in everyone's best interest. (Well, [not everyone's](#).) No one wants you to forget the nasty things Obama said about Hillary more than Hillary herself. And just as Obama was careful not to construe attacks on Bush's Iraq policy as attacks on Gates, Gates is undoubtedly happy not to take Obama's criticisms personally. The attacks may have been personal, but reconciliation is a group effort.

No doubt other past statements will emerge in the coming months. (The RNC is already [on the case](#).) But with reconciliation in the interest of all Democrats, as well as a few Republicans, they shouldn't be hard to explain away. Especially if they were made in the heat of a campaign.

Watch Obama announce his appointment of Hillary Clinton for secretary of state:

politics

Obama's White House, Clinton's Team

Who's (loyal to) who in the Obama administration: an interactive chart.

By Chris Wilson

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 11:23 AM ET

As President-elect Obama forms his administration, he's including a lot of familiar faces. Many of Obama's picks—for his transition team, his staff, and his Cabinet—are people who worked in the Clinton administration. Where else is a Democratic president going to find people with executive branch experience?

The following chart displays Obama's choices for his team according to their Clinton or Obama bona fides (the horizontal axis) and their tenure in Washington (the vertical axis). An appointee's position along the horizontal axis is determined by the individual's service to the Clintons before or during their time in the White House, endorsements in the Democratic primaries, ties to Chicago and Obama's early political career, and anything else that hints at their loyalties. Some, like John Podesta or Valerie Jarrett, are clearly tied to one camp. Others, like Gregory Craig, are trickier; Craig is a longtime friend of the Clintons but endorsed Obama in the primaries. Mouse over any image to get details. The vertical axis defines "Washington experience" broadly, including time in the private or nonprofit sector in addition to government service.

This chart will be updated each time Obama announces a high-profile pick for his White House. Got a suggestion? [E-mail me](#).

Update, Nov. 20, 1:15 p.m.: Added [senior adviser](#) David Axelrod and secretary of Homeland Security [pick](#) Janet Napolitano.

Update, Nov. 21, 4:55 p.m.: Added [Treasury secretary](#) pick Timothy Geithner and [secretary of state](#) selection Hillary Clinton.

Update, Nov. 24, 1:15 p.m.: Added [Commerce secretary](#) pick Bill Richardson.

Update, Dec. 1, 11:23 a.m.: Added National Economic Council head [Larry Summers](#) and U.N. Ambassador [Susan Rice](#). The chart does not include Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) or National Security Adviser [James Jones](#), neither of whom have appreciable ties to the Democratic Party.

press box

The Fog of Breaking News

Why you should take reports from the scene of a massacre with a grain of salt.

By Jack Shafer

Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 5:47 PM ET

Fast-breaking news is usually served broken.

I offer that insight as an observation, not a criticism. As one who has scribbled conflicting eyewitness accounts from a fast-moving story in my reporter's notebook, I have nothing but gratitude and sympathy for the boots on the ground who produce the hot dispatches readers crave—even if many of those hot dispatches turn out to be crap.

The latest example of crap masquerading as authoritative news comes to us from the pens and microphones of the reporters covering the Mumbai massacre: Reading the first wave of Mumbai stories against the second reveals how rough the [first rough draft](#) of history can be. Respected, major media outlets produced contradictory accounts of the carnage and its aftermath.

It would be easy to blame the opening inaccuracies on the discombobulating nature of the terrorist assault, or to accuse a naïve Indian press of leading the Western press astray, or to damn Indian government officials for steering reporters wrong. But it ain't so. Breaking news—especially complex breaking news—has always defied the best reporters' attempts to get the story both first and right.

For instance, immediately following the 9/11 attacks, all sorts of bunk about the identities of hijackers, explosives on the George Washington Bridge, and a car bombing at the State Department turned up in the *Boston Globe*, on CNN, on the *New York Times* Web site, and on CBS. The press foisted spacer onto their clientele when reporting the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. As *Slate* contributor David Greenberg [catalogs](#) in his book *Nixon's Shadow*, the press made serious errors in Watergate coverage that were never corrected.

Should reporters publish only when they've nailed the story six ways to Sunday? Not to endorse journalistic malpractice, but as long as they don't intend to deceive and believe what they publish, I'd rather read their imperfect reports from the scene of breaking news than wait for a book on the subject. "Journalism in lieu of dissertation," to use [Edgar Allan Poe's](#) phrase, is the light artillery we can use *now*.

That said, the press could do a better job of cleaning up after the fact by acknowledging that their frantic chasing of the story also resulted in the publication of some ... crap. (As long as we're on the subject of how the press should clean up behind itself, see former *New York Times* Public Editor Daniel Okrent's 2004 [column](#) about "rowbacks.")

At the very least, newspapers and networks could routinely warn readers of the provisional nature of their hot, breaking reports and advise all to keep pinches of salt handy. Reporter Rhys Blakely of the *Times* of London did just that in his [Dec. 2 Mumbai story](#), indicating why so many contradictory statements were coming out of the interrogations of captured terrorist Azam Amir Kasab. Blakely writes:

It is thought that as many as 15 Indian officials are sitting in on the militant's interrogation, and many are leaking their interpretations of his responses to the media.

So, with that throat-clearing completed, here's an assortment of misinformation, quarreling facts, and bunk published by the world press about the Mumbai rampage. (Note: the spelling of the Kasab's name varies from publication to publication.)

What nationality were the killers?

Two British-born Pakistanis were among eight gunmen seized by Indian commandos who stormed buildings to free hostages, Vilasrao Deshmukh, the chief minister of Mumbai, reportedly said.

—[Daily Telegraph](#), Nov. 28, 2008

A top Indian official, Maharashtra state chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, said there was "no authentic information" to suggest that any British citizens were involved.

—[Daily Mail](#), Dec. 1, 2008

Indian authorities said today that all 10 of the terrorists who attacked the city of Mumbai last Wednesday were from Pakistan.

—[ABCNews.com](#), Dec. 1, 2008

The [Anti-Terror Squad] officer also disputed Indian press assertions that the attackers were Pakistani, saying they were of many nationalities.

—[New York Times](#), Dec. 1, 2008

How did they plan their assault?

After the [terrorists'] training was over, they were sent to Mumbai for a "short internship," [Azam Amir] Kasab is believed to have told the cops. This was the period when the accused did the [reconnaissance] of the city and even went to the five star hotels (Taj and Oberoi), the sources said.

—[Times of India](#), Dec. 1, 2008

Investigators are probing whether the information came by way of local help, or whether a separate team of militants carried out a reconnaissance mission from abroad to the financial center on India's west coast to scope out targets and prepare the attacks.

—[Wall Street Journal](#), Dec. 2, 2008

How well did the terrorists know the Taj Mahal hotel layout?

Elite Indian commandos spoke of fierce battles through the maze of corridors and 565 rooms of the 105-year-old Taj Mahal hotel

in which the terrorists had a better knowledge of the building's layout than security forces.

—[Financial Times](#), Nov. 28, 2008

"I do not think they knew the hotel inside out," [said City Police Commissioner Hassan Gafoor].

—[Washington Post](#), Dec. 3, 2008

Who were the terrorists targeting?

Azam Amir Kasab, 21, a Pakistani national, claimed the terror strikes, which left nearly 200 dead, were intended to kill as many as 5,000 people and that he and his fellow militants were ordered to target whites—especially Britons and Americans. The claims were made in what a police source said was a transcript of his questioning.

—[The Times](#) of London, Dec. 1, 2008

Police believe attacks at the Leopold cafe, popular with tourists, and at CST station, may have been diversions to provide cover as other gang members stormed their two main targets—Mumbai's two luxury hotels, the Taj Mahal and Trident-Oberoi.

—[The Age](#) (Melbourne) Dec. 1, 2008

"It seemed like they were in a hurry," [Leopold Café owner Farhang Jehani] said. "It was as if they wanted to shoot as many people as they could even though this was not their main target. Their motive might have been to divert the police, who have a station across the street, to keep them occupied as they headed to the Taj hotel."

—[Washington Post](#), Dec. 1, 2008

Did the marauders intend to escape?

[Captured terrorist] Kasab has allegedly revealed that their plan was to take hostages at the Taj hotel, Oberoi Hotel and Nariman House and then use them to escape from the city, [a senior police official] added.

—[Press Trust of India](#), Nov. 29, 2008

The sole Mumbai gunman captured alive has told police he was trained in Pakistan and ordered to "kill until the last breath," according to a leaked account of his interrogation.

—[The Times](#) of London, Dec. 1, 2008

[The terrorists] also intended to escape Mumbai after the attacks, but officials say it might have been a formality. One Indian official said that he believes the terrorists knew well in advance that they were on a one-way mission.

—[ABCNews.com](#), Dec. 1, 2008

The terrorists thought they would come out alive and had an escape route, added [gunman] Kasav.

—[Daily Mail](#), Dec. 1, 2008

"Their plan was just to cause maximum damage and return with hostages protecting themselves," [said Mumbai Police Joint Commissioner for Crime Rakesh Maria].

—[The Times](#), Dec. 2, 2008

Another GPS unit recovered in Mumbai suggested that the terrorists planned to return to the [hijacked fishing] vessel if they survived the attacks, [Rakesh] Maria said."

—[Wall Street Journal](#), Dec. 2, 2008

How did the killers sustain themselves for three days?

[T]he militants carried bundles of Indian rupees, packets of raisins and nuts to keep their energy high. ...

—[Wall Street Journal](#), Dec. 2, 2008

Officials said drug paraphernalia, including syringes, was recovered from the scene of the attacks, which killed almost 200 people. ...

"We found injections containing traces of cocaine and LSD left behind by the terrorists and later found drugs in their blood," said one official.

"There was also evidence of steroids, which isn't uncommon in terrorists."

—[Daily Telegraph](#), Dec. 2, 2008

Can you trust anything attributed to Azam Amir Kasab?

An officer of the Anti-Terror Squad branch in Mumbai, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the news media, said [Kasab] had given inconsistent answers to questioning, sometimes saying there were 10 attackers, sometimes more than 10.

—[New York Times](#), Dec. 1, 2008

Only 10 militants have been identified, but, according to a private TV channel, Azam Amir Qasab apparently confirmed there were 15 attackers.

—[BBC.com](#), Dec. 1, 2008

Most of what Mr. [Azam Amir] Kasab has said so far has proven accurate, [Rakesh Maria] said in the interview.

—[Wall Street Journal](#), Dec. 2, 2008

How badly was Kasab wounded?

The government has not allowed outside access to the captive, who is said to have identified himself as Ajmal Amir Qasab, a Pakistani citizen who was wounded in the leg and was being treated at a military hospital.

—[New York Times](#), Dec. 1, 2008

The terrorist [Kasab] was taken to the hospital after he was hit in the hand by a bullet in the early stages of the assault on Mumbai last week.

—[The Australian](#), Dec. 2, 2008

"[Kasab] had some aberrations and bruises on his upper and lower limbs. He did not have any bullet injury and did not require surgery. He was given treatment on the spot and there has been no active treatment on him after that," said Ravi Ranade, dean of B Y L Nair hospital.

—[IndianExpress.com](#), Dec. 2, 2008

Did Kasab want to live or die?

After being captured, Kasab was taken ... to Nair hospital where he was treated for minor injuries. He reportedly told medical staff: "I do not want to die. Please put me on saline."

—[The Guardian](#), Nov. 30, 2008

"He kept saying, 'Please kill me. I do not want to live,'" said Kishore C. Bhatt, 56, a hospital volunteer who was there that night. "He was on a stretcher about three to four feet away from me. He was injured. His face had no expression, but his voice sounded angry."

—[Washington Post](#), Dec. 3, 2008

Poe spoke for me when he [wrote](#), "the lightness of the artillery should not degenerate into pop-gunners." Shoot your mouth off at slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (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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press box

Reunderstanding Rupert Murdoch

Michael Wolff's new biography accepts the mogul on his own sordid terms.

By Jack Shafer

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 8:56 PM ET

Michael Wolff surmises in the opening pages of [The Man Who Owns the News: Inside the Secret World of Rupert Murdoch](#) that the News Corp. chairman and CEO submitted to 50 hours of

interviews and directed family and business associates to speak on the record for the biography because he sensed that Wolff had the "same contempt" for "many of his enemies—particularly the journalistic priesthood."

Wolff, who [writes](#) about media, politics, and power for *Vanity Fair*, cultivates a cynical and dark image for himself, so Murdoch made a logical bet when he wagered that their shared blackheartedness would produce a flattering biography. But Murdoch bet wrong.

Oh, Wolff applauds the entrepreneurial daring that created a global media conglomerate out of an Adelaide daily. He relishes Murdoch's rejection of cultural and business norms and his coldblooded cunning. Recounting in detail News Corp.'s dramatic 2007 acquisition of Dow Jones & Co.—parent to the *Wall Street Journal*—Wolff almost cheers as Murdoch outwits the bumbling Bancroft family (which controlled Dow Jones) and its executives. He also gives the benefit of the doubt to Murdoch's newest wife, Wendi Deng, a 39-year-old Chinese businesswoman with a Yale MBA. Previous coverage of Deng has depicted her as a home-wrecking vamp, but in Wolff's view, she's rejuvenated the 77-year-old [genocidal tyrant](#) and coaxed him out of his shell to socialize with the elites at Davos and Cannes. Deng is no simple gold-digger in *The Man Who Owns the News*. She's Murdoch's partner who speaks business, his language of love. Wolff reports that after-hours Dow Jones deal-making was routed to Murdoch through Deng, writes Wolff, because the mogul still doesn't get e-mail.

By accepting Murdoch on his own terms, Wolff tilts his focus toward the sympathetic, but it's the sort of sympathy John Milton rewards Satan with in [Paradise Lost](#). Murdoch, like Satan, is simply the most interesting character in the larger story and therefore the most deserving of our understanding. This doesn't mean that Wolff turns Murdoch's negatives into positives but that he suspends judgment as he records his subject's many "signature" acts of betrayal, double-dealing, and skulduggery. In a lesser writer's hands, this would have turned into a "warts and all" biography; Wolff is shrewd enough to know that Murdoch is all warts.

Murdoch's media empire has continued to grow, unlike those founded by Ted Turner and Conrad Black, Wolff writes, because Murdoch is unburdened by their human need to be liked. Although Wolff found Murdoch bad at explaining himself in interviews and generally devoid of self-awareness, he figured out what his subject lives for: the scorn and the vilification of the "establishment," and almost any establishment will do. It is his fuel, his life blood, his Vegemite. Upon invading the British newspaper market in the late 1960s with the purchase of the *News of the World* and the *Sun*, Murdoch published whatever would give fits to the nation's left establishment, its journalistic establishment, its banking establishment, its royal establishment, and especially its trade union establishment. Wolff writes:

He's in the tabloid business. He's the whoremaster. The ruder you are, the more papers you sell. You can sugarcoat this, or not. In some perversely honorable sense, he chooses not to.

Murdoch's tabloid vision fails him in San Antonio (*Express and News*) and New York City (*Post*) when he transplanted it onto American soil in the mid-1970s, and in Boston (*Herald*) and Chicago (*Sun-Times*) during the 1980s. He eventually sold all of them and even unloaded the *Post* in 1988 to satisfy FCC regulations barring ownership of a newspaper and a TV station in the same market. But he secured a waiver to reacquire the *Post* in 1993 because he couldn't really function without it.

Wolff understands Murdoch's visceral attachment to his newspapers, especially his tabloids. The *New York Post* "has no business reason for being other than to prosecute political and business grudges and to entertain Murdoch himself," Wolff writes. A Murdoch newsroom is about "pursuing Rupert Murdoch's interests, hitting Rupert Murdoch's enemies over the head," Wolff observes later. Murdoch believes that no real business power can be amassed without political connections, and the *Post*, however shoddy, has provided him a seat at the table on every level of New York politics. Playing the king-making game brings power to a press baron even if the politician he picks doesn't end up winning. The victorious candidate has every motive to turn his press enemy into a friend for the next election, which suits Murdoch just fine.

This kind of press baron flexes power not only in what he runs but in what he doesn't. For example, Wolff alleges that both Conrad Black, former owner of London's *Daily Telegraph*, and Mortimer B. Zuckerman, owner of the New York *Daily News*, have arranged personal coverage "truces" with Murdoch.

Murdoch's position is to represent News Corp.'s interests "while at the same time giving consumers what they want," Wolff writes. Murdoch believes that the "Bishops" of journalism—Murdoch's term, not Wolff's—who criticize his approach "merely hide their interests while continuing to flog them."

Murdoch's tabloid news formula of "mischief and sanctimony" didn't work its commercial miracle in the United States until he started programming entertainments like *Married ... With Children* on his Fox network in the late 1980s and broadcasting it on his Fox News Channel, which started in 1996. The secret of Murdoch's strength is his lack of shame: He doesn't personally care if something he publishes or broadcasts might offend someone, and if it does—like the aborted O.J. Simpson book *If I Did It*—he's happy to walk away and offend again some other day.

This book shines brightest when describing Murdoch's "politics," such as they are. The "liberal people" around him say

he's a "libertarian," Wolff writes, but "Murdoch's politics aren't actually politics." He was a lefty in Australia but later a Reagan-Thatcherite. He supported Tony Blair and hosted a Sen. Hillary Clinton a re-election fundraiser, but he endorsed John McCain for president in his *New York Post*. Murdoch's political worldview floats on an "amalgamation of half facts, quasiprejudices, shorthand analysis, and cockeyed assumptions, with a smattering of gossip. All combined with his massive certainty and determined nature. That's the basis of his and his newsrooms' political agenda." He continues:

A vital element in understanding his political consciousness is understanding its shallowness. For an ideologue, he's done little of the reading. Ideas are of marginal interest to him; he's a poor debater (although he can raise his voice and pound the table).

The Man Who Owns the News ends strangely on the claim that Murdoch desired the *Wall Street Journal* as an antidote to the "belligerent, the vulgar, the loud, the menacing, the unsubtle" that Fox News has come to represent in his later life. The man who bares no shame for falling for the [Hitler Diaries](#), who screwed his friend Clay Felker out of the *New York/New West/Village Voice* mini-empire in the mid-1970s, and who kowtowed to the Chinese Communists in the 1990s suddenly fears for his reputation? Come on!

Just published today, this gossipy, elliptical biography started [making news](#) in October as Murdoch reportedly took issue with some of its claims. Today, *New York Times* Managing Editor Jill Abramson [strongly disputes](#) the book's assertion that Murdoch deterred her paper from fully covering him. If you read it, spend less time concentrating on what it says about Murdoch and more about how it says it. For all of its flaws, this quickie biography, published just 14 months after it was [announced](#), reveals the truest portrait of the inner Murdoch yet.

John Milton on Rupert Murdoch. Now that's a book I'd love to read. What great literary voice from the past would you like to see writing on Rupert? Send your nominations to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (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.)

Track my errors: This [hand-built RSS feed](#) will ring every time *Slate* runs a "Press Box" correction. For e-mail notification of errors in this specific column, type the word *Warts* in the subject head of an e-mail message, and send it to slate.pressbox@gmail.com.

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To the best of my knowledge, nobody ever called Rupert Murdoch a genocidal tyrant until he introduced the useful image in a summer 2007 conference call. Here's how the [Washington Post](#) reported it.

Rupert Murdoch wanted the *Wall Street Journal* badly enough to endure a summer's worth of hurt feelings.

"That's ... why I spent the better part of the past three months enduring criticism that is normally leveled at some sort of genocidal tyrant," the 76-year-old global media tycoon said yesterday during a conference call on News Corp.'s fourth-quarter results. "If I didn't think it was such a perfect fit with such unlimited potential to grow on its own and in tandem with News Corp. assets, believe me, I would have walked away."

recycled

The President Who Never Came in From the Cold

How *Frost/Nixon* gets Nixon right.

By David Greenberg

Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 6:56 PM ET

Ron Howard's [Frost/Nixon](#)—the film adaptation of Peter Morgan's stage play—is set for release this weekend. In 2007, David Greenberg reviewed Morgan's play and described the historical events that inspired it. The original article is reprinted below.

In 1983, Paul Berman called Richard Nixon "the richest, most promising character the American theater has ever seen." Recalling the scores of Nixons that had, even then, already appeared on stage and screen, Berman noted, "His personality descends to almost oceanic depth, plunging from bright intelligence through piety, vulgarity, maudlinity and paranoia to the murky floor of violent criminality. His quivering cheeks and humped back are an actor's dream."

Some years later, [Daniel Aaron](#) offered a different view. "Writers for the most part have used him as a whipping boy rather than as an object for contemplation," he observed. Their "clever exercises in political denigration haven't weathered well because the topical allusions once so devastatingly apt are largely lost on today's readers, and because they weren't all that funny to begin with."

Both men are partly right. Aaron unfairly dismisses some gems, such as Philip Roth's brilliant [Our Gang](#) and Dan Aykroyd's enduring *Saturday Night Live* performances. He neglects others, such as Philip Baker Hall's delicious Nixon in Robert Altman's [Secret Honor](#), and he wrote too early to account for still others, such as *Nixon's Nixon* (a 1996 play, recently revived) and [Dick](#) (a 1999 movie). But he's right (as I've [suggested before in Slate](#)) that plays and films about Nixon have largely failed to capture the Shakespearean traits that Berman enumerates. Now, the latest Nixon effort, *Frost/Nixon*, has come to Broadway from London with much fanfare. Does it capture the dramatically complex Nixon that both Berman and Aaron relished?

Written by Peter Morgan—a Briton best known as the screenwriter of *The Queen*—*Frost/Nixon* tells the story of how, in 1977, British talk-show host David Frost, considered a lightweight (and a washed-up one at that), nabbed the first interviews with Nixon after his resignation and how the two men, both seeking rehabilitation, jostled before and during their series of televised parleys. Frost wanted to gain respectability by exacting an apology and admission of guilt from the unrepentant president. Nixon, convinced the news media had railroaded him, craved a prime-time forum to tell his version of events—a version that would downplay Watergate and stress his foreign policy.

The premise, therefore, is great—at least for hard-core Nixonologists. Yet *Frost/Nixon* begins inauspiciously. Unlike, for example, *Nixon's Nixon*, in which director Jim Simpson permitted "no latex noses," *Frost/Nixon* puts Frank Langella through the paces of a full-on impersonation—replete with gravelly voice, jowls, and even an exaggerated hunch. The choice suggests we're in for broad comedy, not psychological drama. Moreover, the play's early scenes include re-creations of several stock Nixon highlights, including his [self-pitying resignation speech](#), which are by now so well-trodden as to border on cliché.

Yet *Frost/Nixon* quickly leaves the realm of the familiar as it shifts to the characters of Frost and James Reston Jr.—the latter a journalist, son of the great *New York Times* columnist, and research assistant to Frost on the Nixon interviews. Frost, played by Michael Sheen (Tony Blair in *The Queen*), is the best kind of fictional hero—a highly unappealing one. Frost's vanity, superficiality, and bad 1970s tummy-hugging shirts are on full display. He preens, bluffs his way into his meeting with Nixon, and sidles up to a leggy passenger on his flight to Los Angeles.

But he develops during the play, discovering that he actually has deeper motives for wanting to spar with Nixon than mere careerism.

Reston, for his part, is played by Stephen Kunken with the earnestness and goofiness befitting a 1970s baby boomer eyeing a chance to nail the recently pardoned Nixon. An unreconstructed Nixon-hater, Reston's politics are a generation gap away from his father's sober centrism. Recruited to the Frost research team by [Bob Zelnick](#) (who would go on to write an attack biography on Al Gore), Reston groans and winces for much of the play as Frost balks at confronting Nixon as forcefully as Reston thinks he should.

Once the interview tapings begin, Langella's Nixon portrayal deepens and tension builds. For Nixon, the series of four face-offs serves as a repetition of his four debates with John F. Kennedy in the 1960 presidential contest: Again, he is squaring off *mano a mano* against a fair-haired rival who is better-looking, more popular, more sexually accomplished. (Morgan has the good sense to draw his biggest laugh lines from reality—he includes the question that Nixon asked Frost before one of their interviews: "So, did you do any fornicating this weekend?") But if Nixon is reliving the "Great Debates," this time he means to win. He's even put it in the contract that he can stop the filming and dab his sweaty lip or apply new makeup as needed.

As the first few interviews proceed, Nixon seems headed for a victory. He artfully parries Frost's questions. He turns a query about the emotionalism of his White House farewell into a filibuster about his utterly banal feelings on the occasions of Dwight Eisenhower's death and his daughter's wedding. The research team squirms, Frost slumps in his chair, and Nixon prattles on merrily—with Langella conveying the subtle sadistic pleasure that Nixon takes in besting his antagonists.

As anyone acquainted with the actual interviews knows, Frost ultimately prevails, and Reston's quiet heroism proves responsible. For all his sleeve-borne political commitments—the kind we normally distrust as prejudicial in a reporter—Reston turns out to be right about Nixon, and his instincts serve him well. His hatred of Nixon is vindicated, not because we feel no sympathy for Nixon (we do), but because Nixon's pathos never obscures his villainy. Reston helps Frost slay Nixon by finding a transcript from Nixon's White House tapes that becomes a [second smoking gun](#), further implicating the president in the Watergate coverup. Nixon never saw it coming.

Frost's contribution to Nixon's slaying, ironically, resides in an aspect of his own superficiality: his intuitive grasp of television's power. Although Frost never actually gets Nixon to apologize, he comes close. More important, he elicits from Nixon a series of pained, remorseful facial expressions—portrayed beautifully by Langella and magnified for the theater audience via a mammoth TV screen—that speak volumes. "The power of the

close-up," Reston marvels, with both disillusionment and satisfaction. "The first and greatest sin of television is that it simplifies. ... Tranches of time, whole careers, become reduced to a single snapshot." Television—Nixon's friend and aide so often in his career, from the [1952 Checkers speech](#) to his 1972 trip to China—this time did him in. It was 1960 all over again.

The play's irony is true to life. Everyone expected Frost's interviews to offer Nixon an easy platform on which to grandstand. The four programs that resulted drew 45 million viewers, or 42 percent of the TV audience, the same as a typical episode of *Happy Days*, the No. 1 show that year. But the polls detected no improvement in Nixon's public standing. Even old loyalists were unsympathetic. John Ehrlichman judged Nixon's performance a "maudlin rationalization that will be tested and found false," H.R. Haldeman called it an effort "to rehabilitate himself over the prostrate bodies of his aides," and Sen. Bob Dole, who had chaired the Republican Party under Nixon, sniped: "It takes more than four interviews to properly rehabilitate Richard Nixon."

Morgan's grasp of Nixon's place in American culture is confirmed near the play's end, when Reston endorses an opinion that one seldom hears in routine journalistic commentary but that [I believe](#) is undoubtedly true: Nixon was never rehabilitated. He never came back. Despite the pomp and fine words at his funeral, his name remained a synonym for presidential corruption and crime, and the "-gate" suffix attached to scandals ever since certified Watergate's cultural importance. Earlier in the play, Nixon fumed to his aides that the audiences at his speeches were asking questions only about his wrongdoing. That tendency continued years afterward. Indeed, as late as 1990, after Nixon had published another memoir, his third, he sighed to his research assistant: "None of the other stuff in there, like on the Russians or the other personal stuff, made it into the news or even the reviews. Watergate—that's all anyone wants."

James Reston Jr. and Nixon haters everywhere can sleep easy.

recycled

Does Truth Serum Work?

Or is it all lies?

By Chris Suellentrop

Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 11:39 AM ET

Indian police announced Wednesday that they'll be [administering a "truth serum"](#) to the sole Islamic militant captured during last week's terror attacks on Mumbai. How effective are truth serums? In 2001, Chris Suellentrop investigated. The article is reprinted below.

Four suspected terrorists refuse to talk about what they know about Sept. 11 and Al Qaida's plans for the future, the *Washington Post* reports: Zacarias Moussaoui, the French Moroccan who wanted to learn how to fly jets but not how to land them; Mohammed Jaweed Azmath and Ayub Ali Khan, the two Indians who deplaned in St. Louis on the morning of Sept. 11 when all flights were ordered to land and were detained the next day in Fort Worth, Texas, after they were found with box cutters, hair dye, and \$5,000 in cash; and Nabil Almarabh, a former Boston cabdriver thought to have ties to Al Qaida. A former senior FBI official proposed that investigators could use a "truth serum" to get the four suspects to talk. Does truth serum work?

Not in the sense that it makes people tell the truth. So-called truth serums lower your inhibitions, and as a result you may become chattier but not necessarily more truthful. Losing your inhibitions isn't the same as losing your self-control. Subjects who have been administered a "truth serum" can lie, they can fantasize, and they can be manipulated into telling falsehoods by an interviewer's suggestions and cues.

Barbiturates such as scopolamine, sodium amytal, and sodium pentothal were first touted as truth serums in the early 20th century. Because they inhibit control of the central nervous system, truth serums were supposed to induce a hypnotic "twilight" state that elicited a mechanical recitation of truth. In reality, though, the only good truth serums are found in bad science fiction.

Researchers could have found a much older (and equally unreliable) claim of truth-telling for a similar drug in the old phrase *in vino veritas*. As *Lindsey vs. United States*, a 1956 federal appeals court decision, found, "The intravenous injection of a drug by a physician in a hospital may appear more scientific than the drinking of large amounts of bourbon in a tavern, but the end result displayed in the subject's speech may be no more reliable." If a terrorist has something he wants to get off his chest, he may be more apt to tell you about it while drunk or drugged. But you might learn about his propensity to wear his mother's *burqa* when he was a child, or his sinful crush on Madonna, and not his plan to blow up the Eiffel Tower. Or he may tell you lies, or he may tell you nothing at all.

The Supreme Court [decided](#) in 1963 that a truth serum-induced confession was unconstitutionally coerced. More recently, state courts have found truth serum-induced testimony to be scientifically unreliable and inadmissible.

Explainer addendum: Just because the Supreme Court rejected the use of truth serum in the past doesn't mean it will in the future. As Explainer pointed out recently, the Supreme Court [wrote in June](#) that terrorism may require "heightened deference to the judgments of the political branches with respect to matters

of national security." So the former FBI official quoted by the *Post* could be right that "you could reach a point where they allow us to apply drugs to a guy." But that doesn't mean that applying drugs to a guy would necessarily do any good.

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

recycled Still the Worst Football Coach in the Universe

Notre Dame's Charlie Weis somehow manages to keep his job.

By Jonathan Chait

Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 3:42 PM ET

On Wednesday, the University of Notre Dame announced that [football coach Charlie Weis will be retained](#) for at least one more year—this despite the fact that Weis' teams have lost a combined 15 games in the last two seasons, the most ever for the Fighting Irish. Back in 2007, Jonathan Chait asked the following question: "In the entire history of American sports hype, has there ever been any fraud more grossly fraudulent than Notre Dame football coach Charlie Weis?" The answer to that question and Chait's entire piece are reprinted below.

"Charlie Weis has returned Notre Dame to relevancy. Just two years ago, as Notre Dame spiraled toward mediocrity under Ty Willingham, a shot at a national title seemed improbable. But the schemes and the discipline Weis has installed have revived past glories. The only question on the Irish offense comes on the line. But considering the way Weis turned castoff linemen into solid starters with the New England Patriots, that should not be a huge concern."—[New York Times](#), Aug. 27, 2006

In the entire history of American sports hype, has there ever been any fraud more grossly fraudulent than Notre Dame football coach Charlie Weis?

Weis' Fighting Irish now stand at 1-7. This record is only the faintest indicator of just how awful Notre Dame is. They have lost nine of their last 10 games, by an average of 24 points. None has been close. While Notre Dame has suffered very few injuries, three of its opponents have had to play the Irish without their starting quarterbacks. Two of those teams, USC and Michigan, nonetheless beat Notre Dame by a larger margin than either has beaten any other opponent so far this year. Notre Dame's lone win came against UCLA, which had been forced to use its third-string quarterback, a walk-on. In that game, Notre Dame compiled just 140 yards of offense, but won with the help of seven Bruin turnovers, five of them hand-delivered courtesy of the hapless walk-on signal-caller.

Just how bad is Notre Dame? Of the 119 teams in Division I-A, ND is 119th in total offense, 119th in rushing offense, 112th in passing offense, and 118th in scoring. If Notre Dame had *doubled* its scoring output, it would still rank 108th. If it doubled its rushing output (currently 34 yards a game), it would barely eke out Duke for 118th place.

You get the point. I should stop now.

OK, one more. Notre Dame is averaging 1.09 yards per rush this year. The NCAA statistical archive goes back only to 1999. The worst yards per carry recorded in that period belongs to a 2001 University of Arizona squad that gained 1.46 yards per attempt. So, the worst rushing team recorded by the NCAA in the last nine years was still about one-third better than Notre Dame.

This is not merely bad. This is ineptitude on a staggering, world-historical scale. Such a performance would be *prima facie* evidence for firing the coach even at a doormat program like Indiana. At a school like Notre Dame, well ... it's simply impossible to describe how awful this performance is. It's true that Notre Dame has suffered a dip in its talent level, attributable to poor recruiting by Weis' predecessor Tyrone Willingham. But if you go by recruiting rankings, Charlie Weis still has as much or more talent on hand than most of the opponents who have been beating him soundly.

So, Weis is obviously not a great coach—no great coach has ever underperformed so grossly—and he may well be a terrible one. So, why was he ever hailed as a genius in the first place?

The giant edifice of fraud that is Weis' reputation is actually a series of smaller frauds piled on top of each other. The foundational myth is that he was a brilliant offensive coordinator. Weis came from the New England Patriots, who had just won a Super Bowl. Every player and coach associated with a Super Bowl winner is usually subjected to a certain level of hype, and Weis is no exception. But Weis was actually quite ordinary. During his eight seasons as a coordinator, six of his teams finished in the bottom half of the league in total offense. Patriots quarterback Tom Brady has graciously shared credit for his success with Weis, even though the Patriots offense has been dramatically better—seventh in the league, on average—since Weis left.

The myth grew after Weis was appointed at Notre Dame and started proclaiming his own brilliance. He told his players, "Every game you will have a decided schematic advantage." After struggling to salvage his first recruiting class, he announced to the press, "Now it's time for the X's and O's. Let's see who has the advantage now."

Having primed the national media to receive him as a conquering hero, Weis enjoyed a tidal wave of publicity in 2005,

his first year at Notre Dame. His crowning achievement was a narrow loss at home to a USC team then thought, [erroneously](#), to be among the greatest ever. (The 2005 Trojans, who lost to Vince Young and Texas in the national championship game, had great skill position talent but a weak, injury-riddled defense.)

This first season was seen as the start of a new dynasty. In truth, Notre Dame was bound to improve, given the natural maturation of a couple of excellent Willingham recruiting classes. But Weis' first two teams weren't really that good. The 2005 and 2006 Notre Dame teams had a total of one win over an opponent that finished in the top 25, and they were administered several beat-down losses.

Coming into this year, Notre Dame was still picked to finish in the top 40. Blue-Gray Sky, a Notre Dame blog, [polled its nine contributors](#) before the year began, and the average predicted record was slightly better than 9-3. It looks like Weis will fall a wee bit short of that. The difference between that predicted record and Notre Dame's actual record is a good measure of the difference between Weis' reputation as a coach and his actual ability.

Being a head coach in college involves very different skills—motivating kids, teaching basic skills—than being a coordinator in the NFL. Even good NFL coordinators, like Cam Cameron and Dave Wannstedt, have struggled as college head coaches. Maybe Weis did sometimes turn castoff linemen into solid starters in the NFL, but at Notre Dame, he can't turn blue-chip prospects into passable players.

But don't worry, Notre Dame fans. In a few years, the Irish will return to glory again, when Weis' recruits get to play for a coach who isn't horrible.

recycled

Why Did Bombay Become Mumbai?

How the city got renamed.

By Christopher Beam

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 10:52 AM ET

Last week, India's financial capital, Mumbai, was rocked by a large-scale terrorist attack. In an "Explainer" column published in July 2006, Christopher Beam described how the city formerly known as "Bombay" became "Mumbai." The article is reprinted below.

When did Bombay become Mumbai?

Officially, in 1995. That year, the right-wing Hindu nationalist party Shiv Sena won elections in the state of Maharashtra and

presided over a coalition that took control of the state assembly. After the election, the party announced that the port city had been renamed after the Hindu goddess Mumbadevi, the city's patron deity. Federal agencies, local businesses, and newspapers were ordered to adopt the change.

Shiv Sena's leadership pushed for the name change for many years prior to 1995. They argued that "Bombay" was a corrupted English version of "Mumbai" and an unwanted legacy of British colonial rule. Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray once installed a marble plaque with the name on the Gateway of India, a famous sandstone arch. The national government objected to the renaming, though, fearing that Bombay would lose its identity internationally.

The push to rename Bombay was part of a larger movement to strengthen Marathi identity in the Maharashtra region. The Shiv Sena party also declared their intentions to do away with the term "Bollywood," a conflation of "Bombay" and "Hollywood" that refers to Mumbai's film industry. That name, though, has stuck around.

The name change didn't impact all of Mumbai's residents. Speakers of Marathi and Gujarati, the local languages, have always called the city Mumbai. "[Bombay](#)" is an anglicization of the Portuguese name "Bombaim," which is believed to derive from the phrase "Bom Bahia," or "Good Bay." (Portugal held territories in western India until 1961.)*

Several other Indian cities have changed their names in recent years. In 1996, Madras became Chennai. This name change was part of a similar effort by the state of Tamil Nadu to promote Tamil language and culture.

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

Correction, [July 14, 2006](#): This piece originally stated that Mumbai is still known as "Bambai" in India's national language, Hindi. The city's official name, regardless of language, is Mumbai. (Return to the corrected paragraph.)

Science

Obama in Your Heart

How the president-elect tapped into a powerful—and only recently studied—human emotion called "elevation."

By Emily Yoffe

Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 7:03 AM ET

For researchers of emotions, creating them in the lab can be a problem. Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California-Berkeley, studies the emotions of uplift,

and he has tried everything from showing subjects vistas of the Grand Canyon to reading them poetry—with little success. But just this week one of his postdocs came in with a great idea: Hook up the subjects, play Barack Obama's victory speech, and record as their autonomic nervous systems go into a swoon.

In his forthcoming book, *Born To Be Good* (which is not a biography of Obama), Keltner writes that he believes when we experience transcendence, it stimulates our vagus nerve, causing "a feeling of spreading, liquid warmth in the chest and a lump in the throat." For the 66 million Americans who voted for Obama, that experience was shared on Election Day, producing a collective case of an emotion that has only recently gotten research attention. It's called "elevation."

Elevation has always existed but has just moved out of the realm of philosophy and religion and been recognized as a distinct emotional state and a subject for psychological study. Psychology has long focused on what goes wrong, but in the past decade there has been an explosion of interest in "positive psychology"—what makes us feel good and why. University of Virginia moral psychologist [Jonathan Haidt](#), who coined the term *elevation*, writes, "Powerful moments of elevation sometimes seem to push a mental 'reset button,' wiping out feelings of cynicism and replacing them with feelings of hope, love, and optimism, and a sense of moral inspiration."

Haidt quotes first-century Greek philosopher Longinus on great oratory: "The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport." Such feeling was once a part of our public discourse. After hearing Abraham Lincoln's [second inaugural address](#), former slave Frederick Douglass said it was a "[sacred effort](#)." But uplifting rhetoric came to sound anachronistic, except as practiced by the occasional master like Martin Luther King Jr. or Ronald Reagan. And now Obama.

We come to elevation, Haidt writes, through observing others—their strength of character, virtue, or "moral beauty." Elevation evokes in us "a desire to become a better person, or to lead a better life." The 58 million McCain voters might say that the virtue and moral beauty displayed by Obama at his rallies was an airy promise of future virtue and moral beauty. And that the soaring feeling his voters had of having made the world a better place consisted of the act of placing their index fingers on a touch screen next to the words *Barack Obama*. They might be on to something. Haidt's research shows that elevation is good at provoking a desire to make a difference but not so good at motivating real action. But he says the elevation effect is powerful nonetheless. "It does appear to change people cognitively; it opens hearts and minds to new possibilities. This will be crucial for Obama."

Keltner believes certain people are "vagal superstars"—in the lab he has measured people who have high vagus nerve activity.

"They respond to stress with calmness and resilience, they build networks, break up conflicts, they're more cooperative, they handle bereavement better." He says being around these people makes other people feel good. "I would guarantee Barack Obama is off the charts. Just bring him to my lab."

It was while looking through the letters of Thomas Jefferson that Haidt first found a description of elevation. Jefferson wrote of the physical sensation that comes from witnessing goodness in others: It is to "dilate [the] breast and elevate [the] sentiments ... and privately covenant to copy the fair example." Haidt took this description as a mandate. Since it's tricky to study the vagus nerve, he and a psychology student conceived of a way to look at it indirectly. The vagus nerve works with oxytocin, the hormone of connection. Since oxytocin is released during breast-feeding, he and the student brought in 42 lactating women and had them watch either an inspiring clip from *The Oprah Winfrey Show* about a gang member saved from a life of violence by a teacher or an amusing bit from a Jerry Seinfeld routine.

About half the *Oprah*-watching mothers either leaked milk into nursing pads or nursed their babies following the viewing; none of the Seinfeld watchers felt enough breast dilation to wet a pad, and fewer than 15 percent of them nursed. You could say elevation is Oprah's opiate of the masses, so it's fitting that she early on gave Obama her imprimatur. And that for his victory speech was up front in Grant Park, elevation's moist embodiment, feeling so at one with humankind that she used a stranger as a [handkerchief](#).

The researchers say elevation is part of a family of self-transcending emotions. Some others are awe, that sense of the vastness of the universe and smallness of self that is often invoked by nature; another is admiration, that goose-bump-making thrill that comes from seeing exceptional skill in action. Keltner says we most powerfully experience these in groups—no wonder people spontaneously ran into the street on election night, hugging strangers. "We had to evolve these emotions to devote ourselves into social collectives," he says.

When you start thinking about mass movements, all those upturned, glowing faces of true believers—be they the followers of Jim Jones or Adolf Hitler—you don't always get a warm feeling about mankind. Instead, knowing where some of these "social collectives" end up, the sensation is a cold chill. Haidt acknowledges that in "calling the group to greatness," elevation can be used for murderous ends. He says: "Anything that takes us out of ourselves and makes us feel we are listening to something larger is part of morality. It's about pressing the buttons that turn off 'I' and turn on 'we.'"

Even at its most benign, elevation can seem ridiculous to outsiders. Think of how Obama's opponents love to [mock his effect](#) on people. During the campaign, if your chest was contracting while all about you chests were dilating, you may be

a Republican. If you were unmoved by Obama, watching your fellow citizen get all tingly, even fall into a faint (too much vagus stimulation, and you're going down), was maddening. "Other people's reverence seems unctuous and sanctimonious," says Keltner.

Obama himself seemed aware of the dangers that too much elevation might pop his candidacy like a helium balloon hitting a power line. Conservative columnist [Charles Krauthammer](#) [described](#) Obama's canny strategy to make his rhetoric more pedestrian for the final months of the campaign.

While there is very little lab work on the elevating emotions, there is quite a bit on its counterpart, disgust. University of Pennsylvania psychologist Paul Rozin has been a leading theorist in the uses of disgust. He says it started as a survival strategy: Early humans needed to figure out when food was spoiled by contact with bacteria or parasites. From there disgust expanded to the social realm—people became repelled by the idea of contact with the defiled or by behaviors that seemed to belong to lower people. "Disgust is probably the most powerful emotion that separates your group from other groups," says Keltner.

Haidt says disgust is the bottom floor of a vertical continuum of emotion; hit the up button, and you arrive at elevation. This could be why so many Obama supporters complained of being sickened and nauseated by the Republican campaign. Seeing a McCain ad or Palin video clip actually felt like being plunged from their Obama-lofted heights.

Disgust carries with it the notion of contamination, which helps to explain the Republicans' obsession with Bill Ayers, Tony Rezko, and Jeremiah Wright and their frustration that more voters didn't have a visceral reaction that Obama had unforgivably sullied himself by association with these men. But this time, elevation won. And expect that on Inauguration Day, even if the weather's frigid, millions will be warmed by that liquid feeling in their chests.

slate v

Obama's First Month in Two Minutes

A daily video from *Slate V*

Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 11:44 AM ET

slate v

Is Michael Scott Running NASA?

A daily video from *Slate V*

Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 11:13 AM ET

slate v

MILF, and Proud of It

A daily video from *Slate V*

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 1:58 PM ET

slate v

Dear Prudence: Unwilling Other Woman

A daily video from *Slate V*

Monday, December 1, 2008, at 10:48 AM ET

sports nut

Rick Reilly's Complete Dental Records

Why is America's most famous sportswriter obsessed with molars, gingivitis, and floss?

By Josh Levin

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 7:53 AM ET

In 1998, Rick Reilly wrote that Carolina Panthers quarterback Kerry Collins had "all the 'nads of a jelly Danish" for asking to be taken out of the team's starting lineup. "Maybe I'm just getting old, but I remember when your average NFL player would come to the sideline, spit out three bicuspid, Scotch-tape his humerus together and get back out there," [Reilly opined in *Sports Illustrated*](#). On Nov. 19 of this year, [Reilly praised Collins in *ESPN the Magazine*](#), explaining that the QB "never makes excuses" for his failings. By contrast, he asks us to consider Dieter Baumann, a German runner who nine years ago explained away the results of a drug test by saying his "toothpaste was spiked."

It's not particularly significant that Rick Reilly did a 180 on Kerry Collins, who has improbably led the Tennessee Titans to an 11-1 record this year. Every columnist should be entitled to change his opinion, and Reilly—the 11-time [National Sportswriter of the Year](#), longtime [resident of *SI's* back page](#), and recent [ESPN hire](#)—is more entitled than most. What is worth noting, however, is the remarkable persistence of Reilly's favorite linguistic maneuver: the dental one-liner.

Bicuspid and toothpaste are just the beginning of Reilly's oral fixation. Dental floss is a particular passion. In a July 2005 *SI* column, he said that riding in Lance Armstrong's team car at the Tour de France was "about as boring as flossing a shark." "I'd sooner floss crocodiles" than go skydiving, he wrote in 2003. Three months before that, he broke off a punch line—"Clyde Barrow used to floss"—that had something to do with Utah

basketball coach Rick Majerus. Tiger Woods' victory in the 2002 Masters had, in Reilly's estimation, "all the suspense of a good floss." In 2001, after complaining at length about baseball commissioner Bud Selig, he added: "On the plus side, he flosses regularly." In 2000, he said that a hammerhead is the "kind of shark that flosses triathletes from between its teeth." A year earlier: Wayne Gretzky "would rather spend a year flossing rhinos" than undertake a long farewell tour. Upon turning 40 in 1998, Reilly imagined his perfect day: Play strip poker with Heidi Klum, watch Pat Riley go bald, "[f]orget to floss." That January, he observed that downhill "[s]kiing isn't like flossing sharks." In 1992, Reilly conjured the perfect endorsement opportunity for large-toothed Broncos QB John Elway: Johnson & Johnson dental floss. And in 1990, he noted that a golf contraption called the Swing Ring was "as much fun as flossing." (In the interest of brevity, I'll omit the floss joke that [Reilly cracked recently on ESPN.com](#), as well as the two floss quips in his golf novel [Missing Links](#).)

Pick up a handful of Reilly's columns, and you'll soon be overwhelmed by the patois of the hygienist's office: cavities, fillings, molars, root canals, gingivitis. News database searches of the sportswriter's output for the *Los Angeles Times*, *SI*, the *Times* of London, and ESPN, as well as an examination of four of his books, reveal that Reilly has cracked a minimum of 116 dental jokes in his career: 95 in his newspaper and magazine writing and 21 in his books. My not-so-scientific tooth-joke-finding methodology: to Nexis and Google every chopper-related word I could think of. The final total would've been a lot higher if I hadn't restricted it to tooth references that were 100 percent superfluous—that is, jokes and turns of phrase that come out of nowhere in otherwise toothless stories. Any dental fragment that appeared for a defensible reason—Reilly sharing an anecdote about a [basketball player's bloody tooth falling into his notebook](#), or explaining what it's like to be a Chicago [dentist who shares a name with Michael Jordan](#)—didn't make my count. (I was a little less forgiving when it came to Reilly's fiction, considering that he manufactured all of the tooth-baring scenarios.)

As a service to sportswriting and dentistry aficionados, I've compiled [all of Reilly's tooth jokes on a single page](#), with a link to the relevant story when available. Along with all the floss, you'll find 11 molars (three of which are impacted), nine tooth-having or floss-happy animals (three sharks, two crocodiles, two rhinos, a deer, and a schnauzer), seven allusions to picking one's teeth (the items picked out include spinach, AstroTurf, and Retief Goosen), six sets of bicuspid, six orthodontists, five dentists, four allusions to the pains of gum surgery, two cavities (one of which belongs to a sick crocodile), and references to both "standing around waiting" and PGA Tour Qualifying School as evoking anesthetic-free dental surgery. For visual learners, there's a tag cloud below—the larger the word, the more Reilly's used it. (Mouse over each word to see exactly how many times it's been deployed.)

Fig. 1: Rick Reilly's Dental Tag Cloud



Read all of Reilly's tooth jokes in one sitting, and you'll get an alternative, oral history of the last two decades in sports. In one of his maiden *SI* pieces in 1985, Reilly described soon-to-be hit king Pete Rose as "sliding molars first." When Tiger Woods first rose to fame as an amateur in 1995, he wrote that the golfer possessed "a Steinway smile that would make an orthodontist go broke." Mark McGwire chased Roger Maris' home run record in 1998, brandishing "the kind of power that causes 50,000 people to display their cavities in unison." And this year, as A-Rod became a tabloid staple, Reilly said that the Yankees third baseman probably wished that "he'd gone into dentistry."

Despite an early affection for molars—six mentions between 1985 and 1990—Reilly's mouth fetish didn't really take off until he started writing a regular weekly column for *Sports Illustrated* in 1998. As you'll see in the chart below, seven of the writer's top-eight tooth years have come in the last decade. (Note that the bar graph takes into account only Reilly's newspaper and magazine stories.)

Fig. 2: Dental Jokes By Year

It's understandable that Reilly's tooth-joke rate would increase as his writing metabolism sped up. The most likely reason for the sportswriter's dental surge, though, is the influence of legendary [Los Angeles Times sports columnist Jim Murray](#). Six months after he took over *SI*'s back page, [Reilly eulogized Murray beautifully](#), saying that the Pulitzer winner's "column was about sports sort of the way [Citizen Kane](#) was about sleds." (He also wrote a [4,500-word profile of Murray](#) for *SI* in 1986.) Reilly seeks to emulate his hero's breadth and humanism in his own writing, regularly centering his stories around "[great, heroic deeds from small people](#)." His words also betray the influence of Murray's sharp sense of humor. To Murray, Rickey Henderson had "a strike zone the size of Hitler's heart." His suggestion for how to kick off the Indianapolis 500: "[Gentlemen, start your coffins!](#)"

The Murray-Reilly school of one-liner-based column-craft demands a bottomless wit and a skill for self-editing. Humorists like Dave Barry and Gene Weingarten spend paragraphs setting up and detonating a single joke; Reilly launches a grenade every other sentence. When you're such an ostentatious jokester, every punch line is a referendum on whether you're still funny. A good way to lose that referendum is to pop in a molar quip every time you can't think of a Murray-esque witticism.

It's no crime to have a taste for all things dental. Sure, tooth jokes are often corny, but *bicuspid* and *gingivitis* are legitimately funny words. Mouth metaphors can also be quite apt on occasion—the PGA Tour's Q-school does seem a bit like anesthetic-free dental surgery. In broader terms, no one would deny the comedian or the columnist the use of catchphrases and deliberate repetitions. The great Chicago newspaperman Mike Royko regularly trotted out characters like [Slats Grobnik](#), and the *New York Times*' Maureen Dowd drops nicknames like "Rummy" and "Poppy Bush" to give her columns a consistent tone and vernacular. Reilly's ESPN colleague Bill Simmons, too, has a list of regular talking points that function as a kind of call-and-response with his readership: trips to Vegas with his team of sidekicks, copious *Karate Kid* references, and how-sports-work explications like the [Ewing Theory](#) and the [Levels of Losing](#).

But that's not Reilly's game. His reaching for the floss is an unconscious tic, not a willful decision to mine the mouth for comedy. In response to an e-mail query, Reilly says he wasn't aware of his dental habit. "I know gingivitis is funny," he writes, adding that "root canals are generally a strong image." He then offers a psychoanalytic explanation: "I was a terrible Sugar Babies addict, so I had more cavities than the surface of the moon. Really, I'd have three and four every time. So maybe I'm taking it out on dentists."

Reilly says this isn't new territory for him: Around 1995, a reader complained that he'd overused the word *spleen*. "When you've been writing columns for 30 years," he continues in his e-mail, "I suppose you exhaust every body part." (He also asks if

I've counted his references to Barcaloungers. I just did: 15.) The not-enough-body-parts defense is a reasonable one. It's also a symptom of how difficult it is to sustain a wisecrack-heavy writing style. At a certain point, your comic imagination will be outstripped by your perpetual need to fill your column with yuks. A good marker for when there's no more toothpaste left in your tube: the day you make your 116th dental joke.

Reilly is a gifted essayist and wordsmith. His long profile of Bryant Gumbel, "[The Mourning Anchor](#)," written for *SI* a decade before he became the mag's featured columnist, is one of the greatest pieces of sportswriting I've ever read. The first column that Reilly wrote for ESPN back in June, about [reconciling with his alcoholic father](#), is a remarkable demonstration of how much you can say in just 800 words. The rest of his ESPN output, though, has shown signs of complacency. In just six months, he's made five tooth jokes and written two separate columns that refer to a [rat gnawing on someone's stomach](#). Both Reilly and his editors need to start giving his copy more attention. He's far too talented a writer to succumb to something as treatable as tooth decay.

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ESPN the Magazine

Nov. 19, 2008

[Tired of athletes' excuses? Kerry Collins is your guy.](#)

Long-distance runner Dieter Baumann, on why he tested positive for steroids in 1999: My **toothpaste was spiked**.

Oct. 29, 2008

[One coach still knows more than all the others combined.](#)

[John Wooden] is as square as a pan of fudge and **honest as a toothache**, but I love him.

Oct. 8, 2008

[You try walking away from the NFL. It ain't easy.](#)

Forced out of the NFL after 15 years as a legendary safety, [John Lynch had] just watched his old team, the Broncos, beat San Diego in a 39-38 **molar-grinder**.

Aug. 28, 2008

[All World Power Rankings: Special Rick Reilly Edition!](#)

[Denver Broncos kicker Jim Turner] was so alone, he could've caught it, **stopped to floss** and still made it into the end zone. Greatest day in my 19-year-old life.

July 23, 2008

[Hey, what's-your-name! I love you.](#)

Madonna once said, "I won't be happy until I am more famous than God," but right now A-Rod is probably wishing she wasn't—and that he'd **gone into dentistry**.

Sports Illustrated

Sept. 17, 2007

[School for the Uncool](#)

Six-four with a chin you can crack coconuts on. Eyes greener than the 13th at Augusta. And one of those oh-darn-I-forgot-to-shave-and-now-I-look-like-a-cologne-ad beards. But it's not [Tom Brady's] heroic arm or his lifeguard body or his **Crest smile** that makes women smooth their skirts and men curse their parents.

Sept. 10, 2007

[Catch as Catch Can](#)

You say you're 41 years old and your **fastball is slower than gums receding** and your pitches are so wild people get hurt catching you? Then you must be Tim Wakefield, the Red Sox righthander who gives every fettuccine-armed wannabe major league pitcher hope.

Nov. 20, 2006

[Everything Must Go](#)

Every crook and nanny must have an ad on it. I want **Crest ads across the front of mouth guards** and Gillette Fusion across chin straps.

Sept. 18, 2006

[A Hall Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts](#)

Let's see ... **Leon Spinks's two front teeth** (we're surprising him for Christmas), Alonzo Mourning's bad kidney. Here's the **three false teeth that Bobby Hull auctioned off** in Quebec in 2004, the ones he says were lost "during a bedroom romp in a Geneva, Switzerland, hotel."

Aug. 28, 2006

[Foul-Weather Friend](#)

I'm a Euro now. Changed my passport and everything. I like real football now, not fat guys in helmets. I no longer see the point in **regular dental checkups**.

March 13, 2006

[The Ceremonial First Sales Pitch](#)

I feel sorry for certain people. **Leon Spinks's orthodontist**. Bode Miller's agent. Anybody in a ham-eating contest with James Gandolfini.

July 25, 2005

[Along for the \(Wild\) Ride](#)

This year, in [Lance] Armstrong's last Tour, he finally gave in. I

got to ride in The Car with [team director Johan] Bruyneel and one of the team's mechanics. ... And it was boring—if you were riding a bike. But if you were with Bruyneel, who drives as if his boxers were on fire, it was about as boring as **flossing a shark**.

May 16, 2005

[Furious George](#)

Be advised that [George Steinbrenner] is returning from the Kentucky Derby soon after a very, very bad weekend. Personally, I would give him a wider berth than **Sean Penn with an impacted molar**.

Feb. 14, 2005

[Making the Right Calls](#)

Of course, after [Patriots receiver Deion] Branch won the MVP, he thanked God, his blockers, his coaches—everyone but his **dental hygienist** and his own marvelous Velcro hands.

Sept. 27, 2004

[Let the Blame Begin](#)

The Ryder Cup is a biennial **Walk to the Gum Surgeon** for [Tiger] Woods, who seems to enjoy the event the way Joan of Arc enjoyed bonfires.

Sept. 21, 2004

[Ryder Needs New Rules](#)

No more cigars on the course. And no more having so damn much fun. Everybody has to play these matches like the Americans, as though they are **on their way to gum surgery**.

Sept. 15, 2004

[Rick Reilly's Ryder Cup Preview](#)

Nail the shutters. Tie down the pets. **SuperGlue the dentures**. Here comes golf's Hell Week, the Ryder Cup.

Aug. 23, 2004

[One Not-So-Shining Moment](#)

I sat on the embankment and waited. Not exactly as glamorous a deal as I'd pictured. Eventually, a **fat old woman with three teeth** and wearing a bikini top came up and spat out what sounded like a question in Greek. To which I replied, "No, the swimsuit issue is closed for next year, but thanks for asking."

July 26, 2004

[Jack Nicholson's Diary](#)

And if you think I'm bad, you ought to see the owner, Jerry Buss. He used to be **all tan and teeth**. But ever since he fired a coach with nine rings and traded a center with three, he looks like a guy whose Viagra just ran out.

June 28, 2004

[Different Tiger, Different Rules](#)

Woods was at it again on Sunday at the U.S. Open at Shinnecock after finishing in 17th place, 14 shots behind the

kind of guy he used to **pick out of his teeth**, Retief Goosen. ... Tiger's caddie, Steve Williams, has all the charm of a **rhino with an impacted molar**.

Jan. 19, 2004

[What's In? Wrinkled 'Skin](#)

If age is the rage, let's find more! Who's the next geezer to be asked to take his **teeth out of the nightstand glass** and sink them into a foundering franchise?

Dec. 22, 2003

[Greatest Invention, Period](#)

Not convinced, she says, "O.K., tomorrow, you'll have to go up to school and **take Denise to the orthodontist** and then drop her at her clarinet lesson...." But of course you're enthralled with Timberwolves 102, Clippers 98. And this is what you hear instead: "O.K., tomorrow Kevin Garnett will have to go up and underdodontist and then drop four threes on her clarinet lesson...."

Nov. 24, 2003

[What, Me Panic?](#)

"No, I'm not ready to skydive!" you want to say. "I'm about to suffer a premature deployment in my boxers and jettison my lunch here! Every other flight I've ever been on, they won't let us off if the jetway isn't within two inches of the door, and you want me to step out into the bottomless blue sky? **I'd sooner floss crocodiles**, thanks."

Oct. 27, 2003

[War Games](#)

And suddenly there it was, a slice of America: Field Afa, a Yankee Stadium with real Yankees, a place as beautiful to these men as **Fenway Park is to a Dorchester dentist**.

Aug. 11, 2003

[Corrupting Our Utes](#)

And I don't want to hear how clean the Utah program has been either, or how, under [coach Rick] Majerus, the Utes have had four Academic All-Americans in the last five years, more than any other Division I basketball program. **Clyde Barrow used to floss**. So what?

April 28, 2003

[Playing Hardball](#)

Ask yourself: Has anybody run onto an NFL field since Baltimore Colts linebacker Mike Curtis clotheslined that cretin more than 30 years ago? How many lint-brains jump onto the ice at NHL games, when they can see players coming off **spitting bicuspids**?

Oct. 28, 2002

[Fan Power](#)

Amendment VI: The fan shall be afforded a fair and speedy baseball game and not suffer through human glaciers like Nomar

Garciparra stepping out of the batter's box to readjust his hat, sleeves, gloves, groin and stirrups after every pitch; nor shall the fan suffer TV camera closeups so tight that said fan can see the piece of **spinach on a pitcher's tooth**, all the while leaving said fan no idea that the infield has shifted and the first base coach is on fire.

Oct. 14, 2002

[Ten Years After](#)

Next thing you know, Elway gets hurt, and you become, at 21, the youngest QB to take an NFL snap in 46 years. First up, the Los Angeles Raiders. "[Tommy Maddox] looked like my paperboy," Howie Long says after the game, **picking parts of you out of his teeth**.

Sept. 27, 2002

[Sam's Long Gone](#)

The par-four 10th at The Belfry used to be the last page of a Tom Clancy novel, Evel Knievel revving a Harley, President Clinton in front of a grand jury. ... Now, thanks to [European Ryder Cup captain Sam] Torrance, it's a warm arugula sandwich, Sunday morning in Milton Keynes, a **three-day seminar on gingivitis**. It's the dullest, dumbest, dopiest hole in golf.

Aug. 26, 2002

[Demolition Experts](#)

We witnessed the destruction of 57 cars (total blue book value: \$938). We thrilled to spine-tingling action with 5,000 other derby-lievers (**total teeth**: 12,874).

July 29, 2002

[It's an Ad, Ad, Ad, Ad World](#)

Do you **grind your molars** when you see the feared Oakland Raiders play at Network Associates Coliseum? ... I want more ads. I want them everywhere. The more the better. If they could find a way to project the Pepsodent logo onto Tiger Woods's **pearly whites**, I would be delighted.

April 22, 2002

[Killer Instinct](#)

[Tiger Woods' second Masters win] had all the **suspense of a good floss**. Maybe less. ... The leaders teed off at 2:10. By 2:21 Goosen had three-putted number 1, and Woods had a lead **between his choppers** he would never let go.

Feb. 11, 2002

[In Like Flynn](#)

The NFL once told [Super Bowl gatecrasher Dion] Rich if it ever caught him on the field again, he'd be finding out if he could sneak out of jail. He agreed to stay off the fields—but he never said anything about stadiums. A streak is a streak, wartime or peace, and the Gate Crasher knew what lay before him: He must descend into hell and **pull the devil's teeth**.

Feb. 4, 2002

[White Like Me](#)

See, we White Guys know we suck. We hear it all the time. When we hoop, we've got White Man's Disease. When we dance, we've got **White Man's Overbite**.

Nov. 19, 2001

[Star-Studded Lineup](#)

This is baseball commissioner Bud Selig. Homicide brought him in on charges of a) plotting to murder two teams--probably the Minnesota Twins and the Montreal Expos; b) choking the buzz out of one of the greatest World Series; c) killing any chance there was of avoiding a lockout or strike next season; and d) scamming for his own dog-ass Milwaukee Brewers, who would muscle in on the Twins' fans and TV market if Minnesota gets whacked. On the plus side, **he flosses regularly**. ... This is New York Jets defensive back Damien Robinson. He was busted for the ugliest face-masking since Tammy Faye Bakker. Robinson says he didn't know that he had hold of New Orleans Saints' quarterback Aaron Brooks's face mask. What did you think it was, Damien, **orthodontic headgear**?

Nov. 12, 2001

[Brigham Young? I Don't Think So](#)

Of course, the Cougars aren't nearly as much fun on the road as the Cowboys. Just a bunch of guys sitting around in their rooms, reading the *Wall Street Journal* and **picking UNLV players out of their teeth**.

June 11, 2001

[Josephine Palookas](#)

Take this Friday night, when Muhammad Ali's daughter Laila will fight Joe Frazier's daughter Jacqui in Verona, N.Y., in a bout billed as Ali-Frazier IV. The IV doesn't refer to intravenous drip, which is what both will probably need after the fight because they come at an opponent, eyes closed, as your little sister did when you **made fun of her braces**.

Dec. 11, 2000

[Paralympic Paradox](#)

In other words, there were more bogus handicaps in Sydney than at a **dentists' golf tournament**.

Nov. 27, 2000

[Hangin' with the Chads in Tallahassee](#)

[Cokie] Roberts: But you don't understand! It all seems to have come down to a single hanging chad! Bubba: Missy, you best change it back 'fore I make you run a **recount on yer teeth**.

April 3, 2000

[Jaws IV: Snack Time in Sydney](#)

In the last six weeks there were at least nine shark-related incidents in and near Sydney Harbor, the site of the swimming segment of the triathlon. Three sharks were caught just outside the harbor in two days--one bull, one silky and one 17-foot great

hammerhead, which is the kind of **shark that flosses triathletes from between its teeth**.

Jan. 24, 2000

[He Needs a Dream](#)

Ain't that a **kick in the biceps** for [Packers general manager Ron] Wolf? He pulls [Ray] Rhodes off the Salvation Army pile after Rhodes was canned in Philadelphia (the Eagles went 6-9-1 and 3-13 in his last two seasons as coach), and now Wolf's getting his cerebellum beaten in for it.

Dec. 13, 1999

[The NBA Player Who Has Never Scored](#)

In his life [Lakers forward A.C.] Green has had just two girlfriends, one in high school and one five years ago. Now, if Green looked like Jughead or **picked his teeth with his toenails** or smelled like the state fair, you could maybe believe that.

Nov. 29, 1999

[The BCS Formula: Bad Will Hunting](#)

[Psi]: **Number of teeth in Virginia Tech home crowd** divided by number of shoes. (Usually equals 1.)

Oct. 25, 1999

[The Buck Stops Here](#)

Plus these hunters keep coming at us with more and more stuff. They've got solunar tables and laser sights and night goggles. We don't even have **decent teeth**!

Oct. 18, 1999

[Sis! Boom! Bah! Humbug!](#)

This is the event in which 408 girls named Amber attempt to create a human Eiffel Tower, screaming, "Two! Four! Six! Eight!" while **displaying all their gums** at once.

May 17, 1999

[This One's From the \[Gutter\] Heart](#)

In fact, Detroit fans, taken as a whole, [**might have an entire set of teeth** among them] are delightful zealots for their team.

April 26, 1999

[No Fuss Necessary in Wayne's World](#)

Last week everybody up to and including the prime minister of Canada begged Gretzky to play one more season, give the world one last chance to ticker-tape the greatest team athlete in history. Gretzky would rather **spend a year flossing rhinos** than do that.

April 12, 1999

[Funny You Should Ask](#)

I don't think the meaning of life is **gnashing our biceps** over what comes after death but tasting all the tiny moments that come before it.

Feb. 15, 1999

[The Embraceable Replace-a-Bulls](#)

I like the Bulls now. In fact, I'm rooting for the Bulls. I feel sorry for them. What they're up against you wouldn't wish on a **discount gum surgeon**.

Dec. 14, 1998

[The Blind Leading the Blind](#)

Look, officiating in the NFL during the 1990s isn't easy. Most of the time it's like standing on the side of a freeway trying to I.D. the **vegetable stuck between the incisors of a woman in a passing Ferrari**.

Nov. 30, 1998

[Hey, Guys, Get a \(Poli-\)Grip!](#)

On Monday night, Dec. 21, Denver plays at Miami, and if the Broncos are 14-0, the '72ers will make another sideline stand, **baring their dentures**, ready to trip fullbacks with a well-placed cane or wipe out cornerbacks with a flying prune. ... Nobody's put this kind of **Poli-Grip on faded glories since the Rolling Stones**.

Oct. 19, 1998

[The Heart of the Matter](#)

Maybe I'm just getting old, but I remember when your average NFL player would come to the sideline, **spit out three bicuspid**s, Scotch-tape his humerus together and get back out there. Now we have Sta-Puft-like Carolina Panthers quarterback Kerry Collins, who has all the 'nads of a jelly Danish.

Sept. 14, 1998

[You Had to See It to Believe It](#)

I can still see [Mark McGwire's] face. He had this withering glare at the plate, like a bouncer with bunions, but he was as quick to laugh as any man I've known. He would sign for all the kids, but he could spot a collector at a hundred rows. He would **pick a piece of spinach out of his teeth** and it would make the 11 o'clock news, yet he stayed decent and next-door through it all.

Sept. 7, 1998

[The Good Father](#)

What Mark McGwire is doing right now is one of the great achievements in the history of sports, not just because he, like Sammy Sosa of the Cubs, is closing in on Roger Maris's record of 61 home runs in a season, but also because he's breaking it with the kind of power that causes 50,000 people to **display their cavities in unison**.

Sept. 7, 1998

[What Would No. 62 Be Worth to You?](#)

"Listen!" yells [baseball old-timer Ty] Cobb, pointing at you. "Whaddya pull down a year, \$25,000 tops? You got a car that still runs on leaded. Your wife ain't had a new dress since the

Nixon Administration. Your **kids' teeth look like Stonehenge**. You can't afford somebody else's morals!"

April 13, 1998

[Hey, This Turning 40 Ain't So Bad After All](#)

I turned 40 recently. Asked what I wanted, I said, "The Perfect Day." ... 1:05—Satisfying accords reached onboard: Patrick Ewing to be called for traveling every time he touches ball, cliched dumping of Gatorade on NFL coaches outlawed, **bicuspid-bashing goons** banned from NHL but made mandatory at major league baseball owners' meetings. Commissioners praise wisdom, parachute out. ... 2:36—**Forget to floss**.

Jan. 19, 1998

[Slippery Slopes](#)

Skiing isn't like flossing sharks. Just read the little signs, listen to the guys in the bright-red coats and try to make sure your last run isn't really your last run.

Aug. 25, 1997

[You Da Man!](#)

[Golfer Jeff] Maggert's Christmas was **Tommy Tolles's root canal**, since it was Tolles whom Maggert bumped from in at nine to out at 11, after Tolles had spent the entire summer in the top 10. "I stuck a dagger in my own heart," he said.

June 9, 1997

[Four!](#)

Other guys, they'd roll their eyes and say stuff like "It's preposterous even to think about it in this day and age." [Tiger Woods], though, is looking right into **the Slam's dental work** and not even blinking.

May 12, 1997

[A Nose Rings Runs Through It](#)

TV fancy lady Oprah Winfrey banned Chicago Bulls forward Dennis Rodman from plugging his new book—*Walk on the Wild Side*—on her show last week, calling it "vulgar." Well, Oprah, what you know about jock books wouldn't fill a **dentist's spit cup**.

April 21, 1997

[Strokes of Genius](#)

Only 47-year-old Tom Kite, who would finish second in the same sense that Germany finished second in World War II, refused to give up. He was a **schnauzer with his teeth locked onto the tailpipe of a Greyhound bus** as it was pulling into beltway traffic.

Nov. 4, 1996

[In a Pig's Eye](#)

Faced with a drunken fan screaming obscenities and **spitting tobacco juice through stained teeth**, you... a. call security b. change seats c. ask Mom to chill

March 27, 1995

[Goodness Gracious, He's a Great Ball of Fire](#)

This is because corporate golf wants to get its bar graphs on Woods very badly. He is as fresh and handsome as a soap ad. He has a **Steinway smile that would make an orthodontist go broke.**

June 20, 1994

[Stop This Madness!](#)

We figured Withers over in receivables had pretty much put a cap on the Cuproariousness when he came to work with his **teeth dyed green, red and yellow** (Cameroon's colors, of course), but then we all came to work and noticed the water in the cooler was Netherlands orange, the work of Hackenfuss in benefits.

May 30, 1994

[Dealt a Bad Hand](#)

There is a vague royalty to caddies. They are usually neither well schooled nor well dressed, neither well-bred nor well-off; they may need a shave and two showers and **three visits to the dentist**; but when they are on the golf course, millionaires hang on their every word.

March 15, 1993

[Fore! Don't Touch That Dial!](#)

And, then, when you found out that the airtime would be filled with instructional shows, golf movies, talk shows and live feeds from Asian, Australian, European and LPGA tournaments, you still thought that **watching dental plaque form** sounded more interesting.

Jan. 25, 1993

[Here They Come Again](#)

Comebacks like the one by Buffalo's un-Bill-ievable defensive end Bruce Smith, who lined up with a set of bruised, braised and barbecued ribs and still spent **more time in Miami Dolphin quarterback Dan Marino's face than Marino's dentist.**

Nov. 9, 1992

[How Much Is an Arm and a Leg?](#)

"Can't you see Leonard Nimoy buying up the rights to 'In Search of . . . Herschel Walker's Neck'? Or **Johnson & Johnson dental floss acquiring the rights to John Elway's teeth?** 'Buy it in the 3,000-yard size!'"

July 15, 1991

[I Don't Want To Hear One More Word](#)

The Giffords' Ultra Slim-Fast commercials. Please. Fat has never made it to within a county line of these two. Even at 60, Frank looks as if he could **brush his teeth and beat up Mickey Rourke** at the same time.

June 17, 1991

[Man of Iron](#)

On the course, [golfer Lanny Wadkins] always looks as if he would rather be **undergoing gum surgery** than playing golf, but when the round's over, Lanny's the one who asks, "What time tomorrow?"

June 17, 1991

[Work Out the Kinks](#)

The league MVP was (drumroll, please) Stan Gelbaugh. No, not a Phoenix **orthodontist**, but the London Monarchs' quarterback.

July 9, 1990

[Sure Cures](#)

This gadget taught us to keep our head rock steady through the swing, and we hit more good shots with it than bad. We give it a birdie. Unfortunately, it looks like **night braces, those things kids wear to bed to straighten their teeth.** . . . You mean, Bobby Heins is using the Swing Ring! Order me a dozen! This thing is about **as much fun as flossing.**

April 16, 1990

[True Brit](#)

The real [Raymond] Floyd is about as much fun on a golf course as an **OSHA inspector with a toothache.**

April 2, 1990

[The 12th](#)

No, the best hole in the country is a hellacious, wonderful, terrifying, simple, treacherous, impossible, perfect **molar-knocker of a par-3.**

March 26, 1990

[His Name Is Mudd](#)

[Golfer Jodie] Mudd is short on pounds but long on guts. He kept **Calcavecchia's famous molars** out of his backside the entire day, matching Calcavecchia's final-round 69 with a 69 of his own.

Feb. 7, 1989

[Tannia and Me](#)

For those of us under 35, those of us who spent our Wonder years with SI, our voice-cracking, **orthodontist-funding, Richie Cunningham years** with it, the swimsuit issue was a kind of annual hormonal chart, a libidinal litmus test.

Feb. 7, 1989

[Hola! Gracias! Destapador!](#)

Where to surf: Anywhere. Nearly every place we went had very good, head-high surf. The best places we saw were in Puerto Escondido, Ixtapa and just south of Acapulco, but the surfers who showed us the best spots said they would personally **wax my teeth to my tongue** if I told you exactly where they were.

Dec. 12, 1988

[A Trio at the Top](#)

Townsend had returned a fumble for a touchdown against Seattle on the previous Sunday night. With two TDs this season Townsend has more than Lofton, Gault and Christensen put together. [Raiders owner Al] Davis must have been **grinding his molars**.

Feb. 1, 1988

[All Action, No Talk](#)

"I'm a straight-ahead guy," he says. "If you say you're going to be one way, don't be left of it or right of it." Or, as one of Haynes's old coaches puts it, "If you tell Mark it's going to rain, it better rain." [Denver Broncos cornerback Mark] Haynes is to small talk what **David Letterman is to orthodontics**.

Nov. 30, 1987

[Season for No Reason](#)

The NFC is also mastering mediocrity. Most of the glamour teams are **picking AstroTurf out of their teeth**.

June 22, 1987

[Bowed but Not Broken](#)

But even [Jack] Nicklaus never had *two* majors—in a row—**snapped out of his molars**, the way [Greg] Norman did.

Jan. 12, 1987

[Guts, Brains and Glory](#)

Having safely eaten his steak, the Hurricanes' 285-pound All-America defensive tackle and designated orator, Jerome Brown, said, "Did the Japanese sit down and eat with Pearl Harbor before they bombed them? No. We're out of here." And out he Marched with all the Canes in tow, leaving the Lions and Fiesta Bowl officials with their **molars hanging out**.

June 23, 1986

[Guts, Grit and Grandeur](#)

Golf's time-tunnel tour came to Long Island's chichi Hamptons last week, to the land of **tans and teeth** and two-day workweeks, and it lingered there long enough to send us whirling back to the future again.

Sept. 4, 1985

[University of Arkansas Season Preview](#)

[Kevin] Wyatt, who was All-SWC in 1984 at cornerback with five interceptions, got the job because a) he's fast, b) he's sneaky, and c) he's not particularly averse to having his **dental work redone by a size 12**. Last year he blocked two field-goal tries.

Aug. 19, 1985

[On Deck for the Big Knock](#)

Anyway, all these things came to Rose for his uncanny ability to get hits. Celebrity arrived for what he did between them—

sliding molars first, running even when he walked, bouncing baseballs off AstroTurf to punctuate the end of an inning.

The Times of London

Sept. 18, 2004

[First offenders get no sure shank redemption](#)

Your lungs are inquiring why there's no air to breathe, your mind wants to know why you didn't give up this golf notion and **go to dental school** like your mother wanted you to, and your sphincter has closed up shop entirely.

Los Angeles Times

Feb. 11, 1985

Rogers Reaches a New Height in Being Low

If we are going to be fibbed to and then catch the fibber with his pants down, we at least expect to hear a reasonably creative excuse. We at least want [former Arizona State football coach Darryl] Rogers to tell us he **had an orthodontist's appointment** and didn't have time to tell us the truth or that his dog threw up on the Detroit contract and he couldn't see his signature on it or at least that the computer was down.

[Shanks For Nothing: A Novel](#), 2007

Page 49

She never seemed to answer her cell. Girl can be as **stubborn as an impacted molar**.

Page 105

It was a magnificent course, splendid, huge, epic, gorgeous, **manufactured as if by toothbrushes**, greens like a Marine buzz cut, double-cut fairways, tee boxes you would happily roll around naked upon.

Page 160-61

"Commodore Worstenheim?" he was calling in a shaky Scottish accent, walking right toward us. "Commodore Worstenheim?" The dad practically **spit out his dentures**.

Page 195

"Okay, what the fuck's going on here?" the mark said. He was about to start **rearranging dental fillings**.

Page 196

Two **spit out a tooth** and looked up at him as he pulled away. "You're not Mr. Fredericks, are you?"

Page 238

Two shook the bells out of his head and **spit out another tooth**. I walked over and stepped on his neck.

Page 243

The whole room went dead silent, with everybody staring at Dannie wide-eyed and slack-jawed. Two Down **spit out yet another tooth**.

[Who's Your Caddy?: Looping for the Great, Near Great, and Reprobates of Golf](#), 2003

Page 147

Big Al looks to me like a man who would no sooner want to bet Dewey in golf than he would like to fill a **cavity on a sick crocodile**.

Page 193

To Casey Martin, standing around waiting is like **anesthetic-free dental surgery** to you and me.

[Slo Mo!](#), 2000

Page 42

A 7-8 hat rack with spectacles named Maurice "Slo-Mo" Finsternick killed the Kings last night, which, when you consider that he is just slightly slower than erosion, is like saying that **gingivitis killed the Huns**.

Page 60

In fact, I got only four points, no offensive rebounds, **one chipped tooth**, two knees in the groin ...

Page 68

Plus, I got only one rebound, no fouls, no assists, a black eye, a split lip, and my left **bicuspid** knocked out.

Page 145

We both laughed and she had the most beautiful smile. She must've had **twice the amount of teeth most girls have**.

[Missing Links](#), 1997

Page 32

And she was dreaming about that life the day she saw, coming over the emerald-green hill, a man straight out of a J. Crew catalogue—crushingly handsome, **all tan and teeth**.

Page 83

I tried for the PGA Tour, but I got killed in Tour Qualifying School, which is 600 guys trying for 50 places, which is the nearest thing on this earth to **anesthetic-free dental surgery**.

Page 91

To me, most of these guys looked like they **picked their teeth with welfare mothers** and wiped their feet on woven children.

Page 94

The red-brick wall that was so dilapidated on our side looked like they sent a **team of convicts with toothbrushes** out every day to scrub the mortar on this side.

Page 169

This ain't you and me and Chunk chipping into Manelli's drive-thru window. This is lawyer whip-out stuff. These guys **floss out chunks of guys like you**.

Page 197

If you ever so much as look up my phone number to call me again, I'll come down to your office or Republican National Headquarters or whatever you call it and **floss your teeth with my 7-iron**.

Page 242

Sure, he groaned, **spitting out a tooth** and holding his knee. "This is NOT my favorite putting green, y'know what I mean?"

Page 264

I could make a double bogey and Hoover a triple and we'd win. We'd be laughing. **Nothin' but teeth**.

supreme court dispatches

The Wheels on the Bus

The Supreme Court tries to imagine its way out of a sex discrimination case.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 6:51 PM ET

It took six months for Jacqueline Fitzgerald, a kindergartener in Hyannis, Mass., to tell her parents that every time she wore a skirt on the school bus—typically two or three times a week—a third-grade boy forced her to lift it, pull down her underwear, and spread her legs while he and his classmates looked on and laughed. It takes a little more than 10 minutes this morning for the justices hearing argument in *Fitzgerald v. Barnstable School Committee* to tell the Fitzgeralds' lawyer that they had no idea why they agreed to hear this case.

It's one of those days in which everything that can go wrong does, on and off the record. The Fitzgeralds' lawyer, Charles Rothfeld, barely opens his mouth to argue before Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg orders him to raise the podium. As he manfully turns the ancient crank, Justice John Paul Stevens starts teasing: "That's enough! We can't see you!!!" As Rothfeld attempts to lay out his argument, strange booming and banging noises emanate from nowhere—identified [in the transcript](#) only as "(banging sound)"—eventually compelling Chief Justice John Roberts to say, "We'll give you an extra 10 seconds." Justices Clarence

Thomas and Stephen Breyer set a record for loud whispering among themselves. And that's all before three of the four justices who speak during the hourlong argument express doubt that the court should be deciding this case at all.

Jacqueline Fitzgerald's parents felt their daughter's abuse warranted a serious response from the school. The school attempted to investigate Jacqueline's allegations, but since the complaining and corroborating witnesses were all kindergarteners and deemed "too young to be credible," they ended up taking very little action. When the school failed to discipline the bully, place a monitor on the school bus, or assign the boy to a different bus, the Fitzgeralds sued the school district. They alleged violations of Title IX, which prohibits sex discrimination in schools receiving federal funds, and of the Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution under Section 1983 of the U.S. Code, a Reconstruction-era civil rights statute.

The trial court found the sexual harassment of Jacqueline to be severe and pervasive, characterizing it as "one of a parent's worst nightmares." Nevertheless, the district court granted the school's motion for summary judgment on the Title IX claims, finding the Fitzgeralds had not proved that the school showed "deliberate indifference" toward Jacqueline, as needed for liability. The District Court also found that the claims under Title IX precluded further claims under Section 1983. The 1st Circuit Court of Appeals [affirmed](#), agreeing with the district court that the Fitzgeralds failed to meet the standard for Title IX liability and that "Congress saw Title IX as the sole means of vindicating the constitutional right to be free from gender discrimination perpetrated by educational institutions," thus pre-empting their 1983 claims. This is the question the Supreme Court ostensibly needs to resolve: The 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 7th Circuits have all held that Title IX pre-empts Section 1983 claims. The 6th, 8th, and 10th Circuits allow plaintiffs to bring both Title IX and 1983 suits. The consequences for future gender discrimination suits in schools are enormous, as are the consequences for school districts defending such suits.

As he contends with all manner of technical difficulties, Charles Rothfeld argues that there is no evidence whatsoever that in enacting Title IX, Congress intended to pre-empt Section 1983 claims. Justice Scalia scowls about how the court "invented" a right of action under Title IX in the first place and wonders if "the question ought to be whether this Court intended to have the Title IX action *which it invented* preclude 1983?"

Ginsburg, who might almost be accused of hogging the ball this morning, tells Rothfeld that he can win the Title IX pre-emption issue and still lose the case if the school acted reasonably. "Yes, you have two claims; but if you lose under Title IX, you are going to lose under 1983 as well." Rothfeld replies that "there is more to this case" than the ill-fated Title IX claims, and Ginsburg presses him on what that "more" might be. When he suggests that his winning 1983 claims are not in the record but

that further discovery might have uncovered better evidence, Ginsburg stops him again. "But there was no allegation at all of that kind in this complaint."

Justice Breyer seems to agree that if there was "no intentional discrimination and the school board behaved properly," the court shouldn't base its decision on a theoretical 1983 claim. Instead, he threatens we "should dismiss this as improvidently granted and wait until somebody does this again."

It falls to Justice Scalia to point out that "we were warned about all these problems in the brief in opposition, weren't we? And we nonetheless granted cert?" To which Rothfeld replies, "I don't presume to tell the court what it was thinking when it granted review of the case, but it did presumably reject those arguments at that point."

Rothfeld explains that it defies logic to suggest that when Congress enacted Title IX, it set about to permit schools, by accepting federal funds, to insulate policymakers from liability for constitutional violations. "It's inconceivable that Congress could have had that in mind when it enacted a statute that was clearly designed to expand and strengthen protections against sex discrimination," Rothfeld says.

Kay Hodge represents the school district, and she immediately gets on the wrong side of Ginsburg when she claims that Title IX "provides a remedy for sex discrimination in a broader category of circumstances than the Equal Protection Clause." "Explain that," orders Ginsburg. And as Ginsburg presses her, Hodge insists that while the protection afforded under Title IX is broader, the standard for both the statute and the Constitution is the same: "deliberate indifference." Throughout the argument, she will continue to argue that the standards are the same for both and yet also somehow different.

Breyer asks her why not just send the case back to the lower court for determination of the Section 1983 claims. Hodge replies that "there is no issue in controversy anymore." This is the problem Ginsburg identified earlier: no additional facts in the record. Scalia responds, "The other side says that there may be, and I don't know why we ought to get into that." He grins at Hodge as he asks, "Why can't we just send it back and let them figure that out and we decide what we took this case to decide, namely, the split that now exists in the Federal courts over whether Title IX precludes the use of 1983." Hodge repeats that "there must be an issue in controversy." Scalia nods toward Rothfeld: "He says there is an issue in controversy; that's good enough for me."

Then Ginsburg and Hodge proceed to run out the clock, chiefly by confusing and misunderstanding each other in ever-shorter sentences.

The problems with this case start with the awful facts of Jacqueline Fitzgerald's abuse, but they don't end there. The thin record forces the justices to consider imagining a better record in order to resolve a very urgent question. One of the oldest adages in the legal profession is that "bad facts make bad law." The court ends its session today bogged down over the question of whether imaginary facts can ever really make good law.

technology

The Dog Ate My Hard Drive

With lots of easy options, there's no excuse for not backing up your data. Here are the best ways to do it.

By Farhad Manjoo

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 5:49 PM ET

Last month I confessed to being [a backup slacker](#): While I occasionally make copies of some of my files, I've got no regular routine to ensure that everything on my computer is secure. On any given day I'm moments away from disaster—I could be hit by a virus, earthquake, power surge, or malicious co-worker, and that'd be the end of my decades-old collection of snappy ideas for romantic comedies. (*Underwrite Me*: Jennifer Aniston is an opera star who needs life insurance; John Cusack is an actuary with Asperger's. While trapped in an elevator with a wise-cracking janitor—Luis Guzman—they realize you can't put a value on true love.)

Yet despite the irreplaceable nature of all my data, backing up, like organizing my closets, has always seemed too daunting to bother with. First, you have to search through your computer to determine what you want to protect, making sure not to keep too many big files that aren't important. Then you have to spend an afternoon burning the data to a bunch of CDs or DVDs. And finally, you have to find a safe place to store all those discs; inevitably, you'll never find them when you need them urgently.

But in the last few years, all that has changed. We now live in an era of cheap hard drives that have made all this hassle obsolete. Today you can buy an external drive with mountains of backup space for about 15 or 20 cents per gigabyte, meaning you can get at least two or three times as much room as you now have on your computer for less than \$200. And prices are dropping fast: Last month I paid \$170 for a 1 [terabyte](#) Western Digital external drive—about 1,000 GBs, as big as eight of Apple's largest iPods. Today, the same thing is selling [for \\$150](#).

Alternatively, you can rent space remotely. Several companies will let you park all your data on their servers for about \$50 a year. If your computer gets wiped out, you can just download all your saved files over the Internet.

Today, the only reasonable excuse for not backing up your data is that there are too many easy ways to do it, and picking the right strategy can be a pain. When I asked readers for their backup plans, I got 150 e-mails outlining at least 35 different purportedly simple ideas. Readers were split on the two main ways to back up: Just about half of them swore by saving stuff to an external drive while the rest couldn't say enough good things about online services that made backing up as easy as doing nothing at all.

Each method has its pros and cons. Backing up locally is fast and flexible, but it requires that you buy a big enough external hard drive, which is initially more expensive than renting the space on a server. Plus, there's a security downside—your data won't survive a fire, flood, or some other local calamity. And even if your days are free of hazards, you can be sure that your external hard drive will eventually fail because all hard drives eventually fail. (There are [conflicting figures on this](#), but failure rates for drives older than three years [increase dramatically](#).)

That's the main advantage of backing up online: Hard drives at online server farms are themselves constantly backed up, and your data stay safe even if your house gets hit by a hurricane. On the other hand, online services are slow. It takes days—or even weeks—to get your data up to the cloud, and if your computer is destroyed, you'll wait days to restore all your files. In addition, there are space restrictions online. [Mozy](#) and [Carbonite](#), the two most popular online backup services, both offer virtually unlimited backup plans, but there's still a practical limit of how much data you can transfer in a reasonable amount of time. The services keep different snapshots of your data for only a month, and when you delete a file from your computer, it gets deleted from your backup. This means that if you accidentally deleted a file three months ago and only noticed it yesterday, you won't find it on either [Mozy](#) or [Carbonite](#).

Of course, if you're really worried about your data, you can always just do both, getting the speed of a local backup plus the reassurance of a faraway backup. In the past, this would have been prohibitively costly. But cheap storage now makes this sort of redundant backup the best option. I tried out several local and online backup strategies to see which ones could get me the best of both worlds.

Local backup. To get started, first buy a big hard drive. I decided to get one twice as big as my computer—I've got about 500 GB capacity in various drives on my machine, so I bought a 1 TB drive. This gave me enough room to save a copy of everything I have on my computer now, plus multiple versions of those data over many years into the future. (There's enough room for multiple versions because backup software saves updates to your data only when it scans your machine.) Next, plug the drive into your computer's USB slot or get a wireless drive that connects over your home network. People with newer Macs can pretty much stop there; [Time Machine](#), the backup

software that Apple built into the [latest version of its OS](#), works silently in the background, and it's got an intuitive interface that makes restoring your files a snap. As reader [RM "Auros" Harman](#) put it: "Time Machine kicks so much ass that they've had to import extra ass into [Cupertino](#) solely for its kicking purposes."

After connecting the drive, Windows users typically need to add one extra step: Download software to manage your backups. (Many drives come pre-installed with backup software though many of these default programs aren't very good.) Of all the apps that readers recommended, I was most impressed by [Acronis True Image](#), which sells for \$50. (You can download a 15-day free trial [here](#).) While True Image's interface isn't as pretty as Time Machine's, it, too, seems designed for you to have to make as few decisions as possible. When you load up the software, you're asked to choose which drives you want to back up (I selected all the drives on my machine); where you'd like the backed-up files to go (e.g., to your new external hard drive); and how often you'd like the software to take snapshots of your machine. The first time you run it, True Image collects and compresses all of your data and saves them to your external drive; this took about four hours for my 500 GB or so of data. I asked True Image to take snapshots of my machine a few times a day; each of these subsequent scans ran when I wasn't using my machine and took just a few minutes each. Unlike online services, True Image imposes no time limit on your backups—if there's enough room on your external drive to save the old backup, you can restore what was on your computer last month or even last year.

Recovering your data from the True Image backup is also pretty simple. First choose the date of the snapshot you want to go back to, then navigate to the specific file or folder you want to restore. Per its name, True Image can make a perfect image of your computer, so you're best off letting it save everything—not just your data but also the system files that run your OS and your programs. This way if your machine fails, you can quickly reconstitute all your stuff on a new computer. (I didn't try this.)

Online backup. As for the online services, I found both Mozy and Carbonite easy to set up and to use. I preferred Mozy's slightly better-looking interface, but that was subjective. I also found Mozy a little faster than Carbonite though by no means fast. When I loaded it up, Mozy scanned through my computer and found about 56 GB of pictures, music, and documents that it determined needed backing up. This was only partly right—it had missed many older, bigger folders on my machine that I should have saved, too—but I tested it out with the smaller amount. I've got a relatively fast Internet connection—about 16 megabits per second for downloads, 1 megabit per second for uploads—but it still took Mozy about 20 hours just to upload these 56 GB the first time, so it would take more than a week to send the entire 500 GB on my computer. Subsequent scans are much faster—Mozy and Carbonite monitor the changes that

occur on your drive and then send only those differences to their servers—but if you're in a hurry to get your stuff backed up, an external drive is a better bet. Restoring your files is also slow: Of the data that I'd backed up to Mozy, I chose about 2 GB of music I wanted to bring back down to my machine. The files streamed down over the course of about an hour. Were I trying to replicate my entire machine, I would need to wait a week. (And Carbonite was even slower.)

If you like, you can download each service and see which works best for you—but I'm going with Mozy. It offers 2GB of storage [for free](#); if you need more space than that, go with its unlimited plan, which costs [\\$60 a year](#). Carbonite offers a 15-day trial for its unlimited plan, which is [\\$50 a year](#). Each service keeps your data private and [secret](#) using [industrial-grade encryption](#).

But whichever you choose, choose something. In an era of cheap hard drives, you no longer have any excuses for being a backup slacker; at most, you'll spend \$250 on your hard drive, the software, and the online service, and you'll need about 15 minutes to set everything up. Do it now—buy the drive, install Mozy, or do both, and let the backups begin. The world will never be in danger of losing *Underwrite Me* again.

television

Elvis Costello's Talk Show

The rocker chats with such luminaries as Bill Clinton and Elton John.

By Troy Patterson

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 6:14 PM ET

Inasmuch as its host seems assured of escaping its 13-episode run with his dignity intact, *Spectacle: Elvis Costello With ...* (Sundance, Wednesdays at 9 p.m. ET) is a rousing success. To hear that a favorite artist will settle in for a stint as a chat-show impresario is to fret that he's heading out to pasture for a while to chew cud and make milk for mild cheese. It is a relief to see that Costello allows himself no bit of tackiness beyond the frequent donning of a bolo tie. Only occasionally does he try to anesthetize the way that you feel.

At the far end of the title's ellipsis, we find such music-world luminaries as Elton John, Tony Bennett, James Taylor, and Smokey Robinson. All in all, it is a group that invites cuddling, if you make exceptions for the likes of Lou Reed, who turns up as always with his skin looking like papyrus and his wit seeming drier yet. Costello opens each episode by belting out a relevant song—Elton's "Bordertown," Lou's "Femme Fatale"—thus getting its best moment out of the way so that he can settle in David Frost-style, gripping a clipboard in his palms, showcasing a discerning wince behind his eyeglass frames. The interviews

forgo marches through careers in favor of hops across defining moments. From time to time, guests pop behind a piano or a hand mic to illustrate a point or perform a number, and it is good television, even at those moments when *Spectacle* risks assuming the self-congratulatory upper-middlebrow aura of a PBS pledge-week special.

But Costello, unlike public television, asks viewers like you for nothing but your attention, which he rewards with intimate assessments of songcraft and the underappreciated architects of modern pop. Elton John rhapsodizes about Laura Nyro. Lou Reed eulogizes Doc Pomus. Tony Bennett—well, Bennett breaks the news that "Cole Porter was tops" and that Leonardo da Vinci was really very talented. However, Bennett is an American treasure, so what can you do beyond sneering that the proper place for such a treasure is a humidity-controlled case at the Smithsonian? But you can't even maintain your sneer properly, as everyone in sight is so winningly modest, even Bill Clinton, the guest two weeks hence.

Costello opens the Clinton episode by powering through his namesake's "Mystery Train," continuing the time-honored tradition of identifying the former president with the eternal King—see [Greil Marcus from 2000](#): "The idea of Clinton's presidency as an Elvis movie (presumably the 1967 *Double Trouble*, where nightclub singer Guy Lambert is pursued by both a smitten seventeen-year-old heirsch and a calculating woman his own age) is almost irresistible." Clinton, encouraged by such queries as "Is there any place for music in preserving spiritual solace?," then begins a kind of free-form spoken-word jazz piece touching on diplomacy, crisis management, Fleetwood Mac, U2, Nina Simone, the sax collection at his presidential museum, and the time the Austrian ambassador arranged waltz lessons for Chelsea. The improvisation is at once absolutely soporific and utterly remarkable. "I'm not sure I could have become president," he says at one point, "if I hadn't been exposed to music, played in my school band, learned how to compete, learned how to handle defeat." Oh, I think he would have managed. Anyone with the talent for BS that such a statement requires is a political natural.

Whereas Costello & Co. charm the audience into lull, the host of *Shatner's Raw Nerve* (Biography Channel, Tuesdays at 10 p.m. ET) keeps his audience riveted, such is the *Twilight Zone* force of his hypnotic weirdness. In cannot be said that William Shatner—*Star Trek's* Captain Kirk, *Boston Legal's* Denny Crane, kitsch's senior statesman—emerges from his talk-show-host moonlighting with *his* dignity intact, as that was shattered years ago. Here, Shatner positions himself as the businesslike leader of a berserk therapy session. No, literally, that's how he positions himself: On the set, the right arm of his chair faces the right arm of his guest's from a distance of mere inches. Balanced on a meaty elbow, Shatner leans into the conversation like a bad-cop version of Barbara Walters or a confrontational philosopher of the self. The first episode records his sincere attempt to penetrate

the core of the being of Valerie Bertinelli, the TV-movie fixture, celebrity divorcée, and weight-loss spokesmodel.

"Is there sin and do you have to pay for sin?" "Are you a nurturer?" "I'm trying to find the moment where you went, 'Oh, my god!'" "Are you that interested in the inner life of Valerie Bertinelli? Not even Valerie Bertinelli is that interested in the inner life of Valerie Bertinelli, but she seems pleased to have been asked.

the best policy Too Big Not To Fail

We need to stop using the bailouts to rebuild gigantic financial institutions.

By Eliot Spitzer

Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 5:59 PM ET

Last month, as the financial crisis and the government rescue plan dominated headlines, almost everyone overlooked a news item that could have enormous long-term impact: [GE Capital announced the acquisition of five mid-size airplanes](#)—with an option to buy 20 more—produced by CACC, a new, Chinese-government-sponsored airline manufacturer.

Why is that so significant? Two reasons: First, just as small steps signaled the Asian entry into our now essentially bankrupt auto sector 50 years ago, so the GE acquisition signals Asia's entry into one of our few remaining dominant manufacturing sectors. Boeing is still the world's leading commercial aviation company. CACC's emergence—and its particular advantage selling to Asian markets—means that Boeing now faces the rigors of an entirely new competitive playing field and that our commercial airplane sector is likely to suffer enormously over the coming decades.

But the second implication is even bigger. The CACC story highlights the risk that current bailouts—a remarkable \$7.8 trillion in equity, loans, and guarantees so far—may merely perpetuate a fundamentally flawed status quo. So far, at least, we are simply rebuilding the same edifice that just collapsed. None of the investments has even begun to address the underlying structural problems that are causing economic power to shift away from the United States, sector by sector:

- Our trade deficit has ballooned from about \$100 billion to more than \$700 billion annually in the past decade, and our federal deficit now approaches \$1 trillion. These twin deficits leave us at the mercy of foreign-capital inflows that may diminish as Asian nations, in particular, invest increasingly at home.
- Our household savings rate has been close to zero—and even negative in some years—not permitting the long-

term capital accumulation required for the investments we need; China's savings rate, by comparison, is an astonishing 30 percent of household income.

- U.S. middle class income has stagnated over the past decade, while the middle class in China—granted, starting from a lower base—has seen its income growing at about 10 percent annually.
- Our intellectual advantage could soon turn into a new "third deficit," as hundreds of thousands of engineers are being created annually in China.
- We are realizing that the service sector—all the lawyers, investment bankers, advertising agencies, and accountants—follows its clients and wealth creation. This, not over-regulation, is the reason investment-banking activity has begun to migrate overseas.

The great irony is that our new place in the global economy is a direct consequence of our grand victory over the past 60 years. We have, indeed, converted virtually the entire world into one integrated capitalist economy, and we must now bear the brunt of serious and vigorous competition. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the United States was essentially the only nation with financial capital, intellectual capital, skilled labor, a growing middle class generating consumer demand, and a rule of law permitting safe investment. Now we are one of many nations with these critical advantages.

This long-term change frames the question we should be asking ourselves: What are we getting for the trillions of dollars in rescue funds? If we are merely extending a fatally flawed status quo, we should invest those dollars elsewhere. Nobody disputes that radical action was needed to forestall total collapse. But we are creating the significant systemic risk not just of rewarding imprudent behavior by private actors but of preventing, through bailouts and subsidies, the process of creative destruction that capitalism depends on.

A more sensible approach would focus not just on rescuing pre-existing financial institutions but, instead, on creating a structure for more contained and competitive ones. For years, we have accepted a theory of financial concentration—not only across all lines of previously differentiated sectors (insurance, commercial banking, investment banking, retail brokerage, etc.) but in terms of sheer size. The theory was that capital depth would permit the various entities, dubbed financial supermarkets, to compete and provide full service to customers while cross-marketing various products. That model has failed. The failure shows in gargantuan losses, bloated overhead, enormous inefficiencies, dramatic and outsized risk taken to generate returns large enough to justify the scale of the organizations, ethical abuses in cross-marketing in violation of fiduciary obligations, and now the need for major taxpayer-financed capital support for virtually every major financial institution.

But even more important, from a structural perspective, our dependence on entities of this size ensured that we would fall prey to a "too big to fail" argument in favor of bailouts.

Two responses are possible: One is to accept the need for gigantic financial institutions and the impossibility of failure—and hence the reality of explicit government guarantees, such as Fannie and Freddie now have—but then to regulate the entities so heavily that they essentially become extensions of the government. To do so could risk the nimbleness we want from economic actors.

The better policy is to return to an era of vibrant competition among multiple, smaller entities—none so essential to the entire structure that it is indispensable.

The concentration of power—political as well as economic—that resided in these few institutions has made it impossible so far for this crisis to be used as an evolutionary step in confronting the true economic issues before us. But imagine if instead of merging more and more banks together, we had broken them apart and forced them to compete in a genuine manner. Or, alternatively, imagine if we had never placed ourselves in a position in which so many institutions were too big to fail. The bailouts might have been unnecessary.

In that case, vast sums now being spent on rescue packages might have been available to increase the intellectual capabilities of the next generation, or to support basic research and development that could give us true competitive advantage, or to restructure our bloated health care sector, or to build the type of physical infrastructure we need to be competitive.

It is time we permitted the market to work: This means true competition with winners and losers; companies that disappear; shareholders and CEOs who can lose as well as win; and government investment in the long-range competitiveness of our nation, not in a failed business model of financial concentration and failed risk management that holds nobody accountable.

This point will be all too well driven home when the remaining investment bankers in New York board a CACC jet to fly to Washington to negotiate the terms of a government bailout of yet another U.S. financial institution that was deemed too big to fail.

the big idea

Loyalty

It's the most overrated virtue in politics.

By Jacob Weisberg

Saturday, November 29, 2008, at 7:04 AM ET

[Critics](#) of appointing Hillary Clinton secretary of state have focused on the issue of whether she'll be faithful to her new boss. The senator, we are reminded, has her own interests, which diverge from those of President-elect Obama's, and a marked tendency to put her own ambitions first. Perhaps so, but I doubt Obama will have much trouble with disloyalty in his administration, from Clinton or anyone else, for the same reason it wasn't a problem in his campaign: He doesn't spend a lot of time worrying about it.

Loyalty is a wonderful human quality and a necessary political one. No president would think of moving into the White House without known and trusted advisers such as David Axelrod and Valerie Jarrett. At the same time, the recurrent presidential obsession with forms of disloyalty, including leaks, disobedience, and private agendas, is a marker for executive failure. Those presidents who fixated on personal allegiance, such as Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and George W. Bush, tended to perform far worse in office than those, such as Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton, who could tolerate strong, independent actors on their teams.

The demand for absolute loyalty is a relic from the age of patronage, when political appointments were tied to the delivery of votes for a sponsor. A modern media politician does not depend on this kind of machine for his existence and has political control over only a thin sliver of top-level government jobs. The vast majority of public employees is protected by the Civil Service and can't be vetted for loyalty. As the complexity of the government has increased, so, too, has the importance of expertise and experience.

This is part of what has made George W. Bush's loyalty obsession such a throwback. Bush's [first job in politics](#) was as an "enforcer" for a father he thought was too nice to discipline traitors and freelancers. His own fixation on loyalty was born from the experience of watching top aides to his dad such as James Baker and Richard Darman put their own careers and images first. When his turn came, the younger Bush made personal loyalty a threshold test—and even seemed to regard private, internal challenge to his ill-considered preferences as an indication of untrustworthiness.

The price was a surfeit of reliable hacks such as Alberto Gonzalez and outright incompetents such as Michael Brown ("Heckuvajob, Brownie"). My favorite illustration of the misguided notion of loyalty that ran rife through the Bush years was the [testimony of White House Political Director Sara Taylor](#) to the Senate committee investigating the firings of U.S. attorneys deemed insufficiently loyal. Declining to answer a question, Taylor said, "I took an oath to the president."

"Did you mean, perhaps," Leahy asked, "that you took an oath to the *Constitution*?"

Surrounding oneself with die-hard loyalists breeds insularity. Over time, the fixation with loyalty devolves toward a mafia view of politics that lends itself to abuse of power. The circle tightens, enemies are listed, paranoia blossoms. This happened in one way in LBJ's White House, where the president's [mistrust of people tied to the Kennedys](#) prevented him from hearing sound advice about Vietnam. It happened another way in the Nixon White House, where an obsession with national security leaks led to the [reign of Haldeman and Erlichman](#). It happened in another way still in George W. Bush's White House, where so little internal dissent was allowed that truth became disposable. While the elder George Bush could live with a continual ooze of self-serving leaks from his friend Baker, who (like the unfaithful Henry Kissinger) was a highly effective diplomat, his son gave full "you are dead to me" treatment to any official—John DiIulio, Paul O'Neill, Scott McClellan—who allowed a hint of daylight between himself and the official White House line.

Conversely, the most successful presidents generate loyalty without sweating it. Roosevelt brought nonsupporters including Herbert Hoover's secretary of state, Henry Stimson, into his Cabinet. Even after his aide Raymond Moley broke publicly with him and became a Republican, FDR had Moley back to help with his 1936 convention speech. It's hard to think of a bigger turncoat than David Stockman, who gave a series of interviews about why Ronald Reagan's economic policies made no sense. But Reagan didn't fire his budget director. He merely asked him to pretend he'd been given a tongue-lashing (the [concocted "visit to the woodshed"](#)). After Reagan decided on airstrikes against Hezbollah in retaliation for the Marine barracks bombing in Lebanon in 1983, his secretary of defense, Casper Weinberger, countermanded the order because he thought it was a bad idea. Reagan let that one go, too.

Or recall Bill Clinton, who was famously untrue to everyone, including loyal friends such as [Lani Guinier](#), [Jocelyn Elders](#), [George Stephanopoulos](#), and [Harold Ickes](#). Though his many political betrayals hardly cover him in glory, they point to an adaptability that was one of his strongest suits as a politician. Interestingly, Clinton's unfaithfulness to staff and friends was seldom reciprocated. There is never any shortage of people ready to loyally serve the president.

One of the most developed loyalty-based political systems was the old Daley machine in Chicago, which gave us such terminology as *rabbi* for political sponsor and *clout* for unofficial authority. Both Obama and his designated chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel—who, ironically enough, was once [demoted by Bill Clinton](#) for a [perceived act of disloyalty](#)—saw the tail end of this system in Chicago. Though Emanuel [sometimes plays the enforcer](#), neither of them aspires to revive it. Team Obama understands that political devotion can no

longer be cultivated principally through threats and rewards. Instead, it depends on aides feeling that they're advancing a set of shared goals. To put it a different way, a modern president can't command loyalty. He has to earn it.

the chat room

The Pirates of Indonesia

Kelly McEvers takes readers' questions about piracy on the Strait of Malacca.
Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 1:01 PM ET

Slate contributor Kelly McEvers was online at Washingtonpost.com on Dec. 4 to chat with readers about her attempt to track down and interview a [swashbuckling pirate](#) along the Strait of Malacca in Indonesia. An unedited transcript of the chat follows.

Arlington, Va.: What will it take to end the spate of piracy near Somalia. I recall a similar problem in a part of Asia a few years ago. It hasn't been completely eliminated, but it has been minimized to a large extent. Do military vessels need to start sinking some of these pirate ships?

Kelly McEvers: I wish I had an answer about Somalia. As for the Strait of Malacca, the regional navies have stepped up patrols, and this has made a dent in piracy. The U.S. and Japan for years have offered to come in, but the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have pretty fiercely rejected such aid, saying it encroaches on their sovereignty. The problem will never be alleviated until these countries can tackle corruption in a big and systematic way. As long as you have underpaid, crooked cops who are willing to turn a blind eye to pirates in exchange for a cut of the booty, you will have piracy.

DC: How long were you willing to spend in pursuit of meeting a pirate?

Kelly McEvers: I really was ready to leave that day. I had packed my bags. That was about three weeks in. If I hadn't met Agus in the following days, I probably would have given up. But the thought of doing so was crushing.

Downtown DC: Hi Kelly, Interesting assignment—I love how you capture both the boredom and the rush of being on an assignment like this. Sure, I am curious why the chat is before the final segment of the story, but I guess everyone else is too. Ready for Part 5, I guess.

Sounds to me that based on your experience, a male (western) journalist wouldn't have a chance of meeting these contacts (at least in Malaysia/Indonesia). How scared were you, really, when taken into the hold with all these guys? I am assuming it would have been different if they were in their 20s and not 50s...

Kelly McEvers: I'm not so sure that a male journalist would have had problems. See Peter Gwin's recent piece in National Geographic about the same subject, in the same region. The pirate I eventually met was younger—not in his 50s.

But the gender question is an interesting one: I admit that being a woman makes it easier to my job sometimes. But other times it makes it hard. Especially in Muslim countries.

Rockville, Md.: From what I understand, much of the Somali "uncaptured" economy, and therefore much of the economy in general, relies on the capital from the products brought-in by these pirates. From what you have seen, does it seem as if the economic structure would be able to rebound if/when this source of money was completely removed?

Kelly McEvers: I can't speak for Somalia. Haven't been there (yet). But I know that these islands in Indonesia thrive on sea-borne crime. Not just piracy, but stealing oil from tankers and re-selling it on the black market. There's been piracy in the Strait of Malacca for centuries. I think it's difficult for anyone to imagine a scenario without this source of income.

Singapore: How much longer are you on this pirate quest? What other strategies do you have for meeting pirates other than trying to network in Batam?

Kelly McEvers: Good question. Not sure if my family would be too psyched about me going to Somalia.. I'm actually in Saudi Arabia right now, doing some reporting from here about the Sirius Star. As for other "strategies," like I wrote in the first installment, there's not a playbook for this. If you want to find a pirate, you go where pirates go.

San Antonio: Have you read Alexander McCall Smith's book "Love Over Scotland"? His eccentric character Domenica, a world-tripping anthropologist in her youth, ironically pursues the same adventure as yourself in the Straits of Malacca, humorously infiltrating the world of piracy, with similar pirate contacts, and hunkers down on one of the islands, to eventually write a piece about pirate life. After reading this book a few months ago, I could only imagine such an endeavor to be that of

only fiction, via a fearless, made-up character. But not! What sparked you to pursue such an adventure?

Kelly McEvers: I lived in Indonesia from 2003-2004. I've been wanting to do this story since then. Lots of news journalists had reporting on the increase—and subsequent decrease—in piracy in the Strait of Malacca, but no one ever *went there* to do the story justice. This is usually the case with correspondents: We don't have the time or the resources to spend three weeks on a single story.

So, when the foreign editor at Marketplace suggested I do this story, I jumped at the chance. The story was part of a series that was produced (and independently funded) by Homelands Productions, a great group of people who are committed to telling bigger, longer stories—and not just the news of the day. They're really the ones who deserve the credit here.

Singapore: How do you judge whether someone is pulling a fast one or really a real pirate when you meet them?

Kelly McEvers: Great question. This is something I have to consider every day—not just with pirates. Did this guy *really* witness a murder? Does this woman *really* speak for the government?

With Agus, as with many story subjects, it was a case of verifying what he told me with other people. People on Belakang Padang and Batam. This was, of course, touchy, because no one wants to talk about piracy in Indonesia. They all know it happens, but they don't want to admit it.

Also, you just have to go with your gut. If you had met Agus, you probably would have had the same sense about him that I did: This guy was simply not a liar. There was no incentive for him to make stuff up.

Clifton, Va.: The only way to stop piracy is the old fashioned way like the Brits did in the early 18th century. I don't believe liberals and the Obama administration and the UK govt have the stomach for the same sort of measures. Hangings and pirates' heads on poles and other acts wouldn't sit well with the MSM and the EU public. But they stopped piracy in the West Indies in the early 18th century

The pirates in the West Indies in the early 18th century had the first democratic form of government. They elected their leaders etc. Do modern pirates have the same sort of governance? Doubt you will see female pirate leaders amongst today's modern Muslim pirates!

Kelly McEvers: No chicks in the Strait of Malacca, as far as I could tell. (And believe me, I asked.)

I can't imagine Mr. Black running any kind of democracy.

Washington: Why don't ships in pirate-infested areas carry weapons to defend themselves?

Kelly McEvers: The companies who own the ships forbid it, mainly because their insurance premiums would skyrocket if their crews were armed. Crews with guns means more risk of people getting hurt.

(Can you imagine being out at sea for months with a deranged, coked-up captain who also happens to be toting an AK-47? How do you think disputes would end on that boat?)

Also, carrying weapons on board is "strongly discouraged" by the United Nations' International Maritime Organization.

Lyme, Conn.: I found it interesting the economics of pirating. If they don't/can't make expenses they could go into debt. It would be interesting if there was some way pirating could be made economically unlikely to make a profit. I also found it interesting that the big city life motivates some pirates. It almost seems as if the city would offer should more lucrative employment the pirates would leave their careers. Might this be a possibility?

Kelly McEvers: If you're uneducated and have no connections in a place like Singapore, it's not very likely you'll be able to get a job. Indonesia is the world's 4th largest country (while Singapore is a city-state of just a few million people), and in this region most of the people live beneath the poverty line. Needless to say, there is fierce competition for jobs that pay a living wage.

I have friends in Indonesia's captitol, Jakarta, who have the same job I do, the same education level, and make about a third as much as I do. They have to commute to work hours each day, just to live in a place they can afford. This is the situation in a country that's just now struggling out of its corrupt past.

Kelly McEvers: A little more about the series on Marketplace: It's called "Working," and for two years we have profiled individual workers in the global economy. Check out other profiles at <http://marketplace.publicradio.org/segments/working/>.

All of this was the brainchild of Homelands Productions

(<http://homelands.org/>), a truly great and inspirational group of people.

Arlington, Va.: Why pirates? Why weren't you sent out to look for Russian mafia, or Japanese yakuza? Was Marketplace looking for a Robin Hood story?

Kelly McEvers: In this series we've profiled all different kinds of workers in the global economy. I've done a sex worker in an oil-boom town, a smuggler, a war fixer, and a cadaver handler. Others have included miners, pop stars, circus people, and land-mine clearers.

The idea is to find surprising people who do jobs that are somehow connected to us.

Marketplace definitely doesn't give you the idea of the story before you report it. They trusted me to find a pirate and tell his story—whatever that story might be.

washingtonpost.com: What surprised you most during your search?

Kelly McEvers: The fact that no one talks about piracy in this region—even though it's practically a way of life. It took me a while to understand, but in some ways this was a matter of pride for Indonesians. If they admitted there was a problem, then they were admitting a larger problem with their country. And, they were admitting that they might need outside help to solve the problem, as the U.S. and Japan have been suggesting for years.

Also, there's the terrorism angle. For years the Bush administration warned that Southeast Asian militant groups might be able to work with pirates. This is why U.S. officials advocated U.S. intervention. Needless to say, this did not go over well in the world's most populous Muslim nation, where people were already furious about the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Reston, Va.: Who are these pirates when they get back to land? Do they blend in with the rest of the Somalis? Are they well known among the rest as pirates? Do they live like kings?

Kelly McEvers: I wasn't in Somalia. But I can tell you that you would NEVER know Agus was a pirate if you saw him walking around, on the streets of Batam, Indonesia. That's the thing: These guys are just regular guys.

As for the bigger-time guys I met, the ones who hijack entire

ships, they act like guys with money: SUVs, prostitutes, drugs. But even that is not all so out-of-the-ordinary. Many a company boss or government official behaves the same way. In most countries!

Falls Church, Va.: So pirates are just "individual workers in the global economy"?

Kelly McEvers: Well, yeah. I think their jobs wouldn't exist if such an enormous portion of the world's commerce did not take place on the sea.

But I see your point. The idea of the series was not to be reductive, but rather to focus on a single person and his or her story, to try to gain a deeper understanding of why people do what they do—rather than to talk about trends and headlines.

Rockville, MD: Good series in *Slate*. I was almost dying of embarrassment for you; the has-beens trying to get you to drink and take pills were pathetic if they weren't so real. Did you ever feel threatened?

Kelly McEvers: yeah, pretty sad. the only time I really worried was when we were walking up the stairs in that god-forsaken night club that was shaped like a cruise ship. for a moment i saw the entire kidnapping pass before my eyes.

Kelly McEvers: Thanks so much for all the great questions! You can hear my other profiles at www.audiojournal.com.

the green lantern Keep On Plugging

Should you run your laptop off battery power or use a charger?

By Jacob Leibenluft

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 4:46 PM ET

I'm a committed laptop user, but most of the time, I'm just using it at my desk. Do I save more energy by keeping it plugged in, or should I use my charger only when my battery gets low?

First, some good news: Despite your desk-bound ways, you're using a laptop, which is already a greener choice than a desktop.

It's not just that you don't have a monitor to plug in—although that's a big part of it. Laptops are typically designed to be more energy-efficient than their desktop counterparts, and all in all, they are estimated to use as much as [80 percent less energy](#) while operating. There's a simple reason why laptops are more efficient: They need to be. Waste energy on a desktop, and you'll get a slightly higher electricity bill. But if your laptop isn't energy-efficient, that means either you'll need a bigger battery (and a heavier machine) or you'll spend half your time hunting for an outlet at your local coffee shop. (Laptops likely require less energy to manufacture, too—although regardless of which machine you use, one of the greenest things you can do is hold off on buying a new computer.)

Getting back to your question, start with the assumption that your computer will operate exactly the same whether or not it's plugged into the wall. In that case, you're probably better off staying plugged in, because energy is lost in the process of charging the battery, storing the electricity, and then powering the computer from the battery. A [report](#) (PDF) prepared by the Natural Resources Defense Council five years ago estimated that running a laptop from AC power is about 20 percent more energy-efficient than doing it off a battery. Even if battery charging systems have improved since then, common sense suggests that using AC power requires less energy. (Some laptop users contend that keeping a laptop plugged in damages the life of the battery. If so, this would be a tougher call, since batteries require an awful lot of energy to manufacture, and there's an environmental cost to recycling a spent one. Different manufacturers give slightly different answers: Lenovo and Dell told the Lantern your battery should be fine if your computer stays plugged in; HP says [you should remove the battery](#) if you are running on AC power for weeks at a time; and Apple [suggests](#) you should unplug and run off the battery every once in a while. Check your manual, but the Lantern thinks you should be OK using AC power most of the time.)

Still, there's a catch—although it's one you can do something about. Most laptops are set up to use less energy when they aren't plugged in, since battery life is at a premium. As soon as they start receiving AC power, however, they're often set to start running at higher speeds—and thus use more energy. If you've never touched your laptop's power settings before, chances are it uses *more* energy when it's plugged into the wall.

It doesn't have to. Your laptop should make it easy to change your energy settings so that they're the same whether or not your laptop is plugged in. When you do that, your computer will probably run a little slower, your screen may be a little dimmer, and your machine may go to sleep a little faster when you walk away from your desk. But unless you spend most of your time playing [Left 4 Dead](#), you probably won't mind those changes. (A quick aside: For those wondering whether it makes sense to turn off their computer or leave it on idle, it usually makes sense to

shut your machine down if you are going to be away for any extended period of time.)

And there's one more step: Make sure you aren't plugged in when you don't need to be. Even if your computer is asleep—or turned off—it's still sucking in a little bit of energy the entire time it's connected to the power grid. (In fact, a plugged-in power adapter will use a little bit of electricity even if it isn't attached to your computer.) That electricity—the wonkish term for it is "[standby power](#)"; the whimsical term is "[vampire power](#)"—isn't just an issue for computers. It makes a difference for most appliances—from speakers to microwaves—and when you tally all the electrical devices we own, it can add up to a hefty sum. By some estimates, standby power use is responsible for [5 percent to 10 percent](#) of residential electricity consumption in many countries, and [1 percent of global CO₂ emissions](#) (PDF). As you try your best to reduce the energy needed for the gadgets you are using, there's no need to waste electricity on the ones you aren't.

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.

the has-been

The Mound Is Flat

India's first two professional baseball players make a passage to Pennsylvania.

By Bruce Reed

Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 12:45 PM ET

As Christopher Hitchens eloquently [suggested](#) in the wake of last week's tragic terrorist attacks, India may well be America's most important ally. If so, last week also brought [news](#) of our most improbable form of foreign aid: the Pittsburgh Pirates. In a move that underscored both the common bonds and the cultural distance between India and the United States, the lowly Pirates signed two young pitchers who will become the first Indians ever to play professional sports in America.

Before last Monday's signing, few in India had ever heard of the Pittsburgh Pirates, which is just as well. This year the Bucs tied the all-time record with their [16th-consecutive losing season](#), and next year they're on track to become the biggest losers in the history of professional sport. The Pittsburgh franchise is the General Motors of baseball, still reeling from disastrous mismanagement in the 1990s and early years of this decade. If TARP covered the major leagues, the Pirates would be first in the bailout queue.

But in India, baseball is such a novelty that the Pirates might as well be the New York Yankees. The *Hindustan Times* reported,

"Two Indian teenagers created history in the US sports Monday when they were signed up by [prestigious baseball team Pittsburgh Pirates, five times World Series Champions](#)." Never mind that the Bucs' last world championship was 30 years ago. With one grand, unlikely gesture, a team from western Pennsylvania has introduced America's national pastime to the second-most-populous nation on earth.

In many ways, the whole episode is like the Pirates themselves—endearingly ridiculous. Pittsburgh discovered the two Indian pitchers, Rinku Singh and Dinesh Patel, thanks to an Indian reality show called *The Million-Dollar Arm*, the brainchild of Miami sports agent J.B. Bernstein. The show's premise—that any nation with 500 million men must have a Nolan Ryan somewhere—sounds like Tom Friedman trying to peddle a sequel, *The Mound Is Flat*.

Bernstein promised a cool million to any Indian who could throw a baseball accurately at 85 mph. Of the 20,000 Indians who competed, Singh and Patel came closest, doing well enough to earn some cash and a chance to try out here in the United States.

Neither man stands much chance of pitching in the big leagues, even for the Pirates, who gave up [more runs by far](#) than any other team in the National League this past season. In fact, neither Singh nor Patel had ever pitched in an actual baseball game. Both athletes trained as javelin hurlers. When they arrived in the United States this spring, they had to be taught to wear a baseball glove and not try to catch the ball with their bare hand. "What did the shortstop do wrong?" Patel [asked their coach](#). "He's the only one without a base."

Matt Yglesias once argued that baseball's popularity around the world is [a sorry vestige of American manifest destiny](#)—and India is already hopelessly addicted to cricket, which Yglesias dismisses as "the rotting corpse of British imperialism." Throw in a crass reality-show talent search by an American agent, and you have all the makings of a cross-cultural disaster.

Yet judging from the [glowingly proud reaction](#) to their signing in India, as well as their own giddy [blog](#) entries about their experience so far in America, it's hard not to be happy for Singh and Patel—and to believe that this might be the best thing the Pittsburgh Pirates have done for baseball in a very long time.

Both young men come from villages in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. Singh is the son of a truck driver; his mother told the *Hindustan Times*, "He was often dubbed a loafer because he played sport. Now every villager prays for a loafer like him." The newspaper reports that Patel was raised by an aunt and uncle because his mother and mentally challenged father couldn't afford to. Patel's new contract means his uncle won't have to close his handlooms.

Since they arrived in the United States six months ago, the two men have kept an [online diary](#) of their experience. It's endearingly ridiculous, too. First through an interpreter, and later in their own spare, broken English, Singh and Patel take turns gushing about what it's like to learn a silly game like baseball in a silly place like Southern California. If the greatest sportswriter of all, Ring Lardner, could return to write a 21st-century version of his classic *You Know Me, Al*, he would find inspiration in these two's adventures.

More than baseball—a fantasy that is new to Singh and Patel—their blog is about the power, magic, and challenge of trying to make it in America. "People often hope to conquer this great, so-called 'American Dream' back home in India," Patel told their interpreter in May. "But here we are, the lucky ones blessed with this dream." Singh reflects, "You may think I'm building castles in the air, but there's no hope without a dream, is there?" Both players want to usher in a "baseball revolution" by launching baseball academies in India, and their villages are already swept up in baseball fever. Patel is still learning the rules but goes to bed "dreaming of returning home as the first baseball hero of my country."

Their poignant, comic initiation to Southern California culture seems destined to generate screenplays in Hollywood and Bollywood alike—a cross between *Field of Dreams* and *Slumdog Millionaire*. Indeed, [this week](#) Patel wrote, "We have been spending free time meeting with many movies and TV peoples. It is unreal to believe someday our friends could see film about me and Rinku." He posted a photo of himself with a producer who knows the Rock.

Singh and Patel gleefully recount one mishap after another. The first time Patel goes up to bat, he tries the underhand uppercut used in cricket. "No surprises, it doesn't work," he admits. Their coach teaches them to swing the bat like an ax instead. After a day of fielding practice, Patel confesses that he's "nervous about the speeding ball hitting me." They do yoga, get their first salon haircuts, [visit Barry Bonds](#), and marvel at his mirror that turns into a TV. A "disastrous outing at the Laundromat" convinces them to write, "We are quite incompetent at laundry."

Their biggest laughs come at our expense. Watching so many commercials for Viagra, restless leg syndrome, and smoothie makers leads Singh to conclude that in America, "There's a pill and a machine for everything." When he visits the emergency room after cutting his fingers with a kitchen knife, Singh can't believe it costs \$300 for Band-Aids and a tetanus shot that would have cost 20 rupees back home. Seeing the stack of hospital paperwork they had to fill out, he says, "We laughed our guts out."

After signing with the Pirates, Singh and Patel found Pittsburgh on Google and declared it a very good city. Bucs General Manager Neal Huntington doesn't expect [India to be the next](#)

[Dominican Republic](#) or the signing to produce a billion new Pirate fans overnight. For now, Indian sports fans are consumed with the [more pressing question](#) of if any English cricketers will use the Mumbai attacks as an excuse to wimp out of this month's Test Series in India.

But the Pirates' surprise move seems to have charmed the team's dwindling fan base in Pittsburgh. In an online *Post-Gazette* poll, fans overwhelmingly viewed the signing as "innovative" or "desperate"; [only 18 percent considered it "insane"](#)—a record low for the Pirate front office. One Bucs blogger, [Honest Wagner](#), called it a "brilliant move" and proclaimed "Rinkumania." At [Bucs Dugout](#), another wrote, "I love these guys." A fan at [Where Have You Gone, Andy Van Slyke?](#) declared, "After reading their blog I've moved from bemusement to unadulterated adoration."

Last week's attacks in Mumbai made Singh and Patel reflect on the contrast between the unreality of their current quest and the harsh realities back home. "Thanks to God that our families are very far from where the killings are, but still as Indian men we feel very bad," they wrote. "If not for contest we would be in India, and maybe in Army right now fighting terrorist in Mumbai."

Their javelin coach in Lucknow, India, says the two athletes miss Indian food and their friends from school. But he insists that it's worth braving the culture gap, enduring the media scrutiny, and learning English by watching *SportsCenter*. "To achieve something," he says, "you have to make some sacrifices." For their sake, let's hope it's possible to learn baseball by watching the Pittsburgh Pirates.

the undercover economist

Holes in Our Socks

Why it's so hard to predict how bad the recession will be.

By Tim Harford

Saturday, November 29, 2008, at 7:03 AM ET

Right about now, most businesses are trying to work out how their customers are likely to respond to the recession. Looking back to the last really nasty recession—the early 1980s— isn't much help for low-cost airlines, cell-phone companies, Internet retailers, producers of organic and fair-trade food, and many other businesses barely imagined at the dawn of the Reagan era. The economy has simply changed too much since then for experience to be a reliable guide.

In the United Kingdom, we are blessed with tabloid newspapers to explain what's going on. Apparently, sales of aphrodisiacs are up, and so are sales of maternity dresses: Not everything slumps

downward in tough times, it seems. Elle MacPherson's underwear is said to be doing well; so, too, is a budget store called Poundland. Some stories are frankly bizarre: The crunch is alleged to have given a fillip to sales of cake, wooden "gravestones," musicals, and feel-good films. The quality press has not resisted the temptation to join in the guessing game: My own newspaper, the *Financial Times*, found evidence that physiotherapists were in demand to perk up stressed investment bankers.

All this speculation is an engaging diversion, but it tells us little. Even the more solid reports are often based on anecdotes; many are simply spin or wishful thinking. I've heard a food retailer muse that fair-trade-branded goods are recession-proof because once people have seen the light about the importance of fair trade, they never turn back. A travel industry expert told me that the worse things get, the more people feel in need of a vacation. Perhaps he is right. I would not bet on it.

I doubt that these early reports will tell us much about what will happen in the trough of this recession. One of the reasons people curtail their spending is that they lose their jobs, but many economists fear that unemployment is nowhere near as high as it is going to get over the next few months. There is plenty of scope for things to worsen on that score.

Economic theory tells us a little: Consumers should cut back their spending if they believe that their earning power will fall for an extended period of time, but if they believe the hard times are temporary—say, a short period out of work—then they should "smooth" by borrowing in hard times and paying back when things pick up. Because of smoothing, consumption should not shrink as much as the economy does.

That sounds reassuring, but Ray Barrell of the National Institute for Economic and Social Research, a London-based think tank, has two pieces of bad news. The first is that this is the wrong sort of recession: Because it was precipitated by a banking crisis, consumption may well fall much more dramatically. That's plausible: Consumers who want to smooth consumption can't borrow to do so. It is also what has happened during the 14 banking crises, in various high-income countries, that Barrell and his colleagues have studied.

The second piece of bad news relates to the first. Because consumers were already borrowing heavily in the good times, both credit constraints and a long-overdue realism are likely to bite all the more deeply. That, too, is a tendency Barrell finds in the data.

Of course, as the lucky sellers of herbal Viagra are alleged to be discovering, when consumer spending falls, some products do well and others do very badly. Nervous retailers looking for cues might wish to pick up research from the 1990s in an article by economists Martin Browning and Thomas Crossley called

["Shocks, Stocks, and Socks."](#) They find that when people are unemployed, they save money in a logical way by not buying "small durables" such as socks and, indeed, clothes in general. In the short term, people get by and save about 15 percent of their household budget. When they find a new job, they replace the tired old socks. Bad news for Gold Toe, good news for sellers of needles and thread.

today's business press

The Big 3 Plea

By Bernhard Warner and Matthew Yeomans
Friday, December 5, 2008, at 6:09 AM ET

today's papers

No Tears for Detroit

By Daniel Politi
Friday, December 5, 2008, at 6:44 AM ET

The [Los Angeles Times](#) and [New York Times](#) lead, while the [Washington Post](#) off-leads, with the [cool reception](#) that the chief executives of the Big Three automakers received from senators yesterday. The executives were much more humble than in their disastrous hearings last month, but they still faced lots of skepticism from lawmakers, who weren't shy about expressing their doubts that the automakers could survive even if they received a [massive injection of government money](#). The [WP](#) leads with news that U.S. retailers reported their worst sales figures for November in [at least 30 years](#). Overall, same-store sales for November fell by 2.7 percent from last year as Americans increasingly shun credit cards.

[USA Today](#) leads with a look at how the Mumbai attacks have led law-enforcement officials in many cities to try to figure out how they would respond to a similar terrorist [attack on U.S. soil](#). "I think ... what happened in India is going to put a new focus on emergency preparations all over," the president of the Major Cities Chiefs Association said. Hotels are also being urged to increase security and prepare for a worst-case scenario. The [Wall Street Journal](#) leads its world-wide newsbox with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice saying that the Pakistani government has pledged to pursue anyone [connected to the Mumbai terrorist attacks](#). Despite the optimism that Rice displayed as she ended her trip to Pakistan, U.S. officials privately acknowledge it might be unrealistic to expect much cooperation from the Pakistani government considering the potential political backlash against President Asif Ali Zardari.

Once the hearing with the Detroit executives got started, it didn't take long for senators to focus on the real important issues of the

day. "Did you drive or did you have a driver?" asked Sen. Richard Shelby, the top Republican on the banking committee. "Did you drive a little and ride a little? And secondly, I guess are you going to drive back?" The committee's chairman, Sen. Chris Dodd, tried to interject a little humor into the question, but Shelby made it clear he was deathly serious. (In case you care, yes, all of them drove and said they split driving duties with colleagues who went along for the ride.) "Congress, as a whole, is suffering from acute bailout fatigue," [concludes the NYT](#). The executives are in for another rough time today, when they will face the House, where lawmakers were even more unrelenting in their criticism [last month](#).

Everyone had something to say, and even some of the auto industry's biggest backers piled on. Democratic leaders acknowledged that it's not clear whether Congress will be able to agree on a rescue package. To avoid this very real possibility, Democrats want the Bush administration to use the \$700 billion [bailout package](#) to rescue the automakers. But Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and other Bush administration officials have made it clear they want that money to be used only to help out financial institutions. There's a big fear that the \$34 billion the companies requested won't be enough. Indeed, one economist said yesterday that the Big Three might need as much as \$125 billion.

The [WSJ highlights](#) that "a post-election power vacuum" has made matters much more complicated since both the White House and President-elect Barack Obama's team are trying to keep their distance. "Absent strong presidential leadership, the debate over a rescue plan has steered into a legislative thicket," notes the [WSJ](#). Knowing full well that their fate might lie in the hands of lawmakers, the three executives "were so eager to please that they agreed to almost every request from members of the Senate panel," [declares the LAT](#).

Some Democratic senators said they supported a bailout but only with strict oversight that would take time to implement. The [LAT highlights](#) that the idea of handing out the cash in installments rather than all at once seemed to be gaining favor among lawmakers. As currently envisioned, the companies would get about half of what they requested immediately in order to keep operating through the end of March, when a government board of trustees would evaluate whether the companies had made the appropriate restructuring moves. Another idea that was discussed was to force the banks that received bailout money from the government to lend money to the automakers, and a few lawmakers suggested that Chrysler and GM should [reconsider a merger](#) before asking for help from the government.

The retail figures released yesterday showed that despite better-than-expected sales in the weekend after Thanksgiving, November was a bleak month for retailers as a whole. Department stores were particularly hard-hit, as their sales decreased 13.3 percent compared with the [same time last year](#).

The only retailers that managed to do relatively well were those willing to mark down heavily their merchandise and traditional discounters like Wal-Mart. The stores that have been unwilling to drop prices are seeing the consequences. Abercrombie & Fitch, for example, has resisted the urge to slash prices and saw sales at stores open for at least a year fall [28 percent](#). On the other hand, Saks, which has been discounting heavily, saw a decline of "only" 5.2 percent. Despite the grim data, retail stocks rose yesterday, "suggesting some investors believe retail sales have bottomed," [notes the WSJ](#).

The *NYT* off-leads word that Indian and American intelligence officials have found new evidence indicating that two leaders of the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba masterminded the attacks and continued to guide the attacks as they unfolded through [telephone conversations](#) with the terrorists. Officials had already identified Yusuf Muzammil as one of the leaders behind the attacks and yesterday said another top Lashkar leader, Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, helped plan and execute the operation. The attackers were in repeated contact with Muzammil, who was in Lahore, Pakistan and Lakhvi, who worked out of Karachi. It's possible that the two Lashkar leaders were giving attackers information about the Indian response to the attacks as they unfolded. They appeared to be micromanaging the operation so much that they might have even decided who should be killed among the hostages. The *WSJ* reports there's new evidence suggesting the hostages at the Jewish center [might have been tortured](#) before they were killed by strangulation.

The *LAT* takes a front-page look at Lashkar and points out that it's difficult to investigate the militant group since it has moved much of its operational capabilities from Kashmir to lawless tribal regions [along the Afghan border](#). Many who have been following the group for years think it's unlikely it acted alone in the Mumbai attacks and they point to evidence that has been emerging of its increasing cooperation with other extremist groups, including al-Qaida. "In my opinion, this is an Al Qaeda-planned attack using local surrogates in order to relieve pressure on them in [the tribal areas]," said Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist who is one of the top experts on the militant groups in the area. "What better way to do that than create a conflict between India and Pakistan?"

Remember how we used to talk about how all the money raised for this year's presidential race might add up to \$1 billion? How quaint. Now it turns out that President-elect Barack Obama raised [almost \\$1 billion](#) just for his campaign and other related efforts, including money for the convention, transition, and inauguration. Obama's campaign total was \$770 million, which easily beats the combined total of the 2004 contenders. In addition, Obama helped raise more than \$100 million for a joint fund he had with the Democratic National Committee. While noting that it's difficult to calculate exact numbers because of the way the fund-raising is reported, the *NYT* points out that it looks

like Obama raised [more than \\$300 million](#) for the general election alone.

The *LAT* fronts, and everyone covers, news that happiness is contagious. A new study found that happiness spreads like a virus [through social networks](#). If you know someone who is happy, that makes you 15.3 percent more likely to be happy. But in order for it to spread effectively the happy people have to be physically close. If your next-door neighbor is happy, that makes you 34 percent more likely to be happy, but other neighbors on the same block have no similar effect. Even better is to have a happy friend living less than half a mile away, which gives you a 42 percent bounce. Surprisingly, having a happy spouse only provides an 8 percent boost, and happy co-workers provide [no boost at all](#). One of the co-authors of the study tells the *NYT* that the study made him think twice about his mood knowing that it would affect others. But there are limits. "We are not giving you the advice to start smiling at everyone you meet in New York," [he said](#). "That would be dangerous."

today's papers

Pushing Homebuyers To Take the Plunge

By Daniel Politi

Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 6:32 AM ET

The *Washington Post* devotes its top nonlocal spot to, and the *Wall Street Journal* fronts, word that the Treasury Department is considering a new plan that would lower interest rates on newly issued mortgages in an effort to [revitalize the housing market](#). The Treasury would offer to buy securities that back up these new mortgages as long as banks offer interest rates that are [lower than the market average](#). Figures are still being worked out, but it looks like banks that want to participate in the program would have to issue 30-year fixed-rate mortgages at a 4.5 percent interest rate, which is more than a full point lower than the current market average. The *New York Times* leads with news that the United Auto Workers union said it's ready to make [new concessions](#) to Detroit's Big Three as the company's leaders are scheduled to begin a new round of hearings on Capitol Hill today. The union's president said members would be willing to suspend a controversial "jobs bank" program, which pays laid-off workers, and allow the Big Three to delay billions of dollars in payments to a retiree health care trust.

The *WSJ*'s world-wide newsbox leads with the United States calling on Pakistan to turn over at least some of the suspects in the [Mumbai attacks](#), a move that aligns the United States more closely with India at a time when the tensions between the nuclear-armed neighbors continue to increase. *USA Today* leads with a look at how property taxes are rising across the country

even as home values [have been plunging](#). The main reason for this is that the same laws that block taxes from skyrocketing when property values increase also prevent big decreases when values drop. In addition, most states take their time to change the assessed value of homes, so owners might have to wait several years until the plunge in prices is reflected in their tax bills. The [Los Angeles Times](#) leads with news that an official Los Angeles County assessment recognized for the first time that Edith Rodriguez's life could have been saved if she had been [properly treated](#). Her case became infamous when a security video was released that showed how a janitor mopped around Rodriguez and a nurse dismissed her complaints even as she writhed in pain on the waiting-room floor of a hospital.

The *WSJ* and *WP* both emphasize that the new plan to revitalize the stalled housing market is still in the discussion stage. And Treasury officials seem reluctant to discuss details out of fear that news of the plan might encourage consumers to [put off buying a new home](#). Still, not every new homebuyer would be helped by the plan since borrowers would have to qualify for a mortgage guaranteed by Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, or the Federal Housing Administration, which, among other things, means they would have to document their income. This would allow the Treasury to steer clear of riskier loans. How much the plan would cost is still up in the air, but there's word that the Treasury is considering financing it by issuing [Treasury debt at 3 percent](#), which could allow the government to make a profit if it does indeed end up buying securities that pay 4.5 percent.

In addition to the two specific concessions, the president of the UAW, Ron Gettelfinger, also said the union would be willing to modify other terms of its contracts, which could include wages and benefits, but they would require [approval from members](#). Gettelfinger made it clear he wasn't happy about making the announcement, particularly since workers had agreed to major concessions last year, and big financial institutions weren't asked to make the same types of sacrifices before the government handed over billions of dollars. "I'm having a little problem myself understanding why there's a double standard here," [he told reporters](#). "But we accept it and we'll play by those rules." Gettelfinger also emphasized that concessions from workers alone wouldn't save the domestic auto industry. "To be honest with you right now, if a UAW membership went into these facilities and worked for nothing," [he said](#), "it would not help the companies that much."

The *NYT* calls the UAW announcement "[surprising](#)," but the *LAT* [points out](#) that as far as the jobs bank is concerned, the union had little choice, and many had expected this would happen. The program has been highly controversial because it pays laid-off workers, but giving it up is largely symbolic because it currently supports around 3,600 workers, according to the *NYT*.

The *WSJ* notes that there seems to be [less hostility](#) toward the Big Three among lawmakers than there was when they testified last month. But whether lawmakers will be able to pull off a rescue of the Big Three is still far from clear. Sen. Christopher Dodd has been tasked with trying to create a consensus rescue package in an effort to try to circumvent the deep divisions that exist in the House over the issue. Even with the news that General Motors could become insolvent by the end of the month, Democratic leaders are concerned they don't have enough votes to quickly pass a rescue package and insist that President Bush and President-elect Barack Obama will have to carry out a massive lobbying push to convince reluctant lawmakers.

On the same day as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice urged Pakistan to aid in the investigations of the Mumbai attacks, thousands of protesters in India took to the streets and angrily demanded answers from a government that failed to protect its own people while also chanting anti-Pakistan slogans. The *NYT* fronts a piece looking into the [mounting evidence](#) that the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba was behind the attacks. The paper hears word from a former Defense Department official that U.S. intelligence analysts "suspect that former officers of Pakistan's powerful spy agency and its army helped train the Mumbai attackers." The *WSJ* gets similar word from a senior Mumbai police official who says former Pakistani military personnel [trained the terrorists](#). The Pakistani government has denied any involvement, but the fact that Lashkar operates with near impunity inside the country is "raising questions whether it can—or wants to—rein in militancy," [says the NYT](#).

Slate's [Jack Shafer](#) tells readers they should "keep pinches of salt handy" with the news that is coming out of Mumbai since many dispatches about fast-moving stories "turn out to be crap." Indeed, the *NYT* seems to be warning readers that they should at the very least be [a bit skeptical](#) of the mounting evidence of Pakistani involvement. It's not only that India has a long-standing feud with Pakistan, but the United States also has a strong interest in targeting militant groups in Pakistan that often threaten American forces in Afghanistan.

After some hints that the Obama team would be more involved in deciding how the \$700 billion rescue package should be used, Treasury Department officials are back to complaining that the president-elect is [keeping his distance](#), reports the *WSJ*. Obama has had three news conferences on the economy, but the president-elect continues to keep things vague when discussing how the government should be involved in propping up the economy. Obama's statements about the bailout package still center on the painfully obvious, such as saying that there should be strong oversight. Even when it comes to trying to find a way to avoid more home foreclosures—a subject near and dear to Democrats—Obama's aides have yet to present any type of plan they'd like to see implemented. David Axelrod, a senior Obama adviser, says it would be presumptuous to comment on how the money should be used until Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson

makes it clear he'll seek the second installment of \$350 billion. When told the commitment could come next week, Axelrod answered, "Well, that's not this week."

On the *NYT*'s op-ed page, [Charles Seife](#) says the current recount going on in Minnesota to determine who won the state's Senate seat "is futile." Even if there were absolutely no problems with missing or confusing ballots, any manual recount is going to have a tiny margin of error. Normally these are meaningless, but the Minnesota Senate race is so tight that the "error rate is more than double the margin between the two camps." Ultimately, whoever comes out ahead after all the counting is done, "the outcome will really be a statistical tie." The good news is that Minnesota law has a provision for ties. "It's hard to swallow," writes Seife, "but the right way to end the senatorial race between Mr. Coleman and Mr. Franken will be to flip a coin."

today's papers

Big Three Fight for Their Lives

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 6:31 AM ET

The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Wall Street Journal* lead with the restructuring plans that Detroit's Big Three presented to lawmakers yesterday in hopes that they will help garner support for billions of dollars in [government assistance](#). On the same day as new industrywide figures revealed that November was the worst sales month in 26 years, two of Detroit's giants made it clear they're [hanging on by a string](#). General Motors could collapse [by the end of the year](#) and said it needs an immediate injection of \$4 billion and will need as much as \$18 billion in loans over the next year. Chrysler could suffer a similar fate and asked for a \$7 billion loan before the end of the year. Ford asked for a \$9 billion line of credit but took pains to emphasize that [it might not need it](#). The automakers will make their case to lawmakers this week, and Democratic leaders said they hope to have a bill ready by next Friday.

USA Today leads with a look at how the U.S. military is working to build up criminal cases against at least 5,000 detainees in Iraq who are considered the most dangerous to make sure they [remain incarcerated](#) once the Iraqi government takes over. Under the terms of the new security agreement, detainees can be held only if charged under Iraqi law. Investigators are working to find additional information, including witnesses, who can corroborate the U.S. claims. Even so, officials know that Iraqi judges may decide to release some detainees for lack of evidence.

Despite their grim financials, GM and Chrysler continue to dismiss the idea of filing for bankruptcy protection, and

Democratic lawmakers [seem to agree](#). "I think it's pretty clear that bankruptcy is not an option," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said. But the *WSJ* hears word that congressional representatives have been [reaching out](#) to financial experts over the past few days to discuss whether the government could help out in their Chapter 11 filings in what is known as a "prearranged bankruptcy." One idea that has apparently moved to the forefront is to have the government plunge as much as \$40 billion to help GM and Chrysler reorganize. Regardless of what the automakers might think—"There is no Plan B," GM's president told reporters yesterday—the financial experts "are telling lawmakers that bankruptcy is the best option for creating smaller but viable U.S. car companies," [points out the WSJ](#).

The \$34 billion in federal loans that the three auto giants are asking for—the *WP* [specifies](#) that the restructuring plans call for at least \$28 billion and as much as \$38 billion in government assistance—is significantly more than the \$25 billion they requested just two weeks ago. Lawmakers were unconvinced then so they asked the companies to come back with a more detailed plan. And what they got wasn't pretty. "Though the three companies described a dire situation two weeks ago, the situation seems even more grave now," [declares the WP](#). Last month GM said it might run out of money in the [first six months](#) of next year, but now the company is warning it could collapse before 2008 is over.

In exchange for the money, the companies vowed to slash the salaries of their chief executives to \$1 next year and cut compensation across the board. The automakers also said they'd step up efforts to produce more fuel-efficient vehicles. Of the three proposals, GM's was the most sweeping while Chrysler's was relatively short on details. In its efforts to create "[a new General Motors](#)," the company said that by 2012 it would cut 11 North American factories, slash at least 20,000 jobs, and reduce its network of dealers by more than 1,800. GM also said it would sell or close down its Saturn and Saab brands.

After all the criticism the Detroit executives received for taking corporate jets to last month's hearings, it's hardly surprising that all three decided to drive to Washington this time. Ford and GM said they would get rid of their corporate jets permanently. In a piece inside, the *NYT* points out that despite all the hubbub, many think it [makes perfect sense](#) for top executives at big corporations to use private jets because their time is worth quite a bit of money. For example, in 2007, Ford's chief executive made about \$10,000 an hour.

The *WP*'s [Steven Pearlstein](#) writes that as far as he can tell, it seems like Chrysler is basically looking to get enough money to get through the current slump until it can merge with GM or be sold off. Despite all the tough words from lawmakers, "there's not much doubt that the government is going to step in here." But at the moment the situation resembles "a standoff worthy of a spaghetti western" as each party wants something and is

seeking "advantage by pointing the equivalent of loaded guns at the other parties." But no one wants to actually shoot because they know the consequences would be disastrous.

The *NYT* and *WSJ* front, while everyone covers, the latest details on the Mumbai attacks. American officials agree with Indian authorities that it seems virtually certain the attacks were directed [by militants inside Pakistan](#). Indian officials now believe that all the gunmen went through rigorous training in a Lashkar-e-Taiba camp in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. The one gunman who was caught told authorities that one of the main people behind the attacks was Yusuf Muzammil, a leader of the Pakistani militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba. His name is on a list of 20 people that India gave to Pakistan earlier this week demanding they be extradited. The attackers apparently called Muzammil repeatedly during the attacks. The *WSJ* notes that while U.S. officials are looking into Muzammil, they're still not ready to call him the [mastermind](#).

U.S. officials are working to try to tamp down the tensions between India and Pakistan and both Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, will appeal to the nuclear-armed neighbors to set aside rhetoric and [work together](#) to find the perpetrators of the attack. After arriving in India today, Rice [urged Pakistan](#) to cooperate "fully and transparently" with the investigations.

In other interesting details, the *NYT* gets word that the United States had [warned India](#) in mid-October that terrorists might target "touristy areas frequented by Westerners" in Mumbai, although the information wasn't specific. The *WSJ* notes that Muzammil had been in touch [with an Indian Muslim](#) who was looking into possible locations for an attack before he was arrested early this year and officials discovered he had drawn layouts of the Taj Mahal Palace hotel and Mumbai's main railway station, two of the top targets in last week's attacks. And the fact that an attack could come from the coastline shouldn't have been seen as such a huge surprise. Two militants who were arrested early last year told officials they were part of a band of Lashkar members who traveled by boat from Karachi to Mumbai.

The *WP* notes inside that the gunman who was captured is poor and has [little formal education](#). When he was first captured he was taken to the hospital. "He kept saying, 'Please kill me. I do not want to live,'" a hospital volunteer said. The group of 10 gunmen was apparently first briefed about the operation three months ago and shown videos and satellite images of the sites they would eventually attack.

In a front-page piece, the *WP* [takes a look](#) at how the gunmen "made sophisticated use of high technology in planning and carrying out the assault." They used Global Positioning System equipment to get to Mumbai and had BlackBerrys and several cell phones. They also used satellite telephones to call voice-

over-Internet-protocol phone numbers, which are harder to trace. And they had CDs that contained high-resolution satellite images of Mumbai. They used these satellite images to rehearse the attacks so once they got to Mumbai they were able to move around with ease because everything looked so familiar. They were also helped along by the 24-hour news cycle because once they were in the hotels they turned on the televisions in the rooms to find out how their attacks were developing. In sharp contrast, India's police force and intelligence agencies seem stuck in the past and have been slow to embrace new technology.

In an op-ed piece in the *NYT*, [Amitav Ghosh](#) writes that calling the Mumbai attacks India's 9/11 isn't just a simple, ill-conceived metaphor; it is dangerous because the memory of that day is tangled up with the Bush administration's response. By making the comparison, the world is pressuring the Indian government to issue a comparable response, and if India follows Bush's path "the consequences are sure to be equally disastrous." India should instead follow Spain's example of how it responded to the March 11, 2004, train bombings in Madrid. If there is one lesson we can all learn from the terrorist attacks over the last 10 years, it is that "[d]efeat or victory is not determined by the success of the strike itself; it is determined by the response."

today's papers

It's Official: Recession Is Here

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 6:23 AM ET

After five trading days in which investors seemed optimistic about the incoming Obama administration, reality came crashing down yesterday as the private group of economists charged with defining the nation's business cycles declared that the economy has been in a recession for a year. Coupled with fresh grim economic data, the news sent investors into a panic. The Dow Jones industrial average plunged 7.7 percent and the Standard & Poor's 500 index dropped 8.9 percent. In declaring that the nation has been in a recession since December 2007, "the National Bureau of Economic Research confirmed what many Americans had already been feeling in their bones," [notes the *New York Times*](#). The [Washington Post](#) points out that the announcement came at a time when the recession appears to be [getting worse](#), and the [Los Angeles Times](#) highlights that many think the downturn could continue until well [into 2010](#), if not longer. The [Wall Street Journal](#) points out that if it lasts past April, it would be the longest recession [since the Great Depression](#).

[USA Today](#) leads with President-elect Barack Obama officially unveiling his [national-security team](#), which he said would

deliver "a new dawn of American leadership." Obama recognized that some who were on the stage with him, including Sen. Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, had disagreed with him in the past but made it clear that was part of the reason they were chosen. "I'm a strong believer in strong personalities and strong opinions," Obama said. "I'm going to be welcoming a vigorous debate inside the White House." Many foreign-policy experts believe Obama's team "will differ more in style than substance," as *USAT* puts it, from the more moderate team that served in President Bush's second term.

The news that the economy is in a recession wasn't particularly surprising, since most economists had already agreed that it was under way and debated only when it had began. By setting December 2007 as the beginning of the downturn, the group of economists that make up the National Bureau of Economic Research focused on [employment data to make their call](#). But the official declaration of a recession was hardly the only bad news to greet investors Monday. An index of U.S. manufacturing activity dropped to its lowest level since 1982, and a separate report revealed that construction spending suffered a higher-than-expected [1.2 percent plunge in October](#). The *WSJ* points out that the November employment report that will be released Friday is expected to show that nonfarm payrolls decreased by [more than 300,000](#). As has been the trend when faced with bad economic news, investors flocked to U.S. Treasury bonds. The pain spread to other parts of the world today as [stock markets throughout Asia](#) dropped sharply.

If investors were hoping for encouraging words from the nation's economic leaders, they were surely disappointed. Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke [warned yesterday](#) that "even if the functioning of financial markets continues to improve, economic conditions will probably remain weak for a time" and Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson cautioned that "the journey ahead will continue to be a difficult one." Still, Bernanke vowed to do everything at his disposal to try to improve the situation.

The Fed chairman declared it is "certainly feasible" that we'll see more cuts in short-term interest rates, even as he recognized they can't go much lower. The Fed's benchmark rate is already at 1 percent, and many are concerned that if the central bank goes much lower it "would be out of recession-fighting ammunition," [as the *WSJ* says](#). In what the *NYT* [calls](#) "an unusually explicit follow-up," Bernanke emphasized other steps the Fed could take to try to prop up the economy by expanding its involvement in the private markets. Bernanke mentioned that the Fed could purchase Treasury notes and bonds in an attempt to bring down long-term interest rates. Meanwhile, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson made clear that his office is working to develop new programs that will aim to get credit flowing again.

Early morning stories report that a Thai court has dissolved Thailand's top three ruling parties for electoral fraud and ruled that the country's prime minister [must step down](#). The ruling

could end the protests that have paralyzed the country and stranded thousands of travelers but might also lead to clashes between government supporters and the protesters who have been blockading Bangkok's two airports.

Obama's unveiling of his national security team held no surprises: Sen. Hillary Clinton is secretary of state; Defense Secretary Robert Gates will stay on in his job; retired Marine Gen. James Jones is national security adviser; Eric Holder was nominated as attorney general; Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano will be head of homeland security, and Susan Rice will be U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Everyone except Gates and Jones will need to be confirmed by the Senate.

The appointee who is likely to face the most contentious confirmation hearings is Holder. In a front-page profile, *USAT* highlights that Holder is the first African-American nominee for attorney general, and civil liberties advocates are excited about the possibility that the Justice Department could be led by someone who has spoken up in the past about [racial disparities in the criminal justice system](#). But many Republicans have said they're not impressed with the Holder pick, primarily because of his role in President Clinton's pardon of Marc Rich. The *NYT* refreshes readers' memories by taking a detailed look at the events that led to the pardon and [declares that Holder](#) "was more deeply involved in the Rich pardon than his supporters acknowledge." Holder not only had repeated contact with Rich's lawyers, but his assessment that he was "neutral, leaning toward" favorable on the pardon was a key factor in Clinton's decision to approve it, even though some of his senior staff vehemently objected.

The *WP*'s [Richard Cohen](#) declares that the Rich pardon should disqualify Holder for the job. While it might be true that everyone is entitled to a mistake, the Rich pardon suggests that Holder "could not say no to power," which, as the Bush administration has shown, is a critical requirement for an attorney general. "Holder was involved, passively or not, in just the sort of inside-the-Beltway influence peddling that Barack Obama was elected to end," writes Cohen. "Maybe he deserves an administration job, just not the one he's getting."

Much of the attention yesterday was focused on Clinton, whose judgment and foreign-policy credentials Obama questioned during the primaries. When asked about these previous statements, Obama pretty much said Americans shouldn't take too seriously what is said during "the heat of the campaign," and he "shrugged off the discordant notes with a smile," the *NYT* puts it. Want a walk down memory lane? The *WP*'s Dana Milbank republishes some of the [juiciest quotes](#). The *NYT* makes clear that standing side-by-side with Clinton wasn't the only example of how Obama aimed to display that [he's no longer campaigning](#) and is now focused on governing. Notably, his pledge to withdraw combat troops from Iraq within 16 months was much less forceful than it was during the campaign.

Regardless of what happened in the past, the key question in the months ahead will be whether Obama and Clinton can develop a strong relationship that will allow her to serve effectively, points out the *Post* [in a front-page piece](#). In conversations before the appointment was made official, Clinton was apparently reassured that she'd be able to pick her own team and would have as much access to Obama as she needs. Obama's team did make it clear that they want her to place James Steinberg as her deputy "but that hardly seems a problem," declares the *Post* since Steinberg developed a good relationship with her husband as his deputy national security adviser. Interestingly enough, Steinberg recently co-authored a book that questioned the wisdom of appointing high-profile figures who don't have a strong connection to the president in important national security jobs.

The *LAT* says the Bush administration is getting ready to unveil a new "right of conscience" rule that would allow health care workers to refuse to participate in any way in procedures [they find objectionable](#), including abortion and possibly even birth control or artificial insemination. Doctors and nurses have long been permitted to refuse to perform abortions, but under the new rule health care workers could also refuse to provide information on the procedure. Although the Obama administration could reverse the rule, it would take months. Alternatively, Congress could move to reject it, something that a few Democratic lawmakers have said they plan to pursue.

The *LAT*'s automotive critic writes an op-ed piece saying that Congress should forget about bailing out Detroit's Big Three and simply suck it up and [buy General Motors](#). "I say, let's avoid the euphemisms and have the courage of our supercharged Keynesian convictions," writes Dan Neil. The move would not only ensure the industry's survival but it could also put the United States at the forefront of innovation in building new green vehicles.

USAT notes that one calculus teacher has come up with an ingenious way to pay for the photocopying of his tests after his suburban San Diego high school slashed the budget: [Selling ads](#). Tom Farber charges \$10 for a quiz, \$20 for a chapter test, and \$30 for a semester final. When his plan was publicized in local media, he garnered lots of interest and has raised \$350 so far. Despite worries about corporate influence, the truth is that most of the ads are inspirational messages paid by parents, but there are some from local businesses, including from a dentist who has a message for students: "Brace Yourself for a Great Semester!"

today's papers

Piecing Together the Mumbai Puzzle

By Daniel Politi
Monday, December 1, 2008, at 6:36 AM ET

The *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* lead with detailed accounts revealing how a small group of gunmen was able to terrorize India's financial capital for three days. The lack of security along Mumbai's coastline was key, as it allowed the militants to enter the city [undetected by authorities](#). They were then able to carry out an indiscriminate shooting rampage virtually undisturbed by the police, who were [highly unprepared](#) to deal with an attack of such magnitude. The *New York Times* also leads with a piece on Mumbai and highlights the resignation of the home minister, who said he was taking "moral responsibility" for failing to [stop the attacks](#). While Indian officials continue to insist that the attacks were carried out by only 10 men, the *NYT* points out that there are new clues that others might have been involved "and that the attackers had at least some accomplices pre-positioned on the ground."

USA Today leads with, and the *NYT* fronts, news that, contrary to what many were expecting, the traditional start of the holiday shopping season [was strong](#). From Black Friday through Sunday, approximately 173 million people shopped (a 17 percent increase from last year) and spent, on average, \$372.57 (a 7.2 percent increase). But some warn that the discounts motivating consumers to shop were so steep that they could end up hurting retailers down the road. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with an apparent consensus among disparate interest groups about how the nation's health care system [should be reformed](#). Although there are still many details to be worked out—details that could easily derail the process—there's a general agreement that the government needs to get involved to make sure that everyone is protected while preserving the employer-based insurance system.

The total death toll from the Mumbai attacks remains fluid. Almost all the papers say the attack left at least 174 people dead, including the nine terrorists. The *WSJ* and *LAT* helpfully explain that the death toll was [revised down from 195](#), which many of the papers were reporting yesterday, after it was determined that some bodies had been double-counted. But the *NYT* says [at least 188 people](#) died in the attacks.

Regardless of the exact numbers, everyone agrees the Indian police struggled to respond to the attackers—even when the officers came face to face with the terrorists. The *WSJ* describes how the gunmen were met with ["virtually no resistance"](#) as they approached Mumbai's main train station, where there are usually "several dozen" police officers. Witnesses say the police officers just ran away, and the *WP* talks to one photographer who says armed police officers at the station [didn't shoot back](#) even as the carnage continued. Officials insist some officers did try to fight but that most were powerless to do anything because they were unarmed, like most police officers throughout India. The *WSJ*

highlights this as a problem in the locations that came under attack.

It's also clear the gunmen were very familiar with the layout of the hotels. That was hardly the case with the Marine commandos who were called to help at the Taj Mahal Palace and "struggled to figure out the entrances and exits in the hotel," [as the WSJ puts it](#). That has led to suspicions that the attackers had help from the inside. The *NYT* talks to one Anti-Terror Squad officer who says investigators believe the attackers had accomplices who may have left [weapons at the hotel](#). The officer also disputed claims that all the attackers were Pakistani and said they were from many nationalities. The *LAT* fronts a look at public anger in India at the authorities' failure to respond properly to the attacks. The government has vowed to [improve anti-terrorism measures](#), but many doubt whether anything can really be done. "I'll be surprised if this is a wake-up call," one analyst tells the *LAT*. "The government has proven quite adept at making statements after every act of terror and going back to business as usual."

Very little is known about the assailants. The only gunman who was captured is a 21-year-old Pakistani who apparently told the police he was a member of Lashkar-i-Taiba, a Pakistani-based militant group. While the *WSJ* warns that Indian claims of Pakistani involvement should be taken with a grain of salt, the paper talks to a U.S. counterterrorism official who says all evidence does seem to [point that way](#), "even if you still don't have a final definitive conclusion being drawn." Still, the *NYT* points out that Indian authorities have not allowed foreigners to question the prisoner. The *WP* has a good piece inside that explains how Lashkar [has been able to expand](#) and continues to run training camps even though it was banned by Pakistan soon after the United States declared that it was a terrorist organization in December 2001. To continue operating, Lashkar renamed itself Jamaat-ud-Dawa, a group that operates openly as a charitable organization. The U.S. government has classified Jamaat-ud-Dawa as a terrorist group, but Pakistan hasn't and allows the group to continue working. Lashkar has denied involvement in the attacks.

In other news, the *WP* fronts word that the Pentagon is planning to delve deeper into homeland security with 20,000 specially trained troops who will be stationed [inside the United States by 2011](#) to help government officials respond to a terrorist attack "or other domestic catastrophe." While many have been pushing for the shift for some time, it is closer to becoming a reality now that there appear to be funding and troop commitments behind it. Still, many are opposed to the plan—both because it could strain the military in a time of need and out of fear that it would undermine the federal law severely limiting the number of uniformed troops that can be used for law enforcement.

President-elect Barack Obama will formally announce his national-security team today. The *NYT* fronts a piece saying that

although three of the top members of this new team might have different backgrounds and ideologies, they have all expressed support for shifting national-security priorities [away from combat operations](#). Sen. Hillary Clinton, who will be Obama's secretary of state, Gen. James Jones, his national security adviser, and Defense Secretary Robert Gates have all said the country should increase the number of diplomats and aid workers it sends out into the world to prevent conflicts and help rebuild failed states. Despite this broad agreement, it's still unclear where the money would come from for this expansion and whether Obama would be able to carry out this shift successfully while increasing the number of troops in Afghanistan.

In a separate story, the *NYT* takes a look at Obama's choice for ambassador to the United Nations, [Susan Rice](#), highlighting that she has strongly advocated for the United States to get involved in order to prevent genocide. As a sign of the way Obama intends to work closely with the United Nations, the ambassador post will have a Cabinet rank, as it did during Bill Clinton's presidency.

The *LAT* fronts a look at how jurors at the murder retrial of Phil Spector are getting ["an ugly portrait"](#) of the legendary music producer. Surprisingly, much of it is coming from Spector's own lawyer. By painting such an uncensored picture of Spector, his lawyer wants the jury to believe that his client didn't just terrorize women but that, rather, he was an equal-opportunity offender who didn't hesitate to pull out a gun if anyone bothered him. "The expletives and the gun-waving are like conversational exclamation points for emphasis, but not intended to do harm," his lawyer said. "The point is he has never fired a gun at a living being."

today's papers Mourning in Mumbai

By David Sessions

Sunday, November 30, 2008, at 4:18 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with [emerging questions](#) about how the Mumbai gunmen evaded security forces and whether the government could have heeded warnings from last year that showed the city was vulnerable from the sea. The *Washington Post* leads with more details about how the attacks went down, as told by several American survivors who were fired upon with no defense but to play dead. The *Los Angeles Times* off-leads the [latest from Mumbai](#), while the top slot goes to possible [future repercussions](#) of today's bailouts. The government's deficit could top \$1 trillion next year, and analysts warn "the nation's next financial crisis could come from the staggering cost of battling the current one."

The *WP*'s [lead story](#) is full of Mumbai attack survivors giving their gruesome, tragic play-by-plays, including one group of Americans fired upon in the "posh lobby café" of the Oberoi hotel. Nashville resident Linda Ragsdale at first pretended to be dead but was shot when she pulled a 13-year-old American girl to the ground, hoping to help her escape the gunfire. The girl died on the floor next to Ragsdale, who spoke from a hospital. (The general death tolls vary, but all three papers report six American deaths.) Outside the hospitals, the city is slowly beginning to stir again: The *LAT* [notes](#) that Mumbai prides itself on being a city that bounces back quickly, as it did after a 2006 bombing. That optimism is leading many to resume their normal activities, though some are referring to the attacks as their "9/11" and remain leery of crowded public places.

Indian Defense Minister A.K. Antony told the country's parliament in 2007 that he had received intelligence about attacks from the sea, the *NYT* [reports](#), based on details in the *Indian Express*. A subsequent investigation showed the Indian navy and coast guard lacking in long-range surveillance equipment. (None of the papers catches the overnight news that Indian Home Minister Shivraj Patil, facing heavy criticism for the attacks, has [resigned](#).)

New initiatives ranging from \$600 billion spent to lower mortgage rates to \$200 billion handed off to stabilize Citigroup have ratcheted the government's bailout costs to \$8.5 trillion—half of the United States' total economic output this year, the *LAT* [reports](#). Both the Bush administration and Obama's economic team are approaching the current situation as direly as a war, "vowing to spend whatever it takes to avoid a depression; they'll worry about the effect later." Not all of these staggering figures are direct government spending, and the government even stands to make money on transactions like the purchase of equity in troubled banks. But at the very least, Bush's and Obama's aggressive responses to the crisis may threaten Obama's expensive policy proposals like middle-class tax cuts and a health care overhaul.

We need a health care overhaul more than ever, experts tell the *WP* in a [front-page story](#) on the system's wastefulness and inefficiency. The United States spends 16 percent of its GDP on health care, but the numbers show Americans getting a poor return for their investment: We're "29th in infant mortality, 48th in life expectancy and 19th out of 19 industrialized nations in preventable deaths." The consensus among insurers, physicians, and executives on the direction the industry should go is "remarkable" for people with so many competing interests; most of the experts suggest dramatically increasing efforts to promote prevention and wellness.

The *NYT* [reports](#) that, as part of an agreement with Barack Obama, Bill Clinton will release the names of 200,000 donors to his foundation to "avoid any appearance of conflict of interest with Mrs. Clinton's duties as the nation's top diplomat."

Releasing the donor list was one of nine conditions Clinton agreed upon with the Obama transition team, a detailed pact that also allows Obama's State Department to review the former president's future speeches and business activities. Known controversial donors to Clinton's foundation include the house of Saud and "a tycoon who is the son-in-law of Ukraine's former authoritarian president."

The Cathedral of St. John the Divine's in Manhattan, the largest Gothic cathedral in the world, will be reopened today after the completion of a \$41.5 million renovation, [the NYT reports](#). The cathedral's massive pipe organ, which was dismantled after a 2001 fire, will be played for the first time in seven years at the rededication service.

The *WP* fronts a [story](#) on the complete absence of acorns in the D.C. area this year, a mysterious act of nature that has botanists abuzz and squirrels starving. The acorn drought seems to be part of a natural cycle for the area's oaks, and similar conditions have been reported as far away as upstate New York and Nova Scotia.

[Lucille Two](#) is back! After surviving numerous tabloid marriages, "loopy" interviews, and a debilitating brush with brain disease, Liza Minnelli is returning to Broadway in a new show titled *Liza's at the Palace*. Along with the usual celebrity new-beginning pleasantries, Minnelli [tells the NYT](#) how she took control of her life's drama and why she's decided to stay single.

today's papers

On Black Friday, a Respite

By Lydia DePillis

Saturday, November 29, 2008, at 6:10 AM ET

All of the papers lead with the denouement of terrorist attacks in Mumbai, where Indian forces killed the last holdouts in the Taj Hotel to conclude three days of fighting that claimed an estimated 195 lives. Attention is now turning to the diplomatic ramifications of the militants' potential Pakistani connection: As the *New York Times* [summarizes](#), intelligence from U.S., British, and Indian sources points toward a Kashmir-based group that at one point received training from the Pakistani government. Still, the *Wall Street Journal* (which didn't quite catch the end of hostilities) [explains](#) that the prolonged siege is somewhat baffling; terrorists typically aim for maximum damage in a short amount of time, but these attackers made no demands in exchange for hostages.

Although Indian officials continue to make veiled allegations of Pakistan's involvement, Pakistani Prime Minister Asif Ali Zardari has flatly denied any role in the attacks and says that "non-state actors" are attempting to undermine his country's

relations with India. The group in question—Lashkar-e-Taiba—has been blamed for attacks on high-profile targets since 2001, with the goal of destroying India and creating a Muslim superstate on the subcontinent, [experts tell](#) the *Los Angeles Times*. In an apparent attempt to defuse tensions, the *Washington Post* reports, Zardari has [sent](#) an intelligence official to assist with the investigation while U.S. officials have kept in close contact with both governments. Domestically, the *NYT* [features](#) the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party as it capitalizes on the attacks in elections going on now in five states while looking forward to national balloting in the spring. The BJP charges that the ruling party, which has made national security a major campaign issue, failed to do enough to crack down on terrorist activity. And, of course, the attacks are bad news for the Indian economy, with foreigners [spooked](#) by the targeting of their hangout spots.

Everyone but the *Journal* [profiles](#) the Hasidic community in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, that was devastated over the loss of the couple killed with four others inside the Chabad-Lubavitch mission they ran in Mumbai, which served the city's small Jewish population. In its off-lead feature, the *LAT* [highlights](#) the 4,000 Lubavitch rabbis on lifetime missions in 70 countries around the world. Back in the United States, nervous South Asians have started calling the attacks "[India's 9/11](#)," fearing another escalation in tensions between nuclear-armed neighbors.

Almost makes you forget that there are still [terrorist attacks](#) going on in Iraq, largely hidden yesterday in Mumbai's shadow, where a suicide bomb killed 12 people one day after the country signed a security pact to extend the United States' presence. The *NYT* [talks with Iraqis](#) who aren't sure what to think.

Yesterday marked a different kind of Black Friday in America. The numbers are not yet in on exactly how bad this season is expected to be for the nation's retailers, but in a week when the Commerce Department announced the lowest consumer spending in 28 years, prospects are not looking good: "I don't think the holiday has a chance at all. No way," a market analyst [told](#) the *LAT*. While shoppers still lined up in the wee hours of the morning, this year they're more zealously bargain-conscious than ever, and "[hit and run](#)" customers may pass up the gift if the price isn't right. Retailers themselves [blunted the impact](#) of the biggest shopping day of the year by offering one bargain-basement sale after another over the last few weeks, the *Journal* reports, but are also holding out for healthier online sales on so-called Cyber Monday. TP couldn't tell from the papers what it should look out for as the hot new toy of the year (remember [Furby?](#)), although flat-screen televisions factor prominently in the write-ups. But the season did see its first death in a [stampede](#) on Long Island, N.Y., where an employee at Wal-Mart—one of the only retailers that seems to be doing well in the down economy—was trampled by shoppers who broke down the store's doors.

Elsewhere in economic news, investors [take heart](#): The *WSJ* says the United States is still the best ship in a storm! Although the stock index is down 33 percent overall this year, China's is doing almost twice as badly, and the United States is outperforming markets across Europe and Asia. Also, the *LAT* [fronts](#) a look at how the Big Three automakers' bailout plea is playing in Georgia (sneak peek: not well), where South Korea's Kia is building a plant that promises 2,500 well-paying, if nonunion, jobs. Small consolation for the [5,000 employees](#) that Chrysler is hoping to get rid of by the end of the year. Meanwhile, oil barrels top the *Journal's* front page, pointing to a Weekend section feature [defending](#) the fuel's continued influence on the international stage.

The *NYT* off-leads with a profile of President-elect Obama's pick for national security adviser, the moderate four-star Gen. [James E. Jones](#), who will be expected to mediate between Bush holdover Robert Gates and Hillary Clinton at State. The *Post* notices that Harvard professor Samantha Power is [back](#) on Obama's national-security team after having resigned over her criticism of Clinton in the spring, which the paper plays up as the next Aniston-Jolie. Awkward!

Women and minority advocates are [keeping an eye](#) on Obama's picks for the rest of his Cabinet, says the *Post*, seeing a chance for greater representation. In a separate article, the paper runs down a similar list of candidates and observes that many of them would leave [elected seats](#) vacant, potentially jeopardizing Democratic positions like that of Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, whose seat would go to a Republican.

It's pardoning season for the Bush administration, and the *Journal* has [noticed](#) a common thread lately among seven of the 14 inmates whom President Bush has let off the hook this week: a passion for gun sports. Most have also been churchgoing, blue-collar Bush supporters from rural areas, and five of them told the paper that they cited a desire to use firearms again in their petitions for pardons. The administration is also taking advantage of its midnight hours to [move ahead](#) with oil and gas leases on public land, the latest advance in a four-year acceleration of energy exploration in Western states.

In keeping with the media's habit these days of examining the recession's effect of everything under the sun, Lee Siegel notices in the *WSJ* that comedians are being asked to [deliver serious insights](#) on the economic and political predicament. It's a serious world out there, folks. Ba da bum!

war stories

The Enforcer

Obama's most important national-security pick isn't Hillary—it's Gen. Jim Jones.

By Fred Kaplan
Monday, December 1, 2008, at 8:51 PM ET

To those who worry that Hillary Clinton will turn Foggy Bottom into a fiefdom devoted to her own agenda and ambition, I have two reassuring words: *James Jones*.

Everything that President-elect Barack Obama has said and done these past few weeks indicates that this is going to be an administration run from the White House. His selection of Jones as national-security adviser signals that this will very much be the case in foreign and military policy.

A retired four-star general with 40 years of service in the Marines, Jones was a company commander in Vietnam; commander of an expeditionary unit protecting the Kurds of northern Iraq in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War; chief of staff of the joint task force supplying aid to Bosnia-Herzegovina; and—his last position before retiring last year—SACEUR, the supreme allied commander, Europe.

While stationed stateside, he had been, at various times, the Marine Corps' liaison to the U.S. Senate; deputy chief of staff for plans, policies, and operations at Marine headquarters; military assistant to Secretary of Defense William Cohen (President Bill Clinton's third and final Pentagon chief); and the Marine Corps commandant.

In other words, he knows the ins, outs, back alleys, and dark closets of the national-security realm.

His former colleagues use the same words to describe him: *very smart, very organized, methodical, deliberate*. It may be telling that Obama has been seeking advice lately from two other generals who served as national-security advisers: Colin Powell and Brent Scowcroft. Anthony Zinni, a retired Marine general who's known Jones for 30 years and followed a similar career path, told me in an e-mail that he sees Jones as "a Scowcroft type of NSA," elaborating, "He works hard to build consensus and has a lot of patience. He doesn't like to seek confrontation but won't shrink from a fight. ... He doesn't seek the limelight but will be the hand behind keeping things on track and focused."

"On track and focused" is precisely where George W. Bush failed to keep things, especially in his first six years (that is, until Robert Gates replaced Donald Rumsfeld at the Pentagon). As a result, policies drifted, information was suppressed, dissenting views were circumvented, and, sometimes, decisions made by the National Security Council were simply ignored or surreptitiously overruled. (For one crucial instance, click [here](#); for others, read [some of these books](#).)

Rumsfeld in particular was able to get away with this high-handedness—at one point, to prevent a decision from being made, he simply didn't show up for three consecutive NSC meetings—in part because Condoleezza Rice, Bush's first-term national-security adviser, was a weak manager; Rumsfeld, a veteran infighter, ran circles around her; and Bush, a lackadaisical president in this respect, declined to rein him in.

This sort of manipulation and chaos, it's safe to bet, won't be countenanced by Gen. Jones.

While introducing his national-security team at Monday morning's press conference, Obama said that he likes to be surrounded by "strong personalities and strong opinions." Jones is certain to be one of them; he's not *merely* a staff officer; he has his own set of strong views. While still on active duty, for instance, he turned down two prestigious job offers from President George W. Bush—as head of U.S. Central Command when Gen. John Abizaid's term was up and as deputy secretary of state when Robert Zoellick moved to the World Bank—mainly because he disagreed with Bush's policies on Iraq. However, his main mission under Obama—and he must have known this when he agreed to take the job—will be to make sure that, once the debating is done, all those strong personalities will carry out the president's decision.

It is unlikely, by the way, that Hillary Clinton has inclinations to the contrary—and not just because she appreciates Gen. Jones' bureaucratic prowess. Even accepting the critique that she is looking out above all for her own political future and legacy, she has almost certainly read enough history to know that the most renowned secretaries of state are those who lock step with their presidents—and that those who angle in dissent turn out badly.

George Marshall came up with the Marshall Plan, and Dean Acheson did much to carve the NATO alliance and the post-World War II security system, but they succeeded in doing these things because their plans fleshed out and extended President Harry Truman's general inclinations. Cyrus Vance disagreed with President Jimmy Carter, resigned in protest, and disappeared from public view. Colin Powell might have made a great secretary of state under some other president, but he *had* to be ousted from George W. Bush's administration because his differences over policy had grown too substantial and public; he couldn't be an effective emissary because foreign leaders couldn't be sure whether he was speaking for himself or for the president (and if they thought he was speaking just for himself, they would have dismissed his words as irrelevant, no matter how much they liked him or disliked Bush).

It is hard to imagine that Sen. Clinton isn't fully aware of these dynamics. I have no inside track on her thinking or on the alleged machinations of her inner circle, but it seems clear that, given the rules of seniority, she would have had to wait a long time to gain a leadership position in the Senate; and unless

Obama turns out to be a bust as president, she couldn't have another run at the White House for at least eight years, by which time she'd be almost 70. She may simply have calculated that her best prospects and greatest adventures lie in joining Team Obama as a senior subordinate but a subordinate all the same.

And if I'm wrong about this, or if she gradually takes on more manipulative motives, her stiffest obstacle will be, if not Obama himself, then certainly Gen. James Jones.

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