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ad report card

Salesjerk

Meet the next great TV pitchman.

By Seth Stevenson

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 12:01 PM ET

The Spot: *A man demonstrates an absorbent towel called the "Shamwow." It cleans up spills, polishes cars, washes dishes, and so forth. "Eight Shamwows for \$19.95," goes the salesman's closing argument. "Comes with a 10-year warranty. Here's how to order."* (Click [here](#) to watch the ad on the Shamwow site.)

There's something captivating about Vince, the Shamwow pitchman. I always perk up when I hear those initial, outer-borough syllables: "Hi, it's Vince wit Shamwow. Dis is fuh da

house, da car." A friend of mine—a guy who's never succumbed to an infomercial come-on—says he finds himself strangely tempted to order a Shamwow each time he watches Vince's spiel.

There are zillions of ads like this on late-night TV. A pitchman (or -woman) demonstrates a household product, then issues an aggressive "call to action" (as the marketing lingo goes). You're urged to "act now" and given a phone number or Web site through which you can order the product. Often, there's a time limit ("call in the next 20 minutes"), and you're promised free bonus items for beating the deadline. Ads of this ilk generally wash right over me. What makes the Shamwow ad different?

In part, it's the astonishing capabilities of the product. (Holds 20 times its weight in liquid! Instantly extracts cola spills from your carpet! Lasts for 10 years! I'm certain all of this is 100 percent true!) But lots of products make impressive claims. The real star here is Vince, who demonstrates an impressive and subtle mastery of the pitchman's art.

The first thing I notice is the physical grace. Vince puts the Shamwow through its paces with the fluid dexterity of a three-card monte dealer. Cleaning up spills appears not just effortless, but *fun*.

There's a genius, too, in his hectoring tone. He makes us feel like idiots for even entertaining the notion of not buying a Shamwow. "You're gonna spend \$20 every month on paper towels, anyway," he says, palms up and head tilted back. He seems truly dumbfounded that anyone might fail to see the wisdom of dropping 28 bucks (including shipping) on a set of rags.

Vince also conveys a street-smart persona—with his headset microphone, rat-a-tat phrasing and fuhgeddaboutit confidence—that's intended to get the viewer thinking, "Hey, this guy's sharp. He knows a good deal." (It may also get us thinking, "Hey, this guy's a douche. He needs a better haircut." But that's a secondary issue.)

I've made several attempts to get in touch with Vince, hoping to quiz him about the finer points of his delivery. As of this writing, my phone calls have not been returned. But Internet sleuthing suggests (and a Shamwow spokesman confirms) that Vince is a man named Vince Offer. (Key pieces of evidence: the photo attached to [this press release](#), and the fact that Offer once pitched kitchen vegetable choppers at swap meets.)

Offer's history includes lawsuits waged against [the Farrelly brothers](#), [Anna Nicole Smith](#), and [the Church of Scientology](#). He also wrote and directed the 1999 film [The Underground Comedy Movie](#). The *New York Post* review gave the film zero stars, said it "may be the least amusing comedy ever made," and asked,

"How can the War Crimes Tribunal indict Slobodan Milosevic but let Vince Offer still walk the streets?"

Harsh! But hey, Vince is certainly not boring, and therein lies a significant component of his effectiveness. The guy's jerky, aggrieved attitude jumps off the screen—particularly when he berates his own crew, snapping, "You followin' me, camera guy?" Vince manages, in the course of a minute spent swiping counters and dabbing at carpets, to make us wonder, "Whoa, what's the deal with this freak?" That makes the ad an attention-grabber, and it helps the Shamwow stand out from a crowded field of useless doohickies.

Vince's abrasive manner might also mark a unique, new strategy in the annals of pitchdom. TV salespeople tend to be warmly enthusiastic, not confrontational. Watch the crew of hosts on the Home Shopping Network. Their role is to serve as easily wowed surrogates for the viewer. They'll run their fingers along the jeweled necklines of a knit separates collection, rapturously whispering, "Look. At. That." The constant ruse is that the hosts covet these products for themselves.

Billy Mays—likely the most famous pitchman of the last decade—also traffics in friendly excitement. A black-bearded fellow who shills for [OxiClean](#), [Hercules Hooks](#), [Ding King](#), and other as-seen-on-TV dreck, Mays' celebrity no doubt stems from his signature, high-decibel style. (He locks into his upper vocal register and stays there for minuteslong, breathless monologues. Check out the YouTube clip of Mays doing multiple takes as he seeks the perfect way to yell, "[You don't need a cabinet full of cleaners!](#)") But through all the screaming, Mays is always an upbeat pal of the viewer—never a sneering bully.

Can Vince become the next Billy Mays—a ubiquitous, mercenary pitchman hawking products up and down the TV dial? I don't see why not. If anything, the current moment's more suited to Vince's smooth-talking condescension than to Mays' earnest fervor. Jaded consumers expect to get snowed and almost distrust the very pretense of trustworthiness. As my friend who's been tempted by the Shamwow puts it: "What I think I like about Vince is that he is upfront and seemingly comfortable with his schtick. He appears to be saying, 'I am a carnie huckster, you know it and I know it, but that's OK because this product is that good.'"

Grade: B-. It's by no means revolutionary, but the Shamwow ad gets the job done. Just pay no attention to the slew of quick edits going on as that spilled cola miraculously evaporates from that swatch of carpet. Also, ignore the fact that Billy Mays once pitched a [near-identical product called Zorbee](#) using a near-identical set of demos. And, of course, be sure to ascribe no significance to the Shamwow's unfortunate first syllable.

Got an ad you'd like to see reviewed? E-mail your suggestions to adreportcard@slate.com.

Advanced Search

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

art

Drawn-Out Process

Philip Guston's brave evolution from Abstract Expressionist to comics-inspired draftsman.

By Mia Fineman

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 7:03 AM ET

Click [here](#) to read a slide-show essay about Philip Guston.

books

Taming Your Inner Homer Simpson

How to opt out of our own stupid choices.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Monday, May 12, 2008, at 7:03 AM ET

The real trick to understanding how to approach [Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness](#), the new book by Cass R. Sunstein and Richard H. Thaler, lies in recognizing the limitations of your inner Homer Simpson. In the authors' view, your whole brain is a civil-war zone between your "automatic system" (the rapid, intuitive, reptilian part) and your "reflective system" (the slow, deliberate, self-conscious part). Behavioral economists take the position that snap judgments formed by your Homer Simpson brain are often quite terrible ones, which go on to have enormous consequences in your financial, physical, and emotional life. Like Homer, we use all sorts of mental "heuristics" or cognitive "rules of thumb" that are flawed, which is why we pay for magazine subscriptions for years after the three-month "free" trial ended ("status quo bias") and why we buy lottery tickets ("unrealistic optimism").

[The](#) premise of *Nudge*—the authors caution in their very first footnote that this is not to be read as *noodge* (*noun*: from the Yiddish, meaning, "You never call; you never write. ...")—is that in framing public policy, "choice architects" should gently

guide us to make better choices, the sorts of choices Albert Einstein or *Star Trek's* Mr. Spock* might make or that we would make if we were to consult such men on our personal decisions about, say, giving up smoking. Laissez faire economics holds that faced with a broad menu of choices, most of us will choose wisely. Sunstein and Thaler fear that some of us might pull a Homer Simpson and try to eat the menu.

Now, nobody appreciates being compared to Homer Simpson, but isn't that really the whole point? Sunstein and Thaler are very persuasive in illustrating how often we channel him in [our daily decision-making](#). In fact, your automatic system may reveal your own biases with respect to this book: While your Homer Simpson brain might leap to the conclusion that any book by a University of Chicago economist and a law professor—Sunstein is about to become a Harvard law professor—might be hopelessly dry, that could just be a mistake of the so-called "availability heuristic" (assessing the likelihood of an outcome based on the examples that come most readily to mind). But *Nudge* is actually great fun to read. And while your reptilian mind might balk at their language of "libertarian paternalism"—even the authors concede the words are "off-putting" if not "contradictory"—your reflective mind may have to concede that there's something to be said for gently guiding children to eat fruit in the cafeteria or inducing workers to sign up for their 401(k) plans, so long as nobody is being coerced and the Oreos are merely moved to a higher shelf, not banned. In some ways the whole project involves resetting the default buttons of your life to healthy and wealthy and wise. Of course someone else is doing the resetting, and that is where the problem lies.

You will not like the version of yourself you meet in *Nudge*. For one thing, you eat too many cashews, long after you stopped wanting one. (You will also eat squeaky, stale popcorn even if you hate it.) Problem blackjack players (like, er, myself) will play more recklessly with the "house money" you have just won. You are hopelessly enslaved to the judgments (even the wrong ones) of others. You believe everybody knows (and cares) which T-shirt you are wearing. You pay insane fees on your credit cards and don't contribute to your 401(k) even though you know you should. You claim to want to be an organ donor yet somehow find checking the box on your driver's license to be beyond you.

One way you may soothe your Homer Simpson mind is by patiently explaining to it that he is not only stupid, but that public-policy decisions made to get around him are already quite common: Sunstein and Thaler tell us that Chicago's Lake Shore Drive features white stripes on the most dangerous parts of the road that offer drivers the illusion that their speed is increasing. Drivers slow down. An Amsterdam economist had black houseflies etched into the wells of the urinals at Schiphol Airport under the theory that "If a man sees a fly, he aims at it." Spillage decreased by 80 percent. Some of these suggestions for libertarian paternalism in savings have already been enacted into

law. Automatic enrollment is becoming the norm for 401(k) plans. In 2006 Congress passed the Pension Protection Act, which offers employers incentives to match employee contributions and resets certain enrollment defaults to maximize contributions. And the ATM beeps to remind you that you've walked away without your bank card.

Is it oh-so-slightly creepy (or [socialist](#)) to envision a world in which shadowy choice architects are nudging you away from the cashews and toward organ donation? Could those seniors who understood all 46 options offered in President Bush's prescription drug plan please raise their hands?

If Sunstein and Thaler are right that we live in a world of too many choices, with insufficient time and information to make the best one and little feedback about the stupid choices we've made in the past, the question is not so much whether we should be steered toward the smart ones as: Where should we be steered instead? Given that someone someplace is often setting the defaults anyhow, wouldn't we prefer that the guy in charge be Mr. Spock? Could any of us agree, however, about which Mr. Spock is truly worthy of making these decisions? The authors urge that "if the underlying decision is difficult and unfamiliar, and if people do not get prompt feedback when they err, it's legitimate, even good to nudge a bit."

Some of the suggestions will generate controversy, particularly when one contemplates some wise decision-maker who is resetting our defaults, in secret, or producing the summary sheet of the best schools for our children. And although the nudges in question are often referenced as "small" or "gentle" or "non-coercive," there are certainly moments at which a nudge turns into a full-on body check, particularly when you contemplate the government becoming involved. The authors toss out ideas about privatizing marriage, allowing patients to waive the right to sue their physicians, paying teen girls not to get pregnant. And my own favorite suggestion may well be a "civility check" warning you that the e-mail you are poised to send "APPEARS TO BE AN UNCIVIL E-MAIL. DO YOU REALLY AND TRULY WANT TO SEND IT?"

As the child of an economist, I must confess that there was a part of me that wanted to push back against the message that animates *Nudge*, i.e., that every time I think I am picking the best health plan for my children, Homer Simpson is actually just reaching for the double-glazed chocolate doughnut. I want to believe I am smarter than that. But you see that, too, is a product of my reptilian brain. As Sunstein and Thaler explain, another common cognitive error is the heuristic called "optimism and overconfidence." It's what leads more than 50 percent of Thaler's MBA students to predict they will all perform in the top two deciles of their class and allows 94 percent of professors at large universities to believe themselves better than the "average professor." In other words—painful though it may be to admit—the mere fact that we believe ourselves smart enough to optimize

complicated choices may be the most Simpsonic thing about us.
I know: D'oh!

Correction, May 12, 2008: *The article originally referred to "Dr. Spock." The Enterprise's science officer had no Ph.D. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

chatterbox Get Me Rewrite

Dan Balz falls off the momentucrat wagon.

By Timothy Noah

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 11:57 PM ET

Dan Balz of the *Washington Post* is one of the best and most seasoned political reporters in the country, but as I've pointed out from time to time, he's having trouble this year swearing off the political moonshine known as momentum. His newest lapse is the following sentence in his [Page One writeup](#) of Hillary Clinton's lopsided West Virginia primary victory:

[T]he primary win may have come too late to have a significant impact on the trajectory of a nomination battle in which Obama has an almost insurmountable lead in delegates.

May have come too late? Try *almost certainly has* come too late. As the *New York Times'* Patrick Healy [puts it](#), "the West Virginia results are unlikely to hurt Mr. Obama's chances of winning the nomination." (The *Times'* coverage has tended to be more rigorously arithmocratic than the *Post's* throughout the primary campaign.) *How* unlikely, you ask? Well, *Slate's* John Dickerson [observes](#) that Clinton "must reverse the math by convincing more than 70 percent of the remaining superdelegates to initiate Party Armageddon by denying Obama the nomination." Balz himself notes later in his story that Clinton's goal of keeping Obama's lead in primary delegates below 100 "seems out of reach at this point." *Even if you do no more than look at Balz's momentum-besotted sentence itself*, you'll note a troublesome mismatch between "may have" at the beginning and "almost insurmountable" at the end. As my college professors used to write in the margins of my papers: Say Better Please! And, for God's sake, get that momonkey off your back.

Momentucrats vs. Arithmocrats Archive:

May 2, 2008: "[Hillary Clinton, Fairy Princess](#)"

April 23, 2008: "[Hillary Clinton, Ex-Arithmocrat](#)"

March 6, 2008: "[Agony of the Arithmocrats](#)"

Feb. 6, 2008: "[Triumph of the Arithmocrats](#)"

Feb. 1, 2008: "[On the Media interview about momentucrats and arithmocracy, New York Public Radio](#)"

Jan. 30, 2008: "[Momentucrats vs. Arithmocrats, Part 2](#)"

Jan. 28, 2008: "[Momentucrats vs. Arithmocrats](#)"

Jan. 21, 2008: "[Is Obama Winning?](#)"

Dec. 11, 2007: "[Whose Nominee Is It, Anyway?](#)"

Convictions

Vive le Difference!

What we can learn from the French about prosecuting alleged terrorists.

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 10:40 AM ET

corrections

Corrections

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 4:58 PM ET

In the May 8 "[Deathwatch](#)," Christopher Beam misspelled Rep. Heath Shuler's name.

In the May 8 "[Explainer](#)," Chris Wilson used the word *shirking* to mean "shedding."

In a May 7 "[Trailhead](#)," blog entry Christopher Beam misspelled Mika Brzezinski's name.

In the May 6 "[Explainer](#)," Juliet Lapidus originally asked who owns a suicide note but went on to answer a slightly different question about the rights to disseminate the contents of such a note. Technically, the note (and copyright to its contents) belongs to Deborah Palfrey or to her estate. So if her mother inherited her estate, then her mother owns the note. But the sheriff or medical examiner's office has initial, de facto control over the dissemination of the note.

In the May 6 "[Hot Document](#)," Bonnie Goldstein misidentified Richard Loving as Thomas.

In the May 6 "[Medical Examiner](#)," Shannon Brownlee and Jeanne Lenzer correctly stated that the radio show *The Infinite Mind* runs on NPR. *Slate*, however, posted a correction stating that this fact was wrong. We now understand from NPR's ombudsman, Alicia Shepherd, that NPR has a contractual relationship with *The Infinite Mind* to run the show on two Sirius channels. The show also runs on NPR member stations.

In a May 5 "[Convictions](#)" blog entry, Richard Ford misspelled the title of the movie *Gattaca*.

*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.

dear prudence Wingnuts Are Family

My folks will not accept my Republican values or my conservative boyfriend. Help!

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 6:40 AM ET

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

Dear Prudence,

My family members are staunch Democrats and love to bad-mouth Republicans every time the conversation turns to politics. This is heartbreaking, because I myself am a secret Republican. My mom already knows that I'm in love with a Republican, and she won't stop condemning him behind his back for his beliefs, calling him names like "right-wing whack job" and "little lord Republiroy" (also making fun of his height). My brothers all say stuff like, "Republicans suck" and, "Those Republicans are dumb-***es." I am afraid to come out to them about my beliefs because of potential verbal abuse being heaped on me. Also, being a teenager, I do not have the advantage of moving out of the house and escaping said abuse. What should I do?

—Republican in the Closet

Dear Republican,

It sounds like your family members are disciples of Cicero—what powerful oratory they summon to make their political arguments. Their favorite peroration must be, "Nyah, nyah!" It's too bad your family doesn't understand that all its members should feel free to express their views without mockery. It would be great if they wanted to engage you in policy debates; you could have some lively discussions and hone your political arguments at the dinner table. (You might want to join your school debate team in order to learn what it's like to put forth a cogent case.) Still, it is worth it to make a stand on behalf of yourself and your boyfriend. Start with you mother and tell her you thought one essential precept of the Democratic Party's principles is that all people deserve to be treated with respect, whatever their race, creed, or stature. Explain that if your family thinks its political views give them a claim to moral superiority, they undercut it every time one of them ridicules your boyfriend for his beliefs. Let her know her insults aren't changing your feelings for him—or your own beliefs—they're only causing a breach between the two of you.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence Video: Pregnant and Nauseated

Dear Prudence,

One of the things I love most about the wonderful man I'm engaged to is his generosity and kindness to everyone he meets. However, there is one situation in which I feel his "friend" has overstepped her bounds. My fiance is a cancer survivor and has been a cancer coach to help others through this difficult time in their lives. He has a colleague who is terminally ill with cancer. They have met for drinks on a few occasions that I know about. She is married, and he says it is an unhappy marriage. One day I found text messages from her in his cell phone. They said things along the lines of, "I will be dreaming of you tonight." This made me furious. I know that my fiance has good intentions, but I have asked him not to correspond with her anymore. She knows that we are engaged and made these comments anyway. I feel that they are highly inappropriate. Am I wrong for feeling this way, and how should I deal with this situation?

—Jealous Fiancee

Dear Jealous,

Yes, her comments are inappropriate. But knowing you are going to die soon sometimes makes people say and do crazy things. What you haven't explained, or don't know, is how your fiance responded to his colleague. He may well understand her desire to find some happiness in the time she has left but also have told her that while he cares for her, he's in love with you and that she just has to accept that nothing is going to happen between them. You've already told your fiance not to be in touch with her, but obviously he didn't agree with you or else you wouldn't be writing to me. You also must have had to admit that you came upon this information while scrolling through his messages. There is no evidence that he violated your trust in any way (he is not obligated to tell you his terminally ill friend overstepped some bounds), but there is evidence you violated his. I think the way you should handle this is to apologize for snooping; then say your jealousy got the better of you and you regret it, you trust him, and you admire the compassion he shows to others.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence,

I am a female college student halfway through her degree. I recently started a paid internship at a local company with one of my classmates. We have the same amount of experience, the same amount of coursework, and even sit beside each other and work on nearly identical projects. We recently compared hourly wages (not usually a topic of discussion, but hey, it's college and we're broke), and it turns out my nearly identical classmate is getting paid a dollar per hour more than I am. The difference? My classmate is male. Since I just started working, I don't want to ruin my chances of being asked back or cause any awkwardness, but I feel that I am possibly being discriminated

against. I know that unequal pay in the workforce is a topic that women have been struggling with for years. Do you have any suggestions for how I should approach this issue? Do I have a right to want the same pay as my classmate?

—Women's Rights

Dear Women's,

What a juicy opportunity to strike a blow for equality and learn the art of asserting yourself. Go to your supervisor and calmly and respectfully say that you discovered your fellow intern, with whom you share the same experience and duties, is making a dollar more per hour than you. Say you wanted to find out if there is a reason for this disparity, and if there isn't, you would like to get it rectified. Since no two people are precisely alike, be wary if your supervisor offers only a trivial difference between you and your classmate to justify the discrepancy. If you do receive such an answer, respond that since you and he both have the same responsibilities, that small distinction shouldn't add up to \$X a week less in wages. And at that point, you can add, "Because our differences are so insignificant, it makes me wonder if there might be some unconscious gender bias at work here." If this isn't cleared up to your satisfaction, report everything to the professor or academic officer who deals most closely with these internships, and get her or his advice on getting parity.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence,

I am graduating from college soon and moving to a foreign country with a much hotter climate in the fall, so I have a lot of clothes that I won't need anymore. Also, a lot of things no longer fit or I'm tired of them. I was planning on giving unwanted items to a second-hand store run by a women's shelter. However, my roommate and friend of four years wants to peruse my clothes first and pick out what she wants. In the past, we have traded clothes, but now I am irritated by her sense of entitlement. I have considered taking all of my stuff with me and sorting through it in my hometown, but I don't want to give my parents extra boxes to cart. Am I just being selfish or do I have a right to determine the future of my leftover turtlenecks? If so, how should I handle this clothing catastrophe?

—Almost an Alum

Dear Almost,

If you decide you want to turn your old clothes into a patchwork quilt or use them to line rabbit hutches, that's your right. Giving them to a shelter is an admirable thing to do. And your friend is being obnoxious by demanding she get a crack at them. But if you've been pals for four years and have often traded clothes, I don't understand why you won't let her get first go at your discards. The benefit to the shelter of your turtlenecks is going to be minimal, but the damage to your friendship by refusing her

request (even if she should have backed off) could be substantial. This is hardly a catastrophe, but by being self-righteous, you are going to unnecessarily part on a sour note. Be happy your friend will think fondly of you when she wears that skirt and blouse you don't want anymore, and that the rest of the pile is going to a good cause.

—Prudie

Deathwatch

The Hillary Deathwatch

John Edwards' nod is mostly symbolic, but symbolism matters.

By Chris Wilson

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 3:57 PM ET

Endorsements from formerly coy John Edwards and the United Steelworkers for Obama are two more nails in the Clinton coffin. Clinton's odds drop 1.1 to **1.8 percent**.

Whatever momentum Clinton picked up from her 41-point [West Virginia win](#) the Obama camp snuffed out with the Edwards coup de grâce. Edwards sat on his endorsement until long after its game-changing power expired, so the damage to Clinton's flicker of a campaign is more symbolic than anything. The crux of his "everyone's doing it" [speech last night in Michigan](#) was that he was mimicking the will of the voters. Because he waited, Edwards' decision to finally choose a horse reinforces the "it's over" story line. Watch this narrative get another boost next week when Obama clinches the pledged delegate lead for good. (He'll hit a majority of the 3,254 pledged delegates even if he narrowly loses Oregon.)

Perhaps more importantly, Edwards [hands Obama the steelworkers](#). The Pennsylvania primary may have come and gone, but this 600,000-strong union of iconic blue-collar workers should help assuage fears that Obama simply can't attract any support in this demographic—although Kentucky's primary will be the real test.

The last bit of election news today comes courtesy of George W. Bush. In an address to the Israeli parliament today, he took a swipe at those who would meet and talk with "terrorists and radicals," which many people took as a pot shot at Obama. ([Clinton tweaked Obama on the same issue](#) at a debate last summer.)

Multiple choice time. Does this:

- Benefit Obama, showing that he is part of the foreign-policy establishment and at odds with a historically unpopular president?

b) Hurt Obama by making voters queasy about putting this largely untested candidate at the helm?

For now, possibly for the sake of keeping Clinton in positive figures, we're going to split the difference between a) and b) and call it a wash.

For a full list of our Deathwatches, [click here](#). For a primer on Hillary's sinking ship, visit [our first Deathwatch entry](#). Send your own prognostications to hillarydeathwatch@gmail.com.

Deathwatch

The Hillary Deathwatch

Clinton wins West Virginia, but the numbers remain bleak.

By Christopher Beam

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 10:29 AM ET

The past 24 hours have been a combination of sky highs and brutal lows for Hillary Clinton. She won by double digits in West Virginia—one of her biggest victories yet (**Update 9:31 a.m., May 14:** The final tally is 67 percent to 26 percent). But a superdelegate shutout (Obama won four today to her zero) and a crippling campaign debt suggest the victory will be short-lived. We'll bump her up 1.3 points to **2.9 percent**, if only because tonight's victory all but guarantees she'll stick around a few more weeks.

First, the good news: Clinton's West Virginia victory gives her what she most desperately needs—[arguments](#). Her win, while expected, managed to suck away much of Obama's normal coalition (minus blacks, who made up 4 percent of the electorate). She can say Obama is weakening, that he's vulnerable in the general, and that voters want her to stick it out. Not even a landslide victory would earn Clinton enough pledged delegates to challenge Obama's tally, and Obama's [popular-vote lead](#) remains daunting. But she now has an excuse to stay in. In the words of MSNBC's Rachel Maddow, Clinton is now an "understudy candidate," waiting in the wings to see if Obama catches the flu.

The problem is, he's still looking healthy. Obama picked up four superdelegates today, including New Orleans Mayor and walking Katrina symbol [Ray Nagin](#). Obama now [leads by about 13 supers](#). He also won over [pledged delegate Jack Johnson](#), a Prince George's County, Md., executive whose district went for Clinton. (Remember, it's Clinton who [has argued](#) that pledged delegates aren't bound.) While Johnson doesn't have the high profile of Clinton defectors [John Lewis](#) and [Joe Andrew](#), the fact that he's flouting party practice to support Obama suggests that if the tide is turning, it's not toward Clinton.

The money front: also bleak. Over the weekend, Clinton's campaign confirmed that she's looking at [\\$20 million in campaign debt](#). In her victory speech, Clinton again encouraged viewers to visit HillaryClinton.com, and not for the policy positions. A similar plea [worked after her Pennsylvania win](#) but less so after Indiana. Tomorrow's haul will indicate just how costly it will be to stay in the race through June. Meanwhile, rumors are circulating that Obama will announce his April fundraising tomorrow. If both campaigns release numbers, the news will be whichever is bigger.

In her speech tonight, Clinton said she's not going anywhere. And it's becoming clear why. For her, it's not about money. It's not about delegates. It's not even necessarily about thinking she can win. "I am in this race because I believe I am the strongest candidate," she said. It may be that simple. To drop out now would be to abandon all the voters who agree with her. She owes it to them and to herself to see this through. In her speech, she told a story about Florence Steen, an 88-year-old woman who stayed alive just long enough to vote for a woman and then died. If there's a better metaphor for her candidacy—other than [Eight Belles](#), of course—I haven't heard it.

For a full list of our Deathwatches, [click here](#). For a primer on Hillary's sinking ship, visit [our first Deathwatch entry](#). Send your own prognostications to hillarydeathwatch@gmail.com.

Deathwatch

The Hillary Deathwatch

Obama takes the lead in the superdelegate race.

By Christopher Beam

Monday, May 12, 2008, at 1:02 PM ET

Clinton is poised to sweep West Virginia, but Obama has finally surged ahead in the most important contest of all: superdelegates. Dock Clinton half a point to **1.6 percent**.

[We've](#) believed for some time that the day Obama overtakes Clinton in the superdelegate count* is the day Clinton throws in the towel. But Friday was that day, and the towel is still there, mopping up the Clinton campaign's blood, sweat, and tears by the bucketful. According to the [Associated Press' count](#), Obama now has 277 supers to Clinton's 271. It was the last metric in which Clinton was leading, and Obama's momentum isn't slowing any: Over the weekend, he got seven supers to Clinton's one. Clinton campaign Chairman Terry McAuliffe still [claims](#) she's within "striking distance" of the popular vote. But that's only if you count Florida, Michigan, and now Puerto Rico, which doesn't vote in the general election.

Clinton's chances in West Virginia, meanwhile, look good. Insanely good. A *Lexington Herald-Leader* poll puts her at 58 percent to Obama's 31 percent. A landslide victory there will remind people of Obama's weakness with working-class whites and remind the doomsayers that Clinton is still kicking. But the demographic split is nothing we didn't know before, and Clinton's fighting spirit has [started to worry](#) some supporters. Plus, her staying in the race has a silver lining for Obama: It spares him the embarrassment of losing to her even after she dropped out. Even McCain has managed to beat his former competitors after they bowed out.

Right now, the question is no longer who has won the Democratic nomination. It's [how the loser chooses to exit](#). As cops like to say, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. Depending on which way Clinton wants to go, West Virginia, which votes tomorrow, could mean one of two things. Either Clinton seizes on it as an excuse to stay in the race and compete with Obama in Kentucky and Oregon and Montana and Puerto Rico until she has to be [euthanized on the track](#). Or she goes out on a high note. The latter option is looking more and more attractive as it becomes clear that the longer she bruises Obama, the more she'll have to atone for it in the general.

***Correction, May 12, 2008:** This article originally referred to Obama's overtaking Clinton in the pledged-delegate count. The reference should have been to his overtaking her in the superdelegate count. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)*

For a full list of our Deathwatches, [click here](#). For a primer on Hillary's sinking ship, visit [our first Deathwatch entry](#). Send your own prognostications to hillarydeathwatch@gmail.com.

Deathwatch

The Hillary Deathwatch

A steady stream of endorsements for Obama hold Clinton at bay.

By Chris Wilson

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 2:32 PM ET

Superdelegates continue to trickle in for Barack Obama, and John Edwards says Clinton probably can't win. Polls continue to favor Clinton heavily in the next two primaries. But observers increasingly wonder, what's the point? Lacking inertia, Clinton dips two-tenths of a point to **2.1 percent**.

Ever since Obama gained a solid lead in pledged delegates in the weeks after Super Tuesday, his supporters have leaked hints that he has won the private commitments of dozens of superdelegates, [particularly in Congress](#). Every Wednesday morning after a primary, the media would await news of a major shift in superdelegate migratory patterns. It never came.

Instead, it appears that the supers are content arriving in twos and threes by the day, providing a steady stream of small-font headlines. Today, Obama snared [three new endorsements](#), including one, [Rep. Donald Payne](#) of New Jersey, who defected from Clinton's column. Clinton [picked up the endorsement](#) of [Rep. Chris Carney](#) of Pennsylvania, for a net total of 3-0 in Obama's favor.

In an interview on the *Today* show, John Edwards was [generally complimentary of Obama](#) and optimistic about his odds of beating McCain in the fall, though he declined to actually endorse. Edwards' influence is diminished now that both Carolinas have voted, but he could still give Obama a bump in favorable media.

Meanwhile, Clinton is on course [to crush Obama in West Virginia](#) this Tuesday. She's polling in the 50s and 60s to Obama's 20s. Her lead is [similarly lopsided in Kentucky](#), which votes a week later.

How her likely victories in these upcoming states will be received has a lot to do with whether the current trickle of superdelegates picks up. If one allows her a generous 65 percent of the vote in every remaining primary, Obama will still lead by 100 pledged delegates going into the convention. (You can test this yourself on our [delegate calculator](#).) Such a result would mean he would need 358 superdelegates to win the nomination. [DemConWatch](#) estimates that he already has 263, meaning the high estimate for his magic number is below 100 and ticking down by the day.

For a full list of our Deathwatches, [click here](#). For a primer on Hillary's sinking ship, visit [our first Deathwatch entry](#). Send your own prognostications to hillarydeathwatch@gmail.com.

did you see this?

Am I Being Detained?

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 6:26 PM ET

drink

Drinking on the Cheap

Great wines for less than 15 bucks.

By Mike Steinberger

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 6:25 PM ET

The *New York Times* recently [reported](#) that the sputtering economy and soaring food costs are forcing Americans to become thriftier at the table. Among other things, restaurant

alcohol sales are down, and discount domestic beers are gaining at the expense of pricier imports. Wine went unmentioned, but strapped oenophiles are also scaling back. That is not such a hardship in major cities like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, which are home to sophisticated wine boutiques carrying toothsome Bourgeuils, Brouillys, and other inexpensive elixirs. But does this QPR cornucopia (QPR stands for quality-price ratio and is an acronym often used by wine buffs to denote good value) extend to the suburbs and the sticks? What's the cheap stuff like out there?

To find out, I visited a Total Wine & More outlet in Wilmington, Del., last month. Total claims to be the country's biggest independent wine retailer (meaning it's not part of some larger enterprise, like Costco), and given the chain's 52 locations in 10 states and its combined sales of more than 33 million bottles a year, I'm inclined to take their word for it. The Wilmington store was cavernous, with an enormous selection of discount wines. My self-assigned mission: to see whether there were any \$15-and-under wines, domestic or imported, that I'd be willing to recommend.

Twenty-two bottles and \$298.21 later, I can report that I discovered some good wines and had an unexpectedly edifying experience. Over the last decade, international demand for lower-priced French wines has fallen sharply, which helps explain why thousands of French vintners are now struggling to stay in business. The French are not being beaten on price. They are being beaten on taste, and I now understand more than ever why that's the case. The Total store was filled with exuberantly fruity cabernets, Syrahs, and sauvignon blancs from Australia, Chile, South Africa, and other countries. Many of them are not to my liking—I prefer leaner, drier, more mineral-driven wines—but it's easy to see why they are so appealing, particularly relative to what was on offer from France.

There was no shortage of \$15-and-under French wines, but the choices were uninspired. I liked the warm, spicy **2005 S.C.V. Castelmaure Corbières Col des Vents** (\$9.99), a red from a cooperative in the Languedoc, but the other French wines I tasted were decidedly limp. There was nothing interesting from the Loire, and the Beaujolais section appeared to be composed almost entirely of Georges Duboeuf bottlings. It is not that France doesn't produce good cheap wines; the Loire is a QPR nirvana. Ditto Beaujolais, the Languedoc, Mâcon, and the Rhône Valley. But the better ones are generally made in small quantities, and while they are readily available in New York and other big cities, they were not on the shelves in Wilmington.

Conversely, I was struck by the depth of the Spanish section. I knew that Spain had become a popular source of budget wines; nonetheless, I was surprised by the size and quality of Total's Spanish inventory. There were a number of \$15-and-under offerings, for instance, from estimable importer Eric Solomon, who has a vast Iberian portfolio. One of his wines, the **2006**

Artazu Artazuri (\$11.99), a Grenache from the Navarra region, was superb. It packed plenty of ripe, dark fruit, nicely offset by a subtle herbal kick and terrific acidity—all in all, an excellent red for the money. Another winner was the **2004 Cune Rioja Crianza** (\$13.99), a pleasantly juicy wine that hit all the right Rioja notes (cherries, plums, tobacco, a whiff of nuts).

Having written several years ago about the dearth of good cheap wines from California, I expected the \$15-and-under domestic selection to be grim, and, by and large, it was. I did, however, find a few exceptions—and surprising ones, too. The **Gruet Brut nonvintage** (\$13.99) is—I kid you not—a quaffable sparkling wine from New Mexico, with an attractive, yeasty bouquet and a pleasantly creamy texture. It won't cause Olivier Krug any lost sleep, but it was a lot better than the comparably priced champagne that I tried, the anemic Francois Montand Blanc de Blancs nonvintage. The **2006 King Estate Signature Collection Pinot Gris** (\$13.99), from Oregon, also impressed me. It was a zesty, refreshing wine with good pear and citrus notes and a fine mineral edge; if you are looking for a summer white, this would be an excellent choice. California wasn't entirely shut out; I enjoyed the **2006 Cline Ancient Vines Zinfandel** (\$11.99). The bouquet, bursting with white pepper, put me in mind of a Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and while the wine was plenty ripe, it was neither jammy nor excessively alcoholic, two traits that have become sadly typical of zins.

They have also become all too typical of Australian reds, and the ones I tried were no exception. I did, however, taste a decent Australian white, the **2006 d'Arenberg the Hermit Crab** (\$13.99). A blend of viognier and Marsanne, the Hermit Crab delivered a convincing head fake: The nose, bursting with tropical fruits, suggested something confectioned and plump, but the wine, though ripe, was pleasantly restrained, thanks in part to a subtle and much-appreciated mineral note.

The store also had a formidable array of Italian wines. The **2007 Cusumano Nero d'Avola** (\$12.99), a Silician red marked by ripe cherries and a good whiff of tobacco, was an easy-sipping wine that would go well with pizza or pasta. Even better, though, was the **2006 Prunotto Dolcetto d'Alba** (\$14.99) from the Piedmont region, which had crisp, succulent cherry fruit, nice herbal and floral overtones, and excellent acidity. A group of Italians, including famed importer Marc de Grazia, teamed up in 1995 to create an Argentine winery called Altos las Hormigas. The **2006 Altos Las Hormigas** (\$8.49), made entirely of Malbec, Argentina's signature grape, served up gentle waves of blackberry fruit along with an appealing savory note; it went down very smoothly and is a particularly good value. In a very different vein, I really liked the **2007 Loosen Bros. Dr. L Riesling** (\$12.99) from Germany. The wine comes from the Mosel area, Germany's Riesling heartland, and has the classic Mosel profile: ripe peaches, a twist of lime, and subtle underlying acidity and minerality that parry the sweetness. It is a wine that begs to be served with Indian or Thai takeout.

All in all, then, a reasonably successful trip to the corner liquor store. And if there's not a Total location in your neighborhood? Anywhere you look, you are going to struggle to find inexpensive domestic wines worth drinking—it's the cardinal sin of American winemaking, in my opinion. Generally speaking, the foreign shelves will have much more to offer. Of course, French, Italian, and Spanish wines can be confusing in ways that, say, California merlots and chardonnays are not. One usually surefire method of finding interesting foreign wines: Let the importer be your guide. The United States is blessed with a small army of superb importers, who bring in excellent wines at all price points. If any of the names on [this list](#) are on the label, you can be reasonably certain you've got yourself a good bottle.

sidebar

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A Handy List of Great Wine Importers

- Terry Theise (Germany, Austria, France)
- Kermit Lynch (France)
- Alain Junguenet (France)
- Louis/Dressner (France)
- Kysela Pere et Fils (France)
- Weygandt-Metzler (France)
- Robert Kacher (France)
- Dan Kravitz/Hand Picked Selections (France)
- Robert Chadderdon (France)
- Neal Rosenthal (France, Italy)
- Eric Solomon Selections/European Cellars (France, Spain)
- Marc de Grazia (Italy)
- Leonardo LoCascio (Italy)
- Jorge Ordonez (Spain)
- Michael Skurnik (everywhere)

Polaner Selections (everywhere)

election scorecard

No Surprise Here

Clinton dominates West Virginia, and many of its voters disapprove of Obama. What else is new?

By Tony Romm

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 1:14 PM ET

It's clear, based on a look at [the exit polls](#) the morning after Clinton's dominant win in West Virginia, that the state doesn't just favor Clinton; it has distaste for Barack Obama.

According to the numbers, 24 percent of West Virginia voters, half of whom are Clinton supporters, want the campaign to end as soon as possible. That said, if the campaign were to end tomorrow, almost 20 percent of Clinton's West Virginia supporters say they would not vote at all in the general election, an oft-repeated number in the state's pre-primary polling.

Also of interest: One-third of West Virginians disapprove of Clinton's "gas-tax holiday." And, since no exit-poll analysis is complete without some mention of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, more than half of yesterday's voters—more than 80 percent of whom voted for Clinton—also believe Obama shares the views of his former, vociferous pastor.

Election Scorecard uses data supplied by Mark Blumenthal and Charles Franklin at [Pollster.com](#).

Delegates at stake:

Democrats	Republicans
Total delegates: 4,049 Total delegates needed to win: 2,025	Total delegates: 2,380 Total delegates needed to win: 1,191
Pledged delegates won by each candidate: Obama: 1,588; Clinton:	Delegates won by each candidate: McCain: 1,409

1,419

Source: CNN

Source: CNN

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election day" so long as the ballot was postmarked or received by the election supervisor prior to the voter's death. Steen's daughter tells Explainer that she postmarked her mother's absentee ballot on April 29 or April 30, nearly two weeks before Steen passed away.

In 2004, *USA Today* [reported](#) that California, Texas, Tennessee, Ohio, and West Virginia all allow for the counting of absentee ballots of deceased voters while many other states technically do not. Many states that prohibit these so-called "ghost votes," however, lack the reporting system to quickly update voter rolls with recent deaths. That means it's very unlikely that a recently deceased voter would have his or her absentee ballot nullified.

Because most absentee ballots are mailed in the few weeks prior to the election, the likelihood that a significant number of voters will have passed away in the interim is fairly small. Election experts tend to agree that absentee ballots cast legitimately by voters who die soon thereafter are a minor issue compared with concerns about voter fraud or errors in how votes are registered.

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

Explainer thanks Doug Chapin of Pew's Electionline.org, Jennifer Krell Davis of the Florida Department of State, Richard L. Hasen of Loyola Law School, Richard Hauffe of the South Dakota Democratic Party, Kathy Krause, Pennington County Auditor Julie A. Pearson, Randy Riddle of Renne Sloan Holtzman Sakai, and the South Dakota Office of the Secretary of State. Thanks also to reader Jeannine Chanes for asking the question.

explainer

Can a Dead Woman Vote?

Will the late Florence Steen's absentee ballot count in South Dakota's primary?
By Chris Wilson

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 6:54 PM ET

At the conclusion of her [victory speech](#) in Charleston, W.Va., on Tuesday night, Hillary Clinton told the story of a supporter named Florence Steen, who passed away last Sunday. The 88-year-old South Dakotan had just voted for Clinton by absentee ballot, ahead of the state's June 3 primary. It's a touching story, but will her vote still count?

No. As dictated by a [2001 state law](#), the South Dakota Department of Health is responsible for furnishing the county auditors with a list of registered voters who have died each month. This information is used to update the state's electronic voter-registration file, which was created by [a different 2001 law](#). Absentee ballots are collected by county auditors and remain sealed until the election, so if an absentee voter dies prior to the election, then her ballot is never opened.

The 2001 South Dakota law originally required this monthly list of deceased voters to be transferred to the county auditors by the 10th of the following month—which in this case could have occurred after the June 3 election. However, updates to the legislation passed in the wake of 2002's [Help America Vote Act](#) now require more frequent electronic reporting.

Because election law is governed by states, the rules vary widely when it comes to how this issue is handled. Had Steen lived in Florida, for example, her vote would have counted. [Florida state law](#) dictates that "the ballot of an elector who casts an absentee ballot shall be counted even if the elector dies on or before

explainer

Natural-Disaster Death Tolls

Who's counting?

By Juliet Lapidos

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 6:28 PM ET

CNN reported today that between 63,000 and 100,000 people have died as a result of the [May 3 cyclone in Burma](#). According to the *Washington Post*, the death toll from Monday's [earthquake in China has exceeded 12,000](#) and is expected to rise. Where do natural-disaster death estimates come from?

Eyewitnesses and guesswork. Government relief workers and agents from NGOs assess stricken neighborhoods for casualties. They literally count bodies, take down reports from district officials or locals who have lost family members, and make estimates based on damage to infrastructure. (If there are 20 people missing and they all worked in a building that collapsed

due to a tremor, the relief workers might count those 20 people as dead.) The workers then report back either to a government agency in charge of emergency assistance or to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. An aggregate figure filters down to national media outlets.

U.N. estimates are often higher than the local government's. ([Burma's state television](#), for example, currently reports that around 34,000 people have died, while the U.N. claims the actual toll is closer to 100,000.) That's because the U.N. tries to account for regions that have not yet been assessed on the ground by using satellite footage of the wreckage and prior demographic information. If they know that 15 percent of the population perished in one village, they assume the same percentage died in a similarly affected village. Even without such projections, U.N. numbers are often higher because they err on the side of overestimation to ensure an adequate relief response. Local governments, on the other hand, might underreport to save face or to prevent international organizations from assisting opposition groups.

On Sunday, Oxfam warned that the death toll in Burma could reach 1.5 million without massive humanitarian intervention. To arrive at that figure, Oxfam used the U.N.'s 100,000 estimate as a base. Then they used research from previous natural disasters and demographic analysis (children and the elderly are less likely to survive, etc.) to predict that 15 times that many people could die from typhoid, malaria, dengue, cholera, and other diseases.

Newspapers and wire services don't have the resources to verify mortality statistics independently, so you'll often see two or more numbers cited in the same article. A recent article on Burma in the Canadian [Globe and Mail](#), for example, gives the Burmese government's official number of dead and missing; the United Nations' far higher, unofficial number; and Oxfam's 1.5 million "in danger of dying" estimate. In the first couple days after a disaster, death tolls as reported by the media are often low and then creep upward. (On May 6, news sources were reporting just 10,000 dead.) That's because the first numbers usually come from government agencies that 1) may be underreporting or 2) are pressured to make approximations before relief workers have gauged the scale of destruction. Body counts also rise as victims die from indirect causes.

Neither eyewitness reports nor the projections done by the U.N. are thought to be entirely accurate. In the aftermath of a disaster, it's difficult to prevent double- or triple-reporting of individual deaths or to independently verify estimates from district officials. Predictions about inaccessible villages based on similar surveyed areas aren't entirely reliable, either. After the tsunami, for example, relief workers assumed devastation in remote islands that turned out to be [relatively unscathed](#) because the locals had escaped to higher ground.

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

Explainer thanks Stephanie Bunker of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Mike Kiernan of Save the Children, Liz Lucas of Oxfam, and Court Robinson of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

explainer

Were the Dove Ads Retouched?

How to spot Photoshop chicanery.

By Jacob Leibenluft

Monday, May 12, 2008, at 6:40 PM ET

After a [New Yorker profile](#) implied that "king of the photo touchup" Pascal Dangin had airbrushed photos taken by Annie Leibovitz for Dove's high-profile "[Campaign for Real Beauty](#)," the company issued a [statement](#) last Friday explaining that Dangin had only removed dust and performed minor color corrections. Is it possible to determine whether the [Dove photos](#) were retouched?

Maybe, but it would be very difficult. Amateur retouching can leave [seams](#) where two different images are spliced together. But in the case of an expert retoucher like Dangin, visible signs would have been diligently scrubbed away. Additionally, since images can be distorted when they are compressed into other [file formats](#) (PDF) or printed in a magazine, any apparent smudges or irregularities in one of the Dove photos might well be artifacts of the photo's reproduction, rather than signs of tampering.

A more advanced form of analysis might focus on the lighting in the photos to see if there were inconsistencies in the images' shadows or lighting gradients. (See, for example, this [forged photo](#) of John Kerry and Jane Fonda, where [one calculation](#) (PDF) pegged the light coming from 123 degrees onto Kerry and 86 degrees onto Fonda.) Another technique used to spot composite photographs looks at the way light reflects off a subject's eye to determine exactly where the light was coming from. Professional retouchers say they can also recognize where a photo has been altered if the skin texture is [too smooth](#) or the model's symmetry too perfect, or if the perspective appears distorted.

But even the most advanced analysis of the Dove ads might not reveal very much. Because the photos were taken inside a studio, Leibovitz and Dangin didn't have to worry about the complications that come from natural sunlight. The setup of the Dove photos was also rather simple—just the model alone—so a skilled retoucher would probably be able to ensure that any corrections kept the [lighting consistent](#).

If an image-forensics specialist could get a copy of the actual image used in the ad, then he or she might be able to conduct a more detailed analysis of the digital information that encodes the image. Had Leibovitz been using a digital camera—until recently, [she used only film](#)—then analysts might be able to [use a technique](#) (PDF) pioneered at Dartmouth College that takes advantage of the way digital cameras create an image when photos are taken. Nearly all cameras directly record just a fraction of the pixels that make up the photograph and then "interpolate" the rest based on patterns within the image. As a result, any uncorrected section of a photograph should fit these correlations, and a computer analysis can show if the photo has been altered even slightly. Of course, since Dangin and Leibovitz have already admitted that the photo did include the minor dust and color corrections, this method wouldn't be so helpful.

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

Explainer thanks Brian Dilg of Brian Dilg Photography, Katrin Eismann, Hany Farid of Dartmouth College, M. Kimo Johnson of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and George Reis of Imaging Forensics.

explainer

How To Make a Skull Bong

A guide for the ultimate deadhead.

By Arthur Delaney

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 6:02 PM ET

On Thursday, the *Houston Chronicle* posted a [story](#) on its Web site about three teenagers who, according to Houston police, dug up the grave of an 11-year-old boy buried in 1921, removed the corpse's head, and used it as a bong to smoke marijuana. Police have not found the head and say heavy rain has prevented them checking the open grave for a casket. If it's true that the kids stole a skull, could they really have used it as a bong?

Maybe. If the Texas teenagers recovered a skull in ideal condition, they would still have a lot of work to do before they could smoke weed out of it. There are different types of bongs, but any workable model must offer a seal tight enough that water and smoke cannot escape. Assuming the skull was used right-side up, and that the pot-smokers used the brain cavity as their bong chamber, thin fissures in the eye sockets and any other holes would need to be sealed with something like grout to prevent the smoke from seeping out. The teens would also have to cover over the base of the skull, which contains a large opening through which spinal nerves reach the brain. And there

are dozens of small nerve holes, called [foramina](#), which might produce a watering-can effect if left unplugged.

The most effective skull bong might include a removable "slide," a tube that holds lighted marijuana in a bowl on one end and carries smoke into the water in the chamber at the other end. The slide could be inserted into the chamber via a snug hole in an airtight seal over the nasal opening. The user would need to drill a hole in the top of the skull to use as a mouthpiece. While lighting the marijuana in the bowl, the user would suck on the mouthpiece to draw smoke through the water and into the chamber; then he would remove the slide and inhale the smoke.

If the skull were too brittle to be easily drilled, the teenagers might have flipped it upside down. Then they could put the slide through the nose as before but use the large hole at the base of the skull—the [foramen magnum](#)—as the mouthpiece. The disadvantage of this method would be the tendency for the skull bong to roll over when set down.

This all assumes that the teenagers had gotten their hands on an undamaged skull. The decomposition of a corpse depends on a number of factors, such as whether the body has been embalmed, what type of casket is used, and the conditions of the surrounding environment. In ideal conditions, an embalmed body might be covered in leathery flesh for years, which would make using the head as a bong unappealing to squeamish stoners. (There might be some residual brain tissue left inside.) In less pristine conditions, groundwater might have eroded everything, even the bones.

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

Explainer thanks Wayne Cavender of the Dallas Institute of Funeral Service, Danny Danko of High Times magazine, and several other experts, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

faith-based

Loving and Leaving the Head Scarf

What *hijab's* revolving door says about the religious mobility of American Muslims.

By Andrea Useem

Monday, May 12, 2008, at 7:03 AM ET

For most teenage girls, rebellion involves a tongue piercing or sneaking out to a beer-soaked party. But Suraya Ali, the daughter of unobservant Muslim immigrants from India, shocked her parents and her classmates by donning a Muslim head scarf. "It was my way of flipping the world off, saying, 'I

can be what I want,' " says Ali, now 31, who grew up in a Chicago suburb.

But a decade and a half later, Ali had a "strange feeling" of no longer fitting in with her Muslim community; she was constantly set up with potential suitors who assumed her scarf symbolized a certain submissive attitude toward marriage; and her elite education had prompted her to question the traditional roles for men and women laid out in classical Islamic law. "I realized [wearing *hijab*] is not who I am anymore."

Ali's decision was visible only to those who knew her (and because of her family's sensitivities, she did not want her real name used). But her experience reveals how very modern American Muslim life can be. *Hijab* in America is not a social norm of ages past, unquestioningly handed down; rather, it has become a tool of self-expression. Just as Americans frequently [change jobs](#), [leave marriages](#), and [switch religious affiliations](#), American Muslim women choose to love, and sometimes leave, the head scarf.

When Yale anthropologist [Carolyn Rouse](#) studied African-American Muslim women for her 2004 book [Engaged Surrender](#), she observed that the *hijab* (and, in some cases, [niqab](#), or face-covering) was primarily about group identity. Many female converts, for example, started veiling themselves immediately—the two were seen as inseparable. Wearing *hijab* "signified belonging to the *ummah*," or the broader, idealized Muslim community, she said. But this voluntary expression of citizenship doesn't always last. By the time Rouse wrote her epilogue, several of the women she had followed no longer wore the scarf. One convert, Rouse wrote, "believes she used *hijab* to prove to herself the depth of her faith. Now that she feels more secure with her faith she does not feel she needs it."

When I first put on the head scarf eight years ago—starting off with a horrible tan-and-white polyester square I purchased before I realized [hijab could be stylish](#)—I felt that I was daring to follow my beliefs, come what may. What I believed at that moment, as I pinned the polyester beneath my chin, was that God wanted me to cover, to simultaneously hide my beauty (such as it was) and proclaim my faith. I had become Muslim two years earlier while living and working in East Africa. As a journalist and "honorary male," I had mixed with more Muslim men than women in my travels and therefore gave little thought to *hijab* before converting. It was only when I returned to the United States for graduate school that I begin to notice my fellow [muslimahs](#) wearing head scarves. Had I missed something?

A turning point came one day at a cafe (OK, it was Starbucks) in Harvard Square, when a scarf-wearing woman walked in. Some customers gave her uneasy glances, and I felt sharp regret that she had no idea a fellow believer was sitting right there, silently supporting her. After that, I researched classical Islamic law as

best I could and concluded that covering everything but your hands, face, and feet was, indeed, "required" for believing Muslim women.

The Quran actually has just two verses dealing specifically with women's dress. [Chapter 33, verse 59](#), tells women to wear outer garments so they'll be recognized as Muslims and left alone. A longer verse, [Chapter 24, verse 31](#), instructs women to guard their modesty, to cover their breasts, and not to display their beauty to males except their brothers, husbands, fathers, eunuchs, male slaves, etc. To the modern reader, the words can appear maddeningly ambiguous and painfully out of date, and they require not only translation from classical Arabic but a grasp of seventh-century historical context. Both passages are hotly debated. For *hijab* apologists, however, the verses, along with prophetic endorsement and scholarly rulings, prove that full covering is obligatory. This opinion is mainstream among Muslims in the United States; according to a 2007 [study](#), 51 percent of American Muslim women wear *hijab* all or some of the time.

" '*Hijab* is beautiful, *hijab* is what God wants, *hijab* is a Muslim woman's duty'—that's become a mantra among Muslim communities," says Fatemeh Fakhraie, a graduate student, [blogger](#), and co-founder of the Facebook group "Just Because I Don't Wear *Hijab* Doesn't Mean I'm Not Muslim."

These theological arguments, while important in their own ways, sometimes seem little more than a patina atop more primal social urges, however. Wearing *hijab* or not wearing *hijab*—just like owning a gun or [driving a Prius](#)—says something fundamental about your beliefs and aspirations. And in America, at least, beliefs have a funny way of changing.

My own fervent attachment to the scarf gradually faded. Two years after first donning it, I was married and no longer needed the scarf to broadcast my unavailability to non-Muslim guys. I had also moved to a Persian Gulf country where *hijab* was not a personal choice but a cultural system of sex segregation: On the beaches there, men in shorts played soccer and swam, while women in layers of black polyester dipped their toes in the water and shook sand from their shoes.

Like spouses who know they are headed for divorce but still go through the marital motions, many *hijabis* continue to wear the scarf in public long after its inner meaning has dissipated. They wait for a natural break in their lives to make the transition. I took it off on my return flight from the Persian Gulf to the United States. Ali removed it after finishing a summer internship. Another woman I know literally moved across the country to make the change, simultaneously leaving the tight-knit Muslim community she felt was suffocating her and the scarf that pledged her allegiance to it. [Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur](#), author of the 2005 essay collection [Living Islam Out Loud](#), found that taking off *hijab* was about breaking up with not only

her Muslim community but also her childhood assumptions. After she divorced an abusive husband, Abdul-Ghafur found herself judged and isolated by her fellow Muslims. Feeling burned by community norms that rushed her into marriage with the wrong guy, she questioned the *hijab*. "Taking it off expanded my identity—it was exciting, like a new haircut," she says.

But if you start pulling at the thread of doubt, how do you keep the whole sweater from unraveling? When religious scholar Karen Armstrong [left her convent](#) in the late 1960s, she proceeded to leave Catholicism, and today she [says](#) even the label of "freelance monotheist" feels restrictive. Ali still prays five times a day, fasts for Ramadan, and remains attracted to a somewhat-traditional religious outlook. "I don't think Islam is untrue in any way. But I did get very stuck in a way of looking at things that made Islam feel untrue, and I had to separate those things."

While many American Muslims dwell contentedly within the limits of modern Islamic orthodoxy—miniworlds where *hijab* can be taken for granted—others avoid it or pass through en route to more spacious destinations.

family

The Case of the Missing Veggie Sticks

Staving off my son's panic attacks.

By Emily Bazelon

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 1:20 PM ET

On Friday afternoons, my son Simon plays soccer in a clinic organized by one of the mothers at his preschool. He looks forward to the routine: The kids gather at dismissal, and a group of mothers and baby sitters walks them down a path in the woods to the soccer field at a nearby park. I haven't been one of the accompanying mothers yet this season because I have to pick up my older son, Eli, at his school before we meet Simon at the park. This is OK with the other moms, because later this spring it'll be my turn to chaperone the walk. And Simon, who is 5, hasn't complained about my absence. It's his scene—his woods to run through so he can get to the park first. In other words, a bite-sized sliver of independence, broken off from a week of school, parents, and baby sitters.

Sounds great, right? Except for the missing snacks. The food in question is typically veggie sticks or, if Simon comes to the supermarket, mini Chips Ahoy or Oreos. On the first week of soccer, I brought the snacks, but by the time I arrived, it was too late—he was already furious and starving, or would have been if he hadn't devoured the other kids' snacks. The next week, I carefully packed veggie sticks in Simon's backpack. But the

moment Simon wanted his veggie sticks, and wanted them desperately, he couldn't find them. This happened in the minutes before I got to the park, and Simon panicked. By the time I saw him, he was crying, purple, practically vibrating, and shrieking, "*Where is my snack?*"

Simon's upset wasn't a temper tantrum, not of the spoiled-child variety. It was a reasonable desire—snacks before soccer—unreasonably expressed. As my friend Erica says, about her daughter who also been prone to panic, it's as if in that moment, one's normally bright, prepossessing child can't see, and so he can't look for what he needs. Simon was being asked to fend for himself, even if just in some small way, and when something went a little awry, he suddenly and completely discovered he couldn't. So, what to do?

First, I tried issuing instructions. But each week, the scene of distress played out in similar fashion, defeating my drill-sergeant efforts. Week No. 3: The mother who kindly drove all the kids' backpacks to the park (the better for their woodsy romp) hadn't gotten to the park yet, and so Simon thought his bag was lost. Panic. Week No. 4: Simon got his backpack and opened it but didn't see the bag of snacks tucked behind a folder and his lunchbox. Panic. And week No. 5—oh, who knows, I can't remember what went wrong, and the details don't matter. The point is that hard as I tried to stave off crisis by reminding Simon from week to week that his snack would be in his backpack, his backpack would be delivered to the park, and all he had to do was to *look inside, take out the bag, and put the food into his mouth*, he couldn't quite manage it. Not without a panic attack. Which turned him into a purplish puddle, frazzled the other moms and baby sitters, and (not least) embarrassed me, the ever-too-late mother running up to reassemble her wrecked child.

My first thought, admittedly drenched in guilt, was to somehow rearrange Eli's pickup so I could get to the park earlier. The on-time mother, swooping in to save the day. Then I decided that I was the one panicking. If I could just figure out how, the setup was ideal training ground for self-sufficiency, which I like to think I'm a big believer in. The school-to-soccer routine repeated, week to week. Most of it, he liked. I knew that he could handle getting food out of his backpack because every day at school, he hangs his bag on a hook, unzips it, takes out his lunchbox and water bottle, and sets them on a shelf. ([Thank you, Montessori.](#)) The trick was to translate that from school to park, without being there myself to coach him through it. I didn't want to involve another mom. I wanted to help Simon from afar. I wanted him to roll with the small injection of spontaneity and loose supervision that is also what he loves about soccer on Fridays.

I consulted Erica, and she counseled giving Simon a visual aide—a cue that he wouldn't be able to miss and that would remind him where his snack was and how to look for it. When her daughter started going places on her own and panicked over

being left there, Erica would take off a bracelet (preferably one she didn't care that much about getting back) and give it to her daughter to hold. As it happens, there is a children's book about Erica's idea: [The Kissing Hand](#), by Audrey Penn. The story follows Chester the raccoon, who is afraid to go to school for the first time. His mother kisses the center of his hand and tells him to hold his hand up to his face if he feels like he needs her. Absence made present. Sort of. Which for most kids is probably enough.

The Kissing Hand is a hit in kindergarten classrooms, to judge from the [lesson plans it has generated](#). But it all seemed a little treacly and coo-ey, which meant that Simon wouldn't be likely to go for it, and just looking at the art projects and bad poems exhausted me. Plus, Chester's dilemma was slightly different than Simon's. Chester panics over missing his mother herself; Simon just missed me in my usual role of snack finder. Veggie sticks in hand, he would run back to the playground without looking back. The trick was to get him to lift himself over the moments in between. He needed to become his own smoother-outer, his own fixer.

So, here's the plan for soccer this week: On Friday morning, we're going to sit down, put the snack into his backpack together, and talk through the afternoon. I'm going to write a big red *S* on the back of Simon's hand. *S* for *snack*, *S* for *Simon*, *S* for *See what you can do for yourself?* I'll prompt him to issue his own instructions: What do you do when you get to the park? Where do you look? What do you do when you see the *S*? Maybe none of this will make any difference, and later in the day I'll find Simon purplish as usual. But we've got a few weeks of soccer on Fridays left in which to master solving a small problem on your own. Not to mention a lot of years of childhood.

fighting words

Can Israel Survive for Another 60 Years?

Perhaps, but not necessarily as a Jewish state.

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, May 12, 2008, at 12:26 PM ET

It's somehow absurd and trivial to use the word *Israel* and the expression *60th birthday* in the same sentence or the same breath. (What is this, some candle-bedecked ceremony in Miami?) The questions before us are somewhat more antique, and also a little more pressingly and urgently modern, than that. Has Zionism made Jews more safe or less safe? Has it cured the age-old problem of anti-Semitism or not? Is it part of the [tikkun olam](#)—

the mandate for the healing and repair of the human world—or is it another rent and tear in the fabric?

Jewish people are on all sides of this argument, as always. There are Hasidic rabbis who declare the Jewish state to be a blasphemy, but only because there can be no such state until the arrival of the Messiah (who may yet tarry). There are Jewish leftists who feel shame that a settler state was erected on the ruins of so many Palestinian villages. There are also Jews who collaborate with extreme-conservative Christians in an effort to bring on the day of Armageddon, when all these other questions will necessarily become moot. And, of course, there are Jews who simply continue to live in, or to support from a distance, a nerve-racked and high-tech little state that absorbs a lot of violence and cruelty and that has also shown itself very capable of inflicting the same.

I find that no other question so much reminds me of F. Scott Fitzgerald and his [aphorism about the necessity of living with flat-out contradiction](#). Do I sometimes wish that Theodor Herzl and Chaim Weizmann had never persuaded either the Jews or the gentiles to create a quasi-utopian farmer-and-worker state at the eastern end of the Mediterranean? Yes. Do I wish that the Israeli air force could find and destroy all the arsenals of Hezbollah and Hamas and Islamic Jihad? Yes. Do I think it ridiculous that Viennese and Russian and German scholars and doctors should have vibrated to the mad rhythms of ancient so-called prophecies rather than helping to secularize and reform their own societies? Definitely. Do I feel horror and disgust at the thought that a whole new generation of Arab Palestinians is being born into the dispossession and/or occupation already suffered by their grandparents and even great-grandparents? Absolutely, I do.

The questions of principle and the matters of brute realism have a tendency (especially for one who does not think that heaven plays any part in the game) to converge. Without God on your side, what the hell are you doing in the greater Jerusalem area in the first place? Israel may not be the rogue state that so many people say it is—including so many people who will excuse the crimes of Syria and Iran—but what if it runs the much worse risk of being a failed state? Here I must stop asking questions and simply and honestly answer one. In many visits to the so-called Holy Land, I have never quite been able to imagine that a Jewish state in Palestine will still be in existence a hundred years from now. A state for Jews, possibly. But a Jewish state ...

Israeli propaganda for a long time obscured this crucial distinction. If all that was wanted was a belt of Jewish territory on the coast and plains, such as that which was occupied by the [yishuv](#) in pre-state days, the international community could easily have agreed to place it within the defense perimeter of "the West" or the United Nations or, later, NATO. Aha, say the Zionists, the bad old days are gone when we were so naive as to rely on gentiles to defend us. Very well. But also mark the

sequel. Israel is now incredibly dependent upon non-Jews for its own defense and, moreover, rules over millions of other non-Jews who loathe and detest it from the bottom of their hearts. How long do you think the first set of non-Jews will go on defending Israel from the second lot and from their very wealthy and numerous kinsmen? In other words, Zionism has only replaced and repositioned the question of anti-Semitism. For me, the Israeli family is not the alternative to the diaspora. It is *part* of the diaspora. To speak roughly, there are three groups of 6 million Jews. The first 6 million live in what the Zionist movement used to call Palestine. The second 6 million live in the United States. The third 6 million are distributed mainly among Russia, France, Britain, and Argentina. Only the first group lives daily in range of missiles that can be (and are) launched by people who hate Jews. Well, irony is supposed to be a Jewish specialty.

That last point, however, brings me to my own closing observation. It is a moral idiot who thinks that anti-Semitism is a threat only to Jews. The history of civilization demonstrates something rather different: Judaeophobia is an unending prognosis of barbarism and collapse, and the states and movements that promulgate it are doomed to suicide as well as homicide, as was demonstrated by Catholic Spain as well as Nazi Germany. Today's Iranian "Islamic republic" is a nightmare for its own citizens as well as a pestilential nuisance and menace to its neighbors. And the most depressing and wretched spectacle of the past decade, for all those who care about democracy and secularism, has been the degeneration of Palestinian Arab nationalism into the theocratic and thanatocratic hell of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, where the Web site of Gaza's ruling faction blazons an endorsement of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This obscenity is not to be explained away by glib terms like *despair* or *occupation*, as other religious fools like Jimmy Carter—who managed to meet the Hamas gangsters without mentioning their racist manifesto—would have you believe. (Is Muslim-on-Muslim massacre in Darfur or Iraq or Pakistan or Lebanon to be justified by conditions in Gaza?) Instead, this crux forces non-Zionists like me to ask whether, in spite of everything, Israel should be defended as if it were a part of the democratic West. This is a question to which Israelis themselves have not yet returned a completely convincing answer, and if they truly desire a 60th, let alone a 70th, birthday celebration, they had better lose no time in coming up with one.

foreigners

A Drastic Remedy

The case for intervention in Burma.

By Anne Applebaum

Monday, May 12, 2008, at 8:00 PM ET

They are "[cruel, power hungry and dangerously irrational](#)," in the words of one British journalist. They are "[violent and irrational](#)" according to a journalist in neighboring Thailand. Our own State Department leadership has condemned their "[xenophobic, ever more irrational policies](#)."

On the evidence of the last few days alone, those are all perfectly accurate descriptions. But in one very narrow sense, the cruel, power-hungry, violent, and xenophobic generals who run Burma are not irrational at all: Given their own most urgent goal—to maintain power at all costs—their reluctance to accept international aid in the wake of a devastating cyclone makes perfect sense. It's straightforward, as the *Washington Post's* Fred Hiatt put it Monday: "[The junta cares about its own survival, not the survival of its people](#)." Thus, the death toll is thought to have reached 100,000, a further 1.5 million Burmese are now at risk of epidemics and starvation, parts of the country are still underwater, hundreds of thousands of people are camped in the open without food or clean water—and, yes, if foreigners come and distribute aid, the legitimacy of the regime might be threatened.

Especially foreigners in large numbers, using high-tech vehicles that don't exist in Burma, distributing cartons of rice marked "Made in the USA" or even "UNDP." All natural disasters—from the Armenian earthquake, which helped bring down the Soviet Union, to Hurricane Katrina, which damaged the Bush administration—have profound political implications, as do the aid efforts that follow them, and the Burmese generals clearly know it.

Hence the "logic" of the regime's behavior in the days since the cyclone: the impounding of airplanes full of food; the refusal to grant visas to relief workers and landing rights to foreign aircraft; the initial refusal to allow U.S. military (or indeed any foreign military) to supply the ships, planes, and helicopters needed for the mass distribution of food and supplies that Burma needs. Nor is this simple anti-Western paranoia: The foreign minister of Thailand has been kept out, too. Even Burmese citizens have been prevented from bringing food to the flood-damaged regions, on the grounds that "[all assistance must be channeled through the military](#)."

The result: Aid organizations that have staff on the ground are talking about the hundreds of thousands of homeless Burmese who may soon begin dying of [cholera, diarrhea, and other diseases](#). This isn't logic by our standards, but it is logic by theirs. Which is why we have to assume that the regime's fear of foreign relief workers could even increase as the crisis grows, threatening them further.

If we fail to persuade the junta to relent soon—despite what I hope are assurances that Oxfam, Médecins Sans Frontières, and the American military will bring only food, not regime change,

much as we all might like to see it—then we have to start considering alternatives. According to [some accounts](#), the U.S. military is already looking at a range of options, including helicopter food deliveries from offshore ships, or convoys from across the Thai border. The U.S. government should be looking at wider diplomatic options, too. The U.N. Security Council has already refused to take greater responsibility for Burma—China won't allow the sovereignty of its protectorate to be threatened, even at the price of hundreds of thousands of lives—but there is no need to act alone. In fact, it would be a grave error to do so, since anything resembling a foreign "invasion" might provoke military resistance.

Unfortunately, the phrase "coalition of the willing" is tainted forever—once again proving that the [damage done by the Iraq war goes far beyond the Iraqi borders](#)—but a coalition of the willing is exactly what we need. The French—whose foreign minister, [Bernard Kouchner](#), was himself a co-founder of Médecins Sans Frontières—are already talking about finding alternative ways of delivering aid. Others in Europe and Asia might join in, along with some aid organizations. The Chinese should be embarrassed into contributing, asked again and again to help. This is their satrapy, after all, not ours.

Think of it as the true test of the Western humanitarian impulse: The international effort that went into coordinating the tsunami relief effort in late 2004 has to be repeated, but in much harsher, trickier, uglier political circumstances. Yes, we should help the Burmese, even against the will of their irrational leaders. Yes, we should think hard about the right way to do it. And, yes, there isn't much time to ruminate about any of this.

foreigners

The World Without Us

The United States can't afford to snub the 2010 World Expo.

By Fred Bernstein

Monday, May 12, 2008, at 7:03 AM ET

When the hoopla surrounding the Beijing Olympics ends in August, China's attention will turn to a second international extravaganza: the World Expo scheduled to open in Shanghai on May 1, 2010. The Chinese government is sparing no expense for its second giant coming-out party, on a two-square-mile site flanking the Huangpu River.

China understands the power of symbols—something it may have learned from the United States. After all, if the 20th century was the American century, the proof included nearly a dozen world's fairs in Seattle, San Antonio, and—notably—New York

in the 1930s and 1960s. The fairs showcased U.S. cultural and technological prowess.

Now it's Asia's turn. In 2005, a fair in Aichi, Japan, attracted 22 million visitors, far more than skeptics had predicted. Given China's vastly larger population, its expectation that 70 million people will attend the 2010 fair seems reasonable. (After Shanghai, Yeosu, Korea, will host a fair in 2012.)

So far, more than 150 countries have made plans to exhibit in Shanghai, and some are continuing the tradition of using world's fairs as occasions for architectural experimentation. (Think [Crystal Palace](#) and the [Eiffel Tower](#).) Last year, Great Britain held a [design competition](#) in which proposals by Pritzker Prize winner [Zaha Hadid](#) and Marks Barfield (whose [London Eye](#) is that city's nonpareil tourist attraction) were rejected in favor of one by rising star [Thomas Heatherwick](#). [Canada](#) is collaborating with one of its most popular cultural exports, Cirque du Soleil, on what is bound to be a hit attraction.

So what is the United States planning for Shanghai at a time when the American image abroad needs all the help it can get? Having decided to live with a 1990s congressional directive that no public funds be spent on world's fairs, the State Department is hoping private enterprise will fill the void. In April, it gave a Washington attorney and a California theme-park executive the go-ahead to begin raising money from individual and corporate donors. [Ellen Eliasoph](#), a lawyer with Covington & Burling, and [Nick Winslow](#), formerly the president of the theme-park division of Warner Bros., need to obtain \$70 million to \$80 million before the State Department will even commit to attending the Shanghai fair. To raise that money, Winslow said, "We have an enormous mountain to climb, and we have precious little time to do it in."

And there is no Plan B. As it made clear in a [request for proposals](#) published in 2006, "The Department of State is not now authorized, and does not in the future intend to seek authorization from the U.S. Congress, to provide funding for any aspect of the U.S. pavilion/exhibition at the World Expo 2010 Shanghai China." The privately funded pavilion will be treated as a gift to the U.S. government.

Given those strictures, it's anybody's guess whether there will be a pavilion at all, and if there is one, whether it will be badly compromised by commercial entanglements—the fate of the U.S. pavilion in Aichi. That expo was the brainchild of Shoichiro Toyoda, the honorary chairman of his family's Toyota Motor Corp., which is itself a symbol of Japan-U.S. relations. Clearly, the United States had to be there. So, faced with congressional inaction, the organizers tapped Douglas West, a former Toyota executive, to raise money for a U.S. pavilion. West had to promise sponsors a lavish VIP suite in which they could entertain clients. In the end, the suite, which overlooked the building's exhibition hall through bulletproof glass but which

was invisible to most visitors, was the most interesting part of the pavilion (otherwise devoted largely to a presentation on Benjamin Franklin). The theme of the fair was environmental stewardship, and the Japanese came up with some [surprisingly effective ways of making the expo green](#). Yet the Franklin show argued that to the extent there are environmental problems, technology will make them go away.

But even the Aichi pavilion was an improvement over prior U.S. efforts. In 1992, Spain hosted a world expo timed to the 500th anniversary of Columbus' first voyage. Naturally, the organizers—celebrating connections between new and old worlds—reserved a place of honor for the United States. But Congress refused to provide the \$24 million needed to build the pavilion designed by Los Angeles architect Barton Myers after a well-publicized competition. Instead, at the eleventh hour, the State Department salvaged a couple of old geodesic domes—remnants of European trade fairs—and erected them amid cutting-edge European architecture. The *Wall Street Journal* reported, "Expo watchers are laughing up their sleeves at the cheap hybrid pavilion."

In 2000, Hanover, Germany, hosted a fair meant to celebrate the dawning of a new millennium (the theme was "a new world arising"); 181 nations showed up, but the United States wasn't one of them. Although Americans barely heard a word about it, Germany took it as an affront.

In Shanghai, site preparations (which have included tearing down factories and—controversially—slums) are nearly complete. Right now, the expo grounds are bare (surrounded by billboards showing Haibao, the fair's Gumby-like mascot), but it is easy to see what the fair will look like. The Shanghai Urban Planning Exhibition Center, a museum in the center of the city, contains a dazzling scale model of the metropolitan area. The expo grounds are neatly represented, as is the Chinese pavilion (a kind of Modernist take on a pagoda, nearly 200 feet high). At one end of the fairgrounds are models representing the other national pavilions, and there are even tiny flags of the countries that will be attending. But Old Glory isn't one of them.

Nick Winslow hopes to change that, which means planning the pavilion even as he begins raising funds. "We don't have time to do a competition," he said of the choice of architect for the U.S. pavilion. Instead, he selected Clive Grout, a Canadian architect with world's fair experience, as someone who can get the job done quickly. As for the pavilion's theme, Winslow said, "It uses sports as a metaphor for how we transform our lives and our cities." He added, "Too many of the other pavilions are going to be very serious and very scientific."

It is possible that Eliasoph and Winslow will raise the money and get a nonembarrassing pavilion built in time. If they do, it will be a triumph of American ingenuity (exactly what a pavilion

should be about). If they don't, the image of the United States abroad will take another hit—and the government will have done nothing.

The Asian century is starting, with or without us.

sidebar

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The organizers of the Aichi fair created such great public transportation that cars were superfluous; they gave each participating country a prefabricated building that was disassembled and reused after the expo closed; and they put most of the fair on stilts, so the ground below, now a park, was left undisturbed.

gabfest

The Green Shirt Gabfest

Listen to *Slate's* weekly political show.

By Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz
Friday, May 9, 2008, at 10:37 AM ET

Listen to the Gabfest for May 9 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 discuss whether the fat lady is now singing for Hillary Clinton, cyclone damage in Burma, and Barack Obama and patriotism.

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

John discusses Tuesday night's [Indiana and North Carolina primaries](#), which ended with a split result—North Carolina going to Obama, while Indiana went for Clinton.

Lanny Davis defends Hillary Clinton on [CNN](#).

Hillary Clinton [touts her support](#) among a wide range of voters.

Is Hillary destroying the [legacy](#) of the Clinton presidency?

John McCain says he will appoint more [conservative judges](#) to the bench.

The panel discusses the stunning [satellite photos](#) showing the extent of damage in some areas of Burma from last week's cyclone.

World aid organizations struggle to provide [relief](#) to Burma as the nation's military rulers are slow respond to offers.

A [new study](#) shows that conservatives are much happier than liberals.

One way to improve morale in the Army is to provide [one-year sabbaticals](#) for officers.

John raises the continuing issue of Barack Obama's [patriotism](#).

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 by Dale Willman on May 9 at 10:36 a.m.

May 2, 2008

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On this week's show, John and David try to help Emily overcome her laryngitis while they discuss these topics: Obama's pastor disaster, the gas-tax holiday hoax, and whether Miley Cyrus will become the next Britney.

Here are links to items related to this week's episode:

Melinda Henneberger on [Obama's Catholic problem](#)
The Senate [declares McCain](#) a natural-born American
HBO's original movie [Recount](#) (airs Sunday, May 25)
Behind the scenes of the [Miley Cyrus photo shoot](#)

Posted by Andy Bowers on May 2 at 10:57 a.m.

April 25, 2008

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On this week's show: why the Pennsylvania primary has left Democrats re-evaluating their infatuation with Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, how all three remaining presidential candidates are addressing the world food shortage, and why they all should stop talking about the alleged vaccine-autism connection.

Here are some links to items relating to this week's Gabfest:

John's take on the [Pennsylvania primary results](#)
A [Slate V](#) [video of Emily and Dr. Sydney Spiesel](#) discussing vaccines and autism
The ["Jefferson 1" channel](#) on YouTube

And you'll find our sister show, the Culture Gabfest, at its new home [here](#).

Posted by Andy Bowers on April 25 at 10:14 a.m.

April 18, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for April 18 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](#).

On this week's pre-Pennsylvania edition, Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz discuss Wednesday's Clinton/Obama debate (and whether ABC should be ashamed of itself), John McCain's great week, and the Supreme Court's boost for the death penalty.

Here are links related to items mentioned in the show:

[John's take](#) on the ABC debate.
Melinda Henneberger on [Obama's "bitter" remarks](#).
[Slate V](#) imagines a [Hillary ad slamming Bruce Springsteen](#).

Posted by Andy Bowers on April 18 at 4:35 p.m.

April 11, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for April 11 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 discuss the congressional testimony of Gen. David Petraeus, a political demotion and more polls on the campaign trail, and whether we should boycott the Olympics.

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

Gen. Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker [testified this week on Capitol Hill](#).

John, David, and Emily discuss a *New York Times* editorial on the [lack of an administration strategy](#) for dealing with Iran.

David comments on [news reports](#) concerning Iran's claims that it is installing 6,000 new centrifuges to enrich uranium.

Emily explains the "[status of forces](#)" agreement dealing with Iraq and how it is about to end.

The latest [polls show Barack Obama up](#) by as much as 10 points over Hillary Clinton.

National Public Radio had a [segment](#) on Thursday discussing the reaction of the Chinese government to protests over the Olympic torch.

Emily brings up an interesting *Slate* [piece](#) using game theory to explain dating.

David comments on the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Washington Post Magazine* article about noted violinist [Joshua Bell playing anonymously](#) in a D.C. Metro station.

John discusses an [ABC report](#) that links Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to administration discussions about "enhanced interrogation techniques."

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 by Dale Willman on April 11 at 11:47 a.m.

gaming

Unjustifiable Carnage, Uneasy Alliances, and Lots of Self-Doubt

What Grand Theft Auto IV gets right about gangland and illegal economies.

By Sudhir Venkatesh

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 6:46 AM ET

If you are a fan of the new [Grand Theft Auto video game](#), I have just the neighborhood for you. The setting of GTA IV, Liberty City, is an amped-up [version of the New York metro area](#). If you want a slice of the real thing, however, I'd recommend Chicago's South Side. The last time I visited Chicago, I stopped by 59th Street, near Washington Park (and only a few short blocks from the picturesque University of Chicago). Two of the local gangs were fighting each other in full view for control of a prime sales spot, a hotel. For a monthly fee, the proprietor had promised to allow one gang to turn the place into a bordello—drugs, prostitution, stolen merchandise. For the gangs, winning meant more than simply getting rid of their enemy. Neither controlled the area surrounding the hotel. Anyone bringing drugs (or women, or guns, etc.) to the hotel would have to run the gantlet formed by *other* enemy gangs, who would be at the ready to shoot down the transporter.

There is nothing funny about this situation. The residents of this neighborhood are living a nightmare. Their elected political officials have offered little help, and the police don't answer their calls to stop the gang wars. So you guessed it: Their only hope is to pay yet *another* crack-dealing gang to intervene and keep the peace between the warring outfits. To put it bluntly, they can rely on street justice by turning an enemy into an ally, or they can sit, suffer, and hope for the best.

I thought of these Chicagoans and their moral conundrum when I played GTA IV for the first time a few days ago. Nearly every review has championed the unparalleled technical accomplishments of the creative team—and there are many. But I also found GTA IV to be a compelling commentary on urban life, gangland, and illegal economies.

This may sound strange, but I found that Grand Theft Auto actually offered a *less* sensational portrait of gangland and ghetto streets than the one put out by most cops, politicians, policymakers, and even academics. There is nuance in the game that exceeds most of the conventional portraits of American cities; the game goes beyond a black-and-white tale of innocent law abiders fending off the obnoxious criminals. Not that I'm suggesting that we turn to GTA IV to solve the gang problem or that we should we make it required viewing in our high schools. The game is a carnival of violence, deceit, and cruelty that

makes you slightly nauseated after playing for only a few hours—I had to periodically rest and play a Neil Diamond song just to calm down. But I have to admit that I was surprised a video game had such a well-developed, fine-grained understanding of human nature.

The game's success can be traced to a simple principle: Niko Bellic, the protagonist who roams around Liberty City, making his way in the world by building relationships. Even in a city dominated by warring gangs and unjustifiable carnage, people have to find ways to work together not only to commit crimes but to resolve disputes, respond to injustice, and otherwise fulfill their assigned missions. As you move the dashing Niko through beautifully rendered streets, you build up his network of friends and comrades. Of course, in the exploitative terrain of the black market, you can't trust anyone for long; this is one of the key challenges that animate GTA IV. But the point is that a lone wolf can't survive. Niko has to take a risk and trust somebody.

Even the criminals must follow this rule. In the real Big Apple, the local gangs are made up of self-interested mercenaries who move about as money and circumstances dictate. A Jamaican "posse" may control one project one day, but they'll move over a few blocks if the money is right. A gang member might also become a turncoat and join another outfit, even one run by a former adversary. In other words, free agents abound on Wall Street and ghetto streets. GTA IV's Liberty City gets this fluidity of enmity and alliance exactly right. A friend can become a foe; a gang member can turn on you; an ally is never to be trusted for too long. You can't do it alone, and the game forces you to make your bets.

The story lines of GTA IV's missions also resonate with life on New York's streets. Should our protagonist help his cousin even if it is not in his own interest? Should Niko remain with his girlfriend, even if it might jeopardize his personal safety? Could an enemy gang be befriended and turned into an ally? I was always left with a residue of self-doubt after making these decisions. Right and wrong are never so clear—at least in terms of the consequences of one's actions—and Niko's mission can fail because you either did or *did not* do the right thing.

While GTA IV is both a dizzying and dazzling experience, I definitely won't be playing the game up until the final mission. I could never master the joystick in time to stop running over pedestrians while I'm steering Niko's car. But I am curious to see what comes next. [GTA IV](#) was, by all reports, a huge improvement over Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, and I can imagine GTA V taking us to even greater heights (or depths, depending on your perspective).*

If the creative team needs some fuel, they might want to visit Chicago's South Side. There, they will find that gang killings and mercenary actions have some interesting consequences—beyond the tragedy of injury and fatality. When a real-life

mission fails and gangs are indicted, the remaining players must first form a gang before they can move on. No one can move forward until they come together and develop shared interests. The result can be a powerful feeling of solidarity—albeit in the South Side, it is one often wasted on disreputable pursuits.

Another logical step for the creative crew at [Rockstar Games](#) would be to extend the logic of the current game: Why not let us form gangs ourselves in virtual space? Imagine the possibilities: My friend and I could form a gang of nasty South Asian suburban nerds. A bunch of middle-class frat boys might realize their common interests. Let women join in the fun, too. They could create a group of disgruntled ex-corporate lawyers who, after failing to make partner, go after their pig-headed male superiors. In this way, the enemies would depend on the gangs we formed, and, over time, the landscape would reflect our decisions.

And, hey, maybe different gangs can advertise online and play each other? I, for one, would love to form a group of writers who could take on the editors at publishing houses who zap my creative juices with their unintelligible feedback. I'd like to run them over in the streets, get out of my car and bash their heads in, steal their keys and money, break into their homes and destroy their furniture, and then I'd ... You get the point.

Correction, May 12, 2008: This story originally and incorrectly referred to Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas as the "third version" of the Grand Theft Auto series. It was actually the fifth Grand Theft Auto game—two titles, Vice City and San Andreas, were released between Grand Theft Auto III and Grand Theft Auto IV. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

hollywoodland

Does NBC Really Have an *Office* Spinoff?

Also: Gaming out the Conan, Fallon, Leno, and Kimmel late-night musical chairs.

By Kim Masters

Monday, May 12, 2008, at 12:25 PM ET

In front or upfront?: This evening, NBC's "experience" will be taking the place of the usual upfront presentation. Recall that the network said it would forgo all of that this year, opting for the ["in-front" session several weeks ago](#). So instead of filling Radio City Music Hall with advertisers and the press, as usual, the network will instead have reporters walk through some sort of display that will expose us to the many facets of NBC—including its mighty cable properties and the Internet stuff that CEO Jeff Zucker bored us with in upfronts past.

This is a weird year for the upfronts. The writers' strike converged with ongoing digital-revolution-related problems plaguing the industry to throw everything out of kilter. The networks have said they wanted to cut back on the hoopla, anyway, though some think that's not such a great idea. If you're going to brag about being the greatest aggregator of eyeballs, this thinking goes, you gotta keep the *show* in *show business*. But it's not going to happen so much this year. Only Fox is going for the full-on upfront presentation. The others are austere—no Tavern on the Green party for CBS, no rousing *Dancing With the Stars* turn at Lincoln Center from ABC entertainment president Steve McPherson. (That was two years ago now, but *that* was a show. We've never looked at McPherson quite the same way.)

Shari Anne Brill, who analyzes programming for advertisers, says she's concerned that this year's upfront won't provide her with the usual dose of clips from upcoming shows. That's partly due to the strike, though in some cases NBC is boasting of going straight to greenlighting shows [without a pilot](#). Brill thinks that idea is rubbish, by the way. "If you don't have a pilot, that's going to hurt your success rate," she warns. "Pilots allow you to make adjustments."

Brill seems piqued with NBC generally. She wanted to take a look at *Kath and Kim*, an upcoming remake of an Australian sitcom. (Like so much of NBC programming—*The Office*, the planned *Office* spinoff, *American Gladiator*, *The Biggest Loser*—the show comes from Reveille, NBC Entertainment co-chairman Ben Silverman's former company. Happily for him, the fact that he gets paid for getting his own shows on his network [doesn't bother parent company GE](#).)

Brill, concerned that she won't get to see clips from NBC's version of *Kath and Kim*, got hold of an episode of the Australian original. "That thing makes *Married With Children* look like *The Brady Bunch*," she says. (To be clear, that is not a good thing in her mind, though *Married With Children* had quite a run and it may be a great thing in Silverman's mind.) All in all, Brill seems unimpressed with Silverman's progress to date. "Everything that he's done has been an acquisition," she says. And she says talk of an *Office* spinoff has gone on for so long that she's beginning to doubt that the project will jell. "He doesn't have an *Office* spinoff," she says tartly. "He has spin."

Well, we'll see, won't we?

NBC is also poised to announce today that [Jimmy Fallon will replace Conan O'Brien](#) when the latter takes over Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show* next year. In time, that ought to set off an interesting round of musical chairs. Leno won't be able to make a new deal for six months, per his NBC contract, but he isn't likely to take a break longer than he has to. He will be coveted by both ABC and Fox. *New York Times* reporter Bill Carter, who wrote [The Late Shift](#) (the book about the last changing of the

late-night guard in the early '90s, when Johnny Carson retired), thinks Leno will go for ABC, which would give him an 11:30 p.m. time slot (Fox's news lead-in ends at 11 p.m.). That would allow Leno to go head-to-head with O'Brien and David Letterman and prove that he's the real king of late night.

Carter doesn't think ABC would hesitate to kill off *Nightline* to make room for Leno. In that scenario, Jimmy Kimmel's show would be pushed back 30 minutes, which might not sit well with him. So maybe Fox could chase him to fill its late-night void. With all that Leno's seemingly premature forced retirement sets in motion, the drama around late night might be more compelling than anything on the networks' fall schedule. ([link](#))

May 8, 2008

[Don't dream it's over](#): Steven Spielberg finally allowed the folks at Paramount to see [Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull](#) on Tuesday afternoon, less than two weeks before the film's premiere at Cannes on May 18. That's nice, considering that Paramount sunk a few pfennigs into this little romp. We're told that no one at the studio had been permitted to see it before, and we have no word on how it played.

It's safe to assume that the Paramount executives clapped pretty loudly, though. May is supposedly when DreamWorks can start shopping for a new deal, and Paramount might not be ready to say goodbye to Steven Spielberg just yet.

Speculation about the fate of DreamWorks has gone on for quite some time, as the studio has used the press to lay the groundwork for a negotiation over its future. There have been a number of stories about the DreamWorks team's suffering under the supposedly heavy hand of Paramount; partner David Geffen even went on the record a few months back to [tell Vanity Fair](#) that the people running Paramount are "a nightmare."

That's why many observers expect Geffen and Spielberg and Stacy Snider to leave in the coming months. But the speculation about which studio will win over DreamWorks seems misplaced. To us, there seem to be only a couple of possibilities. Option A: DreamWorks raises a bunch of money and makes a deal with Universal to distribute its movies. Option B: DreamWorks raises a bunch of money and makes a deal with Paramount to distribute its movies. We lean toward A, though B probably makes more sense. That's because we tend to believe that animus trumps logic.

We checked in with a favorite DreamWorks observer to see if he agreed with us. He did, kind of. First, he said, everyone should be clear that what began as DreamWorks—David Geffen, Steven Spielberg, and Jeffrey Katzenberg—now is only about Spielberg.

Katzenberg is bound to [DreamWorks Animation](#), which is obligated to remain with Paramount for quite some time. Geffen is negotiating his way out of the movie business. Yes, he'll want to make some noise as he settles the company's fate, but that should be simple enough. He'll just have to raise a mind-boggling sum to finance the DreamWorks slate. If Tom Cruise can raise \$500 million, Geffen should be able to bring in about a trillion for a company with Spielberg's name on it.

So the question is: Where will Spielberg want to make his deal?

We lean toward Universal, because Spielberg has always been attached to the place—he's never left the lot notwithstanding the fact that his company belongs to Paramount. Of course, this isn't necessarily the most logical move. If he were to leave Paramount, he would hypothetically also leave behind many projects in development there. But that's what negotiations are for. The reasonable deal would be for Spielberg to take the projects he wants as long as Paramount can opt in as a partner when it wants.

Our DreamWorks watcher leans toward Option B, staying at Paramount. "There's still a lot of hope at Paramount that Spielberg's not leaving—at the highest levels," he says. And why shouldn't they hope? Paramount is looking at a great summer, but not because of movies that the current regime has developed. "They have *Iron Man*, which they didn't make; *Indiana Jones*, which they didn't make; *Kung Fu Panda*, which they didn't make; and *Tropic Thunder*, which they didn't make," says our observer. "They made *Love Guru*." (That's a dismissive reference to the upcoming Mike Myers comedy, which is being written off as DOA in Hollywood. In spite of or because of that, the impossibly difficult Myers is said to be driving the folks at Paramount so crazy that some say—jokingly, we think—that the studio set the film to open in June against the presumably more commercial *Get Smart* as payback.)

And Paramount should have its attractions for the DreamWorks crew. At this point, our observer notes, Paramount is largely staffed with DreamWorks alumni, and they seem to be doing a bit better at marketing movies than their counterparts at Universal. "The question is, what does Steven get out of going back to Universal?" he asks. To him, the answer is: not much.

As for the idea that there's some bidding contest for DreamWorks involving a bunch of studios, that strikes our observer as foolish. The deal goes to Universal or Paramount. Surprise us, David. ([link](#))

April 30, 2008

Weird: We've never been to the Cannes Film Festival, which is our loss, no doubt. But luckily we've already seen this year's

closing-night selection, *What Just Happened?*, which leads us to ask, what did just happen?

We saw the movie months ago, when it had a much-hyped premiere at Sundance. Robert Redford was there, and Robert De Niro turned up with producer Art Linson to introduce the film. In it, De Niro plays a fictionalized version of Linson—an embattled Hollywood player dealing with an out-of-control director and star (Bruce Willis puckishly playing himself) and winding up with a very bad movie.

Expectations were high that night. The film was directed by Barry Levinson and has a cast that includes Catherine Keener, Stanley Tucci, John Turturro, and Sean Penn. But the film fell flat. After its glittering night at Sundance, it laid there like an overpriced egg—no distributor bought it from that day to this.

So how does this failed venture turn up at Cannes? We asked a prominent producer who has nothing to do with the film to speculate.

"Who is the president of the jury this year?" he asked, as if to imply that we are not very smart. "Sean Penn." And Robert De Niro is a Cannes favorite. "So who promises to show up? Because it's always about movie stars. So Sean Penn shows up, Robert De Niro shows up. ... It just seems so unlikely because the movie has been well-roasted. It was a bad move to take it to Sundance. It was considered at best an inside joke."

The most amusing bit in the movie, to us, is when De Niro-as-Linson stands in the shower, his no-longer-firm flesh exposed to the world as he desperately slathers dye on his hair. That scene would seem to show a wry awareness that an aging producer (not to mention an aging star) doesn't appear at his best when struggling to hold back the hands of time. And that it's quite a challenge, in our culture, to stay graceful after 50.

But the handling of this film seems like an exercise in how profoundly all of them—Linson, Levinson, De Niro—don't get that at all. It was an enormous act of ego to spend the estimated \$30 million on this film, another one to take it to Sundance. And now, Cannes—which is funny because *What Just Happened?* ends with the Linson character taking his very bad film (where else?) to Cannes. *Wag the Dog* indeed.

All this reminded our producer friend of a memo, supposedly created by an anonymous CAA agent in the wake of De Niro's recent departure from the agency. This has been [pinging around the Hollywood blogosphere](#) for a couple of weeks now, but we pass it along in part:

Why did Bobby leave us?

They promised they could turn back time.

They promised they could get him 20m a picture.

They promised they could get a release for his "Something happened," a Barry Levinson show biz pic that's has no market, and Mark Cuban lost a fortune on.

They promised they could get him the \$1m production fee on every picture he does, that he and his partner put their names on, and do nothing to earn.

They promised they could convince Hollywood that they should still pay that 1m vig on top of his acting fees.

They promised him they'd find a respectable release for the Pacino picture he did last summer, that basically stars two 65 year old guys as detectives—while the audience is under 35, and has no interest in seeing.

As I said, they promised him they could turn back time, and make him 50 again, and relevant, and hot, and interesting to today's moviegoing audience.

And they probably promised that they'd find a way to erase the memory of all of America about the number of god-awful paycheck films he did during the past ten years.

De Niro had a choice ten or so years ago. He could either go the Nicholson route—very selective, very particular, protect the brand—or go out sending himself up in tripe like Analyze This, which made money but turned him into that "old psycho guy."

And he could have concentrated on quality stuff, but instead wanted to keep funding his little empire in New York. ...

Bobby blames everybody but himself for the way he's squandered his career, and refused lots of quality pictures because they wouldn't give him producer credit.

Good luck in the Hotel Business, pal. ([link](#))

hot document

eBay v. Craigslist

Twin pillars of the Internet economy sue each other.

By Bonnie Goldstein

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 9:33 AM ET

From: Bonnie Goldstein

Posted Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 9:33 AM ET

In 1995, [Craig Newmark](#) started [Craigslist.org](#), the popular classified-advertising Web site, as a [hobby](#). Newmark declined to charge money for the service, hewing instead to a [philosophy](#) of "giving each other a break." The site followed a [low-growth](#), community-focused model that encouraged posters to buy and sell wares and to publicize events in their neighborhood.

That same year, [Pierre Omidyar](#), whose core values were "[People are basically good, everyone has something to contribute, and an open environment brings out the best in people](#)," created the [online auction](#) site that became [eBay](#), also as a hobby. With users buying products from all over the world, eBay became a [public company](#) within three years. Omidyar is now among the [richest people in the world](#). The fast-growing eBay now has more than 14,000 employees and owns [Paypal](#) and [Skype](#).

Craigslist is [equally popular](#) (it boasts [10 billion monthly](#) page views), but Newmark has kept his company largely private. In 13 years he has distributed stock exactly twice. He gave away roughly one-quarter of the company shares to an early collaborator (identified in news reports as [Phillip Knowlton](#)) and later granted another minority portion to CEO [Jim Buckmaster](#), who runs the [25-employee](#) company.

In 2004, Knowlton sold his stock to [eBay](#), which wanted to "learn how the classified market online works." At first Newmark and Buckmaster welcomed the new partnership, believing "Mr. Omidyar had a moral compass very similar to their own" (Page 8). Shortly after the purchase was announced, Newmark wrote on his blog, "Like craigslist, eBay is about helping folks ... on a level playing field—they emphasize trustworthiness and reputation." But before long, the new stockholder "attempted to treat craigslist as if it were one of eBay's subsidiaries" (Page 9). When that failed, eBay [launched](#) its own classified advertising site, [Kijiji](#) (*village* in Swahili). By 2007, [Kijiji](#) was competing [head-to-head](#) with Craigslist. Newmark and Buckmaster retaliated by refusing to allow eBay's representative to attend Craigslist board meetings (Page 3) and attempted to repurchase eBay's shares (Page 4). eBay wasn't interested in selling, and on April 29, the company [filed a lawsuit](#) claiming Craigslist breached its fiduciary duties (see

excerpts below and on the following three pages). This week, Craigslist [countersued](#), claiming unlawful and unfair competition (see excerpts on Pages 5-9).

Send ideas for Hot Document to documents@slate.com. Please indicate if you wish to remain anonymous.

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hot document
Racist Secret Service E-Mails

What they chat about when they aren't protecting the president.
By Bonnie Goldstein
Monday, May 12, 2008, at 3:29 PM ET

From: Bonnie Goldstein
Posted Monday, May 12, 2008, at 3:29 PM ET

A discrimination [lawsuit](#) filed by African-American employees against the [Secret Service](#) has dragged on for more than eight

years, prompting the plaintiffs to [accuse](#) the government's lawyers of dragging their feet. Last week, a batch of [racist internal e-mails](#) written to or by "at least 20" high-ranking agency supervisors was released by the government weeks after a court-imposed deadline. Samples of the e-mails (see below and the following four pages) demonstrate why the agency might have been [reluctant](#) to turn them over.

In 2003, Daniel Paulson, a Secret Service assistant director in the Office of Government Liaison and Public Affairs, sent a "Harlem Spelling Bee" (see below) to several recipients, including a deputy assistant director who has since retired. The e-mail contained mock "vocabulary words" from an imaginary fifth-grade "Ebonics homework assignment." Example: "Hotel—I gave my girlfriend crabs, and the hotel everybody." Another 2003 e-mail joked about killing the [Rev. Jesse Jackson](#) (Page 2); a third made joking reference to lynchings and large male genitalia (Page 3); and a fourth, this one from 2005, related a joke about robot golf caddies that, when painted black, "didn't show up for work ... filed for welfare, and ... robbed the pro shop" (Page 4). This last was sent to the head of the Cleveland field office.

Meanwhile, in an exchange between the "Special Agent in Charge of the [Dignitary Protective Division](#) and a former GS-14 Special Agent," the two Secret Servicemen complained that "reverse racism and political correctness are destroying every aspect of American life" (Page 5).

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jurisprudence

A Few Good Soldiers

More members of the military turn against the terror trials.

By Emily Bazelon and Dahlia Lithwick

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 6:35 PM ET

Legal commentators have argued for years about whether there might ever be legitimate trials for the so-called "enemy combatants" we're holding at Guantanamo Bay. Some say no. Others, like our friend Ben Wittes, [argue](#) that the evidence is inconclusive. They want to see what the Guantanamo military commissions produce before pronouncing them a failure.

We may never get there. Key actors are declining to play their part in a piece of theater designed to produce all convictions all the time. These refusals, affecting two trials this week, suggest that the whole apparatus—seven years and counting in the making—cannot ever be fixed. The trials are doomed, and they are doomed from the inside out.

[Today we learned](#) that the Pentagon has dropped charges against Mohammed al-Qahtani—the alleged 20th hijacker (or maybe the 21st or 22nd, [since that title has gone to others](#) before him). Along with five other "high value" detainees, al-Qahtani was facing capital charges at Guantanamo. The decision not to try him comes from the convening authority for the commissions, Susan Crawford. She didn't give an explanation for halting the prosecution, but, then, we don't really need one. As [Phillip Carter notes](#) elsewhere in *Slate*, it's been clear for a while that the evidence against al-Qahtani [was torture \(or near-torture\) tainted](#), and prosecutors at Guantanamo had announced long ago

that "what had been done to him would prevent him from ever being put on trial." In light of all that, you might wonder why he was one of the six trotted out for the big show trials in the first place.

Something in the unsavory history of al-Qahtani's interrogation (featuring sexual humiliation, attack dogs, stress positions, and sleep deprivation) must have proved too much for Crawford, which may reveal that Crawford has some filament of legal integrity or simply that she knows when to cut her losses. Either way, it's important that for every course correction at Gitmo from the Supreme Court, there have been many more from within the Pentagon. If the same people who joined the military in the hopes of fighting terrorism have had enough of the government's jury-rigged apparatus of Guantanamo justice, it's probably time to stick a fork in the whole thing.

Since the inception of the commissions, the brakes have almost always been applied when some member of the military has balked, even when going along would have been the far easier course. These refusals—some silent, some very public—have combined to stall the tribunals. The clearest sign that the military system is working is that the military itself has refused to let it go forward.

Start with Charles Swift, the defense lawyer from the Navy's Judge Advocate General Corps who was appointed in 2002 to represent Salim Hamdan, Osama Bin Laden's driver and—thanks to Swift's willingness to buck the system—the big winner of the Supreme Court decision that sent the military commissions back to the drawing board in 2006. According to Jonathan Mahler's new book about Hamdan's case, [Hamdan v. Rumsfeld](#), Swift doubted early on that it would be possible to present a zealous defense on Hamdan's behalf, and with fellow Navy JAG Philip Sundel, he lobbied his superiors to call the commissions "what they thought they were—kangaroo courts." When Swift couldn't work the changes he wanted internally, he teamed up with Georgetown law school's Neal Katyal to sue the Defense Department. Swift became an outspoken critic of the tribunals, including [here in Slate](#).

Next up, Col. Morris Davis, former chief prosecutor for the tribunals. Davis is no pro-detainee marshmallow—he worked for years to ready Guantanamo cases for trial and [penned a spirited defense](#) of the tribunals just last year. But when his bosses pressured him to prosecute the "sexy" cases instead of meritorious ones, while insisting upon the use of evidence obtained by coercion, Davis finally decided he'd had it. He [resigned last October](#) and went on an [op-ed tear](#), writing that "full, fair and open trials were not possible under the current system" because it "had become deeply politicized." Davis, who still maintains that the charges against Mr. Hamdan are "warranted by the evidence," was called to testify in Hamdan's case last month by the defense because of his indictment of the system.

Davis' testimony led to an even odder plot twist, reintroducing us to yet another military naysayer: Keith Allred is the military judge presiding over Hamdan's case. (Winning before the Supreme Court only got the guy another crack at a trial before the same old commissions.) Allred first pushed back against the Gitmo process last June, when he held that he did [not even have jurisdiction](#) to hear Hamdan's case. A hastily convened Court of Military Commission Review found otherwise, allowing the charges against Hamdan to go forward.

But Allred still isn't quite prepared to play his designated part. Last Friday, he disqualified Davis' old boss Brig. Gen. Thomas Hartmann from any further participation in Hamdan's prosecution. Hartmann has to back off, even though he is the tribunals' official legal adviser. In a [written opinion](#), Allred took the general to task for attempting to direct Davis "to use evidence that the Chief Prosecutor considered tainted and unreliable, or perhaps obtained as the result of torture or coercion." (Allred also made a finding of fact that while interviewing Davis for the chief-prosecutor position, Department of Defense Gen. Jim Haynes told him, "We can't have acquittals. We've got to have convictions." So now that's the official account. Good to know.)

Davis is not the only prosecutor to have bailed on the Guantanamo trials. Four others—Maj. Robert Preston, Capt. John Carr, Capt. Carrie Wolf, and Lt. Col. Stuart Couch—have also left, apparently because of micromanagement and the interference of which Davis complained, including the demand that they use what they deemed to be unreliable coerced testimony.

The Supreme Court, then, is hardly the only thing standing between the president and kangaroo convictions at Guantanamo. The truth is that the best thing the commissions have going for them right now are the lawyers and judges in uniform who have, albeit reluctantly, refused to play along. If they'd been out on the battlefield, they'd have killed any detainee they met as an enemy. But they're not willing to see them killed in the wake of a sham trial. That's not because they value the lives of terrorists over the lives of Americans or because they value legal formalism over the exigencies of war. It's because they come out of a long military tradition of legal integrity and independence. And much as it must pain them, this precludes them from being yes men for the Bush administration at the expense of the rule of law.

Critics of the president's military commissions worried that the bodies would do their work in secret, in the legal shadows, answering only to the president as their commander in chief. But the soldiers and lawyers who insist on holding the proceedings to a higher standard have, at crucial moments, operated in the open. They've navigated by the light of the Constitution, sometimes at an enormous cost to their careers. Their performance is the best thing the Guantanamo commissions have to offer.

Correction, May 14, 2008: This article originally contained a photo of a man identified as Mohammed al-Qahtani. However, the man pictured was not the Mohammed al-Qahtani discussed in the article. The photograph has been removed.

jurisprudence Persuasion

Justice Antonin Scalia is persuadable. Or he finally thinks you are.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Saturday, May 10, 2008, at 7:02 AM ET

Had he been born 30 years later, Justice Antonin Scalia would have been a heck of a blogger. One of the few larger-than-life figures on the current Supreme Court, Scalia has also been the most disdainful of the press. In 2003, he [banned all broadcast media](#) from a speech at which he accepted a free-speech award. The next year he had to apologize to print reporters when his security guards made them erase tapes of a speech he delivered in [Mississippi](#). Then there was that awkward episode with a [possibly obscene gesture](#) at a reporter outside a Boston church in 2006. As for the mostly bookish Supreme Court press corps, Scalia has excoriated us for an imagined tendency to reduce cases to conflicts between the "nice old lady" and the "scuzzy guy."

Yet that same Justice Scalia is taking it to the streets this month to promote his new book, *Making Your Case: The Art of Persuading Judges*, co-authored with professional wordsmith Bryan Garner. That's right—Scalia, who claims to believe his colleagues can't be persuaded of anything, is the co-author of a new book on persuasion. And he's not just content to teach others how to persuade—he's started doing a bit of it himself. In a series of unprecedented media appearances over the past few weeks, Scalia has taken his case for originalism directly to the American people. He's gone from the court's loneliest dissenter to the country's first infomercial pitchman-jurist. Whether this means he's reassessing his own powers of persuasion or re-evaluating the intelligence of the American people remains to be seen.

Making Your Case is principally a [how-to manual for attorneys](#), as Scalia emphasized in an MSNBC interview last week with Tim Russert. It's not a book about legal philosophy. But Scalia used that sit-down—and several other interviews this month—to sell his constitutional theories. This is extraordinary exposure for Scalia, who has until now been more comfortable lobbying his intellectual grenades in closed speeches, written opinions, or his inimitable comedic performances at the court's oral arguments.

Scalia's timing couldn't be better. Last Tuesday, presidential hopeful John McCain served up a [stemwinder](#) about judicial philosophy that mostly amounted to a tired old rant about the imagined dangers of mythical "activist judges." The war on judges is hopelessly 2006—even Scalia has dismissed *activist judge* as a "conclusory" label we apply when we dislike of the result in a given case. Still, McCain spent a morning demonizing the entire judicial branch, mostly because judges work in private and never fight back. This makes Scalia's willingness to shuck the robes and chat about his school days and his nine children (and 28 grandchildren!) particularly welcome. The public fears secretive, mysterious judges, and Scalia proves himself very human and unpretentious, even when he's talking about water-boarding. You can disagree with most of what he's saying and still find yourself liking the guy. That's always been his great gift as a writer as well.

Scalia wields a wicked pen. He once wrote of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's position in a case that it "cannot be taken seriously." Last year he lashed out at Chief Justice John Roberts for "faux judicial restraint." Last month he went after John Paul Stevens in a very personal attack. Scalia's writing style is a disarming mix of the lowbrow and the lofty. He recently served up the Supreme Court's [first citation to Oscar the Grouch](#) (PDF). Yet he insists that [lawyers avoid all contractions](#), which he deems inappropriate efforts to be "buddy-buddy" with judges.

A devout Roman Catholic and admitted "social conservative," Scalia also insists his personal politics have nothing to do with his conservative constitutional methodology. As he repeated in his interview on *60 Minutes*, his method of "originalism"—strict adherence to the original text and meaning of the Constitution—is perfectly value-neutral. Reacting to a question from Leslie Stahl about whether he seeks "to drag us back to 1789," he protested: "I'm not saying no progress; I'm saying we should progress democratically." It's for legislators, not judges, to adapt to evolving standards.

That's quite a sales pitch from a justice who has always taken the position that he bears no burden of persuasion. He likes to say that he gave up on swaying his colleagues, or the public, long ago. He told Russert last week that the justices' formal case conferences are "not an exercise in persuading one another." In response to a question from Stahl about his inability to charm his colleagues into embracing originalism, he repeated that his brethren are unpersuadable: "I'm not going to change their basic philosophy. These people have been thinking about the law for years." He has also stated that he writes for law students and the case books; it's "too late" for the rest of us. Which makes it that much more ironic that he has written a book about persuasion. If he truly suspects that he himself cannot influence his colleagues, how can a few writing- and oral-advocacy tips really help lawyers do so?

Some of Scalia's colleagues have not given up all hope of exerting intellectual influence on the court or on the public. In a [Washington, D.C., debate against him last year](#), Scalia's more liberal colleague Stephen Breyer laughed that after writing his own dissents, he invariably proclaims to his wife that "this time it will really persuade them!" In that same spirit, Breyer authored *Active Liberty* in 2005, a book aimed at selling his own constitutional methodology. But Scalia has always seemed more comfortable marinating in his own rightness. He'd either given up on us or just wanted it to look that way.

Perhaps Scalia rejects the burden of winning over his colleagues because he came to the high court in 1986 weighted down with the expectation of conservatives who saw him as the [constitutional antidote](#) to former Justice William Brennan—who schmoozed his way from one liberal triumph to another in the 1960s and early '70s. But Scalia never did manage to glad-hand his way to a conservative counterrevolution. He didn't really try. Some commentators even believe his slash-and-burn approach was responsible for pushing some Rehnquist Court moderates leftward.

Scalia seems not the least bit bothered by his inability to convert his colleagues to his constitutional world view. (Clarence Thomas came to the court already embracing an even more radical theory of originalism than Scalia's.) The court has moved dramatically to the right, not because of Scalia but thanks to the appointment of two new conservative jurists. They may share his conservative principles but not his originalist bent, and perhaps that has led Scalia to seek—finally—a broader audience: He's now reaching out to sell the rest of us—the guys he used to call "Joe Sixpack" back when teaching law school—on the elegant simplicity of originalism.

Critics will argue he's just using the media to move books. I don't think so. I suspect that at 72, Scalia is starting to think about his constitutional legacy, and that legacy won't be that he helped lawyers become better advocates. His legacy is that he espouses what he believes to be a legal method that's near perfect, and after years of whistling that song in the graveyard, he's ready to shout it from the rooftops.

That said, it's not yet clear to me that Scalia truly trusts the American public to do too much constitutional heavy lifting. He recently told a group of students from Thomas Jefferson High School that he didn't want cameras in the courtroom because the court's work is too "lawyerly" for most of us to comprehend. Still, his willingness to defend his ideas in public against Russert, Stahl, and NPR's Nina Totenberg suggests he's more interested in a dialogue than a monologue.

The problem, for those of us admittedly charmed but decidedly not persuaded by Scalia's argument, is that Scalia has decided to make his case at a moment when there's no one with his charisma offering an opposing view. Justice Scalia's absolute

certainty about his own constitutional worldview has benefited over the years from near radio silence from the court's liberal wing. The fuzzy echoes of Brennan's "living constitutionalism"—the notion that the Constitution evolves with social norms—have become too easy for him to parody.

Without a really compelling legal theory from the court's liberals, and with his new willingness to be open and expansive for the cameras, it was virtually guaranteed that once Scalia uncorked his considerable charisma, his constitutional methods would appear to be the most plausible approach, if not the only one. Scalia has mastered the art of persuading by simply being. If that isn't a chapter in his new book, it should be.

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

map the candidates Swinging Through

McCain is in Ohio, which is a likely November battleground state. Clinton is in South Dakota, and Obama is off the grid.

By E.J. Kalafarski and Chadwick Matlin
Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 2:53 PM ET

medical examiner Your Health This Week

Tantalizing new insight into fat cells. Also, why to eat chocolate while pregnant.

By Sydney Spiesel
Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 4:06 PM ET

This week, Dr. Sydney Spiesel discusses striking new findings about [fat cells](#), good news about [eating chocolate during pregnancy](#), and evidence on whether taking [ibuprofen staves off Alzheimer's](#).

How fat works

Question: The masses of [fat](#) in our bodies are made up of millions of individual cells called adipocytes. There are two differences between fat stores in obese and in lean people. Obese people have a larger total number of fat cells, and their individual fat cells are larger, plumper, fuller of fat. What is it that controls these differences? Is there, perhaps, a hormone that signals fat cells to multiply as we gain weight or to stop multiplying as we shed pounds? Or maybe fat cells are like brain cells, and we acquire a number of them early on that remains constant in adulthood?

New research: The answer to these questions was a complete mystery until the publication in *Nature* this month of [this new research](#). The answers it provides may result in an entirely new way to promote weight loss or gain. The study depends on finding a way to determine the age of the fat cells that make up fatty tissues. The [method](#) is an extremely clever one; the researchers made use of the small amount of radioactive contamination absorbed by people who lived during the era of aboveground nuclear weapons testing, from 1955 until testing was banned in 1963.

Findings: Using their method, the authors of the study showed that by the time we end adolescence, our number of adipocytes has been set. Heavy people begin adulthood with more fat cells, and lighter people with fewer, and the numbers won't change as we age or as we become more obese or leaner. The only thing that does change, if we gain or lose weight, is how plump with fat each cell becomes. Meanwhile, however, even though the total adipocyte number remains constant, the cells themselves don't just sit there getting bigger and smaller. Instead, they constantly turn over. Whether you are heavy or lean, losing weight or gaining it, the same rule applies—every year about 10 percent of your body's fat cells die, and they are replaced by the same number of new ones.

Conclusion: We have no idea yet what controls and regulates the one-for-one turnover rate of fat cells. But if we could find and readjust the control mechanism—for example, setting it to replace an annual loss of 10 percent of fat cells with only 8 percent of new cells—we might find a whole new approach to the treatment of obesity. This research is likely to lead us in that direction.

Watch Dr. Spiesel's new video segment from Slate V:

[Eating chocolate while pregnant](#)

Question: Consciously or not, most of us believe that if something tastes good, it surely must be harmful. But the law is not universally true. A little wine, it turns out, [helps protect against heart disease](#). Drinking coffee, [we know](#), is associated with a lower risk of type 2 diabetes. Can chocolate, too, find redemption?

New research: I am pleased, indeed, to report that [a recent study of pregnant women](#) shows that the ones who eat chocolate, especially dark chocolate, are at a lower risk for preeclampsia (which used to be called toxemia). In 3 percent to 8 percent of pregnancies, usually during the third trimester, the mother's blood pressure rises, and she begins spilling protein in her urine. This condition is one of the most serious complications of pregnancy, posing great risk to both mother and baby. The cause is obscure. In fact, several different causes—for example, damage to the placenta from the maternal immune system, an abnormality in the circulation of the placenta, or damage to cells

that line the blood vessels—may all lead to the same preeclampsia outcome.

Findings: While women [can be treated to slow the effect of preeclampsia](#) on both mother and child, there are, as yet, no preventative treatments. This is why the results of the new study are so interesting. The researchers focused on about 1,700 women. They figured out how much chocolate the women ate by asking them and by measuring a chemical marker for chocolate in blood from the baby's umbilical cord. Low levels of the chemical marker were associated with a higher risk for preeclampsia, while a history of eating five or more servings of chocolate weekly in the last trimester was associated with a 40 percent lower rate of preeclampsia than in women who ate chocolate less than once a week. (The servings came from hot chocolate, cocoa, chocolate milk, dark-chocolate candy, cake, cookies, or ice cream.)

Conclusion: Just as there is no clear answer about the cause of preeclampsia, we don't know why chocolate might prevent it. Finding the answer to the second question might help clarify the first. And in any case, if future research confirms these good tidings about chocolate, we'll have found a simple, inexpensive, and tasty way to reduce a common and serious pregnancy danger.

[Ibuprofen and Alzheimer's](#)

Question: Do common anti-inflammatory medications like ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) or naproxen (Aleve, Anaprox, Naprosyn) prevent or delay the onset of Alzheimer's? Initial studies were inconclusive because they weren't big enough or conducted over a long enough period of time. And clinical trials in which patients with established Alzheimer's took these medications have shown no benefit.

New research: Now, however, a [six-year-long study](#) of mostly male Veterans Affairs patients offers evidence that these medications help stave off the [mental deterioration of Alzheimer's](#). Excluding people who had already been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, the researchers identified about 50,000 patients who developed it during the six-year period of the study. Each was matched with four veterans without Alzheimer's, of about the same age and receiving care at the same VA hospital. The researchers then compared how much of the anti-inflammatory medications the Alzheimer's patients took with those taken by the veterans without this illness.

Findings: The results were striking and unequivocal. Use of the medicine—especially ibuprofen—was strongly associated with a lower risk of Alzheimer's disease. The longer the patient took an anti-inflammatory, the lower the risk. Taking ibuprofen for five or more years cut the risk of Alzheimer's almost in half.

Caveat: Ibuprofen is a cheap, easily available, commonly taken medicine—so what's the downside? Plenty. Like all anti-inflammatory drugs, ibuprofen can intensely irritate the lining of the gastrointestinal tract, sometimes leading to severe and life-threatening GI bleeding. In addition, when ibuprofen is taken along with the daily baby aspirin often recommended to decrease the risk of heart attacks and strokes, it interferes with the beneficial effects of the aspirin, rendering it useless. In rare instances, drugs in the anti-inflammatory class cause significant kidney damage or even failure. In short, the same medication that might well help prevent Alzheimer's can increase the risk of disastrous gastrointestinal bleeding and of heart attacks, strokes, and kidney damage.

Conclusion: What to do? The answer is far from clear. We need more research comparing the risks of taking ibuprofen with its benefits. Given what we know at present, don't start taking this medication on your own without discussing it with your doctor. We are all tantalized by the possibility of a cheap, simple treatment to delay or prevent Alzheimer's. But this treatment has significant risks of its own.

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Burning fat generates about nine food calories per gram, which means that a pound of pure fat is worth about 4,000 calories (though because fat isn't really pure, the true number is closer to 3,500 calories). My [daily energy needs](#) amount to about 2,800 calories, of which fewer than 1,000 will be used to power physical activity (the majority of my calorie needs are devoted to infrastructure—servicing my body's background metabolic requirements). Absolute starvation—not a good idea, by the way—would, in theory, burn away about 13 ounces of fat in a 24-hour period. Activity plays a role in weight loss, and, as I don't need to tell anyone who has tried to lose or gain weight, other factors do as well. Appetite, which is partially controlled by hormone effects we are just beginning to understand, is obviously important. So is the caloric density of the food we choose to eat (fat contains more than twice as many calories as the same weight of carbohydrate or protein; many vegetables are full of water and cellulose, both of which contribute little or no calories to our intake). Additional factors (like differences in fat absorption) affect the efficiency with which food is converted into energy or body mass.

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Between 1955 and 1963, open-air tests dumped radioactive material, including the isotope carbon-14, into the atmosphere for all of us to breathe. By its peak in 1965, the amount of this mildly radioactive isotope had approximately doubled over the constant level in the air during the previous 4,000 years. Plants take up carbon dioxide in the air (including the carbon-14-containing CO₂). We eat the plants, and ultimately the isotope is incorporated into the DNA of new cells formed in the body. By determining the proportion in fat cell DNA of carbon-14 (compared with the much more common stable form, carbon-12), it is possible to determine the year in which a new cell formed.

Fat cells that formed before the era of testing would contain only very low levels of the radioactive marker. Cells formed during the period of elevated atmospheric carbon-14 were marked by their incorporation of more of that carbon. Later, when the excess carbon-14 in the air dissipated, newly formed cells again had normal low levels of carbon-14.

This means that, if our fat cells remain stable and unchanged after childhood, then the people who became adults before the era of bomb testing ought to have low levels of the marker for carbon-14 in their adipocytes. If, on the other hand, these adults generated new fat cells, then the new cells would contain more carbon-14. With a little mathematical sleight of hand, the researchers could calculate the number of cells that died and the number of new cells that were produced by their sample. Which led them to this answer: New fat cells are continuously formed during adulthood, but the rate of formation is independent of weight gain and, instead, matches the annual rate of cell loss.

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If preeclampsia occurs before the lungs of the fetus mature, the pregnant mother is typically given some magnesium sulfate to decrease the chance of seizures, which occur when preeclampsia becomes eclampsia—convulsions that can deprive the mother and baby of oxygen. Often the best way to deal with preeclampsia is to deliver the baby. If the pregnancy is not yet full term, obstetricians give another medication to boost fetal lung development so the prematurely delivered baby is less likely to suffer respiratory distress.

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Alzheimer's disease is a progressive deterioration in mental function. Brain cells become filled with tangles of protein fibers (and subsequently die). The connections between brain cells are also disturbed by the accumulation of deposits of a different protein. It is unclear what causes Alzheimer's disease, but it is abundantly clear how terrible and how common it is. About 5 million people in the United States are thought to suffer from it, and an additional 19 million or so are affected in the rest of the world. Although treatments are available to slow the progression of this illness, nothing is known to cure it or prevent it.

moneybox

Gasoline Is Cheap

Four dollars a gallon is outrageous! We should be paying much more.

By Robert Bryce

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 3:24 PM ET

The next time you have to take out a loan just to fill up your tank, remember this: Four-dollar-per-gallon gasoline is cheap.

There's no doubt that high fuel prices are hurting low-income consumers, and high energy costs are placing a tax on the economy that is slowing investment while sending billions of dollars overseas. It's unsurprising that presidential candidates and members of Congress issue new proposals practically every day to lower gas prices: *Stop filling the Strategic Petroleum Reserve! Suspend the federal gas tax! Open ANWR to oil drilling!*

These proposals are delusions, and Americans are living in a fantasy land when it comes to energy and energy prices. Over the past few years, consumers have been inundated with news stories about the soaring price of gasoline. Invariably, these stories include comments from a motorist who is outraged at the evils of a) Saudi Arabia, b) OPEC, c) Big Oil, d) all of the above.

But by almost any measure, gasoline is still cheap. In fact, it has probably been far too cheap for far too long. The recent price increases are only beginning to reflect its real value.

When measured on an inflation-adjusted basis, the current price of gasoline is only slightly higher than it was in 1922. According to the Energy Information Administration, in [1922](#), gasoline cost the current-day equivalent of \$3.11. Today, according to the [EIA](#), gasoline is selling for about \$3.77 per gallon, only about 20 percent more than 86 years ago.

Given the ever-increasing global demand for oil products—during the first quarter of this year, China's oil consumption jumped by 16.5 percent—and the increasing costs associated with finding, producing, and refining crude oil, it makes sense that today's motorists are paying more for their motor fuel than their grandparents and great-grandparents did.

Gasoline is also a fairly minor expense when you consider the overall cost of car ownership. In 1975, gasoline made up 33.4 percent of the total cost of owning and operating a car. By 2006, according to the [Bureau of Transportation Statistics](#), gasoline costs had declined to just 17.1 percent of the total cost of car ownership. Of course, fuel costs have risen by about \$1 per gallon since 2006, but even with those increases, fuel continues to be a relatively small part of the cost of car ownership. By contrast, the fixed costs of ownership—insurance, licensing, taxes, and financing—have increased nearly fivefold since 1975. Maintenance costs have also quintupled over the same time period. Given those increases and the relatively low price of fuel, it's not surprising that Americans are opting for big vehicles with powerful engines. Considering the overall cost of owning a vehicle, fuel expenses just aren't a very big deal.

History shows that significant declines in U.S. oil consumption occur only after prolonged periods of high prices. Over the last two decades, U.S. consumers have been spoiled by low fuel prices. And those lower prices led to a buying binge that put millions of giant SUVs, pickups, and other gas guzzlers on our roads. Today's higher prices are forcing consumers to adapt. The EIA now expects U.S. gasoline consumption to decline this year—the first drop in demand in 17 years. In April, sales of small cars in the United States were up by 17 percent over the same period a year earlier while sales of SUVs, trucks, and large cars all fell by about 30 percent.

On the environmental front, people concerned about greenhouse-gas emissions should be cheering today's oil prices. Expensive motor fuel is the only thing that will lead consumers to use less oil and make the switch to hybrid vehicles, smaller cars, and public transit. Higher oil prices are convincing automakers to change their fleets. Earlier this week, Nissan Motor Company [announced](#) that it will begin selling an electric car in the United States and Japan by 2010. Carlos Ghosn, the chief executive of Nissan, made it clear that fuel prices were a factor in the company's decision to build electric cars, telling the *New York Times* that "the shifts coming from the markets are more powerful than what regulators are doing."

American gasoline is also dirt-cheap compared with gas in other countries. British motorists are currently [paying](#) about \$8.38 per gallon for gasoline. In Norway, a major oil exporter, drivers are paying \$8.73. In 2007, out of the 32 industrialized countries surveyed by the International Energy Agency, only one (Mexico) had cheaper gasoline than the United States. Last year, drivers in Turkey were paying three times as much for their gasoline as Americans were. The IEA [data](#) also show that in India—where the [per capita gross domestic product](#) is about \$2,700 (about 6 percent of the per capita GDP in the United States)—drivers have been paying more for their diesel fuel and gasoline than their American counterparts.

(Gasoline is also cheap compared with other essential fuels. A Starbucks venti latte costs the equivalent of \$23 per gallon while Budweiser beer runs \$11 per gallon.)

The simple truth is that Americans are going to have to get used to more expensive gasoline. And while they may continue grumbling at the pump, they need to accept the fact that even at \$3.50 or \$4 per gallon, the fuel they are buying is still a bargain.

moneybox RV Disaster

The recreational-vehicle industry is the newest casualty of the economic slump.

By Daniel Gross

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 2:14 PM ET

The upcoming vacation season will be the summer of our discontent. With Wall Street in a funk, rentals in the Hamptons and Nantucket may wind up empty. The weak dollar makes a summer jaunt to Europe unaffordable for many. The second-home market is being destroyed by the credit crunch. And sky-high plane fares will crimp internal travel. Summer 2008 will be all about trading down: Forget the grand tour of Italy, and think about a road trip to the [Four Corners](#).

This belt-tightening ought to be good news for a sector of the vacation industry that has enjoyed solid growth in recent years: recreational vehicles. RVs are cheaper than a vacation home, help travelers save on hotels, and appeal to those who prefer leisure and economy over speed and glitz. A [study](#) by [PKF Consulting](#), posted on the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association's [Web site](#), notes that "typical RV family vacations are on average 26 to 74 percent less expensive than other types of vacations studied."

Instead, the RV industry is in trouble. Americans seem to lump recreational vehicles in the same category as powerboats:

discretionary, big-ticket purchases that guzzle too much gas. RVs [vary](#) widely in size and cost, from [folding camping trailers](#) (\$4,000 to \$13,000 new) to [Type A motor homes](#) (from \$58,000 to \$400,000 new). According to RVIA spokesman Kevin Broom, Type A homes get 6 to 12 miles per gallon, while smaller Type C vehicles can get 15 to 18 mpg. He notes that three-quarters of the market is composed of towable trailers, which tend to cost less than motor homes. Back in 2006, we described how rising energy prices and a slowing economy were [swamping the powerboat industry](#). Now, as the *Wall Street Journal* noted this week, the RV industry has skidded off the road.

The RVIA provides excellent [historical data](#) and information on [recent shipments](#). And the yearly sales data show reasonably tight correlation to the business cycle. Sales grew rapidly during the recent expansion. [Last year](#), however, RV shipments fell 9.5 percent to 353,400. For 2008, the industry expects that, thanks to a combination of higher gas prices, a slowing economy, and a reluctance to extend credit—essentially the same factors that are hurting sales of everything from homes to appliances—sales will fall to 305,000, a 30 percent decline from 2006.

RV manufacturers are feeling the pain. [National RV Holdings](#) filed for bankruptcy last November. [Fleetwood Enterprises](#), which makes manufactured homes and RVs, reported a [dismal quarter](#) on May 1: "February and March motor home shipments were down 21 percent and 27 percent, respectively, from the prior-year period." Sales of the fancy Class A homes were off 36 percent in both months. [Coachmen](#), which likewise makes RVs and modular housing, in April [reported](#) that revenues at its RV unit were down 13.1 percent from the 2007 first quarter. In March, [Winnebago reported](#) that quarterly revenues and earnings were off 17.5 percent and 66 percent, respectively, from the comparable quarter in 2007. This is the ugly [one-year chart](#) of the Fleetwood, Coachmen, and Winnebago stock prices compared with the S&P 500. And it's likely to get worse. Much of the carnage of the past 12 months happened when the economy was still expanding, when gas was cheaper than it is today, and when credit was available on better terms than it is today. On May 1, GE Money, the consumer-finance unit of General Electric that is a major lender to RV purchasers, announced it was going to exit the sector.

moneybox High Styles for Low Times

How fashion and luxury firms will ride out a recession.

By Lesley M.M. Blume

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 2:50 PM ET

Mention the word *recession* to members of the fashion elite, and

you'll get some colorful reactions. Among high-end retailers, a grim optimism is de rigueur. Burt Tanky, CEO and president of Neiman Marcus, recently quipped: "Remember, when our customer tightens their belt, it's generally ostrich or alligator."

But even the rarified worlds of fashion and luxury are linked to the broader economy—and marketing lavish, often ephemeral goods is brutally challenging in the best of times. With banks tanking, bonuses vanishing, and retailer bankruptcies on the rise, peddling luxury in 2008 is no enviable task.

Here's a quick survival guide for how the American fashion industry will ride out these distinctly un-fabulous times.

1. Accessories will be everywhere.

Like jewelry, for example.

In a paper detailing predictions for the 2008 luxury market, consumer-trends analyst Pam Danziger of Unity Marketing deemed jewelry purchases less susceptible to market fluctuations. "Jewelry is unique among luxury goods because it offers the customer some perceived inherent value," she said.

Retailers and editors are keeping their fingers crossed that Danziger is right.

"We've shot more and more with jewelry," says Sally Singer, fashion news and features director at *Vogue*. "Jewelry can upgrade any outfit, and jewelry purchase values don't change as quickly as clothes, especially gold."

Other accessories—especially shoes and handbags—will continue to be big business for designers and retailers. Consumers might be skittish about investing in expensive, trendy apparel but will still give themselves a smaller designer fix with these products.

And designers—many of whom already make more money from accessories than ready-to-wear—will be looking for ways to further expand these lower-price-point lines of their brands.

2. Bon voyage, French couture; hello, Americana.

The disastrous state of the dollar abroad has made the importation of European collections prohibitively expensive in America, causing buyers to cut back on purchases from design houses overseas.

"I skipped the last buying trip to Paris altogether," says Erin Crandall, head buyer of designer collections for online retail site ShopBop.com. "The cost of the trip would have outweighed the money we'd have made on the lines."

Which means that enterprising American designers can step up to bat and vie for real estate once occupied by their French and Italian counterparts. Crandall points to wunderkind Alexander Wang and wrap-dress queen Diane von Furstenberg as "recession-proof" designers with perceived long-term value.

Other big American sellers for ShopBop: relative newcomers Derek Lam, Chris Benz, Rachel Roy, and Tory Burch. Expect to see more of them elsewhere.

3. Earlier, increasingly aggressive sales.

You came, you saw, you desired: a gorgeous but hideously expensive Armani dress. You made a deal with yourself: If it goes on sale, I'll buy it.

This might be your lucky season: Designer goods are going on sale earlier than ever. Markdown schedules are moving up and becoming more competitive. For example, Saks Fifth Avenue recently announced 40 percent-off markdowns, which included some of its couture merchandise; the spring sale came a week earlier than last year's. Other retailers will feel obliged to follow suit, since failure to mark down as quickly could hinder sales. In order to keep margins from sinking too low, retailers will likely use techniques like mandating a minimum purchase amount, then giving big discounts on more.

4. Chic downgrade options.

Retailers and editors will provide a variety of lower price options for women looking to spend less but maintain a particular luxury aesthetic.

"Let's say that we have a woman who didn't get her raise or bonus," says Crandall. "She might turn to Theory instead of Chloe, so I'm stocking up on that. I just added Free People, too, to make sure that I had the under-\$100 price point covered, too."

Barneys New York—usually home to some of fashion's most elite fare—surprised many in the industry by showcasing the soon-to-be-launched Rogan for Target Collection in its New York and Beverly Hills locations. Lower-end retailers, such as H&M and Kmart, have made enormous successes of their designer capsule collections, such as Karl Lagerfeld for H&M, Stella McCartney for Puma, Issac Mizrahi for Target, and so on. Elite stores appear to be sanctioning and capitalizing on this trend. Magazine editorials will follow suit in showcasing a high-low mix.

"We'll show big labels with H&M tees," says *Elle's* fashion news director, Anne Slowey. "Ten years ago, fashion was about luxury conglomerations. Now it's democratic."

5. Spare, spare, everywhere.

Fashion oracles declared the trend of the garish "it bag" dead last year, but other gestures toward flashiness are apparently

teetering on the edge of the same grave. In the fall collections, showcased in New York earlier this spring, editors and buyers sensed a move toward minimalism and even austerity.

"There's a mood: It doesn't feel right to show things that are overly opulent or steeped in luxury, in light of everything going on in the world," says Hope Greenberg, fashion director of *Lucky* magazine.

The dress, which has enjoyed a lengthy reign over the market, is losing ground to more conservative, versatile, basic pieces that can blend and carry their owners through several seasons. Retailers report excellent sales in practical items such as blazers, denim, basic separates, and trousers.

As ShopBop's Crandall says: "Classic designs in bad times."

Of course, it's always possible that a downturn will produce its own aesthetic. Uncertain times often produce astonishing results in the fashion world; after all, the dreary early-1990s economy produced Marc Jacobs' now-famous grunge epidemic. Editors and buyers are very curious to see what turns up in the American spring/summer 2009 collections, which will be showcased in New York City this fall.

"We're in very unstable times," says *Vogue's* Sally Singer. "There's a war going on, and you wouldn't know it in the city. But fashion designers are receptors; they have refined antennas, and it comes out on the runways."

moneybox

McCain's Economic Brain

Why Carly Fiorina is so important to the Republican's presidential campaign.

By Daniel Gross

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 4:35 PM ET

One of the most important figures in the presidential campaign this fall is a controversial, hypercompetent blonde. She has blazed new paths, is always on message, and has written a best-selling memoir. Friends and foes alike refer to her by her first name only. And she'll play a significant role shoring up the bona fides of her party's candidate among a core constituency that might be wavering.

No, I'm not talking about the Democrats sending out Hillary Clinton on behalf of Barack Obama to reassure white working-class voters. Rather, I'm talking about Carly Fiorina, the former chief executive officer of Hewlett-Packard, being sent out to reassure business-class voters on behalf of John McCain. Fiorina has emerged as the most prominent surrogate on economics

issues in any of the major campaigns, and her alliance with McCain suggests both his strength and his weakness on the subject.

In July 1999, when Fiorina was named chief executive officer of Hewlett-Packard, she became the first woman to run one of the companies in the Dow Jones Industrial Average. Her rocky, five-and-a-half-year tenure was full of drama: a big, ill-timed [merger](#) with Compaq in September 2001; the dot-com/tech meltdown; difficulty managing the board and other executives. When she resigned in [February 2005](#), there was much speculation that the charismatic executive would pursue a career in public life. In March, the Republican National Committee named her [victory chairman](#), and she pledged to stump for McCain.

At first, Fiorina seemed likely to perform the role that then-Goldman Sachs co-head Robert Rubin played for Bill Clinton in the 1992 campaign. Democrats frequently need business surrogates and market whisperers: rich, successful people who can reassure the CEO class that the candidate won't threaten them much and that he understands the needs of business and the markets. Republicans traditionally haven't required such ambassadors, but McCain does. The Bush fiscal mismanagement of the past eight years and the continuing realignment of the educated and wealthy toward the Democrats have made Republicans suspect on Wall Street. In 2004, an impressive list of executives declared themselves as [business leaders for Kerry](#). And while a [list of economists](#) have signed on to McCain's [non-reality-based](#) economic program, big-shot CEOs haven't been rushing to endorse him.

McCain is a particularly suspect Republican. He opposed the Bush tax cuts. He has admitted that the economy isn't his strong suit. He's doesn't have an instinctive grasp of how to talk about many of the biggest economic issues.

This is where Fiorina comes in. Here's how *Newsweek's* Andrew Romano [described](#) the McCain-Fiorina dynamic at an event for small-business people in Brooklyn, N.Y., in April:

McCain poses a pat question, nods, scribbles and eventually lets Fiorina bail him out—whether by riffing on his "classic straight talk" support of nuclear energy or boasting of his belief in "the power of choice" to improve the health-care system. When Fiorina concluded with a two-minute speechlet on how, "even in this short period of time you can understand why I, as a businesswoman, have entrusted the economy to [McCain]," I couldn't help but think, "Not really."

Fiorina is tailor-made for McCain. Her memoir is titled [Tough Choices](#). McCain loves to talk about [making tough choices](#). And beyond talking business, she performs several other functions.

She's a moderate, a globalist, a woman based in California, a rational believer in technology—in other words, she embodies attributes that were once prized by the Republican coalition but that have since been driven out of it by Karl Rove and George W. Bush. She also has skills that make her perfect for a political campaign: She's a highly articulate salesperson who is always closing the deal. So it's not surprising that Fiorina's portfolio is expanding. On [ABC's This Week](#) last Sunday, Fiorina showed a Terry McAuliffe-esque ability to stay on message. She went far beyond her core competencies of economics and trade, striding confidently into foreign and social policy. She repeatedly highlighted the "clear places where George Bush and John McCain differ." Defending McCain's absurd proposal for a gas-tax holiday, she agreed that virtually no economist thinks it's a good idea. "But, you see, I don't think it matters. Because I think economists sometimes argue about the theory." When Stephanopoulos pushed back, she moved on to talk about earmarks and discretionary spending. She proclaimed her business bona fides—"I'm a businessperson. I know that incentives and competition in the private marketplace work"—and fought Stephanopoulos to a standstill on the issue of corporate tax rates. Like Manny Ramirez taking batting practice, she casually swatted McCain's pro-life record, the Republican Party's harsh anti-abortion platform, and Cindy McCain's refusal to release her tax records out of the park.

Fiorina's performance was noteworthy not just because it was good but because it was unusual. So far, business leaders have been missing from this presidential campaign. Wall Street, long a source of executive statesmen, has been so damaged by the credit-crunch auto-da-fé that the usual suspects have either resigned in quasi-disgrace or are too busy raising money from the Persian Gulf to worry about U.S. politics. Hedge fund, private equity, and venture capital types, who also like to dabble in politics, are cutting a lower profile because they don't want to call too much attention to their wealth and are trying to fight off efforts to end their indefensibly favorable tax treatment. During economic boom times, the public is generally quite interested in hearing what CEOs have to say, and campaigns benefit from their imprimatur. During times of bust, not so much. Fiorina is also working as a McCain surrogate partly because she hasn't landed another executive job since she bounced from HP. So expect to see a lot more of her—and of another blond, California-based, retired-CEO, McCain campaign co-chair, [Meg Whitman, most recently of eBay](#)—on the political talk shows.

moneybox

Coming Soon, the Samsung Washington Monument!

How "naming rights" have become a huge American export.

By Daniel Gross

Saturday, May 10, 2008, at 7:04 AM ET

With domestic demand slumping, exports (up 15.5 percent in March) are keeping the economy afloat. So great is the demand for U.S. products, thanks to the weak dollar, shippers are complaining that there's a shortage of empty containers. Exports of a product that doesn't have to be packed onto seagoing boxes are also rising. Naming rights—for universities, libraries, and sports teams—have always been a great revenue source for prestigious outfits. Status-hungry rich people and corporations will pay top dollar to associate their name with a prestigious place or organization. In March, Stephen Schwarzman of the Blackstone Group donated \$100 million to the New York Public Library in exchange for having the midtown Manhattan landmark renamed for him. (The lion statues outside will retain their own names.)

As the geography of global wealth rapidly shifts—with rich American institutions becoming suddenly poorer and impressive pockets of wealth bulging around the globe—naming rights have quickly evolved into a major export. The trend is most evident in sports. Last year, Barclays PLC, the big British bank, paid a reported \$400 million as part of a deal with the New Jersey Nets in which it acquired naming rights for the arena Frank Gehry is designing for the team in downtown Brooklyn.

Other interesting manifestations can be seen in the groves of academe, where industrialists, financiers, and corporations each year swap billions in cash for prestige. While the American brand may be tarnished in foreign policy (Iraq), financial management (subprime), and even basketball (the 2004 Olympics), "U.S. higher education still has a sterling international brand," said Peter Frumkin, professor of public affairs at the University of Texas. "People love to have their names associated with leading research universities." It was true of 19th-century steel magnates such as Andrew Carnegie. And it's true of 21st-century steel magnates. The Brazilian company Vale, the world's second-largest iron ore miner, has a mammoth market capitalization of about \$180 billion but a minuscule public profile in America. In late April, Vale announced it was establishing the Vale-Columbia Center on Sustainable International Investment at Columbia University, "to promote learning, teaching, policy-oriented research and practical work within the foreign direct investment (FDI)." In exchange for making a FDI of \$1.5 million, Vale gets its name on an Ivy League institute, and its executives get to rub shoulders with bigwigs like Jeffrey Sachs, head of Columbia's Earth Institute.

Just as companies seeking to boost sales must dispatch emissaries to foreign markets, university development has expanded far beyond the Forbes 400. "American university presidents today are all over the place in China, India, the Persian Gulf, doing the same things that presidents did when they went to Silicon Valley in the 1990s," said Scott Jaschik, a founder and editor of *Inside Higher Ed*. That is to say, the presidents are buttering up alumni and schmoozing with rich locals whose children are shopping for college.

The purchasers of naming rights, especially those from emerging markets who are seeking a greater role on the global stage, are less interested in imprinting their names on buildings, à la Schwarzman, and more interested in associating themselves with programs or scholarships—as Vale did. In the past year, for example, the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy Studies has announced the creation of new fellowships or scholarships endowed by the Lebanese Mikati Foundation and the prime minister of Dubai. "Doing so positions you as a thought leader and as part of the global conversation about the future of the field," said Peter Frumkin.

Some deep-pocketed foreigners are still investing in bricks and mortar and thus creating a demand for exports of academic expertise. Saudi Arabia is building a massive university de novo, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, which is slated to open in 2009. Last month, KAUST announced a \$25 million, five-year deal with Cornell to create a joint center on nanomaterials science and technology, with Cornell professors advising on curricular development. KAUST has struck similar partnerships with Stanford and Texas A&M.

Exporting naming rights can be problematic for universities, of course. There's a long and storied history of roguish characters—American and foreign—using university donations to burnish their reputations, from John D. Rockefeller on. And when universities hook up with foreign donors, they'd be well-advised to conduct extra due diligence. In the 1980s, American University thought it had tapped into a new vein of cash when it secured a \$5 million pledge from Saudi businessman Adnan Khashoggi to finance construction of the Adnan Khashoggi Sports and Convocation Center. But Khashoggi's name was removed from the building when he was implicated in the Iran-Contra scandal and failed to make good on his pledged donation. This might make a good case study for [Joe Haslag](#), an economist at the University of Missouri. He holds the Kenneth Lay chair in economics.

moneybox

Game Google, Help the World

Why search-engine optimization makes the Web a better place.

By Chris Wilson

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 4:02 PM ET

The dating service Together bills itself as one of those high-end matchmakers that still connect people the old-fashioned way, face to face. Though they've been around since 1974, the company has long since expanded onto the Web. Google "together dating," and [their site](#) is the first result.

Unfortunately for Together, the next two results that Google delivers are from a site called Ripoff Report, which allows people to air grievances anonymously. One of the results links to a [complaint from a man named Gary](#) in Crystal, Minn., who bought a contract with Together off a friend for \$2,300. Says Gary:

They admit there are not many girls the size I desire 135lbs or under. Being that I'm 165lbs I like to be a little bigger then my date. So to sum it up in 3 ½ years I had 5 dates for \$2.300.00. And my friend before me had 4 dates for a \$1.000.00 for the grand total of \$3.300.00. What a deal!

The other result links to [all 51 complaints](#) about Together that people have filed with Ripoff Report.

That almost certainly hurts Together's business; favorable or at least neutral search results are essential for any firm with a presence online. While the most compelling stories from the [650,000 search queries](#) that AOL released in August 2006 were the [bizarre things](#) people type into search engines, the data also had a lot to say about the importance of ranking at the very top of the results. As the [Guardian reported](#), the first result got 42 percent of all click-throughs, while the second got 11 percent and down from there.

Companies will do whatever it takes to stay at the top—and ahead of their critics. To that end, a variety of firms promise to [drown out the bad publicity](#) with press releases and other friendly content. One even specifically promises to [drown out Ripoff Report](#) with "satisfactory rankings from the opinions of Bloggers throughout the Internet."

At first, this practice might offend our sense that the Web should empower the little guy who's up against the big bad corporation. I've argued before that [democracy in social media is largely a myth](#). In this case, I'm not convinced that the practice of optimizing press releases for prime search position is such a terrible thing. In fact, the competition it fuels should make the Web a better place.

Gaming search engines has gotten a lot more sophisticated since the days of flooding your site with the word *sex* in invisible text. "Search-engine optimization" is now an enormous industry teeming with both legitimate business—those who simply want to help Google help you—and shadier consultants who promise that, by hell or high water, they'll get you to the top of the results—at least for a few days. In the Web idiom, they are referred to as *white hats* and *black hats*, and the former crowd usually doesn't appreciate getting lumped in the same industry as the latter. (Here's a decent rundown of [white-hat vs. black-hat techniques](#).) As usual, there are lots of gray fedoras in between.

Bear in mind that the Internet is a hugely disorganized, dysfunctional mess, rife with sloppy HTML, broken code, and millions of software-generated pages of links that no human would ever want to read. Pity the program that has to make sense of it. Most sites are miserably un-optimized for attention from search engines because many Web masters simply lack know-how to take the basic steps toward making their sites search-friendly. Those who do, or who have the money to hire people who do, are at an enormous advantage.

It's tempting to approach this subject with the consumer-protection assumption that a customer's criticism is fundamentally more honest and relevant than a company's press release. This gets a bit sticky with sites like Ripoff Report or its brethren, like [Complaints.com](#) or [the Squeaky Wheel](#). Most allow anonymous posting and do nothing to verify the veracity of their claims. Gary from Crystal, Minn., could just as easily be an employee of, say, Match.com.

Because these sites aggregate thousands of complaints under one domain, they pack a lot more clout in terms of relevance, at least on some search engines. (Notice that a [Yahoo search for together dating](#) churns up a lot less criticism, as does one on [Live Search](#).) It is very unlikely that Gary from Minnesota—assuming he's real—would have made it to No. 3 on Google's results if he posted his laments on a personal blog without much readership.

A big site like this can be tough to shake from the top of a ranking. "It's very easy to change up the mix-up in the second page or the bottom of the first page" of the results, says Andy Ball, the president of [USWeb](#), an SEO firm. Drowning out unflattering material in the two or three spot, on the other hand, "is going to take a long time and a lot of effort."

This is the fundamental arms race of the Web right now, and it bears a strong resemblance to natural selection; companies with robust sites that play nicely with Google's spiders—that is, its army of bots who read and index pages—are rewarded with more eyeballs and better odds of survival.

There's one important caveat: The search engines write the rules, and they can rewrite them to discourage people who find a loophole in the system. They can remove and redeem individual players on demand, counsel the lower organisms in ways to succeed, and ruffle the playing field at will. (The *New York Times* reported last June that Google makes about a half-dozen changes to its algorithm a week. A Google spokesperson told *Slate* that the company averaged more than one change a day in 2007.)

If—and this is an important *if* here—search engines write and maintain the rules to reward good behavior, like entering relevant keywords and metadata that help connect search terms with content—then searching will become a better experience

for everyone. So long as sites are rewarded with higher ranking for making their sites more search-friendly, competition will spur better, more relevant results.

As it stands, many companies are still very poorly optimized for search, making it harder for them to get noticed and harder for people who are genuinely interested in their sites to find them.

As companies begin playing SEO hardball, other content providers, like media sites, will have to improve as well, spurring innovation from both parties. It helps Google, too, because it gives them better material to work with when deciding, across a broad spectrum of sites, which ones are more relevant than others—an admittedly vague qualification. In their [1998 research paper](#) that introduced Google, founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page acknowledged that this quality is in the eye of the beholder. As they wrote, the maps that their algorithm created, using hyperlinks from other sites as the fundamental electors of relevance on the Web, provided "an objective measure of its citation importance that corresponds well with people's subjective idea of importance."

As companies spend more money paying other sites for a few good links, for example, search engines will have to get smarter about detecting paid links, all with the goal of rewarding Web sites for behaving in ways that make them easier to search and target for specific, relevant pages.

The burden falls to the search engines to build and maintain an environment that can turn this inevitable arms race for rankings into precise search results. Thus far, they have proved to be a decent bet in this task.

movies

Prince Caspian

The Narnia series gets bleaker.

By Dana Stevens

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 11:59 AM ET

[***The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian***](#) (Buena Vista Pictures), the second installment in the Narnia series based on C.S. Lewis' fantasy novels, bears the same relationship to Part 1, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005), as late childhood does to early childhood. It's darker and bleaker and downright grim at times, and that first enchantment of make-believe—the wonder of crawling into a musty wardrobe and finding the door to an alternate world full of talking beavers and hospitable fauns—has given way to the sober onset of adult responsibility. Of course, the responsibilities borne by the Pevensie children—in descending order of age, Peter (William Moseley), Susan

(Anna Popplewell), Edmund (Skandar Keynes), and Lucy (Georgie Henley)—go way beyond the usual roster of childhood chores. Instead of emptying the cat-litter box and sorting the recycling, they have to raise an army to save the land of Narnia from centuries of persecution by the Telmarines.

This glowering race of men, all of whom look like Velázquez portraits and talk like Antonio Banderas, operates from a strict policy position of anti-whimsy. For some reason, they have it in for the peaceful Narnians, a ragtag assortment of sexy centaurs, chatty rodents, and curmudgeonly dwarves. The rightful heir to the Telmarine throne, Prince Caspian (Ben Barnes), on the run from his usurping uncle Miraz (Sergio Castellito), unwittingly summons the Pevensies by blowing on an ancient horn. At once, the children are spirited from a dreary train station in wartime London to the ruins of Cair Paravel castle in Narnia, where 1,300 years have passed since their last visit.

Aided by the valiant mouse Reepicheep (voiced by Eddie Izzard) and the grouchy dwarf Trumpkin (Peter Dinklage, barely recognizable under prosthetics and makeup but savagely funny as ever), the Pevensies join the prince in a struggle for the liberation of Narnia and the overthrow of Miraz. (The brief, electrifying reappearance of Tilda Swinton as the White Witch serves only to remind you what a dull villain Miraz makes by comparison.) What follows is somewhere between a gentle coming-of-age picture and a rousing medieval war epic, complete with sword fights, gryphon rides, and faux Carl Orff on the soundtrack. Peter and Caspian square off over battle tactics, Susan becomes a fierce archer while demurely evading Caspian's moony gaze, and Edmund contends with an epic case of middle-child syndrome. Meanwhile, Lucy, the youngest, communicates in dreams with Aslan (voiced by Liam Neeson), the wise lion king/explicit Jesus stand-in who went to his sacrificial death at the end of Part 1.

As in the first movie, it's only at the end, when Aslan raises his fuzzy, maned head to intervene on the side of right, that *Prince Caspian* shows its cards as a property of [Walden Media](#), the children's entertainment company owned by a Christian billionaire. The final, stunningly staged battle sequence includes a vengeful water spirit whose long, white beard and penchant for foe-smiting recalls the Old Testament God. To be fair, the movie is no more proselytizing than its source material; Lewis was a born-again convert, and the Narnia books were intended as religious parables. But the problem with the (literal) *deus ex machina* story structure in both the books and the movies is less ideological than narratological. Who cares about the death of a beloved character in a world where (if you know the right people—or lions) death itself is reversible? After the final battle, Lucy anoints a few favored survivors with what amounts to a kind of anti-death serum, so that we get to experience the thrill of near-annihilation without actually having to mourn. Richard Dawkins would have a field day with this vision of God as metaphysical Santa Claus, cozily negating all possibility of real

loss (and in fact, when Lucy first received the healing elixir in Part 1, it was a gift from none other than Kris Kringle). But whatever their religious faith or lack of, most viewers know a narrative cop-out when they see one.

They may make for clunky religious parables, but the Narnia books—and so far, the movies based on them—are wonderful as stories about childhood and its loss. Toward the end of *Prince Caspian*, it becomes clear that the two older children, Peter and Susan, are aging out of Narnia; they've crossed over to the world of grown-ups, and only Edmund and Lucy will be back for the next adventure. (Handily for the franchise, which still has five more installments to go, the books don't feature the Pevensie children throughout, so these actors needn't commit to their roles for the next decade.) The scene in which the kids bid farewell to the dreamlike world that's become more real to them than their own has the emotional power of great children's literature. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, L. Frank Baum's Dorothy, or E.B. White's Fern, the Pevensies live on the border between two realities, the mundane and the magical. For those of us who have long since lost the ability to cross over, it's a pleasure to watch them make that journey.

movies

Go, Speed Racer, Go Away!

The Wachowski brothers' high-tech failure.

By Dana Stevens

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 12:16 PM ET

Rather than attempt a linear summation of the sensory blitzkrieg that is the Wachowski brothers' *Speed Racer* (Warner Bros), it's best to set the humbler goal of an experiential viewing diary. You walk in to the blistering strains of a soundtrack by the usually wonderful Michael Giacchino, who scored *Ratatouille* last year. Amid a frantic cacophony, the cheery [theme](#) of the original Japanese cartoon series occasionally, melancholically surfaces. Before your eyes have adjusted to the dark, you're launched pinball-style into a futuristic, multidimensional space (though not shot in 3-D, the movie uses digital deep focus to create a similar effect) in which many, many things are happening at once. A race-car driver named Speed (Emile Hirsch) is hurtling around a track that seems to bend and shudder like a Möbius strip of animate licorice, as swirls of '80s album art colors—fuchsia, orange, teal—hover and blink in the background (or is that the foreground?). Shapes hurtle toward you, then recede abruptly, each bearing some fragment of narrative information that has now passed you by forever. Nausea and anxiety begin to wash over you in overlapping waves.

Narrowing your eyes against the strobe effect, you make out three movie stars: John Goodman, Susan Sarandon, and Christina Ricci, cheering Speed on from the impossibly vast stands that rise up from the racetrack (so vast they recall footage of Nazi rallies, but no time to think about that now). This must be Speed's family: Pops Racer, the master mechanic; Mom Racer, the proud enabler of boyish mayhem; and Trixie, the spunky, bob-haired girlfriend. The Racers are accompanied, inevitably and dispiritingly, by Speed's little brother, Spritle (Paulie Litt), and his pet chimpanzee, Chim Chim, who will mark every major transition in the movie with painful mugging. All the flesh-and-blood actors (even the chimp) plug gamely away at their flimsy roles, but the claustrophobia of acting against a green screen is palpable, and they're upstaged by their digitized backgrounds.

Piloting his vehicle at impossible speeds up banked curves, Speed remembers—or is he hallucinating?—the last race of his brother Rex Racer (Scott Porter) who gave his life for the sport years ago. Speed races for Rex, who once told him (in an elaborately filmed flashback that seems to rotate 360 degrees around Speed's helmeted head) to "listen to the car." After he breaks his brother's record, Speed is approached by a nefarious racing tycoon, Royalton (Roger Allam), a look- and sound-alike for *Slate's* own Christopher Hitchens (who, come to think of it, would make a great movie villain). Royalton wants Speed to dump the family business and come drive for his faceless corporation. When Speed politely declines, Royalton torments him (and us) with 10 minutes of exposition on the history of the World Racing League, now a corrupt federation capable of ensuring Speed never wins a race again.

Other stuff continues to happen until you finally get to leave the movie theater, chartreuse pinwheels burned into your retinas. Speed enters a big cross-country race against his parents' wishes, joining forces with a Japanese driver, Taejo (Korean pop singer Rain). A masked driver, Racer X (Matthew Fox), may be either a double agent investigating fixed racing or a stooge for the bad guys. There are battles with ninjas, drives straight up the sides of ice cliffs, and at least one incident of airborne monkey poo. The rotating-camera flashback technique makes some sense, narratively—when you think about something in the past, that thought describes a kind of circle, ending back in the present. But what's with the Wachowskis' obsession with the wipe—that transitional device whereby an element from one shot moves across the screen, "wiping" it clean for the next? There's a wipe for wipe's sake nearly every 30 seconds in *Speed Racer*: A character's profile, a champagne bucket, a spray-paint gun all come in handy as screen-wipers at one point or another. The overuse of this trick evokes the following responses: First time: Cool! Second time: So? The next 78 times: Why, God, why?

Why, indeed? The Wachowski brothers couldn't really have intended this Starburst-hued assault on all that is holy as a homage to the pleasingly dorky old *Speed Racer* cartoon, with

its flat planes, chalky colors, and stiffly drawn tableaux (not to mention the lousy dubbing in the English version). Watching the old *Speed Racer* induced a state of Zen focus, not because so much was happening but because so little was. The state of mind brought on by *Speed Racer* the movie is more akin to that phenomenon by which young infants, exposed to more stimuli than their systems are equipped to handle, will simply shut down. Lovers of crypto-mystical paradox that they are, the Wachowskis will perhaps appreciate that their first post-*Matrix* attempt to blow moviegoers' minds has instead provided us all with this summer's loudest, brightest, and most expensive opportunity for a nap.

music box

Bach on Top

How one of the most esoteric musical works ever written became an unlikely hit.

By Jan Swafford

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 7:30 AM ET

When I tell musical friends that on its release in March, Pierre-Laurent Aimard's solo-piano version of J.S. Bach's *The Art of Fugue* shot to the top of the Billboard and iTunes classical charts, they get this glazed look. It's as if you told a physicist that Einstein's General Theory of Relativity was topping the best-seller list. It's not supposed to happen.

This is because the 14 fugues and four canons that make up *The Art of Fugue* constitute one of the most esoteric musical works ever written. Each fugue bears the severe title *Contrapunctus* followed by a number, and there is no indication of what instruments are supposed to play them. Every piece is in D minor; all are based on the same melodic theme. It's as if Bach intended the *AOF* as a theoretical treatise, to be read and studied rather than performed, to demonstrate some of the more arcane things you can do with the idea of a fugue.

Surely nobody expected this recording to take off. French pianist Aimard made his name playing 20th-century repertoire on the order of Ligeti, Messiaen, and Ives. This was his first release for the prestigious German label DGG, which must have wondered about his marbles when he declared *The Art of Fugue* to be his choice. The label made no particular PR push on behalf of the recording, and, anyway, selling classical music is a patchwork business. I've seen the classics sold as rock 'n' roll ([Beethoven the Revolutionary](#)), the liner notes putting him up there with Elvis and Kurt Cobain); sold like barbecue ([Grillin' And Chillin' with Johann Sebastian](#)); sold like Cialis ([A Ravel Weekend](#)); and, in the case of violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter and her [fetching album covers](#), sold in the fashion of Pamela Anderson and other famous mammals.

A while back there was a brisk trade in Bach synthesized, scat-sung, plucked on koto and guitar, etc. Many of those ended up in my record store's remainder bin labeled "Schlock Bach." In contrast, Aimard's piano rendition of *The Art of Fugue* is straightforward and sober, trying not to let on how formidable the fugues are to play with 10 fingers. Organ, with its foot pedals, is the more logical keyboard choice; most often the *AOF* is done with multiple instruments. The dozens of recordings listed on Amazon include versions by the Canadian Brass and the Berlin Saxophone Quartet.

Before I give a tour of the piece, there's an issue to deal with: One has to assume that most of the people snapping up Aimard's *The Art of Fugue* don't actually, as it were, know what a fugue is. Here's the short course: A fugue is a contrapuntal procedure. ... Wait, you may not know what counterpoint is either.

Counterpoint is an ancient way of writing music in which everybody is singing or playing melody at the same time, rather than the relatively more modern and familiar idea of a single tune with accompaniment: guy with guitar, soprano with piano. Counterpoint is the art of juxtaposing melodies so that instead of getting in one another's way, they complement one another and make good harmony together. As any music student will tell you, counterpoint is damned hard to write, and the requirements of fugue only make it harder.

A fugue generally begins with a bit of tune called the *subject*, played alone in one voice (in counterpoint every part is called a "voice," whether it's sung or played). Then another "voice" strikes up the fugue subject while the original voice continues in counterpoint, sometimes establishing an also-recurring tune called the *countersubject*. The fugue carries on, in two to five or more voices, with entries of the subject plus new melodies woven freely around it. Sections featuring the subject alternate with *episodes* of free counterpoint where the subject gets a rest. So in a fugue, the subject is like a character who keeps turning up in a conversation, perhaps with spouse along (the countersubject). Except that in a contrapuntal conversation, everybody is talking at once, yet, magically, it all makes sense.

For an example, of Aimard's Contrapunctus 1. As the subject you'll hear the famous *Art of Fugue* theme, then three more entries of the subject until we're in four-voice counterpoint.

Fugues have been around for centuries, and lots of composers have written them, but few have created fugues as complex, disciplined, and beautiful as Bach's. It's the beauty that boggles musicians: There's a kind of mathematical elegance about them, but math doesn't sound that good. As a performer, Bach could improvise multivoice fugues at the organ, which is like writing four to six prose essays at the same time, using both hands and feet. It's not that he couldn't write a nice, straightforward tune. Just about everything that's possible to do in music, Bach could do as well as, or better than, anybody else. But he loved leaping

self-imposed technical hurdles, the more fiendish the better. Thus *The Art of Fugue*.

He starts with relatively basic fugues, as described above, then steadily escalates the complexity, meanwhile ornamenting and varying the *AOF* theme itself. So Contrapuncti 1-4 are straightforward, except that in the second two, the *AOF* theme is *inverted*, meaning every melodic move up becomes an equivalent one down, and vice versa. In Contrapunctus 5 the ornamented subject enters both upside-down and right-side-up. From there, we tune in to the major leagues of fuguedom. In Contrapunctus 6, the first voice is the regular (ornamented) *AOF* subject, the second voice is the subject inverted, the third voice is the subject right-side-up, the fourth voice is the subject inverted—except entries two through four present the subject at double speed. By Contrapunctus 7, the *AOF* theme is going at three speeds, variously rightside up and inverted—with a nice effect, in , of nervous intensity.

Contrapunctus 9 is maybe the most familiar of the bunch thanks to the Swingle Singers, who turned it into a scat-sung hit in the '60s. This one takes a different tack: A fugue on a racing, jazzy new subject bops along in three voices for a while before the *AOF* theme is laid on top of it.

Let's compare three versions of No. 9. Here's . In this version by the early-music ensemble Hespèrion XXI, we'll put it ahead so you hear how the —it's in the thing that sounds like a trumpet (which is a Renaissance cornett). And now , of which I'm still fond for nostalgic reasons. (Schlock is in the eye of the beholder.)

By Contrapuncti 12 and 13 we're in *Alice in Wonderland* territory: The entirety of both fugues is presented right-side-up and mirrored—i.e., upside down—and they all sound perfectly swell.

Bach was playing these otherworldly games when fate stepped in: He went blind and soon died. (On his deathbed, he dictated a haunting organ prelude called *Before Thy Throne I Stand*, as his calling card to God.) The unfinished last fugue in the *AOF* was intended to weave together four different subjects. He only got to the third one, which happened to be his own name. In German notation, B means B-flat and H means B-natural, so he could spell out B-A-C-H in notes. Composers ever since have used the motif as a homage. Aimard's version, like many others, rises to a spine-tingling peroration on the B-A-C-H motif, proclaimed over and over, when the music suddenly stops in the middle of a phrase just as Bach himself did. Here's , where the B-A-C-H subject entries start.

So there you have the makings of an unlikely hit. Meanwhile an Emerson String Quartet recording of fugues from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* has been sharing the Billboard top 10 with Aimard's recording. Is there some musical millennium at hand?

Has the '60s generation finally started to grow up, musically and otherwise?

Nah. My generation will boogie to our graves, our tastes in music and much else still adolescent, still thinking we're cool as hell. The truth is I have no idea why Bach fugues have all this buzz. The Billboard classical charts are dominated by schlock, but the Aimard and Emerson recordings are one of those ever-surprising cases of uncompromising work making a hit in the commercial funhouse we call our "culture."

Even schlock Bach isn't unredeemable. His music tends to work in all versions, I submit, because the notes-qua-notes are so good. Mozart, Beethoven, Stravinsky, or [your favorite composer here] were constantly concerned with the instruments that played or sung their work: great notes, too, but intimately bound to their media. In *The Art of Fugue* Bach didn't seem to care what the medium was; it would work no matter what. A lot of his music—not all, but a lot—is like that: incomparable notes, regardless of avatar.

I'm sure what ultimately turns everybody onto *The Art of Fugue*, not limited to musicians who understand its arcana, is how melodically expressive and rhythmically vital it is. You never forget, for example, how Contrapunctus 9 gathers like a force of nature from a galloping D minor to the most hair-raising D major final chord you ever heard. Bach universalized what he called "the art and science of music" by the power of gripping melody, rich harmony, towering perorations, intimate whisperings, explosive joy, piercing tragedy: the same human stuff we find in Beethoven, Mozart, Shakespeare, and all the great creators. But nobody in music had the science down more than Bach did, and nobody ever wrote better notes.

obit Remembering Rauschenberg

Greatness and golden slippers.

By Jim Lewis

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 6:57 PM ET

I once asked Robert Rauschenberg if he was afraid of dying. It was not as rude or unseemly a question as it might at first appear. At the time, he was elderly but in fine health; I had spent the previous three or four days visiting with him at the large but somehow modest compound he owned on Captiva Island, Fla., and in the course of our conversations, he'd spoken about his past and his work with unusual frankness and great wit.

Moreover, it seemed to me that he'd lived something very close to a perfect life. He'd been in on the origin of the great aesthetic

movements of his time, and his place in history was pretty much guaranteed; he took enormous pleasure in making art and continued to make it long after many artists retire; he had traveled the world and made a great deal of money, much of which he donated to causes he believed in. To be sure, there were dark patches; for many years he was a ferocious alcoholic—he could put away a fifth of bourbon a day—but by the time I met him, he had put all that behind him, and he seemed to have mastered the eudaemonistic life. I was curious to know how he felt about leaving it, so I asked him.

He wasn't bothered by the question at all. He seemed to find it interesting, he had obviously thought about it before, and he reflected for a while before he answered. "There are moments in the day when I find it terrifying," he said at last. "I don't ever want to go. I don't have a sense of great reality about the next world." Then, referencing an old spiritual, he said, "My feet are too ugly to wear those golden slippers." He paused again. "I'm working on my fear of it," he continued. "And my fear is that after I'm gone, something interesting is going to happen, and I'm going to miss it."

Rauschenberg died Monday, at home in Captiva; I hope the terror left him before the time came. As for missing something interesting, he rarely did while he was alive, in large part because he *was* something interesting, and the world will miss him as much as he might miss the world. He was, quite simply, as charming and delightful as any man I've ever met. But he'll be remembered as a great artist, certainly one of the greatest of the last half-century.

He was one of those people—quick as a comedian, deft and knowing—who seem to be effortlessly inventive, spinning off ideas and techniques like droplets of water from a lawn sprinkler, and there is hardly an artist working today who doesn't owe him something. To Rauschenberg, almost anything could be art, and art could be almost anything; he crossed media and created new ones as often as other artists clean their brushes. Consider the following gesture, simple, ingenious, daring, and true: One day in 1953, when Rauschenberg was in his late 20s, he stopped by Willem de Kooning's studio with a request. At the time, de Kooning was emerging as one of the giants of Abstract Expressionism, and Rauschenberg admired him enormously. He asked the older artist if he could have a drawing, not to hang it on his wall but to make into another artwork: He intended, he made clear, to erase it. De Kooning, to his great credit, complied, and Rauschenberg spent the next few weeks and, according to legend, went through 15 erasers trying to get the marks off the paper (he never entirely succeeded; some ghost of the image remains).

Erased de Kooning was the first major work of Rauschenberg's career, and it showed many of the qualities for which he would eventually become known: a paradoxical originality (or perhaps an original paradoxicalness), energy, iconoclasm, unerring

instinct. There have been a lot of artists who have used art to assault art's own verities, but few of them did so as gracefully and cheerfully as Rauschenberg. He was often joking, in a peculiar Zen-ish way that he shared with his friend John Cage, and he was almost always having fun, but he was never bullshitting.

It would take me another 10 pages to begin to describe everything else that Rauschenberg came up with: the combines (painter-ish, sculpture-ish assemblies of found materials), photo-transfer drawings, sets and costumes for Merce Cunningham's dance company, and the famous "9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering" of 1966, a wildly experimental performance festival that Rauschenberg put together with an engineer from Bell Labs named Billy Kluver, and which, with only a little stretching, can be seen as a precursor of everything from video art to Nintendo's Wii.

Rauschenberg was wildly prolific; the drops from the sprinkler landed where they would. Even he couldn't keep track of them all. At one point I asked him how many artworks he'd made in his lifetime. "Maybe 3,000," he answered. "Maybe 5,000. Maybe many more." But if you were to challenge anyone with a reasonable grasp of 20th-century art history to name some, I doubt they'd be able to come up with more than five or six. He was a very rare thing: the great artist who made few great artworks.

I don't think he would mind the characterization: He always preferred the process to the result, the inventiveness to the invention, the gesture to the meaning. There was a wall in one room of his house in Captiva where he kept his own collection of other people's artworks. It was almost all ephemera—little scraps of paper with passing marks made on them, mostly by his friends. But what friends and what ephemera: There was a small drawing by Cy Twombly, a round cardboard coaster from the Cedar Bar upon which de Kooning had doodled one night, and, loveliest of all, a sheet of lined school notebook paper that Jasper Johns had used to sketch an American flag, an early study for one of the greatest paintings of the 20th century. ("Jasper never could draw a straight line freehand," Rauschenberg told me.) It was clear that he'd rather have had those fugitive pieces than their corresponding masterpieces. He thought of art not as a monument but as the record of a passing moment. I suspect he knew, too, how melancholy an idea that can be. That's the thing about moments: They pass. And now Rauschenberg has as well, and there's that much more to miss.

other magazines

Getting Away From It All

New York on the "suicide tourists" who come to the Big Apple—and never leave.

By Morgan Smith

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 2:38 PM ET

New York, May 19

A [feature](#) asks what makes New York "a perversely attractive place to kill oneself." "Suicide tourists"—out-of-towners who make up 10.8 percent of Manhattan suicides—come to New York City partially because of the same glamour that attracts conventional vacationers. But the city's anonymity could also attract some who want to spare family members from "the trauma of discovery and keep them from having to associate a local site with the person's death." ... A [short piece](#) reports on the Crown Heights Shmira, a volunteer patrol group of Hasidic Jews who seek to protect the community and stand accused of beating a black man. Members of the group, which was founded in 1968, increased their presence after claiming the police had failed to respond to a series of attacks on Jewish men. ... A [column](#) plays the what-if game with Hillary Clinton's shot at the nomination, with 10 thought-experiment scenarios that look back at "the coulda-shoulda-woulda campaign."

New Republic, May 28

The [cover story](#) uses political psychology to uncover how racial prejudice could influence an Obama-McCain contest. It argues that the Democratic primaries demonstrated that race still influences voters, "just in a more nuanced" way than in the past: "If 9 to 12 percent of Democratic primary voters in swing states have been reluctant to support [Obama because of his race] ... in the general election, 15 to 20 percent of Democrats or Democratic-leaning Independents may not support him for the same reason." ... A [piece](#) considers the "black case" against Obama, alleging that the candidate "is the black person [white people] want the rest of us to be—half-white and loving, or 'racially transcendent,' as the press loves to call him." It asserts that in his famous speech on race, Obama "obscured the true nature of black religious life" when he implied the Rev. Wright-style speeches were commonplace in black churches.

The New Yorker, May 19

A lengthy piece probes the insular Mississippi legal community to profile the decline of Dickie Scruggs, the legendary anti-tobacco trial lawyer who stands accused of bribing a judge. Scruggs pioneered the two-phase trial process (in which "the first phase would test only the general liability" of the defendant, and the second, if the defendant were found liable, would "determin[e] the damages to be paid to the individual plaintiffs"). The strategy "helped to open the litigation floodgates in Mississippi," which "became a principal battleground in the national political fight over tort reform." ... An article investigates an experimental post-traumatic stress disorder treatment that uses virtual-reality simulations. The simulations, which re-create the sights, scents, and sounds of

combat with a "modified version of Full Spectrum warrior, a popular video game," help patients by disassociating the memory from the response it produces, "so although the memory of the traumatic event remains, the everyday things that can trigger fear and panic ... are restored to insignificance."

Seed, May/June 2008

A piece on the economics of meat consumption observes that "for decades," arguments against eating meat were based on "moral grounds such as animal rights, or for religious reasons—arguments that the rest of society was free to ignore." But now, "the idea that meat-eating is purely an individual choice, and the costs affect only the individual, has been blown wide open." The piece suggests that excessive consumption of meat could become akin to "chuffing on Marlboros or driving a gas-guzzling SUV." ... An essay reflects on astronomers' method of surveying the universe for extraterrestrial life, which is to study Earth to observe how it would appear to alien beings in order to understand what to look for on distant planets. Despite this scientific approach, "it is delusion to pretend any of us look at ourselves, or the stars, dispassionately. ... [W]e don't merely seek the familiar—we ache for it."

Weekly Standard, May 19

A [piece](#) weighs Sen. Jim Webb's veteran educational-benefit bill against the alternative presented by Sens. Lindsey Graham, Richard Burr, and John McCain. Webb's bill provides for generous compensation, but it could also mean "a higher number will leave the military once they reach the maximum benefit level." The Graham-Burr-McCain bill, the piece concludes, "seems more likely to yield an effective fighting force composed of women and men interested in making a long-term commitment." ... An [essay](#) scrutinizes *Trumpet*, the newsletter edited and published by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. The piece concludes that "the now-infamous YouTube snippets from Wright's sermons are authentic reflections of his core political and theological beliefs" and that it would be impossible for Obama not to have known the extremism of Wright's thoughts. One *Trumpet* columnist railed against the Fourth of July as "a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages."

Newsweek, May 19

The [cover story](#) reveals how the Obama campaign will combat the GOP machine in the general election, noting that "the challenge will be to respond quickly and surely—but without overreacting or inviting an endless cycle of recriminations." One anonymous McCain adviser warns that despite both campaigns' claims that they want to avoid negativity, "It's going to be Swift Boat times five on both sides. ... [I]n a close race, I don't see how to shut that down." ... A [piece](#) looks at the Penthouse Media Group's foray into online dating and social networking

sites—ranging from the Christian network BigChurch.com to the self-explanatory Bondage.com. Because of the availability of pornography on the Internet, many adult entertainment companies have been forced to diversify their holdings to counteract losses.

other magazines

Break a Leg Like a Girl

The *New York Times Magazine* on high-school female athletes' alarming injury rates.

By Morgan Smith

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 2:39 PM ET

New York Times Magazine, May 11

The cover story examines girls' frequent injuries in high-school sports. "Advocates for women's sports have had to keep a laser focus on ... making sure they have equal access to high-school and college sports." But female athletes are more likely to have shin splints, stress fractures, chronic knee pain, concussions, and ACL tears than their male counterparts, perhaps because of changes that come with puberty. Many in the field have avoided addressing the girls' higher rate of injuries, worrying that they'll be seen as suggesting "women are too delicate to play certain games or to play them at a high level of intensity." ... A piece details the U.S. government's case against a former Vietnam war ally, Gen. Vang Pao of the Laotian Hmong people. With evidence collected through an anti-terrorism sting operation, the United States alleges Vang Pao sought an illegal weapons deal to arm his remaining followers against the Laotian government.

Economist, May 10

The cover story is an [editorial](#) calling for Hillary Clinton "to concede gracefully and throw the considerable weight of the Clintons behind their party's best hope," Barack Obama. The piece cautions that "there are severe problems with the details" of Obama's policy proposals, but "the upside of an Obama presidency remains greater than that of any other candidate." ... An [article](#) on the cyclone that has devastated Burma observes that the government's refusal of foreign aid "raises a dilemma ... [of] how to rescue desperate people whose own government spurns outside assistance, and how to do so without providing a lifeline to an illegitimate and unpopular regime." But the havoc wreaked by the natural disaster and the government's poor response to it might lead some senior Burmese soldiers to question the notion that the military is the only "force [that] can hold the country together and run it competently."

Reason, May 2008

The [cover story](#) eviscerates the tactics the White House is using

to cover up the true cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Instead of including war-related costs in the annual defense budget, the DoD files requests for war money as emergency supplemental dollars, "which, conveniently for the administration, does not get counted in deficit projections." ... A [column](#) rails against the "raging decency epidemic" that's sweeping Hollywood. But "even as the floodtides of rectitude threaten to give us all a cleansing soak, the Culture War's most dogged mercenaries grow increasingly desperate to sound notes of alarm." ... Another [column](#) amusingly complains about the youth community service plans included in all three candidates' platforms. The writer notes that "the coming McCain-Obama contest holds great promise for those who hope to see the day when youth are expected to perform nearly free labor as a matter of federal policy."

Washington Monthly, April 2008

In the [cover story](#), a former factory inspector reveals how companies avoid disclosing their labor practices and how factories overseas resist complying with regulations. Though private monitors hired by companies can motivate factories to clean up their practices, they are often one step behind the workplaces they inspect—where forged timecards and threats keep workers from speaking to monitors. Companies can also choose private monitoring firms—who "specialize in performing as many brief, understaffed inspections as they can fit in a day in order to maximize their own profits"—to intentionally avoid knowledge of abuse. ... A [piece](#) considers the motivations of disgraced Louisiana Rep. William Jefferson, tracing his path from underprivileged child in segregated Louisiana to Harvard Law idealist to corrupted government official. Jefferson today "bears little resemblance to the brave mother who stood up to a redneck sheriff," and his upcoming trial could bring unwanted media attention to a Democratic scandal in an election year.

Time, May 19

The cover package dispenses with Clinton could-win-if scenarios and pre-emptively hands the Democratic nomination to Barack Obama. Joe Klein's [op-ed](#) declares Hillary Clinton's loss could be tied to her campaign tactics, which "appeared very old and clichéd to Obama's legion of young supporters, who were the real game changers in this year of extraordinary turnouts." ... A post-mortem [piece](#) lists "five big mistakes" of Clinton's campaign—the primary being that she "misjudged the mood. ... In a cycle that has been all about change, Clinton chose an incumbent's strategy, running on experience, preparedness, inevitability—and the power of the strongest brand name in Democratic politics." ... A [review](#) of James Frey's first work of fiction marketed as such cautiously praises the book. The author "has a history of having a little too much fun with facts, among other controlled substances," but as a novelist, "he may finally have found a job where that's not a problem."

Must Read

New York [goes underground](#) with the city employees who repair and clean the subway tracks, exposing horrific working conditions.

Must Skip

Don't bother with *Vanity Fair's* Bobby Kennedy cover package, unless you're in the mood for a Camelot nostalgia fest.

Best Politics Piece

Washington Monthly [explains](#) why the scandal-ridden Rep. William Jefferson was re-elected to Congress after alleged bribe money was discovered in his freezer: "[H]is victory showed how much people in his district despised Washington. If he was a crook, well send him back with the crooks."

Best Culture Piece

The New Yorker [explores](#) the phenomenon of taste as it profiles a chef's attempt to save his tongue from cancer.

Latest to the Party

Reason [interviews](#) *The Wire* co-creator Ed Burns on how to solve inner-city crime. Didn't the media wind up their romance with the HBO series in March?

poem

"The Story of the Father"

By Tony Hoagland

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 7:23 AM ET

Listen to Tony Hoagland read .

This is another story that I often think about:
the story of the father

after the funeral of his son the suicide,
going home and burning all the photographs of that dead boy;

standing next to the backyard barbecue,
feeding the pictures to the fire; watching the pale smoke
rise and disappear into the humid Mississippi sky.

Aware that he is standing at the edge of some great border,
ignorant that he is hogging all the pain.

How quiet the suburbs are in the middle of an afternoon
when a man is destroying evidence,
breathing in the chemistry of burning Polaroids,

watching the trees over the rickety fence

seem to lift and nod in recognition.

Later, he will be surprised
by the anger of his family:
the wife hiding her face in her hands,
the daughter calling him names

—but for now, he is certain of his act; now

he is like a man destroying a religion,
or hacking at the root of a tree—

Over and over I have arrived here just in time
to watch the father use a rusty piece of wire

to nudge the last photo of the boy
into the orange part of the flame:

the face going brown, the memory undeveloping.

It is not the misbegotten logic of the father;
it is not the pity of the snuffed-out youth;

It is the old intelligence of pain
that I admire:

how it moves around inside of him like smoke;

how it knows exactly what to do with human beings
to stay inside of them forever.

politics

Slate's Delegate Calculator

Clinton wins big in West Virginia, but Obama is poised to clinch the pledged contest next week.

By Chadwick Matlin and Chris Wilson

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 6:40 AM ET

Hillary Clinton's 41-point victory over Barack Obama in Tuesday's West Virginia primary awards her 20 pledged delegates to Obama's eight, according to tentative district-by-district results. NBC News [currently reports a 19-7 tally](#) with two delegates still to be allocated.

Though John Edwards pulled down 7.3 percent of the vote—impressive for a man who [ended his bid Jan. 30](#)—he presumably did not garner 15 percent of the vote in any individual district, the threshold needed to start collecting delegates, according to DNC rules.

Clinton's net gain of 12 brings Obama's lead down to 153 pledged delegates with five contests and 189 delegates still on the line. As we've [noted in "Trailhead,"](#) the odds that Clinton can catch Obama in pledged delegates become ever remoter with each contest, even when she wins. Now, with Kentucky and Oregon up next week, we reach an interesting crossroads: It is very likely that, at this time next week, Obama will have clinched the pledged delegate lead for good. Polls currently have him [up in Oregon by more than 10 points](#) and [trailing in Kentucky by about 30](#). For the sake of argument, give him a 55-45 victory in Oregon and a 30-70 loss in Kentucky, and look what happens: Even with 100 percent of the vote in remaining primaries, Clinton trails by 52 delegates at the end of the contest.

Once Obama clinches the pledged delegate contest, he wins the support of the eight members of the so-called [Pelosi Club](#), who have said they will support the winner in this metric.

Methodology

- The current number of pledged delegates comes from [NBC News' tally](#). The delegate count prior to March 4 includes the 14 pledged delegates from the [Democrats Abroad Global Primary](#) and subsequent [convention](#), who count for half as much as their domestic counterparts'.
- We estimate the number of delegates based on the overall state vote, even though delegates are awarded by congressional district as well. We felt comfortable making this approximation because in the primaries through Mississippi, there was only a 2.9 percent deviation between the percentage of the overall vote and the percentage of delegates awarded in primaries. The proportion of delegates awarded by congressional district, therefore, does not differ greatly from the statewide breakdown.
- The calculator now includes options to enable Florida and Michigan. When you check the boxes next to either or both states, you'll notice that the overall number of delegates needed for the nomination changes. With Florida and/or Michigan involved, there are more total delegates to go around, so the number needed for a majority rises. Our calculator assumes that the DNC will allow both states to retain their entire pledged delegation, and not punish the states by halving their delegate totals like the RNC did.
- The calculator does not incorporate superdelegates into its calculations. Superdelegates are unpledged and uncommitted and therefore can change their endorsements and convention votes at any time. As a result, we've simply noted at the bottom of the calculator how many superdelegates the leading candidate needs to win the nomination in a given scenario.

- All of the calculator's formulas and data come from Jason Furman, the director of the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution.

politics

Campaign Junkie

The election trail starts here.

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 6:39 AM ET

politics

The West Virginia Pasting

Is Obama's lead durable enough to withstand Tuesday's rout?

By John Dickerson

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 10:41 PM ET

When a stunt man falls from a skyscraper, it's hard not to draw a short breath even if you know he's going to land on a puffy air bag. Barack Obama lost West Virginia by 41 points, which looks like an enormous fall. Clinton was favored to win the state, but Obama is the all-but-named nominee. Shouldn't that have prevented such a rout?

Whether Obama suffered any damage will be determined by the behavior of the superdelegates in the next few days. Will any of them embrace Clinton after her victory? Right now, Obama's cushion seems intact. Even after the West Virginia loss, he leads Clinton in all the metrics that matter: He's ahead in pledged delegates, the popular vote, and states won. This week he overtook Clinton among superdelegates, who continue to march toward him at a regular clip. Unless Clinton can get the delegates from Florida and Michigan seated in her favor—a big longshot—she must reverse the math by convincing more than 70 percent of the remaining superdelegates to initiate Party Armageddon by denying Obama the nomination.

This bad math for Clinton is what made the days before the West Virginia blowout victory seem darker and darker. Her campaign is reportedly \$20 million in debt, and she's dipping regularly into her own bank account. The tide of opinion in her party is moving against her. John Edwards warned her hardball tactics risked damaging the party. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, officially neutral, suggested Obama had the nomination all but locked up. So did Clinton supporter [James Carville](#). Former DNC Chairman Roy Romer came out for Obama and said: "There is a time we need to end it and direct ourselves to the general election. I think that time is now." This echoed former presidential candidate George McGovern, who dropped his support of Clinton in favor of Obama.

So, the Democratic race may supply us with the kind of headline you'd expect to see in the *Onion*: "Clinton Wins in Landslide, Drops Out of Race." Obama is not without flaws. It's just that Clinton can't exploit them in a way that helps her. In the wake of West Virginia, Clinton will claim more evidence for the already overwhelming case that Obama [can't win among white working-class voters](#). Clinton is suggesting Obama is fundamentally dead to these voters and therefore can't compete in the general election against McCain, but the evidence isn't there. In a recent *Los Angeles Times* [poll](#), Obama performs only a little worse among white working-class voters than Hillary Clinton does in matchups against McCain. More broadly, in other surveys, such as a recent *Washington Post/ABC* [poll](#), he is still running as well or better than Democrats have in the past with white voters. Unless white voters are lying to pollsters consistently and in huge numbers, Obama's problems in the primary don't seem to translate into the general-election campaign.

As the debate plays out with remaining undecided superdelegates, the Obama campaign has other arguments against the big Clinton win. Clinton won impressively in a swing state, but Obama crushed her in the swing states of Colorado, Minnesota, and Virginia.

Obama's problem with white working-class voters does suggest that his powers of persuasion have real limitations. Throughout the campaign, he has touted his ability to reach out to people and to bring them together. His rallies, fundraising, and huge army of volunteers prove he can mobilize many Democrats and some independents as well. But he's been trying to woo working-class whites for months and months—arguably since the start of the campaign—and he can't get a handle on them. This is not an electoral problem, perhaps, but it's a governing problem. How can he make the case for his special ability to rally all Americans of diverse backgrounds and interests, yet have such a big problem with one group? For a while, Obama's supporters said that the more voters got to know him, the more they were disposed to vote for him, which suggested a powerful ability to sway people of all types. They don't make that case any more.

In her Tuesday victory speech, Clinton didn't sound like a candidate who is giving up. She made the case for including the Florida and Michigan delegations and continued to draw sharp contrasts with her Democratic opponent. She didn't mention Obama by name, but argued that he couldn't represent the party's core values and win in swing states.

The Obama team, by contrast, was praising Clinton's win everywhere. None of his advisers, even with the protection of anonymity, were making the case that she'd won by playing the race card or were trashing her in any other way. They know that the best way to keep her in the race is to appear that they are trying to force her out of it. There was no visible sense of tension and urgency in their response. It almost seemed as if they were relaxing on a giant air cushion.

politics

The McCain and Obama Talkalot

An orgy of free thought? Not so likely.

By John Dickerson

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 6:11 PM ET

I love the idea of a joint McCain/Obama town hall tour. Apparently the candidates do, too. Regular voters ask great questions, and, as the YouTube debates [showed](#), it's harder for politicians to duck questions from them than from journalists. (They also can't complain about voters the way they can the press.) The format also lends itself to speaking in whole paragraphs rather than sound bites. Wouldn't it be great if in the age of quickly distributed video clips—which were supposed to drain politicians until they were too afraid to say more than "hello"—we had two nominees try to out-candor each other in an orgy of free thought and talk?

It would be great, but I'm skeptical. Neither of the candidates nor the parties that back them have shown much evidence that they'll let their opponent form a complicated thought in public without hogtying him to it for as many news cycles as possible.

I can see why each candidate would think the idea works for both of them. The idea of a joint free-for-all (which McCain also shopped in 2000) delights McCain both because it's unpredictable (he hates being bored) and because he's a more appealing candidate when he's talking to voters rather than delivering a speech. There are other obvious political advantages. The free publicity will be very helpful, given that McCain won't have nearly the money Obama will to pay for TV ads. And he'll either get to come across as youthful and spry next to the younger candidate—or give voters a chance to get over the issue of his age during a series of summer town halls rather than at the first debate in October, so close to election time.

There are advantages for Obama, too. If his biggest problem when matched with McCain is his gravitas, just walking on stage could help fix that. And, like McCain, Obama is appealing when he's telling us what's on his mind rather than what's on a page. These are candidates who regularly quote the books they read. They love sports. They take an ironic approach to the silly rituals of politics. Their approaches to conversation differ—McCain likes the fast give-and-take, while Obama is more professorial in his longer riffs and questioning. But both men like to do more than hand out safe thoughts in little packets. This, of course, has gotten them both into trouble—McCain countless times and Obama most recently when he mused about the motivations of small-town voters.

If the candidates really go on a joint tour, they'll be testing our capacity to hold off on our snap judgments. Will we let the candidates talk as freely as we say we want them to? Will we put a little cartilage into our politics and let them be imprecise and approximate and not jump on them with the gotchas and the Web videos? We can disdain moderators who ask questions designed to trap candidates, but we're no different if we screech every time they put a foot wrong.

There's also a test for Obama and McCain here. Both men brag regularly about their candor and how they're going to tell audiences brisk truths. That's why they both like this idea so much. It appeals to their sense of boldness, authenticity, and performance. God love them for it. But neither of them is going to have the room to tell any hard truths and explain what he means if they both keep sinking to the gotcha game-playing that makes it impossible to say anything that hasn't been pre-scrubbed.

Obama denounced tit-for-tat politics and the hypercoverage of Hillary Clinton's Bosnia sniper fantasy—and then turned around and [tried to exploit the story days later](#). McCain complains when his words are taken out of context—but he did the same cut-and-paste job on Mitt Romney, [thoroughly distorting Romney's views](#) on a future Iraq "withdrawal." Candidates shouldn't claim points for candor when they have the alarm set for an opponent's slightest mistake.

Of course, even if McCain and Obama elevate their own discourse, they should also be accountable for their parties and allies. Howard Dean and the DNC appear to be able to make any old claim about McCain without Obama showing any upset. The DNC's ad about McCain's reference to keeping troops in Iraq for 100 years, for example, doesn't [exactly meet the Obama](#) standard for honest dialogue. (Though I suppose that one would be hard for Obama to speak out against, since [at times he's embraced](#) the identical distortion.)

The most egregious recent example of word-twisting, though, came to us yesterday from the Republicans. Recently, Sen. Obama let us in on his thinking about Israel in a [thoughtful discussion](#) with the *Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg. At one point, Obama said "this constant wound, that this constant sore, does infect all of our foreign policy." He was clearly talking about the Middle East conflict, not Israel—this is backed up by his thorough support of Israel throughout the interview. Also, when Goldberg asked him directly, "Do you think that Israel is a drag on America's reputation overseas?" Obama said, "No, no, no" right before his constant sore observation.

But that didn't stop Republican Majority Leader John Boehner from issuing a press release denouncing Obama for calling Israel a sore. This amounts to making things up. It's one thing to spin; it's another to see a train and try to convince us it's a ham sandwich. It doesn't bode well for the chance of a new format to

produce free-flowing conversation if this kind of distortion can be produced so easily.

I'd like to have faith in this idea, particularly after the Bush campaigns that set a new modern low for town hall meetings. The audiences were so thoroughly screened, it was only slightly easier to get into one of them than it was his daughter's wedding. This produced lots of questions about how Bush managed to perform so well under pressure and testimonials about his greatness that were not really questions at all. So far, there's not much reason to believe that this new gambit will be much more useful than those staged town halls Bush used to hold.

politics

White Voter Trap

Why Clinton wasn't intentionally playing the race card.

By John Dickerson

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 6:41 PM ET

When Hillary Clinton told [USA Today](#) that she was winning the white vote, she opened herself up to the charge that this was the latest gambit in her attempt to use Barack Obama's race to defeat him. It fit somewhere between Bob Johnson's [ham-fisted attempt](#) to argue that Obama wasn't black enough (while also bringing up his past drug use) and Bill Clinton's [reference](#) to Jesse Jackson after Obama's South Carolina primary win, which many saw as an attempt to dismiss Obama as a candidate with limited mass appeal.

I don't interpret Clinton's latest remarks that way. Instead, I see Sen. Clinton trapped in an unforgiving episode of *Iron Chef*. Time is almost up, and she's got to make a meal out of the spare ingredients left. She's in too much of a rush to check if those mushrooms are poisonous. She grabbed the AP story listing the demographic groups that she is winning and ran down the list just as pundits have been doing for months.

Maybe I'm naive. Or maybe I think you have to have a little more proof before you claim someone's a cynical race-baiter. Exhaustion and desperation seem a more likely explanation for Clinton's dancing close to the white-vote land mine than more devilish motives. As Barack Obama has wisely said, we should give our exhausted candidates a break. (Of course, Clinton didn't give him any quarter when he [bungled his characterization of people who live in small towns](#).)

As campaign veteran Joe Trippi explained to me months ago, the survival instinct that takes hold at the bitter end is not necessarily unique to the Clintons. After months and months of

fighting, no one wants to give up. With no perspective or time for fear, you grab the weaponry at hand and keep fighting. So Clinton is arguing she's going to count Puerto Rican votes to show she's won the popular vote—even though Puerto Ricans can't participate in the general election. She'll whip off a PowerPoint presentation to [show how she's won conservative districts](#). Everything will be pressed into service given the [desperate state of things](#).

Perhaps the best reason it seems likely Clinton wasn't intentionally playing the race card is that she knows it would kill her chances at convincing superdelegates to back her. Roughly 250 of them are still staring out their windows in a rapturous state of ponder, thumbing *Hamlet*, and not making up their minds. Clinton has to somehow convince roughly 70 percent of them to support her. At the moment, they're heading in the other direction as quickly as these risk-averse party-types can go. Obama has won 80 percent of the more than 130 or so superdelegates that have picked a candidate since Super Tuesday. Since the North Carolina and Indiana primaries, he has raked in 14 to Clinton's three.

Clinton's chances are so narrow and flickering as to be almost nonexistent, but of those superdelegates with whom she might still have a chance, sensitivity to race and its potential to divide the party is a big issue. It may be *the issue*, according to some of her aides. The more Clinton appears to have benefited by playing the race card or benefiting from racism that exists but she didn't foment, the harder it will be for superdelegates to support her. At a personal level, they won't want to look like they are ratifying her racial politics or the racist behavior of white voters. They also know that if they don't choose Obama, and his supporters think race was the reason he didn't get the nomination, those voters will be lost to the party for the general election. Not only will blacks stay home, but liberals and the first-time voters Obama has attracted will do the same, disgusted with party fat cats sanctioning what they'll view as racist behavior.

This means Clinton may be past the point at which she can make her best case. It's true that she is beating Obama among a variety of demographic groups. In particular, she's [thumping him soundly with white working-class men](#). There's little evidence this will translate into a problem for Obama in the general election—in the latest Diageo/Hotline [poll](#), he does just as well as Clinton among whites against John McCain. Still, Clinton's argument along these lines is the best she has. The more she tries to make this case, though, the more she risks spooking the superdelegates. Assert that Obama can't win among whites or certain groups of whites often enough, and it just might stick in the heads of white voters that he's somehow irrevocably damaged. To avoid that tarnishing, superdelegates might move all the faster toward Obama, lest Clinton seriously harm the eventual nominee.

The debate over Clinton's tactics could be the next chapter in that national conversation about race Barack Obama talked about in his Pennsylvania speech in March. Of course, the last thing in the world the Obama campaign wants is a conversation about race now, when he's all but won the nomination. It's much easier, and politically smarter, for them to imply that the Clintons are playing the race card or to let the superdelegates come to that conclusion on their own. After the clock runs out, the expansive conversation about race can presumably start again.

press box

Puffing Rauschenberg

The dailies slobber all over the dead artist.

By Jack Shafer

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 5:33 PM ET

The solemn tributes to Robert Rauschenberg in today's newspapers prove that you're more likely to encounter an independent mind operating in the sports pages than the arts section. Hoisting his reputation high and escorting it into paradise, critics from the [Washington Post](#), the [New York Times](#), the [Los Angeles Times](#), the [Chicago Tribune](#), and the [Wall Street Journal](#) write as if toeing the correct line handed down by some cultural commissar.

To the *Journal's* Barbara Rose, he's "the biggest innovator in art after Jackson Pollock." The *Los Angeles Times's* Christopher Knight regards Rauschenberg (along with collaborator Jasper Johns) as "the most important American artist to emerge into prominence in the 1950s." The *Chicago Tribune's* Alan G. Artner writes that Rauschenberg "was one of the most influential artists in the second half of the 20th Century." The *New York Times's* Michael Kimmelman salutes the artist for having "time and again reshaped art in the 20th century" and for giving "new meaning to sculpture." Even mild dissenter Blake Gopnik of the *Post*, who no longer likes Rauschenberg's [Combines](#) as much as he once did, acknowledges the man as a "master" and the maker of "some of the most influential art of the past 50 years."

You'd expect that an artist who deliberately courted controversy might rouse a little debate on the event of his death. But none of his provocations move the daily art-crits in that direction—not his [White Painting](#), not his [black painting](#), not his [Automobile Tire Print](#), not his [screenprints](#), not his [Mud Muse](#), and not his [cardboards](#). Even the time that he asked Willem de Kooning for a drawing, erased its every line, and displayed it as *Erased de Kooning Drawing* wins worshipful treatment from the gang. "[A]n act both of destruction and devotion," reports the *New York Times*. Evidence of "creative overdrive," proclaims the *Los*

Angeles Times. An example of "the younger generation, turning history into a blank slate," finds the *Washington Post*.

Judging from today's clips, there was no *Ishtar*, no *Moose Murders*, no Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*, no *Ancient Evenings*, and no *End of the Century* in all of Rauschenberg's work. His critics discover triumph in his every groan and belch because, as they write, his work was about invention and reinvention and experimentation and possibilities! About inspiring other artists! He was "protean" and imaginative (*Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times*). The headline writer for the *Post* gets caught up in this mood, calling Rauschenberg the "Alchemist of the Mundane," forgetting that all alchemy is about transforming the mundane into the special.

He was "prolific," too, (*Chicago Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *New York Times*), but given that he produced about 6,000 paintings and sculptures, not counting prints and multiples, he was as much an art factory as an artist. How much of it was crap? The art critics are silent.

Even his oracular sayings receive maximum respect. The *Post's* Gopnik quotes the Rauschenbergism, "I am for Art, but for Art that has nothing to do with Art" without pausing to explain what—if anything—it means. The *New York Times's* Kimmelman sees no reason to unravel the artist's quip, "Being right can stop all the momentum of a very interesting idea." According to the *Tribune's* Artner, Rauschenberg "sought to operate in an aesthetic no-man's land, which he famously called 'the gap between art and life.'" Now what in the hell does that mean?

The newspaper reviewers are too busy recycling the many entertaining stories from Rauschenberg's personal history to help readers make sense of his works, leaving it to the *New Criterion's* perpetually grouchy Roger Kimball to pen the only critical [postmortem](#) I could find:

[H]is work is primarily a highly commercial version of what Marcel Duchamp was doing in the Teens and Twenties with his "ready-mades." In essence, it is a window-dresser's version of Dada: Dada (slightly) prettified and turned into a formula—Dada, in short, for the masses.

And not good Dada, either. Rauschenberg's work was "undoubtedly junk" and characterized by "unremitting trashiness," Kimball seethes. "Like Andy Warhol, Rauschenberg's chief genius has been for celebrity. His works are props in a gigantic publicity campaign whose purpose is to foster a species of brand-name recognition."

I don't hold the press gang's reverential treatment of Rauschenberg against the artist. He was only selling. They're the

ones who bought, bought again, and continue to toss coins into his grave.

Addendum, May 15: Jed Perl of the [New Republic](#) obviously didn't get the memo.

I met Rauschenberg in 1979 while working as a handyman at the Venice, Calif., gallery that represented him. He was a nice enough guy but didn't ask me to collaborate with him as he had de Kooning, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, or Bell Laboratories engineers. My lasting Rauschenberg memory is of the enormous inventory of his work that the gallery kept in the back room. We had enough of his stuff to stock every living room in the Hollywood Hills. Twice over. Send your Rauschenberg reminiscences 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.)

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press box

Weird Lede of the Week

The *Wall Street Journal* hypes a nonexistent "backlash."

By Jack Shafer

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 3:39 PM ET

As news ledes go, the one atop "Democrats Face Rescue Backlash: Some Voters Oppose Having to Bail Out Homeowners at Risk" in the [May 12](#) *Wall Street Journal* isn't totally preposterous. *Journal* reporters Sudeep Reddy and Elizabeth Holmes write:

Democrats may be risking a backlash at the polls in November by pushing hard to use taxpayer money to rescue homeowners who can no longer afford their mortgages in the face of stiff resistance from President Bush and many other Republicans.

Yet the piece presents no evidence that any Democrat running for office is at risk from a mortgage-bailout "backlash." The story quotes five citizens—three McCain supporters, a Clinton

supporter, and one likely Obama voter—on the topic. One of the McCain supporters is totally against the plan, one thinks it would be unworkable, and the third says a bank bailout is OK only if you do something for families. The Clinton backer endorses the plan, and the Obama man just can't make up his mind.

The story's eighth paragraph, however, suggests that *no backlash* is in the offing. Citing a Gallup poll from late March, the article reports that 56 percent of Americans favor a bailout for home buyers who can't pay their mortgages, and 42 percent oppose the concept. The poll also recorded 71 percent of Democrats and 55 percent of independents in favor of the idea and 58 percent of Republicans against it, indicating a "partisan divide," as the story puts it.

The article quotes political consultants and members of Congress from both sides of the aisle on the merits of the bill, which passed the House last week. The only one who raises the peril of a backlash is Republican consultant Todd Harris, who speaks of "massive voter retribution against any plan that is perceived to bail out greedy and unscrupulous speculators and mortgage companies."

Since when does a single Republican consultant's prediction frame an entire *Wall Street Journal* news story?

There's not even the fixings for a decent editorial in the *Journal* article—and I'm against the bailout bill! Encountered a ridiculous lede in your reading? Send it 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.)

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The Worst Show on a Cable News Network

It's still *The Journal* Editorial Report.

By Jack Shafer

Monday, May 12, 2008, at 6:04 PM ET

If you're sick of cable news reducing everything it discusses to a left-wing argument versus a right-wing one, tune your TV set to the weekly half-hour of conservative concurrence that is *The Journal Editorial Report* on the Fox News Channel.

Hosted by *Wall Street Journal* Editorial Page Editor Paul Gigot, the show draws its guest list almost exclusively from Gigot's staff and contributors to his page, making each installment an extended exercise in groupthink. Dim groupthink. Dim groupthink punctuated with laughter and knowing nods.

When *The Journal Editorial Report* invites outsiders onto the show, it tends not to stray from its ideological comfort zone. In 2008, outside guests have included Newt Gingrich, John Sununu, Republican pollster Whit Ayres, former New York Lt. Gov. Betsy McCaughey, and three Fox News Channel contributors: journalist Michael Barone, former White House Deputy Chief of Staff Karl Rove, and [New York Post columnist](#) and "Fox News Analyst" Kirsten Powers, the lone Democrat.

I wish I could write that *The Journal Editorial Report* has gotten worse since I first [reviewed](#) it two years ago, but it hasn't. Instead, it has preserved its 2006 badness as if it's an archeological artifact. Gigot still serves mostly softballs to his staff and guests, and the show makes almost no news. As if to acknowledge the show's ongoing badness, Fox still buries *The Journal Editorial Report* in the 11 p.m. Saturday time slot, when most of the nation's televisions take their weekly nap.

The closest the show has come to breaking a pulse was the [June 8, 2006](#), episode. Marvin Kalb—now a Fox News contributor—appeared to defend the *New York Times*' publication of its story about the SWIFT program, which the *Journal* editorial page had attacked. But even that segment dragged. The more you watch *The Journal Editorial Report*, the more you come to admire the skills of a broadcast news veteran like David Gregory, who can play the devil or devil's advocate with equal aplomb. If advancing the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page's ideology is the show's intention—and I think it is—its producers would be better off hiring a host like Gregory who could torture some fresh intelligence out of Gigot and his staff.

Instead, viewers endure the formlessness of Gigot's "interviewing" his writers about what they've written and published in the *Journal*. During the [May 10 show](#), Gigot addressed his questions to editorial-page writer Joseph Rago, who wrote a [May 5](#) bylined column about a wiggy professor at Dartmouth who reportedly threatened to sue her students on the grounds that "their 'anti-intellectualism' violated her civil rights," as Rago puts it in his piece.

Gigot conducts his interview as if he's unfamiliar with the story that his own page ran. He asks, "Is she still threatening to sue the college and superiors at the college?" and "Is this very common

at Dartmouth in the sense that a lot of professors, this kind of thinking?" as if he doesn't know the answers. A better writer than he is an actor, Gigot bleeds the segment of whatever spontaneity it may have promised.

But *The Journal Editorial Report* isn't a complete loss. By repurposing editorials and columns from the last week, it provides a substitute *Wall Street Journal* editorial page for people who can't read.

What's your idea of the worst cable news program? *The Situation Room*, where Wolf Blitzer can't stop lying about his network having the [best political team on television](#)? *Nancy Grace*? *The Beltway Boys*? *Geraldo at Large*? *Glenn Beck*? *Forbes on Fox*? *Verdict With Dan Abrams*? 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.)

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procrastination Just Don't Do It

A special issue on procrastination.

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 6:46 AM ET

Maybe you didn't care for our [package on weddings](#) last summer. Perhaps you weren't interested in the [fall book blitz](#). You might even have skipped over our [blowout neuroscience spectacular](#). Hey man, that's cool. Different strokes for different folks, am I right?

Not anymore. For the next three days, *Slate* will put aside the special interests and present, for the first time, a package of stories that will appeal to every single person reading the magazine. It's time for us to speak out on something that matters to all of you, regardless of class or creed; it's time to unite behind a common problem and a common dream.

Welcome, my friends, to *Slate*'s special issue on "procrastination."

Emily Yoffe kicks things off with a moving memoir of her procrastination addiction and her journey through rehab. Seth Stevenson gives his own survivor's perspective, in the form of a letter to a young procrastinator. Daniel Gross points out that it might be wise to invest in the procrastination economy—coffee, cigarettes, YouTube, etc. And Jessica Winter explores the rich literature of wasted time and the psychology of writers who put off their work for years and years.

Elsewhere in the issue, Josh Levin presents his grand unified theory of computer solitaire. Heather Smith reviews the literature on cross-cultural procrastination and reveals why the Japanese waste more time than we do. Ben Zimmer goes over the long and strange history of the word *procrastination*, and Ray Fisman provides an economist's perspective on putting things off. Finally, we'll present "ProcrastiNation"—a roundup of the time-wasting rituals of everyone from cattle ranchers to CIA agents.

Also, you can join Levin and Stevenson for a [live online chat](#) about procrastination on Washingtonpost.com on Friday. Submit a question [here](#).

Now stop slacking off and start reading!

Tuesday

"[Lollygagging Through Life](#): I'm joining Procrastinators Anonymous—can I get past step one?" by Emily Yoffe. Posted May 13, 2008.

"[Procrastination Lit](#): Great novels about wasting time," by Jessica Winter. Posted May 13, 2008.

"[Lazy Money](#): The procrastinator's portfolio: An investment guide," by Daniel Gross. Posted May 13, 2008.

"[Letter to a Young Procrastinator](#): Some last-minute advice from a veteran slacker," by Seth Stevenson. Posted May 13, 2008.

"[Procrastinators Without Borders](#): Do the Japanese waste more time than we do?" by Heather Smith. Posted May 13, 2008.

Wednesday

"[Solitaire-y Confinement](#): Why we can't stop playing a computerized card game," by Josh Levin. Posted May 14, 2008.

"[Pro-cras-ti-na-tion](#): How we got a word for "putting things off," by Ben Zimmer. Posted May 14, 2008.

"[It's All in My Head](#)': Did Truman Capote and Ralph Ellison have writer's block—or were they just chronic procrastinators?" by Jessiac Winter. Posted May 14, 2008.

Thursday

"[The Unfinished Stories](#): All the stuff we never got around to including in the special issue," by Daniel Engber. Posted May 15, 2008.

"[Like There's No Tomorrow](#): How economists think about procrastination," by Ray Fisman. Posted May 15, 2008.

"[Procrasti-Nation](#): Workers of the world, slack off!" Posted May 15, 2008.

procrastination Procrasti-Nation

Workers of the world, slack off!

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 6:42 AM ET

We already know plenty about how college students and office workers waste time: They check e-mail, send Facebook status updates, and—ahem—read online magazines. But what does procrastination look like for everyone else?

Today, we present a glimpse at the panoply of American procrastination. What happens when a cowboy puts off tending to his cattle? Do astronauts ever procrastinate aboard the space shuttle? What about forest rangers, or imams, or United Nations peacekeepers? What about U.S. federal Judge Richard Posner?

We asked people from all walks of life to describe their procrastination rituals; the answers are presented below. Mouse over the letters at the right to scroll through the list.

Actress

Zoe Kazan

Brooklyn, N.Y.

“There are things I do to avoid getting down to brass tacks and really working on a role. Like, instead of reading over my script and doing all the hard analysis, I’ll go, ‘I should put together a playlist for this character!’ But later, when I’m backstage during the run, I might listen to that playlist on my iPod, so it does end up being useful.”

Air-traffic controller

Jim Marinitti

Miami, Fla.

“Procrastination as an air-traffic controller would be a bad

thing. If we make mistakes, people's lives are at stake, so I don't—*can't* procrastinate on the job. Management does, though. ... Usually, if I'm working a sector and it gets really busy, I split it up with another employee. But we're so understaffed now that I can't split it up and my hours have gotten longer. ... We're having a staffing crisis where we can't split off sectors to do our jobs safely. My employer—the FAA—has procrastinated over the last five years when it comes to hiring new trainees."

Astronaut (former)

Kathryn Thornton

Charlottesville, Va.

"All your time is pretty much scheduled, so procrastination really isn't an issue. [When I was on the space shuttle,] we had a flight-activity plan, and each crew member had a column that told them what they were supposed to be doing at each moment. ... We were on the clock roughly 14 hours a day. On science missions, the plan was typically broken down to the five-minute level. It even got to the point where we had to schedule breaks to use the facilities, because it wasn't on the timeline, and if you did something not on the timeline, you got behind. ... I'm a natural procrastinator, but you can't extend the flight, so you only have one chance to do things right. But having a timeline and a thousand people watching you helps."

Bank teller

Tonja

Washington, D.C.

"One thing some tellers do is take time and reface all the money to make sure it's all facing one direction. They also put the new bills at the bottom of the stack, so they give the client the old bills. They just like to have the new bills."

Barista

Anonymous

Seattle, Wash.

"If there's something you have to do, a major thing would be to sit there and clean the steam wand over and over again. Sometimes, you have to clean out the grease trap, or clean out all the nasty, spoiled milk in the fridge. ... But the slacker's going to be the one who's staring out into space and wiping the steam wand up and down, up and down, and every once in a while shooting the hot air through to get out the gunky stuff."

Bat boy (MLB)

Henry Freedman

Houston, Texas

"The ballpark is the best place in the world to procrastinate. You've got a huge stadium to play with. We'd play catch on the field, all kinds of stuff. Play any sort of game you can come up with—pretending to throw balls at the crowd. We'd do a lot of things involving sunflower seeds, spitting them, flicking them, trying to kick gum all the way from the

dugout to the field. ... We had one batboy who used to sneak out to the bullpen to nap. Sometimes we brought the relievers beer out there."

Bodyguard

Steve Browand

New York, N.Y.

"Every GPS locator has a very specific code to it, and we have access to a lot of codes that are not necessarily available to the general public. ... So if the client is in a six-hour meeting, and there's an agent upstairs with him and some guys are waiting in a motorcade downstairs, they might play with the equipment while they're waiting. You can pick up all kinds of radio frequencies from all kinds of different agencies, so sometimes they'll listen in on conversations, just for yuks. ... But it's certainly the exception, not the rule."

Butler

Regina Mitchell

Las Vegas, Nev.

"Some of the things we do kind of push off are what are called butler-lot assignments—we have a spa, and you've got to restock the spa, you've got to polish the glassware. But we also have teamwork, so if someone's on glassware and they're not getting it done right away, all it takes is for someone else to start polishing the glassware and it makes you think, Oh, I better go do that."

CIA agent

Anonymous

Washington, D.C.

"When I was working in counterterrorism, there was always this mountain of information at your fingertips. ... It was always pretty shocking to me just how deep the abyss of information actually was. It's like the Internet times four. It was hypnotic; you could just get lost in it. I'd tell my girlfriend, 'I'll be home for dinner,' and then all of a sudden it's 8 o'clock and I'd still be sitting there, bleary-eyed. You could easily become obsessed. ... There was always that potential that just by sort of noodling around, you could come across something that other people hadn't noticed, which made it really compelling. It's a different kind of procrastination, I guess. Like, 'I'm going to procrastinate now by chasing a *different* terrorist.' "

Cabinet-level official

Carol Browner

Washington, D.C.

"I did the *New York Times* crossword puzzle when I didn't want to face the tough issues, or when I just wanted to have a few sane moments. ... It was a bit of a joke in the Clinton administration, because Clinton did the crossword puzzle every day and was very fast—so sometimes, if you were around the White House, you could get a clue from him if you were stuck on something. ... One [other] thing Cabinet members procrastinate on is appearing before Congress.

That whole check-and-balance system built into our Constitution can feel a little rough sometimes. I once had to testify for seven and a half hours straight.”

Cattle rancher

Bill O'Brien

Amarillo, Texas

“I don't know if I'd call it procrastination, but there's a certain kind of person who just loves to be out moseying among the cattle. And that's just kind of literally what they do—they just walk their horses all through the cattle and make sure they're all content. ... And if the cattle are out in the fields and they have good, green grass, then there's not really anything a cowboy has to do except be a good observer. So it's a laidback kind of deal.”

Celebrity chef

Dave Lieberman

Los Angeles, Calif.

“I sharpen my knives. It's fun, mindless and pretty convincingly justifiable. The perfect procrastination tool!”

Cheerleader (NFL)

Lindsey

Nashville, Tenn.

“One big thing we procrastinate on is tanning. We have to have color, because our uniforms are really light. But we have practices five times a week, and you don't want to go in to practice smelling like tanning stuff—you're already sweating, and you can't spray and go to practice, anyhow, because it'll all come off. It's just disgusting. So you wait until 24 hours before the game, and then you go lay in a tanning bed for 10 to 12 minutes—just to get your body warm—and then you go right into the spray area to get sprayed. And then you can't shower for eight hours, so you go home and you stink and you smell, and the next morning you're all dark.”

Cheesemonger

Anne Saxelby

New York, N.Y.

“I hate doing maintenance work—cleaning compressors on refrigerators, that kind of thing. I always find a reason to do it later. ... One thing I really enjoy doing is taking care of the cheese in the cave. I love going in there and babying all the cheeses, turning them over, making sure they have straw mats. ... It's a perfect way to kill some minutes at the store if I don't feel like doing something more pressing. ... Building and rebuilding the display is something I [also] get too into. It's this weird Tetris game, it's never perfect. I spent an hour or and hour-and-a-half every morning; I kind of obsess over it.”

Chimney sweep

Dan Junkins

Boston, Mass.

“If I'm up on a roof I like to take in the view. Out on one of the beautiful row houses in downtown Boston, you can see the whole skyline, and it's beautiful. You feel like a bird, checking out everything. ... I often get carried away with the explanatory part—chitchatting about how chimneys work to avoid the pipe part.”

Clown

Danielle Heiderscheidt

Chesterfield, Va.

“As far as I'm concerned, the balloons are a waste of time, because the children pop them so quickly. They have play swords and dogs and cats, and they pop somewhere along the line. Or someone bites one. ... But I'm artistic and love face-painting, so I do that first, and kind of extend that part of the job.”

Exotic dancer

Laura

Kansas City, Mo.

“We make our money two ways: onstage and with table dances. ... I've seen girls just sit in the back and complain—they're like, ‘Oh, these guys are assholes, they don't want any dances, I'm broke,’ and *da-da-da-da-da*. And I'm just like, ‘OK, you just don't want to sit out there and talk to these guys,’ which is what you have to do. You have to converse—you have to be friendly and fun and all that crap, and if you don't want to do that, you probably aren't going to make that much money.”

Fashion model

Liz Whinnem

Brooklyn, N.Y.

“When you're on the job you can't really procrastinate, because you're getting bossed around by so many people—you're sort of their bitch for that day. ... The procrastination comes in on a day-to-day basis, with castings. ... If it's an open casting and you know there's going to be 300 people there, you can probably ditch out.”

Firefighter

Nick Sanchez

Baton Rouge, La.

“On a fire scene, the fun part is putting out the fire—ooh, squirting water, pulling out the hose lines, all that. ... After the fire is the nonfun part. We've got to pick up the hose, clean all the equipment, and put it back on the truck. You can't leave the scene till that's done. But some of the guys will wander over to the service unit, lollygag over there, drinking water and Gatorade, while the other guys are putting the stuff away.”

Forest ranger

Kai Allen

Gunnison, Colo.

“We've got 340,000 acres in eight different areas, so I have to

be out on the grounds a lot, checking to see if we're having problems with noxious weeds, or if there are trails that need maintenance, or if we're having some kind of motorized trespass with ATVs breaking the wilderness boundaries. So that's a routine part of my job, but it's also a great excuse to procrastinate. If there are things that I probably should be doing that I don't feel like, I can say, 'Oh, I need to go up to Big Blue Creek and make sure everything's OK.' And then I'll hop in my truck and go hiking or skiing or something."

Funeral director
Tommy Spain
Morgan City, La.

"I'm not afforded that luxury, because I'm in the type of profession where everything has to be planned *right now*. It's like planning a wedding in two days. I procrastinate on eating and stuff like that. ... And when there aren't funerals to be planned, there's the house to keep up, so we've always got stuff to do for that: There's death certificates to process, cars to clean and fill up, paperwork to fill out, there's watering the lawn, all of those wonderful things."

Gardener
Patrick Thevanard
Washington, D.C.

"I'm distracted by brightly colored things flitting around, like small bugs and birds. Recently I saw a small winter flock of cedar waxwings that hadn't broken up yet. They were eating berries from the holly tree on the property, then going to the creek to get a drink. It was a wonderful cascade of color."

Geomancer
Ivan McBeth
Dreamland, Vt.

"Part of our training is just to sit and distill our thoughts by gazing at things. Procrastinating is one of the things we try to be aware of. And not to do. I don't really procrastinate."

Hip hop MC
Paul Barman
New York, N.Y.

"Procrastinate makes what should go first go last and wait. ... What you postpone is most prone to call back on the ghost phone. ... A major source of procrastination for me is listening to the newest releases, finding out what's going on in the hip-hop world. ... But as my wife says, it's kind of the MC's job to be a fucking slacker and think about bullshit."

Homemaker
Lise Rossi
Brooklyn, N.Y.

"I procrastinate on doing laundry or changing out the diaper pail. ... I go on the Internet a lot, that's what most moms do. ... I go on baby chat rooms and read posts from other moms on every question you could ever think of asking. There are

always controversies. Do you vax or not vax? Do you circumcise or not circumcise? Is piercing your baby's ears a form of mutilation?"

Imam
Sayed Hassan Al-Qazwini
Dearborn, Mich.

"I always have something to read; therefore, I feel like my time has not been wasted. ... I have my own books, or I have my favorite newspaper—though I will not tell you which one and keep it as a secret. I'm joking. My favorite is the *New York Times*. ... I read in two languages, in Arabic and English, mostly books on religion or history and sometimes even fiction. ... I love memoirs. Probably the last one I read in English was President Clinton's *My Life*. I read it and found it interesting. I also recently read Paul Bremer's *My Year in Iraq*."

Maitre d'
Waleska Coindet
New York, N.Y.

"Sometimes, when the kitchen is too busy, I'll intentionally keep people at the bar to give the kitchen time to get caught up. So I procrastinate on seating people just to keep the flow of the room moving better."

Mascot (Jack the Bulldog)
Keenan Steiner
Brooklyn, N.Y.

"I had my own private dressing room with my own private mirror with those little white light bulbs. At halftime, I always had a sandwich from Boeeymongers, and I'd be late coming out for the second half because I was eating that sandwich. Yeah, that definitely happened. Sometimes, during the game, I would go back in the dressing room, take my face off, and eat the leftovers of the halftime sandwich, hang out, catch my breath. Yeah, I did that quite a bit. Just left the court for two or three minutes at a time."

Massage therapist
Kate Jacobs
Philadelphia, Pa.

"When I moved here, I got really into painting all the walls, and getting all the stuff I wanted, and making my Web site and business cards really nice, without actually doing anything to generate clients. I still do that to some degree, because who wants to promote yourself? It makes me uncomfortable. ... I try to make myself the best massage therapist I can be, but if nobody knows that I'm good at what I do, it's totally irrelevant."

New York Times columnist
Gail Collins
New York, N.Y.

"Right now we're in this new building, and we have huge, huge, huge glass walls—my office has three walls made of

glass. I'm on the 13th floor, and right next door they're building this office building. There's this crane that dangles things outside my window, and I sit there imagining scenarios wherein something comes smashing through my window. We talk about it a lot here in the office. It takes up quite a bit of the day, but I don't know what I'm going to do when the building is finished. Maybe I'll be able to look into their windows."

Otolaryngologist
Joshua Mondschein
Cincinnati, Ohio

"[It's not like *Grey's Anatomy*.] There isn't much time for flirting or socializing. There's nothing that thrilling—we have a Starbucks in our hospital, and if you have time to get a coffee in the afternoon, that's considered exciting."

Poet
Christopher Kennedy
Syracuse, N.Y.

"I spend an inordinate amount of time selecting the song for my MySpace page. It's really just set up for my books, but I get obsessed with showing my stellar taste in music across the decades. It's probably really annoying to anyone who has to get an update every time I make a change to my page. ... You take someone like Shakespeare—if he was writing with a computer, we'd be lucky to have four or five sonnets and maybe one play."

Private investigator
Anonymous
New York, N.Y.

"The biggest [way P.I.'s procrastinate] would be creative uses of Nexis. I routinely Nexis myself and people I know using the person locator, which you're really not supposed to do, and just see how much info on you or your friends comes up. ... Another specifically P.I.-related procrastinatory activity is going back through the divorce and domestic dispute court cases we sometimes pull for these fund managers and reading through all the salacious details that are usually outside the purview of our investigations, at least in name."

Psychic
Michele
New York, N.Y.

"If I have to forecast, or do a reading, that's not usually something I procrastinate on, because people need those things. Somebody else's need will usually push through any kind of procrastination. So if someone's in trouble, or if they're having a health crisis, their energy motivates me. ... I have a community of people I feel responsible for. There are always people writing me e-mails, or they want more meditations, so I try to follow their energy. I do what gives me energy first, and once I'm in a centered space, it's easier to tackle some of the things that seem more challenging—like

expenses."

Rabbi
Daniel Pressman
Saratoga, Calif.

"People always e-mail me stuff like, 'Oh, Rabbi, you should see this article,' or, 'Click on this YouTube link, there's a funny Passover video.' The job itself provides opportunities for wasting time. Personally, for me, YouTube is one of the most treacherous locations on the Web ... You can get in there and not be seen for a week."

Race car driver
Patrick Long
Belleair, Fla.

"I spend about 20 days a month either in transit or on the racetrack, and the biggest challenge for me is staying organized with all my travel expenses. I'm famous for just packing 1,000 receipts into a plastic cover and then walking around with it for six months. My finance guy is always on my case to file things in separate categories and submit them once a month. But usually it gets to a point where we're coming up on the end of the fiscal year and I just have to sit there up to my eyes in receipts for 12 hours."

Reality show contestant
Shira-Lee Shalit
New York, N.Y.

"They took away Internet access and cell phones ... so we couldn't procrastinate in the usual ways. We watched a ton of movies, and went to the gym. ... When they wouldn't let us off the lot to go the gym, I'd literally run up and down stairs, or run around in circles, to blow off steam and try to come up with ideas."

Rescue swimmer
John Hall
Kodiak, Ark.

"Part of our job description [in the U.S. Coast Guard] is that we're fabricators—we stitch up rafts, parachutes, flight suits, life vests. It's something I can do as part of my job description, but it's not like the sewing machine is calling my name every day at work, like, 'Come sew, come sew.' ... I sew just to show the guys that I still can. Rescue swimming attracts very testosterone-driven, type-A personalities, so it doesn't hurt my cause to go in every once in a while and bust out a sewing project. That way the guys can see, oh, if the chief is doing it, I better do it, too, and they don't try to dump all the sewing on the one guy in the shop who's really good at it."

Richard Posner
Federal judge
Chicago, Ill.

"Procrastination is very unhealthy. It causes problems for the people who are counting on you to complete things in a

timely fashion and it makes your own life more difficult. ... It helps to be a little compulsive. Then you feel uncomfortable if something is hanging over you—that's the opposite of procrastination, a compulsion to complete things and get rid of the albatross hanging over you. ... I have that compulsion."

Snow plow driver
Shawn Flowers
Cleveland, Ohio

"Luckily, snow plowing is rife with fine times to not work. ... For example, you can say 'Well, Mr./Mrs. So-and-So, we got conflicting weather reports that indicated that the snow might not let up until tomorrow. We would hate to come out there to plow just to have it covered back up with snow and have to do it all over again and charge you twice.' Or for landscaping, 'Reports said 60 percent chance of rain. When it's more than 50, my crew don't roll.' "

Stylist
Martin Christopher
Brooklyn, N.Y.

"Sitting on the couch in the salon, I make hair pieces for models in my spare time, because I have a lot of time. ... I spend probably longer than I need to massaging the parietal lobe, and the occipital, when I wash hair. That gets the client sleepy. Then they don't chat too much. ... I have a lot of clients who divulge family problems."

Teacher (third grade)
Micaela Blei
Brooklyn, N.Y.

"I laminate things that don't really need to be laminated."

Trash collector
Craig Clarke
Brooklyn, N.Y.

"If I'm working with a new guy, I try to make him do the hard stuff—like packing up the stuff that's not already in boxes. I do the easier stuff—the boxes—and take a while bringing them down to the first floor. You have to test the new guys."

United Nations peacekeeper
Laurent Gaudin
Réunion Island

"In Bosnia, most of the guys I was working with had no clue about what we were doing in the country. ... I don't think there is any reason why you should do a good job in a country you are not interested in, and you don't have any reason to help people that remain pure strangers to you. For most of the civpols [civilian police], Bosnia was a leisure mission. ... A mission is what you want it to be. If you want leisure, you get leisure. If you are interested in working, you'll find some very interesting job to do. ... Most of the civpols are in it for the money and for the fun. Just a few of

them are really interested in restoring peace and order in the place they are working."

Zookeeper
Anonymous
Philadelphia, Pa.

"Part of my job required me to take care of the reptiles that the zoo uses for shows and stuff like that. The tortoises always peed and pooped everywhere in their cage, so it was always a pain in the ass to clean. Sometimes, if I really didn't feel like cleaning up after them, I would volunteer to hold an animal while someone else cleaned up the cage. So, basically, I got away with not cleaning up the smelliest, dirtiest cages by holding a lizard or turtle."

procrastination Like There's No Tomorrow

How economists think about procrastination.

By Ray Fisman

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 6:42 AM ET

We are an impulsive and weak-willed species, we human beings. On the one hand, we are masters of delay: The lawn will get mowed tomorrow, the paper written after one more game of [solitaire](#). Yet we are also very good at seizing the moment: overeating, drinking too much, and generally indulging in behaviors that lead to hangover and regret.

These two failures of self-control—the inclinations to procrastinate and to indulge—turn out to be rooted in the same problem: We tend to put too much weight on the here and now when evaluating the costs and benefits of action (or inaction). Behavioral economists refer to such misguided decisions as "time-inconsistent preferences." You've got a report to deliver by first thing tomorrow, but the moment you sit down to start writing, surfing the Web just seems like more fun; you know that you'll be sorry if you eat that last scoop of Haagen Daz, but you just can't resist. Both bad decisions are the result of privileging the present you over the you of tomorrow morning. (It's worth noting that most economists would say that there is only an "inconsistency" if the procrastination or impulsiveness actually leads to later regret. If [Homer Simpson](#) parks himself in front of the TV with a box of doughnuts rather than mowing the lawn, that's a rational choice, since if you ask him tomorrow, he'll feel the time was well-spent.)

By thinking of procrastination as the result of a human tendency to live too much in the moment, we can devise better strategies for overcoming it. If the problem is weighing present versus future costs and benefits, we need to find a way to either bring

future benefits closer to the present or to magnify the costs of delayed action.

One way to bring the ultimate fruits of your long-term efforts forward to the here and now is by visualizing the sense of relief, happiness, and satisfaction that will ultimately come from a job well done (a pat on the back from the boss, perhaps coupled with fantasies of the promotion and pay raise that will surely follow). For some people, taking the opposite approach works better: visualizing the dire consequences of continued delay—a reprimand from the boss and the specter of a pink slip. Magnifying the costs of delayed action is a tactic often employed by public-health officials trying to get people to resist behaviors with short-term allure and long-term danger. For smokers looking for a motivation to finally quit, a recent series of [TV ads](#) that aired in New York taxis may provide some inspiration. In these 30-second spots, Marie, a longtime smoker, explains that her amputated fingers are the result of her decision to keep smoking.

Of course, even the most devoted effort to keep your future self in mind will occasionally falter. But the point isn't so much to banish the impulse to procrastinate, but rather to gain some control over it. Ironically, one of the best ways of keeping procrastination at bay seems to be a kind of regular, circumscribed procrastination—periodic yet controlled indulgences. In my case, writing an academic manuscript can be a decade-long slog, but I try to give myself small rewards for progress along the way, allowing myself some short-term payback for hard work to counterbalance the short-term allure of procrastination. After an hour or so of solid writing (or at least good-faith effort at writing), I'll allow myself a turn at online Scrabble or a few minutes of mindless Web surfing.

For those who don't have the discipline for such approaches, economists have begun to devise some clever ways of lending a hand. (Where there's a human need, there is surely a way of profiting from it in our glorious free-market economy.) A couple of Yale economists, [Dean Karlan](#) and [Ian Ayres](#), have established a [company](#) that *forces* its customers to think about their future selves. Their outfit, called [Stickk](#), allows you to buy "Commitment Contracts," which require the completion of a specified task that you might otherwise put off (finishing a paper, quitting smoking, losing weight). When you sign the contract, you hand over a sum of money and get it back only if you keep your commitment by a particular date. So, rather than having a vague and distant motivation for finishing that dissertation, there's the much more immediate cost of seeing your \$1,000 disappear. So is Stickk's business model to bet against our ability to resist procrastinating? Not quite. Stickk makes its money from advertising, not from its customers. If you fail to live up to the terms of your contract, your money goes to a randomly selected charity. Or, if you want some extra motivation, you can have your commitment payment go to an "anti-charity" of your choosing. They cater to all tastes—both

Americans United for Life and the Pro-Choice America Foundation are possible recipients.

But what if you don't even *realize* you have a procrastination problem? [Richard Thaler](#) and [Cass Sunstein](#) argue in their recent book, [Nudge](#), that a gentle paternal push might be needed here and there, for people who don't fully understand just how much they're shortchanging their future selves. One such nudge, designed by Thaler and [Shlomo Benartzi](#), deviously turns procrastination on its head. Their program is designed for people who keep putting off saving for their future because they're too busy spending money in the present. [Save More Tomorrow](#) is an employer savings program that Benartzi and Thaler have already field tested to remarkable effect, raising savings rates among participants nearly fourfold. Employees enrolled in the program decide ahead of time that a portion of future salary increases will be allocated to retirement savings. For example, you might commit 10 percent of your next raise to the savings program, and 20 percent of the one after that, and so on. Since the program isn't asking us to take away money from our present, spendthrift selves, we're more inclined to participate—I get to help the future me, at no cost to the present me. Once enrolled, participants can always opt out and return to their spendthrift ways. But here, finally, procrastination serves as a force for good. Since the opt-out decision is always available but may in fact take a little effort to take care of, why not just do it tomorrow?

Economists have been studying time-inconsistent preferences for decades. But Save More Tomorrow and Stickk are at the vanguard of a new movement to bring these ideas out of the lab and into the field. Indeed, depending on the outcome of the November election, we may soon see similar approaches embraced by the federal government (which of course already looks after our long-term interests through programs like Social Security). Thaler and Sunstein are both informal advisers to the Obama campaign and might nudge a President Obama to adopt policies that would help Americans put down the doughnut and start spending some time thinking about that too-often-neglected constituency—our future selves.

procrastination

The Unfinished Stories

All the stuff we never got around to including in the special issue.

By Daniel Engber

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 6:41 AM ET

Time for a confession: This special issue was originally planned for the week of May 5. Seriously. We'd planned to publish that Monday morning, but there was one problem: Only a handful of our writers had managed to get their work in on time.

Even after pushing everything back a week, we still couldn't get it all together. Below is a schedule for stories that we assigned, or thought about assigning, but never got around to finishing:

Tuesday

"Telephones, Newspapers, and a Cup of Joe: How we wasted time before computers."

"Doing Things vs. Not Doing Them: Which is better for the environment?"

"The Four-Hour Work Week: How telecommuting changed America."

"Secrets of the Zune: Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer on staying ahead in the new economy."

Wednesday

"Hitler, Schmitler: Neville Chamberlain and other great figures in political procrastination."

"The Procrastinating Parent: How old is too old for circumcision?"

"*Slate's* 2008 Oscars Preview: Will Cate Blanchett win again?"

"The Superdelegate's Dilemma: Hillary vs. Obama vs. *The Hills*."

Thursday

"Too Lazy To Pimp: The many distractions of Grand Theft Auto IV."

"Home Vacation: Day 3, exploring the basement."

"*Slate* Diary: Axl Rose."

procrastination

"It's All in My Head"

Did Truman Capote and Ralph Ellison have writer's block—or were they just chronic procrastinators?

By Jessica Winter

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 12:24 PM ET

There's a heartbreaking moment in Gerald Clarke's biography [Capote](#) when the writer, having finally completed the debilitating process of writing *In Cold Blood* in 1965, waxes optimistic about his next masterpiece: a novel he was calling

Answered Prayers. "Oh, how easy it'll be by comparison!" Capote exclaimed. "It's all in my head."

That may have been true. But upon his death in 1984, after years of public promises, revised delivery dates, and the ravages of alcoholism, Capote had managed to publish only snippets of his long-promised epic—and one of them was the notorious "La Côte Basque," which savagely lampooned his social circle and alienated him from some of his dearest friends. In the American annals of famously attenuated literary careers, Capote is perhaps surpassed only by Ralph Ellison, who worked for nearly 40 years on his second novel—the follow-up to his phenomenally successful 1952 debut, *Invisible Man*—only to leave it incomplete when he died in 1994.

In their sustained anticlimaxes, Capote's and Ellison's writing lives raise a perplexing question: What is the difference between severe procrastination and writer's block? Are they part of one continuum, like a Möbius strip? Were Capote and Ellison truly blocked, or did they merely delay so long that they ran out of time?

I wrote to Clarke and to Ellison's [biographer](#), Arnold Rampersad, to get their thoughts. The "really interesting question," Rampersad responded, is the difference between writers who can't get started and "those who write and write but can't finish the job to their satisfaction. Roughly speaking, Ellison was in the latter category." Clarke struck a similar note about Capote. "He set himself the highest standards, and he knew when he wasn't achieving them," Clarke wrote in an e-mail. "He never allowed anything to be published that he thought was not up to snuff, and despite the booze and the setbacks he wrote well, very well, in fact, even during his final years. ... He just wasn't able to finish the big one, *Answered Prayers*." In other words, Ellison and Capote were both the beneficiaries and the sufferers of perfectionism ... which just happens to be a syndrome that correlates with both procrastination and writer's block.

Neurologist Alice Flaherty attempts a working distinction between procrastination and block—the fearsome [Orthrus](#) of the creative process—in her 2004 book [The Midnight Disease: The Drive To Write, Writer's Block, and the Creative Brain](#): "A blocked writer has the discipline to stay at the desk but cannot write. A procrastinator, on the other hand, cannot bring himself to sit down at the desk; yet if something forces him to sit down he may write quite fluently." But don't these two scenarios amount to different performances of the same role? Every seasoned procrastinator loves to tell himself that, amid his flurry of avoidance strategies—rearranging the furniture in his office, pitching himself into a YouTube rabbit hole, surrendering to a fit of self-Googleing—his brain is secretly marinating ideas and hatching plans. (As the underground narrator of *Invisible Man* puts it, "A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action.") Surely this percolation process is also happening inside the "blocked" writer, even if he's motionless in his swivel chair?

Of course, given that procrastination carries the stigma of sloth and disorganization, it may seem uncharitable to ascribe the dithering disease to the blocked but feverishly ambitious writer—surely, if he weren't truly stuck, he wouldn't be finding new Facebook groups to join instead of composing his *chef-d'oeuvre*? On the other hand, creative-writing instructors often start class with a five-minute automatic-writing exercise for a good reason: *There is always something to be written.*

Yet that knowledge in itself—that there are forever more words to be found, however imperfect—can be dangerous, too. *The Midnight Disease* points to a paradoxical variation of writer's block, more accurately termed writer's *flood*, in which the author spins out page upon page in ceaseless search of *le mot juste*. Flaherty invokes Gustave Flaubert, "who crossed out nearly as many words as he wrote," and Ellison, too, might come to mind: He amassed some 2,000 pages of chapters, scenes, and notes for his second novel without coming close to resolution. (A heavily whittled-down edit of Ellison's manuscript was published as *Juneteenth* in 1999; Modern Library plans to bring out a longer version, titled *Three Days Before the Shooting*, next year.)

Ellison's voluminous labors on the second novel certainly didn't have the appearance of procrastination. And yet his biography, like Capote's, resonates with the findings of decades of academic research on the subject. Perfectionism—check. Precocious success that at once inflates the ego and instills extreme anxiety about future endeavors—check. ("The procrastinator thinks, 'If I never finish, I can never be judged,'" says Joseph Ferrari, a professor of psychology at DePaul University.) Low self-esteem—check. ("La Côte Basque" was self-destruction as performance art.) Blaming others for one's own failings—check. (Ellison's skill at the blame game can be summed up in a telegram he once fired off to his future wife: "YOUR SILENCE PREVENTING WORK.")

And prodigious excuse-making—check, check, check. Garden-variety procrastinators will settle for scapegoating the train or the e-mail server, but these guys were the world champions of the elaborate pretext. For years, Ellison maintained that he had lost hundreds of pages of the second novel in a 1967 fire, a claim that Arnold Rampersad's biography, published last year, showed to be a likely falsehood. Similarly, Gerald Clarke's book recounts how Capote went so far as to sue his former lover John O'Shea for the return of manuscript pages of *Answered Prayers* ("Every word was perfect," Capote lamented); Capote and O'Shea later reconciled, and as for the missing work, Capote "all but admit[ed] that in fact it never had existed." Ellison's house fire and Capote's ex were their variations on famed procrastinator Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "person from Porlock": the visitor whose untimely arrival forever derailed the composition of "Kubla Khan."

According to Ferrari, all these excuses are just the procrastinator's tissue-thin front for what's happening on the

subconscious level: "The chronic procrastinator knows he's presenting a negative image, but he'd rather be perceived negatively for lack of effort than for lack of ability," he says. "Lack of ability is a stable attribute, but lack of effort is shifting—it means you *could* do it, you *might* be able to do it."

Maybe it's the "might" factor that allows us finally to draw a line between procrastination and writer's block. A block is thick, insurmountable, cast in stone, "as impenetrable as the Great Pyramid," in Clarke's words. Procrastination is a more pliant creature. When we defer a challenge until a hazy, ill-defined "later," one might say that we devalue future time and belittle our circumstances in it; but you could also say that we are irrationally exuberant about the future—it becomes an ascetic, distraction-free idyll where all appetites have been permanently gratified, where minutes stretch out as luxuriously as hours, where all our creative prayers are answered. You might even call procrastination a perverse form of optimism. And optimism, as both Capote and Ellison surely discovered, is a tough habit to shake. In a *New Yorker* profile published a month before his death, Ellison said of his novel-in-progress, "I'm eager to finish it and see how it turns out."

Previously: Jessica Winter on [great books about wasting time.](#)

procrastination Solitaire-y Confinement

Why we can't stop playing a computerized card game.

By Josh Levin

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 7:01 AM ET

In a 2000 *Wall Street Journal* essay, *Slate*'s founding Editor [Michael Kinsley wrote](#) that this here magazine once "thought of adopting the slogan 'Slate: The Thinking Person's Solitaire,' but rejected it as too honest." This is a reasonable assessment of our audience—you are reading this alone; you are brilliant—but a bit uncharitable when it comes to solitaire. The canonical single-player game is an easy punch line, most often cited as the preferred hobby of the office slacker or the intellectual playground of dullards. (George W. Bush was [known to play](#) the occasional hand while governor of Texas.) But the poor, benighted game is also—[according to a Microsoft employee](#) who worked on reprogramming it for Windows Vista—the most-used program in the Windows universe. We mock solitaire because it is our secret shame.

Though on its face it might seem trivial, pointless, a terrible way to waste a beautiful afternoon, etc., solitaire has unquestionably transformed the way we live and work. Computer solitaire propelled the revolution of personal computing, augured

Microsoft's monopolistic tendencies, and forever changed office culture. It has also helped the human race survive innumerable conference calls and airplane trips. If solitaire is not the most important computer program of all time, it is at least in the top two, along with Minesweeper.

A long time ago, before the invention of the microprocessor, people played solitaire with real cards. The game, known as "patience" by the Brits, has been around for [more than 200 years](#). It is thought to be French in origin, but it's a matter of dispute whether Napoleon played while in exile on St. Helena. (Some say he preferred whist, a trick-taking game that would have perhaps better sated the tyrant's taste for conquest.) Though solitaire always had its followers, the necessity of shuffling the deck after every hand could make the game a real drag and certainly a nonoptimal entertainment for anyone with access to books, the radio, or any form of human contact. (You could understand the appeal for Napoleon.)

The shuffling problem eventually brought solitaire to the digital world and to its present glory. In the late 1960s, 10-year-old Paul Alfille invented a new solitaire variant—there are hundreds, by the way—called FreeCell. Alfille loved his new game, but he really, really hated shuffling. By 1979, he'd coded up a version for the computer network at the University of Illinois, [PLATO](#), which [supported up to 1,000 users](#) at a time on terminals connected to a central mainframe. (Alfille was in medical school at the time; he is now an anesthesiologist.) FreeCell soon went viral, joining the text-based role-playing game [Avatar](#) among the early online community's most-used programs. Along with shuffling the cards automatically, the program kept track of players' statistics; it was soon recording winning streaks as long as 5,000 consecutive games.

FreeCell caught fire in the early days of networked computing, Alfille says, because it was easy to figure out how to play. In those days, computers were new and intimidating; solitaire was a reassuring presence. For anyone who had played the real-world game—and that's most of the grandmother-having population—there was no learning curve with the computer version. And once you mastered the computerized card game, doing some more serious-minded task on the machine didn't seem so daunting.

As the university mainframes of the 1970s gave way to the personal computer, solitaire once again paved the way for a tech revolution. According to a 1994 *Washington Post* article, Microsoft executives wanted Windows Solitaire (a rendering of the game's popular [Klondike](#) variant) "to soothe people intimidated by the operating system." Solitaire proved particularly useful in teaching neophytes how to use the mouse. When Microsoft first preloaded solitaire as part of 1990's [Windows 3.0](#), clicking and pointing weren't yet second nature. By dragging and dropping cards, newbies developed the mousing fluency required to use every other Windows program.

(The game's pedagogical elements were also a handy cover story. When a Minnesota state legislator got caught playing during a 1995 debate on education funding, she claimed she was merely doing "homework to improve her mouse dexterity.")

Solitaire helped acquaint users with Windows, and it introduced the world to Microsoft's special brand of business ethics. Paul Alfille says that FreeCell's inclusion in Windows 95, and every subsequent version of the OS, was "nothing I did and nothing I condoned." Now an avid Linux user, Alfille says he sold the rights to his version of the game to the University of Illinois, but Microsoft never paid the university a dime in royalties.

Just as [Microsoft froze out Netscape](#), making Internet Explorer the world's dominant Web browser, the three versions of solitaire that are now preinstalled on every Windows PC—Spider Solitaire, Klondike Solitaire, and FreeCell—have ascended to the pinnacle of the world's computer-game hierarchy. In the pre-Internet era, much of solitaire's allure came because it was the only game in town. Moving a black two onto a red three may not have seemed particularly enticing on its own terms, but compared with the visual stimuli provided by an Excel spreadsheet, a [post-victory card cascade](#) was an unimaginably rousing spectacle. It's more surprising that these Windows solitaires, with their primitive delights, remain hugely popular despite now competing for our affections with e-mail, the Web, and thousands of online games. According to Microsoft developer-blogger Raymond Chen, the company's usability research crew discovered that the [three most-played computer games](#) (solitaire or something else, Microsoft or otherwise, preloaded or user-installed) are, in order ... Spider Solitaire, Klondike Solitaire, and FreeCell.

The game's continued pre-eminence is a remarkable feat—it's something akin to living in a universe in which Pong were the most-popular title for PlayStation 3. One reason solitaire endures is its predictability. The gameplay and aesthetic have remained remarkably stable; a visitor from the year 1990 could play the latest Windows version without a glitch, at least if he could figure out how to use the Start menu. It also remains one of the very few computer programs, game or nongame, that old people can predictably navigate. Brad Fregger, the developer of [Solitaire Royale](#), the first commercial solitaire game for the Macintosh and the PC, told me that his 89-year-old mother still calls regularly to brag about her high scores.

The game has also maintained a strong foothold in the modern-day cubicle. Despite the easy availability of other cheap amusements, five minutes of dragging cards around on the screen remains a speedy route to mental health and a mild form of workplace disobedience. (Just don't do it [when Mayor Bloomberg is around](#).) Since solitaire doesn't take up the whole screen, it's easy to click over and play a hand or two when you get tired of data entry, then quickly toggle back over to your database program when your manager happens to walk by. This

sort of multitasking, the ability to minimize and hide applications, is the most essential feature of the Windows OS. And solitaire taught us how to use it.

The ability to screw around while staring at one's computer—a posture once exclusively associated with doing work—added new friction to the boss-employee dynamic. While people screwed around at work before computers—what did they do exactly, those poor souls?—the advent of PC-based leisure pursuits launched a national conversation about how much screwing around is too much. By the early 1990s, companies like Coca-Cola, Sears, and Boeing either removed Windows' preinstalled games or enacted bans on engaging with them. In 1993, a travel agency executive educated *Business Week* on the prevailing wisdom: "If you let people play games on [office computers], you may as well let them insert a TV-reception board so they can watch *The Beverly Hillbillies*." (For his sake, I hope this guy retired before they invented YouTube.)

Despite all of these upper-management freakouts—and despite regular, bogus productivity studies that estimated solitaire and its ilk draining \$800 trillion dollars a year from the economy—you could make the case that the card game has actually been good for business. Before e-mail and the Web, solitaire introduced the idea of being chained to your desk. Consider that the rise of FreeCell coincided with the erosion of coffee breaks, cigarette breaks, and lunch breaks. Why leave the office when you can just eat at your desk and entertain yourself?

For the goal-oriented solitaire player, the entertainment value comes in pushing for the game's outer limits: a new high score in Klondike, a record FreeCell winning streak. It's this sort of private record-keeping that brings on the game's addictive properties. Dr. Maressa Hecht Orzack, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School, opened the first clinic for computer addiction in 1996. Her inspiration: becoming obsessed with beating her personal solitaire scoring record. "I kept playing solitaire more and more," she [wrote in a 2006 Washington Post](#) chat, "my late husband would find me asleep at the computer. I was missing deadlines. I knew something had to be done."

More than a decade on, Orzack's game-junky treatment facility now mostly sees World of Warcraft and EverQuest fiends. Is this a sign that computer solitaire's impressive run might soon come to an end? In the age where everything's networked, and every game is massively multiplayer, solitaire is the ultimate anti-social experience. [Eric Zimmerman](#), the author of *The Game Design Reader*, suggests that office workers who grew up with PCs and Super Nintendo might no longer have any need to play computer games, like solitaire, with real-world referents. After all, they're probably just as familiar with Tetris and Mortal Kombat as they are with FreeCell.

Still, I don't think solitaire will go extinct. It is the cockroach of gaming, remarkably flexible and adaptable. You can occupy

yourself with an easy variant or one that's almost impossible to win, stare at the screen for five minutes or five hours, and play with an eye toward strategy or with your brain turned off. The game also has a way of colonizing new technology: There are implementations for your cell phone, your PDA, your iPod and iPhone. (As a vanguard digital pastime, its only competition is pornography.) And if there's one certainty in this world, it's that office workers will always need a distraction. Solitaire is safe, then, at least until Microsoft starts loading Windows with rock-paper-scissors.

procrastination

Pro-cras-ti-na-tion

How we got a word for "putting things off."

By Ben Zimmer

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 7:01 AM ET

Pro-cras-ti-na-tion. How fitting that the word is lengthy and Latinate, taking its time to reach a conclusion. Alcoholics Anonymous founder Bill Wilson once wrote that *procrastination* is "really sloth in five syllables." And yet the word denotes so much more than mere sloth or indolence: A procrastinator meticulously organizing a sock drawer or an iTunes library can't exactly be accused of laziness. Likewise, *procrastination* is not simply the act of deferral or postponement. It implies an intentional avoidance of important tasks, putting off unpleasant responsibilities that one knows should be taken care of right away and setting them on the back burner for another day.

The promise of "another day" is the key to the word's origin. It derives from the Latin verb *procrastinare*, combining the prefix *pro-* "forward" with *crastinus* "of tomorrow"—hence, moving something forward from one day until the next. Even in ancient Roman times, procrastination was disparaged: The great statesman Cicero, in one of his Philippics attacking his rival Mark Antony, declaimed that "in the conduct of almost every affair slowness and procrastination are hateful" (*in rebus gerendis tarditas et procrastinatio odiosa est*).

When *procrastinate* and *procrastination* began appearing in English in the mid-16th century (a time when Latinisms were flooding the language, mostly via French), the words suggested the classical repugnance toward inaction at critical moments. But *procrastination* soon took on a dire new meaning: Christians used the term to remind sinners that postponing the repentance of one's wicked ways may lead to damnation. A 1553 sermon spoke of dire consequences for "he that doth prolong or procrastinate" the confession of sins, while a 1582 tract on "The Foolishness of Men" warned, "Take heed therefore, that by procrastinating repentance ... thou wittingly and of purpose, do not tempt the Lord."

With the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, Christian moralism fused with commercial pursuits. Procrastination not only forestalled salvation in the next life but also the goal of financial well-being in this one. Thus the evils of procrastination worked their way into the oft-repeated adages of the new capitalist era. "Procrastination is the thief of time," wrote English poet Edward Young in 1742. A few years later, Philip Stanhope, the Earl of Chesterfield, penned the words: "No idleness, no laziness, no procrastination; never put off till tomorrow what you can do today." Ben Franklin is credited with a similar saying, mockingly transformed by Mark Twain into the procrastinator's motto, "Never put off until tomorrow what you can do the day after tomorrow." (Those who follow Twain's wry advice don't just procrastinate, they *perendinate*, a useful word meaning "to put something off until the day after tomorrow.")

Anti-procrastination maxims of the Chesterfield variety crop up in many European languages with very similar wording, from Spanish (*No dejes para mañana lo que puedes hacer hoy*) to Polish (*Co masz jutro zrobić, zrób dziś*). In German there's the rhyming couplet, "'Morgen, Morgen, nur nicht heute,' sagen alle faulen Leute," or "Tomorrow, tomorrow, not today," all the lazy people say." Given these shared sentiments it's peculiar that few languages have a compact single-word equivalent for the English *procrastination*. It's even more peculiar that Romance languages like Spanish and French have sometimes ended up borrowing the word *procrastination* from modern English despite their closer kinship to the Latin original.

Those languages that haven't adapted the English term often have to make do with a word that means something more general like "postponement," missing out on the nuances of *procrastination*. In Russian, for instance, *procrastination* is usually rendered as *promedlenie*, or "delay." Alternatively, a Russian speaker could go the literary route and allude to *Oblomov*, the dithering protagonist in Ivan Goncharov's 1859 novel. *Oblomovshchina* or "Oblomovism" has come to describe a whole set of characteristics (often ascribed to Russia as a whole), including "the habit of waiting for everything to be provided by others rather than oneself." Arabic, on the other hand, comes a bit closer to the mark with *taswif*, literally meaning "to say, 'I will, I will.'" "A beautiful word—considered etymologically," opined Sir Richard Burton in a footnote to his translation of *Arabian Nights*.

Speakers of non-English languages may be scrambling to find translational equivalents as procrastination becomes more widely recognized as a debilitating psychological condition, spawning its own self-help literature and new therapeutic techniques. The Internet age makes the dangers of procrastination all the more acute, with everything from social networking sites to YouTube videos tailored for maximum time wastage. A researcher of the phenomenon, Norman A. Milgram of Tel Aviv University, called procrastination "a malady of modern time" in 1992 (long before anyone had heard of

Facebook Scrabulous). The more industrialized and technologized a society becomes, Milgram argued, the more it has to grapple with procrastination as a problematic notion. Adherents to this view point to the evenhanded approach of the ancient Egyptian language, which had two verbs corresponding to *procrastinate*. One verb referred to the useful avoidance of unnecessary or impulsive efforts, and the other to the harmful shirking of tasks needed for subsistence, such as tilling the soil at just the right time during the Nile's annual flood cycle.

Egyptian agriculture aside, it's unclear exactly how modern the concept of procrastination really is, since one could draw a straight line from Cicero chewing out Mark Antony to a 21st-century boss berating an employee for spending too much time on eBay. Perhaps that's another reason why *procrastination* is so long. A shorter word just wouldn't have enough room to hide so many historical layers of guilt and anxiety.

procrastination

Procrastinators Without Borders

Do the Japanese waste more time than we do?

By Heather Smith

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 3:57 PM ET

Our cultural preoccupations can sometimes be painfully obvious. We've sent droves of people abroad to study the [sexual mores of other cultures](#), and pretty much no one to ask how long it takes them to get around to repairing a leaky faucet.

Take New Guinea: It's small and far away, but almost a century of anthropological research has yielded many interesting facts about the people who live there. We now know, for example, that they (or at least the ones who felt like talking to the white-man visitors) aren't huge fans of the missionary position. We also have a full photographic taxonomy of Papuan [penis gourds](#).

Did perhaps just one anthropologist ever think to ask a penis-gourd-wearer if he wakes up some days and thinks he's going to make a new penis gourd, but instead this happens and that happens, and making the new gourd just gets put off, along with everything else that he's supposed to be doing, until he feels terrible and the only option seems to be to move to a place where no one notices that his gourd is outmoded?

Doubtful. For you plucky grad students in search of untrampled academic terrain, I present the field of cross-cultural procrastination. Slacking off may not be as sexy as, well, sex, but (like sex) everyone seems to do it. The handful of cross-cultural studies that have been done suggest that procrastination is one of those concepts, like [color](#) or [time](#), that occurs in other

cultures, even if those other cultures have their own ways of seeing it and dealing with it.

There are two dominant modes when it comes to the study of cross-cultural procrastination. The first takes the form of the international managerial missive—an ancient narrative template that [delineates the work and business practices](#) of people from one culture, so that a person from another culture can do business with them. These are chatty, [opinionated](#), and prone to generalizations. "Punctuality is the responsibility of the subordinate," [writes](#) corporate cultural training adviser George B. Whitfield III about Jakarta, Indonesia. "The higher the status of a person, the more he or she moves through life causing subordinates to adjust to and swirl around the superior's schedule."

The second mode seeks to quantify, in scholarly terms (i.e., with percentages), just who in the world procrastinates and for how long. The most wide-ranging of these efforts was [published](#) in the *International Journal of Psychology* in 1998. Leon Mann, a business-oriented behavioral scientist at the University of Melbourne, organized a project to discover "cross-cultural differences in self-reported decision-making style" among test subjects in six locations—three "individualistic English-speaking cultures" (the United States, Australia, and New Zealand) and three "collectivistic East Asian cultures" (Japan, Hong Kong, and Thailand). In other words, Mann and his team would hand out questionnaires to undergrads around the world and ask them how much they agreed (on a scale of one through five) with statements like, "I delay in making decisions until it is too late."

The researchers theorized that college students from the "collectivistic" cultures would put off making decisions for longer than those from "individualistic" ones. It turned out that the Japanese students had the highest (which is to say, the most procrastination-inclined) scores, followed by the Taiwanese, the students from Hong Kong, the Americans, the Australians, and the New Zealanders. The differences between the groups weren't quite as dramatic as Mann had hoped, but they were statistically significant.

Of course, how a student chooses to fill out a questionnaire may not reflect his or her true procrastination behavior. It's possible that the American students outdid the Australians and Kiwis simply by virtue of our drive toward [compulsive self-disclosure](#). The world-class procrastinators of Japan might have inflated their scores out of a tendency to [see self-criticism as a virtue](#).

Further research hasn't exactly resolved the question. American procrastination expert Joseph Ferrari did his own cross-cultural studies, with different results; he's adamant that there are no differences at all across international borders. So far, he's given a questionnaire very similar to the one used by Mann to people in America, Australia, Peru, Spain, Turkey, and the United

Kingdom. And he's found no significant differences in procrastination scores, either between countries or genders.

Ferrari's findings also contradict a widely publicized meta-analysis by Canadian psychologist Piers Steel. That study looked at several hundred research papers on procrastination and concluded, among other things, that procrastination is [on its way up](#) in American culture, [spreading its way](#) through the populace like some kind of slacker virus. (In numerous interviews, Steel blamed this epidemic on computers, cell phones, and, most specifically, the game [Minesweeper](#).) But Ferrari has seen no increased scores for procrastination among his U.S. subjects since he began doing research in the early '90s.

Ferrari does have his methodological quirks. He works with middle-aged subjects rather than students—because, in his words, "75 percent of students are chronic procrastinators." He also recruits many of his research subjects from the audiences of his lectures (on procrastination, no less) or from the firms that hire him as a workplace consultant. Drawing on data from this cohort, Ferrari has found significant cross-cultural differences within American society but not abroad. People in white-collar occupations procrastinate more than people in blue-collar jobs, corporate workers procrastinate more than professionals like doctors and lawyers, salesmen procrastinate more than managers, and salesmen in the Pacific Northwest procrastinate more than salesmen on the East Coast.

It may be that the greater occupational diversity among Ferrari's subjects is swamping out more subtle differences. The cultural differences between social classes could have a more dramatic effect on procrastination scores than nation of origin. In a 2003 study called ["Differential Incidence of Procrastination Between Blue- and White-Collar Workers,"](#) Ferrari and his co-author speculate that blue-collar workers might procrastinate as much as white-collar workers if given the chance, but their relative lack of job security and greater supervision were keeping them in a state of enforced timeliness.

We might get better answers from a study that looked at the actual behaviors associated with procrastination, rather than reported self-image. But, despite much effort, I could find only one paper that addressed similar questions without resorting to the questionnaire. Unfortunately, this study wasn't so much cross-cultural as cross-species. In 1998, at the same time that Leon Mann was studying collectivistic and individualistic undergraduates, a psychology professor named James E. Mazur was studying the [procrastination habits of pigeons](#) (PDF).

Mazur's test subjects were trained to peck illuminated keys at regular intervals, in exchange for a tiny wage in bird feed at the end of their workday. The wage was higher for the birds that worked most consistently and didn't take any breaks. In the end, pigeons turned out to be such layabouts that even a four-fold increase in food could not incite them to peck in a timely

fashion. Pigeons aren't the only animals to procrastinate, either. Lab monkeys are known to become distracted when the prospect of a reward seems too far off. In 2004, a research team at the National Institute of Mental Health [induced better work habits](#) in a group of monkeys by temporarily knocking out a dopamine receptor gene.

Despite this evidence from the animal kingdom, Ferrari insists that procrastination as we know it has no biological basis. Steel disagrees, citing a study of identical twins in his meta-analysis as evidence that there is a gene for putting things off—but the study in question remains unpublished and has never been peer-reviewed.

Even if procrastination turns out to have a genetic component, Ferrari is right to point out that time-wasting in the real world is associated with power, social class, and group values. We don't yet know the details on how these factors interact, but a bit more research might provide a lot of insight. Come on, grad students—get to work!

procrastination

Lollygagging Through Life

I'm joining Procrastinators Anonymous—can I get past step one?

By Emily Yoffe

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 7:47 AM ET

According to a top procrastination researcher, there is no gene for idling—it's a learned behavior. If so, my parents were master teachers. (At summer camp on visiting day, as the tail lights of the cars of the other parents were receding down the hill, the headlights of my parents' station wagon would be just appearing.) As their model student, I have spent a lifetime keeping people waiting, pulling all-nighters, paying late fees. I once started packing at 10 p.m. the night before I was to get on a plane for a trip early the following morning. This wouldn't sound so bad except for the fact that it was a one-way flight—I was moving from Texas to California.

So for this "[Human Guinea Pig](#)," a column in which I do things readers wish someone else would do for them (or, in this case, things they can't get around to doing themselves), my challenge was to see if online support groups or self-help books could help me to get my life on track.

It did seem ironic to start in on the project with that Swiss army knife of procrastination tools, the Internet. I began with a visit to a pair of Web sites set up a few years ago: [Procrastinators Anonymous](#) and [Procrastination Support](#). Either they would cure

me, or I could bookmark them as new places where I could waste time.

Scrolling around, I found it hard to see the benefits of interacting with other people who, like me, spend much of the day on activities like brewing tea and squeezing blackheads. People wrote of their hopes that they could buckle down and achieve goals like flossing and brushing. Other posts were cries of despair: "Of the past 27 hours of work time, I have actually worked for only a few minutes. ... When my boss asks me what I have done, I don't know what I am going to say."

Procrastinators Anonymous had an announcement about its weekly phone-in meeting that came with this disclaimer: "This meeting was originally scheduled for every Wednesday, 9 a.m. ET. But people have not been showing up at this time." I called in anyway and listened to the sound of Kenny G-style sax and my own breathing for 15 minutes before giving up.

According to the small but annoyingly prolific band of scientists who study procrastination—serious research began in the 1980s—a lot of us aren't making our meetings. They say the chronic inability to get things done, what they call "trait procrastination," affects about 20 percent of the public, a number far greater than those who suffer from depression (about 10 percent) or phobias (about 9 percent).

Joseph Ferrari, a professor of psychology at DePaul University (and the expert who says there's no DNA for delay), divides us into two general behavior types: arousal procrastinators and avoidance procrastinators. Arousal procrastinators seek the excitement and pumping stress hormones of having to finish everything under duress. (I'm this type.) Avoidance procrastinators make their work the measure of their self-worth and so end up putting it off out of fear. (I'm this type, too.) I talked to Ferrari and discovered that after 20 years of studying us, his sympathy is wearing thin. "I don't understand this, why they're consistently like this. I don't like cutting the grass, but I do it."

Ferrari co-wrote *Procrastination and Task Avoidance: Theory, Research, and Treatment* and co-edited *Counseling the Procrastinator in Academic Settings*. The portrait that emerges from these books is pathological. Procrastination "merits extirpation," it is a "nasty, unattractive" part of human behavior, and its "illogicalness is its salient feature." Procrastinators are noted for their "impulsiveness," "lack of persistence," and "lack of self-control." Self-reflection "is generally not a strong point with procrastinators," and willpower "is a vital weak point" in their character. Sure, we sound like those FBI psychological portraits of serial killers or pederasts. Fortunately, our malady prevents us from carrying out any nefarious plans that we might have.

Finding no solution online and little solace from professor Ferrari, I decided to move to self-help books. I ordered three: *The Procrastination Workbook* by William Knaus, *The Now Habit* by Neil Fiore, and *The Complete Idiot's Guide To Overcoming Procrastination* by Michelle Tullier (which I never read because I ran out of time).

I started with the *Workbook*. The opening chapters present various acronyms for how to modify your behavior. I should stop doing the three Es: excesses, extensions, exonerations. Instead I should PURRRR: pause, utilize, reflect, reason, respond, revise. Knaus also provides quizzes to assess what kind of procrastinator I am. He has many categories, from cramming (I rated high) to decision-making (medium) to lateness (high). There are lists of catalysts for procrastination, from seeking diversions (high) to dodging discomfort (medium) to self-doubt (medium). By Page 37 all this self-assessment made me realize just how intractable my procrastination was, which in turn provoked such an anxiety attack that I had to put the book aside altogether.

I turned to *The Now Habit* and promised myself I'd stick with it. Fiore has a humane approach to procrastinators: He understands how we alternate scouring self-lectures with baleful self-pity and takes a cognitive-behavioral approach to our problem. He aims to replace negative thoughts with positive ones and turn distraction into action.

Fiore wants procrastinators to break down tasks and see them as a series of beginnings: If we can just sit down and do 30 minutes of solid work, the feelings of flow and accomplishment will allow us to continue. He also suggests building play breaks into the day so that we stop feeling our lives are a slogging misery. I followed Fiore's advice and put Post-it notes around the house with his suggested self-talk: "When can I start?" "I choose to." "I can be perfectly human." I started keeping what he calls an "unschedule"—an hour-by-hour record of the day with mandatory breaks for having fun. The only thing I didn't do was create a "planned setback" in which I would deliberately observe myself procrastinating, just to prove I had the ability to stop when I chose. Since my entire life is a setback, I felt no need to create one.

For me, small tasks—getting the dry cleaning, checking the downspouts—have a way of inflating like helium, floating the day away. As I filled in the unschedule, it was disturbing to see how many little rectangles were devoted to the mundane or to scrolling the Internet. (Can't I call that research?) I followed his plan for a month but made no progress. I didn't blame Dr. Fiore; maybe I had worn too deep a dilatory groove in my brain to ever spackle it in and become efficient. Yes, I got stuff done, but in my same stressed-out, staying-up-until-1:30-a.m., self-berating way. (In the Bible, Job described the feeling: "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle and are spent without hope.")

Fiore's book gets many raves from reformed procrastinators on his Amazon page. So I contacted one of them to see if it was still working. Neil Gunton, a computer programmer in St. Louis, had written in 1998: "I tried the other books, and they didn't do anything for me. Save your money, and just get this one." Gunton told me, however, that he was still a procrastinator. The lesson he got from Fiore was to accept it. "I just don't worry about it so much. That's how the book helped. Not so much getting more done, it just helped me to understand who I am." But I don't want to understand who I am; I just want to get more done!

Seeing my desperation, my 12-year-old daughter offered me some personal coaching. First there was a critique, all true: "Mom, you sit down to go to work, then you go to the bathroom, then you walk Sasha, then you say you're checking one last e-mail. You take a lot of breaks, Mom. You say you don't get any work done after I get home from school, but I'm 12, and I don't bother you anymore. Then you'll have so much work, you work 15 hours a day and you don't even come down to dinner. You've got to balance it out."

At least my daughter has broken my family legacy. When she comes home, she does her homework and practices her piano. I never nag her. How does she do it? She said it was something she learned in the Sunshine class, when she was 4 years old. "The teachers would hand out snacks: five pieces of popcorn, five gummy bears, and five pretzels. Everyone ate what they liked first, then they weren't happy. But I liked the pretzels best, and I realized if I saved them for last, I'd get the taste of them in my mouth the longest. So now, if I can get my homework done, then I have the rest of my night to do whatever I want."

There it was—she didn't need online support, Post-it notes, or the unschedule. She figured it out in nursery school: Save the pretzels for last. Which reminds me that I'm kind of hungry, and it's time for a break. I'd like some pretzels, and I'd like them right now.

procrastination Procrastination Lit

Great novels about wasting time.

By Jessica Winter

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 4:00 PM ET

Those of us who are vulnerable to the siren call of procrastination can find plenty of fictional compatriots on our bookshelves, though they may provide cold comfort. We could

start with Hamlet, obviously, who wonders "whether it be/ Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple/ Of thinking too precisely on th' event" that causes his dithering. Or pity the aptly named Jimmy Tomorrow and the other ne'er-do-wells who populate *The Iceman Cometh*, nursing their pipe dreams like toxic cocktails. Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* gives us a cocaine-addled protagonist whose procrastination at work costs him his job and whose punishing nightlife regimen is revealed to be, at least in part, an elaborate deferral of grief for his dead mother. Most endearingly, Grady Tripp in Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys* toils haplessly on an unfinishable novel—he procrastinates not about starting the book but finishing it or, rather, abandoning it.

But there is also a small and unnerving category of literature that is not only *about* procrastination but that, in form and style, *enacts* the frenetic paralysis of irrational delay. The reader who procrastinates may discover the sharpest pleasures and horrors of recognition within the tangled, meandering sentences in these slender volumes—detour-clogged journeys that go around and around in crooked, tortured circles as they strenuously avoid their destinations.

The cruel bard of procrastination lit is Thomas Bernhard, the late Austrian writer whose forte was case studies in failed mono- and megalomania. In *The Lime Works* (1970), a self-styled mad scientist drags his doomed wife with him into near-isolation so that he can compose the definitive book on the sense of hearing, though he never finds the right moment to begin. Likewise in *The Loser* (1983), the narrator works for years on an essay about genius Canadian pianist Glenn Gould, which is never finished or published. *Concrete* (1982), characteristically for a Bernhard story, consists of a single, ranting paragraph that spans 150 pages—the feverish output of a reclusive musicologist, Rudolf, who has been trying for 10 years to come up with the first line of a career-making monograph on Felix Mendelssohn.

In his exhaustive, exhausting endeavors to do anything but write the book he so frantically wants to write, Bernhard's Rudolf exhibits virtually every behavioral glitch of the chronic procrastinator. He's a pathological perfectionist (that elusive first sentence, he writes, has to be "the only possible one"). He shows hints of OCD (fretting that he has never landed on the right arrangement of books and papers on his desk). He's a virtuoso of the pathetic excuse (at one point he claims that the breaking dawn light has blocked him). And he's zealous about blaming his disastrous habits on others, in his case his sister—whether it's her absence, her presence, her imminent arrival, or her very existence: "It's as if her sole aim in life were to destroy my intellectual work." Rudolf's hilariously narcissistic diatribes against this "wretched, malignant, deceitful" woman are so frequent and passionate that her alleged interferences, and his hypergraphic fixation on them, seem to be a source of compulsive, masochistic pleasure—like blowing a deadline because you watched a marathon of *The Hills*.

Rudolf delays writing his opus by writing about delaying writing his opus; his nonfiction counterpart is Geoff Dyer in *Out of Sheer Rage* (1997), a would-be study of D.H. Lawrence that mutated into a memoir about trying and failing to write a study of D.H. Lawrence. (Dyer writes ruefully about a phenomenon that psychologist Maury Silver dubbed "maintaining the procrastinating field": "I even built up an impressive stack of notes with Lawrence vaguely in mind, but these notes, it is obvious to me now, actually served not to prepare for and facilitate the writing of a book about Lawrence but to defer and postpone doing so.") In his recently published novel, *Fanon*, John Edgar Wideman turns up the meta-palooza one more notch. Wideman's narrator, who is faltering in his effort to write a book about the psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon, creates for himself a double, Thomas, who is also attempting a book about Fanon.

Concrete, *Out of Sheer Rage*, and *Fanon* are kindred works, built on unmet expectations: They are not what they were intended to be but, rather, the bitter fruits of displaced, often agonizing labors. They portray the procrastinating disease as fundamentally a *dis-ease*: a suffocating sense of irresolution about where it is the writer wants to be, both mentally and physically. Just as the narrators cannot stick too long with one train of thought before whirling off on a tangent (and then, inevitably, spiraling back to where they left off), they can never attain lasting satisfaction in their environments: Large, time-wasting swaths of *Concrete* are consumed with whether or not Rudolf will leave Peiskam for Palma, while Dyer flits restlessly from Rome to Greece to Oxford.

The narrator of William Gaddis' *Agape Agape* is going nowhere—he is trapped in bed after surgery—but his mind cannot find a moment's peace. As he races against an inexorable deadline ("No but you see I've got to explain all this because I don't, we don't know how much time there is left," the book begins), his thoughts scuttle in agitation from the book he hasn't written, about the sociocultural effects of the player piano in America; to the piles of notes for the book he hasn't written; to the piles of paperwork he has to sort out before he dies. *Agape Agape*, which makes a rambling lament against the mechanization of the arts, is the repository of a lifetime of note-taking on its subject—much like Walter Benjamin's unfinished, far vaster *Arcades Project*, an epic consideration of the 19th-century Parisian consumer experience that J.M. Coetzee once called "a history of procrastination and false starts, of wanderings in archival labyrinths in a quest for exhaustiveness all too typical of the collecting temperament."

Fueled by anxiety, Gaddis' final, one-paragraph novel naturally needs some anxiety of influence, courtesy of Benjamin and also Thomas Bernhard. The narrator in *Agape Agape* channels Bernhard's stream-of-consciousness prose—the opening sentence is 239 words long—and feels such a psychic

connection to passages of *Concrete* that he accuses the author of telepathic idea-theft:

It's my opening page, he's plagiarized my work right here in front of me before I've even written it! That's not the only one. That's not the only one either, he's done it before, or after, word for word right in this heap somewhere you could call it plagiary a kind of entropy in there corrupting the creation it's right in here somewhere I can never find anything in this mess never get it sorted out, never get it in any kind of order but that's what it's all about in the first place isn't it? Get things in order that's half the battle in fact it is the battle ...

At first glance, the rushed and desperate prose style native to procrastination lit seems to burst with urgent, do-or-die, *carpe diem* momentum. But the mode soon feels like a bargaining tactic, a stalling technique, a panicked bid for time to stave off the overwhelming angst generated by enormous—or crazed, or hopeless—ambition. (Next time you're playing Minesweeper instead of working, ask yourself if it's because your standards are too high.) The ticking of the clock is almost deafening in *Agape Agape*: The specter of illness and mortality hangs heavily over the book, which was completed at the end of Gaddis' life (and published in 2002, four years after his death from prostate cancer). *Concrete*, too, is chilly with intimations of death. Rudolf does not disagree with his sister when she says he lives in a "morgue," communing with his books not out of scholarly devotion but out of cowardice: "*You associate only with the dead. ... Because you're afraid of the living*, she said."

Indeed, the most bracing revelation of procrastination lit is the terrible possibility that years of delay and deferral are tantamount to a refusal of life as it is or a self-willed limbo—even a living death. The narrator in *Fanon* appears to recognize this danger: He has, after all, spent 40 years mulling the life of a dead man, to little apparent avail. Accordingly, he scolds his hesitating double, Thomas, with words just pitiless enough to be inspiring to the procrastinator inside us all: "Why couldn't he write this novel. Or better yet, why couldn't he live it. Love it or leave it, Thomas."

Tomorrow: Jessica Winter on authors who procrastinate.

procrastination Lazy Money

The procrastinator's portfolio: An investment guide.

By Daniel Gross
Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 7:43 AM ET

There's no question that procrastination in the workplace is an economic drag. People who step out for coffee or a smoke are, by definition, taking time off from work. And while breaks are frequently necessary to get the creative juices flowing, in this just-in-time economy of long supply chains and 24-7 operations, procrastination is an overwhelming economic negative. But if individual companies lose out when workers doodle on letterhead, send instant messages to their friends, or take frequent YouTube breaks, procrastination can sometimes be a zero-sum game. When you blow off your job, you may be generating sales for somebody else's employer. The more time you waste, the more money someone makes.

Americans can invest in pretty much everything today—from Kenyan stocks to political futures—but it's not yet possible to invest in procrastination. You can, however, buy shares in companies whose products and services encourage, abet, and enable time-wasting and delays. It may even be a good investment: Recent research suggests that [procrastination is on the rise](#)—30 years ago, just 5 percent of Americans were self-described "chronic procrastinators"; today that number is up to 26 percent.

Of course, the best deals are likely out of our reach in the private-equity market—you and I can't yet invest in Facebook. And many of the other best time-wasters are embedded in conglomerates that make them far from pure plays—viz., MySpace and News Corp. But with the assistance of *Slate*'s stock research department (OK, a mass e-mail sent to *Slate* staffers that generated mostly three-word responses), we've assembled a procrastinator's portfolio, seven stocks that represent different sectors of the sultans of slackerdom.

Cyclical

Starbucks. The coffee break is perhaps the oldest and most enduring form of taking time off from regularly scheduled work hours. (An extremely obscure fragment of the Dead Sea Scrolls makes reference to the scribes repairing to Jericho for macchiatos.) While Dunkin' Donuts bills itself as a pit-stop for people in a hurry, Starbucks invites procrastinators to sit for a spell, with its comfy chairs, Wi-Fi service, sweet snacks, and gentle boomer-friendly music (though [Susan Tedeschi](#) wailing Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" was enough to send me sprinting back to work). The downside: The stock performs poorly in slack economic times, as \$4 lattes are an early casualty of penny-pinching.

EBay. The online swap meet is a procrastinator's paradise. If the competing demands for your attention are preparing a quarterly

report or browsing for used Steinway pianos, finishing a paper or taking a look through the 27,257 items on offer in the Home Art & Crafts category, it's really a no-brainer. E-Bay is doubly levered to discretionary e-commerce spending: It makes money when transactions are completed on E-Bay or on subsidiaries like Stubhub, and the company cashes in again if the payments are processed by its PayPal subsidiary.

Noncyclical:

[Altria](#). In the workplace, tobacco is second only to coffee as a time-wasting, consumable vice. Yes, cigarettes are expensive. But Altria, through its Philip Morris subsidiary, makes products to which its customers are physically addicted. That renders the company somewhat immune to the ups and downs of a consumer economy. By passing ever more restrictive laws regulating the time, place, and manner of smoking, society continues to impose additional costs on the use of cigarettes. Ironically, these barriers help make smoking all the more appealing as a procrastination mechanism. In New York, smokers who toil in office buildings must wait for an elevator and then clear security going in and out of the building. Forced to congregate with other smokers on patches of concrete, they inevitably engage in further time-wasting conversation. A single cigarette can easily burn up 15 minutes. Bonus: Altria owns a big chunk of beer giant SABMiller, whose products help fuel late-afternoon and evening time-wasting.

Countercyclical:

[The New York Times Co.](#) When the economy is in the gutter, when cash is low, and when the purpose of time-wasting shifts from blowing off work to blowing off the search for work, products that offer free or low-cost time-wasting opportunities become more attractive. And for procrastinators of the better sort, there's no better outlet than the *New York Times*. Read the full contents of today's newspaper (good for one hour of wasted time), check out the expanding roster of blogs, halfheartedly search for a job in the classifieds, or wholeheartedly engage in real-estate voyeurism by checking out condo ads. Later in the week, the crossword puzzle (available for a modest fee) can make the long acres of the afternoon pass by in the blink of an eye. Subsidiary [About.com](#) is also an excellent time sink. In the [first quarter](#), while the consumer economy was in the tank, the New York Times Co.'s online advertising revenues rose a healthy 18 percent.

The Perfecta:

[Apple](#). For users of PCs, time-wasting may be confined to playing solitaire. But iMacs and MacBooks, which generally arrive embedded with cool video features, offer lazy, creative slackers the ability to waste time by making movies and engaging in iChats—without having to buy and install new software. And in [iTunes](#), Apple has developed the online

equivalent of that increasingly rare time-wasting destination, the used-record store. Why work when you can explore and sample the 145 versions of "Danny Boy," including a truly unfortunate rendering by Tom Jones!

The Trifecta:

[Google](#). Google is one of our age's great productivity tools. It's also one of our age's great counterproductivity tools. It's simply too easy—and too tempting—to use the search algorithms to shirk the task at hand and look up your sister-in-law's 10K results, the number of times your book has been mentioned in the past two weeks, what your high-school prom date is doing. Every time you waste time thusly, Google profits. In recent years, Google has aggressively moved to corner the procrastination market by acquiring [DoubleClick](#), which serves up ads when surfers log onto sites, and by buying the ne plus ultra of procrastination: [YouTube](#). Endlessly entertaining and best used at work, where broadband connections allow for trouble-free downloads, YouTube has replaced television as the most reliable source of nonedifying, time-consuming, daytime viewing activity.

B-to-B play:

[Akamai](#). Here's one of the central contradictions of the procrastination economy: As Web-surfers waste time by poking around the furthest reaches of the Internet, they don't like to waste time. When Web sites are slow to load, when video seems to buffer endlessly without playing, these are the times that try souls. And businesses know this. So they turn to Akamai, the company whose "services enable enterprises, government agencies, and Web-centric businesses to deliver content and applications faster, overcome infrastructure obstacles, accelerate online initiatives, and minimize cost." Translation: It helps procrastinators load their Sudoku games faster.

I'm sure we've missed several obvious publicly held procrastination stocks. Send your own additions to the Slacker Sevento moneybox@slate.com or post them in the [Moneybox fray](#).

procrastination Letter to a Young Procrastinator

Some last-minute advice from a veteran slacker.

By Seth Stevenson

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 7:40 AM ET

Dear chronically procrastinating young person,

Slate has asked me to offer you a few words of advice—as I, too, am a procrastinator. Always have been. In college, I'd start 10-page papers after midnight on the day they were due. Half my memories of this period involve screaming at my printer to print faster, ripping the pages from its maw, and then sprinting to my professor's office with moments to spare, sweat streaming down my face.

Why did I subject myself to so much stress, instead of starting my work earlier like "normal" people do? Well, you've no doubt heard all manner of theories regarding the root cause of procrastination. Fear of failure. Crippling perfectionism. Abnormally low type-2 phloxiplaxitus levels.

I'm here to tell you that it was none of these things. The root cause of my procrastination, in technical terms, is this: I'm lazy. Extremely lazy.

Don't judge, pal—you're lazy, too. It's why you procrastinate. When there's a difficult, disagreeable, or tedious chore that needs to get done, guess what? You don't want to do it. So you don't. Until you have to.

It's just that simple, my slothful friend. And guess what else? The trick to overcoming procrastination is even simpler. Ready? Here it is:

Get off your fat badonk and stop procrastinating. Right now. No, not after the *Gilmore Girls* rerun ends. *Now* now.

Will you do this? No. You will not. You will dabble at the crossword for a while. Later, you might get a yogurt. Eventually, you'll start reading pointless crap on the Internet. You see, you're doing it as we speak! Because: You are lazy.

Understand that this will never, ever change. You will always be lazy, and you will always procrastinate. I know it's tough for you to hear, but it's a harsh truth that you need to internalize.

I'm serious about this. It's bad enough that you're so damn lazy. People like you can't afford to be delusional on top of all your other problems. Oh, I'm sure you imagine yourself growing out of this silly procrastination phase. In the future, you'll get an early jump on projects, work at a steady pace, and always finish ahead of schedule. You'll take the time to do things right—instead of nipping under the wire in a rush of half-assed, flailing chaos.

It's a beautiful dream, my indolent chum. And I'm here to shatter it. Again, I speak from experience in these matters. When I was young, my procrastination was merely debilitating. As I age, it gets far worse.

Take, for instance, this assignment. I first learned of it two weeks ago and, since then, I've gotten really, really superb at Guitar Hero III. Now I'm awake in the middle of the night, facing a deadline that's hours away, and I'm guzzling caffeine and just getting started. Crikey, I haven't done a lick of research! My editor specifically asked me to find historical examples of procrastination. Hold on, gonna Google a couple things ...

OK, back now. It turns out the ancient Greeks [may well have procrastinated](#). And Leonardo da Vinci [left a whole stack of unfinished projects](#). Also—this is conjecture on my part, but seems plausible—I'm guessing the people of Pompeii spent their final moments wishing they'd been a bit more on the ball about fleeing that bubbling volcano.

"But Seth," you interject, as I take a Rubik's Cube from my desk drawer and begin fiddling with it, "what about that kid in my econ section who's always on top of things? He makes an outline of his paper two weeks in advance, writes a rough draft, then does further research and revisions. Couldn't I be more like that kid if I put my mind to it?"

No. You couldn't. That kid will grow up to be a powerful politician or business leader. You won't.

And that's OK! Some of the kindest, most interesting people are pretty lazy, and not at all powerful. Take da Vinci: He was totally awesome, despite—as my extensive research suggests—being an easily distractible scattershot. His very strength was that he allowed his mind to wander where it pleased, instead of always locking into the task at hand. Sure, maybe you wouldn't want da Vinci as your air-traffic controller. But you'd definitely want to have a beer with him—am I right? And despite his problems knuckling down, the guy produced oodles of brilliant, imaginative work. Which is where my advice comes in.

Stop resisting and embrace your procrastination. Don't agonize in front of a blank computer screen. Don't sit around for hours—intending to start your work any moment now—only to find that in the end you've accomplished zilch, save for ruining your own day.

You could instead, for instance, work on a small, tangential aspect of the assignment. Some weird take on things—one that doesn't make you miserable. This may be of little direct application, but there's a chance it could also pay off, kick-starting a new line of thought or adding nuance to your final result.

Or, better, take a walk outside. Read a book for pleasure. Roll a spliff and share it with a friend.

You're going to procrastinate anyway, so you may as well enjoy the time you're stealing from your tasks. While that grind in your

econ class is toiling, you're becoming a more relaxed, quirkier, less-programmed person. You nurture the creative sprouts that take root only in long hours of idleness. You're open to soulful experiences that lie only beyond the bounded worlds of work and study.

Of course, this is all dependent on there being a deadline waiting at the end of your walkabout. For true procrastinators, nothing gets done without a deadline. As we say in journalism: The deadline is your friend. And when that deadline looms too near to procrastinate any longer, you need to take care of business. Crank it out, baby.

Executed correctly, this method is in fact terrific practice for maintaining your cool in stressful work environments. Pressing deadline anxiety can be channeled into an extreme level of focus. If you can train yourself to complete your assignments under pressure, quickly and efficiently, you will always find yourself in demand.

OK, fully bumping up against the clock here. Time to get this thing to my editor. A few important questions remain, so I'll attempt to answer them in our waning moments together:

- 1) Could I have done a better job on this assignment if I'd started sooner? Quite possibly.
- 2) But would I really have used that additional time to my advantage, instead of just doing the crossword and watching *Gilmore Girls* reruns? Very doubtful.
- 3) Am I crazy good at Guitar Hero III? Oh my, yes. I'm money on the multibutton combos now, and I can even nail some of the faster solos. You should come over and play some time. Maybe bring that spliff.

Your shiftless amigo,
Seth

reading list

Super Books for Pretty Good Moms

Parenting guides that won't make you even more anxious than you already are.

By Ann Hulbert

Saturday, May 10, 2008, at 7:00 AM ET

I blame, or bless, my mother for passing on this particular trait: Like her, I'm impatient with Mother's Day—with the commercialized hype and the saccharine pomp about a role that for the rest of the year gets either taken for granted or treated as a deeply anxiety-inducing grind. So, I give my kids a silly little

token of *my* gratitude, since without them, I wouldn't belong to the constituency being honored today. And then, as an imminent empty nester, I try to think sagely about the limits of parental power to shape children and the unpredictability of the future that awaits them—and also about how much harder other mothers and kids have it. It's my one-day bid to buck our hyper-parenting culture.

Actually, our hyper-parenting culture these days is itself full of books telling us to chill out, ease up, back off. Warnings about the dangers of parental pushiness are the current vogue, and the trick is finding counsel that doesn't insidiously ratchet up your anxiety about whatever it is you are, or aren't, doing. David Anderegg's [*Worried All the Time: Rediscovering the Joy of Parenting in the Age of Anxiety*](#) deftly punctures the self-perpetuating panic. Among the fresh contributions to the field, Wendy S. Grolnick and Kathy Seal's [*Pressured Parents, Stressed-Out Kids*](#) is genuinely interested in what helps encourage self-motivation in kids—and usefully blunt in saying that parental overinvolvement doesn't. The authors have a refreshingly level-headed perspective in general, noting that the real problem in this country "isn't that middle class kids have too many activities but that less privileged kids don't have enough."

It is also good to be reminded that for kids of any background, the activities that truly absorb them often aren't parentally approved or obvious stepping stones to success—and that's OK. Benjamin Nugent's recently published [*American Nerd: The Story of My People*](#)—part memoir, part historical and sociological rumination—is a fittingly idiosyncratic portrait of the antithesis of the superkid with the perfect résumé. The "rule-loving, unathletic" specimens Nugent surveys (including himself, "a self-loathing nerd," and his friends, deep into Dungeons & Dragons) aren't budding anythings—neither losers nor geniuses. They're obsessives carving out a marginal niche that gratifies *them*. Yet their intense focus, which goes hand in hand with social obtuseness, has its real virtues: It propels at least some of them on a quest for a sense of meaningful order and identity that alpha kids (and their alpha parents) can be too cool—and too caught up in the race for credentials—to bother undertaking. For further reminders of the quirky paths life may have in store, check out [*The Guild*](#), too, a Web serial about older nerds, which has its own charming weirdness—and a warning about helicopter parents.

In a similar spirit, Mother's Day can serve as an occasion to reflect on the disparities in family experiences and resources. Annette Lareau's [*Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*](#) is a fascinating guide to a cultural gap in child-rearing expectations and styles that starts early and grows. On the low-income end of the spectrum, what many teens could use is *more* college-directed pressure—which their parents, most of whom haven't gone to college themselves, have trouble providing, and their peers are more likely to mock than endorse. Ron Suskind's [*A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey From the Inner*](#)

[City to the Ivy League](#) is a classic about a rare student who overcame obstacles, with lots of help from his mother.

Nonparental help, though, is crucial. College Summit, which you can read about [here](#), is an amazingly successful enterprise that steps in to supply for poor kids the intensive prodding that middle- and upper-class families take for granted (and groan about). A recent PBS segment on the program, which you can view [here](#), offers a glimpse of how volunteers help steer these students through the admissions process, not least the essay-writing ordeal. Mothers shouldn't be surprised to learn that it takes plenty of hovering and hounding—but also listening, really hard, to teenagers trying to make sense of lives that are, after all, their own to lead.

recycled

What—and Where—Is the Strategic Petroleum Reserve?

By Brendan I. Koerner

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 10:44 AM ET

Congress voted Tuesday to [halt deposits into the Strategic Petroleum Reserve](#). Unless the bill is vetoed, the Bush administration will stop diverting 70,000 barrels of oil per day from the commercial market. The president did consider opening the reserve in 2002 to combat soaring oil prices. At the time, Brendan I. Koerner explained where the government keeps that oil and what it's for. The full article is reprinted below.

Political tumult in Venezuela, which has sent oil prices soaring, has President Bush pondering whether to tap into our nation's Strategic Petroleum Reserve, which houses around 560 million barrels of crude. Where's all that black gold stored, and what will it take to turn on the spigots?

The SPR is stockpiled at four locations around the Gulf of Mexico, all within shouting distance of major refineries: Bryan Mound and Bill Hill in Texas, and West Hackberry and Bayou Choctaw in neighboring Louisiana. The oil is kept in subterranean salt caverns, where the temperature's just right to maintain the perfect amount of viscosity, and the air pressure prevents the creation of fissures that could cause leakage. It's also cheaper than using aboveground storage tanks by about a factor of 10. And, of course, a salt cavern 2,000 feet below the earth's surface is a harder target for terrorists to attack.

The SPR was created in 1975 as part of the Energy Policy and Conservation Act, largely in response to the OPEC oil embargo of 1973-74. Much of the present-day stockpile is given to the government by companies who prospect for

petroleum on federal land as a royalty in lieu of cash. Should things get hairy, energy-wise, due to international conflict or some other catastrophe, the president alone has the authority to order a "drawdown" of the reserve, at an estimated rate of 4.1 million barrels per day. Once the president gives the go-ahead order, though, it would take at least 15 days for the SPR crude to hit the market.

The last significant dip into the SPR occurred during Desert Storm, when Bush the Elder ordered a drawdown of 34 million barrels. There have been minor dips into the kitty since then, such as in June of 2000 when the SPR "loaned" 500,000 barrels each to CITGO and Conoco, which were having problems with their tanker fleets. Later that same year, the SPR made 2.8 million barrels of crude available in anticipation of a harsh Northeast winter.

Bonus Explainer: Not all SPR oil is created equal. About a third of the stockpile qualifies as "sweet" crude, meaning that its sulfur content is less than one-half of 1 percent. The rest is more sulfur-laden "sour" crude. Sweet crude is more desirable among refinery pooh-bahs, but when we're in a bind that might require tapping the SPR, beggars can't be choosers.

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

recycled

Disaster by Numbers

If the earthquake doesn't kill you, the clichés will.

By Jack Shafer

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 12:42 PM ET

In the wake of a [devastating earthquake in central China](#) on Monday, the news media have wheeled out their trusted architecture for the disaster story. After a devastating earthquake rocked Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in late May 2006, Jack Shafer lamented the inability of most journalists to elude the gaping jaws of cliché in reporting on natural disasters. The article is reprinted below.

The earth pukes fire and breaks apart. Its oceans dispatch tsunamis, and the heavens, oh the heavens, churn like an intestinal disorder, flinging skyscrapers of water upon the coasts. Winds and floods scrape the land clean of buildings, bridges, and people.

Water schemes with earth to make mud, which spreads over the dead and half-dead like skanky chocolate frosting. Man-made mayhem curses us, too—shipwrecks, fires, plane crashes, derailments, pileups, and cave-ins.

To these scenes comes the journalist—if he hasn't already staked out the territory. With pen, camera, or microphone in hand, he struggles briefly against cliché to document the suffering and mop-up but always surrenders because the disaster-news template defies renovation. Audiences know what they want from the disaster-news genre—a blink of horror before the sports scores and then maybe a longer gaze later—and the press gives it to them.

Saturday's earthquake in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, killed about 6,200, and it got its standard one- or two-day ride on the front pages of American dailies before moving inside. In every regard, the continuing coverage conforms to the disaster-news formula revealed by Alexander Cockburn for *[More]* magazine three decades ago in "Death Rampant! Readers Rejoice" (December 1973).

The only dated element of Cockburn's piece is his observation that American media remain ashamed of disaster coverage, unlike the British press. Since his piece appeared, we've closed the embarrassment gap with our 24-hour news networks, our minicams, our cheap satellites, our never-sleep Web sites, and our color newspaper presses. Cockburn's earthquake template demands:

Quick comparisons with other earthquakes. Secondly, where is it? Usually in "remote Eastern Turkey" or in the "arid center of Iran." But with luck it will have occurred in marginally more accessible Latin or Central America. Good chance for *post facto* description. Most of the buildings destroyed; others leaning at crazy angles. Constant flood of refugees. People clawing at rubble. Survivors crawling, blinking into the light of day. Preliminary tremors, then "for six seconds the earth shook." Make sure to get picture of one building standing (usually a church in Roman Catholic countries or a mosque in Muslim ones.) Get interviews from American survivors. Animadvert on general danger of earthquakes, particularly in San Francisco area. Most important of all: get casualty figures and escalate them each day. Remind people that 200,000 people died in the Lisbon earthquake.

In Cockburn's manual, slow-moving killers such as famine, disease, tribal genocide, or automotive holocaust (approximate 42,000 killed a year in the U.S.) rarely qualify for disaster coverage because quickness of death is the genre's distinguishing characteristic. Hell today, gone tomorrow, in other words—or at least gone from sight.

In the limited vocabulary of earthquake coverage, quakes always "strike" or "hit." A Nexis dump of U.S. pieces about the Yogyakarta earthquake reveals it as powerful. Buildings are flattened. In the aftermath, chaos follows as persistent aftershocks rumble and people refuse to move back inside. Hospitals fill and volunteers arrive and foreign aid is promised. Rubble figures prominently: Homes are reduced to it, survivors

dig and root through it for possessions and victims. Rice farmers and chicken farmers are interviewed. Field hospitals are set up. Shortages of food, water, and medicine hamper the relief efforts. If it doesn't rain, the sun blazes down on hundreds of thousands of the displaced, who camp out in rice fields, on soccer greens, at parks, or by the side of the road. The victims criticize the government response.

In its post-disaster coverage, the press always finds the prophet who warned that authorities weren't prepared. Sometimes the prophet is a journalist, sometimes he's an academic or politician. But he is found and has his day in the blazing sun or the downpour, whichever nature delivers. Stragglers, left for dead, are found. Cockburn counsels that reporters should limit avalanche coverage to just 48 hours, after which rescue is extremely unlikely. Work in a surviving dog, if you can, he advises. Herald the quiet heroism in train crashes. Play up the panic aboard shipwrecks. Age plays an important role in disaster taxonomy: The more children or old people who die, the greater the catastrophe, presumably because they can't rescue themselves as efficiently. Other benchmarks: The closer to the United States or Western Europe, the greater the disaster; the more video footage, the more visible bodies, the more audible the wailing, the greater the disaster.

The randomness of plane crashes, tsunamis, and apartment fires is balanced by the time-clock reliability of tornadoes, floods, and hurricanes, all of which arrive by "season." This makes it easier for editorial desks to plan ahead and even lay in a supply of clichés. "Remember to have 'winds up to 150 miles an hour' and also don't forget the quiet center of the hurricane's eye," Cockburn writes. "Remember that this may be the chance for a record. Is this the biggest hurricane in living memory?" Today, June 1, marks the official beginning of the U.S. hurricane season, an odd opening-day seeing as the hefty storms tend to come later in the year. In any event, see the cliché-ridden hurricane-season stories from [Bloomberg News](#), Florida's *Sun-Sentinel*, the CBC, the [BBC](#), [USA Today](#), the [Associated Press](#), and more in [Google News](#).

As I edited a ho-hum story by a reporter 20 years ago at a weekly newspaper, he defended the many clichés in his copy by arguing that they imparted basic truths about his subject. This defense could be extended to cliché-encrusted disaster coverage: If the sun *is* blazing and the widows *are* weeping and the town *has been* reduced to rubble, why pick nits about it? Indeed, not everybody constructs their best similes when strolling about the decomposing. The mot juste escapes many reporters as they pour important facts into their copy on deadline. And, not every reporter is sufficiently experienced to tell disaster gems from costume jewelry. But enough about reporters' needs. Journalism exists not for journalists but for readers and viewers. Every cliché invites them to believe that nothing new or important is happening and they can move along.

The final blame goes, as always, to editors, who do know their way around clichés, formulas, and templates, having lived them. I'm not suggesting that TV producers instruct correspondents to sing about tornadoes rather than describe and tape them, nor do I want reporters to write epic verse about the day's havoc in the name of originality (unless [Michael Lind](#) can take the assignment). Instead, I'd have editors and the copy desk study Cockburn's seven-page *[More]* classic and glue copies of it to reporters' foreheads as they ship out to catastrophe territory, at which point all would recite this motto: "Kill a cliché: Save a reader!"

[More] magazine—not to be confused with *More* magazine, the Meredith Publications' good-life guide for women over 40—covered the journalism business back in the 1970s. Copies of *[More]* are so rare I couldn't find any on eBay and had to wind through a 10-pack of microfilm reels at a local college library to find the Cockburn piece. If you've got back copies and want to unload them, send e-mail to slate.pressbox@gmail.com and name your price. Better yet, will the owner of the rights to *[More]* please post the issues on the Web? (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise. No mail from earthlink.net addresses will receive responses unless you promise to turn off your anti-spam protection.)

slate v

How To Spend Your Tax Rebate

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 1:35 PM ET

slate v

Dr. Syd on Underage Drinking

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 5:17 PM ET

slate v

The Guilt-by-Association Campaign

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 1:26 PM ET

slate v

Dear Prudence: Pregnant and

Nauseated

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Monday, May 12, 2008, at 11:47 AM ET

slate v

Summary Judgment for May 9

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 5:39 PM ET

sports nut

Dispatch From the New Garden

The Celtics' home court is cheesy and generic. Why do they keep winning here?

By John Swansburg

Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 1:05 PM ET

BOSTON—When historians look back on these last days of American hegemony, they will perhaps point to our blunders in Iraq or the fall of the once-mighty dollar as the first signs of our impending decline. I fear, however, that future scholars may overlook an equally ominous recent development: the invention of [the T-shirt cannon](#). This device—used to project balled-up T-shirts into the farthest reaches of sports arenas—has proliferated among the NBA franchises with alarming speed. Last night, during breaks in the action between the Boston Celtics and Cleveland Cavaliers, [Lucky](#), the Celtics' mascot, pranced onto the court brandishing this weapon, using its coveted ammunition to work the crowd into a lather. That he succeeded despite the fact that every ticket holder had already been given a free Celtics T-shirt seemed to this fan a clear indication that our society's best days are behind it.

There was a time, not all that long ago, when the Celtics didn't need to assault their fans with 100 percent preshrunk cotton to get them pumped up for a game. Nor was it deemed necessary to titillate the crowd by flashing footage of visiting celebrities on the Jumbotron during TV timeouts (last night's unlikely assortment: [Jay-Z](#), Jonah Hill, and [Rob Lowe](#)). In the Bird era, there was no JumboTron—and, perhaps not unrelatedly, no celebrities. Nowadays, pre-game introductions are accompanied by a fireworks display powerful enough to make the menacing Ben Wallace [hide in the locker room](#).

I could go on about how the old Garden ways have been adulterated, cheapened, disrespected. But that'd be a bit silly. Last night, I saw the Celtics [defeat](#) the Cavaliers 96-89, improving their home record in the playoffs to 7-0. Clearly the T-shirt cannon is working. Or something else is, and not just for the Celts. The Boston win last night, coupled with the Lakers'

victory over the Jazz at the Staples Center, makes the home teams a staggering 19-1 in the second round of the 2008 NBA playoffs. The only team to win on the road is the Pistons, who beat the Magic in Orlando in Game 4 of their series. By one point.

The Celtics had the league's best road record in the regular season, but they've yet to win on the road in the playoffs, not even against the supposedly lowly Atlanta Hawks. I'm not the first [to ask](#), What gives? This isn't baseball, where every ballpark has a unique shape, or football, where road teams are often subjected to drastic shifts in climate. Basketball courts are uniform in size and shape. The contemporary arena is a sleek, climate-controlled environment designed to pamper fan and player alike. In other words, it's nothing like the old Garden, which forced its visitors to endure cramped, rat-infested quarters that were cold in January and Kareem-sucking-on-oxygen hot in June. And let us not forget the parquet floor, which Celtic players supposedly knew better than they knew their wives.

Today, there's a section of the old parquet encased in glass hanging outside a ladies' room on the dining concourse behind the loge-level seating. The glimpses of the visiting locker room that I've caught on TNT suggest more than hospitable environs. So why have the home teams in this year's NBA playoffs been so dominant?

Damned if the Celtics know. After another anemic performance Monday night at Cleveland, none of the players could [put his finger](#) on why their play was suffering so badly on the road. Kevin Garnett: "If I knew that, man, I don't think we'd be having these conversations or these problems on the road." Ray Allen: "It's hard to say. I have no answer for it. I have no answer."

Does anyone? The leading theories go like this:

It's the building. Remember that scene from *Hoosiers*, when Coach Dale takes his players out on the court before the state tournament and has them measure the distance from the floor to the rim? Ten feet—just like back home! Yet even if basketball courts don't vary in shape and size, there are differences in how the courts play. Sight lines and floor markings, both of which are cues for shooters, can differ subtly from arena to arena. And there are other quirks. At Cleveland's Quicken Loans Arena, the JumboTron displays both the score (87-78, for example) and "The Diff" (in that case, 9). Maybe the Cavaliers have learned to put the split second they gain from not having to do math to their advantage.

It's the crowd. You're thinking thunder sticks, but not so fast. If it were possible for fans to [distract visiting shooters](#), you'd expect a pronounced drop-off in free-throw percentage, right? Yet Roland Beech of [82games.com](#) has found that free-throw percentage is one of the only statistics that *doesn't* suffer on the

road. Of course, this doesn't mean the home crowd can't have a deleterious effect on the visitors. Basketball is the most intimate of major professional sports, with fans (some [quite partial](#)) literally sitting on the playing floor. I was up in the balcony last night, so I doubt Delonte West heard the gentleman behind me, who inquired of the former Celtic guard, "Hey Delonte, how's your herpes?" But I'm confident even the more tactful types down in the padded seats were giving West, and his teammates, an earful.

It's the refs. What if the crowd doesn't just affect the players but the officials as well? The generous version of the ref theory posits that the game's arbiters are subconsciously loath to make calls that will cause abuse to be rained down upon them from the stands. The more sinister version is that the fix is in for hometown teams in the playoffs, part of a conspiracy to extend series, since more games equal more television, more tickets, more [Gino paraphernalia](#) sold. This is a small sample, obviously, but so far this postseason the home teams have won 76 percent of the time (49-15) compared with 60 percent in the regular season (739-491).

It's the travel. One [study](#) of home-field advantage determined that the highest winning percentages for home teams in football, basketball, baseball, and hockey all occurred in the leagues' early years. One obvious reason for this would be the rigors of travel, which were more arduous before the private-plane era. When it comes to today's NBA playoffs, it's a bit harder to see how travel fits into the equation. Both teams are negotiating the same distances, and at least in the opening rounds, regional divisions mean you're not crossing many time zones. Road teams have to stay in hotels, but it's not like they're being put up in some flea trap. Then again, lobby life, even in luxury hotels, can have its drawbacks. During their Round 1 visit to Boston, the Hawks stayed in the swank new [Liberty Hotel](#) (formerly the [Charles Street Jail](#)). The story [making the rounds](#) last week was that the owner of Alibi, the hotel bar, instructed his employees to double the shots for any Atlanta Hawks who bellied up.

LeBron James, who finished with a game-high 35 points last night, certainly didn't play like a man who'd been slipped a Mickey. And despite some hearty New England vituperation from the Garden crowd, the refs hardly seemed in the bag for the Celtics (on the contrary). It's possible the Cavaliers missed The Diff, but Cleveland came out of the gate much faster than the Celtics, amassing a diff of as many as 14 points. The loudest noise the fans around me made in the first half came when several voices cried out, "Don't shoot!" when the trigger-happy Sam Cassell touched the ball.

It wasn't until the Celtics put together a run in the third quarter that the Garden crowd really got into the game. But when they did, it made the Celts' 10-point lead feel insurmountable in a way their earlier deficits never did. I'm at a loss for how a sports economist could ever measure this effect, but it felt very real. It

was perhaps most clearly manifested in the person of Kevin Garnett. The Celtics are officially ruled by a [triumvirate](#), but K.G. has become the undisputed team leader. Before the game, he conducts his own opening ceremonies, spending some quality time with the padding underneath the home basket (against which he bangs his heads ritualistically and not softly) and anointing himself with a cloud of talcum powder so thick one official scorer has taken to wearing a surgical mask.

Garnett is always a live wire, whether he's on the road or at home. He's constantly chattering—to his teammates, to his opponents, to the fans, and, perhaps most animatedly, to himself—a look of intensity bordering on insanity in his eyes. And more than any other player on the Celtics, he seems to feed off the adulation of the crowd. Last night, as the Celtics started to pull away in the third, and the fans really started to get into it for the first time, Garnett began a series of points, waves, and wags at the crowd, creating a feedback loop of frenzy. When K.G. is locked in, and when the new Garden's crowd is behind him, you start to feel an aura of invincibility that feels very old Garden. In those moments, free T-shirts could rain from the rafters and no one would notice.

television

When We Return ...

The CW has a new *90210*. OMG!

By Troy Patterson

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 4:43 PM ET

From: Troy Patterson

Subject: Turning Down the Volume at This Year's Upfronts

Posted Monday, May 12, 2008, at 3:51 PM ET

Josh Goldin, a main character in Darin Strauss' forthcoming novel, *More Than It Hurts You*, works for a fictitious network called Sparkplug, selling airtime by trading on charm. The book features a set piece about the upfronts, an evocation of the hucksterism particular to the TV networks' annual announcement of fall schedules and ritual allurements of ad buyers. "They know how to force you to watch commercials, these people," Jon Stewart says to an industry audience in Strauss' imagining. "Next, the cast of *Grey's Anatomy* will meet in a bag of Doritos." On the next page, a late-middle-aged CFO takes the stage to roll through a bit of near-meaningless tech-jargon [asyndeton](#) that veterans of the network upfronts will find ticklingly familiar: "We know your customers. They're the ones Googling, blogging, mo: Blogging, IM-ing, iTuning, gaming, podcasting, hypertasking, shoutcasting, and innovating. And, oh yeah,

looking for great TV content. *We feed that need.*" Then everyone goes to the after party and tries to get close to Mr. T.

That's a well-observed scene, one that now amounts to a jaunty elegy. The upfronts—unfolding today through Thursday in Manhattan—will not be what they used to be for a number of reasons. The writers' strike threw the traditional pilot season (already widely agreed to be an anachronism) into disarray. Networks want advertisers onboard earlier, in order to explore multiplatform opportunities (Strauss: "*When multitunites knock, we answer*") and product-placement integrations (NBC exec Ben Silverman: "Tina Fey loves American Express"). Merrill Lynch predicts that the upfront market for 2008-09 could be down by as much as 14 percent from last year's \$9.3 billion, and none of the networks is in a mood to throw what is, once you account for the costs of hauling talent out from L.A. and shrimp up from the ocean, essentially a \$5 million cocktail party—except for gaudy Fox, with its *American Idol* money and Roman Empire extravagance. And as Virginia Heffernan noted in the *New York Times Magazine* last week, "when media buyers can screen shows online and study a network's demographics and ad platforms, the upfronts function chiefly as an ostentatious corporate week on the town."

Nonetheless, I want in and will make a final plea to NBC to grant me access to its 4 p.m. event today at Rockefeller Center. Though the network already unveiled most of its new prime-time shows in April, this afternoon's "NBC Universal Experience" trade-fair-type thingum will further touch upon developments in cable, on the Internet, and in the wilds of late night, where Jimmy Fallon will unaccountably be taking over Conan O'Brien's show when Conan graduates to *Tonight*. Trade magazine *TV Week* says that "people at the network compare the event to a theme park attraction," and I love a good theme park, so Ms. Marks, if you read this, please tell Wendy to put me on the list. She's got my number.

The week promises plenty of other roller coasters—or, at the least, cup-and-saucer rides—for this reporter. ABC will hold a press conference at the not-remotely-civilized hour of 7:30 a.m. to read its schedule to journalists while allowing advertisers to sleep in for a 4 p.m. "sales discussion." CBS will have a presentation and skip the big party. The CW will host a medium-sized party with a brief presentation as its centerpiece. Fox will announce new shows by J.J. Abrams and Joss Whedon and then throw a rager in Central Park. This is not to mention the efforts by cable Goliaths (TBS, TNT) and Web Davids (Hulu) to hawk their wares. If you happen to be in Midtown right now, you might catch a special whiff of deal-making in the damp air. And when I say "special," I mean "maybe a bit slow." In *More Than It Hurts You*, one of Josh's clients, an ad buyer representing McDonald's, repeats an old gag over a steakhouse lunch: "TV airtime sales is a C+ business, because what student who'd made A's or B's would have gone into it?"

From: Troy Patterson
Subject: ABC's Fall Plans: Sending Ashton Kutcher to Your Home
Posted Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 4:55 PM ET

Nope, I didn't make it to NBC's Monday event, an affair I later heard likened to a maze, Ikea, and mild insanity. The word is that it also was absolutely free of news—which, by the standards of an entertainment industry event, is really saying something. And yet, those reporters who were able to put themselves in an ad buyer's shoes—Docksiders, let's say—thought it did a fine job of "moving the conversation away" from NBC (They're No. 4!) and toward NBC Universal (still a conglomerate to be reckoned with). As if the execs were stealing their spin moves from that other great arena of American showbiz, presidential politics.

I heard many such remarks at a cocktail party thrown Monday night by Hulu, the fledgling video site that represents a joint venture of NBC Universal and Fox. The party, held in the kind of awful bar where the margaritas are all sugar and the waitresses wear bustiers, made a number of impressions—primarily that, by being there, you were missing a much better party. Indeed, the most important ad buyers seemed to find their way out in time to make it to the William Morris Agency's dinner by the soup course. And yet we all agreed that Hulu CEO Jason Kilar is a charmer—"so non-douchey," as one entertainment reporter put it—remarking at the contrast between old-school Silicon Valley humility and big TV braggadocio.

Meanwhile, ABC roused reporters from bed for an early-morning press conference that said almost nothing, though with great pith and an attempt to "move the conversation" with talk of new ratings devices allowing advertisers to know precisely which portions of their commercials you watch, how much you earn, and maybe what you had for breakfast. Taking a conservative approach to the fall and trusting that last season's respectable efforts (*Pushing Daisies*, *Dirty Sexy Money*) will catch fire, they showed clips from only two new shows. First was *Life on Mars*, David E. Kelley's adaptation of a BBC time-trip detective program. If I followed the product placements correctly, the cop hero steps out of his Jeep Cherokee, goes to check his iPhone, gets hit by a car, and wakes up in one piece in 1972, where he commits anachronisms to a glam-rock soundtrack. Second was *Opportunity Knocks*, a reality show involving Ashton Kutcher driving onto your front lawn to run a game show. But there was a glitch on the voice-over track, and ABC exec Stephen McPherson cut the clip with a one-liner about *Dancing With the Stars'* Marlee Matlin. The joke was witty and impressively risky: What is the sound of hands clapping at a joke about the hearing-impaired?

From: Troy Patterson
Subject: The CW Has a New *90210*. OMG!
Posted Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 4:40 PM ET

Some observers of this spring's supposedly scaled-back upfronts are beginning to get the idea that much of this "scaled back" business is nonsense—a ruse to appease shareholders, maybe, or an excuse to avoid screening footage of new shows. True, [ABC's upfront was spare and efficient](#); any plying of advertisers with booze and treats was shielded from public view. But NBC still ordered up alcohol by the hogshead and called in enough actors to warrant a red carpet at its Monday event. Yesterday, forgoing the traditional route of staging a presentation and then hosting a lavish party, the CW instead threw a lavish party with a presentation as its centerpiece.

The venue was a tent at Lincoln Center, where ABC used to have its shindig. Though it was far too dark in there, you could still see the talent lounging behind barriers, not unlike giant pandas at the National Zoo with cages built of velvet rope. For entertainment, we had the bombastic simpering of Maroon 5, a group I could only assume my fellow partygoers to be fans of, as they were not actively jeering. The CW's celebrities trod a green carpet, of course. The network was very canny, when it formed two years ago, about selecting a signature color that connoted youth and freshness and recognizing the marketing possibilities of environmentalism. Thus: green cocktail napkins for your Ketel One and soda, unwieldy green chopsticks for the sushi, green wigs on the pretty heads of the modelesque women who had donned gauzy outfits to serve as hostesses or usherettes or geishas or whatever.

Continuing the tradition of [female executives taking a spin through virtual reality](#) at these things, network head Dawn Ostroff first appeared in triplicate, as a hologram—a corny literalization of the CW's "3-D" pitch to clients: "demographics, desirable, destination." Really, this is just three ways of saying the same thing—young women turn to the network to watch shows that young women want to watch—but repetition is the key to advertising. The real Ostroff, pleased to step forward after the mirages dissolved, then read the opening line on her prompter: "I know these green-apple martinis are good. ... But if you're seeing three of me right now, you're in trouble." Ostroff next trumpeted the fabulous buzz surrounding the teen-soap hype bomb *Gossip Girl* because, well, she couldn't very well have crowed about its meager ratings. She called *Gossip Girl* "OMG TV," then introduced three new shows promising more of the same, a reminder that the CW has carved out a brand identity as the network that should make you die a little on the inside every time you catch your daughter watching it, and vice versa.

- The remake of Aaron Spelling's *Beverly Hills, 90210* sells itself, doesn't it? This time around, the Brenda Walsh figure hails from Kansas City, and her father is the new principal of West Beverly High, and one senses that she won't make so much of a fuss about losing her V-card. There will be a grandma and her feistiness. There will be a hot young lit teacher and his stubble. There will be appearances by veterans of ye olde *Bev 9*, though Ostroff—who promises sponsors "dual entry for moms who were fans of the original series"—is only [ready to announce Jennie Garth](#). The tagline is unimprovable, parody-proof, deathless, a zenith of soap-opera-of-manners epigrammatizing: "If you wanna live in the ZIP, you gotta live by the code."
- Somewhat less memorably, *Surviving the Filthy Rich* calls itself "a new series about the things that money can buy and about all the things it can't." Your heroine is a young college graduate who, having accrued much debt in New Haven, ventures to Palm Beach—don't you love it?—to attend to the educational and moral development of two orphans. "I puke cuter than that outfit you're wearing," the mean one says to her new tutor. "I think you just tased our new tutor," the nice one says to the mean one. "I give this show four weeks," I thought to myself.
- *Stylista*, billed as *The Devil Wears Prada* meets a reality show, finds an *Elle* editor named Anne Slowey vamping and camping. "I only take iced lattes with a small straw," says she, *molta maligna*. Contestants will design layouts for accessories pages, plan a birthday party for Slowey's supercilious niece, and then, one hopes, enroll in an LSAT prep course.

In closing, Ostroff again mentioned the three D's, and the DJ put on the new Madonna single, and 50-year-old men began dancing to it. Those who took this as a sign to get out of there went out into the light, where the green-wigged women dispensed green lollipops, joking to each other about fellating them.

the green lantern

Eco-Turf

Is fake grass better for the environment?

By Brendan I. Koerner

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 7:27 AM ET

I fear that my well-tended lawn is wreaking havoc on the environment. I've considered replacing it with synthetic grass, which requires far less maintenance. But manufacturing that plastic vegetation must give off a lot of carbon emissions, right? So which type of lawn is (figuratively) greener—real or fake?

It's tough to declare a winner here without knowing the specifics of your lawn-care regimen, as well as your geographic location. If you're reckless with the fertilizer, oblivious to the consequences of heedless mowing, and live in a [drought-stricken region](#), then ersatz grass has the clear environmental edge. But if you're diligent about your gardening routine, the real stuff may be better.

The environmental drawbacks of genuine lawns are easy enough to tally. They're thirsty, of course—the average American lawn gulps down 21,600 gallons of water per year. Lawns planted atop sandy soil can be particularly wasteful since they drain more quickly. And the water usage problem is particularly acute when a homeowner insists on laying sod that's ill-suited to the local climate.

Gas-powered mowers, meanwhile, are hazardous to more than just eardrums. A [2001 study](#) by Sweden's Stockholm University found that an hour's worth of mowing resulted in the same amount of smog-forming emissions as driving a car 93 miles. Mower manufacturers contend that their newer models have become cleaner, yet they still [resist calls](#) to add catalytic converters to their products; according to the Swedes, doing so would reduce mower emissions by 80 percent.

Another knock against real grass is that it's frequently drizzled with fertilizer, most of which is synthetic. American homeowners use about 3 million metric tons of synthetic lawn fertilizer per year. The fossil fuel equivalent of a barrel of oil goes into manufacturing 560 pounds of such fertilizer, so our collective lawn habit is costing us more than 11.8 million barrels of oil annually. We also use 70 million pounds of pesticides and herbicides on our lawns every year. Clippings that are improperly disposed of can end up [polluting major waterways](#).

On the plus side, lawns do act as carbon sinks. According to a [2005 NASA study](#), the United States is covered with roughly 40 million acres of tended lawns. Assuming all clippings are bagged and tossed in the trash, those lawns can soak up about 13.2 million pounds of carbon dioxide per year. But the study's authors stressed that the lawns' carbon absorption is likely negated by the amount of energy that goes into making synthetic fertilizer and powering mowers.

While it's not entirely maintenance-free, synthetic grass requires neither water nor fertilizer nor mowing. Its greatest environmental sin occurs during manufacturing, since the production of polyethylene and other essential fake-grass materials (such as polymers and elastomeric coatings) is energy intensive. One must also consider the inevitable disposal issues—[like most plastics](#), aside from those found in beverage and detergent bottles, artificial turf is typically landfilled rather than recycled.

So how bad is fake grass? The best life-cycle study the Lantern could find is [this one](#) (PDF), in which Canada's Athena Institute tried to calculate the carbon toll of converting a school's playing field from real grass to artificial. The new field could be made carbon neutral, the study's authors concluded, by planting and maintaining 1,861 trees for a decade. But keep in mind that this was an athletic pitch measuring 96,840 square feet, not a piddling single-family lawn. And Athena's calculations had to take into account the installation of PVC pipes for drainage, something that may not affect the average homeowner.

There are also many environmental activists who revile fake grass that uses rubber infill—that is, crumbs of recycled tires sprinkled between the blades, in order to provide cushioning. They [claim](#) that these rubber bits can cause health problems if inhaled; the artificial-turf industry [counters](#) that such fears are scientifically unwarranted. The Lantern will note only that the infill issue seems to affect athletic fields more than ornamental lawns and that there are [artificial options](#) that don't include rubber crumbs.

The bottom line is that, whichever lawn type you choose, you should commit to managing it responsibly. If you want to minimize your water and fertilizer use by going the fake route, make sure you purchase a quality product that won't have to be replaced for a decade or more.

But if you don't feel comfortable with plastic, think about drastically altering your lawn-care practices. For starters, [compost](#) your clippings instead of bagging them; per the NASA study, this can nearly triple your lawn's effectiveness as a carbon sink. Ditch your aging gas-powered mower in favor of a [reel push mower](#). And make the switch to organic fertilizers that contain ingredients like cornmeal or seaweed.

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

Defining Deviancy Down

How Pat Moynihan predicted Vito Fossella.

By Bruce Reed

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 10:52 AM ET

Tuesday, May 13, 2008

On the Rocks: After years of comparing illegitimacy rates around the world—which were low in Italy, moderate in Germany, and astronomical in the United States—Sen. Pat

Moynihan used to joke that out-of-wedlock birth rates increase in direct proportion to [distance from the Vatican](#). Now another member of the New York delegation has gone out of his way to confirm Moynihan's theory. Vito Fossella Jr.'s office is a long way from Rome.

Moynihan offered an even more prescient explanation of Fossella's behavior in his famous essay "[Defining Deviancy Down](#)." Citing a sociologist's rationalization that "the number of deviant offenders a community can afford to recognize is likely to remain stable over time," Moynihan feared a vicious cycle of what another New Yorker, Fred Siegel, dubbed "moral deregulation": The more people bend the rules, the further some will go in bending them.

Human weakness may be a renewable resource, but public attention is not—so, no matter how many cads live in the tri-state area, only the most shameless can make [the front page of the tabloids](#). According to the tabloids, Rep. Fossella's troubles began in December 2002, when he fell for Air Force legislative liaison Laura Fay on a junket to Malta. The [Daily News](#) marvels that their union could take root on such rocky soil: "Malta is not an obvious place for a love affair to flourish. Not unlike Staten Island, it tends to be a conservative place."

Of course, in those days, so was the House of Representatives. Speaker Dennis Hastert himself led that congressional delegation to Malta. The following summer, Hastert took Fossella and Fay along on another European junket. One person on the trip told the *Daily News* that the affair became an open secret in Spain, somewhere near the Alhambra. The newspaper claims that "word about the affair spread, and Republican officials soon became concerned, fearing it would be exposed, sources said." The tabloid implies that the Air Force dropped Fay as a legislative liaison because she was a little too good at it.

Obviously, Vito Fossella's personal life is not Dennis Hastert's fault. Perhaps the speaker had his nose in a guidebook or was rereading Washington Irving's classic *Tales of the Alhambra*. (Unexplored tabloid angle: The namesake for Irving's most famous character, Ichabod Crane, is [buried on Staten Island](#)—just like Fossella's political career.) Moreover, once you've accepted the ethics of

congressional leaders and Pentagon staffers taking taxpayer-funded fact-finding missions to the tourist capitals of Europe, you don't have to be above the legal blood alcohol limit to have trouble seeing any bright lines.

Still, the leadership's avoidance and denial in this case is eerily similar to the last great House Republican sex scandal, involving former Florida Rep. Mark Foley. A House ethics committee investigation determined that Hastert's chief of staff, Scott Palmer, learned of Foley's page problem in 2002 or 2003, the same period as Fossella's budding romance. The House leadership did nothing about it. As the ethics committee report declared, "A pattern of conduct was exhibited among many individuals to [remain willfully ignorant](#)."

In time, those years may be remembered as the Era of Willful Ignorance. Mark Foley was busy IMing House pages. Jack Abramoff and Ralph Reed were busy [e-mailing](#) each other. Tom DeLay was busy hounding the FAA to track down Texas Democratic legislators who had flown to Oklahoma.

Today's [New York Post](#) reports that Scott Palmer, the Hastert aide, knew about the Fossella-Fay problem, too. He did something but not about the wayward congressman. Instead, Palmer called the Pentagon and reported Fay for unprofessional behavior. "I lost confidence in her and I'm not going to kid you," Palmer told the *Post*. "I was also concerned with this other relationship thing. It didn't look like it should."

Five years later, Republicans no doubt wish their leaders had lost confidence in Fossella after the Alhambra instead of waiting for the mistress, love child, and DUI. But as Pat Moynihan warned, there's a limit to the number of ethically deviant members any community can afford to recognize at one time. ... **10:52 A.M.** ([link](#))

Tuesday, May 6, 2008

Three's Company: For Democrats who still can't decide between Clinton and Obama, a third candidate has put his name on the ballot in the Idaho primary later this month. Keith Russell Judd is pro-choice, opposes No Child Left Behind, wants to end the war in Iraq, and once bowled a 300

game. There's just one catch: he's an inmate at a federal prison in Beaumont, Texas, and won't get out until 2013.

Two decades ago, Idaho nearly re-elected a congressman who was on his way to prison. So perhaps it was only a matter of time before someone already in prison would see Idaho as a springboard to the White House.

Asked how a federal prisoner could qualify for the ballot, Idaho Secretary of State Ben Ysursa told the press, "We got conned." The state recently eliminated the requirement for candidates to gather signatures; now they just need to fill out a form and pay a \$1,000 fee. According to the [Spokane Spokesman-Review](#), Keith Judd sent forms and checks to 14 states, but only Idaho put his name on the ballot.

Judd isn't the only out-of-state candidate on the primary ballot. [Hal Styles Jr. of Desert Hot Springs, California](#), who has never been to Idaho, is seeking the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate. For all the heartache and suffering that Larry Craig has caused the state, his arrest and subsequent humiliation have done wonders for candidate recruitment. Far from frightening people away, Craig has lowered the bar so much that even hardened criminals think they could win there.

Judd's 35-year membership in the NRA might give him an edge with some Idaho voters. But the road from Beaumont to Denver is a tough one. Idaho already selected its delegates in caucuses on Super Tuesday. The May 27 primary is just a beauty contest, and Judd [seems to be going for the Willie Nelson look](#).

Even in a year when come-from-behind victories have become the norm, a come-from-behind-bars campaign requires exceptional resourcefulness. Judd used a Texas newspaper tip line as the phone number for his campaign office, and an IRS line in Ohio as the number for his campaign coordinator. He paid the \$1,000 with a U.S. Treasury check drawn on his prison account.

Although no one has contributed to his campaign, Judd diligently files a [handwritten](#) FEC report [every quarter](#). The FEC database shows Judd for President with \$532,837 in total receipts, \$11,285

in total expenditures, and an impressive \$387,561 in cash on hand. With more than half a million in receipts, Judd's reported total exceeds that of Mike Gravel, who is practically a household name. The Huckabee and Giuliani campaigns would have done anything to match Judd's figure for cash-on-hand.

Running for president isn't a habit Judd picked up in prison, where he has spent the past decade since being convicted of [making threats at the University of New Mexico](#). He has been running for office his whole life. He ran for [mayor of Albuquerque](#) in the early '90s, and tried to run for governor. He sought the presidency in 1996, 2000, and 2004 – when he won [3 write-in votes](#). He has filed more than 70 FEC reports going all the way back to 1995.

Judd has shown the same persistence in the courts, firing off appeals at a faster clip than Larry Craig. In 1999, after receiving a dozen frivolous cert petitions from Judd, the [U.S. Supreme Court barred him from filing any more non-criminal claims](#) unless he paid the required fees. In 2005, the 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals prepared an order noting that Judd had filed "[at least 70 frivolous, duplicative and repetitive actions in this Court.](#)" By the time the order was issued, that number had reached 82.

Idaho has a long history of embracing maverick long shots, and Judd's [iconoclastic background and platform](#) won't hurt. He passes the Mickey Kaus test on welfare reform but not immigration. He favors eliminating all federal taxes so "the government can operate on its own self produced money." He wants to require gun licensing but let people carry concealed weapons. He says his national security views are "classified," but his Iraq position is "withdraw ASAP and forget it."

Judd plays the bass and bongos, belongs to the ACLU and the NRA, and admires JFK and Nixon. His nicknames are "Mr. President" and "Dark Priest," and his favorite athlete is a professional bowler. Bowling is hardly the rage in Idaho: In a fitting tribute to [Bowling Alone](#), Robert Putnam's famous theory of social alienation, my hometown turned the bowling alley into a self-storage complex. Still, Judd's rivals can only envy his claim to have once bowled a perfect game.

Idaho pundits, who've had their fill of national attention, cringe over Judd's candidacy. "Jailbird Makes Us Look Silly," wrote the Ketchum [Idaho Mountain Express](#). Others around the country note the irony that a felon can run but can't vote. The Illinois State University student newspaper, the *Daily Vidette*, defended Judd's right to run, but warned voters and party leaders not to support him: "[All superdelegates should save their endorsements for candidates with a real shot.](#)"

At one particularly low moment of the 1988 campaign, a news crew tracked down Willie Horton and found out that if he weren't behind bars, he would vote for Dukakis. Give Keith Judd credit for passing up the chance to endorse Obama or Clinton, and running against them instead. ... **12:28 A.M.** ([link](#))

Monday, April 21, 2008

[Running With the Big Dogs:](#) While Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama deflected Charlie Gibson's question about running together, last week was a big one for Democrats' *other* dream ticket: any Republican pairing that includes Mitt Romney. With a well-received cameo at a national press dinner and nods from Great Mentioners like [George H.W. Bush](#) and [Karl Rove](#), Mitt is back—and campaigning hard for the No. 2 slot.

When John McCain wrapped up the Republican nomination back in February, the odds against picking Romney looked long indeed. The two spent the entire primary season at each others' throats. Romney trashed McCain over "amnesty" for illegal immigrants; McCain joked that Romney's many flip-flops proved he really was "[the candidate of change.](#)" Even Rudy Giuliani, not known for making peace, chimed in from Florida that McCain and Romney were "[getting kind of nasty,](#)" implying that they needed to come chill with him at the beach.

Sure enough, after a little time off, Romney felt better—good enough to begin his vice-presidential audition. He went on Fox to say, "[There really are no hard feelings.](#)" He interrupted his vacation in Utah to [host a fundraiser for McCain](#). After months of dismissing McCain as a Washington insider, Romney [flip-flopped](#) and praised him as a longtime congressional champion of Reaganism. Lest anyone fail to notice, Romney confessed that he would be

honored to be McCain's running mate, and practiced ripping into the potential Democratic nominees: "When it comes to national security, [John McCain is the big dog, and they are the Chihuahuas.](#)"

Of course, [any big dog should think twice before agreeing to a long journey with Mitt Romney.](#) The past would not be easy for McCain, Romney, and their staffs and families to overcome. Before New Hampshire, McCain's alter ego, Mark Salter, called Romney "a small-varmint gun totin,' civil rights marching, NRA-endorsed fantasy candidate." After the primaries were over, Josh Romney suggested that the Five Brothers wouldn't be gassing up the Mittmobile for McCain anytime soon: "It's one thing to campaign for my dad, someone whose principles I line up with almost entirely," he told the [Deseret News](#). "I can't say the same thing for Sen. McCain."

For Mitt Romney, that won't be a problem: Any grudge would vanish the instant McCain named him as his running mate. And by the Republican convention in September, Romney's principles will be due for their six-month realignment.

The more difficult question is, What's in it for McCain? Actually, Romney brings more to the ticket than you might think. As in any partnership, the key to happiness between running mates is a healthy division of labor. When Bill Clinton and Al Gore teamed up in 1992, Clinton had spent most of his career on the economy, education, health care, and other domestic issues; Gore was an expert on national security, the environment, and technology. Even the Bush-Cheney pairing made some sense: Bush cared only about squandering the surplus, privatizing Social Security, and running the economy into the ground; Cheney was more interested in hoarding executive power, helping narrow interests, and tarnishing America's image in the world.

So, McCain and Romney are off to a good start: They come from different backgrounds and share no common interests. McCain, a soldier turned senator, prefers national security above all else. As a former businessman and governor, Romney rarely brings up foreign policy—for reasons that sometimes become apparent when he does so. In his concession speech, Romney said he was

dropping out to give McCain a united front against Obama, Clinton, and Bin Laden. "In this time of war, I simply cannot let my campaign be a part of aiding a surrender to terror," he said. "We cannot allow the next president of the United States to [retreat in the face of evil extremism!!](#)"

For the general election, the McCain campaign must decide what to do with conservative positions it took to win the Republican primaries. Here again, Romney is a godsend: a vice-presidential candidate who'll flip-flop so the nominee doesn't have to. No one can match Romney's experience at changing positions: He has been on both sides of abortion, talked out of both sides of his mouth on same-sex marriage, and been for and against his own health care plan. It's a market-based approach to principle—just the glue Republicans need to expand their coalition. Moderates might assume Romney was only pretending to be conservative, and conservatives will thank him for trying.

Straight talk is all well and good for presidential candidates. But as Dick Cheney demonstrated, the job of a Republican vice-presidential candidate is quite the opposite—keeping a straight face while saying things that couldn't possibly be true. Take the economy, for example. McCain gets visibly uncomfortable whenever he ventures beyond fiscal conservatism. Romney is more flexible. In an interview with [National Journal](#) last week, he had no trouble contending that corporate tax cuts help the middle class. He spent the primaries warning that the United States was on a slippery slope to becoming the next France. Now he's perfectly happy to argue that we have to cut corporate taxes to keep companies from moving to France.

In his [surprise appearance](#) at the Radio & Television Correspondents dinner in Washington last week, Romney showed another virtue that makes him perfect for the role—a vice-presidential temperament. With his "[Top 10 Reasons for Dropping Out](#)," he proved that he is ready to poke fun at himself on Day 1.

A vice president needs to be good at self-deprecation, yet not so skilled that he outshines the boss. By that standard, Romney's audition was perfect: He chose good material ("There weren't as many Osmonds as I had thought"; "As a lifelong hunter, I didn't want to miss the start of varmint

season") and [delivered it just awkwardly enough](#) to leave the audience wondering whether to laugh or feel slightly uncomfortable.

After watching him up close in the primaries, Team McCain no doubt harbors real reservations about Romney. Some conservatives distrust him so much, they're running full-page ads that say, "[NO Mitt](#)." A Google search of *John McCain*, *Mitt Romney*, and [food taster](#) produces more than 100 entries.

But looking ahead to a tense fall campaign, McCain should put those concerns aside and listen to voices from across the spectrum. This could be the issue that unites the country across party lines. Democrats like a little fun at Mitt Romney's expense. The McCain camp does, too—perhaps more so. And after last week, we know that—ever the good sport—even Romney's all for it. ... **2:14 p.m.** ([link](#))

Thursday, April 10, 2008

Twist and Shout: When the news broke last August that Larry Craig had been arrested in a restroom sex sting, he had a ready answer: The *Idaho Statesman* made him do it. He claimed that the *Statesman's* monthslong investigation into whether he was gay made him panic and plead guilty. Otherwise, he said, he feared that what happened in Minneapolis might not stay in Minneapolis, and the *Statesman* would make sure the voters of Idaho found out.

Craig's jihad against the *Statesman* didn't go over too well in Idaho, where people are more likely to read the newspaper in the restroom than worry about it afterward. On Monday, the *Statesman* was named a runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize in Breaking News Reporting for what the committee called "[its tenacious coverage of the twists and turns in the scandal involving the state's senator, Larry Craig](#)."

The story took yet another strange twist and turn this week. For the past six months, the entire political world has been wondering why Craig promised to resign when the scandal broke, then changed his mind a few days later. In a rare interview Wednesday with the congressional newspaper the *Hill*, Craig finally found someone to

blame for staying in the Senate: The people of Idaho made him do it.

According to the *Hill*, Craig said "[support from Idahoans convinced him to reverse his pledge to resign last year](#)." This was news to most Idaho voters, who have viewed the whole affair with shock, outrage, embarrassment, and dismay. But Craig didn't stop there. *The Hill* reports that he also said his decision not to run for re-election "pre-dated the controversy."

Last fall, Craig stunned Idahoans by insisting he was not gay, not guilty, and not leaving. Now he says it's our fault he never left, he was leaving anyway, and if he's not running, it's not because we don't believe him when he says he's not guilty and not gay.

Unfortunately, Craig's latest explanation casts some doubt on the excuse he gave last fall. If he had already decided long ago that he wasn't running for re-election, he had less reason to panic over his arrest, and much less to fear from voters finding out about it back home. In September, he made it sound as if he pled guilty to a crime he didn't commit to avoid a political firestorm back home. If politics were of no concern, he had every reason to fight the charges in court. For that matter, if he was so sure he wouldn't run again, he could have announced his decision early last year, which might have staved off the *Statesman* investigation before it got started.

Craig's latest revelation undermines his defense in another way as well. If he is telling the truth that he had made up his mind not to run before his arrest, that would be the best explanation yet for why he risked putting himself in a position to get arrested. Eliot Spitzer's re-election prospects plunged long before he got caught, too.

Nothing can fully explain why public figures like Craig and Spitzer would flagrantly risk arrest. But we can rule out political suicide if they'd already decided their political careers were over. ... **3:55 p.m.** ([link](#))

Wednesday, April 2, 2008

B.Looper: Learned reader Kyle Sammin recalls that Idaho's Marvin "Pro-Life" Richardson has

nothing on 1998 Tennessee State Senate candidate [Byron "Low-Tax" Looper](#). Besides changing his name, Looper also murdered his opponent. Under Tennessee law, the names of dead candidates are removed from the ballot. So even though he was quickly charged with homicide, Looper nearly ran unopposed. The victim's widow won a last-minute write-in campaign. Looper was sentenced to life in prison.

Bloopers: The Pittsburgh Pirates are now the most mediocre [first-place](#) team in baseball history. In their season opener Monday night against Atlanta, the Bucs provided plenty of evidence that this year will turn out like the last 15. They blew a five-run lead in the ninth by walking four batters and booting an easy fly ball. Pirate players said they'd [never seen anything like it](#), not even in Little League. For an inning, it looked like the team had gone on strike to [demand more money](#).

But to every Buc fan's surprise, the Pirates won, anyway—12-11 in 12 innings—and with no game Tuesday, Pittsburgh has been above .500 for two glorious days. New General Manager [Neal Huntington](#) e-mailed me on Monday to promise that the team's new regime is determined to build an organization that will make the people of Pittsburgh proud again. That might take a while. For now, we're content to make the people of Atlanta feel really embarrassed. ... **1:35 p.m.** ([link](#))

Tuesday, April 1, 2008

Danger Is My Middle Name: Outgoing Senator Larry Craig can take consolation in one thing: out in Idaho, everyone wants his seat. Fourteen candidates have filed to run for the Senate, including [eight Republicans, two Democrats, two Independents, and a Libertarian](#). Hal Styles Jr. of Desert Hot Springs, California, entered the Republican primary, [even though he has never been to Idaho](#). "I know I'll love it because, clean air, clean water and many, many, many mountains," he says. "My heart, my mind, my body, my soul, my thoughts are in this to win."

The general election will likely be a rematch between former Democratic congressman [Larry LaRocco](#) and Republican Lt. Gov. (and former governor) [Jim Risch](#). If Idahoans find those

two insufficiently embarrassing, however, a number of fringe candidates have lined up to take Craig's place. According to [CO](#), one Independent, Rex Rammel, is a former elk rancher who is angry that Risch ordered state wildlife officials to shoot some of his elk that got away. The Libertarian, Kent A. Marmon, is running against ["the ever-expanding Socialist agenda"](#) he claims is being pushed by Democratic congressmen like John Dingell.

But by far the most creative third-party candidate is Marvin Richardson, an organic strawberry farmer who went to court to change his name to "Pro-Life." Two years ago, he made that his middle name and tried to run for governor as Marvin "Pro-Life" Richardson. State election officials ruled that middle names couldn't be used to make a political statement on the ballot. As plain old Marvin Richardson, he won [just 1.6% of the vote](#).

Now that "Pro-Life" is his full name, the state had to [let him run that way on the ballot](#). He told the *Idaho Press-Tribune* that with the name change, he should win 5%. He plans to run for office every two years for as long as he lives: "If I save one baby's life, it will be worth it."

As the *Press-Tribune* points out, Pro-Life is not a single-issue candidate, but has a comprehensive platform. In addition to abortion, he opposes "homosexuality, adultery, and fornication." He wants the pro-life movement to refer to abortion as "murder," although he has not yet insisted pro-choice candidates change their name to that.

Idaho Republicans and anti-abortion activists don't share Pro-Life's enthusiasm. They worry that conservative voters will check the box next to both Pro-Life and the Republican candidate, thereby spoiling their ballots. So last week, the Idaho Secretary of State persuaded both houses of the legislature to pass [emergency legislation](#) to clarify that "voters are casting a vote for a person and not a political proposition." Under the legislation, candidates who appear to have changed their names to "convey a political message" will be outed on the ballot as "a person, formerly known as" The Prince Bill will go to the governor for signature this week.

According to the Associated Press, Pro-Life accuses legislators of ["trying to legislate intelligence"](#)—a charge not often hurled at the Idaho legislature. "The people that vote for me are more intelligent than to have something defined in legislation like this," he says.

Of course, Idahoans who really want to make a political statement will still be able to outsmart the Prince Bill. Nothing in the legislation prohibits Idaho parents who feel strongly about issues from naming their children Pro-Life or Pro-Gun at birth. For that matter, Marvin Richardson has changed his name so many times that if he changes it again, the ballot might have to describe him as "a person formerly known as 'Pro-Life.'" Or he could just change his name to Mitt Romney.

On the other hand, Republicans and Democrats alike can breathe a sign of relief over another unintended effect: the new law foils Larry Craig's best strategy for a comeback. Before the law, Craig could have changed his name to "Not Gay" and won in a landslide. "A person formerly known as Not Gay" is more like it. ... **5:27 p.m.** ([link](#))

Friday, Mar. 28, 2008

We Are Family: Midway through the run-up to the next primary, the presidential campaigns are searching for fresh ways to reach the voters of Pennsylvania. My grandparents left Pittsburgh more than 80 years ago, so my Pennsylvania roots are distant. But I still think I can speak for at least half the state in suggesting one bold proposal we long for every April: a plan to rescue one of the most mediocre teams in baseball history, the Pittsburgh Pirates.

Granted, the nation faces more urgent crises. But in hard times, people often look to sports for solace. To blue-collar workers in taverns across western Pennsylvania, watching the Pirates lose night after night is as predictably grim as the Bush economy. The lowly Bucs are the reigning disappointment in the world of sport—with a batting average that seems pegged to the dollar and prospects of victory in line with the war in Iraq.

The Pittsburgh franchise hasn't finished above .500 since 1992. If, as universally predicted, the Pirates turn in their 16th consecutive losing season this year, they will tie the all-time frustration record for professional sport set by the Philadelphia Phillies in the 1930s and '40s.

Pittsburgh is still a proud, vibrant city, which has rebounded handsomely from losses far more consequential than the Pirates'. The once-proud Pirates, by contrast, show plenty of rust but no signs of recovery. In 1992, the team was an inning away from the World Series, when the Atlanta Braves scored three runs in the bottom of the ninth to steal Game 7 of the National League Championship Series. The Braves soon moved to the NL East en route to winning 14 consecutive division titles, the longest in sports history. The Pirates moved from the East to the Central and began their soon-to-be-record-setting plunge in the opposite direction.

On Monday, the Pirates return to Atlanta for Opening Day against the Braves. Baseball analysts no longer give a reason in predicting another last-place Bucco finish. This year, the *Washington Post* didn't even bother to come up with a new joke. Last season's [Post preview](#) said:

Blech. This Pirates team is so mediocre, so uninteresting, so destined for last place, we don't know if we can squeeze another sentence out of it for this capsule we're being paid to write. But here's one. ... The Pirates haven't had a winning season since 1992, and that streak will continue this year. That's still not long enough? Well, here's another line! Hey—two sentences in one line! Make that three! And here's another! See how easy that is?

This year, [the same Post analyst](#) wrote:

Okay, folks, here's the deal: We need to fill precisely 4.22 column-inches of type with information about the faceless, tasteless Pirates, and as usual we're not sure we can do it. But guess what? We're already at .95 inches, and we're just getting started! Wait—make that 1.19 inches. ... Should they finish below .500 again (and let's be honest, how can they not?), they will tie the Phillies of 1933-48 for the most consecutive losing seasons. (By the way, that's 3.53 inches, and we haven't even had to mention new manager John Russell, Capps's promise as a closer or the vast potential of the Snell-Gorzalanny duo.) There: 4.22 inches. Piece of cake."

So now the Pirates even hold the record for consecutive seasons as victims of the same bad joke.

Pittsburgh faces all the challenges of a small-market team. Moreover, as David Maraniss pointed out in his lyrical biography, [Clemente](#), the first love for Pittsburgh fans has long been football, not baseball. These days, no one can blame them.

Seven years ago, in a desperate bid to revive the Pirates' fortunes, the city built PNC Park, a gorgeous field with [the most spectacular view in baseball](#). From behind home plate, you can look out on the entire expanse of American economic history—from the [Allegheny River](#) to [1920s-era steel suspension bridges](#) to gleaming glass skyscrapers.

The result? As Pittsburgh writer Don Spagnolo noted last year in "[79 Reasons Why It's Hard To Be a Pirates Fan](#)," Pittsburgh now has "the best stadium in the country, soiled by the worst team." (The *Onion* once suggested, "[PNC Park Threatens To Leave Pittsburgh Unless Better Team Is Built](#).") Spagnolo notes that the city already set some kind of record by hosting baseball's All-Star game in 1994 and 2006 without a single winning season in between.

Although the Pirates' best player, Jason Bay, is from Canada, if Pittsburgh fans have suffered because of trade, the blame belongs not to NAFTA but to an inept front office. Jason Schmidt, now one of the top 100 strikeout aces in history, was traded to the Giants. Another, Tim Wakefield, left for the Red Sox. Franchise player Aramis Ramirez was dealt to the Cubs. When owners sell off members of a winning team, it's called a fire sale. The Pirates have been more like a yard sale. In 2003, when the Cubs nearly made the Series, the Pirates supplied one-third of their [starting lineup](#).

In the early '80s, an angry fan famously threw a battery at Pirate outfielder Dave Parker. Last June, fans registered their frustration in a more constructive way. To protest more than a decade of ownership mismanagement, they launched a Web site, [IrateFans.com](#), and organized a "Fans for Change" walkout after the third inning of a home game. Unfortunately, only a few hundred fans who left their seats actually left the game; most just got up to get beer.

This year, fans are still for change but highly skeptical. In an online interview, the new team

president admitted, "The Pirates are not in a rebuilding mode. We're in a building mode." One fan asked bitterly, "[How many home runs will the 'change in atmosphere' hit this season?](#)"

I've been a Pirate fan for four decades—the first glorious, the second dreary, the last two a long march from despair to downright humiliation. In more promising times, my wife proposed to me at Three Rivers Stadium, where we returned for our honeymoon. On the bright side, the 2001 [implosion of Three Rivers](#) enabled me to find two red plastic stadium seats as an anniversary present on eBay.

Our children live for baseball but laugh at our Pirate caps—and, at ages 12 and 14, haven't been alive to see a winning Pirate season. Yet like so many in western Pennsylvania, I've been a Pirate fan too long to be retrained to root for somebody else.

After 15 years, we Bucs fans aren't asking for miracles. We just want what came so easily to the pre-2004 Red Sox, the post-1908 Cubs, and the other great losing teams of all time: sympathy. Those other teams are no longer reliable: The Red Sox have become a dynasty; 2008 really could be the Cubs' year. If you want a lovable loser that will never let you down, the Pittsburgh Pirates could be your team, too. ... **12:06 p.m.** ([link](#))

Thursday, Mar. 13, 2008

Craigenfrende: In a new high for the partisan divide, a mini-debate has broken out in far-flung corners of the blogosphere on the urgent question: Who's the bigger hypocrite, Larry Craig or Eliot Spitzer?

Conservative blogger Michael Medved of [Townhall](#) offers a long list of reasons why Craig doesn't need to go as urgently as Spitzer did. He finds Craig less hypocritical ("trolling for sex in a men's room, doesn't logically require that you support gay marriage"), much easier to pity, and "pathetic and vulnerable" in a way Spitzer is not. Liberal blogger [Anonymous Is a Woman](#) counters that while Craig and Louisiana Sen. David Vitter remain in office, at least Spitzer resigned.

Warning, much political baggage may look alike. So, party labels aside, who's the bigger hypocrite?

Certainly, a politician caught red-handed committing the very crimes he used to prosecute can make a strong case for himself. In his resignation speech, Spitzer admitted as much: "Over the course of my public life, I have insisted, I believe correctly, that people, regardless of their position or power, take responsibility for their conduct. I can and will ask no less of myself."

Moreover, for all the [conservative complaints about media bias](#), the circumstances of Spitzer's fall from grace ensure that tales of his hypocrisy will reverberate louder and longer than Craig's. Already [a media star](#) in the media capital of the world, he managed to destroy his career with a flair even a tabloid editor couldn't have imagined. Every detail of his case is more titillating than Craig's—call girls with MySpace pages and stories to tell, not a lone cop who won't talk to the press; hotel suites instead of bathroom stalls; bank rolls instead of toilet rolls; [wide angles](#) instead of wide stances; a club for emperors, not [Red Carpet](#).

Spitzer flew much closer to the sun than Craig, so his sudden plunge is the far greater political tragedy. No matter how far his dive, Craig couldn't make that kind of splash. You'll never see the headline "Craig Resigns" splashed across six columns of the *New York Times*. Of course, since he refuses to resign, you won't see it in the *Idaho Statesman*, either.

Yet out of stubborn home-state chauvinism, if nothing else, we Idahoans still marvel at the level of hypocrisy our boy has achieved, even without all the wealth, fame, and privilege that a rich New Yorker was handed on a silver platter. Many Easterners think it's easy for an Idahoan to be embarrassing—that just being from Boise means you're halfway there.

We disagree. Craig didn't grow up in the center of attention, surrounded by money, glamour, and all the accouterments of hypocrisy. He grew up in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by mountains. When he got arrested, he didn't have paid help to bring him down. No Mann Act for our guy: He carried his own bags and did his own travel.

Larry Craig is a self-made hypocrite. He achieved his humiliation the old-fashioned way: He earned it.

Unlike Spitzer, who folded his cards without a fight, Craig upped the ante by privately admitting guilt, then publicly denying it. His lawyers filed yet another appellate brief this week, insisting that the prosecution is wrong to accuse him of making a "[prehensile stare](#)."

While it's admittedly a low standard, Craig may have had his least-awful week since his scandal broke in August. A Minnesota jury acquitted a man who was arrested by the same airport sting operation. Craig [didn't finish last](#) in the Senate power rankings by Congress.org. Thanks to Spitzer, Craig can now tell folks back home that whatever they think of what he did, at least they don't have to be embarrassed by how much he spent. In fact, he is probably feeling some *Craigenfreude*—taking pleasure in someone else's troubles because those troubles leave people a little less time to take pleasure in your own.

Like misery, hypocrisy loves company—which, for both Spitzer and Craig, turned out to be the problem. But Spitzer was right to step down, and Craig should long ago have done the same. Politics is a tragic place to chase your demons. ... **5:30 p.m.** ([link](#))

Wednesday, Mar. 5, 2008

All the Way: As death-defying Clinton comebacks go, the primaries in Ohio and Texas were very nearly not heart-stopping enough. On Monday, public polls started predicting a Clinton rebound, threatening to spoil the key to any wild ride: surprise. Luckily, the early exit polls on Tuesday evening showed Obama with narrow leads in both do-or-die states, giving those of us in Clinton World who live for such moments a few more hours to stare into the abyss.

Now that the race is once again up for grabs, much of the political establishment is dreading the seven-week slog to the next big primary in Pennsylvania. Many journalists had wanted to go home and put off seeing Scranton until [The Office](#) returns on April 10. Some Democrats in Washington were in a rush to find out the winner so they could decide who they've been for all along.

As a Clintonite, I'm delighted that the show will go on. But even if I were on the sidelines, my reaction would have been the same. No matter which team you're rooting for, you've got to admit: We will never see another contest like this one, and the political junkie in all of us hopes it will never end.

It looks like we could get our wish—so we might as well rejoice and be glad in it. A long, exciting race for the nomination will be good for the Democratic Party, good for the eventual nominee, and the ride of a lifetime for every true political fan.

For the party, the benefits are obvious: By making this contest go the distance, the voters have done what party leaders wanted to do all along. This cycle, the Democratic National Committee was desperate to avoid the front-loaded calendar that backfired last time. As [David Greenberg](#) points out, the 2004 race was over by the first week of March—and promptly handed Republicans a full eight months to destroy our nominee. This time, the DNC begged states to back-load the calendar, even offering bonus delegates for moving primaries to late spring. Two dozen states flocked to Super Tuesday anyway.

Happily, voters took matters into their own hands and gave the spring states more clout than party leaders ever could have hoped for. Last fall, NPR ran a whimsical story about [the plight of South Dakota voters](#), whose June 3 contest is the last primary (along with Montana) on the calendar. Now restaurateurs, innkeepers, and vendors from Pierre to Rapid City look forward to that primary as Christmas in June.

But the national party, state parties, and Sioux Falls cafes aren't the only ones who'll benefit. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the biggest beneficiaries of a protracted battle for the nomination are the two contestants themselves. Primaries are designed to be a warm-up for the general election, and a few more months of spring training will only improve their swings for the fall.

And let's face it: These two candidates know how to put on a show. Both are raising astonishing sums of money and attracting swarms of voters to the polls. Over the past month, their three head-to-head debates have drawn the largest audiences in cable television history. The second half of last

week's MSNBC debate was the most watched show on any channel, with [nearly 8 million viewers](#). An astonishing 4 million people tuned in to watch MSNBC's post-debate analysis, an experience so excruciating that it's as if every person in the Bay Area picked the same night to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge.

The permanent campaign turns out to be the best reality show ever invented. Any contest that can sustain that kind of excitement is like the World Series of poker: The value of the pot goes up with each hand, and whoever wins it won't be the least bit sorry that both sides went all-in.

No matter how it turns out, all of us who love politics have to pinch ourselves that we're alive to see a race that future generations will only read about. Most campaigns, even winning ones, only seem historic in retrospect. This time, we already know it's one for the ages; we just don't know how, when, or whether it's going to end.

Even journalists who dread spending the next seven weeks on the Pennsylvania Turnpike have to shake their heads in wonderment. In the lede of their lead story in Wednesday's *Washington Post*, Dan Balz and Jon Cohen referred to "[the remarkable contest](#)" that could stretch on till summer. They didn't sign on to spend the spring in Scranton and Sioux Falls. But, like the rest of us, they wouldn't miss this amazing stretch of history for anything. ... **11:59 p.m.** ([link](#))

Monday, Feb. 25, 2008

Hope Springs Eternal: With this weekend's [victory in Puerto Rico](#) and even more resounding [triumph over the New York Times](#), John McCain moved within 200 delegates of mathematically clinching the Republican nomination. Mike Huckabee is [having a good time](#) playing out the string, but the rest of us have been forced to get on with our lives and accept that it's just not the same without Mitt.

But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? Out in Salt Lake City, [in an interview with the Deseret Morning News](#), Josh Romney leaves open the possibility that his father might get back in the race:

Josh Romney called speculation that his father could be back in the race as either a vice presidential candidate or even at the top of the ticket as the GOP's presidential candidate "possible. Unlikely, but possible."

That's not much of an opening and no doubt more of one than he intended. But from mountain to prairie, the groundswell is spreading. Endorsements are flooding in from conservative bloggers like [this one](#):

Mitt Romney was not my first choice for a presidential candidate, but he came third after Duncan Hunter and Fred Thompson. ... I would love to see Mitt reenter the race.

Even if re-entry is too much to hope for, Josh hints that another Romney comeback may be in the works. He says he has been approached about running for Congress in Utah's 2nd District.

That, too, may be an unlikely trial balloon. Josh is just 32, has three young children, and would face a Democratic incumbent, Rep. Jim Matheson, who is [one of the most popular politicians in the state](#). Matheson's father was a governor, too. But unlike Mitt Romney, Scott Matheson was governor of Utah.

If Mitt Romney has his eye on the No. 2 spot, Josh didn't do him any favors. "It's one thing to campaign for my dad, someone whose principles I line up with almost entirely," he told the *Morning News*. "I can't say the same thing for Sen. McCain."

Even so, Romney watchers can only take heart that after a year on the campaign trail, Josh has bounced back so quickly. "I was not that upset," he says of his father's defeat. "I didn't cry or anything."

In his year on the stump, Josh came across as the most down-to-earth of the Romney boys. He visited all 99 of Iowa's counties in the campaign Winnebago, [the Mitt Mobile](#). He joked about [his father's faults](#), such as "he has way too much

energy." He let a Fox newswoman interview him [in the master bedroom of the Mitt Mobile](#). (He showed her the air fresheners.) He blogged about the [moose, salmon, and whale](#) he ate while campaigning in Alaska—but when the feast was over, he delivered the Super Tuesday state for his dad.

As Jonathan Martin of *Politico* reported last summer, Josh was campaigning with his parents at the Fourth of July parade in Clear Lake, Iowa, [when the Romneys ran into the Clintons](#). After Mitt told the Clintons how many counties Josh had visited, Hillary said, "You've got this built-in campaign team with your sons." Mitt replied, to Ann's apparent dismay, "If we had known, we would've had more."

We'll never know whether that could have made the difference. For now, we'll have to settle for the unlikely but possible hope that Mitt will come back to take another bow. ... **4:13 p.m.** ([link](#))

Monday, Feb. 11, 2008

Face Time: When Ralph Reed showed up at a Romney fundraiser last May, [Mitt thought he was Gary Bauer](#) – perpetuating the tiresome stereotype that like some Reeds, all Christian conservatives look alike. Now, in Mitt's hour of need, Ralph is returning the favor. According to the *Washington Times*, he and 50 other right-wing leaders met with Romney on Thursday "to discuss the former Massachusetts governor becoming [the face of conservatism](#)."

Nothing against Romney, who surely would have been a better president than he let on. But if he were "the face of conservatism," he'd be planning his acceptance speech, not interviewing with Ralph Reed and friends for the next time around.

Conservatives could not have imagined it would end this way: the movement that produced Ollie North, Alan Keyes, and ardent armies of true believers, now mulling over an arranged marriage of convenience with a Harvard man who converted for the occasion. George Will must be reaching for his Yeats: "Was it for this ... that all that blood was shed?"

For more than a year, Republican presidential candidates tried to win the Reagan Primary. Their final tableau came at a debate in the Gipper's library, with his airplane as a backdrop and his widow in the front row. It was bad enough to see them reach back 20 years to find a conservative president they could believe in, but this might be worse: Now Romney's competing to claim he's the biggest conservative *loser* since Reagan. If McCain comes up short like Gerald Ford, Mitt wants to launch a comeback like it's 1976.

Even conservative leaders can't hide their astonishment over finding themselves in this position. "If someone had suggested a year ago and a half ago that we would be welcoming Mitt Romney as a potential leader of the conservative movement, no one would have believed it," American Conservative Union chairman David Keene reportedly told the group. "But over the last year and a half, he has convinced us he is one of us and walks with us."

Conservative activist Jay Sekulow told the *Washington Times* that Romney is a "turnaround specialist" who can revive conservatism's fortunes. But presumably, Romney's number-crunching skills are the last thing the movement needs: there are no voters left to fire.

To be sure, Mitt was with conservatives when the music stopped. Right-wing activists who voted in the [CPAC straw poll](#) narrowly supported him over McCain, 35% to 34%. By comparison, they favored getting out of the United Nations by 57% to 42% and opposed a foreign policy based on spreading democracy by 82% to 15%. Small-government conservatism trounced social conservatism 59% to 22%, with only 16% for national-security conservatism.

As voters reminded him more Tuesdays than not, Mitt Romney is not quite Ronald Reagan. He doesn't have an issue like the Panama Canal. Far from taking the race down to the wire, he'll end up third. While he's a good communicator, many voters looking for the face of conservatism couldn't see past what one analyst in the *Deseret News* described as the ["CEO robot from Jupiter."](#)

If anything, Romney was born to be the face of the Ford wing of the Republican Party – an economic

conservative with only a passing interest in the other two legs of Reagan's conservative stool. Like Ford, Mitt won the Michigan primary. He won all the places he calls home, and it's not his fault his father wasn't governor of more states.

Romney does have one advantage. With a conservative president nearing historic lows in the polls and a presumptive nominee more intent on leading the country, heading the conservative movement might be like running the 2002 Olympics – a job nobody else wants.

Paul Erickson, the Romney strategist who organized the conservative powwow, called McCain's nomination "an existential crisis for the Republican Party," and held out Mitt as a possible Messiah: "You could tell everybody at the table sitting with Romney was asking himself: 'Is he the one?'"

Romney has demonstrated many strengths over the years, but impersonating a diehard conservative and leading a confused movement out of the wilderness aren't foremost among them. It might be time for the right to take up another existential question: If conservatism needs Mitt Romney and Ralph Reed to make a comeback, is there enough face left to save? ... **3:37 p.m.** ([link](#))

Thursday, Feb. 7, 2008

[Romney, We Hardly Knew Ye:](#) When Mitt Romney launched his campaign last year, he struck many Republicans as the perfect candidate. He was a businessman with a Midas touch, an optimist with a charmed life and family, a governor who had slain the Democratic dragon in the blue state Republicans love to hate. In a race against national heroes like John McCain and Rudy Giuliani, he started out as a dark horse, but to handicappers, he was a dark horse with great teeth.

When Democrats looked at Romney, we also saw the perfect candidate—for us to run against. The best presidential candidates have the ability to change people's minds. Mitt Romney never got that far because he never failed to change his own mind first.

So when Romney gamely suspended his campaign this afternoon, there was heartfelt sadness on both

sides of the aisle. Democrats are sorry to lose an adversary whose ideological marathon vividly illustrated the vast distance a man must travel to reach the right wing of the Republican Party. Romney fans lose a candidate who just three months ago led the polls in Iowa and New Hampshire and was the smart pick to win the nomination.

With a formidable nominee in John McCain, the GOP won't be sorry. But Romney's farewell at the Conservative Political Action Committee meeting shows how far the once-mighty right wing has fallen. In an introduction laced with barbs in McCain's direction, Laura Ingraham's description of Mitt as "a conservative's conservative" said all there is to say about Romney's campaign and the state of the conservative movement. If their last, best hope is a guy who only signed up two years ago and could hardly convince them he belonged, the movement is in even worse shape than it looks.

Had Romney run on his real strength—as an intelligent, pragmatic, and competent manager—his road to the nomination might have gone the way of Rudy Giuliani's. Yet ironically, his eagerness to preach the conservative gospel brought on his demise. Romney pandered with conviction. He even tried to make it a virtue, defending his conversion on abortion by telling audiences that he would never apologize for being a latecomer to the cause of standing up for human life. Conservatives thanked him for trying but preferred the genuine article. In Iowa, Romney came in second to a true believer, and New Hampshire doesn't have enough diehards to put him over the top.

Romney's best week came in Michigan, when a sinking economy gave him a chance to talk about the one subject where his party credentials were in order. In Michigan, Romney sounded like a 21st-century version of the business Republicans who dominated that state in the '50s and '60s—proud, decent, organization men like Gerald Ford and George Romney. As he sold his plan to turn the Michigan economy around, Mitt seemed as surprised as the voters by how much better he could be when he genuinely cared about the subject.

By then, however, he had been too many things to too many people for too long. McCain was authentic, Huckabee was conservative, and Romney couldn't convince enough voters he was either one.

Good sport to the end, Romney went down pandering. His swansong at CPAC touched all the right's hot buttons. He blamed out-of-wedlock births on government programs, attacks on religion, and "tolerance for pornography." He got his biggest applause for attacking the welfare state, declaring dependency a culture-killing poison that is "death to initiative."

Even in defeat, he gave glimpses of the Mitt we'll miss—the lovably square, *Father Knows Best* figure with the impossibly wholesome family and perfect life. He talked about taking "a weed-whacker to regulations." He warned that we might soon become "the France of the 21st century." He pointed out that he had won nearly as many states as McCain, but joked awkwardly with the ultraconservative audience that he lost "because size does matter."

He didn't say whether we'll have the Romneys to kick around anymore. But with the family fortune largely intact and five sons to carry on the torch, we can keep hope alive. In the Salt Lake City paper this morning, a leading political scientist predicted that if Democrats win the White House in 2008, Romney "[would automatically be a frontrunner for 2012.](#)"

It's hard to imagine a more perfect outcome. For now, sadness reigns. As the Five Brothers might say, somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout; but there is no joy in Mittville—Guy Smiley has dropped out. ... **5:42 p.m.** ([link](#))

Tuesday, Feb. 5, 2008

Mittmentum: With John McCain on cruise control toward the Republican nomination, Mitt Romney finds himself in a desperate quest to rally true believers – a role for which his even temper and uneven record leave him spectacularly unsuited. Romney knows how to tell the party faithful everything they want to hear. But it's not easy for a man who prides himself on his optimism, polish, and good fortune to stir anger and mutiny in the

conservative base. Only a pitchfork rebellion can stop McCain now, and Luddites won't man the ramparts because they like your PowerPoint.

So far, the Republican base seems neither shaken nor stirred. McCain has a commanding 2-1 margin in national polls, and leads Romney most everywhere except California, where Mitt hopes for an upset tonight. Professional troublemakers like Ann Coulter and Rush Limbaugh are up in arms, trying to persuade their followers that McCain is somehow Hillary by other means. On Monday, Limbaugh did his best imitation of Romney's stump speech, dubbing Mitt the only candidate who stands for all three legs of the conservative stool. Strange bedfellows indeed: Rush-Romney is like a hot-blooded android – the first Dittohead-Conehead pairing in galactic history.

On Saturday, Mitt Romney wandered to the back of his campaign plane and told the press, "[These droids aren't the droids you're looking for.](#)" Oddly enough, that's exactly the reaction most Republicans have had to his campaign.

But in the home stretch, Romney has energized one key part of his base: his own family. Yesterday, the Romney boys set a campaign record by putting up six posts on the Five Brothers blog – matching their high from when they launched last April. Mitt may be down, but the Five Brothers are back.

The past month has been grim for the happy-go-lucky Romney boys. They sometimes went days between posts. When they did post, it was often from [states they had just campaigned in and lost](#). Bright spots were hard to come by. After South Carolina, Tagg found a "[Romney girl](#)" video, set to the tune of "1985," in which a smiling young Alabaman named Danielle sang of Mitt as the next Reagan. One commenter recommended raising \$3 million to run the clip as a Super Bowl ad; another asked Danielle out on behalf of his own five sons. A few days later, Matt put up a clip of a [computerized prank call](#) to his dad, pretending to be Arnold Schwarzenegger – prompting a priceless exchange between robo-candidate and Terminator. Then the real Arnold spoiled the joke by endorsing the real McCain.

In the run-up to Super Tuesday, however, a spring is back in the Five Brothers' step. On Sunday, Josh wrote a post about his campaign trip to Alaska. Richard Nixon may have lost in 1960 because his pledge to campaign in all 50 states forced him to spend the last weekend in Alaska. That didn't stop Josh Romney, who posted a [gorgeous photo of Mount McKinley](#) and a snapshot of some Romney supporters shivering somewhere outside Fairbanks, where the high was 13 below. He wrote, "I sampled all of the Alaskan classics: moose, salmon and whale. Oh so good." Eating whale would certainly be red meat for a liberal crowd, but conservatives loved it too. "Moose is good stuff," one fan wrote. Another supporter mentioned friends who've gone on missions abroad and "talk about eating dog, horse, cow stomach, bugs." Rush, take note: McCain was ordering room service at the Hanoi Hilton while Mitt was keeping the faith by choking down tripe in Paris.

The rest of the family sounds like it's on the trail of big game as well. Ben Romney, the least prolific of the Five Brothers, didn't post from Thanksgiving through the South Carolina primary. Yesterday, he posted twice in one day – with a link to Limbaugh and a helpful guide to tonight's results, noting that in the past week members of the Romney family have campaigned in 17 of 21 states up for grabs on Super Tuesday. Now we can scientifically measure the Romney effect, by comparing the results in those 17 states with the four states (Idaho, Montana, Connecticut, Arizona) no Romney visited. After Huckabee's victory in West Virginia, the early score is 1-0 in favor of no Romneys.

Tagg, the team captain, also posted twice, urging the faithful to "Keep Fighting," and touting Mitt's evangelical appeal: "The Base Is Beginning to Rally." Back in June, Tagg joked with readers about [who would win a family farting contest](#). Now he's quoting evangelical Christian ministers. The brothers are so focused on the race, they haven't even mentioned their beloved Patriots' loss, although there has been no word from young Craig, the one they [tease](#) as [a Tom Brady lookalike](#).

Of course, if the Republican race ends tonight, the inheritance Mitt has told the boys not to count on will be safe at last. By all accounts, they couldn't care less. They seem to share Tagg's easy-come-

easy-go view that no matter what happens, this will have been the best trip the family has ever taken, and [this time no dogs were harmed along the way](#) (just moose, salmon, and whale).

At the moment, the Five Brothers must feel the same nostalgia to keep going that the rest of us will feel for their antics when they're gone. Back when the campaign began, Tagg joked that they would love their father win or lose, although he might become something of a national laughingstock in the meantime. Mitt did his part, but whatever happens tonight, he can be proud the firewall he cares most about – his family – has held up its end of the bargain. ... **6:15 p.m.** ([link](#))

the spectator

A Real Nuclear Option for the Nominees

Averting "inadvertent" war in two easy steps.

By Ron Rosenbaum

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 2:33 PM ET

Do you know about this? On Nov. 22, Thanksgiving Day, 2007, two U.S. jets were scrambled from the 90th Fighter Squadron at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska to intercept two Russian long-range "strategic" bombers (*strategic* being a euphemism for *nuclear-capable*) in the skies over the Aleutian Islands as the bombers approached Alaskan air space.

The U.S. F-22 jets monitored the Russian Bear H bombers at close range for a few minutes before the bombers turned back. This encounter was one of the consequences of Vladimir Putin's decision, announced last August, to resume regular "strategic flights" of its nuclear bombers. Most reports said that the bombers were not carrying nukes, that the flights were ostensibly for "training" and "readiness" purposes, although nuclear armed missions were not explicitly ruled out. And probing the state of U.S. and NATO warning and defense systems and reminding the world of Russia's superpower status may have been on the agenda as well.

The Thanksgiving Day encounter was not an isolated incident. While the resumption of "strategic flights" was fairly widely reported, the number and frequency of such subsequent intercept "incidents" have not been. A Canadian air force major who spoke to me from North American Aerospace Defense Command headquarters in the hollowed-out core of Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado, the central node in the U.S. nuclear-attack warning system, confirmed the details of the Aleutian

incident and said there have been at least 17 such incidents in NORAD's U.S. and Canadian sphere of operations since August.

In each case, the U.S. jets were scrambled to intercept, he said, because the Russian bombers refused to file a flight plan and just showed up out of the blue approaching NORAD-patrolled airspace.

The Aleutian encounter first came to my attention in a relatively obscure U.K. military trade magazine called *Air Forces Monthly*, which also reported similar incidents involving NATO jets and Russian strategic bombers over the Atlantic and Arctic seas and cited a Russian major general saying, "NATO jets approached at what he considered could be potentially dangerous distances—within 16-25 feet ... wingtip-to-wingtip" and concluding that "the fact no emergency situation had arisen ... was a testament to the flying skills of both sides."

And one of the few mainstream press stories on this subject, in the *Denver Post*, contained this disquieting quote:

While odds are low that these increasing Russian forays will cause a catastrophe, "there's more of a risk of something accidental happening," Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen said.

Something accidental happening? The odds of "catastrophe" may be low, but how low? And can they be lowered? I've touched on [the largely unexamined risks of accidental nuclear war](#) before, but now that we know U.S. and NATO jets are buzzing Russian strategic bombers, raising concerns about "dangerous situations" and "catastrophe," I think it's important to press the question now when both political parties are writing their platforms. Let's challenge both presidential nominees to place the problem of reducing the risk of accidental nuclear war on their agendas. Because while "the odds are low," the costs of a catastrophe would be unimaginably high.

In my last column on this subject, I suggested it was time for both the United States and Russia to publicly define and defend their warning and launch procedures. I've now come upon a persuasive set of concrete, achievable steps both countries can take to lower the risk of an accidental launch. These steps would extend the all-too-brief window we now have to evaluate attack warnings, the better to distinguish "false positives" from the real thing. And thus extend the time the presidents of both nuclear superpowers have to decide how to respond. Our current warning decision procedures—both U.S. and Russian—make our nuclear arsenals all too vulnerable to accidental or unauthorized launch. To *inadvertence*, as the nuclear euphemism has it.

It's time to avert "inadvertence."

Not long after I read about the U.S. fighter jet intercept of Russian bombers, I took myself down to Washington to talk to Bruce G. Blair, president of the World Security Institute, a D.C. think tank, and perhaps the world's leading expert on both the U.S. and the former Soviet Union's nuclear warning and launch postures, their "command and control" systems. It turns out he'd recently delivered a paper on "de-alerting"—steps that could be taken to reduce the risk of accidental nuclear war—at an Oslo conference, and they merit close attention by whomever will be in charge of these matters in the next administration. For the most part, his proposals are neither hawkish nor dovey. They're just smart. And urgent.

Bruce Blair is the former minuteman missile crewman and Brookings nuclear systems savant who published a study called "Strategic Command and Control" in the mid-'80s. Its analysis of the flaws in our systems attracted the attention of both the Russians, who would later consult with him in the post-Soviet era, and the U.S. Congress, which got him highly classified access to U.S. warning and launch systems to delve further into the flaws. His *Congressional Record* testimony is the closest unclassified look at the workings of the nuclear attack launch and warning systems we have. It reveals how poorly and patchily thought-out these systems were. According to Blair, the systems in place now have not been much improved.

Blair has long been arguing that the two nuclear superpowers' post-Cold War detargeting is merely "cosmetic." He contends that the original target coordinates are still in the missile memory system and could easily be retargeted in moments via computer.

In addition, Blair has long warned that some of the current warning-and-launch protocols leave almost no time for the president and the nuclear chain of command to adequately evaluate whether a warning signal is a false positive or a serious threat. His Oslo proposals have two key objectives: true de-targeting, and extending the time we have to evaluate warnings.

Of course we all think the days when we have to be concerned about such things are gone. The United States and the former Soviet Union, though still geopolitical rivals, are no longer locked in the ideological death struggle that entailed a nuclear "balance of terror," the threat of "mutually assured destruction," to keep both from inflicting nuclear war on the planet.

But the chance of accident remains (there were two *extremely* close calls and many lesser ones during the Cold War), and the danger of accident or misinterpretation of innocent artifacts on the radar or satellite screens grows greater when the tensions between the superpowers begin to ratchet up again. As they have, alas, recently but unmistakably.

In the spring 2008 issue of the *Journal of International Security Affairs*, Victor Mizin, the director of studies at the independent

Moscow-based think tank the Institute of Strategic Assessments, has a piece called "Russia's 'Nuclear Renaissance,'" which instances the following troubling aspects of the recent U.S.-Russian relationship:

- 1) Public measures such as Russia's withdrawal from the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty with its inspection provisions and Russia's threats to withdraw from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty.
- 2) "Russia's efforts to boost the power and reach of its nuclear forces ... an extensive armament plan worth \$200 billion ... entailing massive, unprecedented procurement of advanced weaponry (including a new generation of advanced ballistic missiles)."
- 3) The stunning but not widely reported fact that "Moscow has threatened"—in response to U.S. and European plans for a limited ballistic missile defense—"to retarget nuclear missiles on Europe."
- 4) The fact that all of the above "suggests that Russian generals still view a nuclear war with either the United States or NATO as theoretically possible. ... On a very basic level nothing has changed since Soviet times."

Nothing has changed? Perhaps that's hyperbole, but such developments certainly raise the level of noise in the strategic background and might carry weight in a warning assessment drill at a place like NORAD's Cheyenne Mountain.

According to a recent paper by Blair (whose account of these procedures has been made public in the *Congressional Record*), an "assessment drill ... is supposed to yield a preliminary assessment three minutes after the arrival of the initial sensor data. Analogous drills take place under comparable deadlines in Russia. A rush of adrenaline and rote processing of checklists, often accompanied by confusion, characterize the process." Rising levels of "strategic tension" between the superpowers may lend more credibility to what are actually false-positive warning signals.

The time pressure to make momentous decisions is the key problem. After the three minutes are up, if the warnings are assessed as "serious," there follows a quick conference between the president and his nuclear advisers "whereupon, on the U.S. side, the commanding duty officer at Strategic Command headquarters in Omaha, Neb., would brief the U.S. president on the nature of the apparent attack, the wide array of response options and their anticipated consequences [human casualties

and physical damage].” Blair noted that “the time allocated for this briefing is as little as 30 seconds,” and that afterward the president’s “decision window is typically twelve minutes, although under certain conditions it can be much shorter.”

The reason for the 12-minute deadline is that missiles launched from offshore submarines can reach coastal targets in less than 15 minutes.

So it's insanely short-fused as it is. But when I spoke to Blair in Washington last week, he noted an additional cause for concern: cyber-attacks.

He pointed to the preface of his [Oslo paper](#), which focused on how “information warfare” in cyberspace heightened the threat of “inadvertent” nuclear war.

“The nuclear command systems today operate in an intense information battleground,” Blair wrote, “on which more than 20 nations including Russia, China, and North Korea have developed dedicated computer attack programs. These programs deploy viruses to disable, confuse, and delay nuclear command and warning processes in other nations. At the brink of conflict, nuclear command and warning networks around the world may be besieged by electronic intruders whose onslaught degrades the coherence and rationality of nuclear decision-making. The potential for perverse consequences with computer-launched weapons on hair-trigger is clear.”

“Perverse consequences” seems to understate the matter. In a footnote, Blair cites one scary example: the discovery of “an unprotected electronic backdoor into the naval broadcast communications network used to transmit launch orders by radio to the U.S. Trident deterrent submarine fleet. Unauthorized persons including terrorists might have been able to seize electronic control of shore-based radio transmitters ... and actually inject a launch order into the network. The deficiency was taken so seriously that new launch order validation protocols had to be devised, and Trident crews had to undergo special training to learn them.”

Is this the only “electronic back door”? Or is it just the only one we've *discovered*? And if an unauthorized launch order could be insinuated into the system by hackers, why not a false-attack warning, which could generate an authorized (but mistaken) launch order? So in addition to the potential for accidental nuclear war, there is an even more disturbing threat of deliberate-but-unauthorized nuclear launches.

This cyber threat offers yet another powerful argument for Blair's de-alerting proposals.

His plan has four phases, but I'd like to focus on the first two, which seem to me to be the simplest to implement, the least

likely to arouse opposition, and the most likely to reducing anxiety about nuclear “inadvertence.”

In Phase 1, he recommends “revising the nuclear war plans to eliminate massive attack options and launch-on-warning from the repertoire of response options available to nuclear decision-makers.” In Blair's vision, massive attacks wouldn't be impossible; they just wouldn't be an instantly implementable, one-button option in the president's “nuclear football.” Neither side has an interest in deliberately annihilating the other and suffering annihilation in return. Why not acknowledge that and remove the capability from instant “inadvertent” use?

In addition, Blair suggests that “the strategic missile forces could also be de-targeted, stripped of all wartime aimpoints.” At the moment, missiles are de-targeted, but—Blair says—all the old target coordinates are still programmed into computers, and missiles could be retargeted with the push of a button. In Blair's plan, retargeting the missiles would take hours rather than minutes, and missiles would be less subject to a cyber-spoofed launch order.

In Phase 2 of Blair's Oslo proposals, “strategic missiles in silos would be isolated from external launch control, by flipping a safety switch inside each silo, as was done in 1991 when former President Bush de-alerted nearly one-half of the U.S. Minuteman force almost overnight.” De-alerting the rest of our missiles would prevent an electronic or physical takeover of a launch control node from causing an unauthorized launch. (That's because re-alerting the missiles would take at least 24 hours.) The Russians would simultaneously match our measures.

Blair also proposes that submarines at sea refrain from installing a crucial element of their launch system, the so-called “inverters,” which would similarly preclude an inadvertent launch.

The combined effect of the two phases of his proposals, if adopted by both superpowers, would be to create a kind of time-delay firewall that would replace the short-fuse, hair-trigger, launch-on-warning, accident-prone command-and-control systems both nuclear arsenals retained from the Cold War. And the overly hasty mistaken decisions they leave us vulnerable to now.

I'll let you evaluate his third and fourth phase proposals—separating warheads from missiles and taking them out of the silos and putting them into storage—for yourself (the whole Oslo paper is [here](#)), but they would seem to require more elaborate negotiation, more commitment to complete nuclear abolition, and would likely arouse more opposition on both sides. They probably couldn't be adopted as easily as Phases 1 and 2 could be.

And there's no reason a version of them shouldn't be inserted into both parties' platforms, along with a pledge for a comprehensive study of our nuclear warning and launch procedures. It's hard to think of anything that should have a higher priority than saving the world from "inadvertently" destroying itself.

today's blogs

Webb of Intrigue

By Michael Weiss

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 6:14 PM ET

Webb of intrigue: As the sponsor of a new GI Bill and a tough-minded Cold Warrior who once served as secretary of the Navy under Ronald Reagan, Sen. Jim Webb [has found himself](#) the subject of vice presidential chatter in the liberal blogosphere. Many bloggers think the Virginian lawmaker has all the essentials in terms of experience and appeal that are lacking in likely Democratic nominee Barack Obama.

Kentucky blogger Ben at [What's Required](#) [downplays](#) the senator's lack of interest: "[H]e's doing what he can to make sure he's in the public consciousness enough to get a cabinet post, if not the VP slot—which I think he's tailor made for, and would solve a lot of the demographic problems Obama presents far better than Hillary would." And Thomas McDonald at [TPM Café](#) [enthuses](#), "A Scot-Irish of Appalachian roots ... A swing-state office holder ... A former Republican (praised by Reagan when he became Secretary of the Navy) who has stated that it is now 'time for Reagan Democrats to come home (to the Democratic Party)'."

Some think Webb is a good foil to GOP nominee John McCain. *Atlantic* campaign blogger [Marc Ambinder](#) [thinks](#) the timing of Webb's new book, *A Time To Fight*, is impeccable: "[R]ight when Obama is starting to look around, ah, here's a guy who can go toe-to-toe with John McCain on national security, is beloved by white working class voters, puts Virginia into play instantly, and has a charming way with the media." Thomas Dunn at [Sam Spade's San Francisco](#) [writes](#), "Obama needs someone who can balance the war hero record of Senator John McCain. Obama needs someone who can have a powerful and positive impact on the Southern states. Obama needs someone who can impress the right-of-center faction of the Democratic Party and reach out to moderates and left-of-center Republicans. Senator Jim Webb is that person."

Among his other attributes, Webb should have appeal outside of Obama's bluer-than-blue base. At [Nah, Nope, Not Quite](#), Ed Fortune [says](#), "His conservative democratic credentials and foreign policy experience will blend perfectly with Obama, and

help counter the experience question. This is the guy that will put Obama over the top in Pennsylvania and Ohio (and dare I say it? Florida?)"

Lastly, "I also find it deliciously ironic," [writes](#) Obama supporter [Tokatakiya](#), "that Webb, who no one had heard of before 2006, would be on a Presidential ticket after beating George Allen, who would be the Republican nominee if Webb hadn't gotten into the 2006 Senate race in the first place. God, that was time well spent."

[Read](#) more about Jim Webb for vice president.

Mall attack in Israel: Islamic Jihad terrorists [fired](#) a rocket into a crowded shopping mall in Ashkelon, in the southern part of the country. Fifteen people were wounded, and one 70-year-old woman was killed in the attack, which has prompted fiery criticism of Ehud Olmert's government and its friendship with President Bush, who is in Israel in honor of its 60th anniversary.

Sara Layah Shomron had just left the mall with her son before the attack. She [writes](#) at [Shiloh Musings](#), "I turned on the computer and learned that the earth shake underfoot were 2 rockets that had landed at the Ashkelon Hutzot mall on the health clinic floor from where I was returning."

"Freedom Fighter" at [Joshua Pundit](#) [writes](#), "This won't end until the Israelis resolve to end it, once and for all ... and probably with far better leadership than they now have. And as far as President Bush and Condi Rice's fantasy about creating a democratic Palestinian state living on peace next to Israel by removing Jews from Judea and Samaria, that's probably going to turn out as well as Gaza did."

Israeli blogger Avram at [Life Through My Eyes](#) [fumes](#), "Our citizens in the South are facing daily warfare and we're spending millions to welcome George Bush? What has this country come to? It's sad that these people are being forced to 'quit' their world because their brothers have forsaken them & because they don't live in 'important' cities like Tel Aviv or Netanya. If these 'border' cities fall, Israel will follow."

[Boker tov, Boulder!](#) [asks](#), "What kind of government neglects its foremost obligation to protect the people? It is despicable. A rocket 'lands' next to a school bus? A man is killed for being a Jew standing in his garden? A boy's leg is 'lost'? Gunmen walk into a Jerusalem yeshiva and mow down our boys when they have hardly begun their lives?"

And [Kishkushim](#) [notes](#), "It may be important at the political level to distinguish among the various factions carrying out the rocket attacks and to evaluate particular motives. For the military, however, these kinds of considerations are irrelevant. What matters is that Palestinian terrorist groups have acquired

and preserved the means to strike major Israeli population centers, despite a much-maligned 'siege' of Gaza and numerous air force as well as ground operations."

[Read](#) more about the Hamas attack on Israel.

today's blogs

Disaster in China

By Michael Weiss

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 3:52 PM ET

Disaster in China: On Monday, southwest China suffered a devastating earthquake that has killed [more than 13,000](#) and injured many more. The epicenter was in Sichuan Province, but tremors could be felt as far away as Thailand and Beijing. [According to the New York Times](#), the earthquake, China's worst since 1876, "destroyed 80 percent of structures in some of the towns and small cities near its epicenter. ..."* Despite the carnage, much of the talk in the blogosphere centers on how readers got their news about the natural disaster.

Online Journalism Blog is [wowed](#) by how quickly Web media jumped to cover the earthquake and scooped their mainstream counterparts: "How quickly would a journalist have found someone who speaks English and was affected by the quake? Or an image? (Of course, this needs verifying, but sourcing has already begun)."

Peter Scoble of **Scobleizer** fame may have indeed [broken](#) the story: "I reported the major quake to my followers on Twitter before the USGS Website had a report up and about an hour before CNN or major press started talking about it. Now there's lots of info over on Google News. How did I do that? Well, I was watching Twitter on Google Talk. Several people in China reported to me they felt the quake WHILE IT WAS GOING ON!!!" Matthew Ingram at *The Globe and Mail's* **Ingram 2.0** [confirms](#): "I didn't get the news from the radio or TV—I got it from Twitter, a group-chat/instant messaging client that has been gaining in popularity as a real-time news application."

Not so fast, [says Better Living Through Software](#): "It's silly in the extreme to act like twitter is somehow breaking news, though. Masses of people within China found out about the earthquake as it was happening via messages from friends on QQ (which is massively more popular than twitter), and CCTV carried the news almost instantly." Kaiser Kuo at **Digital Watch** [agrees](#): "Twitter's immediacy was nice, but by no means unique. The whole time I was twittering, my wife was on her instant messengers, with both QQ and MSN Live open. She was also monitoring all the portals' news flashes on the quake. I didn't feel like I had any more information than she did."

Richard Spencer of the *Telegraph's* blog [writes](#): "A friend points out that this may be a test of residual feudal superstition in China. The Tangshan earthquake in 1976 was said to be an omen of Mao's death two months later. This would be a bad year for a repeat, though there are no indications this is anything like on that scale."

Andrea Hsu of NPR's **Chengdu Diary** has [interviewed](#) survivors: "The first person I spoke to was 14-year-old Zheng Mingzhong, who was balancing himself with a bamboo pole as he stood on one foot, his other foot swollen and blistered. When we approached him, he immediately broke into tears."

[Read](#) more about the China quake.

Einstein's atheism: "The word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honourable, but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish." So [wrote](#) Albert Einstein in a 1954 letter to philosopher Eric Gutkind, delivering the bodkin to claims that the father of relativity believed in the divine. The letter is set to be auctioned in London this week.

Citizen Haines [doesn't think](#) the letter is conclusive: "My problem with all of this speculation is that when one is writing in a journal, it is often of his deepest, most inner thoughts and feelings. ... [Y]ou could have someone write a thought down in 1954 and then read something from 1956 that completely contradicts what was said two years prior." **Roger L. Simon** is [skeptical](#): "Einstein, titanically brilliant as he was, was ... conflicted. That would be reasonable, wouldn't it? The people who have resolved this issue are the ones who scare me."

Scott Allan says the [proof](#) was in Einstein's life's work: "It was inconsistent and contradictory to believe that Einstein would accept faith as an explanation of the universe since he dedicated his life to proving that there is a scientific explanation or unified theory for how the universe worked."

Jason Carson [posts](#): "This may change a few people's views on religion but it should put an end to religious people claiming one of the smartest people to ever live was a believer. There are a few scientists that admit to being Atheists and don't buy into religion but who better to be a trailblazer than one of the most popular scientists to ever live, Albert Einstein."

[Who cares?](#) asks **Sailing to Byzantium**. "What Einstein did or did not believe about God makes zero difference to the possible existence or non-existence of a God. To appeal to what Einstein said would be an empty appeal to authority."

At the *Guardian's* **Comment Is Free**, Andrew Brown [tries](#) to add a subtle psychological comment to Einstein's letter: "Einstein did flay in this letter almost everything that Gutkind

believed in. The claim that Jews were special seemed to him absurd; the civilised interpretation of the Bible, an artificial distortion of the text; even the claim the humans have free will had been exposed by Spinoza. But he didn't regard these theological views as fundamental. He didn't really think they interfered with the 'striving to make life beautiful and noble,' and he meant those words."

[Read](#) more about Einstein's atheism.

The Southern St. Bernard: Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg [died](#) Monday at the age of 82. He melded and transcended traditional media—painting, sculpture, photography—and in his exploitation of the mundane embodied what Robert Hughes once called "supply-side aesthetics." An affable and charming Southerner, Rauschenberg was to 20th-century art rather what Allen Tate was to poetry.

Alex Pareene at **Gawker** [mourns](#): "The Times describes him as a 'brash, garrulous, hard-drinking, open-faced Southerner.' People used to care way more about art when it was made by people like that instead of twee New School students."

Blixity [writes](#), "Building on the work of Marcel Duchamp, Rauschenberg (together with his contemporaries John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and former partner Jasper Johns) opened the doors to chance and gave rise to generations of critical experiments with art, life, and American culture."

And artist **Rob Myers** [confesses](#): "Rauschenberg's work had a massive impact on me when I first arrived at art school. His art was high stakes aesthetics in which either everything was transformed into art or ... But it was always transformed into art. Rauschenberg convinced me that freedom was not only possible but worth pursuing in art, and that art could transform any materials while still (or possibly thereby) retaining a link to real life."

[Read](#) more Rauschenberg obits.

Correction, May 14, 2008: *This article originally misstated that the New York Times reported that 80 percent of the buildings in Sichuan Province were destroyed by the earthquake. The newspaper reported that 80 percent of buildings in certain parts of the province were destroyed. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)*

today's blogs

Free Burma!

By Noreen Malone

Monday, May 12, 2008, at 5:47 PM ET

Bloggers continue to ponder whether the situation in Burma merits military intervention and game out what Hillary Clinton's campaign debt will mean in the Democratic race.

Free Burma! Late last week, bloggers [started asking](#) if it was proper to invade Burma as the ruling junta hindered efforts from the United Nations, the United States, and others to provide humanitarian relief to the victims of Cyclone Nargis. Now, with the mainstream media, via Romesh Ratnesar's *Time* article [posing](#) the same question, bloggers are debating the possibility of intervention even more fiercely.

At the **Huffington Post**, Simon Jenkins [argues](#) that the crisis is comparable to others that warranted humanitarian intervention, such as Kosovo and Somalia. "Hundreds of thousands of people are thus condemned to death by one thing alone, the viciousness of a dictatorship more concerned with its pride and xenophobia than with the wellbeing of its citizens. Like Soviet regimes of old, the Burmese government would rather pretend that disasters have not occurred than admit it cannot handle them."

At **Outside the Beltway**, conservative (and Operation Desert Storm vet) James Joyner [isn't shy](#): "*Hell no*, it's not time to invade Burma. Are you friggin' kidding me? Frankly, I don't care what the junta in Burma wants. The international community doesn't recognize them as legitimate. If the people who do these things for a living decide that ignoring the junta and dropping relief supplies will do more good than harm, I don't have any problems with it. But *coercive humanitarian intervention?* No, thanks." The *Atlantic's* **James Fallows**, writing from China, also [believes](#) that the time hasn't come for military action: "Unfortunately, saying that the regime is evil doesn't automatically indicate how to help its unfortunate people. Invasions -- even for humanitarian purposes -- should be a very last resort. ... As the international frustrations of the last week have suggested, the main option is the unsatisfying one of putting together as much pressure from as many sources as possible, including China**, to force the regime away from its outrageous refusal to allow aid workers in."

In an understated post seized upon by commenters, **Ann Althouse** [directs](#) readers to a *New York Times* [op-ed](#)—from 1990—that asks if it was time to intervene. On **Contentions**, James Kirchick [points](#) to the same op-ed to argue in favor of "a bit of good of old-fashioned American gunboat diplomacy" to "send a message," rather than a full-scale invasion.

Conservative Sean Hackbarth at the **American Mind** is [unconvinced](#) by a bleeding-heart justification for Burmese invasion, though: "The role [of] the United States government first and foremost is to protect the rights of her citizens. All military interventions have to be looked that through that lens. ... Humanitarianism isn't a good enough reason to rally the public. We need cold-hearted national interest reasons. That's why action in Rwanda and Darfur hasn't happened and why I

wasn't convinced bombing Serbia was a good idea." On **Pirate's Cove**, William Teach agrees, [saying](#), "So, it is apparently OK in Liberal World to invade a sovereign nation that has no bearing on US security, is not trying to gain WMD, is not systematically torturing, maiming, raping, and slaughtering its citizens on purpose, is not paying families \$25k to have their kids blow themselves up in Israel, and is not in violation of 17 UN resolutions, not to mention firing on US forces in the No Fly Zones. Great. Maybe we could invade New Zealand next."

Read [more](#) from bloggers on Burma and humanitarian intervention.

Debtor in chief: Hillary Clinton's campaign [has confirmed](#) that it's \$20 million in debt, but senior adviser Howard Wolfson says that's no reason for her to drop out. Bloggers beg to differ.

The **Left Coaster's** Steve Soto [ponders](#) Clinton's motivations: "What nobility is there in continuing a race without broad financial support, one that has generated a debt that will require years of fundraising to pay it off? No matter how much you may support Hillary's remaining effort, can a debt that size this late in the season be justified as the cost of doing business at the back end of a failed strategy, despite [the more civil tone](#) each side has displayed towards the other since North Carolina?"

At the *National Review Online's* **Corner**, Kathryn Jean Lopez [relishes](#) Hillary's money troubles. **Political Chase** [points out](#) that if she were to stay in the race, things won't get any better, since "[t]here are approximately 23 days left in the primary season and it costs roughly \$1 million per day to run the campaign. ...Combine this news with her last [report to the FEC](#) and it's easy to understand why Hillary didn't think she needed the advice of an economist on her gas tax plan."

Jim Newell at **Wonkette** [predicts](#): "She can put a few more weeks on her AmEx if she wants to, and she might as well at this point: Let her run out the rest of the primaries, everyone will decide, and the only thing pushing her out will be her old nemesis, Math, finally set-in-stone. And then she'll sue and take it to the convention where Al Gore will become president, again."

Meanwhile, despite a *New York Times* [piece](#) suggesting that Obama might be willing to help Hillary dig out of her debt; at the *New Republic's* **Stump**, Noam Scheiber [reports](#) that "[a]n Obama insider says the idea of helping Hillary with her debt went down very, very badly among supporters, donors, fundraisers, etc. This person says the most generous offer he could foresee would be Obama headlining a fundraiser for Hillary, but cautions that this is just speculation and might even be a stretch. Of course, this could just be posturing--people often take hardline positions to gain leverage prior to negotiating. But I didn't get that impression. My sense is that the Obama people really are dead set against this."

Read [more](#) about Hillary's debt.

today's blogs

The Next Somalia?

By Bidisha Banerjee

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 5:46 PM ET

Bloggers ponder whether the Burmese junta's attempts to control aid to the devastated country justify a "humanitarian invasion." They also wonder why Cindy McCain refuses to release her tax returns.

The next Somalia? Six days after the disastrous cyclone in Burma, bloggers are tracking the power struggle between the U.N. and the junta over the control of international aid. The U.N. halted shipments after the junta [seized](#) supplies but vows to resume efforts on Saturday. Bloggers are universally outraged.

"It's been 6 days since the cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar and the situation is getting worse day by day due to the decomposed animals and human lying around the effected areas," [exhorts](#) expat Burmese blogger **Soe Moe**. "Recent days, we had witnessed the generosity of the world as the humanitarian aid in millions of dollars. But it is very sad to find out that Burmese government is hesitating to grant visa to UN aid workers and NGOs in the name of politics. It is not the time for politics during the time of humanitarian crisis."

Burma (Myanmar) Blog's Richard Bacon, a pastor, [asks](#): "What can happen? ASEAN can cut off ties to the junta; China can refuse any further aid to the generals (most of their aid is military—the last thing the Burmese people need right now); the UN can [insist](#) that either aid will be distributed or the ruling junta of Myanmar will no longer be recognized as the rightful government of Burma."

On the Guardian's **Politics** blog, Lucy Powell [writes](#): "This challenge requires a major international political movement equivalent to the enormous charitable movement that emerged after the tsunami. Then, the pressure of populations around the world forced governments and institutions to act. We must now do the same."

Just exactly how to force the Burmese government to allow in unfettered aid is a delicate question, but bloggers aren't shying away from raising the topic. Basically, is a humanitarian invasion justified? Australian Mark Lawrence, who has been following the situation closely, [thinks not](#): "However the level of concern, verging on panic, over the junta's refusal to allow the free flow of aid, most sane international aid and Burmese democracy groups are, however, stopping short of calling for an

all-out 'humanitarian' invasion of Burma a-la Somalia, if only just. Reason will prevail in this matter, I hope." **Bangkok Dazed's** Don Gilliland [agrees](#): "If the USA, or any country, wants to offer humanitarian aid, I think that is wonderful. But the aid shouldn't come with strings attached, or accompanied by lectures. Just help the people that need it, and keep your political and religious agendas to yourself."

Another War-on-Terror Blog's Brian compares Burma to Iraq and [points out](#) that both the U.S. and France agree that unilaterally dropping aid into Burma might be a good idea, but "[c]rossing a national boundary with a formation of aircraft, without permission, and then dropping un-asked-for materials on another nation's territory, would be very close to an invasion." Former Iraq-invasion supporter **Andrew Sullivan** is now [calling](#) for action: "If there were ever a moment when the international community, led as it must be, by the U.S. and the U.N., should use force to prevent what now looks like mass murder, this is it. It is also a rare opportunity to open up the beleaguered, isolated repressed population to the outside world, and to show a face for the US and the West that is humane. When aid is being stolen or hoarded in front of our eyes, we have a duty to face down the junta."

[Read](#) more about the aftermath of the cyclone in Burma. **Global Voices Online** has an excellent [roundup](#). **Narinjara News**, a site run by Arakanese exiles from Burma in Bangladesh, [reports](#) about Bangladesh sending two shipments of aid.

Conscientious objector: Bloggers are in a tizzy over the fact that Cindy McCain, whose worth is in the tens of millions of dollars and who always kept her finances separate from her husband's, has gone on record saying that she will [never](#) release her tax returns, not even if her husband becomes president.

Some are nonchalant. "Great for Cindy McCain. She knows that the leftist media and the assorted other liberal kooks would beat her over the head with the information forever. Never give ammunition to people who are trying to destroy you. Mrs. McCain is an admirable person who had done a great deal to provide health care to children in third world countries. She would make an ideal first lady," [comments](#) Archer on the *Chicago Tribune's* **Swamp**. "Unless she's been accused of tax evasion or some other criminal activity, or her fortune is somehow linked to illicit campaign funds, why in the world should she be obligated to share her personal information?" [asks](#) **Midnight Had Come Upon the Crowded City's** Keri.

But the progressive **Media Matters** [claims](#), "John McCain, and therefore John McCain's campaign, benefits from his wife's wealth, and the tax returns would indicate the extent to which Cindy McCain—and presumably therefore John McCain—has benefited from President Bush's tax cuts, which McCain supports permanently extending."

Observing that a majority of Americans think that candidates should make their tax returns public, **Daily Kos** diarist Avenging Angel [cries](#) foul: "Virtually the entire Republican brain trust and its amen corner in the media agree. Or at least they did four years ago, when the subject was Democrat Theresa Heinz Kerry and her vast fortune. Despite eventually releasing a two-page summary of her 2003 income, the Kerrys were pilloried by the same conservative machine that is silent now."

Looking ahead to the general election, **Marc Ambinder** [predicts](#), "[T]his question will return during the general election under the force of holding powerful interests accountable, and No, No, No might not cut it."

And "CubbyChaser" at Comedy Central's blog **Indecision 2008** [riffs](#), "Also, she doesn't want anyone to know that she files an annual Q-4!9p3x*~259.w form. That's how Borg Queens itemize their deductions."

[Read](#) more about Cindy McCain's tax returns.

today's papers Panic at the House

By Daniel Politi
Thursday, May 15, 2008, at 6:11 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with a look at the panic that set in among Republicans yesterday after their candidate lost a [special congressional election in Mississippi](#). It marked the third-straight loss for a Republican-held seat this year, and GOP leaders are scrambling to figure out how they can prevent getting trounced in November. "The political atmosphere facing House Republicans this November is the worst since Watergate," Rep. Tom Davis, R-Va., wrote in a memorandum. The *Los Angeles Times* and the *Wall Street Journal's* world-wide newsbox lead with the [continuing rescue efforts in China](#), where the death toll increased to [more than 19,500](#) with thousands of people [still missing](#). Survivors at the earthquake's epicenter began to receive some aid, but "tens of thousands" continue to struggle to survive without food, water, or shelter.

USA Today leads with word that sensitive [U.S. military equipment](#), in particular night-vision gear, is being stolen and illegally exported in larger numbers, and some of it appears to be reaching fighters in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the last 18 months, "more than two dozen businesses and individuals" have been prosecuted for stealing military gear or illegally selling it abroad. The night-vision gear is seen as particularly sensitive because troops often launch their riskier missions when it's dark because that's when the U.S. military has a distinct advantage. The *Washington Post* leads with John Edwards endorsing Sen.

Barack Obama. Both Democratic contenders had been seeking Edwards' endorsement, and yesterday he finally [agreed to break his silence](#). The move helped Obama gain the [media spotlight](#) on a day when Sen. Hillary Clinton was busy touting her overwhelming victory in West Virginia.

While trying to figure out how to prevent November losses, Republicans are finding themselves increasingly [pointing the finger at President Bush](#) and blaming him for their troubles. As a result, top GOP leaders are suggesting that candidates should try to distance themselves as much as possible from Bush. The *WSJ* points out that this likely means that more Republicans will be [siding with Democrats](#) in a few key pieces of legislation. The *WP* fronts the panic and says that House Republicans "turned on themselves yesterday" as several said the real problem is that the GOP leadership is [out of touch](#) with the changing political climate. In an attempt to "re-brand" their party, GOP leaders came out with a new slogan: "The Change You Deserve." But the fact that it so closely resembles Barack Obama's famous "Change We Can Believe In," not to mention that it's also the slogan for an antidepressant, meant that Democrats were able to spend the day making easy jokes. The *WP*'s [Dana Milbank](#) also has some fun with it and notes that the warning label for the antidepressant "states that patients should be watched to see if they are 'becoming agitated, irritable, hostile, aggressive, impulsive, or restless.'"

Besides being a preview of what could happen in November, the *NYT* also points out that Tuesday's loss in Mississippi highlighted that the Republican strategy of linking Democratic congressional candidates in conservative districts to Obama [doesn't seem to be working](#). It was once thought that Obama would be a liability for conservative Democrats, but now it appears that his candidacy "might have the effect of putting into play Southern seats that were once solidly Republican," says the *NYT*. Meanwhile, aides to Sen. John McCain said the special-election losses have strengthened their resolve to mark sharp contrasts between the senator from Arizona and Bush.

The *WSJ*'s [editorial board](#) says the Republican defeat in Mississippi might "finally scare the Members straight, or at least less crooked." After their losses in 2006, Republicans ignored the need for change and thought they could gain ground by blaming Bush and "donning a Nancy Pelosi fright wig and shouting 'liberal, liberal, liberal.'" Republican lawmakers will be tempted to simply begin siding with Democrats more often, but that will only anger conservatives. "The better strategy is to offer a reform agenda of their own, especially one that begins to speak to the economic anxieties of the middle class."

The *WSJ* notes that even though "China quickly mobilized one of the largest relief operations in its modern history," the massive effort, which has included some 100,000 military personnel, "was falling short for many victims." The *LAT* points out that some citizens and groups have been trying to [fill the](#)

[gaps](#), illustrating how much China has changed over the last few years. But the fact that the quake affected such remote areas means that simply getting to some of the worst-hit regions has been a challenge. The *WP* notes that the Chinese government has sent hundreds of buses filled with [rescue teams and volunteers to the disaster areas](#), where the extent of the devastation makes it likely "the death toll could eventually reach 50,000." The *NYT* highlights that thousands of soldiers were taken off rescue duties to [shore up weakened dams](#) that could make the disaster even worse. The government said a total of 391 of the dams in the disaster area have been damaged. The *NYT* points out that it's not clear whether any of the area's nuclear plants were also damaged.

While rescue workers struggle to reach survivors, the Chinese government is still refusing offers to help from foreign aid workers. And it seems there's no real agreement about whether that's a smart move. The *Post* says it [reflects the government's](#) "distrust of outsiders," while the *WSJ* says some experts think the [decision is understandable](#) because foreigners can slow down the rescue process. But in a separate piece inside, the *NYT* talks to some [professional rescue workers](#) who say that once the first 24 hours have passed, specialized skills are needed to get survivors out of the rubble. "Such needs raise questions about the likely effectiveness of the tens of thousands of soldiers being sent by the Chinese government," says the *NYT*.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Burma the military government has somewhat eased the passage of foreign aid but is still not allowing most foreign aid workers to enter the country. In two stories that really should have gone on Page One, the *LAT* and *NYT* describe how survivors of Cyclone Nargis are struggling to stay alive in [some of the worst-hit areas](#). Most residents along the Irrawaddy River delta say they haven't seen any foreign aid workers and have received meager, if any, supplies from the government. The *NYT* says that in one city, the military began selling rice, while the *LAT* reports that survivors have received "wet, rotting rice." The government has set up checkpoints to prevent foreigners from reaching these areas, and the *NYT*'s reporter writes about [having to hide](#) "in the bottom of a boat" in order to reach them and talk to the survivors. As if that wasn't bad enough, weather forecasters are warning that Burma could be hit with monsoon rains. In a separate story, the *NYT* talks to a few directors of [relief organizations](#) currently in Burma who say that some international aid has been "stolen, diverted or warehoused" by the army.

In other election-related news, the *NYT* reports that Obama's much talked about lapel [hasn't been as naked in the last few days](#). Yes, Obama has been wearing a flag pin. The campaign said it was all much ado about nothing. "Sometimes I wear it, sometimes I don't," Obama said. The "sometimes" included every day this week and is coming at a time when Obama is paying more attention to winning the support of white, working-class voters.

In the *WP*'s op-ed page, [Marie Cocco](#) writes about all the things she won't miss now that the Democratic contest is ending. Cocco then goes on to detail several items that display how deeply misogynistic some of the commentary during the campaign has been. "Most of all, I will not miss the silence" from Democratic leaders who "haven't publicly uttered a word of outrage at the unrelenting, sex-based hate that has been hurled" in Clinton's direction. "For all Clinton's political blemishes, the darker stain that has been exposed is the hatred of women that is accepted as a part of our culture."

today's papers

Crisis = Opportunity

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, at 6:27 AM ET

The [Los Angeles Times](#), [New York Times](#), and the *Wall Street Journal*'s world-wide newsbox all lead with the continuing rescue efforts in China, where the rapidly mounting death toll from Monday's devastating earthquake now stands at [more than 12,000](#). Thousands of people [are still buried](#), and rescue workers struggled to reach some of the worst-hit areas that have been largely closed off to the outside world [by landslides](#) that blocked roads. Around 50,000 soldiers have been mobilized to help with the effort, and the Chinese government said it has allocated \$120 million for aid. Officials welcomed money and supplies from around the world but emphasized that foreign aid workers would not be admitted.

The [Washington Post](#) and [USA Today](#) go big with the rescue efforts in China but devote their lead spots to Sen. Hillary Clinton's [overwhelming victory](#) over Sen. Barack Obama in [the West Virginia primary](#). Clinton trounced Obama by more than 40 percentage points in what everyone says was one of the most lopsided results of the primary season. But while Clinton's camp insists yesterday's results illustrate that she has a better chance of beating Sen. John McCain in November, it doesn't seem like many are paying attention. (Case in point: Today marks the first time this year that the *LAT* doesn't put the results of a Democratic primary on Page One.)

As rescue workers continued to try to find people who might still be alive under the rubble, viewers of Chinese television are able to follow the operations through practically nonstop coverage. That may not be surprising considering the extent of the disaster, but [the NYT points out](#) in a separate Page One piece that it's "remarkable for a country that has a history of concealing the scope of natural calamities." Chinese authorities seem to realize that the world is watching and the decision to scale back celebrations along the Olympic torch route appears to be a sign that the government listens to criticism.

The *Post* notes that the Central Propaganda Bureau told editors in Beijing [not to send journalists](#) to the disaster areas, but [the NYT says](#) that "scores of Chinese reporters have been broadcasting live from places across the quake zone" and foreign journalists haven't faced any restrictions. The *LAT*, in its own front-page analysis piece says [the order not to send journalists was issued](#) soon after the earthquake but "what happened next ... indicates how much China has changed." Top government officials rushed to the scene and most media simply ignored the order. The *LAT* says this tragedy has given the Chinese government "an opportunity for a dramatic image makeover" to change talk of Tibet and abuses into compassion for the victims. More than anything, Chinese authorities seem to want to display competency. The words Hurricane Katrina come up in both the *LAT* and *NYT*, as if the Communist government wants to prove that it can do rescue operations more efficiently than the United States. And, of course, officials want to show that China is not neighboring Burma, where the military government was [still blocking large-scale aid](#) efforts 10 days after Cyclone Nargis destroyed large areas of the country.

The devastation from the earthquake put on display the obvious uncomfortable truth that there's a [widening gap between China's rich and poor](#), says the *WSJ*. Most of the damage took place in rural areas or small cities, where building regulations appear to be routinely ignored. Natural disasters often disproportionately affect the poor, but the issue is "especially thorny" in China, where the government has been emphasizing its plans to close the gap.

Even though Clinton's resounding victory in West Virginia means she'll get [most of the state's 28 pledged delegates](#), it'll do little to change the overall math that will almost certainly crown Obama as the Democratic nominee. *Slate*'s [John Dickerson](#) puts it in perspective and writes that unless the rules for Michigan and Florida delegates change, Clinton "must reverse the math by convincing more than 70 percent of the remaining superdelegates to initiate Party Armageddon by denying Obama the nomination." Still, the results illustrated that Obama might have trouble getting West Virginia voters into his column in November, as more than half said they'd be dissatisfied if he wins the nomination. The *NYT* highlights that "racial considerations emerged as an unusually salient factor" yesterday as [two in 10 white voters](#) said race influenced their decision, and the overwhelming majority of them backed Clinton.

USAT and *LAT* take a look at the question of how Clinton could go about erasing her [campaign's \\$21 million debt](#), which includes more than \$11 million that came from her own pockets. Experts note that Obama will probably have to step in to help, a move that has plenty of precedent. Obama wouldn't be able to directly transfer money from his campaign to Clinton's, but he could ask his supporters to donate money or headline a fundraiser. Clinton has about \$22 million for the general election, and she could ask donors to [send that money to Obama](#)

so his supporters would feel better about donating to her cause. Alternatively, she could transfer the debt to her Senate account and ask donors to send money in that direction. But she must act quickly if she hopes to get her personal loan back, because she can only recoup that money until the convention.

The *Post* fronts, and everyone mentions, news from a [special congressional election in Mississippi](#), where a Democrat won a House seat that had been Republican since 1995. It was the third time this year that a Democrat won a special election for what had been a Republican-held seat, which everyone sees a sign of the troubles that the GOP will face in November. "There is no district that is safe for Republican candidates," Rep. Chris Van Hollen said.

The *WP* fronts the last in its often-unbelievable four-part series that shines a light on the poor medical care that foreign detainees receive at special immigration prisons. Reporters Amy Goldstein and Dana Priest go out with a bang today and reveal that the government has [drugged detainees for deportation](#) with powerful medications that are meant to treat "serious psychiatric disorders." These types of drugs aren't supposed to be used unless the detainee has a medical disorder or is extremely aggressive, but officials even used them on some detainees who "proved peaceful the day they were sent home."

In the *NYT*'s op-ed page, [Robert Kaplan](#) writes that as frustration with the Burmese government continues to grow, "there is an increasing degree of chatter about the possibility of an American-led invasion of the Irrawaddy River Delta." Merely threatening such action could be helpful, and if it's part of an international effort, "this is military doable." But nothing is as easy as it seems, and such an intervention could lead to the collapse of the Burmese government. "Sending in marines and sailors is the easy part; but make no mistake, the very act of our invasion could land us with the responsibility for fixing Burma afterward."

The *LAT*, *NYT*, and *WP* front the death of Robert Rauschenberg, the influential and innovative American artist "who time and again reshaped art in the 20th century" (*NYT*). He was 82 and died of heart failure. The *WP* [quotes art critic Robert Hughes](#): "There has never been anything in American art to match the effusive, unconstrained energy of Rauschenberg's generous imagination."

The *WSJ* fronts a look at "some of the most provocative writing on broadcast television" [that is put out by Chuck Lorre](#), a writer and executive producer of *Two and a Half Men* and *The Big Bang Theory*. The writing the *WSJ* is referring to isn't in the sitcoms but rather in the so-called "vanity cards" that are flashed on the screen for a few seconds at the end of the shows. Lorre uses them to broadcast an essay of around 100 to 200 words, where he espouses his opinions on a variety of topics. On Monday, Lorre's vanity card described Warner Bros., the

producer of his shows, as "monolithic, multi-tiered, entirely un-integrated, boy-did-we-make-a-colossal-boo-boo-with-AOL entity." He also mentioned how the cards would be the subject of an "article in *The Wall Street Journal* (or as I like to call it, *The Depressingly Inevitable Next Step Toward the End of a Free Press in America, Thanks a Lot Rupert, Journal*)."

today's papers

7.9

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 6:34 AM ET

The *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*'s world-wide newsbox all lead with the 7.9-magnitude earthquake that hit southwestern China yesterday afternoon and [killed nearly 10,000 people](#). The quake's epicenter was approximately 60 miles northwest of Chengdu, the [Sichuan provincial capital](#). Most of the casualties appear to be in Sichuan province, but the "quake was so powerful that it was felt hundreds of miles away, from Beijing to Bangkok," [reports the LAT](#). Everybody warns that the death toll is likely to climb as rescue workers reach some of the worst-hit cities and towns in the mountainous region that were quickly cut off from the rest of the country because of severe damage to roads and communication lines. There are reports that more than 80 percent of the buildings collapsed in some places close to the epicenter, and the *NYT* points out that China's state media reported today there are still [10,000 people buried under rubble in Mianzhu](#).

USA Today fronts news of the earthquake but devotes its traditional lead spot to a [new poll](#) that reveals a majority of Democrats still think Sens. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton should continue the campaign. Meanwhile, the number of Democrats who want Clinton to drop out of the contest has increased by 12 percentage points in a week. Overall, 55 percent of Democrats want Obama to choose Clinton as his vice president, but it's clear that backers of the former first lady are most enthusiastic about a joint ticket.

The quake that struck China yesterday was the country's largest natural disaster since 1976, when an earthquake killed 240,000 people and the government came under heavy criticism for trying to cover up the disaster. This time, the government seems to be confronting the problem head-on and Premier Wen Jiabao quickly traveled to Chengdu to [oversee the rescue operations](#). Around 50,000 soldiers and police officers were mobilized to help with the efforts. The *LAT* notes that checkpoints were set up in an apparent effort to bar journalists from entering some of the [hardest-hit areas](#). It's little wonder that the Chinese government would be nervous about the media's portrayal since everyone

says the rescue effort will be a test of the country's ability to handle a crisis [before the Olympics in August](#).

The *NYT* and *WSJ* both point out that the devastation caused by the earthquake could raise questions about whether Chinese builders have been [cutting corners](#) during the country's ongoing building boom. Since the 1976 quake, China has had strict regulations in place that require buildings to be able to withstand earthquakes. But after so many structures, including schools and hospitals, quickly collapsed yesterday it seems clear that these regulations were [not always followed](#).

The *NYT* and *LAT* front dispatches from Dujiangyan, where perhaps one of the most devastating scenes from the earthquake played out after a school simply collapsed, killing [as many as 900 students](#). Within seconds, the building's entire structure pretty much disappeared and [buried the children](#) who were in classes at the time. Both papers describe the heart-wrenching scenes of devastation where desperate parents hope against all odds for some good news and much of the population is in the streets, either because their homes collapsed or simply because they're too afraid to go inside.

The *WP* fronts its own poll that shows even less pressure from Democrats for Clinton to quit the race than what *USAT*'s survey found. According to the *WP*, almost two-thirds of Democrats said [Clinton should stay in the race](#), even as Obama now holds a 12-point lead over the former first lady. The poll found Americans hold an extremely pessimistic view and a "near-record" 82 percent say the country is headed in the wrong direction. This, along with the fact that Democrats have a "21-percentage-point advantage" as the party best able to handle the country's problems, should translate into bad news for Republicans. But, like previous surveys, the *WP*'s poll found that negative views of the Republican Party aren't necessarily transferring to McCain, who continues to be competitive in hypothetical matchups. Obama leads McCain 51 percent to 44 percent, while Clinton beats McCain with a smaller margin of 49 percent to 46 percent. The poll picks up on the general feeling that McCain's age might work against him as only three in 10 said they were "entirely comfortable" with a president who would be 72 when inaugurated. And while Obama leads McCain in being the candidate who can best handle most issues, including health care and the economy, McCain holds a 21-point lead on dealing with terrorism.

As Democrats geared up to vote in the West Virginia primary today, the *LAT* finds many Clinton supporters, particularly women, who are not quite ready to let go of the dream that she [might make it to the White House](#). Clinton is expected to beat Obama by a wide margin, but few of her backers believe she actually has a chance. "For every point of pride welling up in those who hadn't thought they might see a black man become president, there is a counterpoint of disappointment for those who thought it was finally a woman's turn," notes the *LAT*.

Among those the paper interviewed, there are "plenty" who say they'll either vote for McCain or stay home on Election Day.

The *WP* fronts a look at how some Obama supporters have been surprised by the [amount of racism](#) they've encountered while on the campaign trail. Volunteers and field workers have had to deal with slammed doors, derogatory names, and racist rants, to name a few. Part of the story has the feel of idealistic young people who are suddenly coming to grips with the fact that racism exists. But it is true that, as the story points out, "the raw racism and hostility" that these Obama supporters have encountered "have gone largely unnoticed." And it seems the Obama campaign is trying to avoid these stories from getting out. In a few cases, the racism has gone a step further. An Obama campaign office was vandalized, and there were three bomb threats in Indiana alone.

None of the papers give much play to (and the *NYT* seems to ignore) news that former Republican Rep. Bob Barr announced he will [run for president as a Libertarian](#), saying that none of the major party candidates would do enough to cut the size of the federal government. "The government has run amok fiscally," [Barr said](#). There's not much agreement over whether Barr could tip the race one way or another. The most obvious answer is that it could hurt McCain's standing among conservatives. For what it's worth, the *Post* poll found that only 47 percent of conservatives said they would definitely back McCain, which should suggest there's room for a third-party candidate to squeeze in there somewhere. But there are those who think a Barr candidacy might hurt Obama if Barr manages to get support from many of the younger, college-educated voters who gravitated toward Rep. Ron Paul.

The *LAT* asks [handwriting experts](#) to analyze signatures and writing samples from Obama, Clinton, and McCain to find out what they say about each of the presidential contenders. It turns out that Obama and McCain have some things in common. They both have illegible signatures, "which suggests a need for privacy or an aversion to transparency," and emphasize their first names, which shows "a desire to distance themselves from their fathers." For her part, Clinton's signature "is readable, but lacks emotion and warmth." As for their writing, Clinton's is "disciplined" while Obama's is "flexible" and McCain's is "disconnected, forceful and intense."

today's papers

The Burden of Proof

By Daniel Politi

Monday, May 12, 2008, at 6:48 AM ET

The [*New York Times*](#) leads with a look at how the debate over laws requiring voters to show photo identification is likely to get more complicated as more states consider demanding [proof of citizenship](#) from anyone who wants to cast a ballot. Missouri lawmakers are likely to back a constitutional amendment this week that would require such proof. [*USA Today*](#) leads with word that the more than 20 deaths caused by tornadoes in the United States this weekend pushed an already bad year into [record-breaking territory](#). So far, 98 people have been killed by tornadoes since the beginning of 2008, which makes it the deadliest year thus far since 1998 and the seventh-deadliest since 1950. The [*Wall Street Journal*](#) leads its world-wide newsbox with aid workers saying that it [could take weeks](#) to reach many of the victims of Burma's devastating cyclone that are in some of the country's worst-hit areas. The official death toll from Cyclone Nargis is now 28,458, and everyone expects that number to keep rising.

The [*Los Angeles Times*](#) leads with a look at how the government has been increasing the use of its domestic spying powers while the number of terrorism-related prosecutions that end up in court has been [steadily decreasing](#). This disparity has led many to question whether the heightened surveillance is worth it, and some lawmakers are wondering whether the added emphasis on anti-terrorism programs has come "at the expense of traditional crime-fighting." The [*Washington Post*](#) leads with a look at how the growing number of countries that want to start nuclear power programs is raising concerns about the proliferation of [nuclear weapons](#). At least 40 developing countries have told the United Nations they're interested in nuclear power programs, and at least six have said they want to enrich or reprocess nuclear fuel, which "could dramatically expand the global supply of plutonium and enriched uranium."

At least 19 state legislatures are currently considering whether they should require voters to show [proof of citizenship](#), but the Missouri measure is the only one that could be implemented before the November elections. Voters would still have to approve the amendment before it can be implemented, but, even if they do, Missouri wouldn't be the first state with a citizenship requirement. Arizona currently demands proof of citizenship from potential voters, and since the requirement was implemented in 2004, "more than 38,000 voter registration applications have been thrown out," reports the *NYT*. Democrats have long opposed any kind of ID requirement and are likely to fight even more strongly against these expanded measures since they would further limit the types of documents that would be acceptable and therefore risk disenfranchising even more people. Raising the stakes is the fact that Missouri is a swing state where winners are often decided by small margins.

The papers report that epidemics of several potential life-threatening diseases, including cholera, could break out among as many as 1.5 million survivors of Cyclone Nargis. The charity group Oxfam warned yesterday of a potential "massive public

health catastrophe" as aid continues to trickle into Burma more than a week after the cyclone hit. "The ponds are full of dead bodies, the wells have saline water, and even things like a bucket are in scarce supply," [Oxfam's regional director said](#). Although there have been no confirmed reports of political strife, aid workers warn that chaos could easily break out as people grow [more desperate](#).

The *LAT* and *NYT* both front dispatches from inside Burma that illustrate the gravity of the situation and how the Burmese military government is standing in the way of relief. The *NYT* reports that even when Burma's wealthy citizens want to donate supplies they're often stopped by officials who say all aid must [go through the military government](#). Meanwhile, there are complaints that the military leaders are handing out substandard food and keeping much of the international aid for themselves. And while people continue to die, the government is still only handing out a fraction of the visas that relief organizations have requested for their workers. The *LAT* notes that many in southern Burma have stopped waiting for help and are doing their best to rebuild on their own as heavy rains that are predicted for this week threaten to make [a dire situation even worse](#).

Although law experts agree with government officials that increasing surveillance shouldn't necessarily directly correlate with the number of prosecutions, they also say there aren't that many other ways [to check on progress](#). And solely judging by these numbers, the government doesn't have much to show for its increased surveillance. While the number of Justice Department warrant requests granted by the nation's spy court increased 9 percent last year, the number of cases brought by the department declined 19 percent.

Much of the increased interest in nuclear fuel is due to the rising prices of fossil fuels, which is leading countries to [seek alternatives](#). But the *Post* points out that several of the countries that are pursuing nuclear power are in the Middle East and have plenty of oil or natural gas. In this case, their interest in nuclear power seems at least partly due to an overall concern about a future regional arms race that could be fueled by what many see as Iran's obvious desire for nuclear weapons. "This is not primarily about nuclear energy. It's a hedge against Iran," one expert said. Of course, there's a big step between a commercial nuclear power program and weapons, but a civilian program can give a country expertise and a base from which to expand in the future. Experience has also shown that having a commercial plant makes it easier to hide a covert weapons program.

The *NYT* points out that while Sens. Barack Obama and John McCain took Sunday off, Sen. Hillary Clinton spent Mother's Day on the [campaign trail in West Virginia](#). And while she vowed to soldier on despite the general view that she has no chance of winning the nomination, the *Post* notes that Clinton's campaign acknowledged yesterday that it is [\\$20 million in debt](#).

Even though Clinton is still campaigning, the tone of the two Democratic contenders has changed lately, reports the *WSJ*. Both Clinton and Obama are avoiding direct references to each other while [increasing their criticism of McCain](#). For his part, McCain is now preparing to shift the conversation to the environment with the hope that he can appeal to Democrats and independents by highlighting how he's different from President Bush on the issue. But while McCain is trying to paint himself as a friend of green policies, his overall "environmental voting record is more complicated than he portrays it," [notes the WSJ](#). The *WP* devotes a front-page story to the issue and says [McCain's record](#) "shows an inconsistent approach to the environment."

In the *NYT*'s op-ed page, [Edward Luttwak](#) says that "one danger" of Obama's "charisma ... is that it can evoke unrealistic hopes of what a candidate could actually accomplish in office regardless of his own personal abilities." One often-stated claim that Muslim countries would welcome an Obama presidency, which could do wonders for U.S. foreign policy. But under Muslim law, Obama was born a Muslim and committed "the worst of all crimes that a Muslim can commit, worse than murder" when he converted. This would not only complicate the security situation if he were ever to visit a Muslim country, but once this fact is widely known, "most citizens of the Islamic world would be horrified." Luttwak isn't suggesting that Americans should weigh this into their decision, "but of all the well-meaning desires projected on Senator Obama, the hope that he would decisively improve relations with the world's Muslims is the least realistic."

today's papers The General

By Barron YoungSmith
Sunday, May 11, 2008, at 5:19 AM ET

The *Washington Post* leads with an [attempted coup](#) in Sudan perpetrated by Darfuri rebels who crossed the desert to attack Khartoum—a story the *New York Times* does its best to downplay. The *NYT* [lead](#) says Barack Obama and John McCain are already plotting their general-election strategies. Both rely on winning over independents and Latinos. The *Los Angeles Times*' lede [analyzes](#) Obama's political weaknesses, which it says are inexperience and liberalism.

It's not clear which paper knows the truth about Sudan. Briefly, the *WP* piece reads as if its source was Paul Wolfowitz, while the *NYT* [piece](#)—which the paper stuffs—is skeptical, instead reprinting the Sudanese government's version of events.

According to the *WP*, rebels intent on "regime change" traveled hundreds of miles to launch an "unprecedented," "game

changing" attack on a fractured, isolated government in Khartoum with help from members of the Sudanese military. The *NYT* says the attack was bold but openly questions the extent of the violence—and of divisions within the Sudanese military. Either way, the rebels lost decisively and Khartoum is now on lockdown.

John McCain and Barack Obama both think they can [rewrite the electoral map](#) in the fall. McCain plans to tar Obama early as elitist and inexperienced, picking off states that Obama lost in the primary. Obama plans to go on a biography tour and link McCain to Bush, flipping purple states like Virginia and Colorado.

The *LAT* thinks race might be an issue for Obama, but the perception that he is liberal and inexperienced is a bigger problem.

The *NYT* features an interesting [look](#) at how Obama practiced his peculiar brand of "big tent" politics on Chicago's South Side—deliberately fashioning positions that brought together strange bedfellows.

The *NYT* goes up top with sanitary conditions in cyclone-hit southern Myanmar, where the rivers are [filled with floating bodies](#) that could spread disease. Instead of cleaning them up, the government has diverted resources to a [referendum](#) that will bolster its grip on power.

The *WP* fronts its [investigation](#) into the collapse of medical care inside America's new network of prisons for foreign detainees. These detainees are not terrorism suspects but asylum seekers and undocumented workers—and they've been deprived of basic health provisions as their numbers swell.

The *LAT* fronts a [look](#) at U.S. troops policing Sadr City—they try to fight militias there but, for political reasons, can't actually enter the neighborhood. Meanwhile, the *NYT* goes inside with an Iranian-brokered [truce](#) between Shiite militias and Iraq's government. The *LAT* says the truce [presages](#) a crackdown on al-Qaida's last Iraqi stronghold.

The *WP* fronts a [look](#) at uncowed Clinton volunteers in West Virginia, where tensions between Hillary backers and college students run high.

The *WP* [fronts](#) a coming pension crisis, as state and local governments use semifraudulent accounting practices to paper over funding shortfalls. Up next, "a massive breach of faith with a generation of public employees."

The *NYT* [fronts](#) the rise of companies that funnel rich foreign students to obscure U.S. colleges, charging both the students and

the colleges for the service. Critics worry it's ethically and legally inappropriate.

Another *NYT* [front](#) says artificial, ceramic hips created by a company called Stryker have been squeaking ominously once installed in patients. No one knows why this happens, but doctors are worried the hips will endanger patients.

Might as well mention it ... The *NYT* [fronts](#) a short notice that Jenna Bush married Henry Hager in Crawford, Texas, yesterday. Laura Bush wore turquoise. Pictures of the wedding are forthcoming.

today's papers

Disaster Resistance

By Joshua Kucera

Saturday, May 10, 2008, at 6:00 AM ET

The *Washington Post* leads with Hezbollah forces [taking over large swathes of Beirut](#), a story that also [tops](#) the world-wide newsbox in the *Wall Street Journal*. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with a poll showing both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton [ahead of John McCain](#) in head-to-head matchups. The *New York Times* leads with high gas prices pushing more commuters to use [public transportation](#).

The Hezbollah takeover came after three days of sectarian fighting in Beirut between Sunni militias and Hezbollah and its Shiite allies. Hezbollah also shut down a rival television station and newspaper; 11 people have died so far in the fighting. And the country's security forces, which Washington has supported to the tune of \$400 million? They've "largely stood aside," the *Post* says. They did do this, however: "The army had issued a statement saying the fighting had compromised its unity." Hezbollah helpfully handed control of some of the government offices it seized on Friday to the army.

The jury is still out on what it all means. "It was not yet clear what Friday's events would mean for Lebanon's political future, or how Hezbollah's show of force might translate into a corresponding political advantage," the *NYT* says. But the paper also quotes one local analyst: "They want the government to resign. This is effectively a coup." The *Journal's* lede paragraph also is blunt, saying the takeover signals "a dramatic shift in power in the country: The U.S.-backed government of Lebanon isn't in charge anymore." An analyst quoted by the *LAT* has a [different take](#), saying that Hezbollah is not likely to continue its surge or even continue to hold the parts of Beirut it just seized. "Instead, the offensive was an 'object lesson' meant to demonstrate the group's ability to quickly subdue its domestic

rivals without exposing its arsenal of heavy weapons meant to target Israel in a potential war."

The same *LAT* poll showed McCain beating both in February; the paper attributes the Democrats' rising fortunes to the falling economy—voters see McCain as the least able of the three to manage that. In a hypothetical matchup, the poll gave Obama 46 percent to McCain's 40 percent and Clinton 47-38 over McCain. In February, McCain led Clinton by six and Obama by two. Among voters who say the economy is in a recession—78 percent of those polled—both of the Democrats lead McCain by 20 points.

McCain could be facing even more trouble: The *LAT* checks in with Bob Barr, the former congressman who is [mulling a run for president](#) as a libertarian, worrying some Republicans who think he could be a Nader of the right. And while Obama keeps accumulating superdelegates, John Edwards [may or may not](#) have let slip that he voted for Obama on Tuesday, the *NYT* finds.

The jump to public transportation is especially pronounced in cities with relatively strong driving cultures, like Denver, Minneapolis, Seattle, Dallas-Fort Worth, and San Francisco. Even cities of less than 100,000 are seeing big spikes in bus ridership. The increases are all the more remarkable because they are taking place in a poor economy, which usually means fewer people using public transportation.

All the papers have updates on the grim situation in Burma/Myanmar. The *LAT* saw ships in the country's main port [being loaded with rice](#) being exported to Bangladesh, while the government was handing out rotting stores of rice to citizens affected by the storm. The *Washington Post* (which did not have a Burma dateline) took a [political approach](#), going high with the Burmese government's announcement that it would admit U.S. military flights bringing aid but that there was still disagreement over who would distribute foreign aid: Yesterday, the Burmese authorities commandeered two planeloads of U.N.-donated food and equipment and refused to allow in international aid officials. U.N. officials said they will not provide aid without having people on the ground to monitor its distribution.

"This is a regime that is extremely nationalistic—their whole ideology is about how they are a strong government that is protecting the country and holding the country together," said one expert quoted in the *Post*. "Accepting aid would be an implicit admission that they cannot deal with the problems of the country ... What they are seeing here is a threat to their entire *raison d'être*—their whole house of cards falling down."

Both the *Post* and *NYT* have previews of Jenna Bush's wedding tonight in Texas; the *Post* looks at how Jenna has [evolved](#) from a "party girl" and how her husband-to-be, like many in his position before him, seems "hardwired for politics." And the *NYT* puts it in the context of Bush's father [re-entering private life](#).

Also in the papers ... The remains of 200 troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan have been cremated at Capitol Crematory and Friends Forever Pet Cremation Service in Delaware. Defense Secretary Robert Gates says [that won't happen any more](#), the *Post* reports. Moscow held a Red Square military parade, and the papers do not love it: [Every single one](#) of them called it "Soviet." Private military contractor/mercenary group Blackwater is weathering controversy and is [still kicking](#); it just got its main State Department contract renewed, the *NYT* reports. The *NYT* has a feature on the [woeful health care situation](#) of illegal farm workers. Retailers are getting creative, and [aggressive](#), to get their hands on customers' stimulus checks, the *NYT* finds. New Mexico's [commercial spaceport](#) is on schedule to open in 2010, the *Post* reports.

today's papers Let My People In

By Daniel Politi

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 6:20 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with the United Nations' increasing pressure on Burmese officials to drop all restrictions and allow relief workers and aid [to enter the country](#). It's now been almost a week since Cyclone Nargis devastated Burma on Saturday, but emergency supplies continue to trickle in at an unacceptable pace as the military junta is adamant that it won't cede control over the relief efforts. "They have simply not facilitated access in the way we have a right to expect," the U.N. official in charge of the relief effort said. The *Wall Street Journal* also leads its world-wide newsbox with Burma and points out that the military junta allowed the first U.N. aid shipments to enter the country. The *Washington Post* leads with a look at how Sen. Barack Obama began an effort to [unify the Democratic Party](#) behind his candidacy, even as Sen. Hillary Clinton continued to campaign and insist she has a better chance of winning the November election.

USA Today leads with new data showing that an increasing number of prime borrowers are falling behind on their mortgage payments and that foreclosures [are on the rise](#). Although the numbers are still small and the problem is nowhere near as severe as in the subprime market, if they increase further, it "could prolong the housing crisis." The *Los Angeles Times* leads with news that the national coordinator of Mexico's efforts to wage war against organized crime was [killed in his home by an assassin](#). Sources tell the paper that the so-called Sinaloa cartel was responsible for the attack against Edgar Milan Gomez, who was the country's third-ranking police official.

Two U.N. transport planes full of relief supplies finally reached Burma yesterday, but no one thinks that's anywhere close to

what's needed to assist the estimated 1.5 million survivors. Defense Secretary Robert Gates described how U.S. military transport planes and helicopters are in Thailand just waiting for the go-ahead to begin delivering aid, but the Burmese government has yet to approve their entry. The *Post* [points out](#) that one of the U.N. planes that arrived in Burma yesterday "had sat for two days in Dubai ... waiting for clearance." The *WSJ* devotes a separate story inside to a look at how the Bush administration and aid groups are ["examining radical solutions"](#) that include "air drops, border deliveries and helicopter landings." But some warn that such unilateral action will only make things worse.

The United Nations says several disaster experts haven't been allowed inside Burma, and they're also [just waiting around in Thailand](#). It seems Burmese authorities want to pick who can go into the country and who can't and are favoring aid workers [from Asian countries](#) while denying entrance to others. "I've never seen an emergency situation such as this before," the regional director of the International Rescue Committee said. "A week after the disaster, the entire humanitarian community is still sitting in another country." The *NYT* talks to some experts who say the Burmese government is reluctant to receive foreign help because it would prove that it [can't take care of its own people](#). "The disaster has demonstrated that their omniscient power has been greatly exaggerated," one said.

Of course, as time passes, it becomes more likely that the death toll will continue to increase, and there's the very real risk that epidemics of disease will break out. By all accounts, the situation is nothing short of desperate. For the first time since Saturday, the *NYT*, *LAT*, and *WP* all publish dispatches from inside Burma. Staff writers from the *LAT* and *NYT* managed to get into the country and file dispatches from Rangoon, Burma's biggest city, where the death toll was relatively small but the destruction caused by the cyclone is still plainly evident, as residents struggle to pick up the pieces. The fact that the government hasn't managed "to clear debris and restore basic services like water and power in what is the country's wealthiest city" is an illustration of how slow the recovery process will be, [says the NYT](#). The *LAT* [reports](#) that "five days later, a semblance of normality was returning" to the city but says residents now have to pay "exorbitant prices for bare essentials." The *WP* [fronts a dispatch](#) written by a freelance journalist from the "midpoint of the storm's path across the delta," where survivors are struggling to stay alive. Although a few aid groups are working in the area, food remains scarce, and Burmese soldiers and police officers appeared more interested in operating checkpoints than carrying out relief operations.

Even as Obama said yesterday that he's likely to win a majority of pledged delegates after Kentucky and Oregon vote on May 20, he's not publicly calling for Clinton to step down from the contest. It seems his campaign is being careful not to make it seem like Obama is [trying to push Clinton to quit](#) since he will

need the backing of her supporters in November. The chairman of the Clinton campaign suggested yesterday that Clinton won't take the fight to the nomination when he said that "after June 3, this is going to come to a conclusion." The *Post's* Dan Balz says that while it's possible that Clinton might end her campaign early [due to lack of funds](#), the most likely scenario is that she won't officially drop out until the undecided superdelegates move into the Obama column after June 3.

The *WP* fronts a look at how Sen. John McCain pushed a land swap deal through Congress that will "directly benefit" [one of his top fundraisers](#). After approval of the legislation, which will allow an Arizona businessman to exchange remote land for valuable property owned by the federal government, SunCor Development was hired to build thousands of homes in the area. SunCor Development is run by Steven Betts, a longtime McCain supporter who has raised more than \$100,000 for the Arizona Republican's presidential race. Betts denies he ever talked to McCain about it, but besides that connection, there are plenty of other eyebrow-raising aspects to the deal. McCain wasn't very eager to support the swap at first, but that all appeared to change after the businessman who owned the remote land hired a group of lobbyists that included several people who once worked for McCain. Some have also criticized the legislation, saying that the federal government got a raw deal. This isn't the first time that land swaps pushed through by McCain have come under scrutiny because they benefitted campaign contributors. Last month, the *NYT* took a look at how McCain has [sponsored legislation](#) that helped a wealthy Arizona businessman, who has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the senator, get millions of dollars from the federal government in complex land exchanges.

The *WSJ* goes above the fold with a large picture (yes, a large picture!) of, and everyone mentions inside, the [second day of open street battles](#) in Beirut between supporters of the Lebanese government and Shiite gunmen tied to the Hezbollah-led opposition. The fighting intensified and killed [at least four people](#) after Hezbollah's leader accused the government of waging war against the group. Everyone says the fighting could push the country into a sectarian civil war, and the *WSJ* points out that the conflict "has taken on the feel of a political proxy war between Washington and Tehran."

The *LAT's* Joel Stein sets out to buy some [medical marijuana](#) and finds the whole process surprisingly simple. "I always wondered what would happen if marijuana were legalized for anyone over 18," Stein writes. "It seems it already has been, and nothing happened."

video

Capitolio

A Magnum photo essay.

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 4:40 PM ET

well-traveled

Baseball, Dominican-Style

Smoking cigars with a major league MVP.

By Bryan Curtis

Friday, May 9, 2008, at 6:45 AM ET

From: Bryan Curtis

Subject: Baseball, Dominican-Style.

Posted Monday, May 5, 2008, at 1:56 PM ET

Late last summer, when the steroid scandals got to be too much for me, I went to the Dominican Republic. My ostensible purpose was baseball tourism, but this was not one of those trips on which you sun yourself in the bleachers and think happy thoughts about your father; or pester your favorite shortstop for an autograph; or see baseball the way "it's meant to be played," as if such a method existed. No, a trip to the Dominican Republic offered a chance to catch a glimpse of the sociopolitical landscape suggested by David Ortiz's home-run swing, Pedro Martinez's fastball, and Vladimir Guerrero's hypnotically twirling bat. It was a chance to see how a Third World country supports a First World sports league.

If you've been scoring at home, you know that the Dominican Republic—the D.R.—has become the chief foreign source of major league talent, placing nearly 500 players at last count. The players are scouted, trained, and educated at the so-called Dominican baseball academies, outposts owned and operated by major league teams. We wanted to see what those academies were like and how baseball dreams were playing out.

My team: Megan Hustad, my stateside companion, and Alberto Pozo, a Puerto Rican who has set up shop in Santo Domingo, the capital. Pozo was an apprentice TV producer, local fixer, and a fierce Yankees partisan, though you wouldn't have known it from the Red Sox cap that was always on his head. ("I lost a bet," he explained.) The three of us had started in the Zona Colonial, the crumbling, centuries-old center of Santo Domingo, with Pozo at the wheel of my rental car. After weaving through the traffic jams that clog the newer, shinier parts of town, we had emerged in the slums on the city's north side. A few feet from the car, there were lean-tos full of chickens, goats, and a teeming array of food vendors; ramshackle auto repair shops; and unlicensed "sports books," where the poorest of the poor bet on

everything from Major League Baseball to cockfights. Everything and everybody seemed to be kicking up dust. Whenever the car slowed to a stop, it was approached by hawkers on bikes selling knockoff sunglasses, *guayaba* ice pops, or fresh fruit.

After a few wrong turns on unpaved roads, we reached the Philadelphia Phillies' academy around late morning. The academy's buildings sat next to a hillside in a remote stretch of farmland and owed something to Spanish mission architecture. According to the academy's administrator, Elvis Fernandez, the Phillies chose this spot because it is several tape-measure home runs away from girls, shopping malls, and other vices that might tempt a prized 16-year-old prospect. The only thing to do here is play baseball, which the Phillies recruits do morning and night, with an Eastern bloc-style regimentation. Some days will feature a full practice in the morning, a game against another team's academy in the afternoon, followed by post-game hitting and fielding drills before the players return to their bunks for the night.

My team arrived in the middle of a game between the Phillies and the academy squad of the Los Angeles Angels. Habituated as I was to the scowling, thick-legged men of the majors, it is hard to convey just how striking these young Dominicans were: tall with dark, sun-walloped skin; lean muscles; and a youthful spring in their steps. Even their postures seemed optimistic. I was standing along the first-base line watching the Phillies' starter, a kid named Carpio, who had a live fastball and a tendency to get wild. Carpio got bailed out by a few slick defensive plays in the early innings, but by the fourth, his eyes were fixated on the pitcher's rubber, and he looked like he'd rather be somewhere else.

With Carpio in a jam, we ventured from the field to the academy's main building, where the players slept, ate, and studied. The first room Fernandez showed us was a classroom. As he explained it, the academies' educational programs are mostly limited to a smattering of religious study, American law (it doesn't matter that you met her at a 21-and-over club—she could be lying about her age), and the teaching of baseballic terminology like "hit and run" and "cut-off man." ("Those are the first words we teach them," Fernandez said.) The basics established, the academy moves on to the interrogations the Dominican player is bound to encounter from coaches: What's your name? What position do you play? How old are you? (A loaded question, given the [long history](#) of fudging Dominican birth certificates.)

"We teach them that American time is not Dominican time," Fernandez told me. Another lesson: The sexual mores of the D.R.—such as aggressively staring down an attractive woman on the street—will not fly in the States.

The Phillies run the academy like a military school, and no one minded saying so. The team enforces a strict 8 p.m. curfew and a 10 p.m. bedtime. The players, who have received signing bonuses ranging from a few thousand dollars to a few hundred thousand dollars, are not allowed to keep cars; if they want to visit the nearest shopping mall, they must take the rickety local bus. They "eat, sleep, and play baseball," Fernandez said, the reliable sports cliché having real meaning for once. For many of the players, the Phillies academy is the first place they've encountered a well-balanced meal; like hungry teenage boys everywhere, they inevitably want more.

The players' sleeping quarters were fittingly monastic. They slept eight to a room in bunk beds, and I noticed a few of the boys had pulled their mattresses onto the floor because of the sweltering heat. The rooms had the sad monotone of summer-camp barracks and buzzed with tropical insects. We saw some small televisions propped up on plastic chairs but no other signs of affluence.

It is the kind of place that reeks of long odds. One scout estimated that for every 100 prospects signed and enrolled in the Phillies academy, only three or four will make the major leagues. And given Dominican baseball fever—"Every father wants his son to be a ballplayer," I was told again and again—it is safe to assume that for those 100 signees, there are many thousands more outside the academy looking in.

With nothing left to see in the dorms, we marched through a dimly lit and spectacularly cluttered locker room and then stepped back outside into the glaring Caribbean sun. We could still hear metal bats striking the ball in the distance, and the occasional muffled cheer. A flock of tiny black birds swooped overhead, darting over and under the laundry lines. Fernandez couldn't identify them. "They're always here," he shrugged.

From: Bryan Curtis
Subject: The Great Rivals

Posted Tuesday, May 6, 2008, at 7:43 AM ET

If the goal of every young ballplayer in the Dominican Republic is one day to make the major leagues, the secondary goal is to spend the winter in the thrall of one's countrymen. Just as the U.S. World Series ends in October, the Dominican Winter League begins. It is a kind of postseason victory lap, a chance for the player to reconnect with his native country. It is in the winter league that one finds the familiar tropes of Dominican baseball: the highly knowledgeable, and therefore raucous, fans; merengue music wafting from the bleachers; and intranational

rivalries that put our minor domestic disputes, like Yankees vs. Red Sox, to shame.

The main Dominican rivalry these days is between the Licey Tigers—whom we'll think of as the "Yankees" in our gringo shorthand—and the Águilas Cibaenas—whom we'll think of as the "Red Sox." When we arrived in the D.R., the two teams had won every Dominican league championship since 1995—Licey last in 2005-06, Águilas most recently in 2006-07. Both had a total of 19 championships. Each club suspected the other was inferior on the diamond and otherwise.

A few notes about the Dominican Winter League: We're not talking about amateurs here. If you are a Dominican wishing to join the winter league, you first have to play your way to the United States and then spend at least two years in the American minor leagues. At that point, your name can appear on a draft-eligible list for the six Dominican teams. (The others are Escogido, Estrellas, Gigantes, and La Romana.) Being drafted by a Dominican club instantly transforms you into a beloved local fixture, and players can be enticed to return to their Dominican club until they reach what in baseball counts as extreme old age. Luis Polonia, who is 44 and whose major league career ended back in 2000, still plays some designated hitter for his Dominican team, Águilas. The Águilas general manager, Winston Llenas, told me that he believes Polonia practiced with Babe Ruth, but he still signs him every year.

Licey (pronounced LEE-say) plays in the Estadio Quisqueya, a park that has the look of a giant concrete conch shell. Of the D.R.'s two great rivals, Licey is the older and (as its partisans constantly remind you) grander of the ballclubs. We were shown into the office of the owner, Jose Manuel "Pepe" Bustos, who went to the immensely unnecessary trouble of assembling the entire Licey front office for my interrogation. Clearly unprepared for my arrival, they sat rigidly in their seats and faced me as though I were a government tax auditor.

The Licey brain trust consists of Bustos; Jose Bustos Jr., his son and the team's general manager; and Miguel Guerra, the team's accountant. What, I asked, separated Licey from the other winter league clubs?

"We treat the players in a way they like to be treated," Jose Bustos said, "because we don't have the money to pay them what they get paid in the major leagues." (A Dominican Winter League salary amounts to a small honorarium, especially for players like Vladimir Guerrero.)

"We're just one big family," Guerra added.

"We call [the players] every week," Bustos Jr. said. "They need something, they call us. Their wives feel good when they're here."

This might sound like so much sports happy talk, but, in fact, Guerrero, the Los Angeles Angels slugger, played for Licey in the winter of 2004—even though he'd just won the majors' Most Valuable Player award. There's another reason for the friendly atmosphere: Major league players often come here and find their natural positions occupied, and they have to be talked into a switch. Carlos Peña, a first baseman who hit 46 home runs and 121 RBI in 2007 for Tampa Bay, couldn't find a position with Licey the previous winter and spent a lot of time on the Tigers bench.

I told the Licey brain trust that I would be visiting the Águilas clubhouse the next day, and they looked at me with astonishment. The whole interview seemed to go rapidly downhill. Answers became clipped, and pauses gained pregnancy. Pozo, my translator, later explained that my statement was an unfortunate faux pas and had rendered me suspect in their eyes. For I was no longer a foreign journalist come to honor the glories of Licey, the greatest team in Dominican history; I was, annoyingly, insisting on talking to "both sides." *Adios*.

Águilas (AH-gee-las) is headquartered in the D.R.'s second-largest city, Santiago, whose natural insecurity is reflected in the civic motto: "Santiago is Santiago." My team started the two-hour drive north from Santo Domingo under threatening clouds. Santo Domingo's gantlet of bodegas and cell-phone stores gave way to a winding highway lined with hills of thick, verdant forest. It is hard to do justice to the vastness, the greenness of the view—let alone the looming feeling of rural poverty, Dominican-style. Every couple of miles, we'd zoom by a clutch of lean-tos with corrugated scrap-metal roofs, built on the sides of the hills. The huts were staggered horizontally, like terraces jutting off the side of an apartment building. If you squinted, you could see a few faces and loose chickens; skinny babies in dingy, loose-fitting hand-me-downs; animal carcasses for sale. The only sign of modernity is the condition of the highway—surprisingly smooth—and the Brugal Rum-sponsored road signs that announce every town.

Pozo zipped past what little traffic we encountered with the deft hand of someone who had been driving, he estimated, since he was 9. We traveled fast—70, 80 miles per hour—but the traffic slowed as we made our way into Santiago. The Águilas team offices are in a little bandbox of an *estadio* with palm trees pointing upward near the foul poles. We were greeted by Winston Llenas, the general manager and a fine ballplayer in his own right—he played six seasons with the California Angels in the 1970s. ("I did some damage," he assured me.) Whereas the Liceños had comported themselves as polite technocrats, Winston was expansive, bordering on clownish—a Dominican [Charlie O. Finley](#). Broad-shouldered, with a mane of salt-and-pepper hair and a prominent nose, he commanded me to sit in front of his enormous desk and shouted, "The buck stops here," as he pounded it with mock fury.

As Llenas seemed to have a sense of humor, I took a calculated risk and mentioned visiting the rivals down south. "Licey—since you mentioned the Licey club—it's also a club with a lot of tradition," Llenas said tactfully. "It's the oldest club in the Dominican Republic, actually. They're celebrating their 100th anniversary this year. Of course, we're going to ruin their celebration."

If Águilas had an advantage, Llenas explained, it was its rabid fan base. Cibaeñas like to think that they make up for what they lack in Santo Domingo-style cosmopolitanism with energy and passion—which, at the ballpark, means they are louder and more demanding. Even Licey die-hards can be made to admit that Águilas has the superior crowd. "It's crazy, man," Llenas said when I asked about the scene in the stands. "It's fun. It's noisy. It's music, it's yelling ... it's loud ... it's unbelievable."

"You can expect anything to happen in the stands," said Santana Martinez, an Águilas play-by-play announcer, who had joined us.

"It's [like] going to the Bronx Zoo or something," Llenas replied.

"Fortunately, you don't have too many fights."

"No, no fights."

There is little rest for the caretaker of a Dominican Winter League roster. For a time, the major leagues were happy to have players, Dominican- or American-born, spend their winter in the Caribbean. (Everyone from Bob Gibson to Orel Hershiser did a winter tour in the D.R.) These days, the American ballclubs prefer to keep prized prospects in "instructional" leagues back in the States. Even the established Dominican stars, like Miguel Tejada and Melky Cabrera, are often barred from playing a full season in the D.R. due to the "extreme fatigue" (the majors' regrettable phrase) brought on by too many regular-season pitches or at-bats. Thus, a Dominican Winter League team must shuffle players in and out, often with top stars dropping out at the last moment. "Plan A?" Llenas said. "Forget Plan A!"

Before the 2007-08 season, Águilas had never managed to surpass Licey in total championships, giving the team a Red Sox-like inferiority complex that occasionally bordered on paranoia. "I don't want to tell you all of our secrets," Llenas said. Even so, Llenas let on that he planned to give up home-run hitting to win with pitching and defense. On opening day, the Águilas pitcher would be Jose Lima, a rotund Santiago native who is familiarly known as "Lima Time" and pitched parts of 13 seasons in the majors. (Indeed, a few months after I left, Águilas would win the league title, while Licey settled for second.)

Llenas took us down the hall, up the stairs, through an Águilas-mascot-festooned conference room, and into the VIP box, from

which we could glimpse Estadio Cibao in a moment of rare, off-season repose. Just then the clouds made good on their promise, and rain came pouring down in sheets.

From: Bryan Curtis

Subject: A Tripleheader With Juan Marichal

Posted Wednesday, May 7, 2008, at 6:53 AM ET

Juan Marichal is the first baseball player from the Dominican Republic to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame, which makes him the country's baseball patron saint. He lives in Santo Domingo in a sprawling house surrounded by trees and high stucco walls. Like many of the capital city's prominent residences, Marichal's place is guarded by a man in camouflage fatigues who sits in a plastic lawn chair with a machine gun across his lap. One afternoon we were ushered inside the front gate, waved past the watchful eyes of the guard, and shown into Marichal's den. Marichal, who is never late, appeared promptly at 4 p.m., shook our hands, and motioned for us to arrange ourselves on three generously proportioned leather sofas.

Marichal is 70 years old and has salt-and-pepper hair and a smile as wide as a National League strike zone. He told us his life story in three acts. It is a well-rehearsed story, probably delivered many times to different people, but it might be the best encapsulation of how a Dominican baseball player can really make it big.

Laguna Verde: Marichal grew up in Laguna Verde, a small town in the remote regions near the Haitian border. The locals were mostly farmers, growing rice and bananas and yucca. When Marichal was 16 years old, dictator Rafael Trujillo ruled the Dominican Republic, and American-owned United Fruit Co. was Laguna Verde's primary employer.

Marichal was pitching for a team sponsored by the Granada Fruit Co., a subsidiary of United Fruit. He was a side-armed pitcher with a fastball that moved in toward the batter and a curveball that started in the middle of the plate and then broke to the outside. One Sunday afternoon, Marichal was set to pitch against the Dominican air force, a team that was the bauble of Ramfis Trujillo, the dictator's son. Marichal won the game 2-1. It was such a masterful outing that the next morning, a uniformed lieutenant approached Marichal and handed him a telegram that demanded, by order of Trujillo, that he enlist in the air force. Marichal was floored. He retreated to his mother's house in a panic. His mother read the telegram and started pacing nervously. At 4 o'clock that afternoon, with mom still pacing, the air force lieutenant reappeared with a second telegram. "Son,

you can't say no to these people," Marichal's mother said. Marichal enlisted in the Dominican air force. He figured that he could play baseball and learn to fly fighter planes, which he'd always dreamed of doing.

Ramfis Trujillo was what you could safely call megalomaniacal, but he took a keen interest in his young conscript's baseball career. Whenever Marichal was scheduled to pitch, Trujillo would come to the base—an arrival heralded by the sounding of a thunderous horn—and take his seat behind home plate. From the mound, Marichal would find himself staring at Trujillo more than his catcher. "He was one of the two handsomest men I ever saw in my life," Marichal says. "The other was Elvis Presley." As a member of the Dominican air force, Marichal got the uniform and the mandatory crew cut. But when he inquired about flying planes, his commanders told him to never mind all that. He should stick to pitching.

Michigan City: Marichal's first stop in American minor league baseball was a brief tenure with a team called the Michigan City White Caps. Marichal got to Michigan City, Ind., by riding in the back of a Greyhound bus from Florida, where the San Francisco Giants held their training camp. Before he left the Dominican Republic, no one had told Marichal about American segregation laws, and he doesn't think he would have understood the concept if they had tried. By this point, Latin Americans had been trickling into the major leagues for more than 50 years, long preceding Jackie Robinson. Many, like Marichal, were neither white nor black, so they fell into a murky third category—"nonwhite," which was effectively black. In a small, segregated town like Michigan City, Marichal saw his white teammates only on the field and in the clubhouse. After the game, Marichal would retire with the black players to boarding houses around town. Marichal didn't speak much English, so when he went to one of the town's black-owned restaurants, he would examine other diners' plates until he saw something he liked, and he would point at it.

As Marichal's pitching garnered him a bit of celebrity around town, one restaurant began to offer him a free fried chicken for every game he won. During the 1957 season, his first in the United States, Marichal wound up winning 21 games and another two in the playoffs, for a grand total of 23 chickens.

San Francisco: Marichal's arrival in San Francisco, in 1960, was the capstone of the Giants' great Caribbean recruiting spree. The team had signed Dominican brothers Felipe and Matty Alou and Puerto Rican Orlando "Baby Bull" Cepeda. But, for all their internationalism, the Giants retained a manager named Alvin Dark, a cuss from Comanche, Okla., who was nicknamed "The Swamp Fox." As Marichal recalls, Dark once told the team's Latin players that they were never to utter a word in Spanish, not even with each other.

Between 1963 and 1966, Marichal won 93 games and struck out 916 batters, which put him on the rarefied plane of great National League pitchers like Sandy Koufax and Don Drysdale. Marichal was an aggressive bench jockey, riding teammates and opponents, and he tended to wear an unnerving smile on the mound. "The thing I hate about that s.o.b.," one player told *Time* magazine, "is that it all seems so easy for him. It's one thing to go hitless against a pitcher like Sandy Koufax or Don Drysdale or Jim Maloney; at least you can look out there and see the cords standing out on his neck. ... Marichal—he just stands there laughing at you."

A typically Marichalian outing was the game on July 2, 1963, that he pitched against Warren Spahn. The two Hall of Fame pitchers were standing at different ends of the rubber—at 26, Marichal had a live arm and a devastating curveball, while Spahn, 42, was running on fumes. On this day, the pitchers found themselves in a game of one-upmanship: Neither gave up a run through nine innings. At the top of the 10th, Marichal went up to his manager and said, "Mr. Dark, the weather's nice, I feel strong, please let me stay a few more innings." Dark said that would be OK, and Marichal threw five more shutout innings. At the end of the 14th inning, Dark tried to bench Marichal, but Marichal pointed at Spahn—who was also still in the game and also hadn't given up any runs—and said, "That man is 42 years old. I'm only 26. Until that man leaves the mound, nobody's going to take me out of this game!"

Dark was perturbed by Marichal's cheek, but he let Marichal go out and pitch the top of the 15th inning. Marichal got three quick outs. Then Spahn went out and pitched the bottom of the 15th, and he also got three quick outs. At the top of the 16th, Marichal could see that Dark was no longer amenable to his suggestion; a Giants relief pitcher was already trotting out of the bullpen. Before the reliever could reach the infield, Marichal grabbed his glove, raced onto the mound, and started throwing warm-up pitches. Marichal got three more outs in the top of the 16th inning.

All this really happened. What comes next is how Marichal tells the story, and, given his extravagantly charmed life, it's quite likely that it might have happened.

Marichal says he met Willie Mays on the way into the dugout and told him, "Willie, I don't want to pitch anymore!" Mays said he would take care of it. Mays hit a home run and won the game.

Sitting in his den now, Marichal has a way of letting his trademark grin serve as the punctuation mark for each anecdote. He took us around the room and pointed at pictures. On all four walls were photos of Marichal with Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, Muhammad Ali, and numerous others, including his five striking daughters and one handsome son. A uniformed maid entered the room and served us coffee and tall goblets of ice water.

Marichal cautioned us not to drink our coffee while standing up. "In the Dominican Republic, that's bad luck," he said. He had a certain authority on the subject of good fortune.

From: Bryan Curtis

Subject: The Mountain of Dreams

Posted Thursday, May 8, 2008, at 10:35 AM ET

The kid who was driving the scooter took his eyes off the heavily potholed road and said, "Bryan, how do you say in your language—*muerto*?" I was perched on the seat behind him, my hands clutching at his ribs as we weaved between cars, blew through traffic lights, and kicked up dust from the dirt road. I had been thinking *muerto* a lot over the last 10 minutes, but how did this guy know that?

I was riding with a *motoconcho*, one of the brigade of helmetless scooter drivers who provide a kind of unlicensed limousine service in the Dominican Republic. Since few Dominicans own cars, hitching a ride with a *motoconcho*, which typically costs a few pesos, is both a necessity and something of an art form. Men, women, and preteen schoolchildren in their blue-and-khaki uniforms line up along the side of the roads, waiting for a scooter to buzz by. You could be in Santo Domingo sprawl or deep in the countryside. If you wait long enough, you will see a *motoconcho*.

My team had come (by car) from Santo Domingo to the city of San Cristóbal in search of a baseball academy called Loma del Sueño—the Mountain of Dreams. San Cristóbal is one of the Dominican Republic's most fertile baseball towns, and as we cruised the sandy main drag, we saw the visage of Raúl Mondesí, the former major league slugger, on a billboard endorsing one of the candidates in the country's May 2008 presidential elections. Our directions ended in the center of town, so we pulled up next to a *motoconcho* who was relaxing under a shade tree. *Oye!* The *motoconcho* seemed to know the way to Loma del Sueño, but he kept the directions vague: "*Derecho*" was all he would say—straight ahead. He was angling to show us the way himself, for a small fee. So in an attempt to get my money's worth, I exited the car and cautiously assembled myself on the back of the scooter. My translator, Alberto Pozo, who would trail the *motoconcho* in our car, told me that if I felt uncomfortable, I should attempt to exit the bike in a graceful fashion.

Riding with the *motoconcho* is not unlike taking a turn on those mechanical bulls they have at high-end country-western bars. You must lean into the turns and lift your derriere off the seat

about a half-second in advance of every pothole. We finally found a smooth road near an old cemetery. "*Muerto*," the driver repeated, grinning and pointing at the tombstones. I smiled weakly. We took a left, and we found ourselves under a canopy of lush foliage. Then we were going uphill. The scooter shuddered during the climb, and the *motoconcho* kept up a long, half-decipherable patter about the high price of gas and the poor condition of the bike. (New York taxi drivers have never done a better job setting up a tip.) Then the road flattened out, we sped across a bridge, and on the top of the mountain, with all the majesty of a hard-to-reach Buddhist monastery, was Loma del Sueño. The Mountain of Dreams.

If the [Phillies' academy was a summer-camp-style barracks](#), then Loma del Sueño looked like a tourist resort. As we passed through the gated entrance, we could see that baseball diamonds had been carved directly onto the mountaintop. The fields were back-dropped on all sides by a valley of bright green trees that stretched into the horizon. To venture a metaphor I have never seen on the sports page, it was a bit like playing baseball on Machu Picchu. Loma del Sueño is the brainchild of José Rijo, who won the Most Valuable Player award in the 1990 World Series and also happens to be [Juan Marichal's](#) former son-in-law. As he suffered through a string of arm injuries that would ultimately end his playing career in 2002, Rijo decided to return to his native country and create a piece of the baseball infrastructure. Rijo's brother had suggested the mountaintop. The ball fields, housing complex, and executive offices now serve as baseball academies for the Washington Nationals, San Diego Padres, and Detroit Tigers. A playoff game between the Nationals' academy and the visiting Los Angeles Angels had already gotten under way by the time we arrived, and we found Rijo, a rotund, serene presence, relaxing in the shade of an umbrella on the first-base line, a cigar sticking out of his mouth.

Loma del Sueño was very much a local affair. A crowd of maybe 100 had made its way up the mountain, probably via *motoconcho* or on foot, and was chattering excitedly along the chain-link fences that surrounded the main field. There was a spontaneous energy you rarely experience amid all the canned stadium rock at a major league ballpark. Here, one twentysomething fan made his way through the crowd with a snake draped over his shoulders. Small boys of assorted sizes, some lovingly attended to and others blissfully free of parental supervision, scampered around. Two young women came dressed and accessorized as if for a night at one of San Cristóbal's finer discothèques. A banged-up 10-gallon water cooler was hauled out to make sure everyone stayed hydrated under the 88-degree sun. When the hometown Nationals took the field, they were serenaded by a three-piece pep band—complete with horn section—that had set up shop near Rijo. The Nationals team broke out in a spasmodic dance and then ran to their positions.

The young players headquartered at Loma del Sueño were experiencing the kind of luxury accommodations normally available only to *turistas*. They lived in a five-story pink stucco palace, which Rijo, who was concentrating on the game, dispatched us to in his golf cart. The student players' rooms were not unlike those you'd find at any Dominican beach hotel, with wrought-iron headboards and coordinating dressers. Each had a private balcony that overlooked the valley below. "Some kids are very poor here," Rijo told me later. "They don't know how to handle themselves. They do so much damage to the air conditioners, the TVs." An assistant took us up to peek into Rijo's own penthouse apartment, which he had called Suite 27, after his uniform number. It was decorated with African and aboriginal art, flat-screen TVs, embroidered silk pillows, white linen sofas, and top-shelf liquor like Grey Goose vodka and Johnnie Walker Gold whiskey. I could imagine that in the mind of a young, ambitious southpaw, it was a dreamlike vision of the spoils of baseball success.

When we returned to the ball field, Rijo got us chairs and ordered his staff to bring pitchers of passion-fruit juice with ice, along with platters of crackers, cheese cubes, and cantaloupe. He was still engrossed in the game, but he took a moment to make a few remarks over the din of the band. "They've got the Field of Dreams, I've got the Mountain of Dreams," Rijo said. "If you build it, they will come."

Rijo lives at Loma del Sueño pretty much full-time. He pitches batting practice and helps maintain the fields. He preaches about discipline, bringing in police officers to warn the players about the crime and drugs they're sure to encounter in the United States. "The other day, they announced a hurricane," he said. "I told the kids to go home. They said, 'No, no. If we stay here, we know we're going to eat for sure.' So I told them to stay here."

Rijo also pointed out something I hadn't thought much about: The academies are such a booming industry in the Dominican Republic that they produce a number of jobs for locals. "This town is so poor, it needs so much help, I figured this was the best way for me to give back something," Rijo said. Loma del Sueño requires a small army of scouts and groundskeepers and cooks and *motoconchos* and maids, who enter the ballplayers' rooms with the weariness of a mother entering her 16-year-old son's. It is one thing to think about Major League Baseball sending its agents to the Third World to pluck out young shortstops and leave everyone else to fend for themselves. It's another to think of Dominican baseball, at its core, as a local industry.

That is what surprised me most about our tour of Dominican baseball, this forceful assertion of Dominican-ness. Whereas once the baseball industry may have had the whiff of neocolonialism, it seems to have assumed a homegrown air. A Dominican *buscón* brings the young ballplayer to the attention of the academy. A major league team pays a signing bonus to the

player's family (with the *buscón* taking his cut). During his three years at the academy, the player trains with Dominican coaches, is tended to by a Dominican staff, and, in the case of Loma del Sueño, is mentored by a Dominican baseball star who has already made the journey to the big leagues. An academy director like Rijo is ultimately working at the pleasure of the American baseball clubs, of course. But it's Dominicans who run the place, rather than American outsiders—there's no reason for the teams to do much more than sign the checks.

As we got up to leave, Rijo turned to me. "Do you smoke cigars?" he asked. "Well, I have a cigar bar in Santo Domingo. I'll be there from 8 until midnight tonight. You should come by."

From: Bryan Curtis
Subject: Jose Rijo Unplugged
Posted Friday, May 9, 2008, at 6:45 AM ET

When Jose Rijo, Dominican baseball eminence and MVP of the 1990 World Series, [invited me to join him at his cigar bar](#) in Santo Domingo, I quickly agreed. Here was a chance to witness a retired baseball player living in the afterglow of his career and also to pretend, as best I could, that I belonged at the table.

First, we had a farewell dinner with Alberto Pozo, our fixer. Alberto had promised us a final meal of authentic Dominican food—*comida típica*—which we had been eating, between sandwiches and Pollos Victorina fried chicken, for most of the trip. Alberto decided on El Conuco, a touristy joint with an extensive buffet and live dancing. We sat at a table close to speakers blaring *bachata* music, and as the house dancers clapped and twirled in front of us, I picked at a bowl of *sancocho*, a stew made with seven meats. That conversation was all but impossible wasn't as awkward as it might have been. After dozens of hours in the car with Alberto—and a few with his 6-year-old daughter, Paula—to call him a "fixer" would do him little justice. He was a friend and fount of boundless optimism—his answer to my entreaties for more bureaucrats or baseball players was always "No problem." Alberto has an entrepreneur's zeal, and if anyone can make "baseball tourism" into a Dominican industry, it is he.

Rijo's cigar bar was a few blocks down the road, tucked into one of the giant, neon-lit casinos that line the Malecón on Santo Domingo's waterfront. We rolled up around 9 and spotted the pitcher wearing a lime-green shirt and sitting at an outdoor table with about half a dozen friends. When Rijo saw us approaching, he made a few sharp movements with his hands, and we suddenly found ourselves propelled into seats. Spanish-language

torch songs were wafting through the windows of Rijo's white Lexus SC430 convertible, which was neatly parked next to the table. Slowly, as I acclimated myself to the surroundings, something else became apparent: The great Rijo and his friends were not merely listening to Spanish torch songs, they were *singing* them, in unison—a sing-along that, after pausing a few seconds for our arrival and drink orders, resumed in its full-throated glory. It was the kind of karaoke performance you do not normally encounter on Old Timers' Day.

The lead singer was a Rijo confidant, Ramón Antonio Otero, a pudgy, middle-aged man who later told me, "My name is artist." As he tackled songs like "Que Se Mueran de Enviada" and "Esclavo y Amo," Otero sang in an exaggerated mock-opera style: chest pushed out, palms fluttering against pectorals, lower jaw tucked into his clavicle. A few times, I saw Rijo push buttons on his cell phone and hold it up for Otero to sing into the receiver. When I finally asked Rijo whom he was calling, he said it was his wife's answering machine—he was leaving her a serenade.

The scene was fitting, because as a pitcher Rijo had always been something of an exotic. The San Cristóbal native made his major league debut at 18, in 1984, and by 26 he was on pace to become a Dominican legend on the order of Juan Marichal and Osvaldo Virgil. "I became a king," as Rijo once put it. Injuries cost him a chance to be a transcendent pitcher—he endured five surgeries on his right elbow alone—and he dropped out of the game in 1995. But after a grueling rehabilitation, he was able to claw his way back into the majors, and in 2002, nearly seven years after he'd started his last game, he pitched the Reds past the Cubs. In retirement, Rijo has become rounder and more kinglike, with courtiers inside and outside the game.

Between songs, Rijo introduced the gallery that had arranged itself around him. It was a group of regulars that had come to enjoy Rijo's halo of celebrity, snifters of Jameson, and top-quality cigars. One gray-suited gentleman who stopped by to pay his respects was, someone leaned in to whisper, "in the government." A tall, comically good-looking man in a tight pink polo shirt turned out to be the engineer who designed and was supervising construction of the D.R.'s first subway system, the earthworks for which we had seen earlier in the trip. Linen jackets were held rakishly over shoulders, and every other minute a joke would be made at somebody's expense, bringing the table's ever-simmering laughter to a burst. A couple of young women had taken over a table a few yards away and were making expectant eyes at our group, but this was plainly a boys' night out—an evening of bawdy jokes and gleeful showmanship. I could understand only half of what was said—most of the performance was *en español*—but it was one of those rare occasions in adult life where you find yourself giggling along like a confused toddler and yet feel no shame. The sole allowance for feminine delicacy was the smaller, vanilla-flavored cigar one member of the entourage deemed appropriate

for my companion Megan Hustad; she was duly chastised every time she allowed it to go out.

Alas, thanks to a new anti-crime ordinance, the bars in Santo Domingo shut down at midnight, so a few members peeled off and the rest made motions to take the party inside the casino. Just then, Otero turned to us and said, "Now, I sing for you in English. My English is not good."

"But it is good!" Rijo interjected.

Attempting to prove his friend right, Otero gamely started in on "My Way." Rijo joined him for the chorus and softly shook a pair of maracas. It was at this point that I entered a state of delirious happiness I have rarely experienced since childhood. I was in the company of a pitcher whose baseball cards I had collected, whom I had once watched win two World Series games on television. He was handing me drinks. And cigars. He was performing a song. With maracas. It was a rather grandiose end to our baseball tour, a symbol, I guess, of the extravagant lifestyle that awaits in the major leagues. For the triumphant final verse—"For what is a man, what has he got? If not himself, then he has naught"—Rijo sung harmony, and he and Otero finished the song on their feet. There was a light smattering of applause, a few cat calls.

At one point, Rijo excused himself to take a phone call from Jim Bowden, the general manager of the Washington Nationals, who wanted to talk with Rijo about Dominican prospects. "Bowden told me, 'I need you here,' " Rijo told me later, shaking his head. "I said, 'I'm having too good a time!'"

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