

# Slate.com

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**Advanced Search**

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

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**books**

**The Woman Who Never Stopped Talking**

The secret of Madame de Stael's success.

By Stacy Schiff

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 7:18 AM ET

I'll be honest: "First modern woman" does not constitute what I would call a dream job. Someone had to step up, however, and—assuming royal and Ptolemaic women are off limits—one looks to Enlightenment Europe for volunteers. French residency if not nationality was a plus. A fortune was de rigueur. It helped to be an only child; generally one goes further in the absence of pesky male heirs. And what never hurts—arguably even today—is an adoring, intellectually inclined father. Such were the blessings showered on Germaine de Stael, and though I might argue that Mesdames du Chatelet and de Charrière challenge her title—and the subtitle of Francine du Plessix Gray's [new biography](#)—few have done as much with those advantages as Madame de Stael. Certainly no one caused as much trouble.

The prolific writer and thinker was born Germaine Necker in 1766. Neither parent was celebrated for a sense of humor, but both distinguished themselves on other counts. Monsieur Necker was Louis XVI's immensely powerful director general of finances. As financially astute as he was politically obtuse, he did his government few favors; on the other hand, he left his daughter the greatest fortune in France. Madame Necker presided over Paris' most illustrious salon, no mean feat given her mute husband. As Gray notes, Necker's conversation "consisted, at best, of a profound and disdainful silence."

In a manic misreading of Rousseau, the couple force-fed their precocious daughter "math, geography, science, languages, and theology from the time she was three." By 12 she was "a walking encyclopedia of philosophical knowledge." (Where was J.S. Mill when you had the girl for him? Alas, not born yet.) Permanently affixed to her mother's side, Germaine was spared the company of other children. She was allowed to attend Madame Necker's salon on the condition she be seen, not heard, for which the rest of her life could be said to constitute a prolix revenge.

Naturally the walking encyclopedia suffered a nervous breakdown early on. Playmates were prescribed, along with a separation from Madame Necker. (I was reminded of that haunting moment in Strachey's *Queen Victoria*, when the newly crowned 18-year-old asks to be left alone for an hour. At its end she issues her first royal edict, essentially amputating her mother from her side.) In this case Gray attributes a yearning insecurity to an oddly unaffectionate brand of maternal smothering. It was either balanced or exacerbated by an "extravagant passion" for her father, the love of Germaine's life.

At 20, Germaine married de Stael, a hapless Swedish nobleman and sometime ambassador—a man so "sterile and inert" that he actually made her miss her mother. Neatly clinching the modernity title in one realm, she never put sex, love, marriage, and progeny in one basket. The first child was de Stael's. The next two were those of the raffish Vicomte de Narbonne. Benjamin Constant, the liberal writer and politician and the

proto-Sartre to this 18<sup>th</sup>-century de Beauvoir, fathered the fourth. At 45, Germaine was pregnant again, by a man young enough to be her son and whom she later secretly married. He was a lover of a different kind, inarticulate in a manner that may have recalled her father. As Madame de Stael explained to one hardworking hostess, "Speech is not his language."

It was entirely hers. She woke with her mouth open, discoursed "as she was being coiffed, manicured, and laced into corsets," fell silent only when asleep. It was a virtuoso performance, at least at those addresses that thrilled to such things. Her *aperçus* were lost, for example, in Geneva, for whose people she had little patience: "Their love of equality is but a desire to drag everybody down; their liberty is insolence, and their morality is boredom." Generally she set a difficult, relentless pace and was an exhausting companion; Gray may well have a point in diagnosing manic depression. None of which stopped de Stael from wondering why men, in particular, tired of her so quickly. Constant provided one answer: "I have never known a woman who was more continuously exacting. ... Everybody's entire existence, every hour, every minute, for years on end, must be at her disposition, or else there is an explosion like all thunderstorms and earthquakes put together."

It did not take her long to pick up her pen, thereafter lodged (attested Byron) at all times behind her ear; on the page she—and her political acuity—captivated Europe. Her first great work addressed women's difficulty reconciling love and work, for which the winning formula has yet to be revealed. This was new terrain, repeatedly trod by de Stael, who recognized in her sex a moral superiority and a civilizing presence. She begged them to continue to assert themselves: "It is essential to the happiness of society for women to develop their spirit and their rational powers." The novels, too, are polemics on women's rights. Her Corinne certainly qualifies as the first independent literary heroine; as Gray points out, she is not only financially, socially, and romantically independent but celebrated for her own accomplishments to boot. The novel would influence, among others, Mary Godwin, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, who confessed to "intense sympathy" for its heroine.

More than anything it was her assault on imperial politics that put Madame de Stael on the map; she was the bane of Napoleon's existence. He was not pleased to read that "[l]iberality is nothing other than morality in government" and was no happier to be compared on the page to Attila the Hun. For her published offenses he exiled her from Paris so many times I lost count. On no occasion does he seem to have made it through more than a few pages of Madame de Stael's works. More to the point, she was a dangerous woman with influential friends and a dedicated audience.

De Stael's politics were liberal, also at all times wildly inconsistent. She was a contrarian; Gray notes that she tended to

side with the opposition. She wrote against slavery, for Marie Antoinette. When she was not writing she was politicking. She knew everyone worth knowing and appears never to have met an idea, or an intrigue, that left her cold. She colluded with Czar Alexander, who hoped she might entice the Swedes to join in an anti-Napoleon coalition—one that envisioned a Swede on the throne of France. In thanks part to Napoleon, she roamed the Continent; she was responsible for a great deal of cultural cross-pollination, introducing German philosophy and literature to England, the history of Italy to France.

As a woman, she comes off as a mix of self-regard, self-delusion, and raw, overpowering intellect. Her physical charms were less defined, by no means set off to advantage by her wardrobe. She went in for feathered turbans and vibrantly colored décolletés. You know the type; if you grew up in a small town, she taught modern dance. She was speechless on only one recorded occasion, an early meeting with First Consul Bonaparte. "No doubt," he ventured, speaking directly to her formidable bosom, "you have nursed your children yourself?"

As she has proved before, Gray excels at the short form, not exactly made for Madame de Stael. That Gray is able to rein her in is a marvel; that she has compressed her exuberance and corpulence to 256 pages a miracle. Then there are the convoluted politics of the time: At one point Gray neatly extracts de Stael's major ideas, freely admitting her subject's ineptitudes and inconsistencies without bludgeoning her with either. She lets this eminently quotable woman speak for herself, administering a full dose of her intoxicating conversation. What was exile? De Stael, who should know, defined it as "a tomb in which you can get mail."

Gray is fortunate in that the genius was perhaps more in the life than in the literature, always a blessing for the biographer. Madame de Stael endures primarily as an activist, a champion of women's rights, a brilliant nonconformist. She positioned herself at the nexus of talent and society and proceeded to defy the rules of both. To appreciate the immensity of her achievement one has only to remember that this irrepressible force of nature, she who had every gift she bestowed on Corinne—education, independence, a private life, and a public career—was nearly an exact contemporary of Jane Austen.

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## chatterbox

### Fun With Bailout Numbers

The financial pages discover the word *quadrillion*.

By Timothy Noah

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 6:50 PM ET

You know the economy is in trouble when economists start bandying around numeric terms previously associated with astronomy and particle physics. You can't open a newspaper these days without seeing the phrase "trillion dollars" placed in disturbing proximity to the word *losses*. According to the Nexis database, these terms appeared together in 1,774 English-language news reports between July and October 2008. During the same three-month period in 2007, they appeared in only 541, and during the same period in 2006, they appeared in only 316. Those were the good old days!

You may not even remember from grade-school arithmetic what comes after *trillion*. It isn't *kajillion*. (That's just a [whimsical slang term](#) for "unimaginably high number.") It's *quadrillion*. The phrase "quadrillion dollars" and the word *losses* appeared together in only two English-language news reports between July and October 2008, so no need to panic just yet. During the same three-month periods in 2007 and 2006, they appeared in one.

After *quadrillion*, you get *quintillion*, *sextillion*, and *septillion*. I'm relieved to report that the phrases "quintillion dollars," "sextillion dollars," and "septillion dollars" have yet to appear together with the word *losses* in any English-language news reports that I can find in Nexis. After *septillion* comes *octillion*, *nonillion*, and *decillion*. The phrase "octillion dollars" appears only once in Nexis (in a Sept. 27 [snippet](#) from the blog the Volokh Conspiracy). The phrases "nonillion dollars" and "decillion dollars" appear not at all, which suggests that even at this late date they defy human conceptualization. According to *Slate*'s search engine, I am the first person ever to use any numeric terms above *quintillion* in this magazine. (Eat my dust, [Chris Suellentrop](#), [Daniel Engber](#), [Emily Bazelon](#), [John Dickerson](#), and [Dahlia Lithwick](#)!)

What are these large numbers that the financial pages throw around as they describe the credit crisis, and what relation do they bear one another? Allow me to attempt a crude summary.

The **\$700 billion** potential price tag on the just-passed bank bail—ahem, *rescue package*—constitutes roughly one-quarter of the annual total cost of operating the U.S. government, which by last year had reached **\$2.9 trillion**. The **\$2.9 trillion** that went out exceeded by **\$276 billion** the **\$2.6 trillion** that came in, mostly from income taxes. Ten months later, the Congressional Budget Office today puts the budget deficit at **\$438 billion**. To cover the difference between spending and revenue, the Treasury borrows money, which leaves the government in debt. Right now, the national debt is **\$10.2 trillion**. That number is so big that a [National Debt Clock](#) in Times Square had to [eliminate its dollar sign](#) last month to make room for an extra digit. The national debt is approaching the size of the entire U.S. economy. According to the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis, the U.S. gross domestic product for 2008 is **\$14.3**

**trillion**. Of that, **\$10.1 trillion** went to personal consumption. If everybody in the United States decided that starting today they wouldn't consume *anything* for one year and that instead they would set all that money aside in a piggy bank the size of the Houston Astrodome, that *still* wouldn't be quite enough money to pay off the national debt.

(Forgive me if I'm starting to sound like [the rector who describes eternity](#) in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*—"and imagine that at the end of every million years a little bird came to that mountain and carried away in its beak a tiny grain of that sand").

The U.S. economy constitutes roughly one-quarter of the world economy. That is to say, the U.S. GDP of **\$14.3 trillion** accounts for one-fourth of the GDP of *all* nations, which the World Bank calculated at **\$54.3 trillion** for 2007. Have you ever said you wouldn't do something "for all the money in the world"? What you meant *literally*, probably without knowing it, was that you wouldn't do that thing even if somebody paid you **\$54.3 trillion**. Want to reconsider?

As of last month, bank losses on subprime mortgages for homes in the United States totaled **\$518 billion**. The alchemy of finance doubled that into **\$1.4 trillion** in losses on U.S.-based loans and securities, according to the International Monetary Fund. These losses, which may well grow—the IMF [keeps recalculating](#) as the financial crisis worsens—constitute 50 percent of the annual total cost of running the U.S. government; 10 percent of the entire U.S. economy (as expressed in GDP); and 3 percent of the entire world economy (as expressed in GDP). This mess was made in the USA, but in today's globalized economy it is now every nation's problem.

One interesting difficulty, though. As the numbers get bigger, the opportunities for misunderstanding among nations increase exponentially, because of a peculiar and most annoying cultural difference. Human civilization has advanced to the point where it can split the atom and put a man on the moon, but it hasn't advanced far enough to arrive at a common understanding of what the word *billion*—and therefore the words *trillion*, *quadrillion*, etc.—actually means. It's a little bit like the international split between countries that use the Metric system of weights and measures (almost everybody) and countries that stick to the English system (the United States; the United Kingdom gave up on it in 1965). In this instance, however, the confusion is greater because the *same* terminology is used to describe *different* quantities.

[It all goes back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century](#), apparently, when the French worked out a system for describing numbers above 999,999,999. At first, they decided that 1 *billion* would be 1 million to the second power (i.e., what Americans today call 1 *trillion*); 1 *trillion* would be 1 million to the third power (i.e., what Americans call 1 *quintillion*); and so on. What I would call 1

*billion* they called 1 *milliard*. Then, two centuries later, they decided that terms like "1 thousand billion" and "1 thousand trillion" were unwieldy and therefore redefined all numbers above 999,999,999 as multiples not of 1 million but of 1,000. This was inelegant, because the actual numbers designated—*billion*, *trillion*, and so forth—were now inconsistent with their Latin roots (*bi*, *tri*, etc.). But language's loss was arithmetic's gain; the new designations were much easier to use.

Unfortunately, the earlier, inferior system had taken hold throughout Europe—with the Enlightenment due any minute numbers were getting a lot of use—and many of these countries were unwilling to submit to the inconvenience of an upgrade. Today, the antiquated system is used just about everywhere [except](#) the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, Russia, Turkey, Greece, Portugal, and Brazil. Even France eventually reverted to the old system. In a nice reversal of the Metric system story, in which the United States plays the role of know-nothing villain, here the United States is the sensible hero trying in vain to peddle a superior quantification system to its hidebound, impractical fellow nations.

Astronomers and other big-number scientists have learned to steer around the varying-definition problem by avoiding terms like *billion* and *trillion* altogether, instead [designating them](#) as powers of 10. But economists and government officials around the world, having only recently become big-number users, still say *billion* and *trillion* and, increasingly, *quadrillion*. When they do so, there's no telling what they mean. This tower of arithmetic Babel has some potential to create a farcical scene when the G-7 finance ministers [gather](#) this Saturday at the White House.

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## chatterbox

### The New Complacency

Democrats relearn how to take the presidency for granted.

By Timothy Noah

Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 4:36 PM ET

There's a new scent in the air. If you're a Democrat, you haven't felt it tickle your nostrils since October 1996, when everybody knew that Bill Clinton was about to beat Bob Dole. The perfume hasn't been this strong since October 1964, the eve of Lyndon Johnson's [landside presidential victory](#). It's the sweet smell of success that you can take for granted.

With every passing day, it's harder to imagine that the next president of the United States will be a Republican—even a "maverick" Republican like John McCain. A consensus is emerging that the next president will be Barack Obama, a Democrat. Obama may not win in a landside, as [some](#) predict,

but the common wisdom is that he will win and that the Democrats will expand their majorities in the House and Senate. Like the houseguests in Agatha Christie's [And Then There Were None](#), swing states are disappearing one by one. Goodbye, [Michigan](#); farewell, [Ohio](#). Will [Florida](#) evaporate next? [Colorado](#)? [Missouri](#)?

"It's over," [said](#) former Hillary Clinton flack Howard Wolfson in his *New Republic* politics blog:

The campaigns themselves can't afford to believe it. Many journalists know it but can't say it. And there will certainly be some twists and turns along the way. But take it to a well capitalized bank: [Bill Ayers](#) isn't going to save John McCain. The race is over.

Lest you think Wolfson believes this only because he's a Democrat, conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks [reportedly](#) thinks Obama's got it in the bag, too. Welcome to the New Complacency.

Conservatives can carp all they want about the insularity of the cultural elite, but it's been a very long time since liberals had the chance to experience electoral complacency at the national level. You'll forgive them if they take a moment to taste it, savor it, perhaps bottle a little extra to tide them over during the next conservative ascendancy. Practically the only thing you *can't* do is securitize it, but it would be churlish to complain about that, given the central role the financial markets' collapse played in bringing the New Complacency about. Democrats, you want to worry about something? Worry about your portfolio!

For the past quarter-century, liberals have sweated and strained trying to make their worldview palatable to a Republican-electing nation. The exercise inspired some creative thinking, particularly at my alma mater, the [Washington Monthly](#), and also a lot of dreary difference-splitting, particularly at the centrist [Democratic Leadership Council](#). What it didn't do is win liberal ideas any greater acceptance. Even Bill Clinton, a Democrat who "[triangulated](#)" his way through two terms, [pronounced](#) that "the era of big government is over." Clinton's greatest political accomplishment—elimination of the budget deficit—was necessary and important, but it was also fundamentally conservative. Or, rather, it *would* have been conservative had the ideological spectrum not kept shifting rightward; by the end of Clinton's presidency, Republicans were contending that the budget surplus signified the rape of the American taxpayer. Surplus-bashing reflected an irritating political dynamic of the Reagan and post-Reagan eras. Whenever Democrats yielded a little ideological ground to Republicans, the GOP shifted rightward and redefined the Democrats' new compromise as the position of the far left. The Democrats were Charlie Brown; the Republicans were Lucy, at the last minute yanking the football

of bipartisan consensus out of reach nearly every time. Now it's the Democrats who have the football.

During the past 25 years, there have been countless sentiments that respectable Democratic politicians were *never, ever* supposed to say out loud for fear of angering the all-powerful Republicans. It still isn't wise for Obama to say them, but maybe the New Complacency will loosen other tongues within the political mainstream. Even if it doesn't, it's fun to think about what those utterances might be. What follows is a list, compiled with help from my fellow *Slate* staffers. The views expressed don't necessarily reflect those of the contributors—one of whom is a conservative Republican—or even me. But they sure are a refreshing change from what we've been hearing since 1981. With a little luck, they may soon be orthodoxies.

I think Karl Marx had some valuable insights into capitalist economies!

I think abortion should be safe and legal. Rare is fine, too, but the way to achieve that is *contraception*, baby!

I think Mormons are *kooks*!

The Second Amendment *does too* allow government to ban handguns!

Let's standardize the federal age of consent at 16!

Promiscuity between consenting adults is good exercise!

*Wheeeee!* Isn't this fun?

Health care is a *service*, not a *business*!

Pot is *no more dangerous* than vodka. Legalize it!

I *don't* support the troops. I support *some* troops, depending on whether or not they've committed *war crimes*!

*No more wars* without *United Nations* or at least *NATO support*!

Saving the *boulder darter* was worth a few *thousand jobs*!

If Eastern Europeans think NATO will go to war to defend them against Russia, they're *out of their minds!*

Ditto if *Taiwan* thinks the United States will go to war to defend it against *China!*

Let's teach evolution in *Sunday school!*

The military-industrial complex is a *greater menace* than most foreign nations!

If Israel isn't *out* of the occupied territories in six months, *we'll cut off all aid.*

Tell it, sister, tell it!

Higher gas prices are *good* because they make everybody *bike* and *take public transit* like they should!

America *isn't* the greatest nation in the world. We *think* it is only because it's *our* country. *Duh!*

America *won't* be the world's *most powerful* nation forever. And you know what? Handing that responsibility off will be a *relief!*

America's official languages should be English *and* Spanish!

Judges *should* legislate from the bench if they want to. Conservatives do it, so why not liberals?

I *do not* accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior! I don't even believe in God!

*What's so great* about the Judeo-Christian tradition?

*Big-city* values are better than *small-town* values!

*I'm glad* the Muslims whopped the Christians during the Crusades! Served 'em right!

This is better than sex, don't you think?

We need a *shorter* work week!

Employees who work *more than 40 hours* a week should *always* get overtime.

We're going to need *affirmative action* for a long time.

We're *undertaxed*. Look at Europe!

Terrorism isn't *that big* a threat to America!

I'm not a "*progressive*," for Pete's sake. I'm a *liberal!*

I'm not a "*liberal*," for Pete's sake. I'm a *leftist!*

I'm not a "*leftist*," for Pete's sake. I'm a *democratic socialist!*

I'm not a *democratic socialist*, for Pete's sake. I'm a *Communist!* Just kidding!

Let's *bring back* the era of *big government*.

*Walter Mondale* would have made an *excellent* president!

Did I mention that my most conservative *Slate* colleague, a loyal Republican, enjoyed contributing to this list most of all?

It's not enough that the top 5 percent pays *55 percent* of our taxes. Why not *75 percent*? Believe me, they can afford it!

Prostitution is a *victimless crime!* Don't *outlaw* it; *regulate* it, so we can arrest physically abusive pimps, limit the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, and halt sexual trafficking in minors!

Many welfare moms kicked off the rolls by the 1996 welfare-reform bill are *worse off* in their *crappy jobs!*\*

Ronald Reagan was a *crummy president!*

Broad availability of *gay marriage*: good. Broad availability of *gay divorce*: better!

You want to know why George W. Bush was a lousy president? Because he's *stupid!*

*Pornography* is *good* for your marriage because it teaches you *new sexual techniques!*

The problem with *public* schools is *private* schools!

All right, enough for now. Mustn't use them all up before Inauguration Day. But that sure did feel good. I'm taking the rest of the day off.

**Correction, Oct. 10, 2008:** *An earlier version of this column erroneously gave 1986 as the year of the Clinton welfare-reform law. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)*

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## chatterbox

### Not Using Wright, McCain-Style

"Oh, we can't control *her*. She's just the vice-presidential candidate."

By Timothy Noah

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 2:16 PM ET

"McCain officials told *Politico* that the new offensive is likely to focus on [Tony] Rezko and [Bill] Ayers. The officials said the campaign will not bring up the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Obama's former pastor, because McCain has forbade them from using that as a weapon."

—[Mike Allen, Politico, Oct. 6, 2008](#)

"To tell you the truth, Bill, I don't know why that association [with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright] isn't discussed more, because those were appalling things that that pastor had said about our great country, and to have sat in the pews for 20 years and listened to that—with, I don't know, a sense of condoning it, I guess, because he didn't get up and leave—to me, that does say something about character."

—[Sarah Palin to Bill Kristol in the New York Times, Oct. 6, 2008](#)

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## corrections

### Corrections

Friday, October 10, 2008, at 7:06 AM ET

In the Oct. 7 "[Chatterbox](#)," Timothy Noah erroneously gave 1986 as the year of President Clinton's welfare-reform law. It was 1996.

In the Oct. 6 "[Hot Document](#)," Bonnie Goldstein said that Sarah and Todd Palin missed the extended filing deadline for their most recent tax return. They did file it on time.

In the Oct. 3 "[Culturebox](#)," Adam Kirsch mistakenly wrote that there has been just one American winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature since Bellow snared it in 1976. In fact, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Czesław Miłosz, and Joseph Brodsky have all won Nobels since then.

In the Sept. 27 "[Moneybox](#)," Daniel Gross misspelled the name Richard Rodgers.

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

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## culture gabfest

### The Culture Gabfest, Sore-Loser Edition

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

By Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner  
Wednesday, October 8, 2008, at 11:17 AM ET

*Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 18 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:*

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

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss the Nobel Prize in literature's snub of American writers, Tina Fey's pitch-perfect imitation of Gov. Sarah Palin, and the current lack of interest in the recent trial of O.J. Simpson.

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

Nobel Foundation Secretary Horace Engdahl's [comments](#) about American literature.

*Slate's* [article](#) on Engdahl's comments.

"The Nobel Prize in Literature From an Alternative Universe"  
[Web site](#).



JFK impersonator Vaughn Meader's [Web site](#).  
Tina Fey as Gov. Palin debating Sen. Joe Biden on [Saturday Night Live](#).  
Summary of O.J. Simpson's trial on the *Los Angeles Times*' [Web site](#).

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: David Foster Wallace's collection [Consider the Lobster: And Other Essays](#).  
Julia's pick: *New York* magazine's [survey](#) of the recent New York City architecture boom.  
Stephen's pick: Joseph Dorman's documentary film [Arguing the World](#).

You can reach the Culture Gabfest at [culturefest@slate.com](mailto:culturefest@slate.com).

Posted by Amanda Aronczyk on Oct. 8, 2008 at 12:00 p.m.

**Sept. 24, 2008**

*Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 17 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:*

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

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss the cultural impact of the financial meltdown, the death of author David Foster Wallace, and the latest Microsoft ads from that lovable comedy duo Bill Gates and Jerry Seinfeld.

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

Michael Douglas as [Gordon Gekko](#) in the Oliver Stone film *Wall Street*.

[Jim Cramer](#)'s take on the financial crisis in *New York* magazine.  
Michael Lewis' book [Liar's Poker: Rising Through the Wreckage on Wall Street](#).

Bob Rafelson's 1970 film, [Five Easy Pieces](#).

*Slate*'s "[Obit](#)" for David Foster Wallace.

A David Foster Wallace essay from *Harper's*, "[Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage](#)."

The second [Microsoft ad](#) featuring Jerry Seinfeld and Bill Gates.

The newer Microsoft "[I'm a PC](#)" ad campaign.

*Slate*'s ad critic's assessment of [Crispin Porter & Bogusky](#), the advertising firm behind the Seinfeld/Gates ads.

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: David Foster Wallace's essay "[A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again](#)."

Julia's pick: the Emmy-Award winning show [30 Rock](#).

Stephen's pick: Edmund Wilson's book, [To the Finland Station](#).

You can reach the Culture Gabfest at [culturefest@slate.com](mailto:culturefest@slate.com).

Posted by Amanda Aronczyk on Sept. 24, 2008 at 12:00 p.m.

**Sept. 10, 2008**

*Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 16 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:*

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

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss the tabloid coverage of Sarah Palin's personal life, the new Rachel Maddow show on MSNBC, and the hyperquirky Microsoft ad featuring heroes from yesteryear Bill Gates and Jerry Seinfeld.

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

*People* magazine's [Sarah Palin](#) cover story.

*Us* magazine's article on [Palin's pregnant daughter](#).

*National Enquirer*'s [Palin controversy](#) article.

Hanna Rosin's *Slate* article on [why Christian conservatives love Palin](#).

[The Rachel Maddow Show](#) on MSNBC.

Thomas Frank's book [What's the Matter With Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America](#).

The [Microsoft ad](#) featuring Bill Gates and Jerry Seinfeld.

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Julia's pick: Cycle 11 of [America's Next Top Model](#) and the show's first transgendered model, [Isis](#).

Dana's pick: Gregory Curtis' book [The Cave Painters](#).

Stephen's pick: the blog [Naked Capitalism](#).

**Correction, Sept. 11, 2008:** *In this podcast, Stephen incorrectly referred to the proprietor of Naked Capitalism, Ives Smith, as a "he." In fact, Ives Smith is a woman.*

You can reach the Culture Gabfest at [culturefest@slate.com](mailto:culturefest@slate.com).

Posted by Amanda Aronczyk on Sept. 10, 2008 at 10:40 a.m.

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## culturebox

### Emily Dickinson's Secret Lover!

Why the big news is being ignored.

By Christopher Benfey

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 11:43 AM ET

We tend to reserve special roles for our favorite writers—sepulchral Poe; sardonic Mark Twain; sexy, world-embracing Walt Whitman—and resist evidence that contradicts our cherished images. Emily Dickinson in this constellation is forever the lovelorn spinster, pining away in her father's mansion on Main Street in Amherst, Mass. We assume that the grand passion behind her poems ("Wild nights—Wild nights! Were I with thee") must have had a commensurate inspiration, whether imaginary, superhuman, or divine. Evidence that Dickinson's love life was fairly ordinary, with ordinary temptations and disappointments, doesn't quite fit the bill. Her exile on Main Street has seemed a necessary part of the Dickinson myth, so necessary, indeed, that contrary information—which happens to have been piling up lately—has often been discounted or ignored.

For example, when Mabel Loomis Todd, the vivacious and talented wife of Amherst College astronomer David Todd, was invited to play the piano for Dickinson and her younger sister, Lavinia, in September of 1882, she received a startling warning from their sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson, next door. The Dickinson spinster sisters, Sue informed her, "have not, either of them, any idea of morality." Sue added darkly, "I went in there one day, and in the drawing room I found Emily reclining in the arms of a man."

It's now widely assumed that that man was Judge Otis Lord, a widower of her father's generation who proposed marriage to Dickinson late in his life and hers (she died in 1886 at the age of 56) only to be affectionately rebuffed. "Don't you know," she wrote coyly but decisively, "that you are happiest while I withhold and not confer?" Yet the notion of Emily Dickinson making out in her living room is so foreign to our conception of her that her autumnal tryst with Judge Lord has never become part of the popular lore about her.

The discovery that Dickinson did not have to wait until her dotage to experience some of the pleasures of ordinary romantic companionship has so far sunk like a stone, too. A carefully argued scholarly article titled "Thinking Musically, Writing Expectantly: New Biographical Information About Emily Dickinson," published this summer in the staid *New England Quarterly*, has caused not a ripple.

The author, Carol Damon Andrews, is an independent scholar who has worked at the Worcester Art Museum in central Massachusetts. She told a reporter for the *Amherst Bulletin* that she was pursuing some family history among her Penniman ancestors when she stumbled across two intriguing entries in the diaries of Eliza Houghton Penniman, a music teacher who gave piano lessons in Amherst before settling in Worcester.

The first entry reads, in part: "I commenced teaching vocal & instrumental music when I was 16. My first pupils were Fanny Sellon daughter of Dr S. of Amherst ... & lawyer Dickinson's daughter Emily." This was in 1839, when Emily Dickinson was 8 years old. Part of the understated charm of Andrews' article is that she gives as much attention to her discovery that Dickinson's musical education began six years earlier than had previously been supposed as she does to the bombshell that follows, in a later diary entry:

In Amherst ... I had a class in music: ... Emily Dickinson, daughter of lawyer Dickinson, to whom Dr. George Gould of Worcester, was engaged when in college there. Lawyer Dickinson vetoed the whole affair, the Rev. George being a POOR student then, and poor Emily's heart was broken.

The name George Gould is not new to Dickinson scholars. An Amherst College graduate of 1850 and a close friend of Dickinson's brother, Austin, Gould has long been identified as part of Emily Dickinson's youthful social circle. In Brenda Wineapple's new book, *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, he makes a cameo as one of the young friends "to whom she seems to have shown some of her early work" before finding a more sophisticated mentor in Higginson.

In fact, the possibility that Gould might have been more than a friend isn't new, either—but, as Andrews shows, it received a notably cool welcome.

Andrews does not pretend to be the first person to claim that Gould was Dickinson's secret lover. Genevieve Taggard, a leftist poet best known for her Depression-era populist verse, published a vividly written biography of Emily Dickinson in 1930 after teaching for a year at Mount Holyoke, Dickinson's alma mater. Taggard discovered what she called the "purloined valentine," sent by Dickinson in 1850, inviting a mysterious someone to "meet me at sunrise, or sunset, or the new moon." Subsequent scholars have assumed Gould was a likely recipient but left it at that. Taggard, however, built her narrative around the youthful love affair of Emily and George, blaming the breakup of the engagement on Dickinson's father but ascribing a different motive, one more in line with her proto-feminist approach.

It wasn't that George was poor, Taggard maintained; it's that Edward Dickinson wanted Emily for himself. Asking Emily to play the piano "was Edward's way of bringing Emily back when she escaped." When it became clear, at a graduation party in 1850, that Emily and George were in love, Edward declared "that the affair must end." Taggard suggested that Emily and George continued to meet despite the ban, hooking up secretly in Philadelphia and New York as well as in Amherst until a final break in 1862, when George, who had trained for the ministry, married and settled in Worcester.

It's startling to go back to Taggard's nearly forgotten and rarely read book and find how much evidence she tracked down for her tale of star-crossed lovers. She quotes several sources, including a friend of Lavinia's, all of whom requested anonymity but confirmed the basic details of the affair. So, why wasn't her story believed?

Once again, it was the popular image of shade-seeking Dickinson holed up in her father's house that prevailed. As Andrews argues, there was a concerted effort to suppress Taggard's findings, led by Susan Dickinson's daughter, Martha, and Amherst College professor and biographer George F. Whicher, who announced that he intended "to terminate the persistent search for Emily's unknown love." Whicher attacked Taggard's book as "untrustworthy" and suggested that its plotline was derived from the "stale formula of Hollywood romance and Greenwich Village psychology"—a sly dig at Taggard's bohemian and socialist convictions.

There is more to this tale, including some pretty convincing evidence that three mysterious love letters Dickinson drafted in the late 1850s—passionate, masochistic, and lyrical texts referred to as the "Master Letters" for their unknown recipient—were actually addressed to Gould: "I've got a Tomahawk in my side but that don't humor me much, Her Master stabs her more—Wont he come to her." After Dickinson's death, Mabel Todd began collecting her letters for publication and wrote to Gould. He responded that he had "quite a cherished batch of Emily's letters myself kept sacredly in a small trunk ... which some 15 years ago mysteriously disappeared."

If there's a surprise in all this, it's an ordinary one. It turns out that Emily Dickinson had the kind of early romantic entanglement and disappointment that so many young people have. They find someone congenial; they exchange gifts and promises; their parents intervene for various acknowledged and unacknowledged reasons. If such ordinariness seems somehow beneath the dignity of one of our supreme poets, that's probably why even this latest challenge to the image of isolated Emily has gotten so little attention. Alas, there's nothing mysterious or mystical here except what Emily Dickinson made, in her extraordinary poems, of her all-too-human disappointment.

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## day to day

### Should Obama and McCain Go Negative at the Debate?

Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 6:24 PM ET

**Tuesday, Oct. 7, 2008**

#### Politics: Should Obama and McCain Go Negative at the Debate?

Tuesday, Sen. John McCain and Sen. Barack Obama are meeting for the second presidential debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn. John Dickerson tells Alex Chadwick why the candidates need to look out for the "Ponytail Guy" at the town hall-style debate. [Listen](#) to the segment.

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## dear prudence

### Our Pigskin Anniversary

Hubby would rather sit on the 10 yard line than celebrate 10 years of marriage.

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 7:05 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](mailto:prudence@slate.com). (Questions may be edited.)

#### Dear Prudence,

My 10<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary is coming up. Since the beginning of the year, my husband and I have been talking about a nice weekend getaway to celebrate. About a month ago, he came home with a football ticket given to him by a co-worker for the same weekend. I tried to remain calm and explain to him that I thought we already had plans (my mother-in-law is watching our children). I hadn't made any reservations, but I am furious with him for doing this. If I make an issue of it, he says he'll sell the ticket and won't go. That makes me the bad guy. So do I rip him a new one or keep my mouth shut and accept a shortened second honeymoon? He's fine with just going somewhere for an overnight visit and then leaving me to spend the rest of the weekend with the kids so he can go to his game. It makes me wonder if this is his way of saying that he doesn't care about our relationship, and I am struggling to be able to air this without starting World War III.

—No Pass

Dear No Pass,  
During football season, when my husband utters the phrase,

"There's a game on," it has the same imperative quality that the words "You're fully dilated" have on a maternity ward. He once excused himself in the middle of a Sunday dinner party *we were hosting* to flop on the couch and watch the game. Yes, he's distracted every weekend until after the Super Bowl, but I understand it's not personal. There are so many ways to divide the world: One is football haters vs. football fanatics; another is people who think the quality of anniversary celebrations symbolizes the entire relationship vs. those who pray on the way home from work on the night of their anniversary that the drug store still stocks Whitman's Samplers. You sound as if you belong in the former in both categories while your husband is in the latter. I agree that he's fumbled this occasion, but you both have a chance for a save. Traditionally, the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary is celebrated with gifts of [tin](#), but yours will be leaden if you insist on your husband giving up the ticket. Think of how romantic it will be to have him looking deep into your eyes and wondering how the Buccaneers are doing. Since you haven't even booked your trip, give your husband the gift of your blessing for him to use the ticket. Then tell him his gift to you will be to reschedule his mother's babysitting duties for another weekend, make reservations someplace great, and—while you're on your getaway—not even think about reaching for the remote when it's game time.

—Prudie

### [Dear Prudence Video: Sorority Sugar Daddy](#)

#### **Dear Prudence,**

My husband, child, and I moved into a lovely neighborhood two years ago. Unfortunately, the elderly couple next door does not trust us. They have spread rumors about whether we are "really" married, possible depression, and drug use. (Some of the speculation may stem from the fact that I am pregnant and spent a trimester on bed rest.) Because of them, I do not feel comfortable being outside with my 3-year-old daughter. They've lectured me on children watching television and the dangers of hiring a nonfamily member to baby-sit. We don't have available family in the area, and I meticulously screened quite a few candidates before hiring child care. Today, I'm boiling over. I was sitting on the back steps watching my daughter play, and Mr. and Mrs. Neighborly had their back door open as usual. Mr. Neighborly asked Mrs. Neighborly to make sure my daughter wasn't alone in the yard. After Mrs. Neighborly went inside, she began an immediate monologue about my parenting style. I am so frustrated that I avoid block parties, walks, sitting on the front porch—all of the family-centered things that attracted us to this area in the first place. A fence is an obvious solution, but the latest quotes are pretty steep. Any suggestions?

—Neighborhood Watched

Dear Watched,  
Stop letting this pair of old cranks get to you. Listen to how

defensive you are about hiring a nonfamily member as a baby sitter just because you got an uninvited lecture from these intrusive nuts! A fence sounds like a great idea, but if you can't afford one, build your own invisible fence. When you're outside, bring a radio, if you must, to drown out their monologues from their back door. If they try to harangue you directly, say, "I'm sorry, I'm not in the market for advice and I'm busy with my daughter right now, so please excuse me." Ignore them while you go to the block parties, take walks, and use your front porch. Surely everyone else in the neighborhood has been enduring and avoiding them for years. By this point, the rest of your neighbors are probably wondering why you're so standoffish. So stop giving credence to Mr. and Mrs. Nasty's tales about you, and enjoy your lovely neighborhood.

—Prudie

#### **Dear Prudence:**

When my husband and I met 5 years ago, I told him I was 31. I was really 36. We married one year later. When we met, I was feeling free and rejuvenated after the end of a long and difficult relationship. I was traveling around America with younger friends and wanted to be a fresher, younger me. I was very insecure, felt I had "wasted" time with my ex, and was partying hard after our breakup to drown my sorrows. I am basically a very honest person and have shared all other aspects of my life with my husband. My mother and grandmother both lied about their ages and don't celebrate birthday milestones. My husband doesn't check paperwork, but I really need to tell him my true age. He hasn't been the most forgiving in other situations, but we have a loving relationship now. How do I explain my mistake?

—Happy But a Little Older

Dear Happy,

You could tell your husband you've got good news—it's actually only 26, not 31, years until you can start collecting Social Security. You could also point to the example of John and Cindy McCain. When they met, she added four years to her age to seem more mature, and he subtracted four years to seem less superannuated. They found out the [truth](#) when they applied for the marriage license. This is a tough one because while your lie is a only a misdemeanor, it has gone uncorrected for five years, and it's the kind of thing that makes the person hearing it wonder if there's anything else you haven't been honest about. There's really nothing to do but tell him. Don't try to justify this mistake with the rigmarole about recapturing the years you wasted on a bad relationship. Just explain that, like a lot of people, you wanted to seem a few years younger, and since then you've been too embarrassed to correct the record. Say that since you have such an honest and open relationship, you needed to come clean because you hate not having told him the truth. It's too silly a thing for him not to forgive you, and, besides, he should be happy that you're aging even better than he imagined.

—Prudie

**Dear Prudence,**

Over the summer, my roommate and I went on vacation together. A few days before the trip, I had an excruciating toothache and needed to get my wisdom tooth out. Upon hearing about my scheduled procedure, her reaction was, "How could you! You'll still be up to party, right?" I felt bad backing out of the trip, so I boarded the plane just hours after the tooth was extracted. We went out on the town the first night and came home at 1 a.m. (much to her chagrin). The second night, I accidentally overdosed on my painkillers and only stayed out because I didn't want her to be drunk and alone in the city. But by 2:30 a.m., I was fed up and told her I needed to go back. She came home at 10 the next morning. When we discussed what happened, she argued that she spent her hard-earned money on this vacation and thought it was unfair of me to ruin it. My argument was that I'd taken care of her drunk ass more times than I could count and hoped she would return the favor once. We agreed to disagree and pushed the matter aside for the sake of our friendship. We still live together and are good friends, but I've been distancing myself from her and know I will never want to party or vacation with her again. Am I being too hard on her?

—A Little Less Wise

Dear A Little,

Thank you for another chance to express my puritanical views on demon rum. I have been taken to task by readers for my disdain of the notion that a good time includes getting so blotto that people put themselves in all kinds of danger (not that they'd remember half of what they did or was done to them). Your girlfriend was furious that after spending all that money to go someplace presumably interesting and beautiful, you weren't well enough to stay out all night bar-hopping. I think you should have asked her why, if her idea of fun is tossing back shots with a bunch of strangers, she didn't save her money by staying home and doing it at the local pub. At the risk of sounding like [Carrie Nation](#), someone who thinks a successful evening means stumbling home after breakfast service has ended is someone with an alcohol problem. Apart from her drinking, she's also selfish and unsympathetic. If she asks about your coolness, tell her that while you very much value her friendship and enjoy her company, the trip has made you realize you have different ideas about socializing, and that, at the least, you don't want to rescue her from any more alcohol-related adventures.

—Prudie

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**dvd extras**

**Red Dawn**

Its portrait of Russia is dated. Its portrait of America is timely—and terrifying.  
By David Plotz

Wednesday, October 8, 2008, at 6:55 AM ET

The middle Reagan years—the fingernail-gnawing, [doomsday-clock-watching](#), pre-perestroika finale of the Cold War—were a dreadful time for movies in general, but they were the heyday of the Armageddon film. The mid-'80s gave us [War Games](#), [The Day After](#), [Invasion USA](#), [Testament](#), [Amerika](#), and [The Terminator](#), and they gave me nightmares. For much of my teens, I had a dream in which I was standing alone, minding my own business, when a huge helicopter gunship would appear from behind a building or a tree or a cliff and start shooting at me. This nightmare was, of course, a tribute to the feverish power of the World War III movie *Red Dawn*, whose most famous scene involved a Soviet Hind helicopter sneaking up on our American heroes, the "Wolverines," and unleashing a hellfire of bullets against them.

Except for *The Terminator*, none of the mid-'80s Armageddon movies has had as much enduring influence as 1984's *Red Dawn*. The film is beloved of American military types. In 2003, the Army [named its operation](#) to capture Saddam Hussein "Red Dawn" and dubbed the two Saddam safe houses it was raiding "Wolverine 1" and "Wolverine 2." Recognizing that we're again living in an age of existential dread, MGM recently [announced plans to remake \*Red Dawn\*](#). With the Russian army having run rampant over Georgia and [the Kremlin hissing over American plans](#) to base a missile defense system in Poland, this seemed the right moment to revisit *Red Dawn*. I could think of no better way to recall the anxieties of the Cold War than to cheer on the Wolverines again. But *Red Dawn* did not conjure up the chest-swelling patriotism I felt as a 14-year-old. Instead, it turned out to be disturbing in an entirely unexpected way.

For those [arugula-nibbling semi-Americans](#) who've forgotten or never seen it, *Red Dawn* begins with a Soviet/Cuban/Nicaraguan paratrooper invasion of Calumet, Colo., a town in the foothills of the Rockies. World War III has begun! A few teenagers, mostly Calumet High football players, escape the initial assault in Patrick Swayze's truck and high-tail it to the mountains. Gradually, under the tutelage of Swayze, a slightly older kid who spent his childhood hunting and camping, they constitute themselves into the Wolverines, a band of guerillas who sabotage the Commie invaders, assassinate soldiers, ambush convoys, and blow up the "Soviet-American Friendship Center." At first, the Soviets retaliate by executing "America the Beautiful"-singing civilians; eventually, they send commando units after the Wolverines. In the incoherent climax, Swayze and his younger brother, played by Charlie Sheen, launch a kamikaze assault on the local Soviet headquarters, leaving exquisite

corpses in the snow. Meanwhile, the only two surviving Wolverines escape across the Rockies into Free America.

*Red Dawn* embodies conservative nutterdom in a way few films not made by Mel Gibson have ever managed. If Ann Coulter made a movie, it would look like *Red Dawn*. This is thanks to director John Milius. *Apocalypse Now* screenwriter, *Conan the Barbarian* auteur, and former NRA board member, Milius is a military zealot, infatuated with the warrior code. *Red Dawn* is really a fetish movie, an ode to guns and blood. The 2007 *Guinness Book of World Records* judged *Red Dawn* the most violent movie in history. (Amazing it has not lost this title to a film of the *Saw* generation, isn't it?) The only extra worth the name on the 2007 collector's edition DVD is the "Carnage Counter," an on-screen census of RPG rounds fired, civilians executed, Soviets killed, and Wolverines martyred. Blood lust saturates the movie: The camera lingers on wounds and corpses; C. Thomas Howell becomes a man by drinking blood; a feral Harry Dean Stanton, playing a gun nut imprisoned by the Soviets, screams at his Wolverine sons, "Avenge me! Avenge me!"

Milius' vision of the world is curiously—or perhaps presciently—congruent with that of modern Buchananite isolationists. World War III begins as an immigration problem: Mexico and the rest of Central America having fallen under Communist control, Latino illegal aliens infiltrate and sabotage Midwestern Air Force bases. Pathetic old Europe betrays America and refuses to come to our aid. The first thing the Commies do when they seize Calumet is round up all the gun owners—relying on "[Form 4473](#)," a real-life ATF form for registering gun sales. Milius pans from a "They can have my gun when they pry it from my cold dead fingers" bumper sticker to a Red Army soldier prying a gun from the cold, dead fingers of an American.

In my memory, *Red Dawn* celebrated America and its virtues. But its guiding ideology is actually fascism. The only politician in *Red Dawn*, the mayor of Calumet, is a quisling who rats out his neighbors for execution. His son, the student-body president, turns out to be the traitorous Wolverine, seeking immediate capitulation to the invaders and eventually leading the Soviets right to the band's hideout. Swayze takes command of the Wolverines by force, forbids a vote about whether to surrender, and demands that his fellow guerillas obey him without question. The warrior code of *Red Dawn* is nihilistic: Glory and death are the same; there is no higher aim than to fight. It never imagines an America that is worth saving: We have corrupt institutions and cowardly politicians.

But what's most unsettling about *Red Dawn* today is not its infatuation with the warrior death cult. It's that the movie's historical parallels have been turned upside down. In 1984, the Soviets of *Red Dawn* represented, well, the Soviets, and the Wolverines represented both the Americans and also the plucky

Afghan mujahideen then defeating the Red Army in a guerilla war. But on re-viewing, *Red Dawn* isn't a stark reminder of Cold War fears. Rather, it's a pretty good movie about Iraq, with the United States in the role of the Soviets and the insurgents in the role of the Wolverines. In *Red Dawn*, the Soviets have invaded a country whose customs they know not—one of the only funny moments in the film is the Commies' inability to understand the Wolverines' connection to high-school football. They ham-handedly toss leading citizens into hellish prisons. They maltreat the civilian population. They appropriate private and government buildings for themselves. They replace local commerce with their own—the movie theater shows only [Alexander Nevsky](#).

The insurgents are at first merely scared, angry kids, but they're hardened by the viciousness of the Soviets. Seeing nothing to lose, they become suicidal terrorists who assassinate, bomb civilian targets, gleefully murder wounded and captive Russians, and eventually martyr themselves in theatrical, insane ways. Howell faces down a helicopter gunship with nothing but a rifle, screaming, "Wolverines," as its machine gun cuts him to confetti; Swayze and Sheen make their inexplicable suicide assault on a base with hundreds of soldiers and heavy weapons; Jennifer Grey, mortally wounded and afraid of being tortured by the occupiers, booby-traps her own body so when a Soviet soldier touches her, it sets off a grenade that kills both of them. Ultimately, the insurgency and the anxiety of occupying a hostile land take their toll on the invaders. By the end, the Cuban commander is submitting his resignation, demoralized by his job of brutalizing the Americans.

*Red Dawn* is not an exact parallel to our situation, of course. The Iraq we invaded was no functioning democracy; our Army does not execute civilians; many Iraqis favor the American occupation. But *Red Dawn* certainly didn't stir the mad, patriotic fervor I felt when I heard Howell shout, "Wolverines" 24 years ago. MGM is so far tight-lipped about the plot of its *Red Dawn* remake, but I wonder: Will the new Wolverines be us—or fighting us?

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## election scorecard

### Tossup No More

Pennsylvania is now "strong" for Obama.

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 11:51 AM ET

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## explainer

### Is the European Credit Crisis Our Fault?

Not really—they were dumb enough to buy the mortgages.

By Christopher Beam

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 6:04 PM ET

As the European credit crisis [deepens](#), several foreign leaders are blaming the crisis on the United States. German finance minister Peer Steinbrück [says](#), "The origin and the center of gravity of the problem is clearly in the U.S.," whose system is less "robust" than its German counterpart. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin [says](#), "Everything happening now in the economic and financial sphere began in the United States." Is the European credit crisis America's fault?

No. The current financial crisis began with the collapse of the subprime mortgage market, which was certainly largest in the United States. But that market depended on a vast network of international investors, all of whom bear some responsibility for what's happened.

Assigning blame—an essential part of any grieving process—requires some history. During the Great Depression, the U.S. government decided it should be easier for people with low incomes to buy houses. Fannie Mae was created to buy mortgages from banks so that smaller banks didn't have to carry the entire debt burden on their own. Eventually, two things happened: Fannie Mae started buying riskier "subprime" mortgages, which were still rated AAA or "safe" by ratings agencies. It also started packaging these mortgages as securities, chopping them up, and selling them to other investors, who resold them to other investors, and so on—a process called securitization. Many of these investors were foreign companies, banks, and governments. (The United States' [current account deficit](#) is about 6 percent of the GDP, which means the country gets about [\\$1 trillion in foreign loans](#) every year.) Risky practices like credit default swaps, in which investors promise to support each other in case someone goes bankrupt, started in the United States but soon became the norm across the world. Mortgage-backed securities were dangerous and people knew it, but American housing prices continued to climb, so investors bought them, anyway. The result was an international, interdependent system in which all markets leaned on other markets for stability. So when the U.S. mortgage market collapsed, everyone else's followed.

That doesn't mean Europe would have survived had it not been for us irresponsible Yanks. Several European countries, particularly England, Ireland, and Spain, had their own housing bubbles that burst around the same time as ours. (Others, such as Germany, had stable housing markets.) These bubbles were exacerbated by Europe-specific factors. For example, even as housing prices increased by as much as 10 percent a year in Spain, the European Central Bank set interest rates appropriate

for the entire European Union, where prices were increasing much more slowly. As a result, local bubbles expanded faster than usual. Another example: A state-owned German bank [held](#) billions in mortgage-backed securities, even though they weren't safe. The risk was therefore endorsed at home—not the result of an American knife held to European throats. Other structural problems have led to recent collapses: The [failure](#) of several Icelandic banks can be traced in part to their size—their assets were 10 times the country's GDP. Total U.S.-bank assets, by comparison, are far less than our GDP.

So why did the bubble burst here first? For one thing, we've got the biggest subprime housing market in the world. Also, the riskiest mortgages were always bought and sold in the United States; high-wire investment tactics like ["toggle bonds"](#) and ["covenant light"](#) loans have been common in recent years. So you might blame American investors for taking bigger risks than their foreign counterparts. But the difference is comparable to playing Russian roulette with a six-chamber versus a seven-chamber revolver.

Other scapegoats include ratings agencies, which knowingly gave subprime mortgages AAA ratings. The [biggest ones](#)—Moody's, Standard and Poor's, and Fitch—are all based in the United States. The problem with blaming them is that most investors knew their ratings were bunk but bought the securities, anyway. You could blame Congress, too, for insufficient regulation. But, in fact, many European housing markets are just as loosely governed as the U.S. market.

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

*Explainer thanks Andrew Caplin of New York University and Jonathan Wright of Johns Hopkins University.*

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## explainer

### Can Paulson Fire Naughty Executives?

How much control does the Treasury have over personnel at AIG?

By Juliet Lapidos

Wednesday, October 8, 2008, at 5:14 PM ET

A week after the American International Group received an \$85 billion bailout, personnel from its life insurance subsidiary, AIG General, held [a weeklong retreat in Monarch Beach, Calif.](#), that cost more than \$400,000. At the town-hall debate on Tuesday, [Barack Obama railed against the company's excesses](#), suggesting that "the Treasury should demand that money back and those executives should be fired." The Treasury can demand whatever it wants, but can it give company execs the boot?

Not in theory. It was [widely reported](#) that the Federal Reserve, with backing from the Treasury, loaned AIG \$85 billion in exchange for an 80 percent stake in the company. If that were true, the government would be able to hire or fire at will, since it would control the board. But as the [Explainer has noted previously](#), the Fed didn't hand over any cash upfront—just the assurance of cash should it be needed during the next two years. In exchange for this line of credit, AIG granted the government the right to buy stock equal to 80 percent of the company. At this point, the government has veto power over certain company actions, like the sale of major assets or the payment of dividends to shareholders. But as long as the Treasury hasn't yet purchased the stock, it's not an *owner* with full authority over AIG's managers (and junkets).

In practice, the situation is a little different. As a condition of the \$85 billion line of credit, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson insisted that [AIG chief executive Robert Willumstad stand down](#). Now that the deal has come to pass, it's likely that AIG will acquiesce to additional human-resources advice coming from the Treasury. Whether the executives who authorized a fancy retreat (including \$23,000 on spa treatments) should really lose their jobs is another question. The trip was planned long before the bailout, as a reward for top-performing life-insurance agents—not the top dogs responsible for AIG's collapse.

As part of the \$700 billion bailout authorized last week, Congress moved to rein in corporate excess by lowering the cap on federal corporate deductions for executives' pay to \$500,000 from \$1 million, allowing "clawbacks" (recovering pay if an executive is found to have engaged in fraud), and banning "golden parachutes" (bonuses for underperforming executives upon termination). These measures do not have retroactive influence over the AIG deal. The financial products manager whose complex investment strategy is at least partly to blame for AIG's collapse, Joseph Cassano, is receiving \$1 million a month in consulting fees, and former chief executive Martin J. Sullivan received a \$5 million performance bonus.

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

*Explainer thanks Suresh Sundaesan of Columbia Business School.*

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## explainer

### What a Boy Wants

How do you know whether an adolescent really wants a circumcision?

By Brian Palmer

Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 5:38 PM ET

The U.S. Supreme Court announced Monday that it would not hear the case of a 13-year-old Oregon boy whose parents [disagree over whether he should be circumcised](#). The father claims the boy wants to have the [operation](#), but the mother contends that he is merely bending to his father's will. Now a trial judge will attempt to ascertain the boy's wishes. How can the court determine what the boy *really* wants?

By asking him in private. Because 13-year-old children are generally considered capable of developing meaningful preferences, the judge will invite the boy into chambers (and away from his parents) for a private conversation. The separation removes the immediate influence of the parents and protects the child from having to publicly wound one of them. If the judge does not find his answers obviously genuine and meaningful, the court will turn to a [forensic child psychologist](#).

The psychologist's methods are highly individualized and depend on the child's intellectual capacity. The first step would be a lengthy interview to determine the boy's emotional condition and attitudes about his family. A direct question about circumcision would be asked late in the interview, if at all. The psychologist would then interview each parent alone and with the child, then the child with both parents. The goal is to observe changes in the child's answers, mannerisms, body language, or syntax when the parents are present. If he answers the same questions differently depending on whether his parents are in the room, this suggests a lack of independence. In addition, the psychologist would be on the lookout for wooden movements or language that sounds scripted or inappropriately adult—possible signs that the child is ["enmeshed"](#) with one or both parents and unable to make his own decisions. In the Oregon case, a psychologist might probe the boy's knowledge of Judaism—his father converted to the religion—to determine whether his interest in circumcision is a result of a genuine religious conviction or if he doesn't want to disobey his father.

Based on these interviews, the psychologist would develop a hypothesis about the child's competency, preferences, and independence. The hypothesis must then be tested through interviews with teachers, neighbors, or other people who have had regular interactions with the child. A psychologist might also check school records for signs of extreme reticence, which might confirm a hypothesis of enmeshment, or self-confidence, which would undermine it. Some psychologists also use [projective tests](#), such as drawing pictures, playing with dolls, or [Rorschach inkblots](#)—though the validity of these methods is hotly debated among those in the field.

Following this battery of interviews and tests, the psychologist issues a report and recommendation to the judge. In the Oregon case, the psychologist could adopt any of three conclusions: first, that the boy genuinely wants the circumcision; second, that he genuinely does not; or third, that he is so profoundly influenced



by one of the parents that his true wishes cannot be determined or should not be considered. In any event, the conclusion would normally be accompanied by a custody recommendation, and the parties would have the opportunity to examine the psychologist in open court and challenge his or her views. While the judge is not bound to accept the psychologist's recommendation, most judges do.

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

*Explainer thanks Reena Sommer; Jeffrey Wittman, author of Custody, Chaos, and Personal Peace; and William B. Zuckerman.*

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## explainer

### Flight of the Penguins

How do you airlift hundreds of stranded birds?

By Nina Shen Rastogi

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 6:59 PM ET

More than a thousand juvenile Patagonian penguins have washed up on the northern shores of Brazil this year [for reasons scientists have yet to comprehend fully](#). Over the weekend, [hundreds of the stranded birds](#) were airlifted to the southernmost tip of the country and released into the South Atlantic Ocean, close to their native territory. How exactly do you get that many penguins on a plane?

You put them in crates, 23 birds to a box. On Friday, the Brazilian government's environmental authority loaded 399 Magellanic penguins onto a [C-130 Hercules transport plane](#) on loan from the Air Force. The penguins left from [a marine-life treatment center](#) in Salvador, in the northern state of Bahia, where most of them had been living for the past two months. (Some 70 birds joined them from a treatment center in Vitoria; they were transported in the cargo hold of a commercial flight.) Before boarding the military plane, the penguins were fed, watered, given antifungal medication, and tagged with bands for future identification. Then they were flown down to [another rehabilitation center](#) in the southern city of Pelotas. Accompanying them on the 5.5 hour flight were a handful of military personnel and approximately 10 veterinarians and biologists from various environmental organizations.

On Saturday, after an overnight stay in the Pelotas center—where they were fed and watered once again—the penguins were placed back in the crates, lifted onto large trucks, and driven down to the beach, where a movable pen had been set up. Most of the penguins were then transferred into the pen and herded into the sea. (A few dozen were kept back due to medical

concerns, though all the birds survived the flight.) You can watch a video of the beach release [here](#).

Many of the penguins that washed ashore up north perished before they could be returned home. Representatives for the International Fund for Animal Welfare, one of the primary NGOs involved in the airlifting, estimate that half of the 1,600 penguins found in the Bahia region since July were already dead by the time they washed ashore; another 300 died in rehabilitation. The remaining birds were treated for emaciation, anemia, and worm infestations over the course of several months. Before they were allowed to board the Hercules plane this weekend, birds had to be given a clean bill of health by IFAW veterinarians—this involved checking their weight and the condition of their lungs, mouth, feet, and eyes as well as making sure their feather covers were still waterproof. Roughly 100 birds that didn't pass inspection remain at the Salvador center, where they will continue to be cared for until they can be released.

This weekend's flight was the largest penguin airlift in Brazilian history, but the largest penguin airlift ever took place in 2000, when [10,000 to 15,000 birds](#) were transported to clean water after a massive oil spill near Cape Town, South Africa. Other, more pedestrian animals have also been rescued in large numbers by plane: After Hurricane Katrina, Texas oil tycoon T. Boone Pickens and his wife, Madeleine, paid \$50,000 to charter a [Continental Airlines flight](#) to take 100 cats and dogs to safety in California. In 2006, [300 cats and dogs](#) orphaned by the Israel-Hezbollah conflict were flown from Lebanon to Las Vegas in a special Emirates cargo plane.

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

*Explainer thanks Michael Booth, Christopher Cutter, and Valeria Ruoppolo of the International Fund for Animal Welfare.*

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## faith-based

### The Anti-Semite's Favorite Jewish Prayer

The centuries-long controversy over Yom Kippur's *Kol Nidre*.

By Michael Weiss

Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 6:56 AM ET

Of all the Jewish prayers, *Kol Nidre* is one of the most recognizable—and certainly the most controversial. Neil Diamond [intoned it](#) in order to penetrate the stone heart of his cantor father at the end of the remake of *The Jazz Singer*, and Al Jolson [sang it](#), mercifully out of blackface, in the 1927 original. Max Bruch used the haunting music that accompanies the prayer

to furnish the full title, and half the theme, of his celebrated adagio in 1881. Beethoven, too, [borrowed](#) the theme for the sixth movement of his *String Quartet Op. 131*, which had been commissioned by the heads of Viennese Jewry seeking to honor the founding of a new synagogue. Even [Perry Como](#) and [Johnny Mathis](#) recorded their own renditions in the late '50s.

For observant Jews, *Kol Nidre* represents the liturgical kickoff for Yom Kippur (opening services are named for the prayer, which means "All vows"), a repetitive and crescendoing piece of Aramaic recited before sunset on the Day of Atonement. For anti-Semites, it's evidence that Jews are duplicitous and two-faced. The trouble has to do with a misconstrued doctrine of pre-emption. The full text of the prayer reads:

All vows, obligations, oaths, and anathemas, whether called *konam*, *konas*, or by any other name, which we may vow, or swear, or pledge, or whereby we may be bound, from this Day of Atonement until the next (whose happy coming we await), we do repent. May they be deemed absolved, forgiven, annulled, and void, and made of no effect; they shall not bind us nor have power over us. The vows shall not be reckoned vows; the obligations shall not be obligatory; nor the oaths be oaths.

As stand-alone statement, divorced of its context and Talmudic source material, it does seem to suggest that there's no such thing as a promise or oral contract affirmed in Judaism. But, of course, context is everything, and the prayer refers only to personal vows—those made by man in relation to his own conscience or to God, not interpersonal ones made by man to his fellow man. Contrary to claims made by perplexed exegetes such as [David Duke](#), *Kol Nidre* was not invented as a sinister tribal clause to cheat gentiles or one another with impunity.

Judaism goes to great lengths to legislate social behavior, both within and without the community. As Rabbi Gil Student describes it in his primer on the arcana of vow annulment, the Talmud "dedicates one sixth of itself to detailing the Jewish court system which adjudicates based on the sworn testimony of witnesses." Why expend so much ink on the rules and procedures for dealing with betrayal and injustice if a yearly invocation affords an easy get-out-of-jail-free card? The Talmud says that if a person wishes to free himself from a vow made to a second party, he has to plead his case before a religious court in the presence of that person, who must then consent to the vow's nullification. It doesn't matter if the petitioner is beholden to an adult, a child, or a gentile; the same standard applies.

The arduous and prohibitive process by which one can be freed from a personal vow eventually led to the adoption of *Kol Nidre* in the first place. The only passage in the Pentateuch pertaining to personal vows is Numbers 30:3, which states: "If a man takes

a vow to G-d or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth he shall do." In ancient Israel, gaining absolution for these kinds of pledges meant presenting oneself to a scholar, an expert, or a board of three select laymen. One could plead forgetfulness, unintentional violation, or stupidity. A common excuse was that one had entered into a vow without fully understanding its consequences. Typically, an annulment would be granted if the lapsed pledge-maker could prove through interrogation he had erred in good faith. However, the ritual was eventually exercised to the point of exhaustion—imagine going to court every time you broke a New Year's resolution. *Kol Nidre* was introduced in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and transcribed in the *Seder Rav Amram Gaon*, the first comprehensive Jewish prayer book, as a convenient umbrella policy.

The original version encompassed the preceding year, "from the last Day of Atonement until this one." Then, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Meir ben Samuel, the son-in-law of the revered French rabbi Rashi, altered the wording to reflect the year to come, arguing that pre-emptive annulment was more in keeping with the letter and spirit of the Nedarim, the Talmudic treatise on vows. Ben Samuel also added to the prayer the phrase "we do repent [of them all]," which aligned it more closely with purpose of atonement. His version has been taken up by the bulk of the Ashkenazim, while the Sephardim continue to prefer the older, retroactive one.

From its inception, *Kol Nidre* never attained universal sanction or appeal. Five of the heads of the Babylonian rabbinical academies rejected it outright, claiming that it undermined both the sanctity of personal vows as well as the necessary custom for canceling them. Nevertheless, the prayer gained traction in the other lands of the diaspora. It came in handy on the Iberian Peninsula during the Inquisition when *Marranos*—Spanish Jews who pretended to convert to Christianity to escape persecution—were forced to make bogus professions of faith in public and needed the winking dispensation of God to do so.

Jewish authorities have often sought to clarify *Kol Nidre's* intention, while occasionally advocating for its abolition on the grounds that it is theologically worthless. One popular objection to it has been that ignorant Jews would misinterpret the prayer as a license for deceit and treachery—just as anti-Semites have. The prayer was cited as justification for the [Oath More Judaico](#), a humiliating and sadistic legal vow Jews were for centuries forced to swear before testifying in European courts. It wasn't until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that most of the Continent began revising or removing it in earnest. (Romania's remained on the books until 1902.) Perhaps in response to this history of vulgar misinterpretation, Jews themselves have had a hard time deciding what to do with the prayer. A rabbinical conference in Brunswick in 1844 ruled unanimously that *Kol Nidre* was superfluous and should be eliminated from the entire religious

tradition. This decision led numerous congregations in Western Europe and many more Reform congregations in the United States to do just that, or to replace the words of the prayer with a Hebrew psalm while retaining its elegaic melody. Orthodox and Conservative congregations still recite the words.

Whichever way one sides in this antique dispute, it's obvious that the line separating conviction and rhetoric in human discourse has always been blurry. "Lord, if you let the harvest come, I'll marry my neighbor's lazy-eyed daughter" was no more feasible or enforceable in the Dark Ages than "If Bush wins, I'm moving to Canada" was in 2000. Modern parlance has a host of throat-clearing clauses to cancel whatever sentiment follows, often in the same sentence, from "Don't hold me to this" to "Dude, I'm not saying, I'm just saying." And it's hard to imagine how the long, proud history of recreational Yiddish cursing would have progressed had Judaism not afforded this wiggle room with respect to anathemas ("May all the teeth fall out of your head except one, and may that one turn brown and rot.")

There's even an esoteric or Straussian reading of *Kol Nidre*. According to the Kabbalah, the prayer is actually intended as a two-way pact with the Almighty, absolving *him* of any vows he might make in the coming year that could affect his mortal creation. A man-made allowance for God to rescind promises of plague, pestilence, and Jobian misery suggests not just wishful thinking but a lack of trust in the wisdom and surety of his judgments. Heresy and agnosticism run not far behind. I'm not saying, I'm just saying.

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## family

### Mom, What's a Credit Default Swap?

Books to read your children during a financial crisis.

By Erica S. Perl

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 7:06 AM ET

The first time I heard the word *recession*, I was 10 years old. It was 1978, and my parents, like everyone we knew, were cranky and stressed out about gas shortages and rising food prices. One of the ways I coped was by burying my nose in books and discovering kids who had it worse than I did. Like Ramona Quimby, whose dad got fired and took up residence on the couch. And Laura Ingalls, whose dad kept hitching up the wagon to drag his bonneted brood to the middle of nowhere. Many of the books I discovered during the late '70s featured themes of economic hardship that made my circumstances seem manageable by comparison—a happy coincidence, I thought at the time. Looking back, I'm not so sure this was an accident. A review of popular American children's books of the past century reveals a recurring theme in the children's publishing industry:

When times are tough, cue the stories about times that were even tougher.

*Click [here](#) for a slide show on great children's books for tough economic times.*

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## fighting words

### How To Win Afghanistan's Opium War

The best way to deprive the Taliban of drug profits? The United States should buy Afghanistan's poppy crop instead of trying to eradicate it.

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 1:31 PM ET

I used to know [Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles](#), Her Majesty's ambassador in Kabul, and I have no reason to doubt that he was quoted correctly in the leaked cable from the deputy French ambassador to Afghanistan that has since appeared in the Parisian press. I think that he is right in saying that while there cannot be a straightforward "military victory" for the Taliban and other fundamentalist and criminal forces, nonetheless there is a chance that a combination of these forces can make the country ungovernable by the NATO alliance. He may also be correct in his assertion that an increase of troops in the country might have unwelcome and unintended consequences, in that "it would identify us even more strongly as an occupation force and would multiply the targets" for the enemy.

If Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated one point over another, it is that the quantity theory of counterinsurgency is very unsoundly based. If a vast number of extra soldiers had been sent to Baghdad before the disastrously conducted war had been given a new strategy and a new command, then it would have been a case of staying in the same hole without ceasing to dig (and there would have been many more "body bags" as a consequence of the larger number of uniformed targets). As it is, we have learned so many lessons in Iraq about how to defeat al-Qaida that we have the chance to apply them in Afghanistan. This is exactly the reverse of the glib and facile argument that used to counterpose the "good" Afghan war to the evil quagmire in Mesopotamia.

Speaking of quagmires, here are a few admittedly quantitative figures (taken from the testimony before Congress of [Mark Schneider of the well-respected International Crisis Group](#)). He quoted Adm. Mike Mullen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as saying that suicide bombings in Afghanistan were up 27 percent in 2007 over 2006, commenting that Mullen "should have added that they are up 600 percent over 2005, and that all insurgent attacks are up 400 percent over 2005." To darken the statistical

picture further—this testimony was given last spring—one must also count the number of attacks on World Food Program convoys, on relief workers, and on prominent Afghan women. All of these show a steady upward curve, as does the ability of the Taliban to operate across the Pakistani border and to strike in the middle of the capital city as well as other cities, most notably its old stronghold of Kandahar. The final depressing figure is the index of civilian casualties caused by aerial bombardment from NATO forces: This year will show a large increase in these, as well, and that is one of the chief concerns underlying Sir Sherard's bleakly expressed view that the current U.S.-led strategy is "destined to fail."

Innumerable factors combine to constitute this depressing assessment, and many of them have to do with the sheer fact that Afghanistan, already extremely poor, scorched its own earth further in a series of civil wars and ethnic rivalries. I remember flying from Herat to Kabul on a U.N. plane a few years ago and being depressed by the rarity of even a splash of greenery in the mud-colored landscape. Thirty years ago, what was Afghanistan's most famous export? It was grapes, usually made into exceptionally fine raisins that were esteemed throughout the subcontinent. It was a country of vines and orchards. Now, even the vines and trees have mostly been cut down for firewood. Iraq could well be immensely rich in a decade or less: Afghanistan will be well-down even in "Third World" economic terms for a very long time to come.

This is why it is peculiar of us, if not bizarre and quasi-suicidal, to insist that its main economic lifeblood continues to be wholly controlled by our enemies. The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime tells us that last year Afghanistan's poppy fields, on 193,000 hectares of land, produced 93 percent of all the world's opium. The potential production could be as high as 8,200 metric tons. And, unsurprisingly, UNODC also reports that the vast bulk of the revenue from this astonishing harvest goes directly to the Taliban or to local warlords and mullahs. Meanwhile, in the guise of liberators, NATO forces appear and tell the Afghan villagers that they intend to burn their only crop. And the American embassy is only restrained by the Afghan government from pursuing a policy of actually spraying this same crop from the air! In other words, the discredited fantasy of Richard Nixon's so-called "War on Drugs" is the dogma on which we are prepared to gamble and lose the country that gave birth to the Taliban and hospitality to al-Qaida.

Surely a smarter strategy would be, in the long term, to invest a great deal in reforestation and especially in the replanting of vines. While in the short term, hard-pressed Afghan farmers should be allowed to sell their opium to the government rather than only to the many criminal elements that continue to infest it or to the Taliban. We don't have to smoke the stuff once we have purchased it: It can be burned or thrown away or perhaps more profitably used to manufacture the painkillers of which the United States currently suffers a shortage. (As it is, we allow

Turkey to cultivate opium poppy fields for precisely this purpose.) Why not give Afghanistan the contract instead? At one stroke, we help fill its coffers and empty the main war chest of our foes while altering the "hearts-and-minds" balance that has been tipping away from us. I happen to know that this option has been discussed at quite high levels in Afghanistan itself, and I leave you to guess at the sort of political constraints that prevent it from being discussed intelligently in public in the United States. But if we ever have to have the melancholy inquest on how we "lost" a country we had once liberated, this will be one of the places where the conversation will have to start.

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## food

### Eat Your Spherified Vegetables!

Trying out molecular gastronomy on my picky son.

By Sara Dickerman

Wednesday, October 8, 2008, at 11:43 AM ET

My son, who's turning 4 this month, is a hard case at the dinner table. He once ate everything from turnips to gai-lan, but somewhere around 18 months, the gates closed for vegetables. I have tried to be patient with the deforestation of his diet, and in the past few months there has been progress: At a recent lunch, I caught him chomping on a carrot before his (organic) hot dog, something he would never have done if he knew I was looking. And although he refused to taste the radishes we grew in our garden this year, he did take one to bed with him as a makeshift stuffed animal. Still, spinach is off-limits, green beans are opprobrious, and even corn makes him gag.

In an effort to expand his palate, I've followed the standard parenting guidelines without much luck: I keep putting veggies on his plate, even if he won't eat them; I eat lots of them myself; and I regularly cook with him. I've even tried the [morally questionable practice](#) of sneaking veggies into his favorite dishes (a la [Jessica Seinfeld](#)). The Critic—as I like to call him—was not so easily fooled: He quickly detected a quarter cup of squash in his salmon cakes the other night and declared them strange. Frustrated but not yet willing to give up, I enlisted the help of an unlikely accomplice: El Bulli chef Ferran Adria. Adria is perhaps the most famous chef in the world, known as a leader in the field of "molecular gastronomy"—a kind of kitchen alchemy that transforms prime ingredients into surreal concoctions using high-tech tools and commercial food additives. His recipes are full of surprise and playfulness: strange juxtapositions of hot and cold ingredients, intensely flavored frozen powders, and mysterious liquid-centered gelatin orbs made through a process called [spherification](#). The Adrian table is as much magic show as it is dinner, and I wondered if the Critic might have an affinity for such playful food. After all, he's a fan of alphabet pasta, fruit gels shaped like Legos, and animal crackers.

Together with his brother, Albert, Adria is now selling many of his favorite additives under the label Texturas. So I plunked down \$200 for a kit from [Dean & DeLuca](#), the New York specialty retailer. While high-end foodie gift boxes are usually filled with spices or chocolates, this one contains calcium gluconolactate, powdered xanthan gum, agar agar, and lecithin. (For the intrepid gastronaut, these additives can be found a la carte at L.A.'s super chic [Le Sanctuaire](#) and pastry-chef provocateur Will Goldfarb's [Willpowder.net](#).) The Critic immediately gravitates to the giant syringe that came with the kit while I tear through the slim recipe book.

We decide to make tomato spheres (featured in the Texturas booklet) and Asian-seasoned broccoli spheres (my own creation). Before he heads off to preschool, the Critic and I go to work, adding Gluco (the calcium gluconolactate) and Xantana (the powdered xanthan gum) to tomato water (the juice from shredded tomatoes filtered through a cheesecloth) and to a thin broccoli purée. It turns out my son's a champ with measuring spoons, digital scales, and hand mixers. Later that day, the Critic is less gung-ho about our project; he knows that once the spheres are made, it will soon be time to taste them. Working in small batches, we drop spoonfuls of the tomato water and the broccoli broth into an Algin bath (sodium alginate and water), and then we watch them congeal.

The tomato water doesn't really transform into spheres so much as blobs with little tails of clear gelatin. And here my son begins to get *really* nervous; realizing that he will have to eat not only something tomato-flavored but something that in shape and overall texture most closely resembles a tadpole. Though not perfectly spherical, the broccoli actually comes closer to the intended effect. Each orb has a clear skin of gelatin, and, inside, there's a soupy shot of purée—a liquid surprise not unlike that inside a [Shanghainese soup dumpling](#).

When tasting time comes, the Critic cries as if I were feeding him brimstone. The tomato gel slides down his chin, but the broccoli doesn't even make it that far—I don't have the heart to make him taste it. His baby sister, 8 months old, is rather less horrified—she rolls a tomato sphere around in her mouth.

I give the spheres a try, too. Unlike my son, I think the tomato is quite yummy, although the gelatin is too fragile and bursts before I get it to my mouth. (For \$200, I'd expect the Texturas kit to provide significantly more advice on troubleshooting.) With more experimentation, no doubt, I could form more perfect jellied marbles or the smaller spheres known as "caviar," but it's clear that spherification isn't helping my son get into vegetables.

I feel bad about terrorizing my son, but I decide to try one more gag. The kit includes a tin of Lecite or lecithin, an emulsifier,

which Adria uses to create whisper-light "airs" of lemon juice, soy sauce, and vinegar. I recall a picture of Adria with a bowlful of carrot air from the [cover of the New York Times Magazine](#), so I grab some carrot juice, acidify it with lemon, and add a touch of maple syrup for sweetness. (Hey, give the kid a break, yes?) After mixing in a few doses of Lecite, I whiz away at the surface of the liquid with my hand mixer and watch as bubbles erupt wildly from the surface. This is fun. After a few minutes, I scoop up all the bubbles and freeze the first batch of air. Then I invite the Critic to help me whip up a second. This time around, he thinks molecular gastronomy is a gas.

Upon tasting, the frozen variant helps me imagine what carrot-flavored frost might be like; the unfrozen version is like a mouthful of soap bubbles, but tasty. The Critic asks if he can put carrot bubbles in his next bath. "Mom, I really do like it," he tells me in his most earnest voice. I'm not sure how much I've expanded his palate—after all, carrots are the one vegetable that don't horrify the Critic. Nevertheless, I begin to feel that perhaps this silly experiment is worthwhile—it has sparked, ever so briefly, a sense of vegetal wonder. And then, after a few mouthfuls of carrot air, the Critic informs me that he's ready for a real dinner.

I can sympathize with my son. As much as I appreciate the theatrical aspects of my most extravagant restaurant meals—frozen beer foams and liquid-nitrogen poached meringues! I'm always grateful to return to "normal" food afterward, like a bowl of pasta. The Critic gets his real dinner, with plenty of fruit on the plate and a morsel of roasted eggplant—which he tosses onto the ground.

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foreigners

## Enough About Israel, Already

How constant attention from the candidates hinders the Jewish state.

By Shmuel Rosner

Wednesday, October 8, 2008, at 4:01 PM ET

In 2005, when he was the deputy director general for media and public affairs in Israel's foreign ministry, Gideon Meir came to America with an ambitious mission, one that some might call impossible: He wanted to rebrand Israel by scaling down its visibility as a news item.

Explaining his intention, Meir, now the ambassador to Italy, shared a story of his days in Washington in the late 1970s at an event in an embassy of a European country: "The hostess told me, 'Look at us, our prime minister was here last week for a state visit, and all he got is a three-line item in one of the pages inside

the paper. But you, whenever you have someone coming, you get a front-page headline.' You know what I told her? Take the headline and give me the three lines."

Three years later, his goal seems as distant as ever. Loving Israel, and making it known time and again, is still a litmus test for any American politician. Barely can a presidential debate go by without the mentioning of this tiny country in a distant region. Last week in the vice-presidential debate, Israel's name was mentioned 17 times. China was mentioned twice, Europe just once. Russia didn't come up at all. Nor Britain, France, or Germany. The only two countries to get more attention were Iraq and Afghanistan—the countries in which U.S. forces are fighting wars.

And the Biden-Palin debate was not the exception but the rule. A week earlier, in the first McCain-Obama debate, Israel was mentioned seven times, fewer than Russia but still more than China or Japan or any country in Europe, Latin America, or Africa. In the second presidential debate, on Tuesday, Israel was on the table again. "Would you commit U.S. troops to defend Israel if Iran attacks it?" they were asked. In the first two televised debates of the primary season, one could see the same trend: Republican candidates mentioned Israel 18 times, as compared with only one mention for Russia and three for China. Democrats, more modestly, mentioned Israel only three times—still more than Great Britain, Egypt, Australia, South Africa, Brazil, or Canada and almost the same as those of neighboring Mexico.

And, of course, they all love Israel, support it, and commit themselves to protecting it. Tiny Israel is one of a handful of countries to which both McCain and Obama have traveled in the very busy months preceding the election. And the problem doesn't stop with the candidates. Israelis, while some of them understand the danger of being constantly front and center, can also hardly fight the temptation of basking in this barrage of positive, comforting attention. When Israel's Ehud Olmert came for his first U.S. visit as prime minister, he bragged to Jewish legislators: President Bush sat with the president of China for just one hour, he said, but with me he sat for six full hours.

"Israel's security is sacrosanct," Obama has repeatedly explained. McCain and now Palin have promised to prevent "another Holocaust"—a presumed possibility in the case that Iran achieves its goal of acquiring nuclear weapons. The candidates do it for political reasons: getting the Jewish vote and the votes of other pro-Israel groups. (Surveys asking Americans to identify favorable countries list Israel at the top, along with countries like England, Canada, and Japan.) They do it as a way of explaining their policies in the most contentious of regions, the Middle East. They do it because they are constantly asked about it by an American media that is sometimes obsessed with all things Israel.

But if they really care for Israel, they should at least try to resist the temptation. The constant mentions, the high visibility in every election cycle, the overwhelming attention—all do little to serve Israel's interest. They create the impression that Israel's problems, and especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, should be the highest priority for an American administration. They make Americans think that important and costly governmental actions, like the war in Iraq, were done for the sake of Israel, thus turning Israel into a nuisance rather than an asset. They mislead voters to think that dilemmas facing the next president—Iran is the most notorious example—would disappear had it not been for Israel.

But reality is different.

Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as important as it might be to Israelis and Palestinians, will not be a strategic life-changing event for the United States. Advisers to both McCain and Obama have recognized that, in a conference not long ago, as McCain adviser Max Boot [has reported](#): "I said that negotiating an Israeli-Palestinian accord could not be the top priority for the next administration given all the other crises we face, Richard Danzig, an adviser to Barack Obama, said, 'I think we see this rather similarly.'" Contrary to what some Americans might think, Boot rightly explained that "if the Israeli-Palestinian dispute were resolved, it would not solve all the problems of the Middle East."

The fact that supporters of the Iraq war were also known to be supporters of Israel does not mean that Israel had anything to do with the launching of this war. This distorted theory of events was most famously detailed in *The Israel Lobby*, a book by professors Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer—and I suspect some American voters on the left still believe it. In fact, Israel barely played a role in the decisions leading to the Iraq war. As Yossi Alpher [reported](#) a year and a half ago, Israel's Ariel Sharon even warned President Bush against the war: "Publicly, Sharon played the silent ally. ... Sharon nevertheless advised Bush not to occupy Iraq."

But Iran is where the most serious damage was done by the repeated mentioning, by both campaigns, of Israel as the country threatened by Iran's nuclear program. Iran poses a challenge to the United States and its interests in the Middle East, it is a threat to governments and leaders in the Arab world, it is endangering vital energy resources, and it supports terror not just against Israel.

And again, the candidates recognize all these facts but keep their focus on Israel. "What is your reading" of the threat Iran poses "to the security of the United States?" McCain was asked at the first debate. His response started in this fashion: "If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, it is an existential threat to the state of Israel." Obama's response was no better: A nuclear Iran "would be a

game changer. Not only would it threaten Israel, a country that is our stalwart ally ..."

Yes, both McCain and Obama also mentioned some of the other reasons for which a nuclear Iran will be more than just a nuisance, but they both started with Israel. Can one blame an American living under the false impression that Israel is the main, perhaps only reason for which to oppose Iranian expansionism?

One really can't. The blame for creating such impression lies with the overeager candidates, their advisers, and, to some extent, attention-seeking Israelis who all behave like the guy in this long-forgotten Queen song that "never read the signs/ Too much love will kill you."

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## foreigners

### Heartland Government

Washington is closer to small-town Main Street than Sarah Palin thinks.

By Anne Applebaum

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 7:59 PM ET

*"I think we need a little bit of reality from Wasilla Main Street there, brought to Washington, D.C."*—Sarah Palin to Joe Biden, Oct. 2, 2008

A specter is haunting this presidential election—the specter of "Washington." Not Washington the city of museums and monuments, and not Washington the home of 588,000 mostly ordinary people, but "Washington" the metaphor: Washington the bastion of elites who look down on the rest of America, Washington the embodiment of an East Coast liberal establishment that scorns outsiders from the provinces. So frequently have we heard this idea invoked in recent days, I think it's time to dissect it a bit more closely. Increasingly, I am convinced it alludes to something that doesn't exist at all.

I speak here as one of the very few living, native Washingtonians—or, at least, as one who is always treated as one of the very few living, native Washingtonians. "You really come from here?" I'm often asked. "I didn't know anyone actually came from Washington." And they have a point. Although there are plenty of native Washingtonians working as doctors or cabdrivers or bank managers in Washington, it is true that most of the people who actually control the city's most famous institutions—Congress, the White House, the federal government—weren't born there. Like Sarah Palin, they come "from the heartland," places like Wasilla, and it is the values of the heartland and Wasilla that they therefore should be presumed to embody.

There are exceptions to this rule: Among the people who matter in "Washington," there are some who could be said to belong to a hereditary East Coast elite. Al Gore and the Kennedys might fit that bill, and when Chelsea Clinton runs for president, she will, too. There are plenty of bona fide East Coast-establishment types working for newspapers and law firms in Washington, and they do, of course, matter, not least of all to media coverage of national politics. But D.C. is not Manhattan. The significance of these Washington natives pales in comparison with that of the "hockey moms," "Joe Six-Packs," and "Main Streeters" who have dominated the political conversation in the nation's capital for as long as I can remember.

Among these "outsiders," I would include our current president, who was raised in Midland, Texas; our vice president, who was raised in Casper, Wyo.; our most recent former president, who was born in Hope, Ark.; and even our most senior former president, who comes from Plains, Ga. I would also include the large numbers of ex-Texans—Karen Hughes, Karl Rove, Alberto Gonzales—who have towered over national politics for the past eight years, as well as notable figures like Michael "heck of a job" Brown, the Oklahoma native who presided over Hurricane Katrina as the director of FEMA.

Above all, I would include Congress, which, by definition, contains hundreds of "outsiders," many from places just like Wasilla. I am thinking here of Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska (a resident of Girdwood, Alaska), now on trial for corruption, or ex-Texas Rep. Tom DeLay (born in Laredo, Texas) who resigned in disgrace. I'll also mention Louisiana Rep. William Jefferson (originally of Lake Providence, La.), recently indicted for corruption, for the sake of bipartisanship. But if more small-town Republican names come to mind, that's because small-town Republicans have figured among the most powerful and most prominent Washington politicians for most of the past decade.

The result: Washington, however stuffy it may once have been, is no longer in need of "a little bit of reality from Wasilla Main Street." Washington is in need of expertise, management experience, long-term thinking, and more political courage from wherever in the country it happens to come. More to the point, Washington needs people who think like national politicians and not like spokesmen for the local businesspeople who fill their reelection coffers and for the local party hacks who plan their campaigns. Let's be frank: The "bailout" bill passed on Friday not because members decided it would work but because it was once again stuffed with the pork, perks, and tax breaks without which no piece of legislation, however important to the nation as a whole, can now pass. Maybe it's unfair to call that "small-town" thinking, but it sure is small-minded. And small-mindedness, not snobbery, is the dominant mindset of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Washington.

Don't get me wrong: Populism can be a fine thing. It's healthy for a democracy to renew itself. It's also absolutely true that

many of our greatest leaders have had obscure origins and many of our worst have had Ivy League educations. But Sarah Palin, arresting and compelling a cultural phenomenon though she may be, seems to rail against a nonexistent "Washington" because it's easier than making any actual arguments. Her phony, made-for-TV populism is a terrible distraction in a time of genuine crisis.

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green room

## ***The Big Necessity***

Can excrement solve the energy crisis?

By Rose George

Friday, October 10, 2008, at 7:08 AM ET

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**From:** Rose George

**Subject:** Why I Wrote a Book About Human Waste

**Posted Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 6:52 AM ET**

I need the bathroom. I assume there is one, though I'm at a spartan restaurant in the Ivory Coast, in a small town filled with refugees from next-door Liberia, where water comes in buckets and you can buy towels second-hand. The waiter, a young Liberian man, only nods when I ask. He takes me off into the darkness to a one-room building, switches on the light, and leaves. There's a white tiled floor, white tiled walls, and that's it. No toilet, no hole, no clue. I go outside to find him again and ask whether he's sent me to the right place. He smiles with sarcasm. Refugees don't have much fun, but he's having some now. "Do it on the floor. What do you expect? This isn't America!" I feel foolish. I say I'm happy to use the bushes; it's not that I'm fussy. But he's already gone, laughing into the darkness.

I need the bathroom. I leave the reading room of the British Library in central London and find a "ladies" a few yards away. If I prefer, there's another one on the far side of the same floor, and more on the other six floors. By 6 p.m., after thousands of people have entered and exited the library and the toilets, the stalls are still clean. The doors still lock. There is warm water in the clean sinks. I do what I have to do, then flush the toilet and forget it immediately, because I can, and because all my life I have done no differently.

This is why the Liberian waiter laughed at me. He thought that I thought a toilet was my right, when he knew it was a privilege.

It must be, when 2.6 billion people don't have sanitation. I don't mean that they have no toilet in their house and must use a public one with queues and fees. Or that they have an outhouse or a rickety shack that empties into a filthy drain or pigsty. All

that counts as sanitation, though not a safe variety. The people who have those are the fortunate ones. But four in ten people have no access to any latrine, toilet, bucket, or box. Nothing. Instead, they defecate by train tracks and in forests. They do it in plastic bags and fling them through the air in narrow slum alleyways. If they are women, they get up at 4 a.m. to be able to do their business under cover of darkness for reasons of modesty, risking rape and snakebites. Four in ten people live in situations in which they are surrounded by human excrement, because it is in the bushes outside the village or in their city yards, left by children outside the back door. It is tramped back in on their feet, carried on fingers onto clothes and into food and drinking water.

The disease toll of this is stunning. Eighty percent of the world's illness is caused by fecal matter. A gram of feces can contain 10 million viruses, 1 million bacteria, 1,000 parasite cysts, and 100 worm eggs. Bacteria can be beneficial: the human body needs bacteria to function, and only 10 percent of cells in our body are actually human. Plenty are not. Small fecal particles can then contaminate water, food, cutlery, and shoes—and be ingested, drunk, or unwittingly eaten. One sanitation specialist has estimated that people who live in areas with inadequate sanitation ingest 10 grams of fecal matter every day.

Diarrhea—usually caused by feces-contaminated food or water—kills a child every fifteen seconds. That means more people dead of diarrhea than all the people killed in conflict since the Second World War. Diarrhea, says the UN children's agency UNICEF, is the largest hurdle a small child in a developing country has to overcome. Larger than AIDS, or TB, or malaria. 2.2 million people—mostly children—die from an affliction that to most westerners is the result of bad takeout. Public health professionals talk about water-related diseases, but that is a euphemism for the truth. These are shit-related diseases.

I'm often asked why I wrote *The Big Necessity*.

First I establish that I am no scatologist, fetishist, or coprophagist. I don't much like toilet humor (and by now I've heard a lot of it). I don't think 2.6 billion people without a toilet is funny. Then I tailor my answers and language to the social situation—still managing to spoil many lunches—by explaining the obvious. Everyone does it. It's as natural as breathing. The average human being spends three years of life going to the toilet, though the average human being with no physical toilet to go to probably does his or her best to spend less. It is a human behavior that is as revealing as any other about human nature, but only if it can be released from the social straitjacket of nicety. Rules governing defecation, hygiene, and pollution exist in every culture at every period in history.

It may in fact be the foundation of civilization: What is toilet training if not the first attempt to turn a child into an acceptable member of society? Appropriateness and propriety begin with a



potty. From this comes the common claim, usually from sanitation activists, that the toilet is the barometer of civilization. How a society disposes of its human excrement is an indication of how it treats its humans, too. Unlike other body-related functions like dance, drama, and songs, wrote the Indian sanitarian Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, "defecation is very lowly." Yet when discussing it, he continued, "one ends up discussing the whole spectrum of human behavior, national economy, politics, role of media, cultural preference and so forth." And that's a partial list. It is missing biology, psychology, chemistry, language. It is missing everything that touches upon understanding what the development academic William Cummings called "the lonely bewilderment of bodily functions."

If my questioner is religious, I say that all the world's great faiths instruct their followers how best to manage their excrement, because hygiene is holy. I explain that taking an interest in the culture of sanitation puts them in good company. Mohandas K. Gandhi, though he spent his life working towards ridding India of its colonial rulers, nonetheless declared that sanitation was more important than independence. The great architect Le Corbusier considered it to be "one of the most beautiful objects industry has ever invented"; and Rudyard Kipling found sewers more compelling than literature. Drains are "a great and glorious thing," he wrote in 1886, "and I study 'em and write about 'em when I can." A decent primer on sanitary engineering, he wrote, "is worth more than all the tomes of sacred smut ever produced." Anton Chekhov was moved to write about the dreadful sanitation in the far-Eastern Russian isle of Sakhalin. And Sigmund Freud thought the study of excretion essential and its neglect a stupidity. In his foreword to *The Scatologic Rites of All Nations*, an impressive ethnography of excrement by the amateur anthropologist—and U.S. army captain—John Bourke, Freud wrote that "to make [the role of excretions in human life] more accessible ... is not only a courageous but also a meritorious undertaking."

If the cultural standing of excrement doesn't convince them, I say that the material itself is as rich as oil and probably more useful. It contains nitrogen and phosphates, which can make plants grow but also suck the life from water because its nutrients absorb available oxygen. It can be both food and poison. It can contaminate and cultivate. Millions of people cook with gas made by fermenting it. I tell them I don't like to call it "waste," when it can be turned into bricks, when it can make roads or jewelry, and when, in a dried powdered form called *poudrette*, it was sniffed like snuff by the grandest ladies of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French court. Medical men of not too long ago thought stool examination a vital diagnostic tool. (London's Wellcome Library holds a 150-year-old engraving of a doctor examining a bedpan and a sarcastic maid asking him whether he'd like a fork.) They were also fond of prescribing it: Excrement could be eaten, drunk, or liberally applied to the skin. Martin Luther was convinced: he reportedly ate a spoonful of his own excrement daily, and wrote that he couldn't understand the

generosity of a God who freely gave such important and useful remedies.

Starting tomorrow in *Slate*, we'll talk about toilets in outer space and a burgeoning movement to turn human waste into drinking water. We'll bring you a report on the lowest of India's untouchables, the latrine cleaner—and one man's plan to improve their lot. And we'll hear about an excrement-into-fuel technology that's changing life in some Chinese villages. Stay tuned.

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**From:** Rose George  
**Subject:** From Toilet to Tap

**Posted Wednesday, October 8, 2008, at 6:54 AM ET**

The most expensive toilet on earth is designed never to be used on earth. At a cost of \$23.4 million, the toilet designed for NASA's space shuttles may seem a ludicrous waste of money. It certainly wouldn't impress Bindeshwar Pathak of the Indian toilet-building charity Sulabh, whose handbook complains that "our scientists think of going to the moon, [but a] toilet is not in their vision at all."

Yet NASA's attempts to improve the disposal of its crews' excreta in the skies could lead the way for the earth-bound. The Environmental Control and Life Support System (ECLSS), which controls the living environment on shuttles and on the International Space Station, doesn't have the luxury of disposal: discharging trash into space has long been judged a bad idea. In the past, astronauts' conditions were considerably more primitive. Alan Shepard set off for the first Mercury shuttle flight on May 5, 1961, with no provision for any excretion, as the flight was supposed to last fifteen minutes. When it was delayed by four hours, Mission Control gave Shepard permission to pee in his space suit.

"It was a very real problem," says Amanda Young, curator of early space flight at the National Air and Space Museum. Fecal bags were developed for the Apollo missions. These stuck to the astronauts' backside, were sealed with Velcro after use, then stored until landing. Urine could be dumped overboard, but a hole big enough to dump feces in space could make the spacecraft too vulnerable. "If you have a break in the skin of the craft," says Young, "oxygen is sucked out of the astronauts. They begin to boil. They'd die in twenty seconds." For the moon landings, all astronauts were wearing "fecal containment devices"—like padded shorts—as well as a urine collection bag attached to the suit with a valve. No one used the fecal options,

but a famous photo of Buzz Aldrin is known in certain circles as "Buzz whizzing."

Asking how astronauts go to the bathroom is one of the most common questions put during NASA or space museum outreach sessions, Young says. "Interest from the public is strange. Women don't care. They think, they worked it out and that's that. Men have an almost unhealthy interest. Children are interested in the poop factor." What everybody should actually be interested in is the drinking-pee factor.

Water weighs a kilogram a liter. It is heavy and therefore expensive: it costs \$40,000 to transport each gallon up to the International Space Station. They don't want to load a shuttle or space station with extra weight, but they need water. So the ECLSS does what anyone would do in straitened circumstances: it turns urine into drinking water. On future space station missions, and on the planned 2012 mission to Mars, astronauts will be drinking their own urine, sweat, breath, and tears because they have to. Officially, this process is called reuse or reclaiming, and it may be the future of the planet. In fact, it's already happening.

Water is a fixed commodity. At any time in history, the planet contains about 332 million cubic miles of it. Most is salty. Only 2 percent is freshwater and two-thirds of that is unavailable for human use, locked in snow, ice, and permafrost. We are using the same water that the dinosaurs drank, and this same water has to make ice creams in Pasadena and the morning frost in Paris. It is limited, and it is being wasted. In 2000, twice as much water was used throughout the world as in 1960. By 2050, half of the planet's projected 8.9 billion people will live in countries that are chronically short of water.

But usage is only part of the problem. We are wasting our water mostly by putting waste into it. One cubic meter of wastewater can pollute ten cubic meters of water. Discharging wastewater into oceans turns freshwater into the less useful salty stuff, and desalination is expensive.

The reuse of wastewater effluent is now being proposed in several areas. In Toowoomba, Australia, where rainfall has decreased 30 percent in the last thirty years, local councilor Dianne Thorley told a TV interviewer that if she had her way, there would be "advanced water treatment plants bolted onto every sewage plant in Australia." She was convinced that a system using advanced ultrafiltration, reverse osmosis, and UV disinfection—or the best cleansing modern science can provide—would ensure adequate safety. Not everyone takes so enthusiastically to the idea. In San Diego, the so-called "Toilet to Tap" proposal was rejected by voters, and a new and expensive reuse project in Orange County, California, continues to cause consternation. In Arizona, a case involving a leisure firm wanting to use recycled wastewater to make artificial snow for a

mountain considered sacred by 13 Native American tribes may soon head for the Supreme Court, so deep do feelings run.

Yet toilets already go to taps. Countless human settlements take their drinking water from the same sources into which other countless human settlements discharge their raw or treated sewage. Several American municipalities already do this "indirect potable reuse." The Upper Occoquan Sewage Authority's effluent supplies 20 percent of the inflow into the Occoquan Reservoir, which gives the residents of Fairfax County, Virginia, their drinking water. In droughts, it can supply 90 percent, and the sewage authority maintains that its highly treated effluent is cleaner than most water sources that end up in the reservoir.

Reuse works better when it involves camouflage. This technique is used, appropriately for a militarized country, in Israel. During a presentation at a London wastewater conference, a beautiful woman from Israel's Mekorot wastewater treatment utility, who stood out in a room full of gray suits, explained that they fed the effluent into an aquifer, withdrew it, then used it as potable water. "It is psychologically very important," she told the rapt audience, "for people to know that the water is coming from the aquifer." This is a clever way of getting around fecal aversion. Not having wastewater—and not wasting water—would be better still.

Devotees of ecological sanitation—"eco-san"—think that composting or urine-diverting toilets are the solution. Though it only makes up 5 percent of the flow, urine contains 80 percent of the nitrogen and 45 percent of the phosphorus that has to be removed at treatment works. Separating it at source would cut down treatment processes and costs. A urine-separation toilet also cuts water use by 80 percent. In the remote Chinese village of Gan Quan Fang, a schoolteacher named Zhang Min Shu extolled the virtues of his urine-diverting toilet to me with a big grin. "It's very scientific. There are two solid waste containers. We only need to clean it once a year. Once it's full, we swap the containers around." The contents of the full container are removed, hopefully now safely composted and pathogen-free, and applied to fields. The empty container moves into the full one's place, and another year should go happily by. Done properly, eco-san turns waste into safe, sowable goodness. Done properly, there's little argument against it. It is sustainable. It closes the nutrient loop, which sewers and wastewater treatment plants have torn open by throwing everything into rivers and the sea, damaging water and depriving land of fertilizer.

Yet eco-san provokes hostility. I hear references to the "eco-mafia" or to those "damned Germans and Swedes," the two leading eco-san nations. Sanitation experts who have tried and failed for years to persuade people to invest in a \$50 basic cement slab and pit understandably wonder how they'd persuade people to spend \$300—the average cost of an eco-san latrine—instead.

Petter Jenssen is an agricultural professor at the Norway University of Agriculture and a confirmed proponent of eco-san. I ask him why eco-san fans annoy everyone who isn't one. "The way people present eco-san is often a bit religious," he says, meaning the fundamentalist kind. "It's eco-san or nothing but. That can trigger people's resentment. Also, early systems did have drawbacks and they didn't see them." If done wrong, eco-san can leave pathogens in the composted or dehydrated excreta. Even if done well, it may not get rid of worm eggs. Also, it can require huge behavior changes that are notoriously difficult to achieve. Urine diversion toilets, for a start, require men to urinate sitting down, a shock to anyone used to the ease of what Germans call stand-pee-ing. Not every man, I suspect, would be as amenable as Mr. Zhang in Gan Quan Fang, who is serene about such things. "For me," he tells me with a big, satisfied smile, "whatever the toilet is, I use it. For example, here we eat wheat. When we go to the south of China, we eat rice. Otherwise we starve."

The flush toilet needn't be the holy grail of hygiene. Canadian academic Gregory Rose points to the example of cell phone technology. Developing countries without phone systems didn't bother with telephone poles and underground cables. They vaulted directly to cell phones and satellite communications. Similarly, in sanitation, Rose writes, "[t]he opportunity I see for developing countries is to leapfrog over the dinosaur technologies we have funded and implemented in the North and move to these advanced technologies," such as composting latrines or waste stabilization ponds. It is time for appropriate sanitation technology, not blind faith in flushing.

The concept of sustainability, as promoted by eco-san fans, has now penetrated even the rich world of engineering certainties and infrastructurally invasive sewers and wastewater-treatment plants. A large sewage-treatment plant uses a quarter of the energy of a coal-fired power station. As the United Kingdom's environment minister recently realized, "there's a carbon impact here that simply has to be tackled." David Stuckey, an engineering professor at London's Imperial College, thinks change must come, and it will be through economics. "People are looking to invest in wastewater treatment," he tells me. "You don't have to be a genius—just look at the price of resources and the cost of nitrogen and phosphorous. Once costs go up, people change."

Other things will also have to be tackled. Hospital pharmaceuticals in wastewater will be the next headache. In a recent investigation, the city of Philadelphia utility found 90 percent of the drugs it tested for, including evidence of medicines used for heart disease, mental illness, epilepsy, and asthma. A senior EPA official admitted that "there needs to be more searching, more analysis."

Petter Jenssen sits on the other side of the waterborne sewerage and ecological-sanitation divide, but he agrees. "We've invested

so much in conventional sewerage. There are many economic interests tangled up in it. It depends on what politicians dare to do. Maybe it will take another fifty years to reach a sustainable system. But things can happen. Fifteen years ago I was considered a romantic scientist. Now I'm chairman of the national Water Association."

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**From:** Rose George  
**Subject:** Latrine Rights in India

**Posted Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 7:06 AM ET**

It drips on her head most days, says Champaben, but in the monsoon season it's worse. In rain, worms multiply. Every day, nonetheless, she gets up and walks to her owners' house, and there she picks up their excrement with her bare hands or a piece of tin, scrapes it into a basket, puts the basket on her head or shoulders and carries it to the nearest waste dump. She has no mask, no gloves, and no protection. She is paid a pittance, if she is paid at all. She regularly gets dysentery, giardiasis, brain fever. She does this because a 3,000-year-old social hierarchy says she has to.

They used to be known as *bhangi*, a word formed from the Sanskrit for "broken," and the Hindi for "trash." Today, official India calls them the "scheduled castes," but activists prefer Dalits, a word that means "broken" or "oppressed" but with none of the negativity of *bhangi*. Most modern Indians don't stick to their caste jobs any more. There is more inter-caste marriage, more fluidity, more freedom than ever before. But the outcastes are usually still outcastes, because they are still the ones who tan India's animals, burn its dead, and remove its excrement. Champaben is considered untouchable by other untouchables—even the tanners of animals and the burners of corpses—because she is a *safai karamchari*. This literally means "sweeper" but is generally translated into English as "manual scavenger," a term popularized by India's British rulers, who did nothing to eradicate the practice and much to keep it going. This scavenging has none of the usefulness of the usual meaning. There is no salvaging of waste, no making good of the discarded. Champaben recycles nothing and gains nothing. She takes filth away, and for this she is considered dirt.

There are between 400,000 and 1.2 million manual scavengers in India, depending on who is compiling the figures. They are employed—owned, more accurately—by private families and by municipalities, by army cantonments and railway authorities. Their job is to clean up feces wherever it presents itself: on railway tracks, in clogged sewers. Mostly, they empty India's dry latrines. A latrine is usually defined as a receptacle in the ground which holds human excreta, but dry latrines often don't bother

with receptacles. They consist of two bricks, usually, placed squatting distance apart, over flat ground. There is no pit. There may be a channel or gutter nearby, but that would be luxury. The public ones usually have no doors, no stalls, and no water. There are still up to ten million dry latrines in India, and they probably only survive because Champaben and others are still prepared to clean them.

I meet Champaben in a village in rural Gujarat. Like every other state in India, Gujarat is bound by the 1993 Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, which makes manual scavenging illegal on pain of a year's imprisonment or a 2,000 rupee (\$45) fine. On paper, Champaben doesn't exist, and on paper, she is as free as the next villager. Untouchability has been illegal in India since 1949, when it was abolished by means of Article 17 of the constitution.

Champaben knows that. But what can she do? Scavengers have been doing their work since they were children, and they will do it until they die, and then their children will take over. Champaben's mother-in-law, Gangaben, is 75 years old. She has been scavenging for 50 years. In a village nearby, I meet Hansa and her daughter Meena, who is 10. Meena has already been introduced to her mother's job, because she has to do it when her mother is ill or pregnant or both. Most manual scavenging is done by women, who marry into it and have no choice. Men in the manual scavenger class often hide their profession from prospective brides until it's too late, and they can escape their foul work in alcohol because they have a wife to do it for them. Some scavengers work in cities as sewer cleaners and unclog blockages with their bare hands, their only protection a rope. They are regularly killed. Last year, three men died of asphyxiation when they entered a manhole in New Delhi.

The women talk freely. They are chatty and assertive and pristine. I look at them and try to see the dirt on them and in them, but I can't. They are elegant and beautiful even when they bend down to pick up the two pieces of cracked tin they use to scoop up the feces; when they demonstrate how they sweep the filth into the basket; when they lift the basket high with arms glittering with bangles and considerable grace. Their compound is dusty but not dirty, though they are not given soap by their owners and though they are not allowed to get water from the well without permission from an upper caste villager. They offer me a tin beaker of yellow water. "Look at it," says Mukesh, an activist from a local Dalit organization called Navsarjan who has accompanied me. "Look at what they have to drink." The beaker presents a quandary. I consider pathogens and fecal-oral contamination pathways, and I consider that they'll expect me to refuse to take a drink from an untouchable, because many Indians would. I take a sip and hope for the best, feeling pious and foolish, imagining bugs and worms slipping down into my guts, wreaking havoc.

In the late 1960s, the young Bindeshwar Pathak was studying sociology, and like many young Indians, getting used to being part of a newly independent and ambitious nation, he was an idealist. His ideals were those of Mohandas K. Gandhi. The father of the modern Indian nation was one of the few political leaders in history to talk publicly about toilets. There is a scene in Richard Attenborough's biopic where Gandhi argues with his wife because she refuses to clean their latrine. She says it is the work of untouchables; he tells her there is no such thing.

Gandhi's tactics of encouraging brotherly love across caste boundaries and urging Indians to clean their own latrines had failed miserably. The status quo was too convenient. Pathak decided a better solution was to provide an alternative technology. Scavengers' jobs would never be surplus to India's needs, not with a population of a billion excreting people. Perhaps the solution was to make scavengers unemployable by eradicating dry latrines. Not by knocking them down, but by providing a better latrine model that didn't require humans to clean it but that was cheap and easy. Most importantly, it had to be easy to keep nice. Given a choice between a smelly, dirty latrine and the street, even the most desperate might choose the latter. Pathak read WHO manuals about pit latrines and developed his own version.

It had to be on-site, because India has neither water nor sewers enough to install expensive waterborne treatment systems. Even today, only 232 of India's 5,233 towns have even partial sewer coverage. Indian urban wastewater treatment consisted of dumping it in rivers. The mighty Yamuna river, which supposedly dropped to earth from heaven but which actually runs nearly 200 miles from the Himalayas through the nation's capital, has millions of gallons of sewage poured into it every day. By the time it reaches Delhi, the Yamuna is dead. As for the Ganges, its fecal coliform count makes its supposedly purifying waters a triumph of wishful thinking, unless the purification is the kind you get from chronic diarrhea, dysentery, or cholera.

Pathak called his new latrine the *Sulabh Shauchalaya* ("Easy Latrine"). It was twin-pit and pour-flush. It could be flushed with only a cupful of water, compared with the ten liters needed for flush toilets. There was no need to connect it to sewers or septic tanks, because the excreta could compost in one pit, and when that was full, after two to four years, the latrine owner could switch to the other, leaving the full pit to compost. This was another Gandhian concept: The Mahatma had used the phrase *tatti par mitti* ("soil over shit"), and would dig a pit for his own excreta then cover it with soil when it was full. The Great Soul of India was a pioneering composter. The Easy Latrine leached its liquids into the ground but supposedly without polluting groundwater. Most importantly, it was cheap, with the most inexpensive model costing only 500 rupees (\$10).

Despite all this, Pathak's technology found no takers for three years. He had to sell some of his wife's jewelry and resorted to

peddling his grandfather's bottles of home-cure remedies. Until one day, when he entered an office in a town in Bihar and sold the idea of the Sulabh model to the municipal officer on duty.

The Sulabh model consisted of more than the latrine. It was also a method. Pathak saw how the aid and grant-making world worked. Budgets and donor cycles are fixed. They can be withdrawn after a few years with little notice. Pathak decided that Sulabh would not accept grants. It would make sanitation a business that paid for itself.

It doesn't sound radical, but it was. In the 1970s, development experts were convinced that poor people wouldn't pay for sanitation. Since then, this has been proven to be nonsense. Poor people pay up to ten times more for water—from water gangsters or private tankers—than a resident with municipal water supply. United Kingdom regulations concluded that spending more than 3 percent of the household budget was an indicator of hardship. But poor people in Uganda, for example, spend 22 percent of their budget on water.

Pathak thought people would pay, so he developed a range of models for all budgets and tastes. His social-service organization would be nonprofit, but it would be a business. This thinking was new.

In the 1970s, public toilets in India were a rare sight. The few in existence were squalid and offered little advantage to defecating on the pavement outside, so people often chose the street instead. Pathak had an idea that was simple, new, and apparently doomed. If people had a clean toilet with water and light, they'd probably be willing to pay for it. "People laughed at me," he recalls. "They said, in Bihar, people don't pay for bus tickets and rail tickets. Why would they pay for toilets?"

But his negotiation skills served him well, because in 1973, the first Sulabh public toilet opened in Patna, the state capital of Bihar. It had water, electricity, and round-the-clock attendants. Sulabh charged one rupee for toilet use, and urinals for men were free. (Women could also urinate for free, but they have to specify their needs to the caretaker.) A wash cost two rupees. In the first day, Pathak says, 500 people used it.

Sulabh's concept of pay-per-use was not new—a similar government program had been tried, and failed, several years earlier. But the business model was. Instead of funding toilets with government grants, Sulabh approached authorities and municipalities and suggested something different: if the authority paid for the cost of constructing the toilet and provided the land, Sulabh would run it for a set number of years and keep the profits. The business model was an attractive one to municipal authorities who, back then, could not be bothered with sanitation. "Before, no-one wanted to know," says Pathak. "In the beginning, we couldn't find anyone willing to tender to construct toilets. The upper castes wouldn't consider it. They

wouldn't even come to meetings. Now they fight for the tenders. We have blended social reform and economic gain."

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**From:** Rose George  
**Subject:** In One End and Out the Burner  
**Posted Friday, October 10, 2008, at 7:08 AM ET**

Of all the peoples of the world, the Chinese are probably the most at home with their excrement. They know its value. For 4,000 years they have used raw human feces to fertilize fields. China's use of "night soil," as the Chinese rightly call a manure that is collected after dark, is probably the reason that its soils are still healthy after four millennia of intensive agriculture, while other great civilizations—the Maya, for one—floundered when their soils turned to dust.

Sanitation professionals sometimes divide the world into fecal-phobic and fecal-philiac cultures. India is the former (though only when the dung is not from cows); China is definitely and blithely the latter. Nor is the place of excrement confined to the fields. It has featured prominently in Chinese public life and literature for at least a thousand years.

In the Communist era, excrement took on political importance, because Party policy decided excrement was essential for the Great Agricultural Leap Forward. Andrew Morris, a historian at California Polytechnic, relates the story of night-soil carrier Shi Chuanxiang, who in 1959 was a star speaker at the Communist Party's National Conference of Heroes. Shi Chuanxiang worked for the exploitative gangs who controlled Beijing's night-soil collection. Customers showed their appreciation for his work by calling him "Mr. Shitman" or "Stinky Shit Egg."

These days, this national interest takes the form of serious investment into an unusual alternative fuel. Along with all the other stunning statistics China can provide, it can also claim to be the world leader in making energy from human excrement.

Biogas, as this energy is known, can be produced from the fermentation of any organic material, from wood to vegetables to human excreta. In an oxygen-free digester, which acts somewhat like a human stomach, micro-organisms break down the material into sugar and acids, which then become gas. Mostly methane, with carbon dioxide and a little hydrogen sulfide, biogas can be used as fuel for cooking hobs, lights, and, sometimes, showers. It can also be converted into electricity. The slurry that remains from the digestion process is good fertilizer and considerably safer than raw excrement.

At last count, if official figures are reliable, 15.4 million rural households in China are connecting their toilets to a biogas digester, switching on their stoves a few hours later and cooking with the proceeds. India has installed several million digesters, though they run on cow dung, and there are only so many cows. China has a billion humans, and that means a billion suppliers of a cheap and inexhaustible supply of clean energy.

Perched on a bed in her office in Xi'an, Wang Ming Ying explains why she was convinced enough by biogas to change her life. A tiny woman fizzing with energy, she now runs the Shaanxi Mothers environmental association. For her, it began with the trees. As an official in a government propaganda office, she was sent to the UN women's conference in Beijing in 1995, and it changed her life. "I saw," she tells me, "how the poverty of women is directly related to the deterioration of the environment." Poor rural women try to clear more land for crops by cutting down forests. This brought on soil erosion, so more forest was cleared for new crop land. It was a vicious cycle that no one knew how to escape.

Wang Ming Ying set off to northern Shaanxi province "to see what was going on." She found hillsides empty of trees and farmers devoid of hope. "I thought that if a woman has education or not, we can do environmental protection together." She decided to form an organisation of women. Mothers, actually. "Mothers are key: they can influence the family."

The group's name was surprisingly controversial. "The government didn't like the word 'volunteers.'" Voluntary activity was a problematic concept in China then. Public service was always imposed from above. The state controlled everything, and that included excreting habits and public hygiene. Throughout the 1950s, for example, the Chinese government tried several times to eradicate a plague of schistosomiasis, an infection of a parasitic worm found in dirty rice-paddy water. (It's also known as bilharzia or, in Chinese, "blood-sucking worm disease.") Shepherd boys, according to a report, "were mobilized to pick up stray excreta."

But Wang Ming Ying persisted and, after a few years of environmental work—there was a lot of litter-collection—Shaanxi Mothers were shown a video of biogas technology. They liked it, and decided to try it out with two test families in northern Shaanxi. The families lived in a village that had a fate typical of the area. Thirty years earlier, its population had consisted of four families, and the village was surrounded by trees. By the time Shaanxi Mothers arrived, there were thirty-four families and the forest was almost gone.

Biogas was an ideal solution. Two families were chosen to try out the digesters. The technique was simple enough: add pig excrement and human waste to the digester, occasionally stir it, and tap off the energy. But when the Mothers arrived for a follow-up survey, neither digester was being used. Eventually,

Wang Ming Ying discovered that one of the families' toddler sons, Peng, had died by drowning in the pit. The Shaanxi Mothers learned a lesson: you can't install technology (the hardware) without ensuring the human element (the software) is also operational. Follow-up is essential. They began talking to their biogas users, a lot. It worked.

Ten years on, Shaanxi Mothers have installed 1,294 digesters in 26 villages. They have won prizes and got funding, though never enough. The money goes to subsidizing a third of the cost of a digester, with the householder and the government making up the rest. Wang Ming Ying estimates that for every new biogas digester installed, 1.2 tons of firewood—three trees—will be spared. She tells me to go and see for myself.

The journey to Da Li is long. It goes along roads that are so new they're not on the map and roads so bad they are flattened rocks with aspirations to being a thoroughfare. After several hours of bone-rattling driving, we arrive in northwest Shaanxi Province. There are boxes of apples everywhere, being loaded onto trucks, stacked on street corners. This is apple country. What the buyers of apples probably don't know is that this is apples-fertilized-with-human-excreta country.

Wang Ming Ying is a hero here, and all due courtesy is being extended. A blackboard bears the phrase "We wholeheartedly welcome the advice and arrival of our superior leaders," and bowls of apples and grapes have been thoughtfully set out on the table. They have been fertilized with biogas slurry, the village leader tells me with pride. Look, he says, how juicy the apples are. They are better now that we use biogas. The skin is thinner and the juice is sweeter. Even rice is better. Rice cooked with biogas is chewier and less likely to stick.

One of my hosts says there have been three main changes. "Human and national excreta is now turned into treasure. Households are much cleaner. Neighbors have a better relationship." Also, farmers' incomes have increased. Annually, they save 1,400 yuan (\$200) on fertilizer, fuel, and the medicines they would otherwise have to buy for the constant diarrhea and stomach illnesses caused by filthy latrines. Also, farmers save two canisters of cooking gas per year, worth 120 yuan (\$20). Using biogas for lighting saves another 40 yuan (\$5) on energy bills. All in all, she says, the village has increased its income by 300,000 yuan (\$43,000) a year. "The village," she concludes firmly, "is happier and wealthier."

Before biogas, most villagers had used a hole in the backyard as a latrine. In Da Li, as in countless other villages, things began to change when the city came back to the country. Youngsters who had gone to the city got used to different standards. "They were coming home and complaining about the mao kun," says Zhou. "They didn't want to use it anymore." They demanded better facilities for their visits home, making fertile ground for the Shaanxi Mothers to make their biogas case. The women of Da Li

proved to be powerful allies. The reason why becomes obvious when Zhou leads me to his house and into the kitchen, past the cartful of apples in the driveway. Here, his wife gives me a demonstration of how she used to live and breathe. She kneels in front of her cast-iron oven, pretending to feed it with kindling and rice stalks, and mimes how she used to cough and how her eyes would water. The ovens are still used to bake bread, but otherwise the two-ring biogas burner is enough for three meals a day in summer and two in winter.

Biogas is not perfect. As the tragedy of Peng showed, digesters can fail because of mechanics and human error. Also, there is little agreement on how safe the slurry actually is. Opinions vary as to whether a four-week digestion process, for example, kills all pathogens. Ascaris eggs, which grow into long and revolting worms, are exceptionally hardy. (They are also still unvanquished, though humanity has been dealing with them forever: ascaris have been detected in fossilized Peruvian dung dating from 2277 B.C.) Swedish academic Mathias Gustavsson, a fan of biogas—he refers to it as a "solution in search of its problem"—writes that "there is no such thing as a total removal of all parasites due to an anaerobic process."

But a biogas digester has to be better than a bucket. And it has enormous potential: In the French city of Lille, ten city buses now run on biogas taken from the city's sewage works, and city officials claim the biogas buses are carbon neutral and less polluting (biogas gives off fewer particles).

In Da Li, they're not bothered about buses. In a courtyard behind a carved wooden door, a woman sits weaving as if she's been doing it for centuries. In fact, she only got the loom a year ago. A gas made from something we all flush away without thought has given her cheaper bills, a cleaner environment, and something she's never had before, called free time.

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## hot document

### Sarah Palin's Tax Return

The vice-presidential nominee and the first dude won't be subsidizing this election.

By Bonnie Goldstein

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 3:01 PM ET

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**From:** Bonnie Goldstein

**Posted Monday, October 6, 2008, at 3:01 PM ET**

On Oct. 3, the McCain campaign [released](#) federal tax returns filed jointly by Todd and Sarah Palin for [2006](#) and [2007](#). Although Gov. Palin's salary raised the couple's adjusted gross

income last year to \$166,000—a big jump from the \$128,000 the two declared in the previous tax year—the Palins' charitable contributions dropped from \$4,880 to \$3,325. The 2007 return (excerpted below and on the following six pages) shows that \$825, or nearly one-quarter of the Alaskan first couple's largesse, consisted of second-hand items donated on New Year's Eve to the Wasilla [Salvation Army](#) (Page 5). The family also declared \$3,308 in income from the [oil revenue-financed Alaska Permanent Fund](#) (see below). For 2008, Gov. Palin has [asked](#) the legislature to increase this universal dividend, paid to all Alaska citizens, by \$1,200.

The tax return does not include the [per diem](#) travel payments Gov. Palin received for being away from her duty station in Juneau, the state capital, to work out of a state office in Anchorage. Tax experts [contend](#) the reimbursements for living expenses (at her home in Wasilla) are taxable, but the campaign [disagrees](#).

Perhaps to accommodate the seasonal pressures of Todd's snow-machine-racing business (Page 4)—which, despite \$17,000 in [prize](#) income, had a \$9,000 loss last year—the couple applied for and received a filing extension in both 2006 and 2007 (Page 7). [They](#) had not yet filed when John McCain [invited](#) Gov. Palin onto the presidential ticket on Aug. 30.\* Soon after, however, the Palins met with their tax preparer, H&R Block (Page 6), and filed on Sept. 3. The Palins declined to check a box to donate \$3 to the presidential election campaign (below).

Send ideas for Hot Document to [documents@slate.com](mailto:documents@slate.com).

**[Correction](#), Oct. 6:** This article previously said the Palins had filed after the extended tax deadline. In fact, they had until Oct. 15, and their returns were filed within the allotted time period. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

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Posted Monday, October 6, 2008, at 3:01 PM ET

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Posted Monday, October 6, 2008, at 3:01 PM ET

By Radley Balko

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 3:57 PM ET

When Sen. Barack Obama expressed concern early in the primary season that there are more young black men in prison than in college, he raised hope that he might be the first major-party candidate in a generation to adopt a more nuanced criminal policy than the typical "longer sentences, more prisons, more cops." As it turns out, Obama [was wrong on the numbers](#). But the sentiment was right—one in nine black men between the ages of 20 and 34 [is currently behind bars](#).

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Posted Monday, October 6, 2008, at 3:01 PM ET

Obama has also heartened advocates for criminal justice reform by expressing reservations [about mandatory minimum sentences](#), at least for nonviolent offenders. He said he would [end federal raids](#) on medical marijuana dispensaries in states where they're legal. And he has expressed some welcome dismay about America's incarceration rate, which is the highest in the world.

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Posted Monday, October 6, 2008, at 3:01 PM ET

But in the last month, Obama's line on criminal justice has been a lot less encouraging. His running mate selection of Joe Biden, long one of the Senate's [most strident crime hawks](#) and [staunchest drug warriors](#), was telling. Since the vice-presidential pick, Obama and Biden have embraced criminal justice policies geared toward a larger federal presence in law enforcement, a trend that started in the Nixon administration and that has skewed local police priorities toward the slogan-based crime policies of Congress, like "more arrests" and "stop coddling criminals."

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Posted Monday, October 6, 2008, at 3:01 PM ET

In particular, Biden and Obama have promised to beef up two federal grant programs critics say have exacerbated many of the very problems Obama expressed concern about earlier in the primaries. Obama and Biden's position shows an unwillingness to think critically about criminal justice. They are opting instead for the reflexive belief that more federal involvement is always preferable to less.

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Posted Monday, October 6, 2008, at 3:01 PM ET

The first program Obama wants to revive is President Clinton's Community Oriented Policing Services, which provides federal grants to local police departments. Biden sponsored Clinton's 1994 crime bill initiating COPS and has boasted since then that the bill was responsible for the dramatic 15-year drop in violent crime that began in the early 1990s. The Bush administration began phasing out the program in 2002.

To be sure, most criminologists think community policing is a good idea. It gets cops out walking the beat in the neighborhoods they patrol, talking with the people who live there, and generally acting like part of the communities they serve rather than mere enforcers. The idea is to avoid the more aggressive, reactionary methods of policing that have given rise to the us-vs.-them

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## **jurisprudence** **Bad Cop**

Why Obama is getting criminal justice policy wrong.



mentality that divides the police and the policed in many cities. (For fans of *The Wire*, think more Carver, less Herc.)

But there's little evidence COPS has worked, and there's some evidence it has actually encouraged police tactics completely at odds with the objectives of community policing. [A 2005 report](#) by the Government Accountability Office concluded that the program may have contributed to a minor reduction in crime—a little more than 1 percent—but at a cost of \$8 billion. A peer-reviewed study in the journal *Criminology* concluded that COPS "[had little to no effect on crime.](#)"

The main problem with federal block grants is that once they're issued, Congress can't monitor them to be sure they're spent properly. [And that's certainly true](#) of COPS. A 2000 report by the *Madison Times*, for example, found that COPS grants, along with a federal program through which local police departments obtain surplus military equipment from the Pentagon, led to a mass expansion of SWAT teams throughout Wisconsin in the 1990s. SWAT teams popped up in absurdly small communities like Forest County (population 9,950), Mukwonago (7,519), and Rice Lake (8,320).

And not just in Wisconsin. In a survey conducted by criminologist Peter Kraska, two-thirds of responding police chiefs said SWAT teams and paramilitary tactics "play an important role in community policing strategies."

Laudable as the concept of community police may be, the federal government hasn't the means or the ability to fundamentally change the way police operate at the local level. Nor should it try. As COPS shows, such efforts will likely prove wasteful at best and counterproductive at worst.

Obama and Biden also want to revive the Byrne grant drug eradication program, another block grant initiative. [At a speech last month](#) in Florida, Obama promised to ensure funding for the Byrne program, adding that it "has been critical to creating the anti-gang and anti-drug task forces our communities need." Although Byrne has not failed to achieve its stated goal (reducing the availability of illicit drugs), it has made drug policing more aggressive and militaristic and less accountable. And by prioritizing raw arrest statistics, the program tends to focus police efforts on low-level offenders instead of major distributors.

Because they tend to be multijurisdictional, no sheriff or police chief oversees the investigations of Byrne task forces. They are "effectively accountable to no one, least of all the communities they purportedly aim to serve and protect," says Graham Boyd, director of the Drug Law Reform Project for the ACLU, [which has documented](#) abuses by Byrne-funded task forces [all over the country.](#)

In Texas, Byrne-sponsored task forces created so many problems that much of the state has stopped participating in the program. A Byrne-funded operation was in charge of the 1999 debacle [in Tulia, Texas](#), in which 46 people were arrested based on the word of a lying undercover police officer, Tom Coleman. Most of the 46 were later released and shared in a \$6 million settlement. The next year, another Byrne task force arrested 28 [people in Hearne, Texas](#), based solely on the word of a police informant who also proved to be a liar.

Because Byrne grants are given out primarily on raw arrest statistics, they also distort the way drug investigations are handled. Take the use of drug informants. Typically, police arrest a low-level drug offender, then try to make a deal with him to give up his supplier. They then continue their way up the ladder as far into the operation as they can go. But when funding for a task force depends on the number of arrests it makes, the incentive is instead to go *down* the ladder. A midlevel distributor may supply dozens of lower-level dealers, who boost the arrest numbers. Investigators thus have a reason to cut deals with bigger players in exchange for giving up the street dealers they supply.

The Byrne program [has been opposed](#) by analysts for the Heritage Foundation, the American Conservative Union, and the National Taxpayers Union on the right as well as civil rights groups like the National Black Police Association, the Drug Policy Alliance, and the National Council of La Raza on the left. The Bush administration has been phasing Byrne grants out, just as it has with COPS grants.

But Obama, Biden, and [Democratic leaders \(as well as several Republicans\)](#) in Congress want to bring the Byrne grants back. Perhaps one reason is that they're essentially federal job programs for blue-collar workers. They're also strongly backed by police unions and police organizations that, despite the GOP's image as the party that's tougher on crime, have traditionally supported Democrats. (The National Association of Police Organizations [endorsed Obama last month](#) and Kerry and Gore before him.) Members of Congress from both parties also benefit when they can [put out press releases](#) announcing a big federal grant for the police department back home.

Obama's support for these programs is particularly disappointing given the sensible things he said previously about crime, not to mention his experience as a law professor and community organizer. Sending big federal checks to local police departments may help repudiate GOP efforts to make Democrats look soft on crime. But it reinforces another Democrat cliché—that there's no problem that can't be solved with a wad of federal cash.

## map the candidates Midwestern Front

Obama and Palin are in Ohio, McCain is in Wisconsin for a second straight day, and Biden is in Missouri.

By E.J. Kalafarski and Chadwick Matlin

Friday, October 10, 2008, at 9:44 AM ET

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### medical examiner

## Womb Raider

Do future health problems begin during gestation?

By Darshak Sanghavi

Friday, October 10, 2008, at 7:06 AM ET

"The fault," writes Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar*, "is not in our stars, but in ourselves." According to Harvard Medical School researchers, though, Shakespeare's statement of free will was all wrong—at least with respect to fat toddlers. Recently, [a study of 1,044 mother-child pairs](#) found that 3-year-olds born to mothers who gained too much weight during pregnancy had increased odds of becoming overweight. Somehow, it seemed, these women metabolically programmed their kids to get fat. The *New York Times Magazine* [observed](#), "We may come to view pregnancy not as a ninth-month wait for the big event, but as the crucible of a major health problem."

The notion that children's futures are foretold early in life has strong narrative appeal (consider the stories of Aladdin, the Lion King, and Harry Potter, who were all destined for greatness). Increasingly, however, even reality-based researchers and media say that events in the womb and early infancy are critical developmental opportunities with irreversible consequences when mishandled. These notions form the backbone of modern parental anxiety (heaven forbid, for example, that a mother is unable to exclusively breast-feed her newborn). More worrisome, pinning complex public-health problems, like childhood obesity, on failed gestation has a blame-the-victim undercurrent. Though the supporting research is often weak, this view may encourage inaction: More support for kids, the thinking goes, might not alter the fate set in motion by irresponsible wombs.

This fall, the British Broadcasting Corp. will air [War in the Womb](#), a documentary tracing the origins of later depression, autism, and other problems to "fetal-maternal conflict" during pregnancy. Last month, a [group of scientists from the Yale Child Study Center](#) reported on functional brain MRI scans on women who'd just given birth. Compared with those who delivered vaginally, mothers who consented to Cesarean sections had brains that were less sensitive to recordings of babies' cries, which the researchers ominously claim can harm "infant physiology, development, maternal mood, and mother-infant relationships in general." During the 1990s, [schools administrators complained](#) roundly of students with poor

attention and an inability to follow directions. They blamed these behaviors on the epidemic of "crack babies" exposed to drugs while in the womb.

Of course, certain prenatal exposures do cause specific medical disorders. Uncontrolled maternal diabetes can occasionally cause fetal heart defects, and maternal vitamin-D deficiency ups a child's chances of getting rickets later in life. The problem, though, is that large-scale problems also wrongly get blamed on the womb—and, by extension, on the woman who houses it. Womb-centric predictions of a child's future—whether rooted in supposed genetic disparities, gestational maternal-fetal conflict, eating habits during pregnancy, or whatever else—always undersell the role of one's later environment.

Take the so-called crack babies. [Hundreds of pregnant women](#) were prosecuted for child endangerment, and one program even offered a cash incentive of \$200 to crack users who consented to sterilization. Few people argue crack use is harmless, but the uniquely vengeful approach to incarcerating and punishing female crack addicts arose from the conviction that the drug harmed developing brains for good. In 2001, a team of Boston University pediatricians finally [reviewed the evidence](#) and concluded that, in fact, there was "no convincing evidence" for a crack baby syndrome—the whole thing was a made-up affair. (In unusually forceful terms, the authors called it a "grotesque myth" that was "irrationally shaped by social prejudices.") To some extent, the images of poisoned uteruses were simply a convenient cover for bad urban education.

These myths arise from a broader frustration—and lack of rigor—in social-science research. Observe how Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner try to explain school failure in their otherwise sensible best-seller *Freakonomics*. Using data from the federal Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, they separate factors that do predict test scores (highly educated parents, high socioeconomic status, a maternal age over 30 years at time of first birth) and others that don't matter (moving to a better neighborhood, attending Head Start, watching less television, and having parents read to children daily). The authors conclude that securing a child's school success "isn't so much a matter of what you *do* as a parent; it's who you are."

But instead of admitting they can't capture the nuances of good child-rearing, they turn to biology. To explain how socioeconomic disparities affect test scores—apparently, Dubner and Levitt think parents can do little that matters—they trot out the old canard of IQ, the "strongly hereditary" trait they think drives educational and parenting success. Because their logistical regression models identify no practical strategies to help kids, they suggest that the problems must be in the genes. (*The Bell Curve*, Charles Murray's monumental tome of foolishness from 1994, made the same point: A kid is only as promising as his inherited IQ prophesizes. From the American Enterprise Institute, these days Murray claims 80 percent of

Americans are [biologically incapable](#) of understanding college-level material.)

That impulse is understandable. It's easier—for parents, doctors, educators—to say an obese toddler has a slow metabolism than to teach the family better eating and exercise habits. Since 1970, childhood obesity rates [have quadrupled](#). If fetal programming mattered a lot, adult obesity increases would lag years behind. But [they don't](#). According to intelligence researcher James Flynn, the average IQ of the first wave of professional Asian-American immigrants was almost 10 points lower than that of white professionals; within one generation, the gap closed, suggesting that genes don't shackle the mind. As Malcolm Gladwell [points out](#): "There should be no great mystery about Asian achievement. It has to do with hard work and dedication to higher education."

Turning to the womb to explain complex social and public-health problems ultimately means people have given up on changing the things that really matter. That's too bad. The truth is that nothing in this world worth having comes easy. And as any hard-working student who made it to college, overweight person who's changed his or her lifestyle, or adult who's worked through depression can tell you, at some point you have to stop blaming your issues on your mother's uterus.

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## moneybox

### Subprime Suspects

The right blames the credit crisis on poor minority homeowners. This is not merely offensive, but entirely wrong.

By Daniel Gross

Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 2:08 PM ET

We've now entered a new stage of the financial crisis: the ritual assigning of blame. It began in earnest with Monday's congressional roasting of Lehman Bros. CEO Richard Fuld and continued on Tuesday with Capitol Hill solons delving into the failure of AIG. On the Republican side of Congress, in the right-wing financial media (which is to say the financial media), and in certain parts of the op-ed-o-sphere, there's a consensus emerging that the whole mess should be laid at the feet of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the failed mortgage giants, and the Community Reinvestment Act, a law passed during the Carter administration. The CRA, which was amended in the 1990s and this decade, requires banks—which had a long, distinguished history of *not* making loans to minorities—to make more efforts to do so.

The thesis is laid out almost daily on the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, in the *National Review*, and on the campaign trail. John McCain said yesterday, "Bad mortgages were being backed

by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, and it was only a matter of time before a contagion of unsustainable debt began to spread." *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer provides an excellent example, [writing](#) that "much of this crisis was brought upon us by the good intentions of good people." He continues: "For decades, starting with [Jimmy Carter's](#) Community Reinvestment Act of 1977, there has been bipartisan agreement to use government power to expand homeownership to people who had been shut out for economic reasons or, sometimes, because of racial and ethnic discrimination. What could be a more worthy cause? But it led to tremendous pressure on [Fannie Mae](#) and [Freddie Mac](#)—which in turn pressured banks and other lenders—to extend mortgages to people who were borrowing over their heads. That's called subprime lending. It lies at the root of our current calamity." The subtext: If only Congress didn't force banks to lend money to poor minorities, the Dow would be well on its way to 36,000. Or, as Fox Business Channel's Neil Cavuto [put it](#), "I don't remember a clarion call that said: Fannie and Freddie are a disaster. Loaning to minorities and risky folks is a disaster."

Let me get this straight. Investment banks and insurance companies run by centimillionaires blow up, and it's the fault of Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and poor minorities?

These arguments are generally made by people who read the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* and ignore the rest of the paper—economic know-nothings whose opinions are informed mostly by ideology and, occasionally, by prejudice. Let's be honest. Fannie and Freddie, which didn't make subprime loans but did buy subprime loans made by others, were part of the problem. Poor Congressional oversight was part of the problem. Banks that sought to meet CRA requirements by indiscriminately doling out loans to minorities may have been part of the problem. But none of these issues is the *cause* of the problem. Not by a long shot. From the beginning, subprime has been a symptom, not a cause. And the notion that the Community Reinvestment Act is somehow responsible for poor lending decisions is absurd.

Here's why.

The [Community Reinvestment Act](#) applies to depository banks. But many of the institutions that spurred the massive growth of the subprime market weren't regulated banks. They were outfits such as Argent and [American Home Mortgage](#), which were generally not regulated by the Federal Reserve or other entities that monitored compliance with CRA. These institutions worked hand in glove with Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers, entities to which the CRA likewise didn't apply. There's much more. As Barry Ritholtz notes in this [fine rant](#), the CRA didn't force mortgage companies to offer loans for no money down, or to throw underwriting standards out the window, or to encourage mortgage brokers to aggressively seek out new markets. Nor did

the CRA force the credit-rating agencies to slap high-grade ratings on packages of subprime debt.

Second, many of the biggest flameouts in real estate have had nothing to do with subprime lending. [WCI Communities](#), builder of highly amenitized condos in Florida (no subprime purchasers welcome there), filed for [bankruptcy in August](#). Very few of the tens of thousands of now-surplus condominiums in Miami were conceived to be marketed to subprime borrowers, or minorities—unless you count rich Venezuelans and Colombians as minorities. The multiyear plague that has been documented in brilliant detail at [IrvineHousingBlog](#) is playing out in one of the least-subprime housing markets in the nation.

Third, lending money to poor people and minorities isn't inherently risky. There's plenty of evidence that in fact it's not that risky at all. That's what we've learned from [several decades of microlending programs](#), at home and abroad, with their very high repayment rates. And as the *New York Times* [recently reported](#), Nehemiah Homes, a long-running initiative to build homes and sell them to the working poor in subprime areas of New York's outer boroughs, has a repayment rate that lenders in Greenwich, Conn., would envy. In 27 years, there have been fewer than 10 defaults on the project's 3,900 homes. That's a rate of 0.25 percent.

On the other hand, lending money recklessly to obscenely rich white guys, such as Richard Fuld of Lehman Bros. or Jimmy Cayne of Bear Stearns, can be really risky. In fact, it's even more risky, since they have a lot more borrowing capacity. And here, again, it's difficult to imagine how Jimmy Carter could be responsible for the supremely poor decision-making seen in the financial system. I await the Krauthammer column in which he points out the specific provision of the Community Reinvestment Act that forced Bear Stearns to run with an absurd leverage ratio of 33 to 1, which instructed Bear Stearns hedge-fund managers to blow up hundreds of millions of their clients' money, and that required its septuagenarian CEO [to play bridge](#) while his company ran into trouble. Perhaps Neil Cavuto knows which CRA clause required Lehman Bros. to borrow hundreds of billions of dollars in short-term debt in the capital markets and then buy tens of billions of dollars of commercial real estate at the top of the market. I can't find it. Did AIG plunge into the credit-default-swaps business with abandon because Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now members picketed its offices? Please. How about the hundreds of billions of dollars of leveraged loans—loans banks committed to private-equity firms that wanted to conduct leveraged buyouts of retailers, restaurant companies, and industrial firms? Many of those are going bad now, too. Is that Bill Clinton's fault?

Look: There was a culture of stupid, reckless lending, of which Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac and the subprime lenders were an integral part. But the dumb-lending virus originated in Greenwich, Conn., midtown Manhattan, and Southern

California, not Eastchester, Brownsville, and Washington, D.C. Investment banks created a demand for subprime loans because they saw it as a new asset class that they could dominate. They made subprime loans for the same reason they made other loans: They could get paid for making the loans, for turning them into securities, and for trading them—frequently using borrowed capital.

At Monday's hearing, Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., gamely tried to pin Lehman's demise on Fannie and Freddie. After comparing Lehman's small political contributions with Fannie and Freddie's much larger ones, Mica asked Fuld what role Fannie and Freddie's failure played in Lehman's demise. Fuld's [response](#): "De minimis."

Lending money to poor people doesn't make you poor. Lending money poorly to rich people does.

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## moneybox

### Is Warren Buffett the New J.P. Morgan?

In 1907, one man saved us from financial collapse. Today it takes three.

By Daniel Gross

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 11:23 AM ET

"This is the place to stop this trouble!" J.P. Morgan declared on the afternoon of Oct. 23, 1907. After the failure of several trust companies (unregulated banks, kind of like today's subprime lenders), the banker had decided that the collapse of the Trust Company of America would cause too much damage to America's fragile financial system. He pulled together leading bankers and pooled funds to bail out the firm. Over the course of two weeks, as a fevered crisis gripped Wall Street and Washington, Morgan acted time and again: saving brokerage firms, rounding up \$25 million in cash in 20 minutes to help the New York Stock Exchange stay open, underwriting municipal bonds for New York City, and bringing in gold from Europe to bolster the dollar and replenish Washington's coffers.

"He essentially single-handedly saved New York City from failure," said Sean Carr, co-author of [Panic of 1907](#). One of the troubling features of our current, rolling financial crises has been the absence of a single, Morgan-esque financial statesman—someone who can bring a stop to our financial trouble. President Bush is essentially AWOL, and Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke doesn't command the respect of the global markets the way his predecessor Alan Greenspan (who, it is now clear, helped create this mess) did. "I don't think any one man in today's immense and immensely complex markets could play the role J.P. Morgan played in 1907," says Jean Strouse, author of the magnificent Morgan biography [American Financier](#). Indeed,

the best we have is a troika of unrelated executives who are performing different components of Morgan's historic role.

John Pierpont Morgan, all paunch and haughty jowls, owner of a [rhinophyma](#)-ridden nose that launched a thousand caricatures, was the dominant banker of America's gawky financial adolescence. Today, the most powerful banker in Gotham is Jamie Dimon, the CEO of a firm that descends (historical irony alert!) from the House of Morgan itself. Like J.P., he is aloof and willing to play hardball. In March, Dimon's JPMorgan Chase picked up the failed investment bank Bear Stearns, and in September, he snagged the banking operations of the ailing Washington Mutual, both for a nominal price. As a result, Dimon now commands a mammoth bank with more than \$2 trillion in assets, 5,400 branches, and \$900 billion in deposits.

At his core, Morgan was an investment banker—a seeker of order, a deal-maker, and adviser. Today, the investment banker in chief is Treasury's Henry Paulson, the former CEO of Goldman Sachs. Morgan was known to bring feuding railroad executives aboard his yacht, the *Corsair*, and sail it around New York Harbor until they made a deal. Paulson doesn't have a yacht, but he has repeatedly summoned Wall Street executives, members of Congress, and investors to the offices of the New York Federal Reserve and the Treasury Department for marathon deal meetings.

Paulson has the balance sheet of the Federal Reserve and the taxpayers behind him. Morgan had only his name. But in his day, that was more powerful than any guarantee Uncle Sam could provide. Now, it is Warren Buffett, the proprietor of Berkshire Hathaway, whose name commands such respect. In recent weeks, Buffett has stepped in with his own cash and reputation to stop runs on the bank at Goldman Sachs and General Electric. (Disclosure: Buffett is a director of *Slate's* parent, the Washington Post Co.) Of course, like Morgan, who profited on some of his system-saving maneuvers in 1907, Buffett was also out to make a buck.

There are important differences between Morgan and today's wannabes. All three lack his courage: Both Dimon and Buffett made their investments only because of the prospect of government assistance to the sector. And all three lack his imperium: Morgan would never have strummed a ukulele to entertain shareholders, as Buffett does, nor gotten down on his knees to beg a congressional leader for support, as Paulson did to House Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi. But mostly, the difference is that the world has changed. J.P. Morgan, sitting in his fortresslike office at the corner of Wall and Broad streets, could easily survey the entirety of the U.S. financial system and get his arms around the problems. Today, as his modern-day imitators look at a chaotic, interconnected global economy, all they can do is play whack-a-mole.

*A version of this article appears in Newsweek.*

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## movies

### Glossy Torture

Russell Crowe and Leonardo DiCaprio in *Body of Lies*.

By Dana Stevens

Friday, October 10, 2008, at 7:11 AM ET

*Body of Lies* (Warner Bros.), the new Ridley Scott thriller about Iraq, is virtually indistinguishable from *The Kingdom* or *Rendition* or any number of terrorist-themed recent thrillers in which interchangeable Arabs in kaffiyehs do horrible things to the luscious physiques of A-list Hollywood stars. Certain moments are contractually required to happen in a movie like this: Camels will plod across the horizon as a woman's voice wails in Arabic on the soundtrack. An expensive-looking aerial shot will soar over CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., as a legend on the screen's lower left spells out, "Langley, Virginia." Jeeps will explode in the desert. Leonardo DiCaprio's forehead will perspire in extreme close-up. I will consult my watch.

DiCaprio plays Roger Ferris, a CIA operative in the Middle East who elevates himself from his fellow spies by actually liking the region and its residents. He speaks good Arabic, pursues a flirtation with a half-Iranian, half-Jordanian nurse named Aisha (Golshifteh Farahani), and feels more at home dodging rabid dogs in the back alleys of Amman than he does at a cafe table overlooking the Mall. Ferris is an on-the-ground errand boy charged with carrying out the bidding of his gruff boss, Ed Hoffman (Russell Crowe), who observes Ferris' every move from his hypertechnologized office at CIA headquarters. Hoffman has theories about how best to wage the war on terror—theories that have a way of interfering with Ferris' desire to continue living. As the two men team up to catch a reclusive Bin Laden-like figure named Al-Saleem (Alon Abutboul), Hoffman's arrogant, my-way-or-the-highway style sabotages Ferris' attempt to build an alliance with the Jordanian king's intelligence chief, Hani Salaam (Mark Strong).

A good hour into the film, Ferris hatches a plan to create a fake terrorist network, complete with staged bombings, to draw Al-Saleem out of the shadows. He persuades Hoffman to hire a crackerjack computer hacker (Simon McBurney) to create Web sites and false bank accounts framing an innocent Dubai-based architect (whom Ferris vows to keep safe—good luck with that). This potentially clever plot twist is the only thing that sets *Body of Lies* apart from the generic terrorist-thriller format described above, but it should have been introduced *much* earlier—by the time the fake-al-Qaida intrigue comes along, we're too sluggish to engage with the details.

DiCaprio and Crowe, two supposedly high-wattage movie stars, are remarkably dull to watch together—perhaps because so many of their scenes together take place over the phone.

(Occasionally, Crowe's character pops up in Jordan for no discernible reason, other than a chance to see the two in the same room.) Crowe's physique is not just a body of lies but a body of lard; he gained 50 pounds to play Hoffman, a deskbound bureaucrat with a neglected suburban family and a mobile headset affixed to his skull. Mark Strong, a British actor with some of the suave menace of Andy Garcia, out-acts everyone in sight as the impeccably dressed Jordanian spy Hani Salaam. Hani's intricate, ruthlessly enforced code of honor is all the more effective because he truly believes in it. By contrast, Crowe's character is a proudly unrepentant professional liar, and DiCaprio's is an ambivalent and conflicted one. Even DiCaprio's romantic interest, Aisha, is lying, deceiving her family and herself about the true nature of her mysterious suitor's job. But the script by William Monahan (who also wrote *The Departed*) never takes the time to tease out the moral distinctions that would make these differences mean something. The minute anyone sits down to talk, up pops another jihadi with a rocket launcher.

Now that the war-on-terror action film has become as *de rigueur* as the Cold War one used to be, the Geneva Conventions should be revised to include a moratorium on the portrayal of torture in Hollywood (not that the Gonzales memos couldn't have found a way around that, too). In some insidious way, the seamless incorporation of torture scenes into a standard spy story shifts the viewer's focus from the political to the personal, from "Never again" to "No! Not Leo's fingers!" Nothing against those attractive and well-insured digits, but I'm still waiting for the war-on-terror thriller that has more on its mind than the threat al-Qaida poses to movie stars.

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## movies

### Happy Happy Happy

Mike Leigh's new movie actually needed more sadness and woe.

By Dana Stevens

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 1:35 PM ET

It seems unsporting to say anything even remotely negative about *Happy-Go-Lucky* (Miramax), the new Mike Leigh film that's been blissing out audiences abroad since it opened in the United Kingdom last spring. After all, the movie is a pure ode to joy—something we haven't seen, not just from Leigh but from any filmmaker in recent years. It's the rare character study of someone who's deeply and uncomplicatedly good. Not only that, but said character—an irrepressibly cheery primary-school teacher named Poppy Cross—is a wondrous creation, thoroughly uncloying and so deeply imagined by Leigh regular Sally Hawkins that you feel she must go on existing somewhere even after the movie's over. The trouble is that the movie in which Poppy does, in fact, exist never quite rises to her level. The

questions that Poppy poses by her irrepressibility—is it enough to find flashes of joy in a cruel and unjust world? how much compassion do we owe to our fellow human beings, even when those human beings treat us like crap?—remain not just unanswered (questions that big can't and shouldn't be answered) but largely unaddressed.

When we first meet Poppy, her bicycle has just been stolen from outside a London bookstore. Undaunted by this misfortune, Poppy signs up for driving classes with an instructor, Scott (Eddie Marsan), who's a walking time bomb of sexual and racial hatred. Every second spent in the company of the giggly, chatty Poppy serves only to exacerbate Scott's paranoia and rage: "You celebrate chaos!" he scolds her between Tourette's-like repetitions of his pet mnemonic teaching aids: "Peep and creep! Check your mirrors! [En-ra-ha!](#)" The tightly wound Scott is the antimatter version of the free-spirited Poppy, and their scenes together thrum with humor and suspense.

These recurring driving lessons provide the only structure in an otherwise episodic plot. Poppy makes paper-bag bird masks with her pupils; goes out drinking and clubbing with her girlfriends, including her sister Suzy (Kate O'Flynn) and her flatmate, Zoe (Alexis Zegerman); and takes a memorably batty flamenco lesson with a fellow schoolteacher (Sylvestra Le Tousel). This looney-gooney structure isn't a problem in itself; Leigh is a masterful enough director to make each individual scene, especially one in which Poppy manages to connect deeply with an incoherent homeless man (Stanley Townsend), worth watching.

But each of these encounters—with the wiggled-out driving instructor, the befuddled vagrant, or a bully in Poppy's class who turns out to come from an abusive home—promises something that the movie never delivers. Again and again, Poppy is put in a position where she might have to confront some serious opposition to her sunshiney worldview, and every time, the confrontation is defused before it has a chance to begin. This is especially disappointing in the story line about the abused boy, who entirely disappears from the film after Poppy begins an affair with his social worker (Samuel Roukin). What happened to that kid? And if we're not supposed to care what happened to him, why should we be moved that Poppy does? It's not that I want to see Poppy's cheerful enthusiasm dashed against the rocks; it's just that for a moral fable like this to work, the protagonist's goodness needs to be tested against the possibility of real evil or violence.

It's entirely possible that I'm missing something, and that *Happy-Go-Lucky* really is, as many claim, an unblemished gem. It's certainly tempting to let any doubts be conquered by the heroine's steamroller of a personality. Hawkins and Leigh created the character of Poppy together during Leigh's signature monthslong rehearsal process (which they discuss at length in this clip from a recent [Q-and-A session](#) on the film). Given

Leigh's reputation for writing parts for querulous cranks, the two of them must have had great fun crafting the childlike and guileless Poppy from the ground up: She stuffs her bra with shrink-wrapped chicken cutlets! She wears earrings shaped like baby chicks! She jumps on a trampoline after work every day! Poppy Cross, in her chirpy, faintly grating way, is an inspiration; like Jeff Bridges' Dude in *The Big Lebowski*, she may be one of those characters whose sheer lovability outstrips and outlives the film in which she appears. *Happy-Go-Lucky* may come and go, but Poppy abides.

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## other magazines

### Getting Bitter All the Time

The *New Republic* on Sarah Palin's class resentment.

By Morgan Smith

Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 5:21 PM ET

#### *New Republic*, Oct. 22

The [cover story](#) profiles Sarah Palin, arguing that "a trip through [her] past reveals that almost every step of her career can be understood as a reaction to elitist condescension—much of it in her own mind." One Wasilla city attorney says, "Sarah was not an in-depth person. Never has, never will be." The McCain camp hopes that if they surround her with "the right advisers and submerge her in the proper environment, she'll eventually assimilate." But "as Nixon demonstrated, the forces of class resentment can be all-consuming and elemental." ... An [article](#) explores why Americans factor hero worship into their presidential choices, and the writer attributes Obama's inability to "put McCain away" to the former POW's Campbellian myth. He is not the first candidate who has attempted to translate military valor into votes, but McCain's cult of heroism is specially compelling because he "has successfully portrayed his brush with death as the foundation of his selflessness."

#### *The New Yorker*, Oct. 13

In the "Politics" issue, an [editorial](#) endorses Barack Obama. His election "could not help but say something encouraging, even exhilarating, about the country, about its dedication to tolerance and inclusiveness, about its fidelity, after all, to the values it proclaims in its textbooks." ... A [piece](#) examines Republicans' "deep suspicion of language. ... [T]he campaign that claims to loathe 'just words' has proved expert at their manipulation. ... Karl Rove—along with predecessors like Lee Atwater and protégés like Steve Schmidt—long ago showed the Republicans that language is slippery, fluid, a river into which you can dump anything at all as long as your opponent is the one downstream." ... A [profile](#) of Arianna Huffington suggests that "the pursuit of influence—the ability to command attention and to change

minds—not money" motivates the commentator. Her specialty: "harmless but shrewd small talk."

#### *New York*, Oct. 10

A [feature](#) notes the rise of "branded entertainment," which "involves not merely sponsored props but elaborate interweavings of brands into scripts, ads indistinguishable from the show itself." It started when reality shows made it "harder to justify a series with a pricey cast and a team of actual writers." Now more sophisticated forms of product integration purposely leave the viewer unable "to discern what's a prop, what's a paid integration, and what's just a writer freely referencing a brand." ... The [cover story](#) warns that to cope with New York's "teetering" economy, the "charming, messy, disarming, and adaptive" Gov. David Paterson "needs to become something he's never been: ruthless and directed." ... A [piece](#) surveys the sprawling Ochs-Sulzberger family tree in search of a suitable heir to helm the *New York Times*. "[T]he *Times*' royal family presides over an embattled kingdom—its coffers dwindling, but its titles still a source of pride."

#### *Vanity Fair*, November 2008

An [article](#) investigates the underworld of Silicon Valley billionaire Henry Nicholas, now charged with securities fraud and drug trafficking. His indictment "paints a picture of a drug fiend who hired prostitutes for himself and his customers ... and spiked the drinks of other technology executives without their knowledge." But Nicholas isn't without friends: "In some quarters ... there is the attitude that the government is trying to criminalize accounting sloppiness, and that, anyway, entrepreneurs like Nicholas create such value that they should be given a pass." ... A piece exposes the "awkward pas de deux" between celebrated caricaturist David Levine and the *New York Review of Books*, where his drawings have appeared for 44 years. The *Review* has recently rejected Levine's work, since his deteriorating eyesight has affected the quality of his sketches. Some friends say the editors took advantage of the artist, who "never realized how indispensable he was" because they never offered him benefits.

#### *Newsweek*, Oct. 13

The [cover story](#) asks a key question about John McCain's vice-presidential choice: "Do we want leaders who are everyday folks, or do we want leaders who understand everyday folks?" Sarah Palin isn't the first leader to come from a humble background, but she may lack the drive for excellence some of them possessed. Presidents such as Lincoln, Carter, and Clinton "were born to ordinary families, but they spent their lives doing extraordinary things, demonstrating an interest in, and a curiosity about, the world around them. This is much less evident in Palin's case." ... An [essay](#) on the Wall Street meltdown observes that two "signature features of the American

brand"—capitalism and liberal democracy—have taken a hit along with the stock market. In responding to the collapse of its financial institutions and declining image worldwide, "the ultimate test for the American model will be its capacity to reinvent itself once again."

### **Weekly Standard, Oct. 13**

A [piece](#) blames Sarah Palin's lackluster television interviews on her "handlers" who "prepped [her] to be someone she isn't, a political robot without a mind of her own." In last week's debate, though, a candidate emerged who's "smart and quick (smarter and quicker than Biden, for sure)" and one who has "learned the politician's trick of ignoring questions and making whatever points she wishes." ... An [article](#) reveals why "most Israelis, who live daily with the threat of terrorism, simply don't trust Obama." A political consultant claims that "the leaders of all three of Israel's major political parties ... prefer McCain but they don't dare say so publicly" because "they know they might have to deal with Obama for the next four years." Another Israeli claims that "Obama is closer emotionally to the Third World—also the Arab world." Therefore, he says, a vote for McCain "would be a vote for a secure Israel."

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## poem

### "On Love, on Grief"

Why Walter Savage Landor's classic epigram is a lesson in economy.

By Robert Pinsky

Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 6:41 AM ET

Here is a poem that demonstrates how much can be done in just two lines. This epigram by British poet Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864) will revive *Slate's* custom of occasionally presenting a classic in the "Poem" column.

Landor refreshes one of the great clichés—that time has wings and flies—with the observation that sometimes a wing is used not only for flying but for flicking water. With that image, Lethe, the afterworld river of forgetfulness, becomes not merely mythology but a source of actual water. That kind of deft renewal, recasting, or re-envisioning familiar expressions is one way of saying a lot with few words.

Another, more mysterious kind of economy resides in the physical, bodily sounds of language, arranged to become expressive. For example, the first three stresses in this poem fall on consonants, the fricative sounds breath makes when the upper teeth touch the lower lip: the V in *love*, the F in *grief*, and the V in *every*. Something similar happens with the final words of the poem: lips pursed three times for W in "water with his wing."

Such delicate effects of sound—just as essential as the end rhyme, though less conspicuous—give Landor's poem an *inscribed* quality: the essential characteristic of an epigram. *Epigram* comes from the Greek for "written upon," implying something compact and memorable enough to be incised on stone or metal, an attribute traditionally embodied in the Latin epigrams of Martial. I hear a finality or clinching effect, as well as delicacy, in Landor's patterns of like-sounding consonants and vowels. Delicacy and finality, a "sprinkling" that is also Lethal—all accomplished in just 15 words!

On love, on grief, on every human thing,  
Time sprinkles Lethe's water with his wing.

—Walter Savage Landor

*Click the arrow on the audio player to hear Robert Pinsky read this poem.*

*Slate Poetry Editor Robert Pinsky will be participating in the "Poem" Fray this week. Post your questions and comments on Landor's poem, and he'll respond and participate.*

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## politics

### Barack, Bill, and Me

The Bill Ayers that Barack Obama and I worked with was no "domestic terrorist."

By David S. Tanenhaus

Friday, October 10, 2008, at 7:10 AM ET

That Barack Obama and William Ayers knew each other during the 1990s may tell us something about the two men. But it says much more about a particular time and place: Hyde Park, Chicago, more than a decade ago.

Obama first moved to Chicago in 1985, when he worked as a community organizer. But his career got on its current course when he returned to Hyde Park in 1991 to practice law and teach constitutional law at the University of Chicago. Four years later, he met Ayers at a lunchtime meeting about school reform.

As it happens, I was on the scene, too. In 1990, I began my graduate studies in the history department at the University of Chicago, focusing on the legal history of the city's juvenile-justice system. As I result, I was destined to spend many hours at the law school and eventually to meet Bill Ayers and his wife, Bernardine Dohrn.

I'm embarrassed to admit that when I first met this couple, I had not heard of the Weathermen, let alone its militant offshoot, the



Weather Underground, famous from 1970 to 1975 for advocating violent protest against the Vietnam War. I had no idea the group had planned and carried out bombings of the Pentagon and the New York City police headquarters and that its members, including Ayers and Dohrn, had appeared on the FBI's Most Wanted list.

Some of this was naiveté on my part. But it was also generational. Vietnam belonged to history by the time I got around to studying it in college. The books I read were either social histories of soldiers' experiences, such as Al Santoni's *Everything We Had*, an oral history, or accounts of the decisions that led to the war's disastrous conclusion, like Larry Berman's *Planning a Tragedy*. The culture of protest and dissent, particularly fringe groups like the Weather Underground, was not part of the curriculum.

To meet Ayers and Dohrn, as I did in 1995, was to encounter a middle-aged couple in their early 50s who seemed at ease in the vibrant academic community of Hyde Park. Bernardine arranged for us to have breakfast to discuss my dissertation research. When I arrived at the restaurant the next morning, she had just completed a letter to her son, who was away at college.

Like Obama's dealings with Ayers and Dohrn, mine centered on local issues. At the time, my research centered on the punitive turn in juvenile-justice policy. Scholars like William Bennett, John Walters, and John DiIulio were warning about a new generation of "superpredators" who were "feral pre-social beings" and posed a grave threat to safety in the nation's urban areas. Between 1990 and 1996, 40 states passed laws to make it easier to try juveniles as adults. In response to this spate of lawmaking, the Chicago-based John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation began funding research on adolescent development and juvenile justice. The goal was to restore rational policymaking to this area of law.

The world's first juvenile court was established in Chicago in 1899, and since the 1920s, Hyde Park had been at the center of the national discussion about educational and juvenile-justice policy. In the 1990s, Ayers was a professor of education at the University of Illinois and also taught poetry in the classrooms of the juvenile court to children, mostly African-Americans and Latinos, who might spend the rest of their lives incarcerated. Dohrn directed the Children and Family Justice Center at Northwestern University.

They served on the boards of many organizations devoted to issues of juvenile justice and education. I worked, for example, with Dohrn—alongside judges, academics, and philanthropists—on a program to educate Chicagoans about their proud history of developing innovative public policies to provide opportunities to disadvantaged children, including those who had committed serious crimes.

The publication in 1997 of Ayers' book *A Kind and Just Parent: The Children of Juvenile Court* attracted much local and national attention. Drawing on his experience as a father and a teacher, he powerfully contrasted and compared the lives of his children, growing up in privilege, with those he had taught in prison. As he observed, "They are kids after all, and nothing they did can possibly change them into adults." That year, Chicago named Ayers its "Citizen of the Year." In November, Michelle Obama, who was then director of the university's community service center, convened a panel at the law school to discuss Ayers' book and the issues it raised.

Out of serious policy discussions of this sort emerged new and valuable ideas. One of them was the so-called "blended sentence," whereby kids, even though tried as adults, received suspended sentences and were then referred to juvenile programs instead of rotting away for years in adult prisons.

By the late 1990s, such ideas had become part of the national dialogue. Approaches that Ayers helped publicize were being adopted in several states—including Texas under then-Gov. George W. Bush. Juvenile justice was, in fact, a cornerstone of Bush's "compassionate conservative" agenda. In his 2000 [acceptance speech](#), he spoke movingly of a 15-year-old African-American boy he had met at a juvenile jail in Marlin, Texas, who had committed a "grown-up crime" but was still a "little boy": "If that boy in Marlin believes he is trapped and worthless and hopeless—if he believes his life has no value—then other lives have no value to him, and we are all diminished." The passage could have come directly from Ayers' book.

But by then, Ayers was writing another book, *Fugitive Days*, which was published just before 9/11. This frank memoir offered no apologies, instead trying to reconcile his past and present. After 9/11, many angry Chicagoans called Ayers and Dohrn "unrepentant terrorists" and demanded that they be fired from their university jobs. They weren't, though it was a difficult time for them.

In the intervening years, things have changed yet again. Leading Chicagoans, including Mayor Daley, now commend Ayers for his service to the city. "I don't condone what he did 40 years ago, but I remember that period well," Daley [said last April](#). "It was a difficult time, but those days are long over. I believe we have too many challenges in Chicago and our country to keep refighting 40-year-old battles."

I now include the Weather Underground in the history surveys I teach to undergraduates. I do my best to place them in the context of the radicalism of the late 1960s. I sometimes find it hard to believe that the Bill and Bernardine that Barack and I met in Hyde Park in the 1990s are the same people that my students are learning about in class. I know them better as the couple that invited me into their home in 2000 to meet their extended family, make gingerbread-cookie houses, and share

Christmas dinner. Our conversation that night, as it almost always did, focused on the future, not the past.

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politics

## Track the Presidential Polls on Your iPhone

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

Friday, October 10, 2008, at 7:05 AM ET

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

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

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

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politics

## A Republican Mob Scene

John McCain's supporters are madder (and scarier!) than he is.

By John Dickerson

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 7:37 PM ET

At a normal campaign rally, it's the candidate who tries to whip

the crowd into a frenzy. At John McCain's town hall in Waukesha, Wis., Thursday, it was the other way around. "I'm mad, and I'm really mad," said one man who'd been called on to ask a question. "It's not the economy. It's the socialist taking over our country." McCain started to respond, and the man shot back sternly. "Let me finish please. When you have an Obama, Pelosi, and the rest of the hooligans up there gonna run this country, we've got to have our head examined. It's time that you two who are representing us, and we are mad."

After the crowd stopped chanting "USA," McCain promised that he would take on Obama and the Democrats (and wisely didn't choose the moment to present his case for the financial bailout or his plan to have the government buy mortgages). Before the question-and-answer portion of the rally, McCain had already clobbered Obama several times. But the audience stuffed into the gymnasium at a local sports center wasn't satisfied.

A man suggested McCain talk about abortion to draw the distinction between him and Obama. Another asked, "Why is Obama where he's at? Everyone in this room is stunned. We are all a product of our associations. Is there not a way to get around this media and line up the people" whom he is associated with? (No one in the press corps could hear the end of the man's statement because the crowd roar was so loud. Each advice-giver was cheered like a hero.)

James T. Harris, a local African-American talk-show host, stood and said, "I doubt that anyone in this room has taken, pardon me, the ass-whuppin' that I have taken for supporting you. Sir, I believe that in the next coming debate it is absolutely vital that you take it to Obama and that you hit him where it hits" [sic]. The crowd exploded. "ACORN is out there, we have Reverend Wright, all of these shady characters that surrounded him. I am *begging* you, sir." McCain told the man that he would take his advice—but that he also will offer a "positive plan of action" to address the financial crisis.

It was tempting to characterize the mood in the room as "bloodthirsty," what with all of the calls for attacks on Obama. Yet there were occasional flutters of Midwestern charm to lighten things a little. "Everyone here is tickled at all you're doing for us," said one man before explaining just exactly how McCain should wallop his opponent. An Iraq veteran stood to criticize Obama's policies on Afghanistan and Iraq and then introduced his son, A'laa, who was sitting in his wheelchair next to his adoptive father. The veteran said he'd brought him to the United States from the war zone in Iraq.

As McCain answered questions about health care and energy, members of the crowd shouted "ACORN," a reference to the housing advocacy group that also helps lead voter-registration drives that benefit Democrats. In Nevada, the group is [under state investigation](#) for voter-registration irregularities. Many in the GOP grass roots believe that if Obama wins, it will be the

product of voter fraud. McCain heard the calls and addressed the issue by saying, "There are serious allegations of voter fraud in the battle-ground states across America. They must be investigated. No one should corrupt the most precious right we have, and that is the right to vote."

The crowd responded favorably. If they'd rushed the candidate to carry him from the room on their shoulders, it would have been unsurprising. A portion started chanting, "FBI."

There was a time when John McCain would give it right back to the hecklers at a John McCain town-hall meeting. It was part of his charm: He would confront these hecklers and argue with them about his supposed Republican apostasies on judicial appointments or immigration.

No longer. Now hecklers help stir the room. The candidate and his audience are in agreement about the grave national danger posed by Barack Obama and the media.

How much have things changed at McCain's town-hall events? In New Hampshire, with just a few weeks before the primary, a man asked McCain why he didn't bash the press (particularly the *New York Times*) for reporting bad news from Iraq and trying soldiers accused of wrongdoing in the news pages. [McCain said he didn't agree with the man's characterizations](#). He didn't defend the press per se, but he defended its characterization of the troubles in Iraq and talked about the need to hold rogue soldiers to account. In a close contest in which embracing media-bashing would have helped him, McCain refused.

Now McCain and Sarah Palin regularly blame the media for not questioning Obama, though Palin is the more aggressive of the two. "I can't pick a fight with people who buy ink by the barrelful," said Palin. "But we're in dangerous territory when mainstream media isn't asking all the questions. I know when my impatience shows some of you think that I'm trying to provide job security for Tina Fey, but I am like you and wonder, too, when will the questions be asked, and when will we get the answers?"

When the event was over and we got on the press bus to the airport, some of McCain's supporters gave us a single-finger salute. But I'm not insulted. I prefer to think that, as with their candidate, they're just trying to buck us up, too: We're No. 1!

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## politics

### Professor and Pastor

Obama finds his voice on the economy.

By John Dickerson

Wednesday, October 8, 2008, at 6:48 PM ET

INDIANAPOLIS—It was cold, wet, and muddy for Barack Obama's campaign rally at the state fairgrounds here on Wednesday. The several hundred supporters standing next to the stage sloshed and slid in the muck. Fancy high heels disappeared in the bog. Work boots sunk in up to their laces. No one left without looking like he'd stepped on a falafel platter.

And yet, despite the weather and equally ominous financial crisis that has come to dominate the campaign, Obama was able to brighten the crowd's mood. What's more, he was able to do so in a way that must be deeply frustrating to his opponent—because Obama is doing a much better job of conveying a message of optimism that John McCain has tried (and failed) to sell himself.

Obama opened his remarks by recognizing the uncertainty of the "full-blown global financial crisis." He outlined how the bailout affected regular people, repeating an answer he'd given from the debate the night before. Obama explained the relationship between credit and payrolls, inventories and a company's ability to buy new equipment.

He sounded like a professor. That used to be a knock against Obama, but it doesn't seem like such a bad thing these days. Presidents must [persuade, and to persuade they must explain](#).

After playing professor, Obama pivoted to pastor. The sermon was American exceptionalism. "I am here today to tell you that there are better days ahead," he said. "This is the United States of America. This is a nation that has faced down war and Depression; great challenges and great threats. ... Here in America, our destiny is not written for us, but by us. That's who we are, and that's the country we need to be right now."

This is pretty standard political stuff. Obama's earliest speeches were thick with references to America's special historical mission. Politicians are always calling on America's greatness. (It is the rhetorical equivalent of that [mammoth flag pin](#) Sarah Palin wears.) But at this political moment, with 27 days to go till Election Day, John McCain and Sarah Palin are trying to paint Obama as an American outsider.

It's not just his policies that are wrong, they suggest; it's his character. McCain on Wednesday was in Bethlehem, Pa., where Lehigh County GOP Chairman Bill Platt offered this version of the pitch in his introduction to McCain: "Certainly Barack Obama can learn a thing or two from John McCain about what it means to be a patriot. Think about how you'll feel on Nov. 5 if you see the news that Barack Obama—Barack Hussein Obama—is president of the United States." (The McCain campaign [later distanced itself from](#) Platt's remarks.)

Meanwhile, in Indianapolis, Obama was singing a song to America. Sure, he laid out specific programs on tax cuts, education, and health care. His story about his mother spending her last days fighting insurance companies as she died from ovarian cancer is especially effective, on both a personal and political level. The current economic crisis has left many Americans feeling vulnerable, and Obama's message is that McCain's health care plan will only make them feel more so.

But the emotional thrust of his speech was that our collective American identity is the key to overcoming our adversity. "I won't pretend this will be easy or come without cost," he said. "We will all need to sacrifice, and we will all need to pull our weight because now more than ever, we are all in this together. What this crisis has taught us is that at the end of the day, there is no real separation between Main Street and Wall Street. There is only the road we're traveling on as Americans—and we will rise or fall on that journey as one nation, as one people." The crowd of 21,000 (19,500 or so sat under protected bleachers) responded with predictable ferocity.

About 600 miles east, in Pennsylvania, McCain was giving a very different speech. McCain moved quickly through the changes he would make, as if reading from a series of bullet points, then spent the bulk of his remarks going after Obama. He wasn't calling the audience to his vision of the future. He was poking holes in Obama's record.

**Washington Post columnist Dana Milbank, a member of the "mainstream media," looks for a hug at a McCain/Palin rally in Pennsylvania.**

McCain's argument is not unreasonable: Obama has not fought his party in any major way in Washington—at any rate, not on as many issues as Sen. McCain has. That kind of political courage matters. Nor, for that matter, has Obama reached out to Republicans the way McCain has reached out to Democrats.

Still, for this moment in the campaign—for this moment in the economy—Obama's pitch feels much more suitable. It feels like a message that feeds a country starving for an optimistic path forward.

If voters wind up hearing it this way, it will be deeply vexing for the McCain campaign: It was McCain's instinct to make the identical point—about the fundamental strength of American character—as a response to the financial crisis. But he lacked the eloquence and artistry to pull it off, which left him open to criticism that he was out of touch.

The campaign in recent days has been a circus of charge and countercharge, and in many ways the Indianapolis event was no different. Obama blamed McCain for Bush's policies. He

insisted that a Washington veteran couldn't change Washington institutions.

But the overall message was more than the sum of these exaggerations. Obama's mere presence in Indianapolis, in fact, was a powerful message in itself. A Democratic candidate has not won the state since 1964. Obama, who narrowly lost the Democratic primary here, is now in a statistical dead heat with McCain. As Obama heads into the final weeks of the campaign, everything seems to be going his way—even the weather in Indianapolis. By the time Obama left the state fairgrounds, the rain had stopped, the clouds had parted, and the sun had come out.

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## politics

### The Winner: "That One"

McCain needed a knockout, and he didn't get it.

By John Dickerson

Wednesday, October 8, 2008, at 12:48 AM ET

After their second debate, both Barack Obama and John McCain shook hands with the Nashville audience of 80 uncommitted voters. Both were well-received. But Obama stayed longer, and with McCain out of the room, the affection from the swing voters increased. He was mobbed, patted, beamed at, embraced. One woman wiggled up next to him. At one point, about 15 voters posed for a group picture like it was the last day of camp. The "Nashville '08 Debate" T-shirts are in the mail.

These uncommitted voters wanted to be next to Barack Obama, and the adulation from the audience helps explain why he won the debate. In the post-debate polls on CNN and CBS, he was the clear winner, and he also won Fox's focus group.

Obama's likeability is good for him and bad for McCain, of course, but it also undercuts McCain's credibility. It exposes the picture McCain has been painting of Obama in the last few days as a caricature. Since McCain's slide in the polls, he has started personal attacks questioning Obama's character and values. "Who is the real Barack Obama?" McCain asks on the stump and in his ads. Sarah Palin says Obama isn't from "regular" America. He's out of the mainstream, aides regularly say.

That cartoon version of Obama didn't show up for the 90-minute debate Tuesday. If it had, those audience members would have been waving garlic as they fled from the room rather than sticking around so they could tell their neighbors about it.

Instead, what they saw was a Democrat saying, "We will kill Bin Laden. We will crush al-Qaida." He said he thought America

was a force for good. Obama also got to repeat those elements of his biography—his mother's death from cancer and his modest upbringing—that contradict the image of him as a spooky alien.

McCain, meanwhile, did not take Sarah Palin's advice. He did not attack. He pressed Obama repeatedly on issues, but he didn't attack Obama's character. (Don't worry, he will again tomorrow.) McCain stressed that he had a record people could check, while Obama offered nothing but rhetoric. That's fine as far as it goes, but McCain needs more.

McCain is in a tough spot. He's behind. Obama has the momentum, and McCain needs to take it away. He didn't necessarily do poorly—and he did much better on foreign policy than on domestic matters. But McCain needed to change the dynamic. You could see him trying. He pressed Obama on his opposition to the surge, the penalty Obama would impose on those who didn't sign up for a health-care plan, even that he was speaking too long. But this was all small stuff. A town-hall debate is a hard place to change the dynamic, and yet there are few opportunities in the remaining 27 days where he has such a big chance.

Since Bill Clinton's successful town-hall debates, the format has required a compulsory empathy competition where the candidates reach out to the audience. McCain thanked a Navy veteran for his service and patted him on the shoulder. Obama had no equivalent empathetic moment, but he did a better job explaining how the bailout package affected regular folks.

The night was billed as a town hall—but I've seen town halls, and this wasn't one. The strict rules apparently had frightened the questioners with foreclosure if they asked anything interesting, followed up with the candidates, or performed any acts of spontaneity. Town halls are supposed to be freewheeling and probing. This format was dull, and the constant ankle-biting between the candidates compounded the problem.

The optics of the town hall were also dreadful, which hurt McCain. His war injuries meant he couldn't take the relaxed pose Obama held while McCain was giving his answers. The Obama campaign studied the tape of the first debate and recognized that the candidate is often caught in a two shot and so must always look relaxed and attentive. While Obama talked, McCain took an occasional walkabout. This was disconcerting. It looked like he was getting up to get a beer.

There is already a lot of talk in the blogosphere about McCain's referring to Obama as "that one." The Obama campaign was pushing the idea that it was proof McCain was a man of bitter moods. I didn't see it as a major act of disrespect, but it did feel antiquated. I have relatives—older relatives—who use this expression. My mother's version of it was to call someone "himself." (As in, "I'm glad himself has decided to join us for

dinner.") McCain has 27 days to find a better way to take on his opponent, or he'll be calling him Mr. President.

*Slate V: What if Obama loses? Canada beckons.*

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## politics

# The Really Busy Person's Guide to Political Activism

Life-hacking for partisans.

By Christopher Beam

Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 4:43 PM ET

There are 29 days left in the election. (**Update:** 28!) You have X hours, Y dollars, and Z calories to burn on behalf of your favorite candidate. What's the best way to allocate these precious resources?

The campaigns will tell you every bit helps, and they're right. But some tactics help more than others. A lot of it depends where you live and how much money you make. Say you make \$10 an hour—should you donate \$100 or volunteer for 10 hours? (Quick answer: If you live in Dayton, volunteer; if you live in Berkeley, donate.) For that reason, we've divided activism strategies into two categories: If You Have Time and If You Have Money. We then look at the best—and worst—ways to spend it before November.

*If You Have Money (in descending order of usefulness)*

**Bundle.** Not everyone has rich friends. But if you do, milk them. If they max out at \$2,300, that's enough to fly your candidate to a campaign stop, blast a mailer across a contested county, or buy ad time in a battle ground media market. "It's a supply line," says Allen Raymond, a former Republican operative. "If you're in California, your job is to give resources to candidates so they can get out and win." Some people think money matters less in the waning days of a campaign. They're wrong. Obama spent roughly \$55 million in August. In 2004, President Bush spent about \$18 million from mid-October through Election Day.

**Make your own Swift Boat ads.** Now *you* can be the next T. Boone Pickens. If you've got cash to burn, start your own 527—just incorporate an organization, [file with the IRS](#) (and, in some cases, the [FEC](#)), hire a production company, and you're off. If your budget is lower, there are companies that [parcel out cheap air time](#). With Saysme.tv, you can design an ad and run it on CNN or Comedy Central or Animal Planet for as little as \$6. (That's at 3 a.m. on a weekday. For prime time, it costs more.) The company lets you pick exactly which media markets will see the spot, so you can smear McCain in Colorado Springs or

ding Obama in Boulder. Even easier is to make a Web ad—quick, dirty, and just as likely to get media coverage.

**Throw a party.** This is bundling for people who fly commercial. Have a party, invite everyone you know, and make sure they all give money. Small-scale events are often more profitable than blow-out concerts with big-name artists. If you spend \$90,000 on an event that raises \$100,000, that's a net benefit to the campaign of only \$10,000. Better to keep things modest—and possibly even more lucrative, says Eli Pariser of MoveOn.org. "It's much easier to raise \$20,000 with a smaller event," he says.

**Give your own cash.** Small donations have become [critical](#) this election cycle, so don't worry if you can give only \$10. Obama raised a record \$66 million in August and still relies on donations to push him through. McCain receives public funds but could still use your Hamiltons; just give them to the RNC instead. Plus, if you don't have time to volunteer, giving money "helps assuage guilt," says Louise Simmons of the University of Connecticut School of Social Work.

**Make your own robo-call.** Sick of phone-banking? [Record your own robo-call](#) for your candidate. It's easy to set up and can cost only a couple of cents per call. Problem is, you'll probably end up pissing off more voters than you win over.

**Buy a lawn sign.** Yay. Now you have a [lawn sign](#).

*If You Have Time (in descending order of usefulness)*

**Knock on doors.** Boring, but true. If you live in a battle ground state, the single best thing you can do is make face-to-face contact. "Personalize, personalize, personalize," says Tracy Soska, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work and a community organizer. Try to show up before dark—people hate answering the door after night falls, even if it's only 8 p.m. Of course, door-knocking is useless if you live in a blue or red state. In that case, you should probably ...

**Harass your friends.** Call them. E-mail them. Visit them at unexpected hours. (Since you know them, it's OK to show up after dark.) Threaten to break off the friendship unless they vote. And tell them to do the same to their friends. People respond better to someone they know than to strangers on their doorstep. You may be preaching to the choir if your network consists of like-minded people. But that can also be helpful—it's called getting out the base.

**Register voters.** Time is running out on this one—Oct. 6 was the registration deadline for many states—but canvassing is one of the most effective strategies out there. It's also hugely frustrating. Most people know to steer clear of smiling kids with clipboards. But even if only one in 20 stops and only one in 100

registers, that still expands voter rolls. "We're trying to find needles in a haystack," says Pariser. But don't just stand on the sidewalk outside Starbucks. Hit places with fewer registered voters—which tend to be schools, prisons, or community centers in low-income areas.

**Drive voters to the polls.** It's the one time you'll be proud to drive a minivan. The easier you make it for people to vote, the more likely they will. For many voters, getting to the polls is the hardest part. And not just for people with disabilities. If someone has to take two buses and a train to the polls and it's raining on Election Day, he just might give up. "Helping get our voters to the polls is far and away the most important thing supporters can do," says Obama spokesman Tommy Vietor. Plus, in poor communities where voter information might be scarce, you can help people get to the right place. (If you're not sure, check [here](#).)

**Join a phone bank.** If face-to-face interaction is best, phone-to-phone is a close second. But it only works if the caller and the recipient have something in common. If you're a liberal yenta from New Jersey, you might not want to call Colorado voters to tell them all about Obama's gun control record. In 2004, the *Guardian* famously [asked](#) its left-leaning readers to write to voters in Clark County, Ohio, and tell them to vote for John Kerry. The response was, er, [mixed](#). The campaigns try to pair phone-bankers with their peers. But if someone responds negatively to your call, don't get combative—hang up. To combat those pesky caller ID screeners, use your cell phone. And for true believers, there's a new [Obama iPhone app](#) that organizes your contact list by who lives in battle ground states.

**Wave signs.** Depending where you are, this can be the most useless tactic in the world or a marginally effective one. In small towns where the race is tight, displays of enthusiasm supposedly make a difference. (Election experts call it "visibility.") On the other hand, chanting, sign-toting, traffic-blocking activists can be just as annoying as squeegee men. "Totally overrated," says Raymond.

**Make signs.** Sign-making is the child labor of campaign jobs. But it serves an important purpose: weeding out the kooks. There's someone in every campaign office whose job it is to make sure these people—you know, the ones who mean well but whom you don't want approaching people on the street—are occupied. "The guy with the tinfoil hat? Put him out back," says Raymond. Just don't let that person be you.

**Crash online polls.** In productivity terms, this ranks somewhere between yelling at the TV during debates and exposing yourself on the turnpike on behalf of your candidate. When PBS posted a poll online asking whether Sarah Palin is qualified to be president, partisans on the left and right [swamped](#) the site with repeat votes that totaled in the tens of millions. The practical

results: PBS [added cookies](#) so you can't vote twice. Oh, and it's exactly tied.

**Go vigilante.** No, no, no, no, no. Don't start calling random numbers in the Boca Raton phone book. Don't berate voters outside the polls. Don't start a local chapter of NAMBLA for McCain. Do what the campaign tells you; it knows better. It keeps detailed records of which voters lean which way, how many times they've been called, and how many times their doors have been knocked on. It also knows better than you what makes a good pitch. This might make you feel like a pawn in a larger game, but face it—you are!

But you don't have to take my word for it. Call your favorite campaign and ask how to be most useful. You might get answers like this: "The most effective use of your time is to knock on doors and call your friends," said Vietor, the Obama spokesman. Then again, you might get answers like this: "No offense, but answering this question is probably the least effective use of time!" said McCain spokesman Brian Rogers.

Point taken! Now excuse me while I go make some signs.

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## politics

### Beware of Ponytail Guy

How town-hall debates can go very wrong for a candidate.

By John Dickerson

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 7:31 PM ET

In advance of Tuesday's town-hall debate, both candidates have apparently decided to [have a cleanse](#). Before facing questions from an audience of undecided voters who say they don't like negative campaigning, Obama and McCain are engaging in an orgy of it.

Which candidate is hurt more by the negativity? If voters don't penalize negativity, do they penalize hypocrisy? Will McCain's tough but fair questions about Obama's truth-telling and qualifications be overshadowed by the new surge of lower-road attacks on Obama's character and associations? Normally, there'd be a delay (even insta-polls take a few minutes) before we knew what undecided voters make of all this. But Tuesday night's debate may allow us to test their reactions to the race in real time—especially if the Ponytail Guy shows up. Or, since he probably won't, maybe we should call him Son of Ponytail Guy.

"Ponytail Guy" is the term some in political circles use to refer to Denton Walthall, who asked a question in the second presidential debate in 1992. A domestic mediator who worked with children, Walthall scolded President George H.W. Bush for

running a mudslinging, character-based campaign against Bill Clinton in 1992. Referring to voters as "symbolically the children of the future president," he asked how voters could expect the candidates "to meet our needs, the needs in housing and in crime and you name it, as opposed to the wants of your political spin doctors and your political parties. ... Could we cross our hearts? It sounds silly here but could we make a commitment? You know, we're not under oath at this point, but could you make a commitment to the citizens of the U.S. to meet our needs—and we have many—and not yours again?"

It did sound silly: a father-president dandling a nation of children voters on his knee. But instead of challenging the paterfamilias premise, the candidates took his pain seriously. Walthall didn't scold Bush by name, but as the camera shot over his shoulder (showing us his ponytail), Bush could be seen growing annoyed. The question was addressed to all the candidates, but Bush was the candidate running the character-based campaign. He had answered a previous questioner by making the case for why Bill Clinton's character should be an issue. So it was obvious Bush was the target of the Ponytail Guy's criticism.

On Tuesday night, we'll get to hear from some of this campaign's swing voters—the rules of the debate guarantee their participation—as undecided voters pose questions to the candidates in the town-hall debate.

It might be a snooze-fest, full of earnest questions and foggy bromides. But with the spike in negativity coming just ahead of the meeting, there is a chance that one of the two candidates will have to face a question about the harsh tone.

There's been a lot of talk recently about Joe Six-Pack. How will he vote? What does he want? One thing we know: You don't want Joe Six Pack calling you out. Questions from regular voters are hard enough for politicians to handle—they can't be [ignored as easily as journalists' questions](#)—but as the campaign turns ugly, the candidates have to worry about questioners passing judgment.

Son of Ponytail Guy will have a lot of material to work with. The McCain campaign started the latest round of negative ads, reacting to the candidate's falling position in the polls by raising questions about Obama's [connections to William Ayers](#), a remorseless '60s radical. Sarah Palin joined in by trying to [reignite](#) the controversy over Obama's former pastor the Rev. Jeremiah Wright and defining Obama as a fringe American. Obama responded by reminding voters of McCain's [involvement in the Keating Five scandal](#). By the end of the day, McCain had called [Obama a liar](#).

In town-hall debates, the questions from the crowd can easily be turned into "moments" that journalists cling to for weeks. We're always looking for vignettes that allow us to tell a larger story. A

"moment" by a swing voter is particularly valuable. The questioner, after all, is representative of a worried nation (even if very few of us have ponytails). It's not just the journalists who obsess, though. Voters see themselves in other voters—particularly those defined by television anchors as independent-minded—and tend to repeat these moments to their friends.

In 1992, the moment symbolized the disconnect between Bush and the electorate: He wanted to talk about character, while America was pleading for solutions. The president compounded his problem when he inartfully handled a woman's inartful question about how the "national debt" had hurt him personally. (Bush was also caught looking at his wristwatch twice during the evening.) Clinton [knew how to take advantage](#) of the moment. "I worked 12 years very hard as a governor on the real problems of real people. I'm just as sick as you are by having to wake up and figure out how to defend myself every day. I never thought I'd ever be involved in anything like this."

And while there are risks for Obama, of the two candidates, John McCain has the most to be worried about from this year's Ponytail Guy. Like Bush, he is a Republican candidate on the defensive about his ability to handle the problems regular folks face while also raising issues about his opponent's character and judgment.

McCain has gotten more aggressive in recent days because the landscape is [looking bleak for him](#). Obama has a strong lead in the national polls and surveys in early battleground states. Obama has a commanding lead in Iowa and New Mexico, states that Bush won. In Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Minnesota—states John Kerry won where McCain has the best chance—poll averages have Obama ahead by more than five points. McCain's got to do something to change the dynamic.

Tuesday's debate is one of the last chances McCain will have to make his case in front of a big audience. But his aides know that it might also be the toughest venue to make the anti-Obama case. Depending on how McCain responds, criticism can very easily be turned by his opponent into evidence that McCain lacks the temperament for the job. Obama is running an ad that labels McCain erratic, and Obama aides responded to McCain's liar charge by calling it an "angry tirade." The message is sinking in. In a focus group organized last week by pollster Peter Hart, the biggest concern voters of all persuasions had about McCain was about his temperament. McCain knows he has to be on his best behavior during the debate.

The 41<sup>st</sup> president's run-in with Ponytail Guy left such a mark that it haunted his son throughout his campaigns. I remember watching a town hall during the 2000 campaign in which George W. Bush consistently refused to call on a man waving from the middle of the crowd like he was trying to flag a rescue plane. Bush pretended not to see him but let on afterwards that he'd seen him and avoided calling on him for fear of creating a

moment. In 1996, when Bob Dole was given the chance to attack Clinton's character in a town-hall debate, he demurred, saying the debate should be about the issues.

This year's campaign shows how partisans on both sides go after the journalists who ask questions they don't like. During the Democratic primaries, Chris Matthews, Tim Russert, and George Stephanopoulos were all savaged for the questions they asked and how they asked them. Last week, Gwen Ifill was attacked for a book she hasn't written about a subject she isn't addressing.

"Real" people (by which I mean people who don't do this for a living) who are asking the questions may be harder to rough up. Or maybe not. On Tuesday night, if Son of Ponytail Guy asks a question, he can rest assured that he will receive a thorough going-over in the blogosphere. So I suggest all prospective questioners Google themselves, make sure they're on good terms with their co-workers, and wipe clean their Facebook page. If they don't—or even if they do—they could become the story very quickly.

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## politics

### The Power of Vice

Palin is no Cheney, and neither is Biden. How much clout will the VP's successor have?

By Barton Gellman

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 5:50 PM ET

Dick Cheney made his mark by transforming the job of vice president into something very close to deputy president. Now the question is whether Sarah Palin, and to a lesser extent Joe Biden, can carry on his legacy—or whether America should want them to. The answer to both questions: probably not.

Cheney brought to office a singular blend of knowledge, experience, discipline, zealotry, and operational talent. The last two are especially rare in combination, and mercifully so. Zealots drive history harder than opportunists do when they get their hands on the wheel. Cheney won room for maneuver from President Bush, and he knew how to use it. The interplay of their dispositions and skills (vision vs. execution, instinct vs. analysis) left even the president unaware of some of the paths that Cheney took, especially during a near-meltdown at the Justice Department in 2004. (Excerpts from [my book's](#) account of the crisis are [here](#)).

Neither Palin nor Biden will arrive on the job with all of Cheney's tools. But the position is what you make of it, and aspirants to "fourth branch" status (as [one blog](#) has taken to



calling the VP's office) need not despair. The vice presidency comes with great advantages for those who seek to shape events of state. It has its own [seal](#), like the [president's](#), except the blue part is in the outer ring instead of the center. Cabinet officers stand when No. 2 walks in. If a military band is somewhere nearby, it is likely to strike up "Hail to Columbia" (the veep equivalent, in protocol, of "Hail to the Chief"). Everybody takes the vice president's phone call. These are not, in fact, small things. Rank projects a quiet dominance in policy debate if the vice president carries it well.

Still, there are ways Palin or Biden can ensure they retain some of Cheney's influence. The first thing they should do is keep Cheney's West Wing real estate. There's no guarantee: Every White House redraws the floor plan. Cheney disclaimed the perk of a corner office, leaving those for the chief of staff and the national security adviser. The vice president then planted himself [exactly between](#) them, bisecting the power corridor. He did much the same thing, less literally, across the executive branch. When he was chief of staff under Gerald Ford, Cheney would draw "staffing loops" to specify, for each subject of policy, which advisers got the paperwork and a seat at the table. In the last eight years, these loops had a way of skipping rivals and doubling back through the office of the vice president.

This part of the Cheney Method is adaptable by any ambitious successor: Palin or Biden need only hire wisely. Cheney's top advisers, "Scooter" Libby and David Addington, were brilliant bureaucratic operators. Cheney empowered his aides by making them "assistants to the president," the same rank held by Andrew Card and Karl Rove. He arranged for them to be bcc'd on e-mails sent around the National Security Council staff. Libby and Addington shared another Cheney quality that is surprisingly uncommon even in the White House: They knew what they wanted. Even more important, Cheney and his minions knew exactly what had to be done to get what they wanted.

Palin, by her own recent accounts, is more inclined than Biden to emulate the incumbent. In her [interview with Charlie Gibson](#) on ABC News, Palin defended the right of a commander in chief to launch pre-emptive war because "a president's job, when they swear in their oath to uphold our Constitution ... the president has the obligation, the duty to defend." The invocation of oath and duty are common Cheney tropes. Other features in Palin's governing style have led some people to imagine her as "[Cheney: The Sequel](#)." A [close study](#) by the *New York Times* found that Palin values secrecy, "puts a premium on loyalty" and "fired officials who crossed her."

But Palin is strictly an amateur by Cheney standards. The woman tried to use free e-mail services on the Web to circumvent Alaska's public records laws, as if no one would guess the identity of [gov.palin@yahoo.com](mailto:gov.palin@yahoo.com). Letting her account [get hacked](#) was the inevitable newbie comeuppance. No one in Cheney's office would have dreamed of writing down some of

the things the hackers found. Patrick Fitzgerald, the special counsel who probed the leak of Valerie Plame's CIA employment, had this exchange with Scooter Libby during the grand jury on March 24, 2004:

FITZGERALD: You're not big on e-mail, I take it?

LIBBY: No. Not in this job.

Palin's affinity for Cheney is not shared by the man at the top of her ticket. John McCain clashed loudly with the vice president over torture, capital gains tax cuts, and the conduct of war with Iraq. In the GOP primary debates, he made pointed jokes at Cheney's expense. Asked what authority he would delegate to his vice president, McCain [said](#), "The vice president really only has two duties. One is to cast a tie-breaking vote in the case of a tied vote in the Senate. And the other is to inquire daily as to the health of the president." Having earned his laugh, McCain found an applause line: "Look, I would be very careful that everybody understood that there's only one president."

Compare that sentiment to Palin's remarks in the vice-presidential debate last week. Palin described herself as "thankful the Constitution would allow a bit more authority given to the vice president if that vice president so chose to exert it." The word "authority" was noteworthy since the vice president actually has none. Moderator [Gwen Ifill then asked Palin](#) to comment on Cheney's assertion that his office is neither in the executive nor legislative branch. Palin replied:

Well, our founding fathers were very wise there in allowing through the Constitution much flexibility there in the office of the vice president. And we will do what is best for the American people in tapping into that position and ushering in an agenda that is supportive and cooperative with the president's agenda in that position. Yeah, so I do agree with him that we have a lot of flexibility in there, and we'll do what we have to do to administer very appropriately the plans that are needed for this nation.

Biden fired back, but his aim wobbled. He denounced the legal ambiguity as a "bizarre notion invented by Cheney," adding: "Article I of the Constitution defines the role of the vice president of the United States. That's the Executive Branch." Actually, [Article I](#) defines the legislative branch, [Article II](#) the executive, and the vice president is mentioned in both. Cheney did not invent the idea that his office is a hybrid. He merely pressed it to the point of absurdity. It was not long after I mentioned this dispute that Jack Goldsmith, a Justice Department lawyer who clashed with Addington, said to me that the vice president's lawyer was "principled to the point of being stupid."

Addington, true to form, found a 40-year-old Justice Department opinion to support his legal claims. (Watch him cite the precedent in [this hearing](#).) It turned out that the office of legal counsel had come down on three sides of the question of whether the vice presidency is a legislative or executive office. The [first known opinion](#), in 1955, held squarely that the president and vice president are both "elected officers in the executive branch of government." [Seven years later](#), the same office ruled that "from the very beginning of the Nation, the Office of the Vice President has been considered as being in the legislative branch." Addington took his language from still another pair of rulings ([here](#) and [here](#)) by Nicholas Katzenbach, who went on to become attorney general for Lyndon Johnson. Katzenbach noted that the VP presides over the Senate and draws his pay, franking privileges, and stationery allowance from that body. On the other hand, he cannot be a member of the Senate because Article I ([section 6, clause 2](#)) says that "no Person holding any Office under the United States, shall be a member of either House during his Continuance in Office." The vice president not only holds such an office but is subject, like the president, to impeachment. Katzenbach finally punts: "Perhaps the best thing that can be said is that the vice president belongs neither to the Executive nor to the Legislative Branch but is attached by the Constitution to the latter."

That was the best of all possible answers for Cheney and Addington, because it gave them just the kind of "flexibility" Palin cited. A branchless office could and did dispute that it was bound by regulations governing either the legislature or executive branch. But Addington conveniently stopped short of quoting the passages that followed the line he liked. Katzenbach said the "semantic problems ... would not seem to be especially relevant" to the question of whether the vice president serves the executive branch. "If a judicial test of the employment of the Vice President in the affairs of the Executive were ever to occur, there is little reason to believe it would be decided purely on the basis of abstractions," Katzenbach wrote. "In short, theoretical arguments drawn from the doctrine of separation of powers merit little attention in the face of history, like that to the present, disclosing that the Office of the Vice President has become a useful adjunct to the Office of the President."

If Palin makes it to No. 2, she may find more practical inspiration in the U.S. military's *Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. [Search it online](#) for the acronym UNODIR, which is Army-speak for "unless otherwise directed." I learned vividly about UNODIR over dinner at the al-Rasheed hotel in Baghdad, not long before starting my project on the Cheney vice presidency. My host was David Petraeus, then a two-star general. With a mischievous smile, Petraeus described UNODIR as a valuable if risky tool for the commander who values autonomy. The way it works is, you take initiative in the heat of the moment. Then you send a well-timed message ("Unless otherwise directed, I will continue to ... "). Hearing no

objection, you have a patina of authority for decisions that higher headquarters have neither approved nor forbidden. In less skillful hands, this can easily end a career, but Petraeus went on to four stars and a job as chief of U.S. Central Command.

Cheney did well by it, too. He was the UNODIR vice president writ large. He did not defy the commander in chief, but he certainly did not sit around waiting for orders. If the president did not like the results, what was the worst that could happen? As Cheney understood very well, a vice president can't be fired.

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## press box

### Bogus Trend of the Week: Dudes With Cats

The *New York Times*' Sunday Styles section detects a new craze.

By Jack Shafer

Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 2:59 PM ET

If the *New York Times*' Sunday Styles were a hairdo, it would be a wig. If it were on the menu, it would be a meringue. If it were a retail outlet, it would be [Spencer's Gifts](#). As a mélange of fashion notes, celebrity reporting, personal essays, and piffle, Sunday Styles resembles the old-fashioned supermarket tabloids in that it knows that it's a stinking pile of entertaining trash and makes no apologies for it.

So bestowing a "Bogus Trend of the Week" award upon Sunday Styles is a tad like berating Slobodan Milosevic for tracking mud across your nice, clean linoleum floor. The section exists to advance the bogus. Yet sometimes Sunday Styles promotes premises so flimsy that somebody must shout stop, if only to restore the section to its honest awfulness.

That moment arrived last Sunday (Oct. 5) in "[Sorry, Fido, It's Just a Guy Thing](#)," in which writer Abby Ellin revealed that more and more guys—single, straight guys!—are digging pussycats. Here's the nut graf:

Mr. Fulrath is one of a growing number of single—and yes, heterosexual—men who seem to be coming out of the cat closet and unabashedly embracing their feline side.

As trend stories go, this one starts out rocky, as Ellin tempers her "growing numbers" claim with a "seem." She repeats this maneuver in the next paragraph, writing:

Indeed, it seems that man's best friend is no longer a golden retriever, but a cuddly cat named Fluffy.

A few grafz later, she scuttles the logical foundations of her story by writing:

Although there are no hard (or soft) statistics (it is rare to find an owner, man or woman, walking a cat in public), it seems that single, heterosexual male cat owners are on the rise.

How can it be made to "seem" that the number of single, straight, male cat owners is increasing? By presenting the most anecdotal of evidence, which Ellin does. An executive at the Humane Society of New York alleges that "she had seen an increase in the number of single, straight men who are adopting cats." Does the Humane Society of New York really determine the marital status and sexual orientation of cat adopters? If it does, I demand that a picket line be formed around its office now. If it doesn't, I want the executive's finding stricken from the record.

Next anecdotal data point: A cat therapist alleges that her single, straight, male clientele has grown 25 percent during the last five years. Are cat therapists collecting marriage and sexual orientation information, too? Also, a rise of 25 percent might be meaningful if we knew how big the therapist's practice was in the baseline year, but we don't. Could it be that there is no trend toward single, straight, male ownership of cats but that insane felines have started to select them as masters? Let's assign [Clark Hoyt](#) to this one!

Ellin argues against her thesis—such as it is—when she catalogues a number of famous guys who have owned cats: Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain, Victor Hugo, and Marlon Brando. But why stop there? The [Ruling Cats and Dogs](#) Web site alleges that Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Nostradamus, Edward Lear, Sir Walter Scott, Isaac Newton, and Michel de Montaigne loved cats. I cannot vouch for the scholarship behind [CitizenLunchBox](#)'s list of celebrities-who-owned-cats, but more than half of them were males, and I'd guess that most were straight, if not single.

The article's silliest overreach comes when it extrapolates a cat-guy explosion from the observation that men are "posting photographs and videos of their little buddies on YouTube and on Web sites like [menandcats.com](#), and Twittering about them to anyone who will listen." But guys are posting all kinds of stuff *everywhere*. Dudes digging cats is a trend only if everything on the Web is a trend.

Perhaps Ellin and Sunday Styles innocently perceive an increase in single, straight, male cat owners because the U.S. cat

population is on the rise, as the [pet-food industry](#) reports. But if the percentage of single, straight, male cat owners isn't increasing significantly, there's no trend and therefore no story.

Gutted of its dubious facts and thrown bleeding onto a chain link fence, "Sorry, Fido, It's Just a Guy Thing" quickly evaporates. It's one of those works of journalism that leaves its readers dumber than it found them.

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How to write a bogus trend story: Start with something you wish were on the rise. State that rise as a fact. Allow that there are no facts, surveys, or test results to support such a fact. Use and reuse the word *seems*. Collect anecdotes and sprinkle liberally. Drift from your original point as far as you can to collect other data points. Add liberally. Finish with an upbeat quotation like "My cat takes priority over the new relationship. Realistically, unless there's something absolutely amazing about [the woman I'm dating], he wins." Send bogus trend stories to [slate.pressbox@gmail.com](mailto: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

### This "Town Hall" Debate Is Neither

It's more a dance recital than an honest head-to-head between the candidates.

By Jack Shafer

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 5:28 PM ET

This "town hall" debate between Barack Obama and John McCain in Nashville on Oct. 7 is neither.

In a genuine town-hall discussion, anybody can ask a real, unvetted question to inject sonic chaos into the proceedings. The crazy questions, the impolite questions, and even the left-field questions about such things as the price of a gallon of milk push candidates out of their comfort zones, away from their talking points, and to some uncultivated acre of their psyches where voters can observe their thinking processes. In the Nashville, Tenn., session, we'll see almost none of that.

Likewise, an authentic debate demands more rigor from its participants than the Q and As the Commission on Presidential Debates like to stage. In our presidential "debates," candidates decant their two-minute sound bites, dodge the tough questions, and tell the best lies they can get away with. But real debaters observe rules of logic and persuasion. They stick to the topic, they answer the questions, and they talk to one another.

So, as Obama and McCain take the stage in Nashville, fielding questions and giving answers, don't expect much in the way of substance. Instead, pay attention to what Mark Goodman, Mark Gring, and Brian Anderson call "visual bytes"—those TV-friendly actions "that convey a meaning or value."

In a recent [paper](#), the authors portray Bill Clinton as the living genius of the town-hall format. In 1992, the first year the presidential finalists used the format, George H.W. Bush's forces "simply practiced verbal arguments and rebuttals" prior to the appearance. But Clinton's people capitalized on the rules that allowed the "debaters" to move about some. According to Goodman, Gring, and Anderson, they "laid out a grid, complete with fake cameras and doubles for his opponents and the audience, to train their candidate to utilize space effectively."

They continue:

Americans were thus introduced to a new variety of political persuasion. By positioning himself on the stage in relation with the background, to his debate opponents, and to the live audience, candidate Bill Clinton encoded the television image in a manner not seen in traditional moderator or panel debates. He literally carried on a commentary through movements combined with expressions, reinforcing his own oration and "invading" the discourse of others.

They cite another academic—Alan Schroeder—who discovered that Clinton "choreographed his moves so as to keep one or the other of his competitors in the camera shot at all times, a maneuver that circumvented the prohibition on cutaways of one candidate while another was speaking."

Clinton's debate dancing paid off, the authors assert, because as attention flags during a verbal event, audiences become more susceptible to "non-verbal debate." The dramatic effect at the 1992 town-hall debate was as if Clinton had practiced his complete performance in rehearsals of a play while his opponents, Bush and Ross Perot, were reading the scripts for the first time.

The authors adorn their paper with charts and screenshots to document Clinton's skill at maneuvering into the frame while

opponents talked. He had four distinct on-camera responses during those silent moments—"the smirk, attentive listening, challenging body language, and unaware of being on camera." Sometimes he mixed those reactions for effect. He excelled at positioning himself to collect flattering camera angles, especially the "aesthetically pleasing just off-the-nose shot typically used in shooting television news." In the 1996 town-hall debate, Clinton used similar tricks. He played to the camera, offering it his emotive eyes as he spoke, while opponent Bob Dole spoke directly to the debate audience, giving the camera an unbecoming view of the side of his head.

To appreciate how good Clinton was at this sort of political theater, you need only recall how bad Al Gore was at it in the [2000](#) town haller that matched him against George W. Bush. Here's the play-by-play from the Oct. 18, 2000, by the *Washington Post's* David Von Drehle:

The bigger man never looked so big as he did inside the debate hall tonight. Vice President Al Gore has a couple of inches and a couple of pounds on Texas Gov. George W. Bush—but it might as well have been feet and tons. With his bold strides around the room, with his large gestures and his booming voice, and especially with his aggressive attempts to pin Bush to the mat on one painful issue after another, Gore seemed to fill 90 percent of the space.

Gore's scenery-chewing proved to be too much. At one junction, as Bush answered a question, "Gore moved from his stool toward the governor," drawing closer and closer "until he loomed like a shadow at the climax of a film noir," Von Drehle writes.

Expect John McCain to continue to distance himself from Barack Obama during the Nashville recital, avoiding his opponent's eyes and reducing the opening handshake to the briefest of touches—just as he did in the Oxford, Miss., [debate](#). Physical disassociation is McCain's way of saying that not only is Obama not ready to lead, he's not ready to share the same stage.

McCain's age and war injures, which make him look vulnerable, will put him at a disadvantage in the Nashville setting. McCain makes a step look like a lurch, a smile look like a grimace. Any attempt to ape Clinton by entering Obama's space for political effect will only make McCain look doddering. But if he simply stands there, the supple, feline Obama will upstage him with his vitality, even when standing still.

A robot just can't dance with a cat.

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I'd like to put in good words for "gotchas" and the need for "filters." Without them, the campaign will be a series of platitudinous, mendacious speeches. Send your good words to [slate.pressbox@gmail.com](mailto: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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## shopping

### Show Me My Money

What's the best software for keeping track of your personal finances?

By Mason Currey

Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 6:47 AM ET

While the magnitude of the current financial crisis remains uncertain, one thing seems clear: [The party is over](#). The era of easy credit and blithe overspending is drawing to a grisly close. And not just for Wall Street [BSDs](#). After years of being goaded toward ever greater heights of consumerism, average Americans are finally feeling pressure to buckle down, spend less, save more, and prepare for lean times ahead.

This is particularly bad news for me because I am a comically inept manager of my personal finances. It's not that I don't try. Over the years I have instituted several budgeting systems, ranging from a simple list of expenses tacked above my desk to an ambitious attempt to track every penny I spent for months. Still, my money disappeared in ways I could neither understand nor predict.

But then I discovered [Mint](#), a two-year-old Web startup that lets you keep track of all your financial accounts in one place for free. It seemed like the perfect way to see where my money was going (and with colorful pie charts, no less) minus the hassle of tracking everything manually and without actually spending money on software. But Mint's not perfect, and the more I used it, the more I wondered: Would it be worth the upfront cost to purchase more powerful desktop software like Quicken or Microsoft Money? Or would a different free or low-cost Web service be even better? I decided to pull my finances together and find out.

#### Methodology

I spent a month tinkering with a host of computer money-management tools, including an array of Web sites with funny

names: [Wesabe](#), [Buxfer](#), [Geezeo](#), [Expensr](#), and [Green Sherpa](#), among others. After winnowing the list to a manageable five finalists, I put them through the usual ups and downs of my monthly finances: the dizzying highs of payday; the demoralizing lows of rent payments, credit card bills, and impulse Internet sneaker purchases. The ideal software would help a financial dunce like me easily monitor multiple accounts (checking, savings, credit cards, 401[k]), identify spending trends, and maybe even save a buck or two. I evaluated the software using four criteria:

#### Security (10 points)

When I told friends about sites like Mint, which require you to divulge the passwords used to access your financial accounts online, they all had the same question: Is it safe? The answer: probably. All of the companies I evaluated tout their use of secure sockets layers technology and 128-bit encryption to securely transmit data on the Internet. To find out what that means—and if it's enough protection—I called up Alfred Huger, vice president of engineering at [Symantec](#). He said that 128-bit SSL encryption provides a basic level of protection, but he would look very closely at companies' security statements, and he would be more inclined to trust a national bank than an unproven startup.

Bottom line: Yes, [there are risks](#), and it's tough to say definitively that one site is more secure than another. If you're the type of person who is fundamentally uncomfortable sharing financial data on the Internet, I won't try to change your mind. (In that case, you might try a no-frills program like [Buddi](#) or [Pear Budget](#), or download a [budgeting template for Excel](#).)

#### Features (10 points)

Does the software support numerous financial institutions? How many ways are there to slice and dice your data? Can you categorize your spending, and does it let you invent your own categories? Can you set up budgets? Bill reminders? E-mail and text-message alerts?

One important issue: All of the tools I tested—except one—failed to incorporate pending transactions on my checking account. As a result, they displayed a balance that was usually a day or two out of date, forcing me to consult my bank's Web site for the real number. This may not be a deal-breaker for some people, but when you play the high-stakes game of paycheck-to-paycheck brinkmanship that I do, knowing the most up-to-date balance is crucial. This played a deciding factor in choosing a winner.

#### Ease of Use (10 points)

Is the software easy to set up? Does it have an intuitive interface? Can you update your accounts with one click? Is there an overwhelming number of features? What if you need help?

**Value** (10 points)

How much does the software cost? Are there associated bank fees? Are the features on the pay software worth the money, or would you do just as well with a free Web-based platform?

Here are the results, from confounding to *ka-ching!*

**Quicken Deluxe 2009**, \$39.99

Quicken seems to hold a slight edge over its rival Microsoft Money in head-to-head comparisons, and it has certainly attracted a devoted fan base of [expense-tracking obsessives](#). So, I was expecting fireworks. Instead, I found a crowded user interface with a bewildering array of options. Setting up all my accounts was time-consuming and frustrating, and I was disappointed that the software lacks a simple central overview of my financial health (or illness, as the case may be). Plus, the fact that all transactions are recorded on a checkbook-style ledger drove me crazy. I've never balanced a checkbook in my life! In short, the software made me feel stupid—which, naturally, made me want to cheer myself up with some reckless impulse spending. Not a good start.

Securitywise, Quicken is a safe bet—it stores passwords only on your home computer, not on its own servers. And it certainly offers a lot of powerful tools. (I particularly like the fact that you can write checks in the software.) But if, like me, you're looking for a simple snapshot of your finances, I would suggest something more basic—and less costly.

Security: 10  
Features: 8  
Ease of Use: 2  
Value: 2  
**Total: 22** (out of 40)

**Microsoft Money Plus Deluxe**, \$39.99

Money is classic Microsoft: Everything is fine, if a bit clunky; nothing is particularly great. I definitely found it to be more user-friendly than Quicken. When you log in, it immediately displays a summary of all your accounts with a chart of spending categories and some personalized reminders. The Windows XP-style interface isn't very attractive, but it's familiar and relatively easy to navigate. In terms of features, Money's a draw with Quicken: There are tools for budgeting, bill payments, and even lifetime fiscal planning.

My biggest complaint is cost: The initial download is priced the same as Quicken, but my bank charged me an additional \$10 a month to let Money automatically download data. (I could grab data manually for free, but then what's the point of the software?) Money's security practices may also give some people pause: It stores your bank passwords in a Microsoft data center, and, as [CNET](#) has pointed out, it requires a Windows

Live ID, which is used for a variety of Microsoft-run services and hence may be more vulnerable.

Security: 7  
Features: 8  
Ease of Use: 7  
Value: 1  
**Total: 23** (out of 40)

**Wesabe**, Free

Founded in 2005, Wesabe attempts to apply the community spirit of social-media applications like MySpace and Digg to your personal finances. Of course, it does not actually share your financial data; instead, it provides personalized tips based on your spending habits, plus access to a bunch of message board-style groups. I like the concept, but I found the execution spotty at best. The tips in particular were a bust: I'm not jazzed, for example, by the fact that 948 Wesabe users recommend Arby's, where they saved an average of \$1.41 per visit over McDonald's. And while I can see the appeal of joining a group devoted to, say, paying down debt, this seems incidental to the site's money-management tools—which, in general, weren't as nicely presented as some of the other Web sites.

On the plus side, Wesabe's privacy policy is positively [saintly](#); the site has zero advertising, and although it is a young company without much of a track record, its security measures are encouraging. Wesabe doesn't store your user names and passwords on its servers. Instead, you use an "uploader," which keeps your bank credentials on your own computer. The trade-off is ease of use: I found setting up my accounts with the uploader difficult and time-intensive.

Security: 8  
Features: 5  
Ease of Use: 5  
Value: 10  
**Total: 28** (out of 40)

**Mint**, Free

Mint was the first site I tried, and it remained a favorite throughout these tests. Of all the software, Mint was the easiest to set up, and it has the most cleanly designed and intuitive interface. Its e-mail and text-message alerts work great, and unlike some of its competitors, Mint will e-mail you a weekly financial summary that I found useful—I like being able to look back to see that, despite the global financial meltdown, my net worth actually increased in recent months. (Granted, it's still in negative digits.) Plus, Mint was the only software to support all seven of my financial accounts—none of the others recognized my current 401(k) provider.

But Mint is not without its flaws. Its "Ways To Save" section—which is supposed to provide personalized tips based on your transactions—is more like thinly disguised advertising, repeatedly exhorting you to switch to a lower-interest-rate credit card or sign up for a different checking account. Mint stores users' data on a third-party server, albeit a [trustworthy one](#). And while you can easily assign categories to transactions, Mint doesn't let you create your own—forcing me to classify subway expenditures under "Auto" and visits to the corner deli under "Groceries" instead of something clever like "late-night beer runs."

Security: 7  
Features: 7  
Ease of Use: 10  
Value: 10  
**Total: 34** (out of 40)

### [Quicken Online](#), \$2.99/month

I disliked Quicken, but I loved its stand-alone Internet platform, which Intuit launched at the beginning of the year. The only thing Quicken Online does wrong, really, is charge \$3 a month for its service. In every other respect, this was my favorite by a significant margin. It's the only software that managed to consistently display the most recent balance on my checking account, which was key. It also lets you enter expenses that haven't cleared yet and thus avoid those classic "Oops, forgot all about *that* check!" moments. Setup and navigation are a breeze. The main page is good-looking, and it has a handy "Am I living within my means?" calculator. (Answer: not really!) The security measures seem reliable. Help is easy to find—and actually helpful. And I love being able to create custom categories for my spending, which allows me to tease out some interesting trends—and occasionally casts harsh light on some bad habits. For instance: Did I *really* spend more money on wine and liquor in September than I did on groceries? Well, you know what they say: The first step toward change is admitting you have a problem. Thanks, Quicken Online!

Security: 7  
Features: 10  
Ease of Use: 10  
Value: 8  
**Total: 35** (out of 40)

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## slate v MSM ISO GOP Love

Dana Milbank pleads for mainstream media affection from Republicans outside a McCain/Palin rally.

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 12:59 PM ET

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slate v

## C'mon, Move to Canada!

A daily video from *Slate V*

Wednesday, October 8, 2008, at 11:03 AM ET

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slate v

## Interviews 50 Cents: Voters Are Like Snowflakes

A daily video from *Slate V*

Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 11:26 AM ET

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slate v

## Dear Prudence: Sorority Sugar Daddy

A daily video from *Slate V*

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 12:30 PM ET

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sports nut

## A Prayer for the Tampa Bay Rays

Sure, Cubs supporters have been suffering longer, but Rays fans have it much, much worse.

By Tim Marchman

Wednesday, October 8, 2008, at 4:02 PM ET

Throw a rock in Chicagoland these days, and you're liable to hit a mourning Cubs fan who's old enough to remember [Gabby Hartnett's](#) spry youth. "All of a sudden, I was sitting here, sobbing," 89-year-old Edith Konya [told](#) the *South Bend Tribune*, describing her mental state after the Cubs lost the second game of the National League Division Series to the Los Angeles Dodgers. If Edith and other aged Cubs fans are in need of comfort this week, they can consult with [96-year-old Inez Rishworth](#), [104-year-old Leo Hildebrand](#), [100-year-old Speedy Iavarone](#), and [100-year-old Richard Savage](#), all of whose long sufferings were chronicled in the papers this year.

With Boston's sudden surge to the baseball elite, Cubs supporters have become the poster centenarians for baseball's oldest cliché: long-suffering fandom. In baseball, more than any other sport, a long history of losing is seen as a prerequisite for winning. The Milwaukee Brewers, [wrote George Vecsey](#) last week, "have no right to win the World Series when it is so obvious that this is the perfect year for the Cubs to repair the slips and slights and full-fledged calamities of the past century." The Brewers, you see, have existed only since 1970, meaning

their oldest fans have been without a championship for less than four decades. Considering that attitude, one would expect that Vecsey would pay the Tampa Bay Rays even less respect, and one would be right; he dismisses them as being in the line of the Florida Marlins and the Arizona Diamondbacks, "arrivistes" who "should have joined the queue."

Enough is enough: The poor, beleaguered Rays fan deserves a defense. The mistake here isn't to sneer at expansion teams—to be uncomfortable with a team whose color scheme involves teal or magenta hoisting a World Series trophy is just to be a baseball fan. Rather, it's to regard duration, rather than intensity, as the proper measure of baseball suffering. By a standard that holds that a team deserves to win in proportion to what it's endured, the Rays have as great a right to a trophy as anyone else. Cheering for the Cubs is like carrying on with a rotten tooth; cheering for the Rays has, until this year, been like being stabbed in the face repeatedly with a butter knife.

Consider the plight of the Tampa Bay baseball fan. For pretty much the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century, he didn't even have a team. If you don't count that as suffering, consider that in the 1980s and 1990s, his city was regularly used as a means to extort other baseball-having cities into building new stadiums—the Twins, White Sox, Rangers, Mariners, and Giants all teased Floridian fans with threats to move to Tampa/St. Petersburg, but none of those deals came to pass. When Tampa did finally get a team in 1998, they instantly became the worst franchise in baseball—and perhaps in all of American pro sports.

Since 1998, the Cubs fan has watched his team play in October four times; the Rays fan has watched his lose 90 games 10 times. While the Cubs fan has taken in games at Wrigley Field, the finest park in the major leagues, the Rays fan has trudged into [Tropicana Field](#), the only park in baseball whose [ground rules](#) distinguish between four possible calls that can be made on balls that strike one of several catwalks suspended over the field. ("Batted ball that is not judged a home run and remains on a catwalk, light or suspended object: Two Bases.") Cubs right fielder Sammy Sosa hit 129 home runs in 1998 and 1999; former Rays right fielder Aubrey Huff is the team's career leader with 128. On a given game night there are probably 8,000 Cubs fans drinking on Clark Street; the Rays could muster only 8,000 fans to [a recent rally](#) celebrating their epic ascent to the postseason.

Far worse than any of this, though, is the dignity gap. To be a Cubs loyalist is to assume a certain air of nobility. Watching the best lineup in the National League score six runs in three games against a Dodgers team that finished the year four games above .500 is wretched, but it's also a historic event—another line in the team's glorious record of losing. While the Cubs fan has the pity of national baseball writers and the consolation of a fraternity of similarly deluded millions, Rays fans are seen as a possibly spectral phenomenon. [Dick Vitale](#) is the team's only celebrity fan; a great proportion of the typical Rays crowd shows

up wearing a Manny Ramirez or Derek Jeter shirt. In enemy territory, even at home in Florida—that's the life of a Rays fan.

The Rays fan's agonies are considered, if they're considered at all, to be a fitting reward for poor taste. He has attended games at [a park featuring fake grass and an aquarium](#) in right field. He has watched his team run up one of the [10 highest payrolls in baseball](#) while running the powdered remnants of Dwight Gooden and Jose Canseco into the field. He has even bought and proudly sported [teal jerseys festooned with fish](#). But so far as the broader baseball-loving world is concerned, all those evenings spent perched next to the radio living and dying with each [Ryan Rupe](#) start don't count at all.

If you think that Rays fans don't understand pain, just take a look at the club's history with outfield prospects. Rocco Baldelli, the Rays' first-round pick in 2000, somehow contracted a mysterious disease that makes his ["muscles stop working."](#) Delmon Young, the top overall pick in the 2003 draft, became famous for [throwing a bat at an umpire](#) in a minor league game. Elijah Dukes, a 2002 third-rounder, made his name last year by texting his wife a picture of a gun and [leaving her a voice mail](#) that started out: "Hey, dawg. It's on, dawg. You dead, dawg." (Both Young and Dukes now play for other teams.) And then, of course, there's Josh Hamilton, whom the Rays picked over Boston ace Josh Beckett with the first overall pick of the 1999 draft. After establishing himself as a top prospect, Hamilton [went on a yearslong crack binge](#) and played all of 98 games in Tampa Bay's minor league system from 2001 through 2006. After straightening out and being snared away in the 2006 Rule 5 draft, he promptly had two years that wouldn't look out of place in Ken Griffey Jr.'s prime.

I could go on here—did I mention [Toe Nash](#)? or that the Rays took a 23-year-old Bobby Abreu in the 1997 expansion draft and then traded him for Kevin Stocker?—but the point is that this is a history of unmitigated disaster, with a sprinkle of soul-searing catastrophe mixed in. I still maintain that the team that deserves to win the World Series is the one that wins 11 games in October, but if we're going to invoke any criteria that involve shame and misery, the Rays have a compelling claim. A goat, a black cat, and a Steve Bartman game are awful. A Steve Bartman game every day for 10 years—unrelieved by any such amenities as playing your home games in the most beautiful city in America, being consistently good, or having an owner willing to spend hundreds of millions of dollars over two winters—is worse.

Those who know it best are doubtless those elderly Floridians who, like their Chicago brethren, have been waiting their entire lives for a World Series victory. Given demographic reality, there has to be at least one Tampa centenarian whose last, burning ambition is to see a flag raised over the Trop. Do it for him, Rays. You owe him.



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## supreme court dispatches

### Smoke Rings

How to fight big tobacco without ever talking about the health risks of smoking.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 6:34 PM ET

The first monday in October usually shuffles in on soft slippers—ordinary cases, argued ordinarily. Today is no different. The justices strive to rein in any possible drama that might accompany the start of the new term. Nothing to see here folks ... just brains in a vat, coming back to life after a long summer marinating. Actually the entire 2008 term promises to be—how to put this—as thrilling as [cleaning out the lint filter](#). Which is why Supreme Court reporters struggled this weekend to make today's first case—about federal pre-emption doctrine and tobacco lawsuits—sound like a knuckle-biter. Here's the bad news: Not only is this morning's case the [less-interesting tobacco case](#) this term, it's also the less [interesting of the pre-emption cases](#). Grim. I know. But stick around. It turns out good.

Federal pre-emption law stomps around in big boots. Whereas the states-rights "revolution" once celebrated the ingenuity of the various states when it came to working out complex legal problems, federal pre-emption doctrine strives for "national regulatory uniformity" and the consistency of clear federal laws. Thus, if Congress wants to, it may pre-empt or block state lawsuits in areas into which it plants its federal flag. The Roberts Court has been feeling [all kinds of love](#) for federal pre-emption lately, which is why Philip Morris is feeling giddy at the prospect of using it to deliver a "[knockout blow](#)" to a raft of state consumer-protection lawsuits alleging the cigarette maker fraudulently misled smokers into believing that "low-tar" or "light" cigarettes were not actually as dangerous as the everyday kind.

Today's argument, [Altria Group v. Good](#), involves a lawsuit filed by three smokers from Maine, but it's one of dozens of similar "light" lawsuits filed around the country. The tobacco companies are hoping the impenetrable shield of federal pre-emption will protect them absolutely from all of these state anti-deception suits, which would represent another big win for business at the Roberts Court. A district court in Maine dismissed the "light" suit on pre-emption grounds. The [1<sup>st</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals found for the smokers](#).

The facts don't look great for the smokers. Altria, Philip Morris' parent company, points to a 1965 statute, the [Federal Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act](#), which explicitly says that "no requirement or prohibition based on smoking and health shall be imposed under State law with respect to the advertising or

promotion of any cigarettes." In other words, states can't go after cigarette companies for misleading ads connecting smoking and health. You can always mouth the word *cancer*, but if you say it aloud, federal pre-emption kicks in, and your lawsuit evaporates. For their part, the smokers contend that this case has nothing to do with advertising pertaining to "smoking and health." They just want to sue big tobacco for being big fat liars.

Former Solicitor General Ted Olson, representing Altria, points out that the Maine lawsuit is completely obsessed with "smoking and health" and is an obvious candidate for federal pre-emption. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg asks him whether that leaves any space at all for state attorneys general to remedy deceptive advertising or labeling practices. Olson offers an example of non-health-related deception that would not be pre-empted by the Labeling Act: Tobacco companies would be on the hook under state law for, say, lying about the number of cigarettes in a package. Justice Stephen Breyer wonders if even blatantly false claims about cigarettes cannot be pursued under state law. Claims, he says, like "smoking 42 cigarettes a day will grow back your hair." Olson says this sort of claim does not relate to smoking and health. So Breyer changes his hypo to "smoking builds strong bodies in eight ways."

Breyer remains perplexed. In contemplating the Labeling Act, he says, "I can understand totally why Congress would not want 50 states telling cigarette companies what to say about health and smoking." But he just can't figure out "why Congress would want to get rid of the traditional rule that advertising has to tell the truth."

The tobacco company is arguing that the Maine lawsuit must be dismissed because it is both "expressly" pre-empted and "impliedly" pre-empted, although when Olson is invited by Justice Scalia to address the implied pre-emption argument, he says, very frankly, "I'd like to spend no time on the implied pre-emption argument," to which Scalia laughs, "Good idea!"

David Frederick, representing the Maine smokers, opens with the claim that the Labeling Act was never intended to "immunize cigarette makers for the false statements they made in violation of anti-deception in the marketplace rules." But he is roughed up immediately by Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito. Then David Souter, too, begins to pound Frederick on the fact that the only way his clients can realistically prove damages is by linking smoking and health, and that's the kind of argument pre-empted by the federal rule. Frederick tries manfully to argue that the issue here isn't the "health" distinction between regular and light cigarettes but a "difference in value." But Souter appears unconvinced that consumers would value low-tar over regular cigarettes for any but health reasons. Breyer's urgent nodding suggests Frederick may have lost him on this "smoking and health" point as well. Justice Anthony Kennedy says outright to Frederick: If it's "your position that this suit is not based on a link between smoking and health, I'm going to have

difficulty in accepting your position in this entire case. Do you have a secondary position?"

Things start getting weird when Douglas Hallward-Driemeier, assistant to the solicitor general, rises to argue only the "implied" pre-emption part of the case on behalf of the smokers. First the chief justice busts his chops for taking a position on only 50 percent of the issues in the case and then for arguing a narrow position that—as Roberts sees it—"Mr. Olson gave up in his opening argument." Then Hallward-Driemeier has to pry an enraged Alito out of his hair when Alito begins accusing the FTC of "tacitly approving" low-tar labels for 40 years, long after it became clear they were as dangerous as the alternative. Alito accuses the federal government of single-handedly "creating this whole problem" by passively approving the low-tar advertisements and having "misled everybody who's bought those cigarettes for a long time." When it looks like Hallward-Driemeier is ready to crawl under counsel table, Scalia—who's clearly been studying the Katie Couric "gotcha" tapes—begins to vaguely threaten that bad things will happen to him if the justice discovers the SG's office has taken a contrary position on the express pre-emption question in an earlier case.

Everyone gets gotcha-ed at least once this morning. Justice John Paul Stevens nabs Olson for citing an Illinois case in which it turns out there was no federal pre-emption. The chief justice triumphantly gets Frederick to admit he misspoke when asserting that the smokers hadn't sought injunctive relief in this case. Then Olson has to explain in his rebuttal that he hadn't exactly *abandoned* the implied pre-emption argument; he just had better things to do. And when all the smoke clears, it looks to be another good day for big tobacco and another bad day for the folks harmed by it. Big tobacco blames the FTC for its deceptive claims. The FTC blames big tobacco for its deceptive claims. And the Marlboro Man tips his hat and rides off into the sunset.

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## swingers

### As Goes Omaha ...

Could Nebraska's 2<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District swing the presidential election?

By Jacob Leibenluft

Wednesday, October 8, 2008, at 6:33 PM ET

OMAHA, Neb.—It's hard to know which is stranger: that the man I'm talking to in a North Omaha Burger King was once Jesse Jackson's campaign manager or that we are discussing a competitive presidential race in Nebraska.

Over breakfast, Preston Love Jr. is explaining to me how North Omaha can carry Nebraska's 2<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District for Barack Obama. In most states, carrying a single district wouldn't

matter. But Nebraska is one of only two states that splits its electoral votes—it has five—by congressional district. (Maine, whose 2<sup>nd</sup> District may represent a possible pickup for John McCain, is the other.) Obama has no hope of a statewide victory (meaning two at-large electors would go to McCain) and little chance of winning the state's other two districts. But in the last two months, the Obama campaign has signaled its intention to compete in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congressional—which includes Omaha and some of its outlying areas—by opening up two offices and hiring 15 paid staffers.

The plan Love describes for picking up that vote—which had been in place since well before the paid staff came to town—is pretty straightforward. First, thousands of new voters in the historically black enclave of North Omaha need to be registered—a task that's already been completed. Next, organizers will work to make sure these voters actually get out and vote—by encouraging early voting, by organizing a massive effort to drive residents to the polls, and by preparing for the likelihood that precincts will be overwhelmed on Election Day. By more than doubling previous records for turnout, North Omaha will provide Obama's margin of victory in the district.

For Love, this election—in which he is also running for a seat on the local utilities board—represents a homecoming of sorts. Love grew up in North Omaha as the son of one of the [all-time great jazz saxophonists](#). He played football for the Nebraska Cornhuskers, then left the state to work for IBM. He started working in politics in 1980; four years later, he was running Jackson's 1984 campaign for president. (Two weeks after the campaign started, a more experienced operative came on board.) After a short stint as the Rainbow Coalition's executive director, Love and Jackson fell out, and Love eventually dropped off the political map, became addicted to drugs, and disappeared into Oklahoma. Three years ago, Love came back home to North Omaha, and it wasn't long before he was back into politics—albeit on a slightly smaller scale.

Love had good timing. Voters in Omaha are used to being neglected during presidential elections. After all, their state hasn't been in play for nearly a half-century—casting its electoral votes for a Republican in every election since 1964, when Love was still suiting up for the Huskers. The last Democrat to break 35 percent statewide was Michael Dukakis.

In past elections, when Omahans have turned on their televisions and seen a campaign ad, they've known those messages aren't meant for them. They are targeted at Iowans who live just across the Missouri River. Iowans are a hot commodity in a presidential year, with their all-important caucuses and their nearly even partisan split. At the height of caucus season, the candidates might fly into Omaha—but they usually won't spend any time there, immediately crossing the state line for voters who matter a little bit more.

Nebraska is so deeply Republican that since the state started splitting its electoral votes in 1992, the Republicans have swept them all—making the provision nothing more than a nice piece of political trivia. And even Omaha is still pretty Republican territory. Bush walked away with the district in 2004, winning 60 percent of the vote. Along with Omaha's Douglas County, which tilts slightly Republican, the district includes part of Sarpy County in the south, where the GOP enjoys a huge advantage. In recent years, Republicans have turned out to vote in higher numbers, and GOP candidates have been able to peel off enough independents and conservative Democrats to win the district comfortably.

Given that history, it's natural to wonder whether Omaha is as competitive as Democrats say. After all, by placing just 15 staffers in Nebraska, renting some office space for a few months, and running TV ads that will get viewed by a good swath of Iowa anyway, the Obama campaign can create the perception that it is broadening the playing field. David Bywater, the executive director of the Douglas County Republican Party, says as much, arguing that Democrats were hoping for a "self-fulfilling prophecy" that would be aided by a local and national media eager to cover a new battleground. (Guilty as charged!) It's also true that, unless Democrats can overturn a traditional GOP advantage in turnout, their persistent—albeit shrinking—deficit in registered voters means they may simply run out of votes.

Still, compared with the rest of Nebraska, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District isn't quite so unforgiving for a Democrat. (Granted, that doesn't say much.) For one, it's geographically small, which makes the logistics of campaigning easier. (By comparison, Nebraska's 3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District, covering the western three-quarters of the state, is about 65,000 square miles.) As Omaha has grown in recent years, its population has become more diverse and more college-educated. I arrived in town on the day of the [River City Roundup](#) rodeo (official tractor dealer: A&M Green Power), but the one-time cattle town's largest employers now include PayPal and the credit card processor FirstData.

And campaign professionals in both parties say they think Obama has a fighting chance. A poll commissioned by Jim Esch, the Democrat hoping to unseat incumbent Rep. Lee Terry, found Obama within four points in early August—before Obama had any staff presence here. (Republicans say they don't find that poll credible, contending their own numbers have them "very optimistic.") A few days after I left, Sarah Palin arrived for an unexpected visit, although she insisted in her speech that she was only in town because she had "[asked to come to the heartland of America](#)."

To win, however, Obama will have to do more than rack up huge margins in North Omaha. Douglas County's political dividing line is 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, a north-south highway that serves as

one of the city's main thoroughfares. West of 72<sup>nd</sup>, the electorate tilts heavily toward the GOP. East of 72<sup>nd</sup> are the Democratic strongholds: not just North Omaha, but also a growing Hispanic population to its south. And then there's South Omaha—a neighborhood traditionally dominated by the conservative Catholic Democrats who may be the key swing voters in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District.

In 2004, the South Omaha precinct that casts its ballots at the Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Church went for John Kerry by a five-vote margin. When I visited the parish's fair on a Sunday late last month, the general mood was frustration—along with a bit of bemusement as to why anyone would travel to Nebraska to write about the election. No one was happy with the bailout Congress was set to vote for the next day. (One woman told me her colleagues at work had resolved to write in Omaha's favorite son, Warren Buffett, for president.) Sitting with her adult daughter and a few friends, Pat Smith told me that she is not terribly happy with either Obama or McCain.

But Smith—who voted for Bush for 2004 and described herself as "strongly pro-life"—said she was leaning toward Obama after watching the first debate. "I like Obama and what he's saying," she said. "The middle class has been left out," she explains, and she believes Obama is doing a better job of expressing that.

John Krause, who had a piece of tape reading "NOBAMA" on his shirt and reveled in his role as the parish's conservative standard-bearer, said that while some of the "cafeteria Catholics" in attendance might vote for Obama, many would end up voting for the Republican ticket. "At the end of the day, people are going to say, 'That's not the way we want to live in Nebraska,'" Krause says, running down the list of issues on which he says South Omaha Catholics might favor McCain over Obama: abortion, national security, energy policy.

It may all be irrelevant. For Nebraska's single electoral vote to matter, the [rest of the map](#) would have to line up in such a way to give one candidate 269 votes and the other 268. Obama, for example, could win the states Kerry won, plus Iowa, New Mexico, and Nevada. Or McCain could win all the Bush states but cede Iowa and Colorado to Obama. These permutations are exceedingly unlikely, but they could leave Nebraska's 2<sup>nd</sup> as the district that puts either candidate over the top. After decades of being ignored, it would be quite a way for Nebraska to matter again.

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## technology

### The Daily Beast's Burden

Can Tina Brown show me everything that's great on the Web today?

By Farhad Manjoo  
Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 5:28 PM ET

Early every morning, I open my Web browser and load up a half-dozen "aggregator" sites: [Techmeme](#), [Memeorandum](#), [Real Clear Politics](#), [Google News](#), [the Drudge Report](#), and [the Huffington Post](#). This is my first sortie into the day's news, the way I orient myself to what's going on in the world now that I [no longer subscribe](#) to a print newspaper. After picking clean the smorgasbord of links, I dip into a second set of sites, these pulling in quirkier tales from around the Web: [Digg](#), [BuzzFeed](#), [Fark](#), [Hacker News](#), [Boing Boing](#), and [Kottke](#) as well as my personalized Web aggregators at [Friendfeed](#) and [Google Reader](#). During the course of the day, I repeat this process often; in my manic hunt for the freshest stuff on the Web, I reload some of these sites 10 or 20 times each. No wonder Tina Brown decided to start her own Web aggregator. Even if other people are only a fraction as reload-happy as I am, these sites are click magnets.

Brown's new venture, [the Daily Beast](#), launched this week. It's still too soon to assess its place in the online firmament—new Web sites change radically over time, and though I think TDB does some things well, there's much it could improve. (My favorite feature is "The Big Fat Story," a daily chart that outlines different viewpoints on a contentious topic in the news—Barack Obama's [connection to Bill Ayers](#), for instance, or the press's [effect on the markets](#).) It's telling that the former editor of *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair* is now running a Web aggregator. Her entry into the business highlights these sites' leading role in how we get our news. My dream site—a meta-aggregator that sifts through all my favorite aggregators and picks out the stories that it can tell I'll love—still doesn't exist (that's why I've got to keep refreshing so many different URLs), but all of the investment in the field suggests that it might not be far off.

"Does the world really need another news aggregator?" Brown asks in an entertaining introductory [FAQ](#). She answers by asserting that, actually, her site "doesn't aggregate." Instead, in addition to providing a smattering of original content, the Daily Beast "[sifts](#), [sorts](#), and [curates](#). We're as much about what's not there as what is."

But Brown protests too much. Aggregating carries no shame: Sites that exist primarily to link to other sites embody the Web in its purest form. Linking is the soul of the Web, and the companies that recognized this early have seen enormous success. (Yahoo was a [thriving Web directory](#) before it was a corporate tragedy.) The online-news business came to prominence on the back of outbound links—you may have first visited Matt Drudge's page for unsourced Clinton administration gossip, but if you kept coming back, it was for his irresistible tabloid eye. (If you can read a Drudge headline like "[Fury Over Cat-Eating Festival ...](#)" without clicking, you're made of stronger stuff than I. And if you can't hold back, here's a handy hint for

navigating aggregators: If you've got a newish Web browser, click the link with your middle mouse button—the scroll wheel—to open the story in another tab. Now the cat-eating story can wait until you're done reading this.)

Brown is correct that all aggregators are as much about what they omit as what they include. Omission, indeed, is their primary feature—you go to the Daily Beast or BuzzFeed or HuffPo because they've already scanned through the news, gossip, funny videos, games, and assorted ephemera that hits the Internet each day and will presumably give you just the good stuff. In this light, "Does the world need another aggregator?" is as silly a question as "Does the world need another map?" The answer is always yes—different people need different guides for different purposes. And as the Web expands, with more people posting ever-stupider stuff each day, we're only going to need more, and better, aggregators.

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of aggregators—those produced by people, and those produced by machines. The Daily Beast is made by people. The staff scouts the Web and pulls together the best stuff into a "[Cheat Sheet](#)," a list of "must-reads from all over." It's a comprehensive effort, but in its beta form, the "Cheat Sheet" seems to miss much of the Web. It's composed mainly of stories from big outlets around the world—the *New York Times*, Politico, Bloomberg, etc. So far, there hasn't been much stuff from YouTube, Flickr, right- or left-wing discussion sites, or some dude's blog.

I chalk this up to newness: The best aggregators choose stories for a specific, finely targeted audience, and TDB doesn't yet have an audience. The Huffington Post was in much the same position when it first launched three years ago. "What is its political sensibility?" I [wrote at the time](#). "Who are its target readers? Are they people who like politics, or people who like art, or technology? Why should you read it, and what should you do with what you've read once you're done? Most important: Why would you go back?"

In the years since, HuffPo has found an answer to that question: "that one." It has transformed itself into a lean, mean, Obama-loving political news machine, a site that finds and dissects big political stories more quickly than most full-fledged news organizations. You can scoff at HuffPo's bias—just as you can at Drudge's—but you can't question its journalistic importance to its target readers. Take a look, for instance, at [the page](#) that the site assembled for this week's presidential debates. Starting a few hours before the debate, HuffPo's minions began pulling together bits from big and small newspapers, the AP, *Slate*, Politico, the Obama campaign's Web site, and YouTube to assemble a full guide to the festivities. Then it updated the page during the debate with a live blog. The result was not especially pretty to look at, and it wasn't even really objective, but for Obama-leaning political junkies, it was catnip—a page begging to be refreshed. As a result of such pages, HuffPo has seen an

amazing increase in traffic over the past year—some metrics put it [above Drudge](#).

The Daily Beast has no detectable partisan lean, and Edward Felsenthal, the site's managing editor, told me that he didn't think he had to cater to a political group to gain an audience. He's right; though a partisan view does seem to boost traffic, some of the best aggregators do well by pursuing other audiences. Fark caters to people who like stupid stories about, say, [mishaps involving transsexuals](#) or the perils of [driving a lawnmower while drunk](#). Jason Kottke has a curatorial sense matched to folks who watch *The Wire* and read Michael Lewis, Malcolm Gladwell, and David Foster Wallace. Different aggregators for different people, then. When I asked Felsenthal to describe TDB's audience, he was more vague; he said his mission was to point to stuff that's "provocative and essential." If the Daily Beast does well, that designation will get more concrete over time. Certainly Tina Brown knows about building an editorial sensibility.

The other way to build an aggregator is through machines, and it's in this area we've seen the most progress recently. Google News uses computers to analyze the text, publication date, and length of news stories to determine the biggest news of the day. Techmeme and Memeorandum, which were both created by programmer [Gabe Rivera](#), monitor link patterns to come up with a list of the most-blogged stories of the day. Digg and its social-news brothers seek to measure enthusiasm for a story; they let you vote on what you like, and the most-popular stories float to the front page.

On all of these sites, the computers are attempting to bring some automation to the quintessentially human act of editing. Tina Brown got famous by assigning magazine stories that hit a nerve with the public. Digg uses the crowd to do something very similar—by collecting the input of thousands of readers, it shows off stories that it knows will hit a nerve with readers. At this year's TechCrunch50 conference, [several startups](#) showed off technology that they say will filter and edit the Web even more efficiently.

The interest in automated aggregation reflects the field's economic appeal. As Google proved, finding a way to present people with a link to exactly what they want can be a very lucrative endeavor. Still, I bet that we'll be relying on both human- and computer-curated sites for some time. I notice a lot of overlap in the many different aggregators I check out each day, but there are also many stories that only one or two of the sites have posted. Digg is by far the best place online to find a hilarious YouTube video. On the other hand, if someone's written something compelling about David Foster Wallace, you're more likely to find it on Kottke. If your interests are diverse, it still makes sense to keep hitting reload on every aggregator in town.

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## technology

### Google Plays Monopoly

Why the search company's ad deal with Yahoo is bad for the Web.

By Farhad Manjoo

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 5:37 PM ET

Last spring, Yahoo was under assault. Microsoft had launched a hostile takeover, activist investor Carl Icahn was promising to [sweep out](#) the company's recalcitrant management team, and large shareholders were filing [a barrage of lawsuits](#) accusing the company of acting irresponsibly in turning Microsoft away. Yahoo had only one option: run to Google. The search giant offered Yahoo a Faustian bargain—in return for a huge chunk of cash, Yahoo would outsource its advertising operations to its primary rival. Yahoo accepted, and experts estimate that the company could get a much-needed infusion of cash from the deal, as much as \$1 billion annually. There's only one potential holdup: the Department of Justice.

While both companies maintain they're doing nothing illegal, they [agreed](#) last week to suspend their collaboration while the DoJ finishes its review, which is expected to take a couple more months. Google already commands about [70 percent](#) of the search engine market. A deal in which it takes over ads for Yahoo—which controls another 20 percent of the market—would seem to create a monopoly. Nevertheless, the government isn't likely to stand in the way of the deal, and Google looks sure to further expand its power and reach in the ad market. This could be bad news not only for advertisers but also for the many Web sites that depend on revenue from ads. In the long run, the deal could also mark a turning point for Google—the moment its public image shifted from that of an innovator to a monopolist whose every move is suspected and dissected.

In scrutinizing the Google-Yahoo project, regulators are asking one main question: Will it raise the prices of ads on the Internet? Generally when two big producers in a market join up, competition declines, and prices rise. But Google, Yahoo, and [their defenders](#) say that the market for search engine ads is completely different. Search ads are pegged to keywords. If you want to run a Google ad for your Web shoe shop, you choose terms ("shoes," "sneakers," "pumps," etc.) for searches on which you'd like your ad to appear. Many other shoe companies want their ads to come up on the same keywords, of course, so Google runs an auction to determine which ads to display most often and in the highest positions. The shoe company that pays Google the most gets prime billing. In other words, Google and Yahoo argue, search companies don't determine ad prices—the [advertisers set their own prices](#). If an advertiser is willing to pay Google 50 cents every time someone clicks on an ad pegged to

the keyword "shoe," he's not going to raise his bid just because his ad might also come up on Yahoo.

There's also some fear that a Google-Yahoo collaboration could push advertisers to abandon Yahoo's ad platform, further narrowing the search market. After all, if ads you place with Google will run on both search engines, why would you bother dealing with Yahoo at all? Google [says that's unlikely](#). Yahoo has promised that it will run Google's ads only on a small portion of its search terms. (Under the terms of the agreement, Yahoo will display Google ads when users search for a term—say, "[red roses in Alabama](#)"—for which it has no ads of its own to display.) The only way for advertisers to guarantee that their ads come up on Yahoo, then, is to place ads at Yahoo. In this way, Google argues that the deal would be *better* for advertisers. Because Google will provide Yahoo with "more relevant ads," advertisers will likely see "a better return for every dollar they invest" in online advertising. Google's advertising president, Tim Armstrong, [wrote](#) in a blog post last month.

The Association of National Advertisers, a trade group that represents more than 9,000 consumer brands, disputes Google's claims as speculative. In [a letter](#) that the group sent to the Justice Department last month, it put forward a different scenario: If Yahoo can boost its cash flow by running a small number of ads from Google, why wouldn't it decide, over time, to run more and more ads from Google? The ANA predicts that will happen—and in time, "all search engines will increasingly rely on Google as a source of advertising."

There's another big flaw in Google's defense of the Yahoo deal: It's not exactly true that search engines give advertisers *complete* control over the price they pay for ads. Search engines use algorithms to determine an advertiser's "relevance" to a given keyword—the less relevant your ad, the higher you've got to bid for that keyword. Search companies do this to make sure that a given ad goes with a given search term. This makes sense—you wouldn't want every keyword to trigger ads for Viagra just because Pfizer has a huge advertising budget.

The trouble is that Google doesn't give much guidance on how it calculates relevance. This measure—what Google calls a "[quality score](#)"—has been the subject of enormous controversy among advertisers. Google's secret algorithms can decide that one shoe company must pay at least 10 cents for the keyword "shoe" while another must pay 50 cents. To advertisers, these price differences often seem arbitrary, unfair, and even self-serving. Worse, Google isn't very good at explaining itself to advertisers who feel slighted by its pricing decisions. Last month, *New York Times* columnist Joe Nocera [recounted the saga](#) of Dan Savage, an entrepreneur who runs [Sourcetool.com](#), a directory of sites that sell industrial products. Google hiked up Savage's minimum price for ads overnight, and when he pressed the company for an explanation, he was told to "please refrain from repeatedly contacting our team." Savage—who filed a

complaint with the Justice Department—now believes that Google was trying to hurt his company in order to prop up [Business.com](#), a Sourcetool rival that's also one of Google's advertising partners.

Did Google hurt Sourcetool on purpose? Probably not—but Savage's concern suggests the kind of fears we'll see if Google were to dominate Web advertising even more than it does today. As it is, advertisers like Savage have few options when they're looking to run ads; Google is already the biggest game in town. But if Google begins to run Yahoo's ads, too, there'll be no recourse—you either take Google's terms or forget about anyone seeing your ads.

It's not only advertisers who ought to worry about Google gobbling up Yahoo: A more powerful Google will also hold greater sway over the millions of Web sites that depend on advertising for their revenue. Many big sites—newspapers and online magazines like *Slate*, for instance—and millions of small sites (blogs, e-commerce sites, startup firms) run ads provided by Web companies like Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft. As Michael Arrington—the founder of the tech industry blog TechCrunch, one of the most successful new publishers on the Web—points out, Google doesn't share much revenue with sites that run its ads. "The only thing keeping them even close to honest is the fact that Yahoo and Microsoft will occasionally compete for those partners," he [argues](#). Once Yahoo is gone, Google will be able to decrease the revenue given to blogs and other small publishers—a potentially huge blow to a vibrant new medium.

Despite these fears, few in the industry believe that the government will stop the Google deal. When it came into office, the Bush administration [rolled over on prosecuting Microsoft](#), and since then, it has shown little interest in fighting monopolies. The government raised few objections when Google acquired the advertising firm DoubleClick, and Google has been lobbying the government aggressively to approve the Yahoo deal.

Google is also helped by the fact that its biggest adversary, and the biggest critic of the Google-Yahoo proposal, isn't exactly the most admirable company in tech. Given Microsoft's own sorry antitrust history, its promise to help the government fight the deal is something like Hannibal Lecter counseling the FBI on how to catch a serial killer. But if you worry that Google is [taking over the world](#), it's hard not to cheer for Steve Ballmer's Lecter. Google's critics—not only its search rivals but also entertainment companies, publishers, and consumer advocacy groups who've all become alarmed over its growing market power—see the deal as their best chance to initiate a vast antitrust charge against its operations. As Brad Smith, Microsoft's general counsel, [told](#) a congressional panel in July, "Never before in the history of advertising has one company been in the position to control prices on up to 90 percent of

advertising in a single medium. Not in television, not in radio, not in publishing. It should not happen on the Internet."

At a press conference last month, Google CEO Eric Schmidt argued that the only people who are really worried about the deal are folks who've been brainwashed by Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer. "We are quite certain Microsoft is busy helping everyone get upset about things," [he said](#). That's not really true, but Schmidt's Microsoft reference may remind lawmakers that in the tech industry, giants fall quickly. Ten years ago, Gates and co. looked indomitable. As we look back, though, it's clear that Microsoft let its power get to its head. Blinded by the profits it was reaping from Windows, it didn't notice other innovations coming along—the Internet, Web software, and the awesome profits to be had in search. Google sees itself as a wiser company. But in pushing to join forces with its nearest rival, it may be repeating the last tech giant's biggest mistake.

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## the audio book club

### The Audio Book Club on *The Night of the Gun*

Our critics discuss David Carr's memoir.

By Meghan O'Rourke, Troy Patterson, and Katie Roiphe  
Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 3:54 PM ET

*To listen to the Slate Audio Book Club discussion of David Carr's *The Night of the Gun*, click the arrow on the player below.*

*You can also download the audio file [here](#), or click [here](#) to subscribe to the Slate Audio Book Club feed in iTunes.*

This month, the Audio Book Club ventures into R-rated territory with a discussion of [The Night of the Gun](#), by David Carr. The story of Carr's descent into alcoholism and drug dependency, *The Night of the Gun* is, on the one hand, a typical addiction-and-recovery memoir. But Carr tries to add a new twist to the old genre by relying on his reporting skills, rather than just his memory, to reconstruct a more accurate personal history. Now a *New York Times* columnist, Carr interviews his friends, family, and ex-girlfriends, and digs through his old medical records in search of objective truth. Does Carr succeed at leaving convention behind? The 45-minute conversation explores this question and many others.

If you'd like to get an early start on the next book-club selection, we've chosen F. Scott Fitzgerald's [The Great Gatsby](#). Watch for—and listen to—our Audio Book Club about *The Great Gatsby* in November.

You can also listen to any of our previous club meetings through our [iTunes feed](#), or by clicking on the links below\*:

[American Wife](#), by Curtis Sittenfeld  
[Brideshead Revisited](#), by Evelyn Waugh  
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[All the King's Men](#), by Robert Penn Warren  
[Eat, Pray, Love](#), by Elizabeth Gilbert  
[Tree of Smoke](#), by Denis Johnson  
[The Audacity of Hope](#), by Barack Obama  
[The Road](#), by Cormac McCarthy  
[The House of Mirth](#), by Edith Wharton  
[Independence Day](#), by Richard Ford  
[The Emperor's Children](#), by Claire Messud  
[The Omnivore's Dilemma](#), by Michael Pollan  
[Beloved](#), by Toni Morrison  
[Everyman](#), by Philip Roth  
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[The Year of Magical Thinking](#), by Joan Didion

Questions? Comments? Write to us at [podcasts@slate.com](mailto:podcasts@slate.com). (E-mailers may be quoted by name unless they request otherwise.)

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## the big idea

### Name That Economy

We don't just need to recapitalize the banks. We need to reconceptualize capitalism.

By Jacob Weisberg

Saturday, October 4, 2008, at 7:51 AM ET

At the beginning of the century, when the United States briefly contemplated the prospect of paying off its national debt, Alan Greenspan [raised an unexpected concern](#). A government surplus would end up being invested in private assets, which would violate free-market principle and could deliver socialism through the back door.

Greenspan smothered that dangerous surplus in its crib by endorsing the Bush tax cuts, but his benign view of derivatives and his nonchalance about the unregulated "shadow banking system" helped bring about the [outcome he feared](#) anyhow. Authorizing the Treasury Department to take stakes in financial firms is merely the Paulson plan's most dramatic departure from

textbook capitalism. The legislation—which the Senate had enough sense of irony to attach to a mental health bill—implicitly recognizes that major financial institutions have become too interwoven with the global economy to be allowed to fail.

What should we call the economic model emerging from this crisis of capitalism? Despite the collectivization of losses and risk, it doesn't qualify as even **reluctant socialism**. Government ownership of private assets is being presented as a last-ditch expedient, not a policy goal. Yet it's inaccurate to describe our economy, either pre- or post-Paulson, as simply *laissez faire*. A system in which government must frequently intervene to protect the world from the results of private financial misjudgment is modified capitalism—part invisible hand, part helping hand. This leaves us with a pressing problem of both conceptualization and nomenclature.

Where right-wing critics denounce the Paulson plan as socialism, those on the left see it as a form of **corporatism**. This was the economic philosophy of fascist Italy, which Mussolini defined as a merger of state and corporate power. Under such a system, the largest industries function as adjuncts to the regime. There are many contemporary variations on this theme, such as the Asian and Latin American styles of **crony capitalism**, oil-state **plutocracy**, and **kleptocracy** on several continents. Vladimir Putin's **authoritarian capitalism** is yet another version. But despite the closer ties that can be expected between government and a consolidated financial sector composed of superbanks like J.P. Morgan Chase-Bank One-Bear-WaMu; Bank of America-LaSalle-U.S. Trust-MBNA-Countrywide-Merrill; and Citi-Smith Barney-Wachovia, corporatism doesn't accurately describe a system in which favoritism toward specific companies is roundly decried and concern about moral hazard nearly sank the economy.

Perhaps, then, we're at another of the midpoints between public and private ownership usually described as a **mixed economy**. The New Deal welfare state that arose in response to the Great Depression is one example of this compromise. The most durable version is the Western European model of **social democracy**, with its larger, more interventionist state, wider social safety nets, more extensive regulation, and higher taxes. Socialized health care would represent a step in this direction, but bailing out bondholders to protect the financial system doesn't. Our new order also can't be described as trending toward **dirigisme**, the economic approach of Charles de Gaulle, where government directs the allocation of resources toward chosen technologies—in the French case, nuclear power, high-speed rail, *Le Minitel*. Nor are we moving toward the Chinese system, a modern form of **mercantilism**, in which government-owned enterprises serve the power of a philosophically bankrupt state.

The system that's emerging from this crisis has less to do with the eternal liberal project of finding a humane **Third Way**

between socialism and capitalism than it does with containing the fallout from private risk-taking. It might be described as **regulatory capitalism**, since stringent capital requirements, thoroughly enforced, are probably the most obvious preventive measure for the future. But regulation, which is inherently backward-looking, seems an insufficient answer to the current crisis. What got us into trouble wasn't merely a failure of oversight. It was something we previously thought of as a strength of the Anglo-American system, namely aggressive financial innovation. Even a supervisor with broad authority, like Britain's [Financial Services Authority](#), is challenged to keep pace with the inventiveness of investment bankers. To prevent crisis, we need something more akin to a financial-preemption doctrine, to address systemic risks before they materialize.

A better name for our new system might be **life jacket capitalism**. The role of the watchdogs isn't just to enforce seat-belt and helmet laws for the financial sector. Market misjudgments have produced systemic risk with growing intensity and alarming frequency, requiring rescues in 1988 (the savings-and-loan crisis), 1994 (the Mexican collapse), 1997 (the Asian meltdown), 1998 (the Long Term Capital Management debacle), and 2008 (the subprime catastrophe). In an age of globalization, threats to the financial system can arise unexpectedly from almost any place. What's scary about such an arrangement is how much power it vests in our economic guardians and how vigilant, wise, and adroit those guardians need to be. One dud call [like letting Lehman go](#) and the whole world can blow up.

Or perhaps we should say that we've entered the Marxist stage of **Rube Goldberg capitalism**. Bill Gates [coined the term](#) *creative capitalism* earlier this year to describe a market approach to alleviating poverty. In a broader context, his phrase gets at the reality that private enterprise on its own won't address global ills such as climate change, economic inequality, or systemic financial risk. Put a different way, when capitalism stops working, it's time to start looking for a good adjective.

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## The Big Sort Lessons From the "Redneck Caucus"

Rural-friendly Democrats still win by getting the urban vote.

By Bill Bishop

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 1:28 PM ET

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## the chat room Knock, Knock!

It's Christopher Beam, taking readers' questions about the most effective kinds of political volunteering.

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 1:56 PM ET



*Slate* political reporter Christopher Beam was online at [Washingtonpost.com](http://Washingtonpost.com) to chat with readers about the [most effective kinds of political activism](#). An unedited transcript of the chat follows.

**Christopher Beam:** Hey everyone. We've got 26 (!) days left till Election Day, and if there was ever a time to maximize the time and money you give to your favorite campaign, it's now. Looking forward to your questions!

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**kwheless:** Does knocking on doors work? I was called by one of the campaigns, asking me if I would "knock on doors" for candidate X. My first thought was "gee, I hope they don't knock on my door, that's really annoying." I asked many of my friends, and they said the same thing: "Ugh, I hate when people knock on my door. It's so intrusive and annoying. It just makes me want to vote for the other candidate!" This was true of the Democrats and the Republicans—all of them thought a door-knocker would turn them off, rather than attract them. Who wants some annoying stranger at their door?

Maybe I'm in the minority on this, or maybe it's generational. After all, there are people who like being called by telemarketers, people who think spam is great, and people who love getting a visit from a Jehovah's Witness. But I find a stranger at my door about as appealing as a root canal. And I wonder if it really helps the candidates.

**Christopher Beam:** This was my initial reaction—who wants to answer the door EVER, let alone twice a day? But the campaigns insist it's the best way to win over voters. "Personalize, personalize, personalize." If you already know who you're voting for, it's useless. (In that case, put up a "Do Not Knock" sign or something.) But if you don't—which is still a big chunk of the population—it's a rare chance to get actual information about the candidates from a real, live person.

Plus, it helps campaigns keep tabs on how voters are leaning. If voters in a particular neighborhood used to be for McCain, but are now reconsidering, the campaign knows there's a problem.

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**Gulfport, Miss.:** Hi, I really enjoyed your "busy person's guide." On the subject of getting voters to the polls ... I heard that sometimes misinformation is spread about polling places being closed or changed, in order to prevent some sections of the community from voting. What do campaigns do to combat this, and how do we help?

**Christopher Beam:** The only solution is to combat bad information with good information. Tons of voting rights groups

are out there monitoring neighborhoods—particularly low-income areas—for misleading fliers with inaccurate polling locations, etc. Rumors also circulate about voter ID laws (in some states, you need to show a driver's license, in others you don't). This happens every year. The real threat this year, I think, is cyber-dirty tricks—emails and robocalls designed to confuse voters.

The best place I've seen to find your polling location is [maps.google.com/vote](http://maps.google.com/vote). Type in your address and you can see where you're supposed to vote.

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**Philadelphia:** Someone is going around Philadelphia posting a notice that anyone with an outstanding warrant or unpaid bill, such as an electric bill or student loan, will be arrested by a plain-clothes police officer when they go to vote. What is my civic duty to counteract this?

**Christopher Beam:** Classic dirty trick. Some fliers also say you'll be arrested if you have overdue rent. Or if you don't have the proper ID. Or if you or a family member has ever been in prison.

These kind of rumors are ALWAYS untrue. The problem is, correcting them is tricky. Sometimes, by denying the rumors, you end up reinforcing them. (Lots of good articles about this phenomenon this election.) The trick is to spread the good info without repeating the bad.

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**Middle America:** Aren't the campaigns worried about donor fatigue, especially in this very uncertain financial climate? I gave \$500 to Obama in the primaries and had planned to give more for the general, but I won't because of the economy and because signs all say he will win anyway.

**Christopher Beam:** Donor fatigue is only a problem if most of your donors have maxed out. In the Obama campaign's case, that hasn't happened. Last time I checked, the vast majority of donors were still giving in small increments and were nowhere near approaching the \$2,300 limit. The flagging economy could dampen donations, but I think the race is tight enough and the stakes high enough that people will continue to give through Election Day.

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**ellamenta:** The most important thing to do is to try to make certain that voting takes place without improper restrictions. See today's article in the *New York Times*. The Republicans have been making their own arrangements to ensure that the system is

gamed by widespread voter disenfranchisement. I am predicting chaos on Nov. 4 unless this issue is addressed quickly and very publicly.

**washingtonpost.com:** [States' Actions to Block Voters Appear Illegal](#) (*New York Times*, Oct. 8)

**Christopher Beam:** That article is a good example of how restrictions on voters can be non-partisan in theory, but partisan in practice. It's a systematic problem: election officials are using the Social Security database to confirm voter registration—a process that often results in invalidation—as a first resort instead of a last resort. They're not partisans. But because Democrats have much higher registration levels this year, it ends up hurting them more. The Obama camp has an army of lawyers across the country dealing with this kind of thing. But your "chaos" prediction may come true if one of the swing states is especially close.

**Houston:** I think that knocking on doors might be good in some cases. I once had the candidate herself come to my door, and needless to say, I did vote for her. Also, I am going to volunteer for my candidate at a call center on the weekend before the election. Do you think that calling closer to the election is better than doing it earlier?

**Christopher Beam:** I don't. By the week of the election, most people have already decided who they're voting for. That doesn't mean you can't make a difference. But you're more likely to change someone's mind now. Plus, close to election day, they'll be getting inundated with calls. So you'll have more competition.

**Biloxi, Miss.:** What are the requirements for being an election observer? Do you have to be a lawyer? I've heard the campaigns are seeking people to volunteer as observers and would prefer lawyers. What does the observer do, how much does it help to be a lawyer, and what do they do when something shady goes on at a polling place?

**Christopher Beam:** Each campaign is allowed to have an election observer at every polling place. (Independent observers from voting rights organizations, oddly, are not allowed.) The campaigns prefer lawyers because they 1) probably know state election law better, and 2) have more authority to challenge ballot tampering. Each state's election law is different, so it can be confusing to discuss them all at once. But one by one, they're pretty easy to understand. I'm afraid it's too late to get a law degree between now and Election Day, but you should still volunteer.

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**Knocking on Doors:** I live in New Hampshire. During primary season, we are inundated with volunteers calling, knocking on doors, stopping us on the street, etc. This past year, Sen. Clinton's campaign arranged for busloads of volunteers to come to New Hampshire from New York to knock on doors. It was cold, and more than a few of them were bundled up in their New York Yankees hats and sweatshirts, prompting the average New Hampshire voter to wonder—do they want us to vote for her or not? This is Red Sox Nation!

**Christopher Beam:** Fools! This is door-knocking 101. Try and establish a connection with the resident, whether it's you both live in the same neighborhood, both have kids, both work at a union, whatever. The corollary: Don't say or wear anything that's going to tick them off. Clinton should have known better—after all, she was the one who hedged and said that in a Yankees-Cubs match-up, she'd have to "alternate sides."

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**Grand Rapids, Mich.:** Hi. I was wondering what we know about the origins and uses of the names in the Obama campaign's "neighbor-to-neighbor" database. After spending hours knocking on doors with these lists, I don't think I've persuaded one person—all I've done is cleaned up the list of people who have died, moved or are already firm McCain supporters. And then of course, I found the pre-existing Obama supporters. I live in a tony suburb; turnout is high. So why is it really worth my time to identify these voters? I guess that's what I want to know.

**Christopher Beam:** Hate to say it, but updating the database is a big part of door-knocking. It's the best way for campaigns to keep tabs on who's leaning which way.

But in a tony neighborhood like yours, it's probably pointless. People are already well-informed, and, I'm guessing, opinionated. Your time would be better spent in less-decided areas of the state. You might think about phone banking instead, or calling up people you know and getting them to volunteer with you in neighborhoods more likely to swing the election—ie, not Grand Rapids.

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**Columbia, Md.:** Another option for voters in red or blue states is to commute to nearby purple states to knock on doors (obviously this is more practical in small states!). There are regular carpools and convoys of Maryland Democrats driving up to Pennsylvania to knock on doors for Obama (and I assume Maryland Republicans have similar groups), or individuals can contact campaign offices in nearby undecided states to volunteer.

**Christopher Beam:** Make the exodus! Face-to-face campaigning is much more effective than over-the-phone, not to mention a lot more fun. The only danger—make sure you don't look like a carpetbagger. (See above example about Red Sox/Yankees.) People respond best to their peers. If you're a NYC liberal trying to persuade rural PA voters that Obama's gun control record really isn't so bad, you might do more harm than good.

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**Evanston, Ill.:** What should one do, given that the election is now a forgone conclusion? Will the media ever admit the race is over?

**Christopher Beam:** David Plouffe, is that you?

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**Australian in America:** I'm an Australian living in America, and when I first moved here I was surprised to find out how many people don't vote, and how much money is spent trying to "get out the vote." Back home, voting is compulsory. The election is held on a Saturday and you get fined if you don't show up and cast a ballot. My question: As much as I long to, I can't vote here. It makes me crazy to think of people wasting their voice by forgetting or not bothering to vote. What's the best way I can motivate/remind eligible voters to vote, without annoying them? (For what it's worth, my efforts the past couple of months have been directed at reminding my friends to register and to apply for their absentee ballots. I have a new baby, so spending Election Day holding a sign probably is not an option.) And, um, has voting always been noncompulsory here?

**Christopher Beam:** Dear Aussie in America—I hate to say it, but ... stay away. Depending where exactly you were planning to volunteer, you might actually dissuade voters. Probably not in Massachusetts or California, but swing counties of swing states like nothing less than to be told what to do by someone they probably think is British. Case in point, in 2004 the *Guardian* (the British paper) asked its readers to write to Ohio residents and tell them to vote for Kerry. It was a disaster. Many Ohioans wrote back in words unpublishable in a family newspaper.

So, I know you mean well, and it must be frustrating to see people wasting their votes. (As they say, not voting makes everyone else's vote count more.) What you can do, though, is give a lot of money. Better yet, give Australian dollars. Leverage that exchange rate!

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**Volunteering long-distance?:** I have a friend from a swing state who temporarily lives in Mississippi. She is volunteering for the

Obama campaign here despite the redness of this state, and I applaud her for that. But would she be better off making telephone calls for the campaign in her home state and reaching swing voters there? Her cell phone still has the old area code. Just wondering...

**Christopher Beam:** The Obama campaign says they're contesting every state, but frankly Mississippi is still far from a toss-up. If she's a tragic hero kind of person, let her stay there. But if she wants to maximize her time, she's much better off calling people in her home swing state. Especially with that area code—looks less suspicious on the caller ID.

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**Washington:** More about poll monitoring: I was considering taking the day off and becoming a poll monitor in Virginia. I imagine there may be long stretches of time with nothing to do. Do you know if poll monitors can bring books? Laptops? If not, I might fall asleep and embarrass myself and my candidate.

**Christopher Beam:** If you want to be responsible for mass disenfranchisement in a key Virginia swing district, be my guest! Just don't bring a copy of *How to Rig an Election*.

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**Hampton, Va.:** There are new revelations of a huge, multistate scandal with ACORN's registration of poor voters (read: Democrats). The feds raided offices in Nevada and subpoenaed voters in Ohio who have registered up to 90 times(!) There are reports that the Dallas Cowboys starting lineup all registered to vote in Nevada. Are we seeing the nationalization of Chicago politics? Will graveyards be voting in November? Does all this lead back to Obama?

**washingtonpost.com:** [ACORN accused of submitting false voter registration forms again](#) (*Kansas City Star*, Oct. 9)

**Christopher Beam:** It's an ugly situation, but it seems to be partly the result of giving volunteers registration quotas. If there's incentive to register a certain number of people every day—or a punishment for failing to—you get this kind of fraud. Again, registration this year is disproportionately Democratic, so it's tempting to see it as a partisan issue. But I think it's more an institutional problem than a partisan one.

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**Fairfax County, Va.:** I know it's a perennial, but I think yard signs (you call them lawn signs) really are more important than you say. They boost morale for me as a volunteer about 1,000 percent. I also like the way the signs tell my neighbors who I stand for; when I do the neighbor-to-neighbor canvassing,

people actually say (happily), oh, you live in the house on the corner with the signs. Plus, all this annoying talk about Obama needing "validators" is certainly served by all of us having visible signs in our yards. It's also an arms race in our neighborhood. I would hate to have the McCain signs up, and no Obama signs. People look for signs and they assume it's like reading a local poll result. We don't want a false bandwagon effect for the person with more signs.

**Christopher Beam:** Agreed that in neighborhoods where Obama might have some skeptics, it helps to "validate" him publicly. But in general, I think yard signs and sign-waving are more for the people doing the planting and waving than for the people who see them.

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**Northern Virginia:** Is it legal for an Australian to donate to an American campaign, as you just advised?

**Christopher Beam:** Good point—you have to be a U.S. citizen to give money to a campaign. If our Australian friend is not, then he's out of luck.

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**Southern Maryland:** Personal contact works. In my experience, the people who claim it made them vote against a candidate would have done that anyway—they just wanted an excuse. In any event, those numbers are minuscule. I've knocked on thousands of doors in campaigns and it is an overwhelmingly positive experience. I've spent six hours phone-banking this week already and will spend the weekend door-knocking in Northern Virginia.

**Christopher Beam:** That's what most people say. It's rare that someone will change their mind about a candidate based on something a supporter says. It's like with music—every band has some terrible, embarrassing fans. You can't let that cloud your judgment of the tunes.

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**Christopher Beam:** Thanks, all, for the great questions. Now get out there and knock on doors! Except mine.

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## the green lantern What the Heck Is "Clean Coal"?

It depends whom you ask.

By Jacob Leibenluft  
Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 6:44 AM ET

**In last Thursday's vice-presidential debate, Joe Biden and Sarah Palin seemed to be falling over themselves to demonstrate their support of "clean coal." What is clean coal, anyway, and should I be in favor of it?**

If nothing else, your confusion suggests that whoever came up with the term "clean coal" deserves a raise. After all, the phrase has become so successful that politicians can get in trouble for seeming to oppose it—[just ask Sen. Biden](#)—despite the fact that nobody agrees on what it actually means.

It's not hard to see the problems with regular old coal. The mining process destroys the land—not to mention what it does to the miners themselves. In the United States, coal accounts for more than half of nitrogen oxide emissions and about one-quarter of sulfur dioxide pollution, and it's a major source of the particulate matter that makes smoggy air so hard on your lungs. And even among fellow fossil fuels like petroleum, coal is in a [class of its own](#) when it comes to emitting greenhouse gases.

Now that we've gotten that out of the way, what's clean coal? That depends a little on whom you ask. The industry-sponsored American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity defines it as "any technology to reduce pollutants associated with the burning of coal that was not in widespread use" prior to regulations from 1990. By that definition, the group can call any newer coal-based power plant clean. Indeed, as the ACCCE never hesitates to point out, the nation's coal power plants are 70 percent ["cleaner"](#) than they were when it comes to regulated pollutants like sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, and nitrogen oxide.

The Lantern supposes America's electricity producers deserve credit for those advances—although it's worth noting that many of them came in response to new laws like the Clean Air Act. But that doesn't change the fact that—kilowatt for kilowatt—coal remains just about the most carbon-intensive energy source out there. From the perspective of global warming, at least, the kind of "clean coal" we have now still isn't very clean.

Outside the industry, "clean coal" usually refers to something different: namely, the idea that the carbon dioxide produced from burning coal in power plants might be [captured and stored](#), preventing it from contributing to climate change. There are reasons to be skeptical about this idea. While carbon-capture technology has been demonstrated on a [small scale](#), a larger project in Illinois [hit a major snag](#) when increases in its projected cost put its funding into doubt. Indeed, building the infrastructure necessary to transport and store all that carbon presents its [own huge challenge](#). Even supporters within the

utilities industry admit that a target of 2020 for large-scale tests of the technology is "[very aggressive](#)."

So should you support politicians who support clean coal? It's certainly better than dirty coal—and the United States isn't likely to be rid of either one for the foreseeable future. If nothing else, the greatest benefit might come from exporting carbon-capture technology to other countries that are even more coal reliant than we are. Federally supported research for cleaner energy is a worthy cause, and while it is hard to know the most cost-effective way to spend those dollars, carbon-capture technology seems like a plausible option.

Still, there's no doubt at all that coal—as it's presently burned in power plants, or will be in the near future—is not a clean source of energy. (Even low-emissions coal power would require maintaining those environmentally destructive mining operations.) And that means that the folks who have made "clean coal" into a buzzword are almost certainly using the language of environmentalism to obscure less-noble motives.

Quite simply, a greener use of coal will happen only with a much tougher effort to cut emissions. Even if we had the technology and infrastructure to capture and store carbon dioxide, that process would likely be too expensive for the coal industry to implement at current prices. According to a widely respected [MIT study](#), coal power plants will use that technology only if they are going to suffer financially by emitting so much carbon dioxide.

To their credit, both [John McCain](#) and [Barack Obama](#) have implied that building new coal plants with existing technology isn't acceptable. (Obama's climate-change proposals are [stricter on emissions](#)—and, as a result, [more likely to ensure those plants don't get built](#).) But neither candidate appears too eager to advertise that point in the [coal-rich swing states](#) where the election may be decided. At that point, clean coal starts sounding a little more like dirty politics instead.

Is there an environmental quandary that's been keeping you up at night? Send it to [ask.the.lantern@gmail.com](mailto:ask.the.lantern@gmail.com), and check this space every Tuesday.

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**the has-been**

## **What Won't You Do for Us Lately?**

The next president doesn't have to solve everything at once.

By Bruce Reed

Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 5:01 PM ET

**Tuesday, Oct. 7, 2008**

**The Going Gets Tough:** In the first two debates, the presidential candidates and their running mates were asked a host of questions on what they will do about America's most pressing problems, from the financial crisis and the recession to Iraq and Afghanistan. But so far, the toughest question of all has been one the candidates would rather not answer: what they *won't* do for us—and what, because of the economic crisis, they might not be able to get done as quickly as they would have liked.

Two weeks ago in Mississippi, Jim Lehrer asked Barack Obama and John McCain, "[What are you going to have to give up](#) ... as a result of having to pay for the financial rescue plan?" Obama readily admitted that "there's no doubt that we're not going to be able to do everything," then cleverly used the rest of his answer to list key priorities he won't abandon. McCain repeated a proposal he made in April for a freeze on domestic discretionary spending.

Last Thursday in St. Louis, Mo., Gwen Ifill tried again, asking both vice-presidential candidates, "[What promises have you and your campaigns made to the American people that you're not going to be able to keep?](#)" Joe Biden said he and Obama would slow down their commitment to double foreign aid and would end the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy, then reaffirmed the campaign's agenda on energy, health care, and education. Sarah Palin said she ought to be able to honor all the promises she has made since she has only been on the ticket for five weeks.

It's easy to see why candidates wouldn't want to answer a loaded question like which promises they won't keep. And understandably, the campaigns are no more eager to look at the damage the past month has done to next year's federal budget than Americans are to see what the market has done to their 401(k)s.

Yet in many ways, it might be in the candidates' interest (not to mention the country's) to say a bit more about what they won't do. Voters won't mind, because for them, reality is already on the ballot. And the next four years will be a lot easier for the new president if he spends the next four weeks letting the country know just how hard that job will be.

As the front-runner for the toughest job on earth, Obama stands to gain the most from elaborating upon his point in the last debate that "we're not going to be able to do everything." The more Obama emphasizes that government can't do everything, the harder it will be for Republicans to scare voters into believing the cost of government will go up. Along those lines, Obama recently gave a smart, little-reported speech on his plans to [cut spending through government reform](#).

Ironically, the credit crisis and the recession are bound to make the electorate need government more and like it less. That's why the politics of the rescue plan took us on a trillion-dollar rollercoaster ride last week. Voters know that in a crisis, sometimes government must step in—but with their own cupboards so bare, Americans are even less inclined than ever to pay more for it.

For Obama and McCain, the challenge is to make sense of that dichotomy. The Bush administration has been a case study in big government run badly, and the electorate feels doubly burned as a result. Consider a remarkable finding in today's [NBC-Wall Street Journal poll](#), which has Obama up by six points nationally. Voters were asked whether they would prefer a president who'll "provide changes from the current Bush administration policies and create a government with more active oversight to protect consumers in areas such as housing and financial transactions" or a president who'll "provide changes from the current policies in Congress and deal with waste and fraud in the system to protect taxpayers from government inefficiency and pork-barrel spending." Voters deserve both, but forced to choose, they picked the pork-fighting president over the active-oversight president by a whopping 58 percent to 38 percent.

Since the next president's most difficult challenge will be holding onto the trust and patience of a beleaguered electorate, it wouldn't hurt to get a head start. Even before the credit crisis, the next president stood to inherit more problems from George Bush than he could hope to solve all at once. Now the next administration's burden will include a global financial crisis beyond what any one president, party, or country alone can address.

In the darkening economic climate, some of our pre-existing challenges will take on greater

urgency—for example, cutting middle-class taxes to keep consumers and homeowners afloat, tackling health care costs before they drag the auto industry under, turning energy efficiency into a prime job-creation sector, and dealing with the nation's long-term balance sheet. On some other fronts, the rate of progress may depend on how long it takes the economy and markets to rebound, and how well Hank Paulsen's rescue fund pays off.

Acknowledging limits won't crush people's expectations—Americans have no illusions about how tough the next few years will be. They'll welcome a president who understands just how tough things are and levels with them about how to deal with it.

The next president doesn't need a broad mandate to solve everything. He needs a clear, focused, patient mandate to put us back on our feet so we can go on to do greater things. Our current president hasn't done much for us lately. We're ready for one who'll tell us what he won't do, and we can count on to come through on the rest. ... **5:03 P.M.** ([link](#))

**Tuesday, Sept. 23, 2008**

**[Someone's Better Off:](#)** With a deep recession looming and the government going bust, the widespread consensus is that the financial crisis strikes a bitter blow to the presidential candidates' grand policy ambitions. As Ted Widmer asked in the Outlook section of Sunday's *Washington Post*, "[Why on Earth would anyone want to be president right now?](#)" The next president will have to spend so much cleaning up the mess, he might be tempted to let Treasury foreclose on the White House.

Is the next president worse off than he was eight days ago? In many respects, yes. No president can do well if ordinary citizens are doing badly. A number of national problems that were getting too little attention before Black Monday will now sink even deeper in the beleaguered next president's stack.

Yet in the long run, our next leader may look back on the current meltdown as the biggest break of his presidency. While the next president's job just got a bit more perilous, it also became a great deal

more important. And if President Obama or President McCain is able to rise to the occasion, this crisis could increase the odds that his time in office will be a success.

Here are three reasons why, down the road, our 44<sup>th</sup> president might see the earth-shattering economic news of the past week as not all bad:

**1. It takes a crisis to change the tone in Washington.** Throughout their campaigns, Barack Obama and John McCain both have promised to put partisan politics aside and set a new tone in Washington. The financial crisis seems to have beaten them to the punch. Oddly enough, the two campaigns spent much of the past week jabbing at each other—while Republicans and Democrats back in Washington sounded more notes of bipartisan harmony than we've heard since 9/11.

That's not a coincidence. In normal times, the two biggest deficits in Washington are urgency and seriousness of purpose. In a crisis, those are no longer in short supply. JFK once said the time to fix the roof is when the sun is shining. But until the rain starts, it's also much easier for the political world not to notice any leak. On many public policy issues in recent years—health care, Social Security, climate change—the two sides have struggled even to reach agreement on whether crisis was looming. Not this time. You know it's a crisis when conservatives start the bidding at \$700 billion.

Because of their inherent uncertainty, crises tend to force parties to hedge their bets, tamp down ideological certitude, and be pragmatic. "There are no atheists in foxholes and no ideologues in financial crises," [says](#) Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke. The good feeling doesn't last forever: A president who wants to revive partisan rancor can do so in a hurry, as Bush demonstrated in the nasty 2002 midterm elections. On the other hand, a president who wants to keep the spirit of cooperation alive can do so till the crisis goes away—a window that might last awhile.

**2. The next president will be too broke to fail.** Like Wall Street titans, presidents tend to think more clearly when times are tight than when they have money to burn. When George W. Bush inherited a huge surplus, he squandered it in his first six months. When Bill Clinton took office, by

contrast, all he inherited was a huge stack of IOUs. That forced him to make a few tough, painful decisions early in his presidency—which produced a far bigger economic payoff for the country over the long haul.

All politicians dream of a world in which they don't have to make choices. But for a president, having to make choices can be a blessing, not a curse. Bush would have done better fighting one war at a time, not two. LBJ ran into trouble because he thought he could afford both guns and butter. Most successful presidents concentrate on getting one thing done before moving onto the next item on their to-do list. With no illusions of plenty, the next president will be forced to focus his priorities and invest his political capital well.

**3. Caution is not an option.** Consider this: Henry Paulson has proposed a more sweeping domestic agenda in the last eight days than George W. Bush proposed in the last eight years. The next president could get a whole term to govern like Paulson.

Exhausting as it sounds, that too could prove to be a blessing in disguise. For the past two years, Obama has worked hard to make the political world safe for change. McCain, caught between a failed brand and a reluctant base, is looking for ways to make change his friend. The economic crisis will give the winner an opportunity and obligation as president to be a bolder agent of change than they or their parties imagined.

For example, the current conventional wisdom assumes that big-ticket items like health care and distant challenges like Social Security must be put on hold until the economy recovers. But the more big new debts we take on in the short term, the more important it will become to shore up our financial stability over the long haul. For that matter, if we do nothing about health care costs, the auto industry could be next in line at the Treasury window.

From tax reform to energy to modernizing government, our economic woes will compel the next president toward what FDR called "bold, persistent experimentation." In the depths of the Great Depression, Roosevelt chose that course for a reason: When challenges we've never tackled

before start appearing at rates we've never seen, bold experiments are our only hope of catching up. We have to try new things, and keep trying until we get it right.

Shortly after the 1992 election, the Clinton economic team met at Blair House to tell the president-elect that he was about to inherit a far bigger budget deficit than anticipated. He should have been crestfallen, but surrounded by portraits of FDR and other predecessors, he couldn't help feeling inspired by the challenge. Let's hope, for his own sake, the next president feels the same way. ... **4:25 A.M.** ([link](#))

**Wednesday, Sept. 17, 2008**

**Ice Time:** When Joe Lieberman became the first Jewish vice-presidential nominee, Clyde Haberman of the *New York Times* [summed up](#) the American Jewish reaction as one of initial pride, followed immediately by the question, "Is it good for the Jews?" When Mitt Romney launched his presidential bid, he ran into [similar worries](#) from many fellow members of the Church of Latter Day Saints, who wondered if it would be good for the Mormons.

So perhaps it's only natural that since Sarah Palin emerged as the most famous hockey mom in history, the reaction around the rink has been, is it good for hockey?

Other sports have made their peace with politics. For a century, major league baseball has asked presidents to throw out the first pitch on Opening Day. Both parties have elected retired football players to Congress, the Super Bowl is a major political event, and George W. Bush [risked his life](#) to watch an NFL playoff game. Barack Obama played basketball with troops; he and McCain both hyped their NCAA tournament picks.

Yet aside from Team USA's gold-medal upset in the 1980 Olympics, the worlds of American politics and hockey have tried their best not to collide. A few politicians may tout the sport in hockey-mad states like Alaska, Minnesota, and Massachusetts, and John Kerry nearly brought his skates all the way to the White House. But in general, the two arenas have kept their distance, each viewing the other as too rough, cold, and foreign.

Now comes Sarah Palin, who threatens to turn hockey into the biggest celebrity spectator sport in the world. Suddenly, "[hip check](#)" and [Zamboni](#) have entered the political lexicon. Last week, the *New York Times* examined the "[hockey way of life](#)," suggesting that in Alaska, the game is at best a way to keep young people off the streets and at worst the reason Bristol Palin got pregnant. This week, hockey moms went viral with a Swift Boat parody, "[Hockey Moms for Truth](#)."

As a fading hockey player and below-average hockey dad, I have one reaction to the overnight surge of media attention to our once obscure game: Thanks, but no thanks! If we wanted to become a political football, we would have signed up for a different sport.

At first, the rush of Palin publicity seemed like a boon for the game. Before she introduced herself as "just your average hockey mom," "average" wasn't the first word most often associated with hockey parents. In popular culture, the more common adjectives were "[violent](#)" and "[homicidal](#)." USA Hockey, the governing body for the sport, frets enough about the stereotype to run chill-out ads [like these](#).

What's more, ice hockey suffers from the same problem as the Republican Party: not much of a female fan base. The scoreboard company Jumbotron makes the astonishing claim that [only 22% of NHL fans are women](#). By comparison, women make up nearly twice as big a share ([43%](#)) of Major League Baseball fans, [41%](#) of NBA fans, [40%](#) of NASCAR fans, and [37%](#) of NFL fans. (Hope is on the way: Ice hockey is [one of the fastest growing women's sports](#).)

But after a few weeks under the media spotlight, the hockey world is starting to remember why we preferred our rinks dimly lit in the first place. Stu Hackel, [a hockey blogger for the New York Times](#), wrote a long post recently on how much he resents the game being dragged into politics and used as a pawn. Several readers agreed -- and chided him for dragging politics into a hockey blog.

Over at [OnFrozenBlog](#), [pucksandbooks](#) tried to look on the bright side: "If you love hockey, how can you not like how hockey is being celebrated (associated with perseverance and toughness) in



the rhetoric of 2008's political debates?" For readers, however, pride was tempered by grave concern about what the association with politics might do to hockey's reputation.

In my experience, we hockey parents are already a little grumpy from ice times that are too late or too early. For many, the sudden attention just brings up the sore subject of how little respect the sport gets in the U.S. "You know hockey is never going to be better than the fourth major sport," one OnFrozenBlog reader lamented, recalling how ESPN's SportsCenter used to make fans suffer through golf highlights before getting around to the NHL.

Then again, at least we don't live in [Canada](#), where politicians are always trying to put lipstick on a puck. The current leader, Stephen Harper, is a self-styled "[hockey-dad-turned-Prime-Minister](#)." A Canadian hockey pol gets to have it both ways – screaming at the refs now and then shows you're a regular bloke, while sitting behind your kid on the bench [softens your image](#).

Yet even in Canada, the hockey schtick doesn't play well in all quarters. With national elections a month away, the Toronto *Globe and Mail* ran two articles last week after an "exclusive interview" with Harper. [One piece](#) discussed the Prime Minister's views on NHL expansion, noting that he has written an unpublished history of hockey. The [other](#) article took a different tack: "During a campaign stop at a winery in St-Eustache, Que., Mr. Harper, who many have called a Philistine, also spoke at length about his life-long passion for music and the piano." With great panache, Harper recounted writing poetry, suffering as a pianist from "nervous" hands, and overcoming one of the most unusual childhood hard-luck stories in political history: "For the first half year I was in lessons, we didn't have a piano and I would actually practice for my lessons on a cardboard keyboard."

If politicians start saying the difference between a hockey dad and a pit bull is a cardboard keyboard, hockey parents might decide we liked our old reputation better. ... **1:38 P.M.** ([link](#))

**Tuesday, Sept. 9, 2008**

**NASCAR on Ice:** Every election, pollsters and pundits introduce another voter group whose views are certain to decide the outcome: [soccer moms](#), [NASCAR dads](#), [security moms](#), [office park dads](#), and (three times in the past week) [Wal-Mart moms](#). These categories, while sometimes useful, share an important methodological flaw: On Election Day, when undecided voters finally make up their minds, exit pollsters don't ask them where they work or where they shop, what sports they watch or what games their children play. Exit polls eschew these trendy questions in favor of boring demographic perennials like age, race, gender, education, and income level.

Precisely because exit poll questions don't change much from one cycle to the next, however, they provide an interesting portrait of how the electorate evolves—or doesn't. Some segments of the electorate are fiercely loyal to one party; others lean toward one party but more dramatically in some years than others.

According to exit polls, the most volatile swing voter group over the last 20 years hasn't been hockey moms like Sarah Palin, commuter dads like Joe Biden, or soccer parents like Barack and Michelle Obama. Over the last two decades, the swing voters most prone to moving away from Republicans in elections Democrats won and toward Republicans in elections Republicans won have been white men with a degree from high school but not college. In other words, forget Sarah Palin: In recent elections, the biggest swingers looked more like her husband, Todd.

Democrats don't need to win a majority among white men without bachelors' degrees, but it's crucial to cut our losses. In 2000 and 2004, Democrats lost that group by about 30 percent. In the 2006 midterms, Democrats cut our losses in half. In 1992, with some help from Ross Perot, we managed to eke out a slim plurality. Because this voting bloc still makes up nearly one-fifth of the electorate, losing them by 30 points instead of 15 means a shift the size of George W. Bush's margin over John Kerry. The only group with a swing that comes close is white women with the same educational profile, who turn out in greater numbers but are less likely to switch sides.

Of course, past performance is no guarantee of future results, especially in a path-breaking year like this one. The Obama campaign has invested heavily in registering and turning out new voters, while the McCain campaign carries the albatross of an old, unpopular GOP brand. In an economy this troubled, and after an administration this bad, all kinds of voters who went Republican in the past should be up for grabs. Then again, that might be yet another reason men with no college degree should be among the most up-for-grabs of all.

So far, Todd Palin has attracted as much attention for [his looks](#) and [his nickname](#) as for his politics. No one knows whether he joined the Alaskan Independence Party because he wanted a vote on statehood, was a [Perot supporter](#) fed up with the two parties, or just liked this one's quirky platform: "[The AIP supports fishing!](#)" Sarah Palin called her husband "a story all by himself"—fisherman, oil worker, snowmobiler, part Eskimo, and perhaps the first person ever to be [cheered](#) by a Republican Convention for belonging to the United Steelworkers Union.

The current vice-presidential spouse, Lynne Cheney, grew up in a small Western town, got a Ph.D., and used it to write [racy novels](#). Todd's passion is the 2,000-mile, NASCAR-on-ice [Tesoro Iron Dog](#). Last year, he told the [AP](#) that his principal cause as First Dude of Alaska was expanding training for noncollege workers: "For those of us who learn by touching and tearing stuff apart and for those who don't have the financial background to go to college, just being a product of that on-the-job training is really important."

Noncollege men aren't going to vote Republican just because they identify with Todd Palin—and in any case, he's hardly the stereotypical working-class swing voter. He's now a registered Republican, married to a passionately conservative one. Before he left his job as a production operator for BP, he was earning between \$100,000 and \$120,000 a year—about three times the Census Bureau average for men who haven't finished college. In contrast to the Lower 48, Alaska remains a land of opportunity where it is still possible to succeed beyond one's wildest dreams through what the AP called "a lifetime of manual labor." Many of my high-school classmates in Idaho headed north for the same reason.

The trouble with the GOP argument is that so far, their only plan to boost the incomes of non-college-graduates is the one Todd Palin came up with on his own 20 years ago: work in Alaska!

So in the rush to court more familiar voters, Democrats shouldn't concede Dude Dads to the Republicans. Democrats may not have a First Dude on the ticket, but we have a good plan to help the forgotten middle class do better again. The next president needs to help the United States [build the job-rich industries of the future](#), such as new energy-efficient technologies, and give Americans what Rep. Rahm Emanuel calls "[a new deal for the new economy](#)": health care they can afford, a 401(k) pension they can keep, a tax cut they've earned, and the chance to get more training and send their kids to college.

In this campaign, Americans have heard more than enough about [the Bridge to Nowhere](#). What millions of voters want out of this election is a bridge to somewhere. A [bridge to the 21<sup>st</sup> century](#) would be a good place to start. ... **5:19 p.m.** ([link](#))

## **Saturday, August 30, 2008**

**The New Frontier:** Flush from a pitch-perfect convention week and a crescendo of can-you-top-this speeches by Bidens, Clintons, and Obamas, Democrats in Denver had no trouble bounding out of bed Friday morning. After running up the score at Invesco Field on Thursday night, our biggest worry was getting penalized for excessive celebration. Then, just when the party thought its luck couldn't get any better, John McCain's choice of an obscure rookie governor sent Democrats popping champagne corks all over again. Giddy partisans rushed to the phones and microphones to trash Palin as "[Geraldine Quayle](#)."

I wasn't so quick to jump for joy. For one thing, I would have rather spent the fall poking fun at Mitt Romney, and got my hopes up when his stock soared to 80% in the political futures market shortly before the Palin announcement. Alas, passing up Romney deprives us of the perfect slogan: "[Four More Houses!](#)" While we weren't able to elect the first presidential android, his supporters and I can take heart that thanks to his campaign, there are now 4.7 million cracks in that plastic ceiling.

For me, the choice of Sarah Palin cuts a little too close to home. She was born a few miles from where I grew up, went to junior college in my hometown, and has now eclipsed Deep Throat and Larry Craig as [the most famous graduate in University of Idaho history](#). It's as if the McCain campaign were micro-targeting my wife's demographic: [exercise-crazed](#) hockey moms from Idaho

who married their high school sweethearts. The Obama campaign can rest assured – universes don't get much smaller than that.

As governor, Sarah Palin helped stop the Bridge to Nowhere. Now she's the Candidate from Nowhere. That's a steep climb for any candidate, even one who shoots moose and runs marathons. Before every VP selection, the only people willing to talk about the choice don't know anything. With Palin, that was still pretty much the case even after her announcement. Republican congressman Mike Simpson doesn't know her, but told the *Idaho Statesman*, "[She's got Idaho roots, and an Idaho woman is tough.](#)"

If national security experience is the measure of a potential Commander-in-Chief, Palin has an extraordinarily high burden to prove. To paraphrase the words Lloyd Bentsen used to destroy the last surprise vice-presidential choice, she's no Joe Biden.

But for a host of reasons, Democrats needn't rush to run down Sarah Palin. Obama seemed to come to that conclusion Friday afternoon, [striking the right tone](#) after Democrats had gone after her with a few early hip checks. Both Obama and Biden called Palin to wish her good luck, but not too much. Hillary Clinton echoed that Palin's "historic nomination" would nevertheless take the country in the wrong direction.

Why hold back? First, as Obama himself demonstrated in winning the Democratic nomination, 2008 is a tough year to handicap the relative virtues of being a fresh face and having experience. The natural reflex is to brand Palin as too great a risk. But McCain is practically begging our side to throw him into that briar patch. Convinced he can't win as a candidate of the status quo, he wants everyone to know he's willing to take a risk.

Second, anyone going after Palin for the important experience she lacks had better be careful not to dismiss the value of the experiences she does have. Raising a large family and running a small state may not be sufficient qualifications to assume the Presidency. But we're not going to get far by minimizing those jobs, either. Here again, the McCain campaign may be hoping that Democrats – or the press – will come down too hard on Palin, and spark a backlash that turns her into a working mom's hero.

Third, and most important, voters don't need our help to figure this out. In the end, they'll be the best and toughest judge of whether or not Sarah Palin is ready. Back in 1988, the Dukakis campaign actually ran an ad against Dan Quayle. It didn't work, and wasn't necessary. In any case, Quayle had only himself to blame for falling flat on the national stage. By straining so hard to compare himself to JFK on the campaign trail, he practically wrote Bentsen's famous line for him.

In fact, Quayle never recovered from his debut at the '88 convention, when voters witnessed his deer-in-the-headlights moment. Over the next few days and in the vice-presidential debate, Palin's reputation will be shaped in much the same way – by whether she can take the heat, or looks like a moose hunter in the headlights. ... **1:38 A.M.** ([link](#))

## Friday, August 22, 2008

**Spoiler Alert:** When the McCain campaign floated the idea of a pro-choice running mate, social conservatives reacted with the same outrage they've been rehearsing for 40 years: Some threatened to bolt at the convention; others said they'd rather lose the election than expand the Republican tent. "If he picks a pro-choice running mate, it's not going to be pretty," Rush Limbaugh warned.

But the most explosive threat comes from former [right-hand-of-God](#) Ralph Reed, in his new novel, [Dark Horse](#), a "political thriller" that imagines this very scenario. Spoiler alert! Just hours after forcing his party to swallow a pro-choice VP, the Republican presidential nominee in Reed's pot-boiler is brutally murdered by radical Islamic terrorists at the GOP Convention. Reed's implicit threat to Republican candidates: The Christian right has so much power, they can even get someone else's God to strike you down.

Reed doesn't just kill off the character who named a pro-choice running mate—he has the running mate go on to destroy the Republican Party. For the Republicans (and the reader), the plot goes from bad to worse. With the pro-choice figure—an African-American war hero named David Petty—now at the top of the Republican ticket, evangelical leaders throw their support behind Calif. Gov. Bob Long, who just lost the Democratic nomination at a brokered convention and decided to run as an independent after going through a religious conversion in the chapel of the hospital where his daughter nearly lost her baby. Petty offends evangelicals, while Long—obviously a quick study—wows them with the depth of his knowledge of the Bible.

Petty's candidacy implodes when a YouTube clip shows him telling Iowans that his support for the GOP abortion plank is only symbolic. Days before the election, voters also learn that as defense secretary, Petty convinced a no-bid contractor to hire a lobbyist who moonlights as his mistress and madam of an exclusive Washington brothel.

Reed's clear warning: If you put a pro-choice Republican on the ticket, don't be surprised when he turns out to be a lying, cheating, no-bid-earmarking john.

By contrast, Reed's evangelicals love Long, who woos them with parables and waffles on abortion. "I've heard through the grapevine that he's become a Christian," says televangelist Andy

Stanton, a composite of Limbaugh and Pat Robertson. "He may be someone we can do business with." With Stanton's enthusiastic blessing, Long sweeps the South and beats Petty 2-to-1 among evangelicals.

All three candidates come up short of 270 electoral votes, so the election goes to the House of Representatives. Even though Republicans control the House, Petty loses when Republican members of the evangelical caucus support Long instead. The message to McCain: Social conservatives will gladly support a maverick, as long as he says what they want to hear on their issues.

Of course, John McCain doesn't need to curl up with a Ralph Reed roman à clef to know that social conservatives won't budge on abortion. The more interesting question is why my evil twin decided to write the Great Republican Novel in the first place. True to his own life story, the book suffers from too much plot and not enough character. But it's not nearly as bad as I'd hoped, and it's chock-full of accidental revelations:

- Ralph expects the Republicans to lose the White House in 2008 but win it back in 2012 and 2016. By the time the book takes place, Democrats haven't carried a single Southern state in five straight elections (2000 through 2016), and a Republican president who is retiring after two terms reminisces fondly about how "I did what I had to do" to win the 2012 election. Alas, his "botched effort to overthrow the Iranian government" inspires the terrorist attack on the 2020 GOP convention.
- Much as social conservatives and neocons can't stand liberals and the media, most of all they hate each other. Reed's hapless Republican nominee insists that "this election is about terrorism, not social issues" and doesn't hide his contempt for social conservative leaders and "their self-importance, single-issue litmus tests, and insufferable sense of entitlement." Meanwhile, social conservatives view themselves as "abused spouses" trapped in a "self-destructive codependence" with "the spineless wonders" who run the Republican Party. Reed says the Reagan formula can't save the GOP anymore: "A pro-business party with the religious right grafted in like a wild olive plant, it no longer appeals to the center of the country."
- Money-grubbing consultants are obsessed with alcohol, drugs, and sex. Long's adman is arrested for snorting cocaine, and his top strategist nearly costs his candidate the election by shacking up with a spy from a rival campaign.
- Novel-writing operatives, by contrast, are obsessed only with sex. Reed tries his best to turn social conservative politics into steamy beach reading. In *Dark Horse*, the operative always gets the girl, and she is invariably "bronzed," with swaying hips and tight designer clothes. One femme fatale is "a brunette lollipop" who

captures her prey with lines like, "I thought I was dessert."

- Apparently, Reed does not have much experience courting the women's vote. Long's wife is an alcoholic who's upset that he found God. The Democratic VP candidate is a lightweight who can't remember her party's position on Iran. Two campaign operatives refuse to discuss their grand jury testimony but stop to answer press questions about the designer outfits they're wearing.
- Reed enjoyed running the Christian Coalition more than humping corporate accounts for Jack Abramoff. He writes himself into the book as a minor character named Ross Lombardy, "a veritable computer hard drive of political trivia" and "strategist-cum-organizer with a killer instinct who could quote 200 Bible verses from memory" and "had an uncanny ability to cite the precise vote percentages in every key U.S. House and Senate race in the previous three election cycles." The Abramoff character, G.G. Hoterman, is a corrupt, ruthless multimillionaire lobbyist who crushes anyone who gets in his way. "Politics has a way of criminalizing the normative," Hoterman complains.
- Reed writes knowingly of the "time-honored Washington tradition" of "expressing false regret at the misfortune of someone caught in a scandal, when the truth was everyone enjoyed it." With a twinge of bitterness, he adds that "Washington scandals burn like funeral pyres, and only go out after the angry mob has tossed someone to the flames to pacify the gods."

That pyre suggests Ralph's next move. It's time to gin up the social conservative movement to forget about McCain's running mate and wake up to the GOP-bashing, sex-peddling novelist in their midst. Nothing could do more for slumping sales than an urgent edict from the religious right: Burn this book! ... **3:58 P.M.** ([link](#))

## Monday, August 11, 2008

**It's Your Money:** Over the next two weeks, the Obama and McCain campaigns will spend an impressive [\\$11 million](#) to advertise during the Olympics. Obama's first ad, "Hands," outlines his plan for a green economy. McCain's attacks Obama on taxes. Both ads reflect the campaigns' respective game plans, although Obama's fits in much better with the upbeat not-the-triumph-but-the-struggle spirit of the games that surround it.

If I had a few million to help NBC fill the time between tape delays, I might go after a topic that is on most American viewers' minds during these

games and that seems destined to weigh heavily on the next president: China.

When the 2008 campaign started a few lifetimes ago, this election appeared to be all about China—or, at least, about the long-term competitive challenge that the emerging economic superpowers of China and India pose to the American way of life. But a host of urgent short-term economic problems have pushed our long-term economic challenges aside. For the moment, falling housing prices, rising gas prices, and soaring credit-card debts have made us more concerned about the threat the American way of life poses to the American way of life.

But if our next president ever gets done cleaning up after our current one, he'll confront China's growing shadow on issue after issue. While the United States can make an enormous difference by finally doing its part on climate change, the Chinese have already passed us as the [largest producer of greenhouse gases](#), and our ability and willingness to make progress will depend in part on theirs. Meanwhile, China's [rising demand for oil](#) to fuel its relentless economic growth will continue to cost us at the pump.

When the next president decides what to do about education reform in the United States, China should be on his mind. The Chinese education system churns out 5 million college graduates a year, while we still paper over our high-school dropout rate and look away as half a million of the young people we send to college every year [never finish](#).

Perhaps most urgently, the next president will have to admit what George W. Bush would not—that if we don't put our fiscal house in order, China will foreclose on it. As Obama has pointed out, "[It's very hard to tell your banker that he's wrong](#)." This year's federal budget deficit will be a record \$500 billion, not counting wars and economic bailouts. One of history's headlines on this administration will be, "Bush Owes to China."

The rise of China is [the story of this Olympics](#) and [threatens](#) to be [the story of the next presidency](#). So it's only fitting to give viewers a sense of what's at stake.

My dream ad would show the robot [Wall-E](#) methodically stacking pressed blocks of discarded dollar bills to form giant structures, which turn out to be the [Bird's Nest](#) stadium, the [Water Cube](#) aquatic center, and the [CCTV tower](#). The script would go something like this:

### "Sponsor" (60 seconds)

*Voiceover:* "Ever wonder what Washington has done with your tax dollars? This Olympics is your chance to find out. For the last 8 years, the Bush administration has been paying China billions of dollars in interest on the trillions it borrowed for tax breaks, pork, and special privileges you never got. That money helped create thousands of businesses and millions of jobs—in China. So as you enjoy the games, keep an eye on your tax dollars at work. The way our economy's going, it's tough to pay your bills. But take heart: You already paid China's."

*Tagline:* "America's Taxpayers. Proud Sponsors of the Beijing Olympics."

What's an Olympics without a little national pride? And with any luck, NBC might refuse to run it. ...  
**10:30 A.M.** ([link](#))

### Tuesday, July 29, 2008

**Trader Mitt:** As if John McCain didn't have enough reason to [keep quoting](#) JFK's line that [life isn't fair](#), consider this: According to the political futures markets, Mitt Romney now has a [better chance of being McCain's running mate](#) than [McCain has of winning](#).

Since the primaries, Romney has steadily [gained ground](#) in the VP sweepstakes through hard work and a [disciplined message](#): He'll help on the economy, he grew up in the swing state of Michigan, and he makes his current home in the right wing of the Republican Party. He seems at ease with the unattractive chores of being the vice-presidential nominee: raising money, playing the attack dog, telling the base what it wants to hear.

On paper, Romney's VP bid looks as picture perfect as his presidential campaign once did. Yet even as Mitt watchers revel in the current boomlet, we

can't help wondering whether this Romneymania will last.

With that in mind, Romneystas everywhere need to start making new and urgent arguments on his behalf:

- **The French Are Coming!:** Romney was widely [mocked](#) last fall when he warned that France posed a clear and present danger to the American way of life. But after watching French President Nicolas Sarkozy embrace Barack Obama in Paris last week, conservatives may finally warm to Mitt's "[First, Not France](#)" slogan after all. Romney has impeccable credentials as a Francophobe; Sarkozy would never dream of saying of him, "[If he is chosen, then France will be delighted](#)." In a few short hours in Paris, Obama claimed the president as a convert. Romney spent two whole years in France and converted no one whatsoever.
- **Leave 'Em Laughing as You Go:** One of McCain's heroes, Mo Udall, loved to tell the story of primary voters who heard him say, "I'm Mo Udall and I'm running for president," and responded, "We were just laughing about that this morning." Poor Mo wouldn't know what to make of this campaign. Two months into the general election, nobody's laughing about anything. No one much wants to [joke](#) about [Obama or McCain](#). If Romney were the VP, pundits across the spectrum would exult that at last they had someone fun to mess with. He's a [good sport](#) and a [happy square](#), with a track record of supplying ample new material.
- **WALL-E's World:** Mitt Romney's [Web site](#) is a shadow of its former self—no Five Brothers blog, no ad contests, no animatronic Mitt messages for your voicemail. Yet like WALL-E's [stash](#) of charming knickknacks, the few surviving objects on Planet Romney carry greater meaning. For example, [a striking photo](#) highlights a strength few politicians reveal: Unlike [McCain](#), Mitt Romney was born to read a teleprompter. In the official campaign photo of him rehearsing his concession speech, Mitt is barely visible. All the focus is on the words in big type to be loaded on the prompter.

McCain doesn't much like giving speeches and treats teleprompters accordingly. But you can see how a campaign that has struggled to follow a script might be tempted by the first completely programmable running mate. In 2000, McCain often joked that he was [Luke Skywalker](#). This time, Romney could be his C3PO. ... **12:47 p.m.** ([link](#))

**Tuesday, July 8, 2008**

**Make My Day:** What a difference a month makes. At its June meeting, the D.C. City Council debated Mayor Adrian Fenty's emergency legislation to ban sparklers. After the Supreme Court struck down the city's gun ban, the Council spent last week's July meeting debating emergency legislation to let residents own handguns. Here in the District, we couldn't shoot off firecrackers over the Fourth because they're too dangerous, but we can now keep a loaded pistol by our bedside, ready to shoot down prowlers in self-defense.

Like most D.C. residents, I have no plans to stockpile guns in the wake of the Supreme Court decision. But if the city wants to take away my sparklers, they'll have to pry them from my cold, dead, slightly charred hands.

When I was growing up, the rights to keep and bear firearms and fireworks went hand in hand. My grandmother used a revolver to shoot garter snakes in her garden. Well into her eighties, however, her greatest pleasure in life was to spend the Fourth setting off massive strings of firecrackers, 200 at a time. When she came to visit, she'd step off the airplane with a suitcase full of firecrackers purchased on an Indian reservation. As soon as we got home, she'd light the fuse with her cigarette, then squeal with delight as serial explosions made the gravel in our driveway dance.

In recent years, firearm regulation and firework regulation have gone their separate ways. The National Rifle Association has successfully opposed most gun laws, even ones aimed primarily at criminals. Armed with Justice Scalia's maddeningly unhelpful ruling on the D.C. ban, the NRA already has begun to target the rest.

By contrast, although fireworks aren't nearly as deadly as guns, the government treats them like what they are – a widely popular, sometimes

dangerous American tradition. The federal government long ago banned once-commonplace explosives like cherry bombs. Most states – [even the libertarian bastion of Idaho](#) – have banned or restricted the use of firecrackers. According to the website [AmericanPyro](#), five states, including Iowa and Illinois, permit only sparklers and snakes. Five others, including New York and Massachusetts, [allow no consumer fireworks whatsoever](#). In general, states insist that fireworks must be "[safe and sane](#)" – a balance that has been all but impossible to strike with firearms.

Thanks to the enduring power of pyromania, sales haven't suffered. Since 1976, fireworks consumption has increased ten-fold, while [fireworks-related injuries have dropped](#). Fireworks manufacturers can take heart in knowing that this year's survivors are next year's customers.

Because there is no Second Amendment right to keep and bear sparklers, fireworks law is a straightforward balancing test – between the individual right to burn a hole in the back porch and the mutual responsibility not to burn entire communities to the ground, the personal freedom to pyromaniacal self-expression and the personal responsibility not to harm oneself and others. These days, the fireworks industry has more to fear from climate change than from the authorities. This summer, the threat of wildfires led [Arnold Schwarzenegger to ask Californians to boycott fireworks](#). Drought forced John McCain to forego fireworks at his annual Independence Day barbecue in Arizona.

The trouble with the Supreme Court ruling in the *Heller* case is not that it interprets the Second Amendment as an individual right. The Second Amendment is the constitutional equivalent of the grammatical paradox *Eats Shoots & Leaves*, but whatever the Founders meant by its muddled wording and punctuation, most Americans now take it for granted. The real problem with the Court's decision is that the balancing test for gun rights and responsibilities is even less clear than before. Scalia's opinion devotes 30 pages to a grammatical history of the Second Amendment and a single sentence to how the courts should apply it to most other gun laws already on the books.

Alongside such vast imprecision, the Court went out of its way to strike down the requirement for trigger locks – an extraordinarily modest attempt to balance freedom and safety. Trigger locks can help prevent gun accidents and keep guns out of the hands of children. Far from impeding self-defense, new trigger locks can be unlocked with a fingerprint or a special ring on the gun owner's finger. That means today's gun owner can arm himself to shoot an intruder in an instant – compared to the 30 seconds or more it took to load a pistol or musket in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Over the long term, it's not clear how much of a boon the *Heller* decision will be for gun rights advocates. In winning the case, the gun lobby lost its most potent argument – the threat that at any moment, the government will knock on the door and take your guns away. With that bogeyman out of the way, [the case for common-sense gun safety measures is stronger than ever](#). Perhaps now the gun debate will revolve around more practical and less incendiary issues, like what can be done to reduce illegal gun trafficking and trace guns used in crimes.

If it's any small consolation, the real winners in *Heller* may turn out to be the sparkler lobby. If cities have trouble banning handguns, they will be hard-pressed to take away sparklers. Of course, as with guns, the threat to sparklers may well have been exaggerated. The D.C. Council [rejected Mayor Fenty's sparkler ban](#) by a vote of 11-2, as members nostalgically recalled playing with them in their youth. Councilman and former mayor Marion Barry voted no "with a bang." As Barry knows, there are worse things in life to light than a sparkler. ... **9:51 A.M.** ([link](#))

**Friday, June 6, 2008**

**[The Fight of Her Life:](#)** Ten years ago, at a White House farewell for a favorite staff member, Hillary Clinton described the two kinds of people in the world: born optimists like her husband who see the glass as half-full, and born realists like herself who can see the glass is half-empty.

As she ends her campaign and throws her support behind Barack Obama's remarkable quest, Hillary could be forgiven for seeing her glass as, quite literally, half-empty. The two candidates traded

primary after primary down the stretch, two titans matching each other vote for vote. In the closest race in the modern era, she and Obama split the Democratic wishbone nearly right down the middle, but she's not the one who got her wish.

Yet for Hillary and the 18 million of us who supported her, there is no shame in one historic campaign coming up just short against another. History is a great deal wiser than Chris Matthews, and will be kinder, too. The 2008 contest has been one for the ages, and the annals will show that Hillary Clinton has gained far more than she lost.

The Obama-Clinton match will go down as the longest, closest, most exciting, most exhausting ever. Obama ran an inspired campaign and seized the moment. Clinton came close, and by putting up a tough fight now, helped fortify him for the fight ahead.

Our campaign made plenty of mistakes, none of which has gone unreported. But Hillary is right not to dwell on "woulda, coulda, shoulda." From New Hampshire to South Dakota, the race she ran earned its own place in the history books.

While the way we elect presidents leaves a lot to be desired, it has one redeeming virtue, as the greatest means ever invented to test what those who seek the job are made of. In our lifetimes, we'll be hard-pressed to find a candidate made of tougher stuff than Hillary Clinton. Most candidates leave a race diminished by it. Hillary is like tempered steel: the more intense the heat, the tougher she gets.

And has any candidate had to face fiercer, more sustained heat? As a frontrunner, she expected a tough ride, and as Hillary Clinton, she was accustomed to it. But if she was used to the scrutiny, she could not have anticipated – and did not deserve – the transparent hostility behind it. In much the same way the right wing came unglued when her husband refused to die in the '90s, the media lost its bearings when she defied and survived them. *Slate* at least held off on its noxious [Hillary Deathwatch](#) until March; most of the press corps began a breathless Clinton Deathwatch last Thanksgiving. The question that turned her campaign around in New Hampshire – "How do you do it?" – brought Hillary to tears out

of sheer gratitude that someone out there had noticed.

For a few searing days in New Hampshire, we watched her stare into the abyss. Any other candidate forced to read her own obituary so often would have come to believe it. But as she went on to demonstrate throughout this campaign, Hillary had faith that there is life after political death, and the wherewithal to prove it.

In New Hampshire, she discarded the frontrunner mantle and found her voice. For a race that was largely won or lost in Iowa, the discovery came a few days too late. But the grit Clinton showed with her back to the wall all those months will make her a force with a following for years to come.

The chief hurdle for Clinton's presidential bid wasn't whether she could do the job; Democrats never doubted she would make a good president. Ironically, the biggest question she faced for much of the race is one she answered clearly by the time she left it: whether America was ready for a woman president. No one asks that question any longer. For all the sexism she encountered as the first woman with a serious shot at the White House, voters themselves made clear they were ready. The longer the race went on, the more formidable she looked in the general election. In this week's CBS News poll, she was beating John McCain by nine points, even as she was losing the Democratic nomination.

Last year, the press and other campaigns insisted that Clinton was too polarizing and that half the country was united against her. Now, a woman who was supposed to be one of the most polarizing figures in America leaves the race with handsome leads over McCain in places like North Carolina, a state her husband never carried.

When her campaign started, aides often described Hillary as the least known, least understood famous person in America. During this campaign, it became clear that in certain quarters she's the most deliberately misunderstood person as well. The recent RFK flap was yet another attempt to suggest that her every miscue was part of some diabolical master plan.



Yet while talking heads imagined the evils of Hillary Clinton, voters finally came to know and understand her. They saw someone who knew what they were going through, who would stick with them, fight for them, and get back up when she got knocked down. The phony, [consultant-driven shadow boxing](#) of the last few years has dulled Democrats to the party's historic mission – to defend the values and stand up for the interests of ordinary people who are doing all they can just to get ahead. For those voters, Hillary Clinton was the champion they've been looking for, a fighter they can count on, win or lose, not to let them down.

That's a fight she'll never quit. Like the woman in New Hampshire, we still wonder how Hillary does it, but this time, the tears are on us. As we wish her well, our hopes are high, our hearts are full – and [if our glass is empty](#), it was worth every drop. ... **11:58 P.M.** ([link](#))

**Friday, May 30, 2008**

**The Adventures of Bobble-Foot:** For enough money, any McClellan or Stephanopoulos in Washington will write a kiss-and-tell book these days. But the memoir Larry Craig just announced he's writing could launch a whole new genre: don't-kiss, don't-tell.

Craig revealed his plans [on Boise television](#) during Tuesday's coverage of the Senate primary to choose his potential successors. For the senator, if not his viewers, it was a poignant moment, one last point of no return in a three-decade-long political career.

With a touch of empathy, the local reporter told Craig, "You're looking forward now to a much different life for yourself." Alas, the life Craig described isn't much different from any other retiring pol's, nor does he sound like he's looking forward to it. He hinted that he is entertaining a number of lobbying offers. Because of ethics rules, he explains, "There are some one-way conversations going on, 'cause I've said I can't talk, but I certainly can listen." Perhaps they can figure out some kind of code.

These are heady times for the Idaho senator. Last Sunday, on National Tap Dance Day, the first-place

St. Paul Saints, a minor league baseball team, drew their biggest crowd of the year with a special promotion in Craig's honor: a [bobble-foot doll](#) commemorating the bathroom stall at Minneapolis-St.Paul airport. The team website reported, "[Saints Have Toe-Tapping Good Time, Win 9-3.](#)"

The bobble-foot promotion gave Craig a way to test his market value even beyond the lobbying and book worlds. Scores of Craig bobble-feet are now available [on eBay](#), selling for upwards of \$75 apiece. You'd better hurry: Like successful appeals of uncoerced confessions, supplies are limited.

The upcoming memoir may be the last we ever hear from the man, so it's worth asking: What kind of book will Larry Craig write? Consider the possibilities:

- *The Broken Branch:* Left to his own devices (never a good idea), Craig seems likely to write an insiders' version of the [woe-is-gridlock lament](#) popularized most recently by political scientists Norm Ornstein and Tom Mann. "The thing that's important for someone with my experience to talk about is the state of politics in Washington," Craig said Tuesday. "It's created what I call a extremely dysfunctional, hyperpartisan Senate. We're getting little to nothing done." Craig cites immigration and energy policy. As his agent and editor will surely tell him, this sober approach is not the way for Craig to put his best foot forward. No one wants to read the case for decisive action written by a man who claimed his innocence after pleading guilty and remained in office after promising to quit. Then again, Craig might not be a household word if he had listened to the advice of Ornstein and Mann, who urged members to bring their families to live with them in Washington.
- *The Packwood Diaries:* With slight modifications, Craig has modeled his entire Senate career after his friend, former Oregon Sen. Bob Packwood. Craig [sobbed on the Senate floor](#) the day Packwood resigned. Packwood dug in his heels and remained in office for three years after his sex scandal became public. Craig has done the same,

and is only leaving because his term is up. Considering how much Packwood served as his role model, it's possible that Craig tried to emulate another part of the Oregonian's legacy: [the Packwood diaries](#). Packwood kept a meticulous journal of [all his exploits](#), with an eye to history and none on the lookout for [satire](#) or [federal prosecution](#). We can only hope Craig has done the same.

- *What Happened*: Every publisher is looking for the next Scott McClellan, who told lies for a living but was scared straight after his escape. Craig could play this role with gusto. The pitch: It wasn't his idea to stand up in front of the press time after time and insist he wasn't gay. Karl Rove made him do it, in a deliberate cover-up to protect the Republican brand – and he'll never forgive Rove for it.
- *If I Did It*: O.J. Simpson never got to keep a dime of his controversial book, [If I Did It: Confessions of the Killer](#). Craig, on the other hand, could hypothesize all the way to the bank. Senators love to write loosely autobiographical fiction. Gary Hart and Bill Cohen wrote [The Double Man](#) about a politician who wanted to be president. Barbara Boxer wrote [A Time to Run](#) about a woman who becomes a liberal senator from California. Craig could write a great book about an imaginary conservative senator who happens to be gay. His hypothetical musings would wow the critics and sell like crazy. Besides, what does Craig have to lose? Hinting he did it would be no more an admission of guilt than the misdemeanor plea he was just kidding us about last June. ... **8:48 P.M.** ([link](#))

considerations just because of his own greatness. Perhaps *El Comandante syndrome* might capture it.

We saw it first in the cavalier contempt for the Constitution displayed by "Hank" Paulson sending the original bailout bill to Congress with a declaration that there can be no judicial (or other) review of how he spends the near-trillion-dollar check he wanted to write to himself.

Amazing "I am the law" ploy: zero judicial review. Tear out Article 3 of the Constitution for El Comandante Hank. He didn't get away with it, but the fact that he tried demonstrates a banana republic mentality.

And now Comandante Michael Bloomberg seeks to turn New York City into a banana republic. He wants to ignore two citywide votes for term limits—because (of course!) at the time they were passed, in the '90s, voters had not yet had the chance to contemplate the full grandeur of Michael Bloomberg. So far above the kind of mortal mayor the term limits were designed for that the ordinary rules shouldn't apply. So now, even though he's served the two terms the law allows, he wants to find a way to grant himself the power to run again.

Then ... well, let's take these two and their contempt for democracy first. At the heart of this syndrome, the billionaires' arrogance is an all-encompassing unspoken sense of *entitlement*. Maybe, though, it's time to make the unspoken explicit: Perhaps we should have a rule (maybe sub it in for Article 3 of the Constitution) that once you earn a billion or close to it, you are so wise that, like the guardians of Plato's *Republic*, you need no longer be troubled by the inconveniences of democracy.

You get placed in a certain category. Maybe with special parking-zone privileges like they give the handicapped. Instead of the stenciled figure in a wheelchair, a stenciled Monopoly-game millionaire silhouette. An argument can be made that they deserve it more than the mere handicapped, anyway, because, after all, they bear the weight of the world on their shoulders. It takes a lot of heavy lifting to destroy the economy and walk away with \$500 million the way the execrable clown Richard Fuld, the former CEO of Lehman Bros., did. Ordinary democracies don't understand the hardships of billionairehood, but banana republics do. What's a banana republic good for if it doesn't take care of its plutocrats?

True, Paulson's "no court can touch me" plan was one of the factors that caused the backlash to the original bailout plan, and Bloomberg's power grab will have to undergo court challenges (judicial review!), and even if it survives that, voters may have a chance to reject him at the polls, if they don't share his lofty self-estimation as the only person who can shepherd us through these troubled times. Look how well his fellow billionaires have done destroying the economy: *just* the kind of people we need to tell us how to put it back together again.

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the spectator

## The Bloomberg Syndrome

The New York mayor's power grab is a symptom of a national problem.

By Ron Rosenbaum

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 12:28 PM ET

Banana republic fever: It's catching! Another word for it might be *Bloombergism* or the *Bloomberg syndrome*. Where a figure in public life suddenly decides he's above the law or above ethical

Or so you would think from the shameless way Paulson and his cronies have been acting.

Indeed, there are a couple of aspects of Paulson's involvement in the bailout that should not be lost in the welter of crisis headlines. On Sept. 28, the *Times* published a [front-page story](#) that shows our guy Hank inviting a Goldman crony—one with a huge *unacknowledged* \$20 billion stake in AIG's survival—into a key meeting about whether to ensure said survival. And Goldman's \$20 billion.

The *Times*' Gretchen Morgenson reported that "[o]ne of the Wall Street chief executives participating in the meeting was Lloyd C. Blankfein of Goldman Sachs, Mr. Paulson's former firm." Even worse, as the *Times* delicately put it, "Mr. Blankfein had particular reason for concern. *Although it was not widely known ... a collapse of the insurer threatened to leave a hole of as much as \$20 billion in Goldman's side ...*" (italics mine). Can anyone say "obscene conflict of interest"? Corrupt cronyism on a disgraceful scandalous scale?

Gee, I wonder what advice Lloyd gave his old pal Hank. And I guess it was just coincidental that Hank suddenly reversed course and, after previously [declaring that there would be no more bailouts](#) and letting Goldman competitor Lehman Bros. go bankrupt, decided that a bailout of AIG was essential. Price to taxpayers: \$85 billion. Hey, what are friends for in the billionaire buddies club?

(And then [five days later we learned, also from the Times](#), that the key reason banks were able to "pile up new debt and risk" and ultimately precipitate the current crisis was a 2004 SEC rule change that was vigorously lobbied for by the head of Goldman Sachs, who was, at the time—guess who?—our millionaire buddy Hank Paulson. Still later we learned that, to top it all off, Paulson has named a former Goldman exec to oversee his bailout plan.)

Nice the way these people take care of one another. It really refreshes the wisdom of that once-tired refrain: "Some people rob you with a gun, some rob you with a fountain pen."

But it is the blatant use of fear-mongering and power-grabbing in a time of crisis that unites Paulson and Bloomberg's power grab. Anti-globalization writer Naomi Klein called such power grabs "shock doctrine" tactics. The shock doctrine (see this [YouTube exchange between Klein and Andrew Sullivan](#)) argues that it is the pattern of the übercapitalist plutocrat class to create—or at least take advantage of—economic crises and crashes by using them as excuses to suspend and violate democratic and constitutional principles, getting a panicked populace to cede power to the plutocrats. Or by simply *taking* power from weakened democratic institutions.

Still, Klein's examples had mainly come from banana republics like Bolivia or the prostrate polities of post-Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe. These shock-doctrine banana republic tactics can't happen here, can they? Not when it's blatant, I'll admit. I don't think we'll ever emulate the Bolivian government, which [in Klein's account](#) kidnapped labor-union heads until they agreed to an ultimately futile attempt to rescue its economy by sacrificing (among other things) workers' union-won rights. But our lack of appropriate outrage at Paulson's despicable gall in sending Congress his "I am above the law" bill, his willingness to manage the AIG crisis in a manner beneficial to Goldman Sachs, and his central role in causing the crisis he was supposedly rescuing us from—our lack of outrage, our failure to demand that he be sacked—suggests that the shock doctrine works here perhaps more subtly, incrementally. Locally.

Take Bloomberg, for instance. Twice the voters of New York City voted in referendums in favor of term limits for mayors and other elected officials. According to the *New York Daily News*, Bloomberg supported it ardently both times. But now, suddenly, those limits apply to him, and he just doesn't like it. Or, as he disingenuously and utterly unconvincingly says, he's doing it for *us*—he wants to give us the opportunity to enthrone him once more.

By the way, I'm *against* term limits; I can see the problem of corrupting incumbency they address, but I don't like the term-limit solution, which arbitrarily limits voters' choice of candidates. On the other hand, my point of view lost—*twice!*—and I actually believe that in a democracy, those in the majority on a referendum win. And not just until some mediocre self-congratulatory mayor stomps his foot like a petulant child and says he wants *more*.

But this mayor of mediocrity, enemy of trans fats who lets killer cranes crush people and buildings on a regular basis because of lax enforcement, the mayor who hasn't managed to get a 9/11 memorial off the ground in *seven years* (yes, I know there are other entities involved, but that basically says he's too weak to knock heads together and make it happen), suddenly this self-inflated suit looks in the mirror and decides: "The city cannot live without me."

The excuse being given is that in this time of crisis we need a steady hand at the helm. And, of course, he was so prescient about the magnitude of the current crisis. You remember all those speeches he made in the past seven years about the potential market instability that subprime mortgages threatened? He was a lone voice crying in the wilderness. What's that, you say? You can't remember those speeches? Well, neither do I, but he must have made them because *that* might qualify him to say he is a better candidate than the other bungling billionaires who have wrecked our economy to protect our city from the consequences. Of course, Bloomberg had no access to detailed financial information. Oh, wait ...

Anyway, here is the insultingly disingenuous way he turns the fact that the bill he sought to turn his power grab into some kind of virtue: "The mayor maintained he was still a supporter of term limits," [according to the Times](#). "You're not taking away term limits," he said. "You're simply going from two terms to three terms."

And then, if he feels like it, maybe three terms to four terms. Just ignore the law the same way. It's such an insult to the intelligence that it alone should disqualify him.

He will be employing a dodgy, sketchy, barely legal (if that) maneuver to get the city council to pass a bill to nullify the two democratic citywide referendums that established term limits just for Mayor Mike. At least he hasn't attempted the Paulson-ian ploy of placing his power grab beyond judicial review: There are already several entities lining up to sue him to force him to follow the law.

The [New York Daily News](#) quoted someone close to the situation saying, "I think people are troubled when it looks like one person is more important than the system. Everyone here is struggling with that."

Struggling with it? Struggling with one-man rule that tosses democratic votes in the trashcan?

As Michael Daly, the fine [New York Daily News](#) columnist, put it on Oct. 2:

The people of our city have voted twice on term limits, first in favor of establishing them, later against scrapping them. If the people want them done away with the way to do it is by popular ballot not through a [City] Council vote by members who will also be extending their jobs.

But nobody seems much to care or connect the dots to the banana republic shock-doctrine mentality. Although an amazingly frank quote in the *Times* should help. In a story about the reaction of city council members to this, [the Times](#) said: "They decried the mayor's strategy as overly exclusive and were especially upset that the mayor had solicited support from newspaper executives and Ronald S. Lauder, the cosmetic heir, which suggested to them that *the plan had been hatched by a select group of billionaires and power brokers solely with the mayor's interests in mind*" (italics mine).

Well, not solely the mayor's interests; the other billionaires weren't secretly "hatching" this plan for their health. Sound familiar—this secret meeting of cronies—to Paulson inviting his Goldman crony into a meeting to save said crony's \$20 billion?

It's disgraceful; do you think Bloomberg's billionaire buddies might have some "special extralegal influence" on decisions about the term-extended mayor's policies? It would make them the unofficial plutocrats junta of New York City, more capable of protecting their own empires from feeling the heat—the consequences fiscal and legal—the way Paulson's cronies did with Hank.

You don't think it matters that much? You think we should let it slide? Extraordinary circumstances and all that. But that's the mentality of the shock doctrine. A populace too panicked and a media too cowed to protest.

Because you know when this latitude, this sleazy complicity in shock-doctrine tactics will matter? After the next terrorist attack, when the president will have the freedom to invoke the shadowy (because still partly classified, kept secret even from Congress) and untested executive order known as [National Security Presidential Directive 51—issued in May 2007](#). I [warned about this here](#) about a year ago. It's a guaranteed constitutional crisis in the making since it allows the president to declare any "catastrophic emergency" an excuse to turn *the entire power of the government* over to the "national continuity coordinator" and his handpicked "Continuity Policy Coordination Committee," who will on the face of the document have unlimited "I am the law" power to render all actions by the judiciary and the legislature basically null and void until—if—the president declares the "catastrophic emergency" over.

But Bloombergism isn't limited to national-security matters; it's an attitude that unfortunately seems to be spreading into other aspects of society: the cavalier dismissal of established legal and ethical restraints and considerations.

It extends, this sense of Bloombergian entitlement, to journalists as well. I have to say that, although I'm an Obama supporter, I'm amazed at the cavalier way Gwen Ifill dismissed her flagrant conflict of interest—the clear-cut appearance of impropriety—as potential debate host, [failing to even mention to the Presidential Debate Commission](#) when they first asked her to moderate the vice-presidential debate that she was writing a book whose success could well be dependent on an Obama victory.

Even the [Columbia Journalism Review](#) [called into question](#) the appearance of impropriety it represented.

The point wasn't that she couldn't do the job fairly but that her stake in the outcome of the election of which the debate was a key decision point would be a distraction from the debate itself, with viewers trying to analyze how fair or unfair her questions were based on her conflict of interest. She'd made herself part of the story.

But instead of giving the debate commission the opportunity to decide the question, Ifill issued a [statement](#) that totally (and, for someone so intelligent, shockingly) missed the point: "I'm not particularly worried that one-day's blog chatter is going to destroy my reputation. The proof is in the pudding." (Queen Latifah captured the disdainful sense of entitlement on display in that quote on *Saturday Night Live*.)

With all due respect, Ms. Ifill, it's not *your* reputation (alone) that is at stake but that of all journalists who will look utterly insensitive to the appearance of impropriety that they are always hounding politicians about if one of their leading avatars doesn't understand such an obvious violation of the principle.

I think that, in fact, she came across as impartial, and more credit to her for that, but again, it was the Bloombergian attitude that was the problem. The attitude was basically, I am the law, I am the standard. How dare you question me? The condescending dismissal of any criticism as merely "blog chatter" just reinforces the public impression of journalists as holier-than-thou hypocrites.

Nor is literature exempt from the entitlement syndrome. Consider last week's New School panel on the *The Original of Laura*, the unfinished Vladimir Nabokov manuscript which he'd [asked his family to destroy](#). His sole surviving son, Dmitri, has decided to contravene his father's wishes and hired literary agent Andrew Wylie to peddle the rights worldwide for what will surely be a pretty penny.

Dmitri's original rationale was that he could imagine a visitation from his dead father in which Dad said, basically, "Go ahead and cash in." At the panel on *Laura*, I suggested this was like imagining Hamlet's father's ghost coming to him and saying, "Forget about that whole revenge thing, son."

But Dmitri had another card to play. He now suggested, through an intermediary on the panel, that the visitation from Vladimir was a "joke" and somehow seemed to blame Dmitri's mother for not burning it or blame me for accusing his mother of bad faith in not burning it (I never have).

I don't know: I've always felt conflicted about the difficulty of the choice Dmitri faced, but the more I think about it, the more I think the father's unequivocal request should have precedence over the son's willingness to abrogate it. As I put it at the New School panel, even if it were a pearl of great genius, Nabokov himself, for good reason or bad, didn't think it was ready to be seen and his word should be law.

All Dmitri has left (minus the "visitation") to support his decision to violate his father's pleas is the fact that he *can*. I can therefore I shall. My father's "vote" doesn't count.

Literary Bloombergism.

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## the undercover economist

### Bailouts Are Inevitable, Even Desirable

Stop complaining about the "moral hazard" problem and enjoy the rescue.

By Tim Harford

Saturday, October 4, 2008, at 7:50 AM ET

During the bailout of AIG, Fannie Mae, and Freddie Mac—and, at the time of writing, the still-unresolved debate over the bailout of the entire U.S. financial system—the phrase "[moral hazard](#)" has become [popular](#), typically in conjunction with the phrase "privatizing profits and socializing losses." It's easy to sympathize: The erstwhile masters of the universe seem to have forgotten the meaning of both *moral* and *hazard*. Why should they be helped now?

Still, we might usefully remember what the antiquated jargon "moral hazard" means. The term originated in insurance, recognizing the idea that people with insurance may be careless—for example, paying for secure off-street parking looks less attractive if your car is insured.

Moral hazard can sometimes take extreme forms. According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, more than two-thirds of insurance claims for the loss of a limb originated in the Florida Panhandle. At the epicenter, "Nub City"—the tiny town of Vernon, Fla.—almost 10 percent of the adult population had lost a limb. One man was said to be insured by dozens of companies when he lost his foot: Fortunately he had been carrying a tourniquet at the time of the accident. He pocketed \$1 million. Another man shot his foot off—"while aiming at a squirrel"—just 12 hours after buying insurance. Now that's careless—and that's moral hazard in spades.

Sometimes moral hazard is so severe that it makes insurance impossible. Football players would like to insure against losing football games, and students would like to be compensated if their exams go poorly. Tough luck: Moral hazard makes such insurance contracts absurd. But all these examples exaggerate the problem. So does the archaic use of the word *moral*. It used to carry no ethical connotation, referring merely to a risk arising from human action rather than natural forces.

Forget the baggage that comes with the word *moral*. While moral hazard makes insurance more expensive and less efficient, many insurance markets work well enough to be useful. Moral hazard need not destroy them, and it need not destroy financial markets either. If AIG had shot off its own metaphorical foot to

claim a government bailout, the argument against the bailout would be compelling. But it didn't, and it isn't.

This perspective can suggest lessons for today's bailouts. The government will not help you replace your possessions if you smoke in bed and your house burns down, but government-funded fire engines will put out the blaze, moral hazard or not. That is partly because fire can spread, and your neighbors should not suffer for your carelessness. The same motive lies behind the current spate of rescues. It is also because a civilized society tries to save people from accidentally burning themselves to death. If the consequence is a little more carelessness, so be it.

A second lesson is that remedies for moral hazard will always be imperfect. Insurance companies could fight moral hazard by checking that your behavior is consistently safety-conscious. Because that's impractical, deductibles have to serve as imperfect proxies. The current bailouts are a strong argument for tighter regulation, but regulators cannot be everywhere, any more than a claims adjuster can ride around in your car all day. Bailouts can save the innocent as well as the culpable, but even when they don't, it is fantasy to expect governments to refrain from them. It is useless to pretend otherwise: Bailouts are inevitable, and sometimes they are even desirable. The moral hazard they provoke is also inevitable. The final lesson: Insurers get paid for the insurance they provide; it would be nice if the taxpayer were shown the same courtesy.

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## today's business press

### Party Like It's 1929

By Bernhard Warner and Matthew Yeomans  
Friday, October 10, 2008, at 7:05 AM ET

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## today's business press

### Dow: How Low Can You Go?

By Bernhard Warner and Matthew Yeomans  
Wednesday, October 8, 2008, at 6:51 AM ET

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## today's papers

### Seven Days' Battle

By Daniel Politi  
Friday, October 10, 2008, at 6:25 AM ET

It's all about fear. Wall Street was in full panic mode yesterday as a wave of terror washed over investors, who couldn't hit the sell button fast enough during the last hours of trading. It marked

the seventh consecutive day of losses on Wall Street as the Dow Jones industrial average plunged 679 points, or 7.3 percent, closing below 9,000 for the [first time since 2003](#). This means all the gains from the last bull market have been effectively wiped out. The *New York Times* points out [it was the](#) "busiest day in New York Stock Exchange history," and the *Wall Street Journal* notes that the 11<sup>th</sup> largest plunge [in the history of the Dow](#) "put the stock market either in, or nearly in, a crash."

*USA Today* helpfully churns out several statistics to put the recent declines in context and [points out](#) that Standard & Poor's 500 index "is on track for its worst year since 1931." Looking for a particular reason for all this selling is bound to be a futile effort because, as the *Washington Post* [highlights](#), it "could not be blamed on any single piece of horrible news." Rather, as the *Los Angeles Times* points out, many think it indicates that many investors who had [resisted selling in the last few weeks](#) "were now throwing in the towel." The pain is unlikely to stop there as Asian markets [plunged today](#)—Japan's Nikkei dropped 9.6 percent and was down 24 percent for the week—and European markets followed suit in early trading. Pressure is now higher than ever for government leaders to come up with a unified strategy to deal with the mounting crisis. The *NYT* leads with a look at how the British and American governments seem to be "converging on a similar blueprint" that will likely be at the center of talks between President Bush and key finance ministers [this weekend](#).

The *NYT* takes pains to highlight that the British and American plans are [far from identical](#)," yet they have two key elements in common that involve pumping government money into banks and issuing guarantees for different types of debt. The fact that the Treasury seems willing to directly inject cash into banks marks a stark change—"Putting capital in institutions is about failure," Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson said on Sept. 23—and illustrates how government officials are ready to alter plans now that the crisis seems to be expanding.

Another example of how the U.S. government is looking beyond the \$700 billion bailout plan for solutions can be found in Page One of the *WSJ*, which reveals that officials are discussing whether to issue a blanket guarantee of [all bank deposits](#). This move would aim to help out financial institutions, including small and regional banks, "some of which are buckling under the strain of nervous customers," notes the *WSJ*.

If the move is approved, it would mark another attempt at a national solution, which a growing number of economists say is simply not enough. Many are now pushing governments to infuse cash directly into the banking system, but they emphasize that governments need to act in unison to "maximize the punch of their actions," [notes the NYT](#). But as senior economic policy-makers gather in Washington today, the Bush administration has been careful [not to raise expectations](#) that a deal will come to fruition. So far, leaders haven't been able to come up with a

comprehensive global plan of attack beyond dealing with interest rates. Still, pressure is mounting for governments to adapt quickly not just to deal with the current crisis, but, as the [LAT notes in a Page One piece](#), "head off potential crises in the future."

In the United States, it seems there's no end in sight for how far stocks can drop. Several of the papers highlight the plight of General Motors, which saw its shares plunge 31 percent to their lowest price since 1950. "I've never seen a panic like this," [one economist tells the WP](#). Of course, no one knows what to believe, so investors are trying to play it safe. "Right now, you can take economic fundamentals ... and throw them out the window," [a market strategist tells the LAT](#). "This is mass liquidation at the point of a gun."

Even some who were optimistic that we were close to capitulation, or the point where there's so much selling that the market is near bottom, are throwing their hands up in frustration. "So many signs say we are getting to that ultimate capitulation," [an investment strategist said](#). "But I thought that on Monday too." The *WSJ* attaches a label to the current trends, saying that it looks like we're in what is known as a [secular bear market](#), or a prolonged weak period, that follows much of the same patterns of the 1970s and 1930s. During those long downturns, the markets also rallied sporadically but eventually ended up losing the gains. Why? Because the higher values are seen as opportunities to sell since no one thinks they will last.

As government officials try to wage war against the financial crisis, John McCain is waging his own war against Barack Obama's rising poll numbers. And things are getting heated. In a piece inside, the *WP* [takes a look](#) at how the McCain campaign "has found itself at the center of an outpouring of raw emotion rare in a presidential race." While addressing supporters, McCain and Sarah Palin are encountering people who are increasingly angry at the media and scared at the possibility that Obama will win in November. And as his supporters seem to show a declining willingness to hear talk of bipartisanship, McCain has responded in kind by spending most of the time at his rallies criticizing Obama.

The *NYT* talked to several people who were involved in the so-called Troopergate scandal and publishes a revealing Page One piece that sheds some new light into whether Palin pressured Alaska's public safety commissioner to fire Michael Wooten, a trooper who went through a nasty divorce with the governor's sister. Today, the *NYT* reveals that Palin, her husband, and members of her administration contacted the commissioner and his aides "[three dozen times over 19 months](#)." The commissioner contends he was fired for refusing to dismiss Wooten. Of course, no one ever directly ordered Wooten to be fired, but their focus on that one trooper was greater than has been revealed. In fact, the commissioner's successor says that Palin's aides mentioned Wooten twice when he was angling for the job, even though

none of the other troopers were discussed. Palin has said she was just issuing complaints against someone who could be a danger, emphasizing that he made a death threat against her father.

The *WP* takes a look at how the newbie governor of an obscure state managed to get such a big national spotlight so quickly and says it was at least in part due to a successful [public-relations effort](#). Alaskan officials tried to position Palin as an expert on oil and gas issues so she could speak to the national media about Alaska's natural gas pipeline project, and they hired an outside public-relations expert to help. She was then quickly billed as an "upstart governor" who was unafraid to take on Big Oil. Some lawmakers contend Palin was so preoccupied with media coverage that she ignored the state legislature.

The *NYT* analyzed Barack Obama's campaign finance records and found [almost 3,000 donations](#) "with apparently fictitious donor information." Of course, they represent a mere fraction of the hundreds of millions Obama has raised, and the amount that hasn't been refunded as of the campaign's last filing amounts to a mere \$40,000. But since the *NYT* only picked up on the most obvious—a contributor who used the name "Jgtj Jfggjfgj," for example—it raises questions about whether the Democrat's campaign is "adequately vetting its unprecedented flood of donors." There's no evidence of fraud, and surely any concerted effort to skirt contribution limits would have been more sophisticated than the person who listed his employer as "Loving" and his occupation as "You."

The *LAT* fronts, and everyone mentions, two military linguists saying that they listened in on personal phone calls from Americans overseas and their [families back home](#). Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV called the allegations "extremely disturbing" and said the Senate intelligence committee would investigate. The linguists said that recordings of intimate conversations were shared among analysts. "I observed people writing down, word for word, very embarrassing conversations," one of the linguists told the *LAT*. "People would say, 'Hey, check this out, you're not going to believe what I heard.'" The two former intelligence analysts were interviewed for a book that will be released next week and spoke to ABC News last night.

Count the *NYT*'s [Paul Krugman](#) as one of the big fans of the British plan to help out its financial sector. "The United States and Europe should just say 'Yes, prime minister,'" writes Krugman. "The British plan isn't perfect, but there's widespread agreement among economists that it offers by far the best available template for a broader rescue effort." And there's little time to waste. "You may think that things can't get any worse—but they can, and if nothing is done in the next few days, they will."

## today's papers National Bank

By Joshua Kucera

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 6:57 AM ET

It was another day of grim, fast-moving news on the economy. The *New York Times* leads with late-breaking plans by the Treasury Department to [take ownership stakes in some banks](#) while "injecting" cash into them. All the other papers lead with coordinated interest rate cuts by central banks across the globe, which failed to stop financial markets from falling further downward.

The *NYT* said the bank nationalization plan is "still preliminary and it was unclear how the process would work, but it appeared that it would be voluntary for banks." The authority to do this was part of the \$700 billion bailout package and is similar to a British government plan announced Wednesday. The paper cites administration officials saying that the plan "has emerged as one of the most favored new options being discussed in Washington and on Wall Street. The appeal is that it would directly address the worries that banks have about lending to one another and to other customers."

The sourcing on the *NYT* piece is a bit opaque, and the story apparently broke late. The piece contains no comments, even on background, from government officials, although it does say "Treasury officials" described the broad outlines of the plan. But it noted that Paulson, at a press conference Wednesday, "pointedly named the Treasury's new authority to inject capital into institutions as the first in a list of new powers included in the bailout law." Of the other papers, only the *Wall Street Journal* [had the story](#), and an *Associated Press* [piece](#) on the plan said an "administration official" talked about the plan late Wednesday.

Everyone calls the [other big news](#), the coordinated interest rate cut, "unprecedented." Central bankers from the United States, the euro zone, the United Kingdom, Canada, Sweden, and Switzerland all cut interest rates by half a percentage point. In the United States, that puts us at 1.5 percent—a "tricky spot," the *Journal* says, as it means "rates don't have room to go much lower." China, Australia, South Korea, Taiwan, and Brazil also cut rates, although not as part of the coordinated effort. But it failed to stop the stock market tumble, at least immediately, as the Dow Jones average fell another 189 points yesterday (though Asian markets did appear to be bouncing back overnight). The international efforts will continue on Saturday; the United States has called a meeting of the Group of 20, which includes the United States, Europe, and "cash-rich stars of the developing world, such as China, Brazil and Saudi Arabia," according to *USA Today*, which [leads with the story](#).

The *NYT* fronts a lengthy, [damning analysis](#) of the legacy of the once-revered Alan Greenspan, the longtime chair of the federal reserve, and his role in pushing deregulation of financial derivatives. Those derivatives, he argued throughout his career, would allow investors to share risks, but they have now fueled the crisis we're in. "If Mr. Greenspan had acted differently during his tenure as Federal Reserve chairman from 1987 to 2006, many economists say, the current crisis might have been averted or muted," the paper says. Greenspan, for his part, keeps the faith and blames greedy investors rather than a lack of regulation for the crisis. "In a market system based on trust, reputation has a significant economic value," Greenspan told a Washington audience last week. "I am therefore distressed at how far we have let concerns for reputation slip in recent years."

The *Los Angeles Times* fronts some [news you can use](#), an analysis of whether the market has bottomed out yet and whether you should buy in. The verdict? Probably not: "Economists and market strategists willing to call a bottom amid the current market turmoil are thin on the ground, vastly outnumbered by forecasters with distinctly more apocalyptic outlooks," the paper writes.

The *Washington Post* has [a long front-page account](#) of Barack Obama's days in the Illinois state Senate where, the paper says, he was converted from an idealistic do-gooder into a tough politician. "Barack had this misconception that you could change votes with thoughtful questions and good debate," one of his former colleagues told the paper. "That was a little idealistic, if you ask me. It's not necessarily about smarts and logic down there. Votes are made with a lot of horse trading, compromise, coercion, working with the other side. Those are things that Barack can do—can do very well, actually. But it took him a little while to figure it out."

Also in the papers ... the *NYT* and *Post* get word of an upcoming intelligence report on Afghanistan that concludes the country is in a "downward spiral" with widening violence and a corrupt government unable to handle it. A tragicomic play skewering the Iraqi government is [selling out in Baghdad](#), the *LAT* finds. It's not just the United States that's dragging down the world economy—the *Journal* reports that [Iceland](#), too, is suffering a banking crisis that is drawing in the rest of Europe. And all the [papers](#) report that Russia has pulled its troops out of Georgia proper, two days ahead of the deadline called for in the French-brokered peace deal.

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## today's papers Nothing Personal

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, October 8, 2008, at 6:34 AM ET



A few hours after the stock market took yet another plunge, the presidential candidates met in Nashville, Tenn., for a town-hall-style debate last night, where the economy quickly became the dominant issue. The verdict seems to be that there were no game-changing moments as each of the candidates stuck closely to his stump speech. The *Los Angeles Times* says it was "an often testy debate" [in which the candidates](#) "made little effort to hide their seemingly mutual contempt," and the *Wall Street Journal* [points out](#) that it "included more sharp edges" than the first encounter. The *Washington Post* highlights that it was John McCain, the candidate under the greatest pressure to [dominate the debate](#), who "played the role of the aggressor." Still, while the candidates [exchanged blame](#) and "clashed repeatedly over taxes and spending," as *USA Today* notes, they largely bypassed the character attacks that have dominated the campaign over the last few days. The *New York Times* says the bad economic news and the debate's setting [combined to produce](#) "an often stifled encounter."

The *NYT* goes against the grain and leads with the latest [downturn in the markets](#). Investors kept their fingers firmly on the sell button throughout most of the day, even after the chairman of the Federal Reserve suggested a cut in interest rates is on the way. In normal times, that sort of announcement would have sent stocks soaring, but with the looming threat of a global recession, investors are increasingly skeptical that the government can do anything to improve the situation. "The Fed is just plugging holes in the dam and the water keeps rushing over," an economist tells the paper.

The questions made it clear that undecided voters wanted to hear some new ideas from the candidates on how they'd deal with the financial crisis, but, for the most part, John McCain and Barack Obama had nothing to offer. McCain did try to make some news by using the debate to call for a \$300 billion program that would have the Treasury Department [buy up bad mortgages](#) and effectively renegotiate them so struggling homeowners can stay in their homes. The *LAT* [calls it](#) one of McCain's "most significant proposals of the campaign" that "would require a radical shift in the government's approach."

The Republican nominee's proposal left many unanswered questions, including how it would be financed, beyond his campaign saying that the money should come out of the bailout plan. The *WP* also notes that McCain [appeared to contradict](#) himself since he "seemed to be proposing two opposing ideas at once: paring back on the budget, through cutting defense programs and earmarks, while at the same time adding an expensive program." Obama's campaign was unimpressed, calling it "old news," noting that the Democratic nominee backed just such a proposal last month and that a similar program is already part of the bailout plan.

Obama continued with his tactic of trying to tie McCain to the Bush administration. For his part, McCain tried to distance

himself from the president and even criticized the current administration's approach to a few issues. The Republican nominee sought to portray himself as someone who has a proven record of working across the aisle, and while he didn't mention his running mate once, he did invoke Sen. Joseph Lieberman's name [a few times](#).

In an analysis piece inside, the *WSJ* points out that even though McCain stayed away from the polarizing character attacks against Obama that he has been raising on the stump, he still attempted to make the [debate about his opponent](#). "Time after time, his answers were as much critiques of Sen. Obama's plans, record and attitudes as explanations of his own proposals," says the *WSJ*. Still, those hoping that McCain would take Sarah Palin's advice to "take the gloves off" and go on the attack "probably came away disappointed," says [the LAT's analysis](#). The *NYT* notes that the country's pessimistic mood appeared to have [seeped into the debate](#) as "the sort of can-do, feel-good, rah-rah exuberance that candidates sometimes bring to debates was in conspicuously short supply."

In a mark of just how boring the debate really was, everyone says a highlight of the debate came when McCain "disparagingly" (*USAT*) referred to Obama as "that one" without saying his opponent's name. "McCain did not, tellingly, look at him," notes the *NYT*. And while the economy was the No. 1 issue, [the WP says](#) that "some of the most pointed exchanges were over foreign policy." It was during mentions of Pakistan and Iraq that McCain was most aggressive in trying to portray his opponent as inexperienced and naive while Obama countered that it was the Republican nominee who muddled facts and was dangerously belligerent in his rhetoric.

The *LAT* says there was a "telling contrast" in how each candidate addressed the economic downturn and how it would [affect citizens](#). While McCain spent lots of time talking about details in energy policy and even went as far as to call health care "a responsibility," Obama said it was a "right" and repeatedly talked about education and health care, two issues that are usually most appealing to women. Ultimately, if what McCain wanted was to change the course of the campaign, "it was difficult to find evidence that he succeeded." The *WP's* [Dana Milbank](#) says the debate's format ended up hurting McCain because questioners and topics changed so frequently that it "precluded a game-changing moment."

Going back to the financial crisis, Ben Bernanke, the Fed chairman, made it clear yesterday that even though the government will use all of its power to improve the situation, things are likely to get worse before they get better. While many have been predicting the Fed will cut interest rates when policymakers meet at the end of the month, the *NYT* notes that the central bank may [choose to act earlier](#). The *WSJ* points out that it's possible the Fed will try to coordinate interest-rate cuts with [other central banks](#).

The Dow Jones industrial average plunged 508 points, or 5.1 percent. The *LAT* points out that since the beginning of last week, the Dow has dropped nearly 1,700 points, or [15.2 percent](#). While Bernanke's interest-rate announcement didn't stop the stock market's freefall, the Fed's official announcement that it would begin to lend directly to corporations by buying up short-term debt, otherwise known as commercial paper, for the first time since the Great Depression appeared to have an effect in the credit markets. Still, investors aren't sure this "[historic and potentially risky move](#)" (*WSJ*) will work.

The *LAT* notes that some investors [are worried](#) the government may be taking on more than it can handle. For its part, the *WP* says that the Fed's latest plan [may be just the beginning](#) because yesterday's actions "could even lay the groundwork for future interventions in credit markets, should troubles deepen." Some economists suggest the Fed should expand the program to other types of securities.

In a stark reminder of how the stock market decline affects those who may be far away from Wall Street, *USAT* and the *WP* front an analysis by congressional budget analysts that reveals Americans' retirement savings have dropped [by about \\$2 trillion](#), or about 20 percent, in the past 15 months. The losses are widespread and have even hit traditional pension plans that are usually considered more stable. Meanwhile, a new study by AARP revealed that 20 percent of baby boomers have stopped contributing to their retirement plans. *USAT* notes that financial planners say this "is exactly the wrong thing to do in this environment" because those who are buying now can snap up stocks at [bargain prices](#).

In a Page One [piece](#), the *NYT* says that if, as some suspect, the market is in fact close to reaching bottom, investors are likely to see big increases quickly. One investment strategist estimates that recent history has shown stocks recoup "about a third of their bear market losses in the first 40 days after the market hits bottom." For now, anybody "searching for cause-and-effect logic in the daily gyrations of the market will be disappointed" because it all boils down to fear and panic as "the market has become a case study in the psychology of crowds."

Early morning wire stories report that stock markets across Asia fell today, and Japan's Nikkei average [plunged 9.4 percent](#), its steepest drop since the 1987 stock market crash. In addition, as [the \*WSJ\* previews today](#), the British government announced a bailout plan for major banks that could pump around \$87 billion into some of the [country's largest financial institutions](#).

In other news, the *NYT* gets word that a military investigation has concluded that [more than 30 civilians](#) in a village in Afghanistan were killed by American airstrikes against a suspected Taliban compound on Aug. 22. That figure is far higher than the five to seven civilians the military has long said were killed, but still lower than the 90 civilians that the Afghan

government claims died in the airstrikes. The report also supports the military's assertion that the compound was a legitimate target, "a finding that is likely to rekindle tensions with the government of President Hamid Karzai."

The *WP*'s editorial page says that while the [presidential candidates](#) "proved more adept at casting blame for the current travails than they were at outlining the best way forward," last night's debate "brought a welcome return to civility." The *NYT* [isn't convinced](#) and says that "[n]inety minutes of forced cordiality did not erase the dismal ugliness of [McCain's] campaign in recent weeks." *USAT* is by far the [most positive](#) about the debate, saying that the "lasting impression was one of two highly qualified candidates engaged in an interesting exchange of ideas about where the nation should be headed." The *LAT* says that what McCain needs to do to [stop his slide in the polls](#) is to "persuade voters that he has a cogent, coherent economic proposal and a command over this dominant issue. He did not deliver either Tuesday night." For its part, the *WSJ* says McCain didn't "change the dynamics of the race" because he [failed to knock Obama](#) "from his cool evasion or even do much to rebut the Democrat's routine talking points." The *WSJ* says McCain particularly needs to counter Obama's promise to provide more health insurance while claiming that the cost of his plans would be covered by cuts in spending. If McCain lets that "claim go un rebutted, he deserves to lose."

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## today's papers Drowned World Tour

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 6:29 AM ET

It's a new week, and the bad news keeps getting worse. "The global financial crisis has taken a perilous turn," [declares the \*Wall Street Journal\*](#). Hopes that the massive bailout package approved by Congress last week would give investors some breathing room were quickly dashed as soon as the markets opened. And pretty much the whole world is feeling the pain. Markets in Asia, Europe, and Latin America closed deep in the red yesterday, a pattern that was repeated in the United States. The Dow Jones industrial average plunged 800 points, or 7.7 percent, before rebounding late in the day to close down nearly 370 points, or 3.6 percent. It marked the first time the Dow fell below the 10,000 mark since 2004. [USA Today](#) helpfully puts it in perspective and points out that the Dow has lost [nearly 30 percent](#) since Oct. 9, 2007.

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* highlight word that the Federal Reserve is considering a plan to buy large amounts of [unsecured short-term debt](#)—so-called commercial paper—in an effort to [revive the financial system](#). This "radical new plan"

(*NYT*) would essentially make the Fed "a major funder of a wide range of U.S. businesses facing imminent cash shortages," explains the *Post*. While the growing financial crisis is putting pressure on government officials to act, the *Los Angeles Times* points out that if there's a clear message from yesterday's worldwide sell-off, it's that investors are increasingly concerned "that government intervention won't be enough to stave off a potentially severe global recession."

Fed and Treasury Department officials were working out details last night of the plan to set up a special fund that would buy short-term commercial paper. The Fed hopes this plan would help credit start flowing again. Of course, the plan would increase the risk that taxpayer dollars would be lost. The *WP* says it's likely that any losses would be covered by the Treasury through the new bailout package. But the *NYT* notes that any attempts to shore up the commercial paper market "could represent an undertaking even broader" than the bailout's key goal of buying up mortgage-related securities. The *NYT* also points out that the move could create conflicts of interest for the Fed since it would have to protect the investments it makes with taxpayer money while also worrying about stabilizing the economy. The *WSJ* says that if the Fed does get involved in trying to ease the strains in the commercial-paper market, interest-rate cuts "look increasingly likely to follow."

The move would merely be the latest by the Fed, which is deep into "a sometimes makeshift campaign that is rewriting textbooks on central banking," as the *WSJ* puts it. Yesterday the Fed said it would begin to pay interest on the reserves that banks keep on deposit with the central bank, which would make it easier for it to keep control over interest rates. The central bank also said it's expanding, to \$900 billion, the funds available to banks under a special short-term loan program. A mere two weeks ago, the Fed had planned to make \$150 billion available.

Meanwhile, European governments were working feverishly to avoid the collapse of several major lenders. But despite pledges from government officials that they would work together to ease the financial crisis, a pan-European solution has yet to emerge. One expert tells the *WSJ* that while economies in Europe are deeply integrated, "national politicians haven't understood that yet, and they're acting as if banks still had a nationality, so that some banks are their children and others are not." While it may have taken a bit longer for European banks to catch the cold, it's likely that they actually face a more acute problem than their partners in Asia and the United States because they're "more dependent on the short-term-lending markets," says the *WSJ*.

As the financial crisis intensifies, everyone says that a meeting scheduled for later this week of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank will take on a new level of importance as officials are likely to use the gathering as an opportunity to discuss coordinated action to tackle the problem. When stock markets in emerging economies "took one of their biggest

collective tumbles in a decade" (*NYT*) yesterday, it became clear that even countries far from the subprime debacle are vulnerable to the freezing up of the credit markets. And now there's growing fear that all the signs are pointing toward a worldwide economic recession. The *WP* notes that the president of the World Bank said the global financial system may have reached a "tipping point."

"Up to now, it's been a financial crisis," writes the *WP*'s Steven Pearlstein. "This is a meltdown." Pearlstein says the root cause of the current problems can be summarized as "a set of economic and financial bubbles bursting at roughly the same time." Since all these bubbles were related, it's unsurprising that they're popping at the same time, and now the only way to ease the crisis is "for governments to step in with massive amounts of money."

Wait, isn't a massive amount of money exactly what Congress approved last week? Well, yes, but now even \$700 billion is starting to look like a drop in the bucket. The *NYT*'s Joe Nocera says the market was sending a message yesterday that it can't wait six weeks for the government to start getting toxic securities out of the markets. "In these compressed times, it seems terribly slow," writes Nocera. "The markets want to know—right now—whether the bailout plan will work."

In the United States, even investors who used to be optimistic that any recession would be short-lived were ready to throw in the towel. "Recession is unavoidable at this point," one stock market strategist tells the *LAT*. "Now it's just a matter of depth." More pain is almost certainly on the way for U.S. markets as Bank of America revealed last night that its third-quarter profits fell 68 percent. The company announced it would try to raise \$10 billion from investors.

The *LAT* and *USAT* point out that while Monday's stock market action had some of the signs of a capitulation, few think we're actually there yet. Investors have been waiting for this moment when the panic gets so bad that everyone who was going to sell has sold and stocks have nowhere to go but up. While some say that moment could be close, many think stocks still have a ways to fall.

Knowing about the world's problems is all well and good, but what does it mean for an individual investor? In a column appropriately titled "Is Now a Good Time to Panic?" the *Los Angeles Times*' Tom Petruno tries to take a shot at the question and says there are plenty of signs of capitulation all around us. But while it's true that bear markets "usually end just when investors are feeling that there is no hope of a recovery," the current credit crisis is unprecedented so no one can predict when that time will come. That means all an individual investor can do is answer one question: "Between now and however long it takes to resolve the credit mess and the hit it delivers to the economy, how much more pain can you handle?"

Markets may be plunging, but that doesn't mean the presidential campaigns are putting the brakes on their [plans to go negative](#) in the last month before voters head to the polls. Key question: Is anyone listening? The *NYT* and *LAT* both front looks at how the two candidates, who only a few months ago were denouncing politics as usual, have now made it clear that they're [sticking to the old formula](#). As was previewed over the weekend, John McCain and Sarah Palin have been raising questions about Barack Obama's past and his relationships as a way to raise doubts in voters' minds about the Democrat's character.

In order to raise questions about Obama's association with William Ayers, Palin has frequently cited a *NYT* article that was [published on Saturday](#). Today, the paper all but calls the Alaska governor a liar by [noting that](#) "she has sidestepped its conclusion that the two men did not appear to be close and that Mr. Obama had never expressed sympathy for the radical views and actions of Mr. Ayers." By writing these words, couldn't the *NYT*'s Adam Nagourney be seen as questioning his paper's editorial decisions? After all, papers aren't usually in the business of putting no-news stories on the front-page, above-the-fold, are they? Oh wait, maybe [they are](#).

"Who is the real Barack Obama?" McCain asked yesterday at a rally. McCain and Palin have caused raised eyebrows among political analysts by directly talking about the issue themselves "in unusually strident terms," [as the LAT puts it](#). The move, of course, risks turning off undecided voters who simply may not care about details from Obama's past during an economic crisis. Still, Obama's campaign made it clear that it's ready to hit back by reminding voters about McCain's association with the Keating Five savings-and-loan scandal while also raising questions about the [Republican nominee's temperament](#).

It's not surprising that McCain's campaign would want to change the subject as the candidates prepare to face off tonight in what will be the second of their three scheduled debates. The *Post* publishes the results of a new poll that gives Obama a six-percentage-point [lead in Ohio among likely voters](#). The figures could easily change as about 2-in-10 voters are "movable," but Obama has an edge in handling the economy, which is described as the top issue by more than half of all voters. No Republican has ever been elected president without Ohio.

Knowing that the Republicans are attempting to distract voters away from the big issues of the day, "are we in the media going to aid and abet the McCain campaign's obvious ploy?" asks the *WP*'s Eugene Robinson. Even if reporters point out that the allegations McCain's campaign makes are false, "writing about them at all gives them wider circulation." Journalists "have a duty to avoid being turned into instruments of mass distraction" and must press for answers about the issues that really matter. "The McCain campaign has made clear that it wants to change the subject," writes Robinson. "We can, and should, change it back."

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## today's papers Europe's Turn

By Daniel Politi

Monday, October 6, 2008, at 6:33 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with, and the *Wall Street Journal* fronts, a look at how European governments are taking steps to prevent [major banks from going under](#) while trying to prevent panic from spreading by boosting insurance levels [on private accounts](#). What at first looked like a problem that was limited to American mortgage-backed securities has now expanded (this may sound familiar) as European banks are growing more reluctant to lend to one another. And while there's little question that they take the problem seriously, the *WSJ* points out that [yesterday's](#) "frantic and disparate moves raise questions about whether European governments, regulators and bankers have a comprehensive approach to addressing the deepening financial crisis." The crisis is making it clear that while their economies may be integrated, there are still deep divisions among European governments.

Today marks the deadline for [voter registration](#) in many states and the *Washington Post* and *USA Today* use that timely hook to take a fresh look at how Democrats have been far more successful at [registering new voters](#), which could be critical to Barack Obama's success in November. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with a local focus on the news that Countrywide Financial has agreed to what is almost certainly the ["largest predatory-lending settlement in history"](#). The deal could provide as much as \$8.7 billion in relief to 400,000 borrowers, most of whom might see reductions in their interest rates and principal. The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with a look at the small but crucial minority of voters who say they are [still undecided](#) or who may only be leaning toward one candidate. Some of them are voters who chose President Bush in the last two elections but are unhappy with his presidency. As hard as it may be for news junkies to believe, many of these voters say they don't feel as if they have enough information about the candidates, especially Obama, to make a decision.

In a surprise move, the German government said that all private bank deposits [would be guaranteed](#) and also announced details of a new bailout package for Hypo Real Estate, a large property lender. Meanwhile, the governments of Belgium and Luxembourg announced that a French bank will take over most of what is left of Fortis, a banking and insurance giant, after last week's bailout package failed to shore up the company. And these are just the two biggest examples of how European governments are trying to deal with the crisis after the leaders of Europe's largest countries vowed to protect the [financial system from collapse](#).

The *NYT* says this [financial crisis](#) "appears to be the most serious one to face the Continent since a common currency, the euro, was created in 1999." Officials had hoped the \$700 billion bailout package approved by Congress last week would calm markets around the world, but that is increasingly starting to look like a pipe dream. Early-morning wire stories report that Asian stock markets plunged today out of increasing fears that the crisis is spreading.

*USAT* takes a look at eight key states that [register voters by party](#) and notes that while Democrats have increased their rolls by about 800,000 voters, Republicans have lost 300,000. These numbers are likely to change as officials deal with a wave of late-filing registrants. So far, according to the *WP*, about 4 million voters have been registered in a dozen battleground states over the past year. In some cases the difference between Democratic and Republican registrations is staggering, as in North Carolina, where the ratio is [6 to 1](#).

The *WP* says the "[trend is clear](#)" even in states that don't register voters by party, as a disproportionate number of new voters live in Democratic areas. While Republicans recognize they're at a disadvantage in terms of voter registration, which saw a big boost during the heated primary fight, they also insist there's a big difference between registering voters and actually getting them to the polls.

The *WP* and *WSJ* front a look at the intensifying fight between [Citigroup and Wells Fargo over Wachovia](#) that now has Federal Reserve officials acting as middlemen to speed up a compromise. In the end, Wachovia might be split up between the two buyers, but nothing is quite clear yet, and it could all very well result in a protracted [legal battle](#). One could find it encouraging that an institution seen as close to collapse last week now has two potential buyers. But Fed officials' worries that uncertainty about Wachovia's future could create bigger problems illustrates the vulnerability of the industry and the increasing involvement of the government in deciding the future of big financial institutions.

The *LAT* fronts a look at three crashes in the early days of [John McCain's aviation career](#) that reveal a pilot who "was cocky, occasionally cavalier and prone to testing limits." Although crashes were more frequent when McCain started flying than they are now, the *LAT* talks to some experienced pilots who say that three is an unusually high number. It's likely the Navy would have launched a review of the accidents before McCain was deployed to Vietnam to determine whether he should have been permitted to continue flying. But the results of any review would have been confidential and the McCain campaign isn't talking. It's hardly a secret that many considered McCain undisciplined when he was younger, but it's interesting to read about other parts of the nominee's military career that are often ignored.

The *WSJ* takes a detailed look at the days leading up to Lehman Bros. filing for bankruptcy protection, days that raise questions about whether executives went too far in [expressing confidence in the company's future](#). All financial firms that are in trouble have to play a complicated balancing act, since so much of their business is based on trust, but Lehman executives might have taken this to an extreme. The FBI is investigating whether the firm deliberately misled investors. Some think that the misrepresentation went beyond the public statements and say that Lehman kept the value of its real-estate holdings artificially high even after it was clear that the financial crisis was decimating the value of these types of securities.

All politicians are evasive, so why were Gov. Sarah Palin's efforts to ignore moderator Gwen Ifill's questions at the debate last week so jarring? The *WP* suggests Palin may have just been too honest about what she was doing. While other candidates might try to make a transition between the question's subject and what he or she actually wants to discuss, [Palin was more explicit](#) and even declared, at one point, that she was switching topics. Psychologists say politicians are unlikely to pay a price for skillfully dodging questions, because most people aren't good at remembering what was asked in the first place. "Voters say they prefer candid politicians," writes the *Post's* Shankar Vedantam, "but the experiments suggest politicians may pay a higher price for intellectual honesty than dishonesty."

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## today's papers

### Advantage Obama

By Roger McShane

Sunday, October 5, 2008, at 7:57 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with a look at how the beleaguered economy has shifted the electoral map in Barack Obama's favor. (The *Washington Post* stuffs a [nearly identical story](#).) According to the *Times*, Obama has a "solid lead" or is "well positioned" in states that account for 260 electoral votes, while John McCain has the advantage in states representing 200 electoral votes. McCain's advisers are hoping that the issue of the economy recedes, but the *Los Angeles Times* lead story predicts sustained misery. "[A]lmost every major player in the economy...is now beating a hasty retreat," says the *LAT*. Europe, meanwhile, isn't faring much better and the *Washington Post* leads with the continent's four largest economic powers [rejecting a joint strategy to shore up banks](#). The leaders of Britain, France, Germany and Italy did, however, call for a global summit to revamp the international monetary system set up under the Bretton Woods Agreements.

Only a month ago Barack Obama's strategy of competing aggressively on Republican turf was looking [overly ambitious](#).

But, [as the NYT reports](#), the weakening economy and Obama's fundraising advantage have given new force to his efforts to win at least nine states that voted for George Bush in 2004. Not only does this give Obama more ways to reach the 270 electoral votes needed to win, it also forces John McCain to spend money defending once-reliable red states, while limiting his ability to compete elsewhere.

After pointing out Obama's substantial advantages, the *Times* covers itself by mentioning "how closely contested the campaign remains" and warning that "the field could...shift again in the final weeks." The McCain campaign certainly isn't throwing in the towel. "Senator Obama has more money than God, the most favorable political climate imaginable—a three-week Wall Street meltdown and financial crisis—and with all that, the most margin he can get is four points?" said Bill McInturff, a McCain pollster. Four points, [really?](#)

The *Times* lead delicately mentions the McCain campaign's strategy going into the final weeks of the race. Aides say the Republican ticket will step up its attacks on Barack Obama, and on Saturday Sarah Palin previewed the new approach. The *WP* reports that, seizing on a [NYT article](#) examining Obama's relationship with former radical Bill Ayers, Palin accused the Democratic nominee of "[palling around with terrorists](#)." Apparently Palin didn't read the whole article though, because the *NYT* concluded that "the two men do not appear to have been close." The *Post* doesn't mince words, calling Palin's comment "a distortion."

Further inside the *WP*, columnist [David Broder asks](#), "Why in the world has the McCain campaign kept Palin under wraps from her debut at the Republican National Convention until [the vice-presidential] debate? What were they afraid of?" Oddly, he then admits to having seen the Katie Couric interviews.

The *WP* also takes a look at the top of the Republican ticket, examining [John McCain's experience as a prisoner of war](#). *TP* has not seen a more comprehensive and compelling look at the facts surrounding McCain's fateful bombing mission and subsequent imprisonment at the Hanoi Hilton. The *Post* also makes the interesting observation that, unlike John Kerry and George W. Bush, McCain has come under little pressure to release his military records.

The McCain story appears on page one, perhaps assuaging those Republicans who feel the *Post* is biased toward Barack Obama. According Deborah Howell, the paper's ombudsman, [the complainants may have a case](#)—since Obama became the presumptive Democratic nominee on June 4, he has been featured in 163 page-one stories, compared to 131 for McCain. (The *NYT* ombudsman says his paper has published [more tough articles on Obama](#), 20, than on McCain, 13, since the beginning of last year.) More troubling is that, since November, the *Post* has published twice as many horse-race stories as issue stories.

The *LAT*'s [pessimistic lead story](#) on the economy relies on troubling statistics and the grim predictions of analysts. American employers cut 159,000 jobs in September and other numbers show "consumers hunkering down, manufacturers losing orders and states making cuts." But perhaps the *Times* should ask itself if it's prudent to rely on the dire forecasts of analysts who, the paper admits, were predicting much rosier scenarios only a month ago.

The *NYT* continues its "Reckoning" series of articles exploring the causes of the financial crisis with a look at [the decline of Fannie Mae](#). Facing pressure from all sides, the government-sponsored (and now government-controlled) mortgage giant purchased or guaranteed at least \$270 billion in loans to risky borrowers between 2005 and 2008—"more than three times as much as in all its earlier years combined." Yet up until recently, investors, lenders and Congress were urging the company to take on even more risk.

The *NYT* fronts allegations that [Hamid Karzai's brother is linked to the heroin trade in Afghanistan](#). American officials think he's dirty, as do many Afghans. But when the Americans urged Karzai to remove him from the country, the president refused, demanding clear-cut evidence of his brother's misdeeds. That is something the Americans don't have.

The *WP* reports that the Army will unveil a new doctrine on Monday that asserts [nation-building will take precedence over standard warfare in the future](#). Meanwhile, the *NYT* reports on the [formation of the new Africa Command](#), which is responsible for coordinating American military affairs on the continent. The papers make no connection between the two stories.

**A five-letter word for Democratic presidential nominee ...** In his column this week, Clark Hoyt, the *NYT* ombudsman, notes a finding by *Politico* that "Obama" has [appeared six times in NYT crossword puzzles](#) since January 2005, while "McCain" hasn't appeared once. Political bias on the part of crossword editor Will Shortz? Nope. "Obama is a godsend for crossword constructors because the name is short and has three vowels out of five letters," Shortz said. Hoyt notes that "McCain", with its successive c's, is much harder to work with. No pun intended.

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## today's papers

### Bail Is Set

By Jesse Stanchak

Saturday, October 4, 2008, at 6:51 AM ET

The House passed the \$700 billion financial bailout package by a comfortable margin on Friday, after rejecting the measure earlier in the week. President Bush signed the bill into law, and the Treasury is expected to have the program up and running in about six weeks. Even so, the Dow Jones Industrial Average sank more than 150 points, signaling that the financial crisis isn't going to evaporate just yet. The [New York Times](#) and the [Washington Post](#) [each lead](#) with the bailout becoming law, while the [Wall Street Journal](#) fronts the bailout and tops and its worldwide newsbox with the reactions of the presidential candidates to the measure.

The [Los Angeles Times](#) fronts the [bailout](#) and leads (at least online) with a [report](#) that September unemployment numbers show the country hemorrhaged 159,000 jobs, the worst decline in five years. The [NYT](#) [points out](#) that the survey was done before the credit crunch heated up, meaning there could still be plenty of ugly surprises waiting next month.

At the same time, Wells-Fargo announced they'll be [buying Wachovia](#) after all, paying \$15.4 billion for the troubled bank, according to the [WSJ](#). The paper suggests, however, that former Wachovia suitor Citibank may still decide to fight the Wells-Fargo deal. The sale could end up [costing taxpayers \\$74 billion](#) in lost revenue, according to the [WP](#), due to tax law changes.

The vote caps two weeks of intense negotiations and vote wrangling, ending with 58 members changing their votes from "nay" to "aye." The [NYT](#) [profiles](#) four House members who opposed the bill during Monday's vote. The paper followed them during the week as they negotiated the tangle of lobbyists, concerned constituents and leadership figures who all clamored for them to reverse their positions. Some changed their mind by Friday, some didn't. The [WP](#), meanwhile, gets a little breathless with its [blow-by-blow recounting](#) of the week's drama.

The [WP](#) [investigates](#) the tactics of party whips in the House, who are charged with keeping their fellow party members in line on a given vote. Some whips favor a hard sell approach, others are more diplomatic. Everyone can agree that it's a difficult and occasionally thankless chore, but for the right person the position can be a key to great power.

Online, the [NYT](#) runs a neat [graphic](#) detailing the roll call for Friday's bailout vote.

In order to get the votes to move the package, Congress added \$107 billion in tax breaks for things like NASCAR, rum making, and the manufacture of wooden arrows. Many of those provisions were meant as inducements for certain members. The [WP](#) [covers](#) a few of the more notable items inside the paper.

The [WSJ](#) [argues](#) that Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson has used up much of his political capital getting Congress to go along with this.

With the politics of the deal finally over, the real policy work can begin, as the Treasury Department figures out how it'll actually implement the bailout. The plan right now is to have a small number of Treasury employees watching over the program, but to have the bulk of the work of managing assets done by Wall Street professionals. According to the [WP](#), there are [three big questions left](#): Who will end up managing the government's portfolio? What exactly should the government be expected to pay for a mortgage that no one else is willing to buy? And how will the Treasury get around the seemingly inevitable conflicts of interest that come with having Wall Street manage its own rescue package? The [LAT](#) [cites](#) a proposal to divide the government's assets into competing funds in order to keep costs at market value, but warns that putting the kibosh on bad deals may be a tall order no matter what.

Lest you think the credit crisis is only going to affect huge corporations and stock brokers: Think again, says the [WP](#). The paper reports that if the credit crunch doesn't ease up in the next few months, [ten to 12 states could have trouble making payroll](#).

Plenty of small-government advocates have expressed displeasure with the bailout, but it turns out that card-carrying [socialists aren't pleased by it either](#). The [WSJ](#) has the story.

Sen. John McCain's presidential campaign is planning a shift in tone for the month leading up to the election, according to the [WP](#). With economic issues favoring Democratic candidate Sen. Barack Obama in many recent polls ([including in Florida](#), the [NYT](#) notes), the [McCain camp plans to go on the offensive](#) and focus on negative ads assailing Obama's record and past associates. TP isn't sure that this approach is entirely new to the campaign, but the paper says this more aggressive approach should be evident in Tuesday night's debate. Perhaps comparisons between the two debates can provide a kind of benchmark.

The [NYT](#) [addresses](#) something McCain will almost certainly bring up: Obama's association with '60s radical Bill Ayers. The paper claims, however, that the two men were casual acquaintances at best.

The [LAT](#) [writes](#) that playing basketball isn't just a way for Obama to relieve some stress—it's also something of a good luck ritual for the campaign.

Meanwhile, the [NYT](#) and the [WP](#) both report that Sarah Palin is a millionaire.

The *WP* teases a story on last Thursday's VP debates generating the [second-highest debate ratings ever](#), falling only behind a Carter-Regan debate from 1980.

A Las Vegas jury found O.J. Simpson and his co-defendant guilty of armed robbery and kidnapping, [says](#) the *LAT*—13 years to the day after he was acquitted of murder.

Who's the world's leading consumer of [geothermal power](#)? Would you believe it's the Philippines? And they've got Ferdinand Marcos to thank for it, says the *WP*. The paper argues that the United States has far more geothermal potential, but that it would take some serious cash over a number of years to really tap into it.

Nobody fronts it, but an [explosion](#) in South Ossetia killed seven people and has raised tensions between Russia and Georgia just days before a scheduled pullback of Russian troops.

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## twitterbox

### McCain: Vote Petraeus/Lieberman '08

The latest from *Slate's* presidential-debate Twitter feed.  
Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 10:26 PM ET

Want instant commentary from *Slate* writers and editors on the debates? Bookmark this page, and follow along as we Twitter all three McCain-Obama face-offs. Keep coming back to read our 20 latest tweets, which will automatically update below. You can also follow us at <http://twitter.com/Slate>, and you can read an explanation of our Twitter project [here](#).

## Latest Twitter Updates

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## war stories

### Obama Won the Foreign-Policy Questions

McCain was vague and contradicted himself during the debate.  
By Fred Kaplan  
Tuesday, October 7, 2008, at 11:52 PM ET

Foreign policy didn't come up much in tonight's presidential debate; but when it did, Sen. John McCain—whose strengths lie in this realm—seemed surprisingly unsteady while Sen. Barack Obama came off as more sure-footed than he did in the first contest.

Several times, McCain opened himself up to easy counterpunches. At least once, he was vague to a baffling degree. And he contradicted himself on a key issue (though Obama didn't say so).

McCain left the biggest opening when he touted his judgment and experience in answer to a question about *when* to use military force, capping his response by noting, as he did several times two weeks ago, that Obama doesn't understand these issues.

This allowed Obama to reply that, yes, he didn't understand a lot of things—for instance, he didn't understand why George W. Bush invaded Iraq, which had nothing to do with Sept. 11, yet let Osama Bin Laden thrive in the mountains of Pakistan. McCain, he noted, said that the invasion would be swift and we'd be welcome as liberators—judgments that were wrong and fatal.

The other opening for Obama came when McCain chided the Democrat for *saying* that he'd "attack Pakistan." McCain quoted Teddy Roosevelt's chestnut "Talk softly, carry a big stick," yet here was Obama, doing the exact opposite.

Obama had two replies. First, he wasn't calling for an invasion of Pakistan—just for "taking out" Osama Bin Laden if we had him in our sights and the Pakistanis couldn't or wouldn't do it. Then he won the round decisively by remarking, "This is the guy who said 'Bomb, bomb Iran,' " who called for "the annihilation of North Korea," and who, after we ousted the Taliban from Kabul, said, "Next up, Baghdad." That's not talking softly. (McCain's response, that he was just joking with an old veteran friend, was, first, not true—he said it in a public forum—and, second, quite lame.)

McCain's contradiction came early in the debate, when he said that he knew how to cut defense spending, citing his savings of \$6.8 billion in an aircraft contract—but then, not one minute later, he advocated a freeze in all federal spending except for defense and veterans. If he knows how to squeeze defense contracts, it's unclear why he would exempt the Defense Department, which spends more than \$500 billion a year on items that, by the Pentagon's own accounting, have nothing to do with the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan or the wider war on terror.

Finally, McCain's baffling statement: "I'll get Osama Bin Laden, my friends. I know how to get him. I know how to do it." This is reminiscent of Richard Nixon's secret plan to win the war in



Vietnam—except that McCain belongs to the same party as the current president. If McCain knows how to do this, shouldn't he have told George W. Bush?

Otherwise, the foreign-policy segment of the debate was a [rehash of the previous debate](#). There were the same disagreements over the merits of talking with Iran "without precondition" and the wisdom of a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq. There were the same agreements, more or less, over wagging a finger at the Russians over their aggression against Georgia.

The one new question—under what criteria each of them would go to war for strictly humanitarian reasons—went unanswered by both. (Obama said allies were important in such circumstances—true but an evasion. McCain said, "I know these situations. I've been in there all my life"—his customary mantra when he doesn't have an answer to a question about national-security matters.)

Overall: not a deeply inspiring debate, but a clear victory for Obama.

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## webhead

### Measuring the Palin Effect

Is the Alaska governor responsible for record Web traffic in September?

By Chris Wilson

Thursday, October 9, 2008, at 11:26 AM ET

September was a great month to write about politics on the Web. The *Los Angeles Times* had an all-time-high [137 million page views last month](#), the *Washington Post* [topped 320 million](#), and both [Slate](#) and the [Huffington Post](#) set their own traffic records. It's tempting to give Sarah Palin credit for these new waterlines—she's ubiquitous on every site's most-read lineup, among the [most blogged-about people](#) in the country (including celebrities and fictional characters), and far and away the most [searched-for political figure](#) in America. Then again, September was also a [great month](#) for newspaper sites in 2006, with Democrats poised to retake both houses of Congress and no spunky Alaska governor on hand. So, how much credit does Palin deserve for driving page views to the media elite she so disdains?

Quite a bit. Even in the midst of other major story lines—total financial catastrophe comes to mind—data from the Web analytics firm [Hitwise](#) suggest a very real Palin Effect. One of the clearest ways to measure this is by focusing on search engines. Slightly more than one-third of Palin search queries drove traffic to news and media sites, according to figures that

Hitwise general manager Bill Tancer provided for *Slate*. Fox News received the largest share of these search referrals at 1.12 percent, followed by *Time* at 0.98 percent. Many other publications received at least 0.1 percent—nothing to shake a stick at, given the torrential interest in Palin.

Knowing this, one can then look for a Palin Effect in the percentage of traffic that publications received from search engines. The spike is unmistakable. In early September, right after McCain announced the Alaska pol as his running mate, the percentage of traffic that Web sites for print publications received from search engines peaked at close to 26 percent, up from about 22 percent the week before and a clear high point for 2008. Broadcast media and other political sites saw a similar jump in the numbers, reversing a downward trend in the proportion of traffic from search engines that Tancer attributes to the increased prominence of blog referrals close to the election.

Speaking of which, Palin continues to reign supreme over the blogosphere. According to Nielsen's BuzzMetrics technology, which tracks mentions of people and topics on blogs, Palin has been the [most blogged-about of the four candidates](#), ceding her top billing to McCain and Obama only in the days after the two presidential debates. (The BuzzMetrics charts can compare only three items at once, so [here's one](#) that includes Biden.)

Quantifying the Palin Effect for an individual publication is difficult to do without access to that site's internal tracking figures. We do have those numbers for *Slate*, if not for anyone else. In keeping with the overall trend in news media, *Slate's* referrals from search engines for September were the highest for any month this year. Five of our 25 most-read articles in September were explicitly about Palin—the [Sarah Palin FAQ](#) and pieces about her [hacked e-mail account](#), her [convention speech](#), her [pregnant daughter](#), and her [interview with Charles Gibson](#). Another four were pegged to Palin news: "Explainers" on [whether you can see Russia from Alaska](#) and [music licensing at conventions](#) plus a ["Dear Prudence" column on teen pregnancy](#) and a tribute to the [intrinsic weirdness of Alaska](#). Those nine articles, which accounted for about 5 percent of *Slate's* September page views, aren't just a symptom of our readers' voracious appetite for election news; only one non-Palin politics story ranked in the top 25. Meanwhile, traffic to *Slate's* ["XX Factor"](#) blog increased by nearly 30 percent last month, when three out of four posts mentioned Palin.

Was Palin solely responsible for *Slate's* record traffic? It's a very close call. *Slate's* [87 million page views](#) in September beat the previous record by about 9 million. By my estimates, Palin-related content (including blog posts) pulled in at least 10 million page views. Had McCain gone with a safe, Joe Biden-like choice, *Slate* would have written fewer articles that would have gotten fewer page views. Articles about Palin receive on average several times as many views as articles about Biden, but that doesn't mean those 10 million page views evaporate entirely

if Palin turns into, say, Tom Ridge. If we assume even a boring would-be veep recoups a few million views, then *Slate* still probably would've set a record, but it would've been a very close call.

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