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ad report card

You Can Stand Under *My* Umbrella

Travelers snatches its logo back from Citi.

By Seth Stevenson

Monday, April 14, 2008, at 7:28 AM ET

The Spot: *A man in a bowler hat walks around with a red umbrella the size of a Ferris wheel. In his travels, he encounters various citizens in distress—and uses his giant umbrella to help them. It shelters people from rain, of course, but it also serves as a boat, and even an aircraft. "There when you need it," says the tag line. "For auto, home, and business. Travelers."* (Click here to watch the spot.)

The Travelers umbrella has an interesting history, as corporate logos go. It dates back to at least 1870, when it appeared in a newspaper ad for the fledgling insurance company. It was reinvigorated in the late 1950s, when it was given its signature red hue. More recently, it spent a lost decade as the logo of Citigroup, after Citicorp and Travelers merged (somewhat disastrously, it turned out) in 1998.

Travelers became an independent company again in 2002, but it left the umbrella behind with Citi. (Who hasn't forgotten an umbrella in a rush to leave an unpleasant gathering?) It wasn't until a year ago—when Citi re-branded, opting instead for a bland little arc emblazoned above the letters of its name—that the umbrella was at last set free. Travelers jumped at the chance to buy it back.

How much did this cost? Travelers wouldn't tell me, but newspaper reports peg the transaction in the millions. "It was a substantial investment," says Shane Boyd, vice president of communications and branding for Travelers, "but we think well worth it."

I'm inclined to agree. For a Hydra-headed financial products firm like Citigroup, the umbrella was never an apt metaphor. To me, it always conjured the array of disparate departments all crammed unhappily under the Citi name. For an insurance company, though, an umbrella is a perfect symbol: It shelters us when stormy weather hits. The logo's enduring appeal is perhaps best summed up by a Travelers executive, quoted in the *New York Times* in 1964: "It illustrates the concept of protection, it is friendly, it is warm, and it is very merchandisable." (Of course, a slot machine might be just as fitting a symbol for an insurer: You feed it money with the vague hope of a payout that may never be awarded.)

After giving Citi a year to wipe the umbrella off all its signage, letterhead, and marketing materials (to avoid any overlap), Travelers is now putting the umbrella front and center. This new ad debuted during the NCAA Tournament's Sweet 16 round and is the first spot in what will be a yearlong campaign of ads built around the logo itself.

A whole campaign about a company's logo instead of about the service or product the company offers? Can this be wise? In this case, I think yes.

Consider some recent, nonumbrella Travelers ads. In one, scientists reattach "lucky rabbit feet" to real rabbits, and we see the bunnies doing adorable rehab exercises. In another, a man representing risk (he has the word tattooed on his knuckles) wanders around in the wee hours of the night damaging expensive property. Both ads are clever, and I still remember them long after they stopped appearing on TV. But until I began researching this story, I couldn't have told you which product they were pitching.

Brand awareness is a major issue for any insurance company. There's no eye-catching box you can carefully position on supermarket shelves and no tangible product the consumer might

see around town. Yet you need to make sure that potential customers weighing their options will include you in the mix. A further challenge is that the insurance category is incredibly crowded when it comes to advertising, and huge spenders like Geico, Progressive, State Farm, and Allstate have been filling up the airwaves— becoming top-of-mind brands in part through the sheer ubiquity of their ads.

Travelers says it can't compete with those massive marketing budgets, which are several multiples of its own. Instead, the company feels it can leverage its iconic umbrella to get more bang for the buck. Its consumer research shows that even now, after the logo's muddled recent history, people still very strongly associate it with Travelers. (Boyd wouldn't share his proprietary findings with me, but he claims the level of recall is quite remarkable.) Thus that memorable red umbrella—blown up to absurd proportions and plastered across television screens with judicious ad buys—will help jam Travelers into the mind of the comparison-shopping insurance buyer.

I also think the campaign finds a nicely placed sweet spot in terms of its tone. The art director who worked on the spot says he was going for a "modern fairy tale" vibe. There's a lighthearted mood here that contrasts with all the fear-mongering insurance ads on TV, with their terrifying footage of floods and car accidents. At the same time, the umbrella is a much statelier brand icon than Geico's hammy lizard. It manages to be both elegant and, thanks to its size, in-your-face.

I wonder if Citi is jealous? It's like their dowdy, neglected girlfriend met a new guy, got a stunning makeover, and is now flaunting her enhancements for all to see.

Grade: B+. The pretty scenery (filmed in New Zealand) and the cinematic touches are nice, but it's the well-executed deployment of that zany umbrella that really makes the spot memorable. And, by the way, that's no computer graphic. It's a 35-foot-tall, custom-made umbrella. During shooting, it was stabilized by cranes that were later digitally erased. One of the ad guys described the surreal nature of the scene on set: "Walking through downtown Auckland with this thing," he says, "was like living in a Magritte painting."

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

art
The New Emperor of No-Brow
Is Takashi Murakami Japan's Andy Warhol—or its Walt Disney?

By Mia Fineman
Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 7:19 AM ET

Click here to read a slide-show essay about Takashi Murakami.

books
The Mirror of History
What hinders historians from discovering the strangeness of the past?
By David A. Bell
Monday, April 14, 2008, at 7:29 AM ET

Given how fiercely cultural conservatives defend the importance of a single "Western canon," it is more than a little ironic that different parts of the West have such different versions of it. True, the canon everywhere tends to start with the same Greeks and Romans, but thereafter, things get trickier. Consider, for instance, what competing accounts of "Western" philosophy and literature say about the 19th century. Where the French highlight Auguste Comte and Victor Hugo, the British give pride of place to John Stuart Mill and Charles Dickens, while Germans speak of the age of Hegel and Goethe. The multinational canon that dominates survey courses at universities like Columbia and the University of Chicago is actually a peculiarly American phenomenon.

When it comes to canonical works of history writing, national differences are all the more striking. Before the 18th century, nearly all historians wrote exclusively about their own countries, and in most of the world, most of them still do (America, with its immigrant heritage and global reach, is again an exception to the nationalist rule). So not surprisingly, when looking back on the "history of history," German historians loom largest for the Germans, French ones for the French, and so on.

In his whimsically titled *A History of Histories*, British historian John Burrow seems at first to avoid this tendency. He offers the book as a survey of history writing in general, or at least the part of it that falls into the "European cultural tradition." He starts with Herodotus, dwells lovingly on Thucydides and the Romans, and only gets to his first British subject (a sixth-century monk named Gildas) on Page 175. In his sections on the 19th century, he gives ample space to the German school and an entire chapter

to the United States. Yet in the end, the book still shows just how hard it is to think about history outside a particular national framework.

For one thing, Burrow's gestures toward the world beyond Dover go only so far. His chapter on the Enlightenment looks almost exclusively at British historians, despite the significance of continental contemporaries like Voltaire. Moving on to the 19th century, the book has almost as much on the eccentric if brilliant Thomas Carlyle as on Jules Michelet, Leopold von Ranke, and Jacob Burckhardt—three giants of historical scholarship—combined. Burrow gives extensive treatment to Victorian medievalist William Stubbs, a hero mostly to his own countrymen, while barely mentioning France's Marc Bloch, perhaps the most admired medievalist of modern times. Taken individually, any of these decisions are defensible. Put together, they emit a strong whiff of "Fog in Channel; Continent Cut Off."

More broadly, the themes that Burrow sees as central to his story are often peculiarly British ones. The British are not the only people to have seen history as the "story of freedom," but they are the ones who have most closely identified this story with the progress of parliamentary institutions. Burrow gives a chapter and a half to parliament-centric "Whig History," while disposing in a brisk seven pages of France's influential "*Annales* school" (co-founded by Bloch), which sought to place social history at the heart of the discipline.

Burrow's perspective is not just British, but a very old-fashioned sort of British. In his account, women do not have much of a place in history, either as its writers or its subjects. He gives no more than a few lines to any female historian, and dismisses all of gender history in (literally) two words. Nonwhites get similarly egregious neglect, as does the whole vast subject of the history of slavery, race relations, and genocide. (Jewish history, meanwhile, seems to end with Josephus.) You don't have to worship at the shrine of political correctness to look aghast at this shrinking of the "European cultural tradition" to stories of white men told by the same. At the conclusion of his book, Burrow hails the men he has written about, in Burkean tones, as "a kind of community of the dead and the living." In his pages, it often looks more like a kind of exclusive British club.

This narrowness is a pity, because within its bounds, Burrow has written a lucid, enjoyable survey that achieves miracles of concise summary. He is particularly good on the ancients, whom he plausibly credits with inventing most of the worthwhile elements of the historian's art, beginning with rigorous standards for weighing the reliability of evidence and for determining cause and effect. He also points out that despite writing mostly about wars fought by their own societies, ancient historians had a sustained interest in the diversity of human customs and beliefs that anticipates the ethnographic turn taken by modern social history. Here, Burrow's arguments are provocative and acute.

Yet this very willingness to embrace Herodotus and Thucydides as colleagues—almost as compatriots—leads Burrow to play down one of the most important contrasts between classical and modern history writing: namely, the modern sense of the strangeness of the past. While ancient historians could certainly discern long-term changes (for instance, the decline of Roman virtue lamented by Livy), they did not see fundamental differences between patterns of thought and behavior in successive epochs. In the medieval and early modern worlds, historians and nonhistorians alike continued to collapse different epochs—think of the way that artists portrayed biblical figures in costumes of their own times (as in Pieter Bruegel's *Adoration of the Magi*).

The modern consciousness of historical difference began with Renaissance advances in textual analysis, which allowed scholars to see how differently classical authors had approached issues of law and custom. It grew during the 19th century, when self-proclaimed "historicists" heavily inspired by G.W.F. Hegel insisted that particular historical contexts can give radically different forms to a society's mental structures at different moments in time. More recently, historically minded post-structuralist philosophers like Michel Foucault have even argued that systems of thought in different periods can be radically incommensurable.

Today, much of the best history-writing bears the influence of this tradition. It starts from the premise that what one society regards as normal, "natural," and "human" may strike another as arbitrary, bizarre, and perhaps even unintelligible. Intimate attitudes toward the body, sexual practices, definitions of madness and criminality—all of these things have their own, often surprisingly discontinuous, histories. A good deal of modern scholarship, for instance, has shown that modern racism, with its assumption of vast, biologically grounded differences between races, took shape over a matter of decades, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The most potent resistance to historicist ideas has come from nationalism and the belief that cultural and/or genetic continuity trumps chronological change. Few Western historians still have overt nationalist agendas, but the unquenchable public appetite for stories of past national glories (something particularly strong in the United States, as HBO's *John Adams* has shown yet again) pushes scholarship subtly back in this direction.

Though Burrow's Anglocentrism hardly qualifies as stridently nationalist, his vision of a "community of the dead and the living" is not one that allows much room for consideration of these issues. He acknowledges the significance of Renaissance scholarship, but flits inconsequentially over historicism, and pays more attention to the ways that 19th-century Germans professionalized the discipline than to the ideas they developed. As for the post-structuralists, he barely even mentions them, except insofar as they have contributed to the demolition of "Whig History." Throughout the book, his emphasis on the

bonds among historians across time (facilitated by the Anglocentrism) keeps him from drawing significant connections between historians and the philosophy of their day.

Yet these connections, if not always obvious, are usually profound. Historians, like all practitioners of the human sciences, operate with a particular idea of what makes human beings tick—of how the mind works. You cannot really understand their writing unless you have a sense of how *they* understand the mind itself—in other words, their psychology and philosophy, which are things that change over time. A writer like Burrow, who sometimes seems to see Thucydides and Xenophon as modern Englishmen born by odd happenstance into ancient Greece (he refers to the latter as a member of the "Athenian gentry … a country gentleman"), is almost certain to resist sticking more than a toe into these deep waters.

Of course, those who study a canon, like nationalists, will always stress continuities across history rather than the gulfs that separate us from the past. It's a worthwhile perspective but one that can easily be taken too far. For if we fail to pay due attention to the profound and surprising ways that patterns of thought can change, our canon will all too easily end up becoming a mirror.

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chatterbox

Six Degrees of Adolf Hitler

A reader contest in the spirit of Philadelphia's April 16 presidential debate.

By Timothy Noah

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 7:13 PM ET

In the April 16 ABC News debate, George Stephanopoulos—following on an idiotic question from Charlie Gibson to Barack Obama asking why he doesn't wear a flag lapel pin *more often*—posed a question suggested to him the day before by Sean Hannity, the right-wing Fox News blowhard:

> A gentleman named William Ayers, he was part of the Weather Underground in the 1970s. They bombed the Pentagon, the Capitol and other buildings. He's never apologized for that. And in fact, on 9/11 he was quoted in the *New York Times* saying, "I don't regret setting bombs; I feel we didn't do enough." An early organizing meeting for your state senate campaign was held at his house, and your campaign has said you are friendly. Can you explain that relationship for the voters, and explain to Democrats why it won't be a problem?

Obama answered that he scarcely knew Ayers, that they happened to live in the same neighborhood, and that he regarded Ayers' past participation in bombings as "detestable."

I yield to no one in my distaste for Bill Ayers and the fashionably outré image that he and his wife, former Weather Underground coed Bernardine Dohrn, have managed to cultivate. Indeed, I believe I was the first journalist to point out Ayers' bad timing with that bomb quote, which rolled off the presses mere hours before al-Qaida's planes hit most of their targets. I also panned (here and here) Ayers' morally clueless memoir and bemoaned the shockingly favorable reception it received prior to 9/11. Bill Ayers: bad guy!

But to call Obama's 1995 visit to the house Ayers shares with Dohrn an "early organizing meeting" is simply dishonest. According to a Feb. 22 article by Ben Smith in *Politico*, Obama was taken to the Ayers-Dohrn residence by State Sen. Alice Palmer, who wanted Obama to succeed her. The actual purpose of the meeting appears to have been for *Palmer* to announce to a small group of Hyde Park supporters that she was stepping down. (Don't they employ fact-checkers at ABC News?) At the debate, Hillary Clinton piled on by pointing out that Obama also served with Ayers on the board of the Woods Fund of Chicago, a poverty-fighting nonprofit. This gave Obama the opportunity to point out that Hillary's husband commuted the jail sentences of two members of the Weather Underground, Linda Evans and Susan Rosenberg. He might further have pointed out (but didn't) that Rosenberg is strongly suspected of having driven a getaway vehicle in a 1981 Weather Underground robbery in which three members of Hillary's beloved proletariat were killed. Ayers, by sheer luck, seems never to have killed anybody.

Since guilt by association is the emerging theme of campaign '08, I propose that we carry this smear-off to its logical conclusion with a reader contest in the spirit of John Guare's delicious play *Six Degrees of Separation* (the movie was pretty good,

too) and the parlor game it inspired, Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon. The idea (which journalist Malcolm Gladwell further explored in an essay about, by illustrative coincidence, the mother of ***Slate***'s editor) is that every person on planet Earth can be connected to every other person by six steps of association. Guare's character Ouisa Kittredge (Stockard Channing in both play and movie) puts it this way:

> I read somewhere that everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people. Six degrees of separation between us and everyone else on this planet. The president of the United States, a gondolier in Venice, just fill in the names. I find that extremely comforting, that we're so close, but I also find it like Chinese water torture that we're so close because you have to find the right six people to make the connection. It's not just big names—it's anyone. A native in a rain forest, a Tierra del Fuegan, an Eskimo. I am bound—you are bound—to everyone on this planet by a trail of six people. It's a profound thought….

I will call my game Six Degrees of Adolf Hitler. Readers are invited to connect, via documented acquaintanceships—friendly or unfriendly—*Der Führer* with any one of the three remaining major presidential candidates. Whoever is able to connect a candidate to Hitler with the fewest number of "degrees," or steps, will be named the winner. Send entries to chatterbox@slate.com (subject heading: *Hitler contest*) by noon on April 18. Let's show Stephanopoulos and Gibson what rank amateurs they are at the game of character assassination.

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chatterbox

Who *Is* the Working Class, Anyway?

And do the proles *really* hate the party of the working man?

By Timothy Noah

Monday, April 14, 2008, at 8:05 PM ET

At a San Francisco fundraiser on April 6, Obama uttered his now-famous remark about white working-class Pennsylvanians:

> You go into some of these small towns in Pennsylvania, and like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years, and nothing's replaced them. And they fell through the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration, and each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are gonna regenerate, and they have not. And it's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.

This theory of white working-class alienation from the Democratic Party derives from Thomas Frank's compellingly argued 2004 book, *What's the Matter With Kansas?* To Frank, the proletariat suffers from a form of "derangement" in believing that its woes derive from the decline of traditional values—patriotism, organized religion, self-reliance, the heterosexual two-parent nuclear family, etc.—when the true source of its troubles is a set of economic policies that favors the rich. Republicans have come to win blue-collar votes in elections by portraying Democratic tolerance of racial and cultural diversity as depravity—"abortion, amnesty, and acid," in the famous slogan used against George McGovern in 1972. (This is not a new trick.) GOP officeholders typically set their conservative cultural agenda aside after the election is over to concentrate on cutting taxes, reducing regulation, busting unions, and so forth. But the white working class continues to fall for the bait-and-switch because the demoralized Democratic Party lacks the courage to lure it back with a muscular appeal based on economic justice.

Frank's is probably the dominant theory today about how the Democrats lost their core working-class constituency. This is in large part because Frank avoids the usual euphemisms and pieties to make his case with clarity, humor, and anger. These qualities render *What's the Matter With Kansas?* insanely readable, but they also make it unwise for any politician to adopt its diagnosis as his own. Working-class people don't *like* being told they're deranged (or "bitter," to use Obama's term), even—make that *especially*—if it's true. Obama will therefore have to either shut up about Democrats' struggle to win working-class votes—that's the usual tack, and the one I'd probably advise—or find himself another theory. Below, three possible candidates:

1) *The white working class likes being pandered to even less than it likes being insulted.* This is the official line of the Democratic Leadership Council and other party centrists. One

heard it a lot after the 2000 election and, to a lesser extent, after the 2004 election. It is the argument that ended the career of Bob Shrum, a political strategist with a penchant for putting left-populist rhetoric into his candidates' mouths; Shrum was a key figure in Gore's 2000 campaign and Kerry's 2004 campaign, and his input was widely blamed for contributing to their losses. Shrum's recent memoir, *No Excuses*, serves up some evidence that a class-based "on your side" pitch will often work well for Democrats running in Senate, House, and gubernatorial races. That's how Shrum got to be a hot political consultant in the first place. Shrum argues that it can work at the national level, too, and, given recent signs of a leftward drift at the grass roots, that may be truer today than it was in 2000 and 2004. But nobody's ever pulled it off, including Shrum.

Hillary Clinton has been attacking Obama nonstop since his "bitter" remark surfaced, even to the point of boasting that her father taught her to shoot *right there in Pennsylvania* ("behind the cottage that my grandfather built on a little lake called Lake Winola outside of Scranton"). This last prompted a reporter to ask when she'd last attended church or fired a gun, a question she refused to answer, and gave Obama an opening to mock her posturing: "Hillary Clinton is out there like she's on the duck blind every Sunday." If proles don't like being pandered to, mightn't Clinton's overkill hurt her? The logic is seldom applied to the "values" agenda, but there's no reason it shouldn't be. One possible indicator: A *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* online poll shows (at this writing) 43 percent of respondents identifying Clinton as the most "out of touch with the voters of Pennsylvania," against 28 percent identifying Obama and 20 percent identifying John McCain.

2) *The white working class isn't the problem; Dixie is.* This theory has been forwarded by Paul Krugman and Thomas Schaller, among others. It would not be wise for Obama to embrace this theory before he locks up the nomination, lest he forsake Southern superdelegates or primary delegates in North Carolina and West Virginia, whose contests still lie ahead. (Obama has tended to do particularly well in the South in part because African-Americans are well-represented in the Southern Democratic Party base.) But after the convention, Obama, if he is the Democratic nominee, might as well write off the South, because Democrats can't win there. Princeton's Larry Bartels made the case two years ago in the *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*. According to Bartels, the white voters lacking college degrees who have abandoned the Democratic Party in droves are *nearly all* Southerners. Outside the South, the decline among voters in this group who support Democratic presidential candidates is *less than 1 percent*. Moreover, if the white working class's interest in "guns or religion" indicates derangement or bitterness, then the white working class isn't very deranged or bitter. According to Bartels, there is *no* evidence that social issues outweigh economic ones among white voters lacking college degrees. Social issues have admittedly become more important to voters during the past two decades, but the derangement/bitterness index has risen most steeply not for the proles but for the country-club set. For example, white voters with college degrees give more than twice as much weight to the issue of abortion than white voters lacking college degrees. Most devastating to Frank's analysis, "most of his white working-class voters see themselves as closer to the Democratic party on social issues like abortion and gender roles but *closer to the Republican party on economic issues*" (italics mine).

If this is correct, then Obama should apologize to Pennsylvanians not because his gaffe was *condescending* but because it was *inaccurate*.

3) *Don't sweat how the white working class votes, because soon it won't exist.* Less crudely, the white working class will exist, but it will no longer conform to the familiar definition. It will continue to shrink, but not as fast.

Bartels defines the white working class as white people who lack college degrees. This notion of the white working class works fine if the setting is 1940, when three-quarters of all adults age 25 and older were high-school dropouts and 95 percent lacked a college degree. Today, however, only about 14 percent of adults 25 and older are high-school dropouts, and only about 70 percent lack a college degree. *Fifty-four* percent have "at least some college education." These data are included in a new Brookings Institution study by Alan Abramowitz and Ruy Teixeira, who further point out that since 1940 the percentage of workers who have white-collar jobs has increased from 32 percent to 60 percent. Nobody knows what to call the newly swollen ranks of people at the low-income end of white-collar America. In the 1980s, a University of Massachusetts journalism professor named Ralph Whitehead floated the term "new collar," but it didn't take. Increasingly, it seems most logical to call these people "working class," even though they often make more money than we once associated with the working class.

In complicating their definition of class, Abramowitz and Teixeira rely on four factors: income, education, occupation, and "subjective class identification," i.e., the class that people *think* they belong to. This rejiggering has the effect of shoring up Frank and knocking down Bartels to some extent. The trouble with Bartels, they maintain, is that his definition of the white working class includes too many people who aren't working at all because they're disabled, retired, going to school, or raising kids. Most of these people are too poor to categorize as working-class, while some are too wealthy. In addition, Abramowitz and Teixeira prefer to measure working-class allegiance to the Democrats not by presidential votes but by Democratic Party identification, which has plummeted dramatically. By that measure, the Democrats are experiencing their greatest difficulties with working- and middle-class white voters and their least difficulties with upper-class white voters. Abramowitz and Teixeira say it isn't true, as Bartels argues, that white-working-class defection from the Democratic Party is a regional

problem almost entirely confined to the South. Using their revised definitions of the white working class and Democratic Party allegiance, the defection remains more dramatic in the South (a 34 percent drop in party identification between the 1960s and the current decade), but it's also substantial in the North (an 11 percent drop).

On the other hand, Abramowitz and Teixeira favor Bartels over Frank on the question of whether working-class whites score higher on the derangement/bitterness index than wealthier whites. Although they found working-class whites more likely to oppose abortion than upper-class whites, for instance, the working-class whites were far less likely than upper-class whites to abandon the Democrats over the abortion issue. Only 57 percent working-class whites opposed to abortion identified with the GOP, compared with 92 percent of upper-class whites opposed to abortion. Abramowitz and Teixeira also lean toward the DLC and away from Frank on the question of whether economic populism can save the Democrats, mainly because working-class Americans, like Americans as a whole, tend to harbor unrealistically grim notions about how bad life is for everyone else while simultaneously harboring unrealistically sunny notions about how good life is for themselves. (This phenomenon, which isn't new, is nicely described in David Whitman's 1998 book, *The Optimism Gap*, and in Gregg Easterbrook's 2003 book, *The Progress Paradox*.) "The white working class today is an *aspirational* class," they write, "not a downtrodden one." In promoting economic security, they conclude, Democrats would do best to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, and don't mess with Mr. In-Between.

Obama, being a quick study, will note that *none* of these theories suggests that it's *ever* a good idea to tell a person whose vote you want that you find him "bitter." But the bitterest people, these studies suggest, aren't the proles. They're the very ones who, judging by economic circumstances, have the least to be bitter about.

[*Update, April 16*: Thomas Frank answers Bartels' criticisms here. One point he makes that's relevant to the Obama flap:

> Bartels spends several pages testing whether or not religion is "distracting religious white voters from a hard-headed pursuit of their economic policy views." This is an interesting argument, but it is not one that I make. Although I do indeed use colorful language to establish that religion is a part of the cultural background in Kansas, I do not evaluate its role systematically. Sometimes I wish I had, but I didn't. The brief snippets of mine that Bartels cites, all drawn from different parts of [*What's the Matter With Kansas*?], are simply not enough to prove anything more than my fondness for sarcasm.

It's four years since I read Frank's book, and I now I can't find my copy, so I'll take Frank's word for it. Any notion Obama acquired that economic disenchantment intensified the white working class' religiosity would be based not on Frank's analysis but on his wisecracks.

Frank challenges many of Bartels' quantitative findings, but his bottom line is that even if Bartels were right on the particulars, he would be wrong to think they undermined his (i.e., Frank's) thesis. "Does a movement have to be growing in order for it to be the subject of a cultural study?" Frank asks. *What's the Matter With Kansas*, he continues,

> does not require or depend upon a majoritarian argument of any kind; it only requires that the cultural formation in question is *significant* or is somehow *worth examining*. ...Even if they are a minority, right-wing populists do exist, and some people really do care about culture-war issues. ...After all, the two major parties are coalitions of groups from all walks of life, and the slightest change in the loyalties of these groups is often enough to determine victory or defeat. Success doesn't require a solid majority *from each group*, just a majority when all the different components are put together.

This introduces a giant fudge factor, but Frank is certainly right that in the 21st century presidential elections can turn on small changes.]

Convictions

Cool Courts

Why judges won't do anything to stop global warming.

Friday, April 18, 2008, at 9:02 AM ET

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corrections

Corrections

Friday, April 18, 2008, at 6:56 AM ET

Due to an editing error, the April 17 "Faith-Based" mistakenly referred to "non-Passover seders" instead of Passover seders.

In the April 16 "Art," Mia Fineman stated that Takashi Murakami reportedly settled a lawsuit over use of one of his images for tens of thousands of

yen. In fact, the settlement was reportedly in the tens of millions.

In the April 16 "Moneybox," Chadwick Matlin misidentified William Rhodes as Citigroup's vice president. He is Citigroup's senior vice chairman.

In the April 15 "Medical Examiner," Darshak Sanghavi incorrectly referred to a recent ad in the *New York Times* touting the anti-cancer benefits of sunscreen. The ad actually ran in magazines last year.

In the April 12 "Today's Papers," Jesse Stanchak originally stated that Abkhazia is a former Soviet-bloc country. It is considered a break-away region of the former Soviet-bloc republic of Georgia.

In the April 11 "Foreigners," a photo caption originally misspelled Tessa Jowell's name.

In the April 10 "Today's Blogs," Bidisha Banerjee misspelled the name of blogger Om Malik.

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

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culturebox

Yo Mamma

Hillary Clinton as the battleground in the war between mothers and daughters.

By Linda Hirshman

Friday, April 18, 2008, at 7:11 AM ET

The next president of the United States will be at the helm of the largest and most powerful military and economy in the world, literally holding the power over life and death, wielding the legislative veto, administering the bureaucracy, and selecting life-tenured federal judges. Here's how young feminist writer Courtney Martin is selecting her candidate: "I have a dirty little political secret. I hate to admit it, because it makes me feel unfeminist and silly and a little bit irrational. But it's true and I have to get it off my chest. I'm not backing Hillary Clinton—and that's at least in part because she reminds me of being scolded by my mother."

Yo mamma.

In an interview on PBS's *NOW* with Maria Hinajosa, *Ms.* magazine founding editor Letty Cotton Pogrebin and her Obama-supporting author daughter, Abigail, discussed their personal quarrel over the election. The fortysomething daughter of one of the most famous feminists in the country explained to the camera that she had finally been forced to implore her mother to stop trying to convince her to vote for Hillary: "Mom, mom, mommmeeeeeee," the segment ends, as Abigail gets in touch with her inner child.

It's not just their mothers these young women are defying; it's all those women who had the effrontery to start the feminist movement in the 1960s. This week by an amazing coincidence, ***Slate*** contributor Amanda Fortini in *New York* magazine and *Salon*'s Rebecca Traister published courageous, conversation-altering essays about the rabid anti-feminism alienating even Obama's own female supporters. But Traister still began her analysis with the caveat that:

> The exhortations from [famed old feminist activist] Robin Morgan have not exactly been lyrical, or tuned to ears of women younger than 50. Assertions from Obama-maniacs that a woman who votes for Hillary must be doing so only because she is a woman may be bad, but it's just as bad for older feminists to instruct women that they have some kind of ovarian, fallopian responsibility to do the same.

One of Traister's sources, Rebecca Wiegand, is quoted saying, "Those editorials by Gloria Steinem and Robin Morgan I was appalled by, and I felt completely alienated from second-wave feminism." Amy Tiemanns, a blogger who calls herself Mojo Mom, recently told readers of Women's e-news that she and the women of the second wave are indeed engaged in "an overdue 'Mother-Daughter' power struggle that we need to examine. [T]he Mothers have the upper hand. They control the largest established organizations, the purse strings of foundation grants."

These stereotypes of second-wave feminists as overbearing, selfish mothers resemble nothing so much as WASP avatar and '50s icon Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers*, which coined the term *momism*. Wylie's book sold 180,000 copies. His mother was "the murderess, the habitual divorcee, the weeper, the weak sister, the rubbery sex experimentist, the quarreler, the woman forever displeased, the nagger, the female miser, and so on and so on and so on, to the outermost lengths of the puerile, rusting, raging creature we know as mom and sis." An entire generation of '50s-era child psychiatrists blamed illnesses we now know to be chemical on the baleful influence of domineering momism.

We old '60s feminists thought that by standing up for women as rational creatures, opening up the public world to them, and ending their dependence on men for their support, we would put to an end this image of the scolding, selfish older woman. After all, one of Wylie's central arguments was that "Satan finds work for idle hands to do. … Never before has a great nation of brave and dreaming men absent-mindedly created a huge class of idle, middle-aged women. Satan himself has been taxed to dig up enterprises enough for them."

Despite our best efforts, yo-mamma feminists contend that even gainfully employed, productive, and liberated women were selfish dominatrices who must be rejected. Not until the Hillary-bashing liberal male establishment went so over the top with their attacks that it could not be ignored did the feminist oldsters start to seem sensible. How self-destructive is this?

And how untruthful. I am hard-pressed to find feminist proponents of Hillary Clinton suggesting a "vagina litmus test"—the original phrase the youngsters used against feminists like Robin Morgan. (By changing *vagina* to *ovaries*, Traister robs this crucial locution of its real sexism. *Ick*, a *vagina*,"would not want to dip my litmus paper in that!) If you actually read Robin Morgan's manifesto, "Good-Bye to All That No. 2" she says explicitly that we must not resort to any such silly standard: "And goodbye to some feminists so famished for a female president they were even willing to abandon women's rights in backing Elizabeth Dole."

Morgan's recitation of the practices she's hoping to end included much of the evidence that Traister and Fortini invoked against Hillary-bashers as well: the nutcracker ("Goodbye to the HRC nutcracker with metal spikes between splayed thighs"), the T-shirts, the Chris Matthews. Most important of all, Morgan anticipated the intimidation Traister and Fortini report—intimidation so frightening that most of Fortini's sources would speak only on condition of anonymity. Morgan foreshadowed just this when she wrote, "Goodbye to some young women … who fear their boyfriends might look at them funny if they say something good about her." In her attack on the mammas in the *Guardian* recently, youthful feminist author Michelle Goldberg described Morgan's warning about the silencing as "hysterical," meaning driven insane by your uterus. Does Goldberg now think Traister and Fortini have been infected with the women's disease?

Self-destructive, untruthful, and unnecessary. Deborah Siegel has written a very important book, *Sisterhood Interrupted*, about the fractious relationships between the '60s feminists and their filial successors, to show, as she put it, that "we are more alike than we are different." The manifesto *Full Frontal Feminism* by the icon of young feminism—Jessica Valenti—actually sounds a lot like Betty Friedan (except perhaps that Betty didn't say *fuck* so much). What is the origin of the idea that because your mama or a member of your mother's generation recommended something, that's sufficient reason not to do it? In this "Mother-Daughter power struggle" that Mojo Mom seeks to ignite, the feminist movement would just replicate the endless division of the feminists within the generations by dividing the generations themselves into interest groups so small that no politician in the world will ever pay them the slightest heed.

Psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow famously speculated that since women raise children, men form their moral psychology by separating from their mothers while women identify with their mothers and so are caught in a web of relationships. The campaign actually contains a nifty example of this. In a little-noticed video, when NBC's Brian Williams once prompted Sen. Obama to say if the first picture of himself on the cover of *Newsweek* made him think of a "loved one," Obama said he thought of his mother. "I think she would have been proud, and she would have cried. Her chin would tremble, and she would get all weepy," he said, with his usual composure.

I've never been much for pop-psychologizing, but perhaps the yo-mamma feminist rebellion is an attempt by young women to similarly free themselves from their identification with the mother. If so, it's a great argument for shared childrearing, but it still makes for lousy politics. Following Chodorow's reasoning, just for argument, men are free to stand on the shoulders of their fathers, who weren't around all that much, without psychological consequence. And so they do. Liberal and conservative. Al Gore and Al Gore, the Bushes, unto the fourth generation, the Harold Ickes, the unbreakable Kristols, Norman and John ("Normanson") Podhoretz. Only women seem to need to separate and destroy in order to start all over again with each generation.

Before all the commentators reach for their macro buttons to accuse me of shilling for the Clinton campaign, I suppose I must offer the obligatory reassurance that neither all women nor even all feminists need to march in lockstep to the polls to vote for Hillary Clinton. But I want to amplify that with the additional caution that *just because your mother did it does not make it wrong*. After all, she had you, didn't she?

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culturebox

Why Don't Modern Poems Rhyme, Etc.

Frequently asked questions about the business of verse.

By Robert Pinsky

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 12:39 PM ET

1. Sometimes I see a poem in *Slate* or another magazine, and it doesn't do a thing for me. Half of the time I can't figure out what it means—what is that all about?

Generalizing won't do. We'd have to discuss a particular poem. At times prominent magazines publish things that aren't very good.

Magazines sometimes make me think of four lines the 18th-century actor David Garrick wrote as part of his poem praising poet Thomas Gray. About a certain kind of reader, Garrick wrote:

> The gentle reader loves the gentle Muse.
> That little dares, and little means;
> Who humbly sips her learning from Reviews,
> Or flutters in the Magazines.

2. Isn't so-called "free verse" just prose chopped into lines?

Read the following aloud, listening to the vowels and consonants, the sentence movements:

William Carlos Williams, "Fine Work With Pitch and Copper"

> Now they are resting
> in the fleckless light
> separately in unison
>
> like the sacks
> of sifted stone stacked
> regularly by twos
>
> about the flat roof
> ready after lunch
> to be opened and strewn
>
> The copper in eight
> foot strips has been
> beaten lengthwise
>
> down the center at right
> angles and lies ready
> to edge the coping
>
> One still chewing
> picks up a copper strip
> and runs his eye along it

Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man"

3. How come modern poets don't write in rhyme?

Read the following aloud, listening to the vowels and consonants, the sentence movements:

Thom Gunn, "Still Life"

> I shall not soon forget
> The greyish-yellow skin
> To which the face had set:
> Lids tight: nothing of his,
> No tremor from within,
> Played on the surfaces.
>
> He still found breath, and yet
> It was an obscure knack.
> I shall not soon forget
> The angle of his head,
> Arrested and reared back
> On the crisp field of bed,
>
> Back from what he could neither
> Accept, as one opposed,
> Nor, as a life-long breather,
> Consentingly let go,
> The tube his mouth enclosed
> In an astonished O.

Thom Gunn, "The Reassurance"

> About ten days or so
> After we saw you dead
> You came back in a dream.
> I'm all right now you said.
>
> And it was you, although
> You were fleshed out again:
> You hugged us all round then,
> And gave your welcoming beam.
>
> How like you to be kind,
> Seeking to reassure.
> And, yes, how like my mind
> To make itself secure.

4. How come *real* poetry—in our great-grandparents' time or, anyway, some other long-ago time—was easy to understand *and* great?

Do you mean like this?

Emily Dickinson, "I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl"

> I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl—
> Life's little duties do—precisely—
> As the very least
> Were infinite—to me—
>
> I put new Blossoms in the Glass—
> And throw the old—away—

I push a petal from my Gown
That anchored there—I weigh
The time-twill be till six o'clock
I have so much to do—
And yet—Existence—some way back—
Stopped—struck—my ticking—through—
We cannot put Ourself away
As a completed Man
Or Woman—When the Errand's done
We came to Flesh—upon—
There may be—Miles on Miles of Nought—
Of Action—sicker far—
To simulate—is stinging work—
To cover what we are
From Science—and from Surgery—
Too Telescopic Eyes
To beat on us unshaded—
For their—sake—not for Ours—
'Twould start them—
We—could tremble—
But since we got a Bomb—
And held it in our Bosom—
Nay—Hold it—it is calm—
Therefore—we do life's labor—
Though life's Reward—be done—
With scrupulous exactness—
To hold our Senses—on—

Or do you mean like this?

Edgar Guest, "Home"

It takes a heap o' livin' in a house t' make it home,
A heap o' sun an' shadder, an' ye sometimes have t' roam
Afore ye really 'preciate the things ye lef' behind,
An' hunger fer 'em somehow, with 'em allus on yer mind.
It don't make any differunce how rich ye get t' be,
How much yer chairs an' tables cost, how great yer luxury;
It ain't home t' ye, though it be the palace of a king,
Until somehow yer soul is sort o' wrapped round everything.

Home ain't a place that gold can buy or get up in a minute;
Afore it's home there's got t' be a heap o' livin' in it;
Within the walls there's got t' be some babies born, and then
Right there ye've got t' bring 'em up t' women good, an' men;
And gradjerly as time goes on, ye find ye wouldn't part
With anything they ever used—they've grown into yer heart:
The old high chairs, the playthings, too, the little shoes they wore
Ye hoard; an' if ye could ye'd keep the thumb-marks on the door.

Ye've got t' weep t' make it home, ye've got t' sit an' sigh
An' watch beside a loved one's bed, an' know that Death is nigh;
An' in the stillness o' the night t' see Death's angel come,
An' close the eyes o' her that smiled, an' leave her sweet voice dumb.
Fer these are scenes that grip the heart, an' when yer tears are dried,
Ye find the home is dearer than it was, an' sanctified;
An' tuggin' at ye always are the pleasant memories
o' her that was an' is no more—ye can't escape from these.

Ye've got t' sing an' dance fer years, ye've got t' romp an' play,
An' learn t' love the things ye have by usin' 'em each day;
Even the roses 'round the porch must blossom year by year
Afore they 'come a part o' ye, suggestin' someone dear
Who used t' love 'em long ago, an' trained 'em jes t' run
The way they do, so's they would get the early mornin' sun;
Ye've got t' love each brick an' stone from cellar up t' dome:
It takes a heap o' livin' in a house t' make it home.

5. Who is Edgar Guest?

The most popular poet in American history. Sold a million copies when a million was a million; wrote a syndicated poem-a-day column; had his own radio show and even, for a while, his own TV show in the early days of that medium. Here's a poem by a poet more or less his contemporary, less popular than Guest was though more read today:

Marianne Moore, "Silence"

My father used to say,
"Superior people never make long visits,
have to be shown Longfellow's grave
or the glass flowers at Harvard.
Self-reliant like the cat—
that takes its prey to privacy,
the mouse's limp tail hanging like a shoelace
from its mouth—
they sometimes enjoy solitude,
and can be robbed of speech
by speech which has delighted them.
The deepest feeling always shows itself in
silence;
not in silence, but restraint."
Nor was he insincere in saying, "Make my
house your inn."
Inns are not residences.

6. How come American poets don't write about politics or current events?

Read the following:

Allen Ginsberg, "America"

America I've given you all and now I'm
nothing.
America two dollars and twentyseven cents
January 17, 1956.
I can't stand my own mind.
America when will we end the human war?
Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.
I don't feel good don't bother me.
I won't write my poem till I'm in my right
mind.
America when will you be angelic?
When will you take off your clothes?
When will you look at yourself through the
grave?
When will you be worthy of your million
Trotskyites?
America why are your libraries full of tears?
America when will you send your eggs to
India?
I'm sick of your insane demands.
When can I go into the supermarket and buy
what I need with my
good looks?
America after all it is you and I who are
perfect not the next world.
Your machinery is too much for me.
You made me want to be a saint.
There must be some other way to settle this
argument.
Burroughs is in Tangiers I don't think he'll
come back it's sinister.
Are you being sinister or is this some form of
practical joke?
I'm trying to come to the point.
I refuse to give up my obsession.
America stop pushing I know what I'm doing.
America the plum blossoms are falling.
I haven't read the newspapers for months,
everyday somebody goes
on trial for murder.
America I feel sentimental about the
Wobblies.
America I used to be a communist when I was
a kid I'm not sorry.
I smoke marijuana every chance I get.
I sit in my house for days on end and stare at
the roses in the closet.
When I go to Chinatown I get drunk and never
get laid.
My mind is made up there's going to be
trouble.
You should have seen me reading Marx.
My psychoanalyst thinks I'm perfectly right.
I won't say the Lord's Prayer.
I have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations.
America I still haven't told you what you did
to Uncle Max after he
came over from Russia.

I'm addressing you.
Are you going to let your emotional life be run
by Time Magazine?
I'm obsessed by Time Magazine.
I read it every week.
Its cover stares at me every time I slink past
the corner candystore.
I read it in the basement of the Berkeley Public
Library.
It's always telling me about responsibility.
Businessmen are serious.
Movie producers are serious. Everybody's
serious but me.
It occurs to me that I am America.
I am talking to myself again.

Asia is rising against me.
I haven't got a chinaman's chance.
I'd better consider my national resources.
My national resources consist of two joints of
marijuana millions of
genitals an unpublishable private literature
that jetplanes 1400
miles an hour and twentyfive-thousand
mental institutions.

I say nothing about my prisons nor the
millions of underprivileged who
live in my flowerpots under the light of five
hundred suns.
I have abolished the whorehouses of France,
Tangiers is the next
to go.
My ambition is to be President despite the fact
that I'm a Catholic.

America how can I write a holy litany in your
silly mood?
I will continue like Henry Ford my strophes
are as individual as his
automobiles more so they're all different
sexes.
America I will sell you strophes $2500 apiece
$500 down on your
old strophe
America free Tom Mooney
America save the Spanish Loyalists
America Sacco & Vanzetti must not die
America I am the Scottsboro boys.
America when I was seven momma took me to
Communist Cell
meetings they sold us garbanzos a handful
per ticket a ticket
costs a nickel and the speeches were free
everybody was
angelic and sentimental aboutthe workers
it was all so sincere
you have no idea what a good thing the
party was in 1835 Scott
Nearing was a grand old man a real
mensch Mother Bloor the
Silk-strikers' Ewig-Weibliche made me cry
I once saw the Yiddish
orator Israel Amter plain. Everybody must
have been a spy.
America you don't really want to go to war.
America it's them bad Russians.
Them Russians them Russians and them
Chinamen. And them
Russians.
The Russia wants to eat us alive. The Russia's
power mad. She wants
to take our cars from out our garages.
Her wants to grab Chicago. Her needs a Red
Reader's Digest. Her
wants our auto plants in Siberia. Him big
bureaucracy running
our fillingstations.
That no good. Ugh. Him make Indians learn
read. Him need big black
niggers. Hah. Her make us all work sixteen
hours a day. Help.
America this is quite serious.
America this is the impression I get from
looking in the television set.
America is this correct?
I'd better get right down to the job.
It's true I don't want to join the Army or turn
lathes in precision parts
factories, I'm nearsighted and psychopathic
anyway.
America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the
wheel.

Robert Lowell, "Waking Early Sunday Morning"

Muriel Rukeyser, "Mearl Blankenship"

7. But what about living American poets—how come they don't write about politics or current events?

C.K. Williams, "Fear"

1.

At almost the very moment an exterminator's
panel truck,
the blowup of a cockroach airbrushed on its
side,
pulls up at a house across from our
neighborhood park,
a battalion of transient grackles invades the
picnic ground,

and the odd thought comes to me how much in
their rich sheen,
their sheer abundance, their hunger without
end, if I let them
they can seem akin to roaches; even their curt,
coarse cry:
mightn't those subversive voices beneath us
sound like that?

Roaches, though … Last year, our apartment
house was overrun,
insecticides didn't work, there'd be roaches on
our toothbrushes
and combs.
The widower downstairs—this is awful—
who'd gone through
deportation
and the camps and was close to dying now and
would sometimes
faint,

was found one morning lying wedged between
his toilet and a wall,
naked, barely breathing, the entire surface of
his skin alive
with the insolent, impervious brutes, who were
no longer daunted
by the light, or us—the Samaritan neighbor
had to scrape them off.

2.

Vermin, poison, atrocious death: what
different resonance they have
in our age of suicide as armament, anthrax,
resurrected pox.
Every other week brings new warnings, new
false alarms;
it's hard to know how much to be afraid, or
even how.
The second world war was barely over, in
annihilated cities
children just my age still foraged for scraps of
bread,

and we were being taught that our war would
be nuclear,
that if we weren't incinerated, the flesh would
rot from our bones.
By the time Kennedy and Khrushchev faced
off over Cuba,
rockets primed and aimed, we were sick with
it, insane.

And now these bewildering times, when those
whose interest is
to consternate us hardly bother to conceal their
purposes.
Yes, we have antagonists, and some of their
grievances are just,
but is no one blameless, are we all to be
combatants, prey?

3.

*We have offended very grievously, and been
most tyrannous*,
wrote Coleridge, invasion imminent from
radical France;
the wretched plead against us … then, *Father
and God*,
spare us, he begged, as I suppose one day I
will as well.

I still want to believe we'll cure the human
heart, heal it
of its anxieties, and the mistrust and
barbarousness they spawn,
but hasn't that metaphorical heart been slashed,
dissected,
cauterized and slashed again, and has the
carnage relented, ever?

Night nearly, the exterminator's gone, the park
deserted,
the swings and slides my grandsons play on
forsaken.
In the windows all around, the flicker of the
television news:
more politics of terror; war, threats of war, war
without end.

A half-chorus of grackles still ransacks the
trash;
in their intricate iridescence they seem eerily
otherworldly,
negative celestials, risen from some counter-
realm to rescue us.
But now, scattering towards the deepening
shadows, they go, too.

Frank Bidart, "To the Republic"

Ann Winters, "The Displaced of Capital"

8. Aren't a lot of contemporary song lyrics the real poetry of our time?

Read them aloud in your own voice, without the music, and see how they hold up compared with this:

Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays"

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering,
breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.

What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Or this:

Jack Gilbert, "Measuring the Tyger"

Or this:

Yusuf Komunyakaa, "Facing It"

Or this:

Louise Bogan, "Several Voices Out of a Cloud"

9. Well, I like poetry that is amusing, that maybe makes me chuckle a little. I'd rather read something reassuring and light than something complicated or gloomy. Is that bad? Does that mean I am a jerk?

Yes.

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culturebox

Risky Businesses

Are *Ice Road Truckers* and *Ax Men* as good as *Deadliest Catch*?

By Robert Weintraub

Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 6:53 PM ET

The Perfect Storm wasn't just a book about terrible weather. At heart, it was about the awful risks Gloucester fishermen take every time they sail to the Grand Banks. The book became a best-seller and later a George Clooney vehicle because of its vivid detailing of those risks—weather, yes, but also getting yanked overboard by fishing gear or skewered by a swordfish.

Sebastian Junger, the author of *The Perfect Storm*, began writing the book as part of a larger project about people with dangerous jobs, including smoke jumpers and war correspondents. That never came to pass, but Thom Beers has picked up where Junger left off, making it his business to spotlight occupations in which the risks go way beyond carpal tunnel syndrome. Beers is the producer behind *Deadliest Catch*, which begins its fourth season on Discovery Channel tonight. *Catch*, which follows the Alaskan king crab fishing fleet in the Bering Sea, is an obvious descendant of *Storm* and, as entertainment, far outstrips the celluloid version of Junger's book. The show offers close-up looks at raging, frigid seas, footage that has seldom been captured so thoroughly and adeptly on television. That men go out and perform a difficult job in those conditions almost defies belief.

Catch was Beers' first entry in the growing genre we might as well call Jungereality: programs about dangerous jobs and the men who do them. *Ice Road Truckers* follows men who drive supplies over frozen lakes in the Arctic Circle, while *Ax Men* spotlights lumber companies in the Pacific Northwest; both air on the History Channel, and both are produced by Beers. The newest Beers show, National Geographic's *America's Port*, focuses on the stevedores and anti-terror police working the Port of Los Angeles shipyards. *Dirty Jobs*, also entering its fourth season on Discovery, occasionally chronicles jobs that are dirty *and* dangerous. And more Jungereality is on the way—NBC recently announced a deal with Beers to produce several similar programs for the network, including one that will follow divers as they attach tracking devices to sharks.

Deadliest Catch has consistently ranked highly in the coveted 25-to-54-year-old demographic—at times, higher than any cable programming save sports. Will its offshoots enjoy similar success? A closer look at the elements that have made *Deadliest Catch* so compelling suggests its success will not be easily repeated.

Greed Is Good

The subjects on display in Jungereality aren't daredevils—they're employees. But merely working for a living isn't enough. In addition to the man-against-nature theme, the shows add an element of man-against-man (and except for a lone female "ice road trucker," there are no women in Jungereality). The dollars earned by each worker are tracked as the season progresses. The game-show aspect of these programs can feel a bit unseemly—these guys work to feed their families, not to show up the guy working on the other side of the hill. Then again, these are high-risk, high-reward gigs, and knowing exactly how high the reward is informs the viewer.

The accounting aspect of Jungereality works particularly well on *Catch*—it's astonishing to learn that a veteran deckhand can expect $20,000 to $30,000 for a few weeks of work, and it follows that the more crabs caught, the better the payoff for the crew. On the other shows, however, the chain of commerce is murkier. The ice road truckers compete to haul the most "loads," but there is no explanation of the pay scale: what factor the weight of their loads plays in their paychecks, whether they get docked for lost time, etc. *Ax Men* counts the trucks full of "green gold" (although the trees are brown) that each company of loggers sends down to the mill for processing, but since the size and nature of the forest tracts the men are asked to clear-cut differ wildly, this, too, feels forced.

It's Risky, I Tell Ya, Risky

The sinking of the crab-fishing vessel *Big Valley* during the first season of *Deadliest Catch* was proof enough that the show's title was not hyperbole. (Five crewmen died, only two of whom were ever found.) The other Jungereality programs labor to remind the viewer that if all goes well, death will be captured on camera. *America's Port* isn't out of its first segment before Beers (who narrates all the shows except *Catch*) intones about the dockworkers, "When they come to work, they leave their fear of death at home." Granted, working around multiton shipping containers *is* more perilous than, say, bookkeeping, but thanks to high-tech equipment like computerized loading and offloading systems, being a stevedore isn't as tough as it was in Terry Malloy's day.

On *Ax Men*, almost every lumberjack gets a turn saying things like "You might get killed on the way to work, at work, or on your way home," and the show goes out of its way to prove it. Four companies compete to bring in the most lumber on the show. Three are small firms that patch faulty equipment with elbow grease and jury-rig their operations to overcome a lack of loggers. The fourth, J.M. Browning Logging, is a large operation that employs helicopters to help haul felled trees up the slopes and expensive machinery to keep its operation chugging smoothly along. Why have such a big outfit competing with small fries? Because the titular head of the company, Jay Browning, lost an arm in an accident years ago, and each episode contains loving close-ups of his mechanical replacement—proof that Things Can Go Terribly Wrong out Here. Worst injury actually captured in the first several episodes? A wrenched back.

The Blue-Collar Bear

The breakout stars of Jungereality TV look more like candidates for a night in the drunk tank after a barroom brawl than for a chat on late-night TV. Phil Harris, captain of the Cornelia Marie on *Catch*, is the archetype—a husky, bearded gent with a voice deeper than the Bering Sea who suffers no fools and drops Bibles full of truth in every episode. On *Ax Men*, world-weary Dwayne Dethlefs teaches old-school lumber techniques in a similar basso profundo to his son, Dustin, the show's comic relief, who can't resist needling his old man about how time has rendered him considerably less nimble than his son. *Ice Road*'s resident Gruff Gus is Hugh "The Polar Bear" Rowland.

These working-class heroes are crucial to the success of Jungereality. As the History Channel's marketing campaign is keen to point out, these are the kind of guys who made this country great, building it up through backbreaking labor. In a time when the American Way of Work is seemingly in its death throes, it's comforting to see that spirit still intact, if only at the extreme end of the want ads. *Ice Road Truckers* suffers in this regard, though, because the raison d'être for the whole ice-trucking operation—keeping a diamond plant in northern Canada operating through resupply—doesn't do much for anyone but the recently engaged. *Ax Men*, for its part, is simply depressing—several loggers mention halfhearted hopes of getting out of the forest and into school or a better job. Good luck: *America's Port* spent much of its debut episode tracking shipments from Asia, a grim reminder of the loss of our industrial base. It's only *Catch*, with its fishermen straight out of Jack London, that manages to meld thrills with nostalgia for a simpler, better time.

Who's the New Guy?

The crusty veterans of Jungereality shows make the deadly look routine. Unfortunately, that cannot sustain the dozen or so episodes that constitute a season, so it is imperative to introduce someone likely to screw up into the mix. These callow kids (often barely 20 years old) struggle to attach cables properly or fail to keep up with the trucker convoy. Careful editing adds comic effect—on *Ice Road*, one rookie driver snottily insists over the CB radio that he "has no intention of winding up in a ditch, Bro." Sure enough, in the next scene, there he is, stuck in a ditch.

On *Catch*, though, such mistakes aren't funny. Greenhorns without the proper mettle immediately snap in the crucible of the unforgiving conditions, reduced to weeping in the hold or threatening to commit suicide by jumping off the boat. Therein lies perhaps the most important difference between *Catch* and its knockoffs. While *Ax Men*, *America's Port*, and *Ice Road Truckers* are mildly interesting, what they lack is the hypnotic power and unpredictability of the ocean. Forests and frozen lakes just can't provide the same drama as the open sea. Besides the tragedy of the *Big Valley*, the second season of *Catch* saw another vessel slammed by giant rogue wave. Boats have been caught and nearly demolished by floating ice, and crewmen have been swept overboard and rescued in the nick of time. Sebastian Junger realized his seafaring story was too potent to mix with tales of other risky work. The networks now rushing to woo Thom Beers may yet come to the same conclusion.

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sidebar

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Risky Businesses

No Jungereality show is ever likely to appear on Al Gore's Current TV. The fishermen of *Catch* take great risks because it is harder to find the crabs every year—they may wind up as

overfished as Atlantic cod or the swordfish in *The Perfect Storm*. The ice road truckers deliver heavy machinery to a diamond mine in the Northern Territory of Canada, and the guys on *Ax Men* chop down trees for a living. Beers and Co. make sure to toss in a perfunctory line in the script about "replanting trees for future generations," but these shows are not for the green at heart.

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dear prudence

Bother of the Bride

My future mother-in-law's skimpy dress is inappropriate for my big day. How can I tell her?

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 7:12 AM ET

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

Dear Prudence,
My wedding is 59 days away, and I am concerned about my future mother-in-law's dress. She is a wonderful woman who makes me feel accepted as her son's choice for a wife. But with only two months left before the wedding, she had finally begun her search for a dress. Last Sunday, my mother-in-law held my bridal shower at her house. My mother told me that while she was there, she saw a photo of the dress my mother-in-law picked out. She described it as "young, low-cut, and flowing." I wanted to get to the bottom of this, as my mother-in-law had not even informed me that she had purchased anything. So, after the party, I sent her an e-mail, and she sent me a picture of the dress. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. My 51-year-old mother-in-law has picked out a dress with a wispy skirt, a V-neck, and spaghetti straps. It's fit and styled for someone my age—25! And it's robin's egg blue—which doesn't even go with my champagne-colored dress, the bridesmaids' sage green, the chocolate brown tuxes, and my mother's pale pink dress. I can't swallow the fact that she would attempt such a daring wardrobe choice on a day so important to me and her son. This dress has been ordered and is not set to arrive until two weeks before our wedding! I really need advice on how to tell her that I do not feel it is appropriate to wear.

—Frustrated Bride

Dear Frustrated,
The nerve of this 51-year-old woman to decide she's just going to march off and buy a dress that she finds flattering without asking permission of a 25-year-old. Sure, she has welcomed you into her family and thrown a shower for you. But now she has really shown her true colors—robin's egg blue, to be exact—by pulling this spaghetti-strap stunt. This V-neck desecration has to be stopped! You simply must tell her the hard truth. Something along the lines of, "Hey, you old hag, no one wants to see your saggy flesh. Your choice of color is an outrage. And, in case you've forgotten, in 59 days it's going to be my day, my day, my day, my day."

—Prudie

Dear Prudence Video: Secret Romance

Dear Prudie,
I am a 23-year-old recent college graduate paying back loans and barely making ends meet. In August of last year, during a routine physical exam, a lump was discovered in my left breast. Later, I had an ultrasound and biopsy (which, ever so luckily, was benign), leaving me with a $300-plus bill that I could not pay in full. I struck a deal with the medical office and send in $20 a month. Last weekend, I ended up telling my close male friends about the incident (at the time, only my best friend knew). They were shocked I had gone through that procedure and were relieved the results were benign. I made an off-hand comment like, "Yup, and I send them $20 to pay it off." They made replies along the lines of, "We could each write you a check, and you could pay that off." The night continued, and it wasn't brought up again. The next day, two of my friends each handed me checks for over $100. They are engineers, financially well-off, and insisted this was no big deal. Their generosity and show of support nearly brought me to tears. However, I don't want to take the money because my $20 a month is a satisfactory, although slow, way to pay it off. I have the two checks but really don't want to cash them. How do I handle my recent (slightly unwanted) donations without offending my dear friends?

—Lucky

Dear Lucky,
Cash the checks. You are lucky to have had good medical news, and to have such generous, caring friends. Because they gave you the checks the next day and not on the spot, they had time to think about it and discuss with each other their desire to make this gesture to ease your financial burden. For you to return the checks would be awkward and embarrassing for all of you. However, what you can do is write them notes expressing your gratitude and letting them know that once your bill is fully paid off, you will make a contribution (it can be small!) to a cancer charity in each of their names.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence,
I'm a 29-year-old woman with a great job, super family, and fantastic boyfriend. "Tom" and I have been dating for a few months now, and things are going very well. As a baby, I was put up for adoption and have recently been reunited with my biological siblings. He and I drove 1,500 miles together to meet

them last month. But I have a secret I haven't told him: When I was 16, I got pregnant and had an abortion. He comes from a religious family, and I'm afraid if I tell him, he'll think I'm a horrible person for having sinned. Or he'll think I should have given my baby the chance that I was given and put it up for adoption. I wanted to keep my baby or at least give it a chance at life like I had, but my parents made me get the abortion. I've always been very open about the abortion with previous boyfriends, and most of my friends know. I want to know if I should tell him and, if so, how.

—Hiding a Secret

Dear Hiding,
You are not hiding anything from him, because this actually isn't his business. Falling in love does not obligate you to disclose every deeply private thing that happened in your life prior to your meeting. You were a 16-year-old girl in a terrible situation, so have some compassion for yourself. Even though you have told other people, this is hardly the kind of thing that comes up in conversation. If by some slim chance someone else does mention it, or if Tom asks you directly whether you've ever had an abortion, then you can explain the circumstances. If he is the fantastic guy you say he is, he, too, will have empathy for the teenage girl you were. You have known Tom only a short while. As your relationship gets more serious, see if you feel you are holding back something you want him to understand about your past. If so, tell him that because you feel so understood and loved by him, you want him to know about a painful episode from years ago.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence,
I am about to marry a wonderful man who happens to be a police officer in the town where we live. Several times now, I have found myself in an uncomfortable situation. I recently met a neighbor who, in the middle of a pleasant conversation, said to me, "Your fiance arrested my daughter for drunk driving." Likewise, acquaintances who ask my fiance's name have proceeded to tell me my fiance has arrested them. These people don't seem particularly angry or feel they have been wronged, but it creates a very awkward situation. I can't fathom why someone would bring up their arrest, and I never know what to say. Any suggestions?

—Not the Police

Dear Not,
That's quite a town of miscreants you live in. The next time someone mentions how your future husband arrested them or a loved one for their offenses, just smile and say, "He is very good at his job."

—Prudie

Deathwatch
The Hillary Deathwatch

Clinton edges out Obama in the debate, but he picks up two more superdelegates.

By Chadwick Matlin
Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 1:00 PM ET

The 21st debate has come and gone, and the general consensus is that Hillary Clinton beat Barack Obama behind the lecterns. Her win barely outweighs the announcement of two more superdelegates and a newspaper endorsement for Obama. As a result, her chances of winning the nomination glide upward by 0.3 points to **10.7 percent**.

The debate in Philadelphia—which was near-universally panned in the blogosphere—spent its first hour on process questions. Usually, this would have hurt Clinton, whose mastery of policy details has shone through in previous debates. But last night, Obama bore the brunt of the process questions. It was like a guilt-by-association greatest hits—we heard about former Weatherman Bill Ayers, Jeremiah Wright, and the "cling" thing. The result, aside from getting people to turn off their TVs, was to remind viewers that Obama could be vulnerable to Republican attacks in the general election.

For Clinton, this was the best-case scenario. As much lip service as the candidates give to remaining primary voters, the struggle is really for superdelegates. The more Clinton can remind superdelegates that Obama isn't Mr. Clean, the more likely they'll be to subvert the voters' will and vote for her at the convention. Granted, there's that whole "subvert the voters' will" thing that gets in the way, but those are details that can be hammered out later.

Speaking of superdelegates, a Washington, D.C., super switched from Clinton to Obama after 83 percent of his district voted for Barack. Obama also picked up one in Oklahoma, a state Clinton won by 24 points. That's a net gain of three for Obama, and he now trails Clinton by 22 superdelegates, according to DemConWatch.

Also, one last endorsement to relay. The *Philadelphia Daily News* says Obama is their man, echoing the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*'s endorsement yesterday, which described the primary as a choice between the past and the future. The *Daily News* prefers the future.

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Deathwatch
The Hillary Deathwatch

The Boss endorses Obama, and Clinton continues to lose traction in Pennsylvania polls.

By Chadwick Matlin

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 1:10 PM ET

A morning endorsement from Bruce Springsteen will help Barack Obama dominate the news cycle heading into tonight's debate. That, coupled with some new poll numbers and a newspaper endorsement, helps drag Clinton's ship down by two points to a **10.4 percent** chance of winning the nomination.

Barack Obama may have E Street to thank if he ever lives on Pennsylvania Avenue. Bruce Springsteen endorsed Obama today, the first mega-celebrity to endorse since Oprah, Babs, and the gang in January. While Obama could've used the Boss' backing before New Jersey's primary on Feb. 5 (Obama lost by 10 points), today's timing actually works well for Obama. Springsteen is a perfect emissary for the campaign in the wake of Obama's "cling" comments in San Francisco. The Boss acknowledges as much and writes in his endorsement that "[w]hile these matters are worthy of some discussion, they have been ripped out of the context and fabric of the man's life and vision." If Obama can coax Springsteen onto the trail in Pennsylvania, that will start to nullify Clinton's and McCain's claims that he's an elitist. The less traction Clinton gets on that issue, the more desperate she looks. Desperate candidates don't become the nominee.

But Clinton isn't giving up. She released the first attack ad since the lead-up to Wisconsin's primary, using man-on-the-street interviews to hammer Obama on his "bitter" gaffe. Obama responded with two rebuttal ads that don't attack Clinton directly but guide the conversation back to Obama's legislative record. We'd call this spat a draw, but Obama is reportedly outspending Clinton on advertising by at least 2-to-1. He wins this round.

The polls, meanwhile, are grim for Clinton. More surveys are starting to include the post-*bitter* landscape, and none of the reputable outfits shows a major shift toward Clinton. New *Los Angeles Times*/Bloomberg data show Clinton ahead by just five points in Pennsylvania. Public Policy Polling (PDF) has Obama in the lead by three points. A glimmer of sunshine: She demolishes him in Kentucky, according to SurveyUSA.

Moving along, Obama, not Clinton, picked up the endorsement from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. The paper said Clinton has an antiquated view of America and that she's "doing the work of Republicans" by attacking Obama. Industrial Western Pennsylvania should be a Clinton stronghold, so this endorsement does not bode well. Mix that in with an Indiana superdelegate for Obama and rumors of a few others coming down the pipeline today, and today is looking bleak for Clinton in the endorsement category.

But all is not lost! Clinton picked up two New Jersey add-on delegates. No surprises here: They're from New Jersey, which, as we've discussed, is a state Clinton won. But delegates are delegates, and Clinton now has two more.

The only other good news for Hillary is that *USA Today* ran a front-page story asking why Obama says he doesn't take money from lobbyists, yet has fundraisers who do. On a Boss-less day, this may have found some traction on cable news and in tonight's debate. Instead, Springsteen's announcement that Obama is "Born To Run" for president will overshadow any negative coverage.

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Deathwatch
The Hillary Deathwatch

The "bitter" flap fails to ignite.

By Christopher Beam

Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 3:15 PM ET

Barack Obama's "bitter" comment gave Hillary Clinton an opening. But the combination of hackneyed outrage and a fast counterpunch by Obama suggests that the "scandal" may not last. Take Clinton down 1.8 points to **12.4 percent**.

On Day 4 of the controversy, journalists scramble to measure how much people care. So far, signs point to *not really*. A new Quinnipiac poll shows Clinton's six-point lead in Pennsylvania holding steady. The poll summary cites "no noticeable change" in the numbers on April 12-13, when the "scandal" was entering full tilt. Then again, that was over the weekend, when Pennsylvania voters were busy venting their frustrations by shooting guns and going to church. Other surveys vary: A SurveyUSA poll shows Clinton up 14 points in the state—less than her 18-point lead last week. A Rasmussen poll puts her ahead by nine points, as opposed to five last week. An ARG poll shows Clinton jumping from a tie to a 20-point lead but merits skepticism, given that it's a robo-poll and a wild statistical outlier. Expect more thorough numbers later this week.

Meanwhile, anecdotal evidence is mounting: Clinton gets shouted down when she brings up Obama's remarks at a forum; Pennsylvania booster in chief Gov. Ed Rendell downplays the significance of the comments, saying it won't cost Obama more than "a couple of points at the margin" (this could be more expectations gaming, but still); undecided superdelegates seem largely unconcerned.

Still, Clinton is pushing this angle hard. Some would say too hard. Her campaign released a new ad showing the good citizens of Pennsylvania expressing how shocked, *shocked* they were to hear Obama calling them bitter. The spot feels awfully cardboard—almost on par with Ron Paul's famous New Hampshire ad—and it's not helped by the fact that nearly every word out of the mouths of these "citizens" has also come out of Hillary's. (If you want to see an effective Clinton spot, watch "Jewel.")

And this is the problem with Clinton's response—it feels forced. Voters have a nose for BS, and even if they found Obama's remarks condescending, nothing reeks worse than manufactured outrage. Obama, meanwhile, has mastered the counterpunch. The last few days have given his rapid-response team a workout. Almost enough to persuade superdelegates previously concerned that Obama wouldn't be able to weather general-election attacks.

To step back for a second: The only way the "bitter" flap could save Clinton would be if it helped her persuade superdelegates to swing her way. So far, that doesn't seem likely. Given that Clinton needs to sway such a huge number of the remaining uncommitted superdelegates—at least 70 percent, in the most favorable scenarios—we're willing to say that this scandal doesn't have the necessary steam.

And just when the dropout drumbeat was starting to soften, another Clinton supporter, Massachusetts Rep. Barney Frank, suggests that whichever candidate is "trailing" should drop out in June. "Probably sooner," he added. (Frank also defended Obama on the "bitter" issue: He had "a very legitimate point to make," he said, but it came out wrong.)

Remember how Obama decided not to hand out "street money" to Philadelphia party workers? At the time, we thought it might cost him support. But now Clinton is following suit. Gov. Rendell (he's everywhere!) pled poverty: "Sen. Clinton has no street money," he said. "We barely have enough to communicate on basic media. Sen. Obama has money to burn."

Maybe that's why the Clinton team is still pushing its claim that a loss in Pennsylvania would be a "significant defeat" for Obama—despite the fact that it's been handicapped in favor of Clinton just about forever. And now, after the "bitter" flap, *no one* expects him to win. Ironic, eh?

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Deathwatch

The Hillary Deathwatch

Obama's "bitter" gaffe is just the miracle Clinton needed.

By Christopher Beam

Monday, April 14, 2008, at 12:31 PM ET

Barack Obama's "bitter" comment is just the gaffe Clinton needed to woo superdelegates. Her chances of winning the nomination jump 4.5 points to **14.2 percent**.

Hillary Clinton needed a miracle. She's down in pledged delegates, likely to lose the popular vote, and slipping on the superdelegate front. So, Barack Obama's comment at a San Francisco fundraiser—that bitter Pennsylvanians "cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them" in response to economic hardship—is as close to divine intervention as she could get. With Pennsylvania a week off, Clinton has just enough time to foment outrage and perhaps regain her formerly wide lead in the polls. It's also as comprehensive a gaffe as Obama could have mustered: It's got elitism, guns, religion, immigration, and trade—just the controversy cocktail Clinton was waiting for.

The "bitter" incident serves one real purpose for Clinton: It strengthens her case to superdelegates. Clinton has already been painting a potential Obama nomination as a disaster scenario. This flap gives her fresh buckets and a new brush. Among her plausible arguments: Obama just lost Pennsylvania in the general. He alienated Reagan Democrats across the country. He squandered a major advantage over the less-religious McCain. His "bitter" comments—and the attitudes they represent—are just the tip of an iceberg of vulnerabilities. Clinton even compared him to John Kerry and Al Gore (so much for that endorsement), who voters thought "did not really understand, or relate to, or respect their ways of life." An Obama nomination, she can now argue, would be the worst kind of disaster—a repeat.

But will it be enough to overcome the daunting delegate math? No. She still needs to win the rest of the states by fat margins and spark a mass superdelegate migration in order to secure the nomination. Even if the entire state of Pennsylvania is offended by Obama's remarks, she needs North Carolina, Indiana, and the rest to be equally miffed. And so far, Obama has been doing a fine cleanup job. He may not have chosen the right words, he says, but he was speaking elemental truths about economic hardship. (He's lucky Clinton's first salvo focused on the word

bitter—the more defensible part of the statement—rather than the guns-and-religion part.) He also fired back, mocking Clinton for pretending she's "Annie Oakley" and portraying her attacks as dirty Washington politics: "Shame on her," he said. In some small way, Clinton may be doing Obama a favor—he's proving to superdelegates that he knows how to weather controversy and fight back.

Some pundits argue that Obama's mistake is a game-changer that will hurt him more than the Wright controversy ever did. That may be true. But Hillary won't be the one who benefits. John McCain will. If this flap revives Clinton's candidacy—which took a beating last week after her husband's Bosnia resurrection—it will only be for the short term. The election fundamentals still weigh heavily against her—a mathematical fact that makes Obama's screw-up, however damaging in the long run, little more than a speed bump on the road to the nomination.

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did you see this?

Jon Stewart Interviews Will Ferrell as Bush

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 5:07 PM ET

dispatches

Inside Saudi Arabia

"This is one of the only countries in the world where the government wants change more than the people do."

By Nicholas Schmidle

Friday, April 18, 2008, at 7:09 AM ET

From: Nicholas Schmidle
Subject: Blogging in Support of the Saudi Government
Posted Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 4:00 PM ET

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia—In the pre-Internet age, Raed al-Saeed would be punching above his weight. Last month, the 33-year-old Saudi posted a six-minute film on his blog that has thrust him into a millennial debate previously waged by only mullahs and popes: Can religion be evil? "My goal was not to make me or my blog famous," said al-Saeed. His intentions were more subtle: "Don't be brainwashed into judging a religion by one video made by someone who hates that religion." I met al-Saeed last week in the grassy courtyard of a luxury hotel in Riyadh, where we sat around a wooden picnic table in the late afternoon while songbirds crooned from nearby trees. Al-Saeed wore a black T-shirt and baggy blue jeans. A surfboard-shaped Bluetooth device poked out of his right ear.

Al-Saeed's film, called *Schism*, opens with a series of militant-sounding passages from the Bible (including 1 Samuel 15:3 and Deuteronomy 20:16), followed by footage of Christians saying and doing cruel, irrational, and inexcusable things in the name of God and country. For instance, there is an audio clip of President George W. Bush describing the war on terror as a "crusade"; excerpts of adolescent evangelicals pledging to die for God in the 2006 documentary *Jesus Camp*; and video of coalition soldiers beating teenage boys in Iraq as their colleague, laughing, rolls the tape. When we met last week, al-Saeed's film had been viewed 3,000 times; a week later, the number had jumped to 250,000.

Al-Saeed insists that he didn't make the movie to malign Christians or to exacerbate differences between Muslims and Christians. But he felt it was his duty to defend his fellow Muslims against the blatantly anti-Islamic film produced by Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders. The Dutchman's film, *Fitna* (which means "schism" in Arabic), takes belligerent-sounding verses from the Quran and couples them with Hezbollah fighters marching and saluting like Nazis, al-Qaida henchmen sawing the heads off foreigners in Iraq, and imams swearing jihad against the West. Wilders implies that the Quran, which Muslims consider the literal word of God, sanctions the murder that some extremist Muslims commit in the name of Allah. "I got angry and pissed off at people who see all Muslims like that," said al-Saeed. And he wasn't the only one. At the United Nations earlier this week, several Muslim countries protested Wilders' film, and, in scenes reminiscent of the ones that followed the 2005 publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper, demonstrations broke out in cities across the Islamic world.

The Internet is often praised for its ability to connect hundreds of millions of people around the world. But al-Saeed's blog exposed another dimension of the Web: how a single, husky Saudi who lives with his parents can speak for masses around the world—in this case, 1.2 billion Muslims.

There are an estimated 500 blogs in Saudi Arabia. They create a thriving source of information online, despite the best censoring efforts of the country's conservative religious establishment. Censorship here is intrusive, though inconsistent. Upon arriving, I conducted an informal study and found the that *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, YouTube clips of public beheadings in the kingdom, and *Esquire* magazine were all blocked, while

the full line of Victoria's Secret "Angels" models was on display. Of course, hackers, bloggers, and other computer-savvy types can always elude the censors and break through firewalls without being tracked. According to Dr. Abdulrahman al-Hadlaq, who heads the Counter-Radicalization Unit at the Ministry of Interior, young Saudi extremists are increasingly recruited into terrorist networks through the Internet. On one popular DVD, titled *Secrets of the Mujahideen*, jihadis share tips for penetrating pesky Internet filters and maintaining anonymity.

Saudi bloggers comment on a range of topics, from Islam to economics to the growing number of foreign workers in the kingdom, most of whom are from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. (Officially, the government estimates that slightly more than 6 million of the country's 27 million residents are expat laborers, though the percentage could be much higher.) The Saudi government has never come out and said what bloggers can and cannot say, so most of them learn as they go. Fouad al-Farhan, a 32-year-old blogger, learned the hard way when he was arrested and detained last December. Neither the police nor the Interior Ministry have officially charged al-Farhan, though many assume that his criticisms of the kingdom's harsh detainee policy for alleged terrorists landed him in trouble. He has spent at least two months in solitary confinement. Authorities blocked his blog and other sites dedicated to his case (such as freefoaud.com). Human Rights Watch and the Committee for the Protection of Journalists have repeatedly raised al-Farhan's case, though he remains behind bars.

But not all bloggers are fighting the establishment. "There are two kinds of bloggers here," al-Saeed explained. "Those who are pro-Foaud, and those like me. I blog, but I support my government. So people charge me with working for the secret police." In particular, al-Saeed supports the vision of King Abdullah. Abdullah took over in 2005 and initiated a program of economic and social liberalization. I asked al-Saeed whether Abdullah could succeed in imposing change on society from above, especially one as traditional as Saudi Arabia. "It is impossible to make everyone happy," he said. Some liberals accuse Abdullah of moving too slowly, while some conservatives accuse him of moving too quickly. Ultimately, al-Saeed suggested, the king reacts to the will of the people. "He will do whatever the majority wants."

As the afternoon wore on, waiters hustled between the wooden tables, setting out placemats and silverware, and an exterminator wielding an industrial-sized fumigator blew clouds of noxious gas meant to wipe out the insect population before dinner. I asked al-Saeed whether he felt free to speak his mind in cyberspace. "I talk about wanting more freedom of speech on my blog," he said, "but there are limits to freedom of speech everywhere." A cloud of bug-killing gas floated in our direction, and we jumped from our seats. Before we parted, al-Saeed added, "In America, you can't talk about the Jews. And in Saudi Arabia, there are limits to freedom of speech, too."

From: Nicholas Schmidle
Subject: What High Oil Prices Can Do for a Country
Posted Friday, April 18, 2008, at 7:09 AM ET

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia—From the outside, Effat College doesn't seem like a bellwether of change. The all-girls school in Jeddah, a port city on the coast of the Red Sea, is rimmed by unscalable high walls and an empty parking lot, resembling the scene of a freshly departed circus in Middle America. In many ways, the college's exterior illustrates conventional misperceptions—closed, drab, and unwelcoming—of modern Saudi Arabia. Perhaps the only thing less inviting is the bold, red lettering at the top of the form handed to visitors as they enter the kingdom, which reads: "WARNING: Death to Drug Traffickers."

But inside the walls of Effat College, female students stroll along the campus pathways with their heads and faces uncovered, play sports, and eagerly offer a handshake to male guests. Two weeks after my visit, the college was due to host a basketball tournament, fielding squads from all over Saudi Arabia and even one from Beirut. I asked Dr. Rania Mohammad Ibrahim, an Egyptian professor at the college, if women shooting hoops didn't provoke the country's conservative clerics. "We must tread calmly," she admitted. "We are moving forward slowly, but steadily."

Saudi Arabia is considered one of the world's worst violators of human rights. International organizations regularly chastise the kingdom for its mistreatment of liberals, journalists, religious minorities, and especially women. In February, a U.N. report concerning women's rights in the Arab world found severe inequalities between men and women, highlighted by women's inability to seek legal protection from violent husbands—or to even drive a car.

But Saudi society is also in the midst of a minor social revolution, as several faculty members at Effat College could attest. Effat College was founded in 1999, in honor of Queen Effat, the wife of the late King Faisal. Faisal ruled from 1964 to 1975. The current king, Abdullah, fashions himself as a reformer, much like his half-brother Faisal. Soon after taking power in 2005, Abdullah flew to the Vatican to the meet the pope, and more recently he called for interfaith dialogue between Jews and Muslims. Such a statement is not taken lightly in Saudi Arabia, where anti-Semitism is rife. (One night at a dinner in Riyadh, a Saudi man informed me that Jews had funded Christopher Columbus' expedition to America.) "This is one of the only countries in the world where the government wants change more than the people do," said Faisal bin Abdur Rahman

bin Muammar, secretary-general of the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue.

If a government wants to implement wide-ranging reforms, it needs money. Fortunately for Abdullah, there's no shortage of that. With oil at $115 a barrel, and Saudi Arabia holding the world's largest oil reserves, Abdullah is flush with cash. (A gallon of gasoline costs around 73 cents here.) And yet, rather than relying solely on energy revenues for the future, the kingdom is striving to diversify. The Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority champions the slogan "10 in 10"—that is, to become the 10th most competitive economy in the world by 2010. In its debut on the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report this year, Saudi Arabia ranked 35th, surpassing Italy and Portugal. And in the 2008 "Doing Business" report, sponsored in part by the World Bank, Saudi Arabia ranked 23rd in the "ease of doing business" category, beating out Spain, Austria, and Israel. American economic gurus have taken note, too; Michael Dell of Dell Computers recently lunched at SAGIA's office.

Saudi Arabia's economic development depends on the labor of foreign workers. An estimated 27 million people live in the kingdom, of which at least 6 million are migrants from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. Saudis have always despised manual labor, perhaps because of confidence stemming from their oil wealth, or perhaps because the concept of royalty pervades society. Many Saudis live as if the world were their five-star hotel, with bellboys and waiters and maids always eager to please. In 1962, the kingdom abolished slavery, though human rights organizations argue that expat workers are subjected to inhuman conditions today. One Saudi man in his late 20s confessed that, should he take a scholarship to study overseas, he would end up spending thousands of dollars a year on underwear. At his home in Riyadh, his family kept a Filipino cook, driver, and maid who washed his briefs. "I don't know how to cook or to clean my clothes," he told me. "So, whenever I am in the United States, I just wear my underwear once … and then throw them away."

Saudis have had a tough time studying in the United States since 15 of their countrymen flew airplanes into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. Though glimmers of progress appear throughout the kingdom, the modern Saudi state is nonetheless founded on a strategic marriage between despotism and Islamic fundamentalism. A contract between the House of Saud and Mohammad bin Abdul Wahhab in the late 18th century made Wahhabism the state ideology. The agreement was signed in Dir'aiyah, a village of mud-spackled homes barely an hour outside Riyadh.

On the way to Dir'aiyah one afternoon, our car pulled beside a minivan loaded with female students. All the girls wore full veils over their heads and across their faces. Only their mascara-lined eyes shined through a slit of black cloth. One, sporting raspberry-colored bangles around her wrists, and another, her fingernails painted bright yellow, waved, smiled, and blew kisses in our direction. I assumed, from their conservative dress and the dilapidated minivan, that they were returning to households considerably more modest than the ones Effat College students went home to. Perhaps some of these girls, after a long day of hitting the books, were heading back to abusive homes.

But I could guess that few of the girls' mothers had the chance to go to school. Maybe this was the kind of slow, steady change Dr. Ibrahim referred to. Regardless of the pace, however, the girls' smiles and kisses reflected happiness. Oil, when it is priced at $115 a barrel, can do that for a country.

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dvd extras

It's a New Box Set!

How much would you pay for a four-disc collection of the best episodes of *The Price Is Right*?

By Keith Phipps

Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 8:15 AM ET

***Click the launch module to the left for a video slide show on the 50-year evolution of* The Price Is Right.**

When Bob Barker announced his retirement from hosting *The Price Is Right* in late 2006, it came as something of a shock. There's nothing unusual about a man in his 80s deciding to call it a career, but Barker's *Price* had been a staple of the daytime lineup for 34 years. Some details had changed in that time: Barker let his hair go white in the mid-'80s; buxom models skilled in the art of gracefully sweeping their hands in the direction of prizes had come and gone; inflation had raised the prices of Quaker Oats and Whirlpool refrigerators. Otherwise, however, *The Price Is Right* experience had remained remarkably unchanged.

Can the show survive post-Barker? Daytime ratings have declined under new host Drew Carey, though a decline was expected. As Carey works to win over viewers, he might do well to study the new four-disc set *The Best of The Price Is Right*—both for the episodes it includes and for the ones it doesn't. Spanning five decades, the episodes in the set suggest that guessing the price of things is an activity Americans will not soon tire of, whether it's Barker or someone else holding the microphone. Other episodes, conspicuously absent from the set, suggest just how unlikely *Price*'s long run has been.

***Click the launch module above for a video slide show on the 50-year evolution of* The Price Is Right.**

candidate: Obama: 1,626; Clinton: 1,486 *Source: CNN*	candidate: McCain: 1,325; Huckabee (out): 267; Paul: 16 *Source: CNN*

Want more ***Slate*** election coverage? Check out Map the Candidates, Political Futures, Trailhead, XX Factor, and our Campaign Junkie page!

election scorecard

Obama Closes In

A battle for Pennsylvania's undecided voters could end the race.

By Alex Joseph

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 4:18 PM ET

With five days to go until the Pennsylvania primary, a new Zogby poll shows Hillary Clinton's lead has eroded to a statistical tie with her opponent. She now leads Barack Obama by only one point, garnering 45 percent to his 44 percent. That's down from a four-point lead a week ago.

Although she trounces Obama in the question of who understands Pennsylvania better (58 percent to 27 percent), voters do not agree with the characterization of his "bitter" remarks as elitist. By a margin of 31 points (60 percent to 29 percent), voters were more likely to agree with Obama's suggestion that economic troubles have led to bitterness than with Clinton's suggestion that he is out of touch.

These data are in accord with Pollster's Mark Blumenthal, who recently suggested in his *National Journal* column that Clinton does better when undecided voters are pushed to declare a preference. At 9 percent, Zogby's poll has a relatively high level of undecided voters, which could explain Obama's strong showing. (A week ago, the Zogby poll had a 10 percent undecided total.) However, Sunday's Rasmussen poll, which also recorded 9 percent of voters as undecided, showed Clinton leading Obama 50 percent to 41 percent. Rasmussen's poll was automated; Zogby's was not.

Election Scorecard uses data supplied by Mark Blumenthal and Charles Franklin at Pollster.com.

Delegates at stake:

Democrats	**Republicans**
Total delegates: 4,049 Total delegates needed to win: 2,025	Total delegates: 2,380 Total delegates needed to win: 1,191
Delegates won by each	Delegates won by each

explainer

Is It Safe To Eat Pork Brains?

Only if you don't inhale.

By James Ledbetter

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 4:00 PM ET

Early last year, a number of workers at a pork processing plant in Austin, Minn., began reporting similar symptoms: weakness, fatigue, "heavy legs," pain, and sensory disturbance. When doctors and state health officials investigated, it became clear that all the affected workers had been stationed in or near a portion of the plant where hog brains were liquefied using blasts of compressed air. Wait, does that mean it's time for the Explainer to stop eating pork brains?

No, but inhaling them would be a bad idea. After months of study, it now seems fairly certain that breathing aerosolized hog brain tissue triggers an immune response in the human body that is responsible for these workers' ailments. But there is no evidence thus far that eating pork or even pork brains will trigger the illness. In a press conference Wednesday at the annual convention of the American Academy of Neurology, doctors stressed that "there is no indication that this is a food-borne illness," nor any indication that it can be passed from person to person.

At the same time, the investigation is preliminary, and scientists have yet to identify the specific agent that is making workers sick. And, anyway, given that a single serving of pork brains in gravy contains a heady 3,500 milligrams of cholesterol—or 1,170 percent of the government's recommended daily intake—it might be best to go easy on the brains.

Bonus Explainer: Does anyone actually eat pork brains? You bet. They are a stir-fry staple in China and Korea, and while they may not make it onto the menu of your local bistro, Rose brand pork brains are commonly seen in Southern supermarkets in the United States. Longtime North Carolina Congressman Howard Coble once offered up a recipe for pork brains and eggs for a congressional cookbook.

Food companies in the United States may need to come up with a new way to extract their product, however. The compressed-air method—which has been around since the 1990s—seems doomed. The Austin plant voluntarily stopped performing the procedure late last year. Officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Department of Agriculture have identified two other plants, one in Indiana and one in Nebraska, that also used the procedure; there, too, workers have shown the same symptoms. The officials are now trying to find out whether the compressed-air procedure is used abroad.

Got a question about today's news? Ask the Explainer.

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explainer

Can I Buy Life Insurance on a Stranger?

Not unless you have "insurable interest."

By Chris Wilson

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 7:11 PM ET

A California jury is debating the fate of two elderly women accused of befriending a pair of homeless men, taking out millions of dollars in life insurance on them, and then killing them. Prosecutors charge that the women collected nearly $3 million from the insurance policies and were seeking to collect more when they were arrested. Murder aside, are you allowed to buy life insurance for someone else and then hope they die?

Not if he's a stranger. A federal law enacted in 1945 leaves the regulation of the insurance industry to state governments, so the rules vary from place to place. In most cases, the beneficiary of a policy has to demonstrate that he or she is dependent in some way on the person whose life is being insured. This is known in the business as the "insurable interest" doctrine and has origins in common-law practice. In California, the rule is written out in the official books and grants insurable interest between a beneficiary and "any person on whom he depends wholly or in part for education or support," as well as other relationships involving a financial stake, like if the insured person owes the beneficiary money.

The two California women currently on trial are alleged to have claimed some relationship to the two homeless men; one is said to have posed as a relative when she claimed a body. A federal grand jury originally charged the pair with attempts to defraud insurance companies, but that case was dismissed when the state initiated murder charges.

The insurable-interest doctrine originates from similarly devious schemes in England in the mid-18th century. When the British Parliament passed the Life Assurance Act in 1774, it acknowledged that the opportunity to insure a stranger would create a "mischievous kind of gaming" that allowed one person to profit from the death of another.

The scheme ascribed to the ladies in California is far from original. A 2002 article in the *Nevada Law Journal* recalls a 1954 case in which a man named Henry Lakin hired a transient World War II veteran named W. Harvey Hankinson to do odd business jobs and then quickly established him as a business partner. Lakin took out a life insurance policy on Hankinson and then brought him on a hunting trip to Pleasant Hill, Mo., from which only Lakin came back alive. There wasn't enough evidence to prove that Hankinson had been murdered, but the insurance company was able to invoke the insurable-interest doctrine and void the policy.

Most cases of fraud are not as clear-cut. Many insurance companies and senior-rights groups are concerned about "stranger oriented" or "stranger owned" life insurance, in which investors approach an elderly person and offer him cash or other incentives to sign up for a plan. In return, he agrees to transfer the plan over to the investors after a two-year delay, which is enough time to skirt industry regulations. It's not clear whether this scheme is legal, since the elderly are, in fact, taking out life insurance on themselves—which doesn't run afoul of the insurable-interest rules.

Got a question about today's news? Ask the Explainer.

Explainer thanks the California Department of Insurance, Robert Jerry of the University of Florida Levin College of Law, Susan Nolan and Mike Humphreys of the National Conference of Insurance Legislators, and life-insurance consultant Anthony Steuer.

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explainer

Three Girls for Every Boy

Where does the FLDS find all those women?

By Juliet Lapidos

Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 5:53 PM ET

Ever since Texas authorities removed 416 children from

Yearning for Zion Ranch, the Fundamentalist Church of Latter-day Saints has been making headlines. As is well-known, the FLDS teaches that plural marriage—whereby each man partners with at least three women—is essential to salvation. How does the church get enough ladies to go around?

By kicking out the boys. The FLDS doesn't practice sex-selective abortion, nor does it recruit from outside the ranks. To reduce competition for wives, the church systematically expels adolescent boys, thus trimming the eligible male population. It's estimated that the FLDS has thrown out between 400 and 1,400 male members in the last decade.

Church elders excommunicate boys as young as 14 ostensibly for bad behavior—like flirting with girls, watching a movie, listening to rock music, drinking, playing basketball, or wearing short-sleeve shirts. Sometimes called the "Lost Boys," they're considered apostates and cut off entirely from their relatives. Parents or siblings who protest are sometimes asked to pack their bags as well. Girls have also been cast out of the church, but this happens much less often. Usually this punishment is reserved for women who don't wish to be part of a polygamous marriage.

The sect also expels married men who violate religious tenets. After the wrongdoer leaves, the church leader reassigns his wives to loyalists. In theory, those who repent in earnest can be reunited with their families. In practice, almost no one is allowed back.

Ever since breaking off from the mainstream Mormon Church in the 1930s, the FLDS has encouraged plural marriage. The sect maintains that polygamy results in a higher birthrate and thus increases the "righteous" population. Warren Jeffs, president of the priesthood from 2002 to 2007, is thought to have more than 50 children and at least 40 wives. When his father, Rulon Jeffs, died in 2002, he left behind an estimated 75 widows and 65 children.

Got a question about today's news? Ask the Explainer.

Explainer thanks Shannon Price of the Diversity Foundation, Rick Ross of the Rick A. Ross Institute for the Study of Destructive Cults, Controversial Groups and Movements, and Neil J. Young of Columbia University. Thanks also to reader Erica Hatfield for asking the question.

explainer

Why Do the Blind Get a Tax Break?

And other questions about the IRS, with answers from our archives.

By Samantha Henig
Monday, April 14, 2008, at 4:03 PM ET

The cherry blossoms have erupted, birds have flown back north, public parks have turned the water fountains back on, and … it's time to file your taxes. Today the Explainer opens its archives with a roundup of questions about one of the more enigmatic American traditions.

Taxpayers have the option of checking a box to send $3 to the Presidential Election Campaign Fund, making it available for presidential candidates during the primary and general election. But John McCain and Barack Obama may choose not to use that money in the '08 race. If that happens, where does the money go?

It stays put. The fund, which is maintained by the U.S. Treasury Department, would simply build up in anticipation of the 2012 election, at which point it would again be available for the parties and qualifying candidates. Since being established in 1976, the account has provided matching funds for the primary campaign and grants in the general election to candidates who meet certain guidelines and agree to abide by set spending limits. (This year, the grants would total about $85 million for each candidate.) The Presidential Election Campaign Fund also supplies a subsidy of about $16 million to each party for its nominating convention, regardless of whether the candidates decide to accept public money.

If both the Democratic and Republican nominees turn down the public funds—for the first time since the program began—Congress may move forward with the debate over whether to raise the program's spending caps. So it's possible that by the time the pot of money accumulated from those check-off boxes rolls over to the 2012 election, it will be doled out a little differently.

If you do check the box, do your taxes increase?

Nope. As the IRS promises on the forms, checking the box to give $3 to the fund "will not change your tax or reduce your refund." It merely tells the government that you want $3 from the big pool of tax revenue to go toward the election campaign fund. Despite that assurance, the percentage of taxpayers who check the box has declined steadily from a high of 28.7 percent in 1981. (Back then it was only a $1 contribution; it jumped to $3 in 1993.) In 2006, only 9.1 percent checked the box. (For more on the check-off box, read this Explainer from 2001.)

Campaigns aren't the only cause benefiting from tax-form check-offs. Taxpayers filing their state taxes can also choose to give to a host of charitable organizations. How do charities get a check-off box?

By convincing state legislatures. That's harder in some states than others. In Oregon, for instance, an organization needs 10,000 signatures and proof that it received at least $1 million in contributions and revenue the previous year. Virginia and California require that charities make a certain amount from the check-off box donations (at least $10,000 a year over three years in Virginia and more than $250,000 in the second year in California) in order to stay on the form. But too much success can get you booted: In 2000, after two funds brought in $10 million to $15 million, each over 20 years, Michigan took them off its state tax form. (For more on how charitable organizations can get a tax-form check-off box, read this Explainer from 2007.)

Once you send in your forms, where does your tax check actually go?

To the Federal Reserve Bank of New York—eventually. If you pay by check or money order, that first goes to a lockbox bank that is equipped to process a whole lot of mail. From there, your check is deposited into a Treasury Department account, and the money is wired to the Federal Reserve Bank. If you file electronically, your money takes a slightly different route: It's transferred directly from your bank account to the Electronic Federal Tax Payment System. (To read more about the path of your tax dollars, read this Explainer from 2006.)

Americans living and working abroad are often allowed to exclude tens of thousands of dollars of income and the cost of housing from their federal taxes. How come?

Because the country wants to encourage businesses to expand overseas. The Foreign Earned Income Exclusion statute, introduced in 1954, makes it more appealing for U.S. citizens to work a couple of continents away by offering them massive tax breaks. It's a sweet deal for people sent to the Third World countries, where local taxes are barely existent. But for corporate types sent to London or Paris, the high European taxes could basically negate the hometown perks. (For more on tax breaks for Americans working abroad, read this Explainer from 2003.)

Is there any way to have someone else pay your taxes for you?

Yes, but it has its own tax implications. Since having your tax bill covered is a form of income, you'd be liable for the taxes on the taxes that were paid on your behalf. (For more on having someone else pay your taxes, read this Explainer from 2006.)

Do informants have to pay taxes on the rewards they get from the government for revealing terrorists' whereabouts?

Well, they should. Reward money has been subject to taxation since 1913, so terrorist informants do owe taxes on their earnings. Congress can choose to exempt a specific reward from being taxed, and there are other ways around the informant tax. David Kaczynski was awarded $1 million in 1998 for helping the FBI crack the case on his brother, Ted, the Unabomber, which he intended to use for legal fees and to pay the families of his brother's victims. Despite the noble intentions, he would have been taxed on that money at the highest rate. By putting it into a fund administered by a charity, he cut down his liability. (For more on reward money for terrorist informants, read this Explainer from 2003.)

So terrorist informants don't get tax breaks, but the blind do? What's the deal with that?

It's a result of the Revenue Act of 1943, which provided a slew of tax breaks, including a $500 deduction for the blind, meant to offset their higher cost of living. The tax break is available to anyone who can't see better than 20/200 or who has a field of vision of less than 20 degrees. People with other medical disabilities can deduct significant medical expenses from their income, but not all conditions are as easy to diagnose as blindness. (For more on tax breaks for the blind, read this Explainer from 2005.)

What if you cheat on your taxes—are you going to end up in an orange jumpsuit on a dingy cot?

Not likely. Tax cheats end up in prison if they're found guilty in criminal court. But the government only has the time and money to make criminal charges against a few thousand people each year. Most of the cases are tried in civil court, where a fine—not a jail sentence—is the punishment for fraud. Careless filers can also get hit with a fine: The IRS imposes a 20 percent "negligence" penalty on people who recklessly disregarded the rules. (For more on what happens to tax tricksters, read this Explainer from 2006.)

Got a question about today's news? Ask the Explainer.

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faith-based

The Passover Test

What the Passover Seder reveals about interfaith couples.

By Shmuel Rosner

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 7:14 AM ET

A professional-looking woman in her 30s walked into a Maryland synagogue a couple of weeks ago, searching for someone to give her some advice. She is Jewish, married to a Catholic fellow, and they are "very relaxed about religion," as she chose to put it. But the kids are starting to ask about God.

Since his family took them to church several times, she has decided to start bringing them to a Passover Seder, a feast marking the night when the Israelites were saved from slavery in Egypt and became a people. Maybe, she asked the executive director of this temple, you have a Seder to which I can come with the kids, so that they'll have a first positive exposure to Judaism?

But the executive director gave her advice she didn't expect: If this is your children's first encounter with Judaism, don't start by bringing them to a Seder. It is long, can be boring at times, and requires a lot of reading. Better start their schooling in Judaism with a lighter practice.

The American Jewish community has been obsessed by the roots and implications of interfaith marriage—that is, a Jewish person with a non-Jewish spouse—for more than a decade and a half. About half of Jewish Americans choose to marry non-Jews, a reality that was seen, until recently, as devastating for the shrinking minority religion. Now, it is increasingly cause for debate between the "intermarriage optimists," who think that the trend could help the Jewish community grow in numbers, and the "intermarriage pessimists," who think that it will just lead to lowering the entry bar to Judaism, watering down the faith.

Some new studies have fueled this intermarriage debate in recent months by addressing the two major concerns of the pessimists: They show a community that's growing in number, thanks to intermarriage, without watering down the faith—or so it seems.

"Intermarried Families and Their Children," a study out of Boston, shows that many of the area's intermarried couples are dedicated to "raising Jewish children": Nationally, approximately 30 percent of interfaith couples raise their children Jewish, while the Boston community keeps them Jewish at a rate of 60 percent. A follow-up study from the same source concluded that interfaith couples who claim Judaism as their religion of choice practice it in ways very similar to those of other "inmarried" Jewish families (specifically, Reform Jews).

Five traditional Jewish practices are usually used as criteria in studies tasked with assessing the viability of a Jewish community: lighting Hanukkah candles, attending a Passover Seder, fasting on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), lighting Shabbat candles, and keeping a kosher home. The first two—Hanukkah-candle lighting and Seder attendance—tend to be those with the highest levels of participation among the vast majority of Jews.

But even among those in the "intermarried/Jewish" category—namely, interfaith couples who decide to identify as Jewish—only 65 percent attended a Passover Seder on a regular basis, while more than 90 percent of inmarried couples do so.*

Arnold Dashefsky, the University of Connecticut professor who authored "Intermarriage and Jewish Journeys in the United States," found that couples who have already made the decision to join the Jewish community attend the Passover Seder in even greater numbers than the "average" Jew. Cause for "optimism." But yet another study—one that might be more optimistic because Dashefsky started with a group of already committed intermarried couples—found that "40 percent to 45 percent of young Jews with one Jewish parent attended a Passover Seder compared with nearly 80 percent of those with two Jewish parents." Good reason for the "pessimist" to raise his hand to ask some tough questions.

Being a pessimist on intermarriage is not easy these days. The Jewish community is tired of gloomy reports conveying what Steven Cohen titled "An Inconvenient Truth" in one of the most controversial studies of the last couple of years. The identity chasm between inmarried and intermarried is so wide, he wrote, as to suggest the imagery of "two Jewries." One group attends Passover Seders in high percentage—namely, the inmarried—while the other, the intermarried, either refrains from doing so or attends these Seders in much lower numbers. "A Tale of Two 'Jewish' Cities: The 2002 Phoenix and 2003 San Diego Jewish Community Studies," another study, describes lower Jewish affiliation in these cities: "Relatively low rates of Jewish congregation membership, moderate levels of Passover Seder and Chanukah celebrations, low Shabbat candle lighting, high intermarriage rates. …"

The correlation between the Hanukkah-candle lighting and the Passover Seder—the two most practiced rituals among American Jews—is interesting. Hanukkah is more popular for most Jewish groups. The reason is clear: The holiday competes with Christmas. However, the more affiliated the group, the narrower the gap between these two practices. The "highly affiliated" is the only group in which Seder attendance surpasses Hanukkah candle lighting (96 percent to 94 percent, according to the National Jewish Population Survey). For the intermarried—couples with one Christian spouse—the gap between the two practices is the widest (85 percent celebrate Hanukkah; 41 percent celebrate Passover).

But there's an even wider margin between these two groups—the one symbolizing the most contentious corner of the optimist/pessimist debate. "One issue consistently brought up by both Christian and Jewish partners was the decision to have a Christmas tree," the Dashefsky study stated. Almost 100 percent of inmarried couples do not have trees; nearly 80 percent of intermarried families sometimes—or always—have them.

To Cohen, this is yet another component of "the overwhelming evidence of very weak levels of Jewish engagement," as he told a gathering of Reform Jewish rabbis earlier this month. According to this school of thought, celebrating both the Seder and Christmas cannot be proof of Jewish attachment. But the

"optimists" look at the trees and see a different forest: Family connection and cultural habits of the non-Jewish spouse are those responsible for the tendency of even "Jewish interfaith couples" to erect the Christmas tree in the winter, they say. Two ways of looking at the same data. One—the cup half full. One—as Woody Allen said in the movie *Scoop*—also the cup half full. With poison.

A couple of days ago, in the *Wall Street Journal*, there was a story about the Mothers Circle, a program for non-Jewish women raising Jewish kids. Its headline was funny but right to the point: "But Will the Chicken Soup Taste as Good?" Hundreds of thousands of such mothers (and fathers) will be sitting at the Seder table next week and asking themselves such questions. Their chicken soup might taste as good, but it will inevitably also taste somewhat different.

And there will be something different about their Seder itself, too. Passover, more than any other Jewish holy day, is the one in which Jews celebrate not their religion but this strange concept of becoming a people. This idea, of Jewish people-hood—the historic fact that Jews, for generations, didn't see themselves as just sharing their faith, but also their national fate—will be the one most challenged by the influx of people from other religions into the Jewish community.

***Correction*, April 17, 2008:** *Due to an editing error, this piece referred to "non-Passover seders" instead of Passover seders. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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faith-based

Short Creek's Long Legacy

How a failed 1953 raid shaped the relationship between polygamists and the government.

By Neil J. Young

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 1:15 PM ET

Earlier this month, when Texas authorities entered the compound of the polygamous Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints near Eldorado, the men, women, and children of the ranch surely thought of a similar raid conducted on their predecessors more than half a century earlier. In 1953, Arizona law-enforcement officials descended on the Short Creek community on the Arizona-Utah border and took nearly 400 Mormon fundamentalists, including 236 children, into custody. The raid on Short Creek backfired, however, by arousing public sympathy for the polygamists, and it shaped the ensuing relationship between state powers and polygamous communities for the next 50 years. But this legacy also ultimately helped lead to the recent events in Eldorado.

Though the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints banned polygamy in 1890, plural marriage remained a way of life for many church members and leaders for several more decades. By the 1930s, however, Mormon officials began to excommunicate those who refused to abide by orders to enter only monogamous marriages. Polygamists—or fundamentalist Mormons, as they came to be called—insisted the church had strayed from Joseph Smith's most important teaching about the path to salvation. Many of them, vowing to preserve the practice of plural marriage, gathered in Short Creek, Ariz., an isolated town north of the Grand Canyon where other polygamists had begun to settle in 1928. The residents hoped to separate themselves from the world and live out their holy experiment.

Both church and state, however, refused to forget the polygamists at Short Creek. The Mormon Church, still struggling with its own relationship to plural marriage, pressured Utah and Arizona authorities to prosecute the fundamentalists' flouting of state laws. (A small part of the Short Creek community sat on the Utah side of the border.) Small raids in 1935 and 1944 resulted in a handful of arrests, but nothing would compare to the raid of 1953.

In the middle of the night of July 26, 1953, Arizona officials and state police swooped in to arrest the entire town. Government leaders claimed they were acting on behalf of the state's taxpayers. Area residents, resentful of the increase in school taxes connected to the abundance of fundamentalist children, had pressured the Arizona government to do something about the polygamists. The county welfare department was also struggling to support the large number of "single" women who applied for assistance for their dependent children. But Martha Sonntag Bradley, a professor at the University of Utah and the author of *Kidnapped From That Land*, a book about the Short Creek raid, contends this was all a smoke screen for the government's real desire to stamp out polygamy. "The real problem," Bradley says, "was the way this lifestyle was offensive to the far more basic Judeo-Christian values of the area."

Short Creek had become a ghost town. Thirty-six men were arrested, while 86 women and 263 children were taken into state custody and distributed to small towns throughout the state in an attempt to destroy the polygamous community. (Only a few nonpolygamists avoided arrest.) Newspapers excoriated Arizona for the raid, seeing in it—against the backdrop of the growing Red Scare—the threat of a totalitarian state's power over individual rights. And Americans, sensitive to the images of sobbing children being torn from their parents' arms, defended the fundamentalists' right to practice their religion and to raise their families as they saw fit. Only the Mormon Church seemed to endorse Arizona's actions against the polygamists at Short Creek.

Two years later, nearly all of the men, women, and children had returned to their town—and the already largely separatist fundamentalists further withdrew from the world, taking with them the lessons of the raid. The raid became a community reference point, underscoring the evil intentions of the outside world and the need to remain cut off from its influences. FLDS Church leaders used the raid as an excuse to tighten restrictions on clothing and hairstyles, ex-polygamist Carolyn Jessop writes in her memoir, *Escape*. Lest future generations forget, the Short Creek raid became a standard feature in community sermons and in the textbooks fundamentalist children studied.

Because the political backlash to the raid had been so strong—Arizona's governor, who had pushed for the raid, was voted out of office the following year—both Arizona and Utah retreated from their prosecution of the fundamentalists, even though polygamy remained illegal. In the détente, the fundamentalists flourished, and the community at Short Creek doubled its population each decade. By 2000, more than 5,000 fundamentalists resided in the twin towns Short Creek had grown into—Colorado City, Ariz., and Hildale, Utah. (Observers estimate the FLDS Church has more than 10,000 members scattered throughout the West.)

But as more time passed since the Short Creek raid, the fundamentalists began taking jobs outside their community and interacting more with the world around them. It was this decreasing separatism that Warren Jeffs sought to curb by moving some of the residents of Colorado City and Hildale to the Texas compound. Jeffs, who had succeeded his deceased father as leader and prophet of the FLDS Church in 2002, claimed direct lineage from both Jesus Christ and Joseph Smith, and he took more than 70 women as wives, many of whom had been his father's spouses, too. Jeffs' sense of his own power was immense, and he commanded absolute obedience from his community. In building the ranch compound in Texas, Jeffs hoped to prepare a perfect place where God's chosen could wait for His imminent return—the compound's name is Yearning for Zion—and he gloried in his status as God's leader on earth. "It was almost as if he thought he was invincible," Martha Bradley notes. "It was exactly how Joseph Smith acted in the last year of his life."

That hubris would eventually spell disaster. As Jeffs began work on the compound in Texas, he also challenged the relatively laissez-faire approach the Utah and Arizona state powers took to the FLDS community with a series of acts that outraged government officials. Jeffs ordered the fundamentalists to remove all their children from the public school system. And charges of sexual abuse among the fundamentalists became public when some of Jeffs' nephews filed a lawsuit claiming he had sodomized them during their childhoods. Other women and men who had left the FLDS Church testified that Jeffs oversaw all marriages in the community and frequently forced underage girls to marry older men. Authorities could no longer turn a blind eye to the community that had grown out of Short Creek.

Jeffs went into hiding after the FBI placed him on its 10 Most Wanted List, but his presence was always felt in Colorado City/Hildale and in Eldorado. Texas officials, free of the legacy that had curtailed Arizona and Utah officials, watched the YFZ ranch closely, probably mindful of their state's own difficult history with a previous separatist sect community—the Branch Davidians, who had established a settlement near Waco more than a decade earlier. When a 16-year-old girl reported sexual abuse at the YFZ ranch via a cell-phone call earlier this month, state troopers rushed into the compound and removed 416 children accompanied by more than 100 women. After most of those women were separated from their children this week, they appeared on Web videos pleading for compassion—perhaps hoping to appeal to the same public sentiment that led to the Short Creek backlash.

State officials in Texas have justified their actions as protecting children from widespread physical and sexual abuse rather than as an interference in nontraditional religious practices. But this separation of polygamy from child abuse confounds some observers, like Martha Bradley. "Why isn't it about polygamy?" Bradley asks. "Because that's the condition that leads to these problems of child abuse. That really is the issue."

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fighting words

Cardinals' Law

Two questions for the pope.

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, April 14, 2008, at 12:55 PM ET

The visit of his holiness the pope to the United States this week will be an occasion for all kinds of manifestation of deference and servility from politicians and from the press. There will also be the usual speculation about the growth of a specifically or distinctively "American" Catholicism: a Catholicism that, for instance, this week sent me a heavy envelope of material titled Catholics for Choice, arguing against the church's dogma on abortion. The phenomenon of "cafeteria Catholicism," by which the faithful pick and choose among the doctrines that do and do not appeal to them, has long been understood. It was Joseph Ratzinger's role, when he was the right-hand man and enforcer of the last pope, to recall the flock to a more traditional and orthodox version of the faith. The chief interest of this trip, at least for Roman Catholics, will be to see how explicitly he addresses himself to a flock that is too used to making up its own a la carte rules.

Meanwhile, all this piety and ceremony is a bit of a bore and a waste of media space for the large majority of us who are still not Roman Catholics. How should we get through the week? I have two suggestions.

As well as being the head of his church, the Roman pope differs from the other Christian popes in being the head of a foreign state with which the United States maintains diplomatic relations. Small as the papal state may be, the implications of its foreign policy are sometimes of interest. It signed important concordats with the fascist powers in the 1920s and '30s, for example. In the 1990s, it was the only state to recognize the government established by military putschists after the overthrow of Haitian President Jean Bertrand Aristide. During the period when sanctions and diplomatic isolation were aiming to keep Saddam Hussein in his "box," the only fully accredited ambassador from Baghdad anywhere in Western Europe was in the Holy See. In the recent past, and in response to protests at his remarks on Islam, the pope has agreed to receive more than 20 ambassadors, from nations defining themselves as Muslim, at his residence at Castel Gandolfo. This seems to many of us to be licensing the right of foreign states to interfere, on matters such as the Danish cartoon furor, in the internal life of secular Europe.

So journalists and reporters who can manage to get off their knees might want to ask the pope if he is conducting his own foreign policy and, if so, in consultation with whom? Then there is another question, which also raises a matter of diplomatic propriety: Why is the Vatican continuing to shelter Cardinal Bernard Law?

It will be remembered that Law resigned his position as head of the Archdiocese of Boston in late 2002. He had little alternative. A series of lawsuits and depositions and disclosures had established beyond doubt that, as my ***Slate*** colleague Dahlia Lithwick phrased it, "Law was not only *aware* of egregious sexual misconduct among his subordinates but was apparently engaged in elaborate efforts to cover up incident after incident of child rape." (I pause to praise her for employing that latter term instead of the grubby all-purpose euphemism *abuse*.) To be specific, the cardinal admitted in a deposition that he *knew* that the Rev. John Geoghan had raped at least seven boys in 1984 *before* he approved Geoghan's transfer to another parish where other boys were at risk. Further disclosures revealed that the Rev. Paul Shanley, who at one point was facing trial for 10 counts of child rape and six counts of indecent assault and battery, had been moved from ministry to ministry in what amounted to an attempt to protect him. Law himself lied to a West Coast bishop about Shanley's history and certified in writing that another rapist priest, the Rev. Redmond Raux, had "nothing in his background" to make him "unsuitable to work with children."

A vast majority of Americans told the polls at that stage that they favored prosecution of any clerics who had knowingly failed to act on the exposure of child rape in the church. In certain jurisdictions it nearly did come to that, but in Massachusetts, as Lithwick dryly pointed out, there was no mandatory reporting law. In other words, a person with information about child rape was not *obliged* to come forward with the facts. Or that, at least, was the shame-faced excuse of the Massachusetts district attorney. However, suppressing information about a crime can also be a crime in itself, and Cardinal Law and seven of his bishops were at one stage subpoenaed to testify before a grand jury.

The whole question became moot after his resignation because Law thereupon abruptly moved to Rome and took up a series of positions in the Vatican. He resigned only as head of the Boston archdiocese he had so gravely outraged and was allowed to retain his cardinal's hat. He was appointed as archpriest of the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore and made a member of the congregations of Oriental Churches, Clergy, Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, Evangelization of Peoples, Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Catholic Education, and Bishops, as well as the Pontifical Council for the Family! He took a full part in the conclave that selected Ratzinger as the successor to John Paul II.

So, I think that we are entitled to hear, as the vicar of Christ and holder of the Keys of Peter favors us with his presence, whether he regards his brother Bernard Law as an honored guest in the holy city or as someone who has been given asylum. And even if we cannot get a satisfactory answer, it is essential that we hear the question. Will the press do its job, and will our elected representatives remember their responsibilities to so many thousands of tortured and exploited children? Some of us will be watching and keeping an account.

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first mates

For Better or for Worse

Why the Clintons will stay married, win or lose.

By Melinda Henneberger

Monday, April 14, 2008, at 7:29 AM ET

When Bill and Hillary Clinton's friends say they are exactly the same in public and private—well, except for the F-bombs—they tend to mean it literally: "I don't think I've ever heard them talk about anything *but* politics," says a friend who has known them since the McGovern campaign. Many a public person seems to feel cozier in crowds, abler at rope lines than at intimacy. But former White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta describes the Clintons' entire existence as the constant forward motion of two people who are "living, eating, drinking, and breathing politics"—to the point that Bill was always trying to line up recreational Democratic meet-and-greets even when he was

supposed to be on vacation. "It's very surreal. You see a lot of drive and ambition" in Washington, of course, "but never like the Clintons, where it's ceaseless." Asked whether the president and the senator are at all distinguishable in that regard, Panetta says, "Probably she more than he—she being a human being, after all—it takes a toll on her." Yet even when the more flesh-and-blood half of the entity known as *Theclintons* does take a night off, it can turn into a busman's holiday, as when, according to their biographer Sally Bedell Smith, they spent their 25th anniversary, in October of 2000, at home in Chappaqua, N.Y., watching a Bush-Gore presidential debate. Which is not at all to say that their marriage is the dispassionate alliance some critics take it for: Would you accuse two hard-core philatelists of only being in it for the stamps?

Before she announced that she was in the presidential race to the finish and would march on Denver if it came to that, the big Hillary questions were: Just how mad is she at Mr. Bigmouth? And would she finally throw him out if she lost? But she wasn't and wouldn't. In fact, neither of the Clintons has ever thought Bill did anything wrong in this campaign. In their view, any perceived missteps have been wholly manufactured by the media. And the two are never more in sync than when it's them against the bad guys, which in this case includes the press, the Obama camp, and all former allies who have defected—whose stand-up, "I wanted to tell you myself, Mr. President" phone calls Bill Clinton refuses to take or return. "If anybody should know that changing horses doesn't mean you didn't like the person you worked for before, it should be them; they've done it enough," says a Clinton loyalist taken aback by their fury at those who have switched sides. "But what nobody understands is that they're a two-person wagon train that can circle all by itself. She thinks nobody can defend him better, and he thinks nobody can defend her better." One of them is even right.

Hillary Clinton certainly propped her rescue ladder up against Bill Clinton's house on fire and hauled out his 1992 presidential campaign, luring the nation into highly distracting debates about cookie-baking and Tammy Wynette after the Gennifer Flowers story broke. Later, she saved his presidency by blaming allegations that he'd run amok with Monica Lewinsky on a "vast right-wing conspiracy." And it was she who made it possible for him to serve out his second term: In a dramatic personal appeal to Democrats on Capitol Hill on the day he was impeached by the House of Representatives, she rallied his defenders by presenting herself as "a wife who loves and supports her husband." But the former president seems to have found that utility as a political helpmate is harder than she made it look—notably when he grinningly compared Barack Obama to Jesse Jackson in comments that were either flatly racial or evidence of an awfully late-onset tin ear. Either way, they wildly overshot the mark and damaged both her candidacy and his legacy as the "first black president."

"The last thing we would have expected is that her campaign would fail because Bill Clinton became a liability in a Democratic primary. He was supposed to be a strategic genius and an asset on the trail," says his former press secretary Dee Dee Myers. Instead, his performance has been so startlingly subpar that "[y]ou have to wonder, is he intentionally trying to undermine her? The answer I think probably is *yes*, but it's also unconscious." He both badly wants his wife to win—by some accounts, even more than she herself does—but also can't seem to help sabotaging her efforts by making himself the issue. Just in the last two weeks, he went off on an anti-war heckler at a rally in Oregon ("Do you want to give the speech?"), accused his own party of a "new strategy of denying and disempowering and disenfranchising" in a speech in Indiana, and managed to revive the fading uproar over Hillary's invented tale about landing under sniper fire in Bosnia: Hey, she's 60 and it was late at night when she "misspoke," the former president said not at all helpfully, suggesting that she's so old and muddled she might not be sharp and on the case at 3 a.m. He also, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "had one of his famous meltdowns" in a private meeting with donors there. "Red-faced and finger-pointing," he exploded in the face of a woman who'd murmured during a photo op that she was sorry to hear that James Carville had called Bill Richardson a "Judas" for endorsing Barack Obama. "It was as if someone pulled the pin of a grenade," a witness to the tirade told the paper. "This was not the Bill Clinton of earlier campaigns." Immediately after the meeting, the former president called on his fellow Democrats to "chill out" about the race.

But what if this really *isn't* the Bill Clinton of earlier campaigns? Myers, for one, sees Hillary as giving her husband a pass—again—in part because of concerns about his health; she suggests that some of the "not presidential and not particularly effective" flashes of Clintonian temper we've seen lately might be the Dick Cheney-style cloudbursts of the heart patient Clinton now is. "His health—after a quadruple bypass? After your heart is out of your body for 75 minutes? He doesn't have the emotional resilience he used to, and he got too emotionally worked up."

Not only because he'd love to move back into the White House, but because he's still in awe of his wife, in his way. Though it's hard to think of a relationship that's been more pawed over, this is no time to look away from their unorthodox but mutually oxygenating setup, in part because the whole rationale of her candidacy is predicated on her symbiotic relationship with, and experience alongside, her husband.

And his fidelity, or lack of it, has loomed over their public relationship. Hillary has more than implied that no Lewinsky-style dramas will derail her campaign or damage her White House. When asked by a voter whether history might repeat itself with a "business or personal scandal" involving her husband, she did not equivocate: "That's not going to happen.

None of us can predict the future." But "I'm very confident that will not happen." After all their years in public life, Hillary Clinton advertises herself as a known quantity—overexposed, if anything.

But the truth is that the press has been running away from Bill Clinton stories for years—to the point that the Obama campaign has even done some not-too-slick whining about it. The *Atlantic*'s Marc Ambinder wrote months ago that "at a campaign event in Iowa, one of Obama's aides plopped down next to me and … wanted to know when reporters would begin to look into Bill Clinton's postpresidential sex life." Could be we've had more than enough of such reports, particularly after the unhappy spectacle involving Eliot Spitzer, to whom Hillary sent a vanilla-gram of "best wishes and thoughts." Could be that adultery isn't what it used to be. While Clinton was still president, on Super Tuesday in 2000, I was with a bunch of other reporters at the Four Seasons Hotel in Austin, Texas, when somebody came by with word that, hey, some woman in the bar was claiming she'd had an affair with Bill Clinton! And nobody even got up. So all I know is this: Not one of the post-Monica rumors about the guy Maureen Dowd calls Frisky Bill has ever been substantiated. But also this: If Hillary Clinton gets the nomination, we will wind up fully briefed.

An official in the Clinton White House who strongly supports her and is highly skeptical of Obama says that when Hillary promises there won't be another Bill Clinton sex scandal, that's not just hope talking. This wasn't some pro forma assurance, either, or a Scarlett O'Hara-style, we'll-worry-about-that-another-day sort of remark. No, there's a reason the candidate feels, as she said, "very confident" on that score: Her husband has been "put on a diet for the last year," the former Clinton official told me, referring not to cheeseburgers but to women. "And he's stuck to it, as far as we know."

In a long, and at times rather loud, interview in her Senate office four years ago, I asked Hillary Clinton whether she might hesitate to run for president to avoid having her private life rummaged through all over again, and she either took offense or pretended to: "I'm never going to get out of scrutiny" in any case, she snapped. "Here you are talking to me, and it never ends." As things were going so well, I went on and asked her how it was going on the homefront. "It's the same as it's been," she said coolly, drawing out the words, "for 32 or 33 years." And though she said this in pique, it's true that the dynamic between the two of them hasn't varied that much over the decades.

Hillary has often said that she learned about constancy from her own mother, Dorothy Rodham, whose early life was nothing short of tragic. After Dorothy's parents divorced, she was, at the age of 8, packed off across the country to live with grandparents who didn't want her, either. She left home to become a nanny when she was only 14—and when her mother finally reached out to her, years later, it turned out that she didn't really want to reconcile; she hoped Dorothy would come to work as her housekeeper. Though Hillary has disputed reports that the man Dorothy married, her father, Hugh Rodham, was emotionally abusive, as Carl Bernstein wrote in *A Woman in Charge*, and her mom's life "painfully demeaning," her own account of her upbringing in her autobiography, *Living History*, supplies plenty of evidence that her home life was not, as she chooses to see it, like something out of *Father Knows Best*:

> My father could not stand personal waste. Like so many who grew up in the Depression, his fear of poverty colored his life. My mother rarely bought new clothes, and she and I negotiated with him for weeks for special purchases, like a new dress for the prom. If one of my brothers or I forgot to screw the cap back on the toothpaste tube, my father threw it out the bathroom window. We would have to go outside, even in the snow, to search for it in the evergreen bushes in front of the house. … To this day, I put uneaten olives back in the jar, wrap up the tiniest pieces of cheese and feel guilty when I throw anything away.

She also learned to keep marching, achieving, and upholding standards that no one else even knew about while standing on one foot and denying that anything was amiss—just as she's done in her own marriage and in her presidential campaign. Smiling her brightest smile, even as she's most harshly criticized during presidential debates, she sometimes seems as inured to actual insult as she is alive to strategic opportunities for umbrage. Though big-old, huggable Bill Clinton must have looked like just the antidote to her hypercritical, cheapskate dad, it's funny how often a thing and its opposite wind up at the same damn place. When Bill and Hillary met at Yale Law, she—even more than he—was considered the one with the big political future. Back then, it was Bill who was suspected of ulterior motives in hitching his wagon to Hillary's star. And after all this time, who can say whether he would have ever made it to the national stage without her—any more than she would have made it without him? After all this time, their well-established MO is to process the political information they live on as a team of two, constantly looking to each other for both the validation and the correction they never fully trust from anyone else. When he was president, Hillary was not what you'd call beloved by his aides, because she regularly took her anger at him out on them, berating his advisers in front of him as a way of getting under her husband's skin. Yet his aides also had a running joke about how the president felt he had to consult her before rendering any real decision—just as, in her current campaign, she looks to him as to no one else.

Since the death of their mutual friend Diane Blair, no one is more of a confidant to either Clinton than the other—along with their grown daughter, Chelsea, who works for a hedge fund in

New York. And though there are many people in their orbit, intimacy does not come easily to either of them: "I am not the sort of person who routinely pours out her deepest feelings, even to her closest friends," Hillary wrote in her autobiography. "My mother is the same way. We have a tendency to keep our own counsel, and that trait only deepened when I began living my life in the public eye." Former Clinton Labor Secretary Robert Reich, who first introduced the couple at Yale but who has been disillusioned with them for some time, is one of several former associates who described their current circle as mostly money people: "The world for them tends to be divided between those who are useful to them, financially or politically or both, and those who aren't. So many of their friends are accordingly very wealthy, and they associate informally with a fairly wide circle of extremely wealthy people."

Yet though there may be considerable turnover on the Clintons' Christmas-card list, friends past and present are in near-perfect agreement on what keeps the couple together: Mysterious as they are to us, even now, Bill and Hillary Clinton do get each other, and that is no small thing.

Again and again, what their friends circle back to is that both Bill and Hillary truly believe no one on this earth is smarter than the person they married. Progressive evangelical pastor Tony Campolo, who counseled the Clintons after the Lewinsky affair, says, "They are two people who are perfectly fit for each other; I'm not sure she could be married to anybody else, and I'm not sure he could be married to anybody else. They feed off each other" and get along better than we think. "Everybody knows he has a problem in his personality," Campolo says, referring to Clinton's past indiscretions. "And he's trying to deal with it, and I think he is dealing with it."

While their union is unconventional, it also remains intense in ways a lot of more traditional marriages just aren't after 30-plus years. Sally Bedell Smith, who spent three years researching her book on the couple, *For Love of Politics*, says their relationship still boils down to what Bill Clinton told his mom about why he was marrying Hillary: "I need someone I can talk to." Barging in on the two of them in the heat of a political discussion is, by some accounts, almost like walking in on another couple having sex. "The one scene that sums it up for me," Smith says, "is one day in September of 2000, when they had both just given speeches, and she was in the campaign van and he was leaning in and they were staring into each others eyes" in a way that made aides who witnessed the scene wish they were anywhere else. "They were staring into each other's eyes, and it was described to me as a moment of rapture. It's always been a different kind of marriage, but if you define your passion in those terms, yeah, it's there."

Their friends are split on how aware she ever really let herself be of his philandering over the years. Having developed a high threshold for pain before she ever laid eyes on Bill, Hillary learned from her mother both incredible toughness and coping strategies that mostly involved refusal to acknowledge unpleasantness. During their Arkansas years, one of her ways of sidestepping bad news of all kinds was simply refusing to read the papers. After the Gennifer Flowers story came out during her husband's '92 presidential run, her response, according to Carl Bernstein, was to throw herself into efforts to discredit Flowers and to try to persuade horrified campaign aides to bring out rumors that Poppy Bush had not always been faithful to Barbara. She never so much as cracked open the Starr Report, according to her autobiography.

Strangely, what Hillary seems to have exaggerated about her marriage is not how well they mended it after Monica—but how serious a breach there ever was. Even when strains were visible—or seemed to be, as when they walked to Marine One with Chelsea in between them after the news broke—in private they for the most part seemed inconceivably at ease. So that if there was any posturing for public consumption going on, it was not in the way we might think. At the time, the word put out by Hillaryland was that the president was in the doghouse and had to win her back. But if that was true, his probationary period was over almost before it began. Peter King, the Republican congressman from Long Island who was working closely with Bill Clinton on the Irish peace process at the time, recalls dreading a trip to Moscow and Ireland that he, Sen. Pete Domenici, and Rep. Steny Hoyer were taking with the Clintons right after the post-Monica Martha's Vineyard vacation that everyone assumed had been a disaster: "We were leaving from Andrews [Air Force Base], and they were coming directly from Martha's Vineyard, and everybody was kind of nervous because no one knew what to expect. But they came on the plane like the two happiest people in the world, laughing and joking, and it seemed legit. They came holding hands and kidding each other. Steny likes to sleep on the floor on the plane, and she's joking, 'They're going to say we're sleeping with Steny.' I've seen people trying to pretend everything's great when it isn't, and it *wasn't* that; it wasn't forced."

King voted against Clinton's impeachment and spoke to him regularly during that period. He says mending fences with his wife seemed like the last thing on the president's mind. "I had maybe 20 conversations about impeachment and five seconds were about her. He'd say, 'I've gotta work it out with this Senator and that one, and, yeah, with Hillary, too.' " Which King took not as evidence that the president didn't care, but that she didn't particularly need propping up: "He made it sound like she was being pretty decent about it. I'm not into psychobabble, but whatever complexities they have, it is not an arrangement; they seem to need each other's reassurance."

A friend of mine who is a therapist notes that for people who either were raised by a highly critical parent, like Hillary's dad, or were inappropriately enmeshed in messy grown-up problems, as Bill was, it's run-of-the-mill to wind up more comfortable in a

relationship when triangulating—yes, that was the word she used—with some third party or crusade or common enemy to take the pressure off the primary relationship. At this moment in their lives, they are certainly united in their anger. Though in the past aides found him lighter and her less trusting, he's grown more like his wife in that regard in recent years.

And in this campaign, they've come full circle, with him overreacting to perceived slights and her marching on, head aloft no matter what. Their longtime friend Max Brantley, editor of the alt-weekly *Arkansas Times*, even gives the press corps backhanded credit for lighting the candles, pouring the champagne, and locking them in the bunker—where they do best together: "My sense is they may be closer than ever. They're embattled and really haven't gotten a fair shake in the media, and that's drawn them together. They've made a mistake whining about it—that's not how the game is played. … But they're in the Alamo, and it's a common-purpose kind of thing."

Should Hillary prevail, of course, Bill will have his restoration and she her turn. Should she lose, they will almost certainly try again in four or eight years. To ask what would keep them together in the absence of a presidential campaign is the wrong question. Because win or lose, the campaign for their dual, inextricably intertwined legacy will never be over. And, win or lose, they'll fight on together.

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food

The Extravagant Gourmets

Why the food press rarely talks about dollars and cents.

By Sara Dickerman

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 7:17 AM ET

Sky-high gas prices partnered with record-setting corn and wheat prices have led to what the AP calls "the worst case of food inflation in nearly 20 years." In combination with a looming recession and the deflation of the real-estate market, these high prices mean that the everyday grocery bill is overwhelming Americans. And yet a happy hedonism still dominates the food media; turn to the food section of your city paper and you'll learn where to spend $120 a pound on *jamón ibérico* or where to taste a flight of pricy olive oils. When such outlets deign to consider cost, they tend to produce "frugality stunts": Think of the recent *New York Times* articles on cooking with 99-cent ingredients or the countless *Top Chef* challenges in which contestants turn out high-end fare from tin cans and vending machines. Even a "cheap eats" restaurant review, when defined at "less than $25 a head," exceeds the national daily average spent on food by about $18.50 (PDF).

As an industry, we rhapsodize about *la cucina povera*—that is, "poor food" like polenta, beans, and braise-worthy cuts of meat like short-ribs and pigs trotters—but we rarely talk about cooking in terms of dollars and cents. When food writers and producers advocate economy, they're usually talking about time—churning out recipes for fast, easy, everyday weeknight meals that can be prepared in minutes. The dollar-savvy recipe is far less common. Why, even as the economic news turns grim, is it so unusual for the food media to take cost into account?

In part, it's because we assume our readers are looking for a window into the epicurean life, not a mirror of their own kitchens. And, of course, there is the subtle or not-so-subtle pressure to sell advertisers' expensive food products, travel packages, and restaurants. But a big factor, I think, is an aesthetic concern—a fear of taking the hectoring tone of the much-maligned home economist. Cutting your food budget requires systemic organization: cooking foods from scratch (roasting your own chicken rather than buying it at the grocery store); shifting the focus of your meal away from animal protein; using your leftovers; and, perhaps most importantly, planning ahead to take advantage of economies of scale and grocery bargains. That's a hard sell for the food press of today, which tends to linger over fast and spontaneous rewards rather than strategic planning.

Finally, there's a political element to the food press' shyness about pricing—most of us followers of the food revolution believe that industrially produced cheap food is not actually cheap. It might not cost much at the checkout line, but it hides a raft of government food subsidies and externalities like pesticide and methane pollution, not to mention the inhumane mass production of animals. So it can be hard to get to the bottom of the bottom dollar.

Writers weren't always so reluctant to tackle the economic component of home economics: Until the mid-1980s—when the fancy-food revolution really took hold and works like the iconic *Silver Palate Cookbook* helped Americans discover costly specialty ingredients like morel mushrooms—there was a steady stream of American cookbooks that focused on how to run a household efficiently and within a budget. A very quick sampling includes works like *The Frugal Housewife* (1829), *Practical Sanitary and Economic Cooking Adapted to Persons of Moderate and Small Means* (1890), *Ida Bailey Allen's Money-Saving Cook Book: Eating for Victory* (1942), *The Southern Living Low Cost Cookbook* (1971), and the very thoughtful *More-With-Less* (1976), a collection of Mennonite recipes gathered by Doris Janzen Longacre that focuses on moving down the food chain, reducing processed foods, and simply eating less.

Perhaps the most famous piece of writing about stretching food dollars is *How To Cook a Wolf* by MFK Fisher, the patron saint of all sensualist food writers. *HTCAW* was written in 1942,

during a period of rationing and scarcity in the U.S. food market and with an eye to the even more desperate situation of homemakers in England. Fisher provides a progression of recipes from modest to truly subsistence fare (a paste of grains and vegetables and a wisp of meat she piquantly names "sludge") but urges readers to hang on to the humanizing experience of pleasure at the table and in the home. She even provides a final chapter of rich, expensive recipes to dream about while scrimping. The wolf that Fisher wrote about may have slinked off—our wartime hasn't confronted us with the same kind of home-front sacrifices that World War II did. But there are other unpleasant creatures outside the door—recession, overconsumption, and escalating food costs.

There *is* a market for money-saving cooking ideas that the food media is simply failing to fully exploit. *Cheap. Fast. Good!*, a plucky guide to stretching food dollars published by Workman in 2005, has been a moderate success. The authors of *Dining on a Dime* claim to have sold 130,000 copies of their comb-bound cook book. Budget-minded discussion boards have sprung up all over the Internet. There are Web sites for "once-a-month cooking" enthusiasts (homemakers who make 30 days worth of freezer-ready meals in one marathon cooking session). And there's the 99-cent chef, who, since 2006, has kept a regular blog devoted to the *Times*' one-off premise: hip recipes sourced from 99-cent stores. "Russ Meyer Lemon Chicken," anyone? The time seems right for a mainstream voice (better yet, voices) to marry the pleasures of the table with the reality of a reduced budget, perhaps by using what we've learned from the food revolution. Michael Pollan has already made a big splash this year by recommending that people shy away from packaged products and eat less meat—two steps that are not only a grassroots vote for a new kind of food system but that will help save money. It's possible, after all, to economize without reverting to a freezer full of Tex-Mex lasagna (one of those "mock-ethnic dishes that American dieticians love," as Jeffrey Steingarten puts it). A new home economics could harness seasonal ingredients and real ethnic flavors; it could weave a lusty appreciation of food with a sober appreciation of the grocery dollar.

foreigners

Olympic Flame Out

China learns the price of a few weeks of global attention.

By Anne Applebaum

Monday, April 14, 2008, at 8:02 PM ET

In London, a man with a fire extinguisher hurled himself at a torchbearer using what a friend gleefully describes as a "rugby tackle." In Paris, the torch's omnipresent security guards—members of the Sacred Flame Protection Unit of the Chinese People's Armed Police, the same paramilitaries who put down riots in Tibet—had to extinguish the flame themselves to prevent protesters from doing so first. In San Francisco, the torch disappeared, reappeared, changed routes, and then vanished altogether. City officials explained that they had moved their "farewell to the torch" ceremony to a "private" location in order to avoid demonstrations.

In other words, the ceremony was canceled. Score one for the protesters! And welcome to the latest Olympic sport: "put out the torch"—a game being followed, at least in my part of the world, with enormous enthusiasm. Over dinner in Warsaw, Poland, visitors from London brag about "their" protesters. Over breakfast in Berlin, Germans can read accounts of the ceremony's modern origins: It seems Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler's filmmaker, invented the torch relay for the 1936 Berlin Olympics and then deployed it with "terrifying mastery," according to *Die Welt*, in her film *Olympia*.

What a disappointment this must all be for the *China Daily*, the English-language organ of the Chinese Communist Party, which last month bragged that the 2008 torch relay "will traverse the longest distance, cover the greatest area and include the largest number of people" since this ancient Greek custom was invented by the Nazis in 1936. After the chaos in Paris, the same newspaper was reduced to spluttering at the French press, the French people, and French culture itself: "Pride and prejudice," the newspaper intoned, have "cast a shadow on this ancient civilization."

How utterly predictable. Even without the recent riots in Tibet, anything as ludicrous as a 130-day, 85,000-mile torch relay was going to attract a healthy dose of negative attention. Why does the thing have to go to so many cities, after all? Why does it need to go through Tibet? Why is it surrounded by track-suited thugs? Why does it travel in a customized jumbo jet? Wasn't this supposed to be a relay? And what is the symbolic significance of a battery-operated chemical flame, anyway? What does it have to do with athletes or world peace? Any ceremony of such profound inauthenticity—the Chinese are calling it the "journey of harmony"—deserves to be disharmoniously disrupted as often as possible.

It's true that the Greeks put on a parallel extravaganza four years ago. Previously, it had traveled only between Athens and the Olympic city or within the Olympic country. But the Greeks are a small nation with only local enemies. China is a totalitarian empire with many enemies and should know better than to stage a deliberately provocative, easily disrupted event like this one.

But clearly the Chinese did not know better. Their confused, unprepared official reaction has wavered between outright dishonesty—"all Torch Relay cities have given strong support for the event"—and incoherent anger. Chinese bloggers apparently favor the latter. One posted a photograph of an anti-

torch protester, along with the words, "Remember him … he'll die a terrible death."

In fact, for all of their wealth and sophistication, China's leaders still have an extremely crude understanding of global media—you can't *force* the world's press to celebrate "harmony," for goodness' sake—and of global politics. Despite his earlier enthusiasm, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has now announced he won't attend the opening ceremonies in Beijing: The photographs of Chinese paramilitaries pouring out of his Downing Street residence have made it politically impossible.

Inevitably, "wiser heads" and old China hands will now call upon the world's press and the world's politicians to calm down, avoid boycotts, and leave the torch alone so the games can go on and China's nationalist passion can cool down. Right this very minute, I'm sure someone is whispering in George Bush's ear, urging him not to skip the Olympics, not to offend the Chinese, not to follow Brown's example.

I hope he doesn't listen. Americans, Brits, Russians, and indeed the citizens of many large nations are forced to think all of the time about how their actions are perceived abroad. Why shouldn't the Chinese do so, too? They wanted to use the Olympics to trumpet their success, but there is a price to be paid for those few weeks at the center of global attention. Of course, no one believes that "Free Tibet" signs on the Golden Gate Bridge will truly liberate Tibet, and the absence of the U.S. president from some horrifically overchoreographed ceremony in Beijing won't bring democracy to the Middle Kingdom. But it will show some of the Chinese people what some of the world thinks of their repressive system—and quite right, too.

green room

The Carbon Olympics

Keeping track of the Olympic torch's carbon footprint—one leg at a time.

By Chadwick Matlin

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 7:11 AM ET

The 2008 Olympic torch relay has not exactly inspired warm feelings of international cooperation, as in years past. Pro-Tibetan activists mounted protests in Paris and London, and even managed to force the extinguishing of the flame on a few occasions. But in the long run, the torch could generate more pollution than political dissent. Its journey across the world (and back again) is leaving a historic trail of CO_2 emissions.

Assuming the International Olympic Committee doesn't snuff out the relay in the face of mass protests—it says that won't happen—our calculations estimate that the entire trip will unfold over 50,000 miles in 20 countries. (Including a 31-city tour in mainland China, the entire thing will cover 85,000 miles.) As *Wired* reports, the flame gets its own private plane, so those 50,000 miles of travel demand 270,000 gallons of jet fuel. (The torch's plane needs 5.4 gallons of fuel for every mile flown.) With every gallon of fuel burned, 23.88 pounds of CO_2 get pumped into the air, which means air travel alone will generously offer the environment 6,447,600 pounds of CO_2. That's the equivalent weight of more than 1,000 Hummer H-2s.

To track the flame's slow assault on the atmosphere, we created a map that charts its total carbon emissions as it flies. (Find it below.) Through Monday's stop in Kuala Lumpur, the relay has traveled an estimated 36,782 miles, burned 198,622 gallons of jet fuel, and released 4,743,112 pounds of CO_2. We'll be updating the map regularly over the next few weeks as the torch makes its way back to China. Click on the red lines between stops to see the impact of each leg of the trip on the environment and click on the torch markers to see video of the relay.

View Larger Map

To put this in perspective, the average American leaves an annual carbon footprint of 42,000 to 44,000 pounds of CO_2 emissions, according to the United Nations. That means the Olympic torch will spew as much greenhouse gas during its international travels as 153 Americans do a year. Put another way, the four-month torch relay puts twice as much carbon in the atmosphere as you will over the course of your entire life.

The numbers get even more lopsided when you compare the torch with the average Chinese national. The flame's 50,000-mile journey has an annual carbon footprint equivalent to 624 Chinese citizens'. (Keep in mind that China claims it's offering a green Olympics.)

The above calculations don't include the carbon emissions of the torch itself—nor the lantern that keeps the official Olympic flame lit 24/7. The torch—or rather, all 10 thousand to 15 thousand torches—are fueled by propane, which puts out another 12.669 pounds of CO_2 per gallon burned. We can't calculate the carbon footprint of the torch while it's being paraded around by Olympic heroes because neither the company that designed the torches nor the Beijing Olympic Committee answered our questions about how much propane was burned every hour.

hey, wait a minute

The Fizz-dom of Crowds

If prediction markets are so great, why have they been so wrong lately?

By James Ledbetter
Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 7:18 AM ET

When political junkies first encountered prediction markets in the early 1990s, it was as if the opinion poll had been perfected. Academic studies showed that the markets—in which individuals bet real or fake money on futures contracts that expire when an election is over—consistently did a better job of predicting electoral outcomes than even exit polls. They've been an important part of ***Slate***'s political coverage for years.

But lately, prediction markets have been getting some big questions very wrong. Hollywood Stock Exchange and its cinema brethren are great at some things but have consistent trouble making accurate best supporting actor and actress predictions, including this year. In January, ***Slate***'s Dan Gross wrote about how the prediction markets failed during the crucial New Hampshire Democratic primary. Instead of beating the conventional wisdom, the prediction markets trailed it. The Intrade contract for Obama to win the New Hampshire primary rose as high as 95 cents; on the day that voters went to the polls in New Hampshire, Intrade still had Obama's chances of being the Democratic nominee as more than 70 percent. But as results favoring Hillary Clinton began to come in, the contracts became a dead heat. That's hardly a prediction—it's simply tracking the day's results.

On the evening of the California primary, the prices on InTrade indicated that Obama would win; he didn't. When Barry Ritholtz, who runs a quantitative research firm called FusionIQ and writes the popular Big Picture financial blog, wrote about New Hampshire in January, he reminded us that TradeSports had also failed to correctly predict the Democrats' recapturing the Senate in 2006, and that the Iowa Electronic Markets had Howard Dean as the favorite to win the Iowa caucus in 2004. Citing Ritholtz, the *New York Times* declared in February that "a little backlash has begun" against prediction markets.

So, what's going on? Is there something fundamentally wrong with this one-time darling of pop economists? Here's an examination of the leading pet theories for why prediction markets fail:

They're too small. That's one of Ritholtz's biggest gripes. Political-prediction markets, he wrote in January, "are thin, trading volumes are anemic, the dollar amounts at risk are pitifully small. Thus, these markets are subject to failure at times."

There's no question that tiny markets are bound to yield inadequate results. Yet by the usual standards of prediction markets, the trading on political futures markets has been pretty robust. In the days before the Iowa caucus, for example, several thousand dollars changed hands in the Iowa Electronic Markets, and tens of thousands of contracts were sold.

Yes, that level of participation is far lower than, say, the 2-billion-plus shares that are traded on the New York Stock Exchange most weekdays. But it's not so small as to alone make a prediction market inaccurate. Thomas Malone, who studies prediction markets at MIT's Center for Collective Intelligence, says that his rule of thumb is that only "somewhere around a dozen" participants are necessary to give a prediction market sufficient liquidity.

The stakes are too low. People betting on prediction markets are typically playing with small amounts of money (compared with big traders in capital markets) or with fake money. Therefore, one theory holds, they lack sufficient incentive to ensure that their calls are rigorous—they are lazy bettors.

This will ring true with anyone who's ever played online poker for fake money. The lack of any stings attached to losing leads players to stay in hands holding terrible cards; it brings down the quality of play and rewards reckless bets. A similar dynamic is at work in prediction markets, which is why conventional wisdom has long held that real-money prediction markets are more reliable than fake-money ones.

Yet that conventional wisdom has been challenged this year. InTrade is a real-money site, and it failed to accurately predict the California primary. Neither the play-money Hollywood Stock Exchange nor InTrade correctly predicted that Tilda Swinton would win the Academy Award for best supporting actress, but, somewhat surprisingly, the play-money site at least had Swinton in second place. And the incentives argument certainly can't explain *recent* failures in prediction markets, because nothing has changed: They offer the same minor incentives as they always have.

They're too slow to react to events. David Leonhardt made this argument in the *New York Times*. Citing Barack Obama's ups and downs in the Intrade market after the contests in Iowa (he won and went up), New Hampshire (he lost and went down), and South Carolina (he won and went up again), Leonhardt asserts that "the impact of each contest took surprisingly long to sink in."

Which only raises the question: compared with what? Leonhardt's yardstick is the stock price of drug maker Schering-Plough, which appears to react to market news almost instantaneously. That's true, but it's an individual equity, not a futures contract scheduled to expire at a prearranged date. As such, few would argue that its current price is intended to predict anything in particular about the company eight months down the road. One might just as usefully compare the political-prediction market with the prices of yachts or Beanie Babies. Moreover, there are counter-examples in which political futures seem to

react pretty rapidly: On the day of the New Hampshire primary, a contract that Hillary Clinton would be the Democratic nominee traded as low as 18.1 cents and as high as 58.7 cents on the Iowa presidential market.

None of this is to suggest that all of the above theories are wrong, but they are each incomplete and unproven. I suspect that a large part of the problem has to do with expectations: Because prediction markets have been more accurate than other prognostications in the past, we crave them to be perfect. They aren't, and so long as they are built on bets in which no one has perfect information—like Oscar winners and political candidates—they never will be. Every bettor's perception of who will win is filtered through a myriad of inputs: a sense of who is the leader and who is the underdog; the influence of other people's bets; even something as mundanely human as whom we want to win. To get the maximum use out of them, we must—as with political polls—learn to read them in a discriminating, critical fashion. This year, that process seems to have begun.

history lesson

Watershed Moment

The death of a Montana dam.

By Caitlin DeSilvey

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 7:13 AM ET

On March 28 in Milltown, Mont., the waters of the Clark Fork and Blackfoot rivers breached a coffer dam to flow freely through their confluence for the first time in a century. The moment came at the midpoint of a $100 million Superfund cleanup of contaminated sediments at the Milltown Reservoir—perhaps the most ambitious environmental remediation project ever attempted in the country. When the cleanup began in 2006, a ***Slate*** slide show looked at the history of the dam and the memories attached to the landscape it created.

Click here to read a follow-up slide-show essay on the passing of Milltown.

hot document

Pope Rope-A-Dope

Past victims of sexual abuse request a meeting with the pope, and receive no reply.

By Bonnie Goldstein

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 11:33 AM ET

From: Bonnie Goldstein

Posted Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 11:33 AM ET

A recent report by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops tallied 14,000 molestation claims against Catholic clergy since 1950. The church's abuse-related costs during this period totaled more than $2.3 billion. Although Pope Benedict XVI declared—while flying into Washington April 15 for his first official visit to the United States—his deep shame of pedophiles among Catholic clergy, many abuse victims are not satisfied.

Three months ago, the leaders of Survivors Network of those Abused By Priests (SNAP) sent Pope Benedict a letter (via Pietro Sambi, the Holy See's ambassador to Washington) requesting a meeting during his six-day visit to Washington and New York. The letter (below) began, "As children, each of us was raped or sexually assaulted by a priest." SNAP seeks face-to-face assurance that the Vatican "will never again tolerate sexual violence from within the ranks of the ordained." Despite church efforts to address disclosures of sexual abuse, the group faults "bishops and provincials in the United States" for continuing failures. SNAP represents "over 8,000 survivors in over 60 chapters."

SNAP received no response to its letter, and as a result its grievances with the pope became more personal. On April 8, SNAP issued a press release criticizing the Holy Father ("formerly known as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger") for his own record on clergy sexual abuse. Among SNAP's accusations is that, as cardinal, he was slow to see the scandal as anything other than a plot to discredit the church, and as pope he has failed to discipline U.S. bishops who have failed to enforce a sexual-abuse policy agreed to in 2002. SNAP also repeated speculation from some Catholic commentators that during his current trip the pope is not visiting Boston, "the epicenter of the ongoing clergy sex scandals," because he doesn't want the issue to dominate news coverage. Although the 81-year-old pontiff has been met with throngs of admirers during his visit, the abuse record has nonetheless shadowed him. On Wednesday, while Pope Benedict scolded a group of American bishops at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, saying they had "badly handled" the scandal, angry victims carrying baby pictures and placards demonstrated a few blocks away.

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

hot document

Sexual Blackmail at Immigration Services

Land of the free. Home of the brave.

By Bonnie Goldstein

Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 3:10 PM ET

From: Bonnie Goldstein

Posted Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 3:10 PM ET

Isaac Baichu works for the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Agency as an "immigration screening officer." A few days before Christmas, he phoned a 22-year-old Colombian woman whose green card application he was reviewing and asked her to meet him—in his car. The woman and her American husband had met with Baichu in his New York office a few weeks earlier. Now Baichu explained that there were some problems with her record. He'd be parked on Queens Boulevard at noon.

The woman agreed to the meeting. As she settled into the passenger seat, Baichu, himself a naturalized immigrant from Guyana—he obtained his citizenship in 1991—got right to the point. In exchange for his help establishing lawful permanent residency, he said, "I want to have sex one or two times, that's all." He promised, "You'll get to like me, because I'm a nice guy." He also said he was "single" and wanted "to be friends." Perhaps, Baichu told her, when she and her husband visited Colombia, "I go with you. You hook me up with somebody nice." We know Baichu's precise words because the woman recorded the conversation on a digital video camera in her purse.

Then events took a nastier turn. According to an affidavit filed in criminal court last month by detective Joseph Brancaccio of the Queens district attorney's office (below and on the following page), Baichu "grabbed her by the arm" and insisted she "perform oral sex upon him, then and there." The woman pleaded, "Let me go because I tell my husband I come home." But Baichu refused and, restraining her physically, "placed his penis in her mouth." The charging document states that Baichu assured her that "it would only take a second and that he was very fast." He'd have to be; according to the *New York Times*, during the last three years alone Baichu "handled 8,000 green card applications."

Within days, the woman played the recording to both the district attorney and the *Times*. Baichu was charged with sexual misconduct, coercion, and receiving a "reward for official misconduct" (below). A criminal trial will begin in May.

Currently, Baichu is suspended while the agency investigates. His lawyer told CNN, "We're denying any wrongdoing at the moment." The woman's immigration status, meanwhile, remains unresolved.

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Posted Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 3:10 PM ET

human nature

Rearming America

The military's plan to regrow body parts.

By William Saletan

Friday, April 18, 2008, at 12:40 PM ET

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The regeneration of lost body parts has just moved from science fiction to U.S. military policy.

Yesterday the Department of Defense announced the creation of the Armed Forces Institute of Regenerative Medicine, which will go by the happy acronym AFIRM. According to DOD's news service, AFIRM will "harness stem cell research and technology … to reconstruct new skin, muscles and tendons, and even ears, noses and fingers." The government is budgeting $250 million in public and private money for the project's first five years. NIH and three universities will be on the team.

The people who brought you the Internet are about to bring you replacement fingers.

If you've been following Human Nature for the past three years, you know that tissue regeneration is well underway. The military has been working on regrowing lost body parts using extracellular matrix. Scientists in labs have grown blood vessels, livers, bladders, breast implants, and meat. This year they announced the production of beating, disembodied rat hearts. At yesterday's press conference, Army Surgeon General Eric Schoomaker explained that our bodies systematically generate liver cells and bone marrow and that this ability can be redirected through "the right kind of stimulation."

Now that the regeneration fantasy is becoming real, it's worth pausing to notice how we're absorbing it culturally. This is extremely freaky stuff. Just a few days ago, my wife and I were explaining to our five-year-old daughter that she needs to take good care of her adult teeth because they're the last real teeth she'll ever have.

That's just not true anymore. It's not true of her fingers and toes, either. And why stop there? Schoomaker points out that salamanders can regenerate whole limbs. He asks: "Why can't a mammal do the same thing?"

When technology transforms humanity in such a fundamental way, it's best to start with a context that feels normal. Today, that context is what every American politician now calls "our brave men and women in uniform." The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, waged in large part through improvised explosive devices, have produced nearly 1,000 U.S. military amputees. Many other service members have lost eyesight or suffered burns or spinal-cord damage. We all want to help these young people recover. We've seen inspiring stories of doctors outfitting them with prosthetic limbs. If only we could make them truly whole again. And now we can.

At the press conference, Schoomaker displayed pictures of a wounded Marine whose disfigured features could be restored only through tissue regrowth. He vowed to "redefine the Army and military medicine." The Defense Department's assistant secretary for health declared a goal of "getting these people up to where they are functioning and reintegrated, employed, [and] able to help their families and be fully participating members of society."

It's a familiar and worthy goal. And it has to be, because in the larger context of human history, its job is to ease us across the mind-blowing threshold of human regeneration. If my daughter loses a tooth, she may be able to grow it back. If my son loses a finger, the work pioneered by AFIRM early in his life may be able to help him.

Warfare will never be the same again, either. American military medicine is already saving the lives of soldiers who would have died in previous conflicts. Yesterday's death is today's wound. Now we're raising the ante: Today's permanent wound will be tomorrow's bad memory. Blow off our fingers, and we'll grow them back.

Further down the road, other possibilities will emerge. If we can restore a soldier's original muscle strength, we can probably add to it. The military is already encouraging soldiers to get LASIK, which improves some people's eyesight beyond 20/20. It's hard to believe we won't continue to improve that surgery and systematize it across the armed forces. Most of us civilians will face these revolutions when we're ready. By then, like AFIRM, they'll already be here.

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juicy bits

My Life in a Polygamist Compound

Carolyn Jessop's FLDS memoir, condensed.

By Torie Bosch

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 1:18 PM ET

When Texas authorities seized 416 children in a raid on a compound of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Americans quickly learned that the religious group encourages polygamy and the marriage of young girls to older men. *Escape*, a memoir published last fall, offers a more detailed portrait of life with the FLDS. In the book, Carolyn Jessop, a sixth-generation polygamist describes her life as the fourth wife of Merril Jessop, who ran the recently raided Texas compound. Carolyn left Merril in 2003, before he moved to Texas, but her memoir sheds light on the man and on the beliefs and practices common within the insular community. Below, ***Slate*** flags Carolyn's most intriguing, strange, and heartbreaking allegations.

FLDS Beliefs

Page 17: The FLDS split from the Mormon Church more than 100 years ago, after the latter outlawed polygamy. Members, like 19th-century Mormons, believe that "[a] man must have multiple wives if he expects to do well in heaven, where he can eventually become a god and wind up with his own planet." Not every man marries multiple wives; being encouraged to take more than three signifies that you're considered important by the leaders of the community.

Page 25: In a favorite children's game, called Apocalypse, kids act out the FLDS vision of the end of the world. According to FLDS lore, Native Americans who were mistreated and killed in

pioneer days will be resurrected in the end times, when God will allow them to wreak vengeance on those who wronged them (the presumably also-resurrected settlers). In return for this indulgence, "resurrected Indians" will also be "required to take on the job of protecting God's chosen people"—FLDS members—by killing FLDS enemies with invisible tomahawks that can sever a person's heart in half. Very cowboys and Indians!

Page 37: Carolyn, who grew up in the FLDS communities of Colorado City, Ariz., and Hildale, Utah, was educated in a "public school," but the teachers and students, like the rest of the area community, were almost exclusively FLDS members. They were taught that dinosaurs never existed and man never landed on the moon.

Page 157: Polygamy isn't the only way FLDS doctrine differs from that of the Mormon Church: "Many of us in the fundamentalist faith drank coffee, tea, beer, and wine, all of which is strictly forbidden in mainstream Mormonism."

Prophet Motives

Pages 72-73: The community's rules changed as different leaders—called prophets—established different priorities. When Carolyn was 18, the prophet was a man called Uncle Roy, who gave her permission to attend college, an honor granted to very few girls in the community. But there was one major caveat: In order to do so, Carolyn had to marry Merril Jessop, a 50-year-old man with a reputation for cruelty who already had three wives.

Page 313: When Uncle Roy died in 1986, a man called Uncle Rulon took over. But Rulon was elderly and frail, and his favored son, Warren Jeffs, held the reins for many years. Carolyn says that marrying off underage girls was relatively rare before Rulon: "When Uncle Rulon first came to power, girls didn't marry until they were over twenty. After his first stroke, the age dropped into the late teens. The sicker he got, the younger the brides in the community became."

Page 234: As the FLDS leadership became increasingly radicalized, Uncle Rulon began to discuss blood atonement, a draconian punishment for anyone who committed "[i]mmoral acts for which there could be no forgiveness … such as fornication and adultery." Blood atonement, Carolyn explains, is "murder": The sinner submits to being killed as punishment for his or her crimes. The practice is rejected by the mainstream Mormon Church. Carolyn became terrified that the FLDS might adopt it.

Jessop's Marriage

As was the case with many FLDS unions, Carolyn and Merril's marriage was "spiritual," not official, to help avoid charges of polygamy. (Having technically single mothers in the community also helped bring in government benefits.)

Page 80: Carolyn was fearful of consummating her marriage: "Merril spread my legs apart but could not get an erection. I felt angry, humiliated, and embarrassed. Should I fight him? I began to try to free myself, and after a few minutes he released his hold on me." Though the couple eventually had sex, in their 17-year marriage, Carolyn never saw Merril fully nude.

Page 181: Merril became furious with Carolyn when she ordered shrimp, which he dislikes, at a restaurant: "A devout wife would never even desire to eat something her husband disliked."

Page 147: Carolyn and Merril eventually had eight children together, but that's hardly a big brood by FLDS standards: "Producing large numbers of faithful children was a way for a woman to gain favor not only with her husband but with God. It wasn't uncommon for a woman in the community to have as many as sixteen children, and most had at least twelve."

Bad Medicine

Page 189: FLDS leaders don't look kindly on modern medicine. During childbirth, "a doctor was never present, nor was pain medication ever used. Women were expected to be perfectly silent during childbirth. If a woman screamed or made loud noises she was criticized for being out of control. Sometimes she'd be reprimanded by her husband during her delivery."

Page 224: One woman Carolyn knows gave birth at home and "was given an episiotomy with sewing scissors and then stitched up with dental floss."

Page 231: Uncle Rulon "began preaching that anyone who needed medical help to heal was a person of little faith. A person in harmony with God could heal him- or herself with fasting and prayer." When Carolyn's sister-wife Ruth was diagnosed with skin cancer on her nose, she tried to heal herself with chemicals from a health-food store. The chemicals burned off her nose.

Page 275: Merril blamed Carolyn when their seventh child became gravely ill: "You can take him to every damn doctor you can find, but no one will be able to heal him. God is going to destroy his life because of the sins of his mother."

Warren Jeffs

Jeffs, who is currently in prison for arranging the marriage of an underage girl, exercised extraordinary control over the community even while Uncle Rulon was still the nominal

prophet, and eventually became the prophet himself, when Rulon died in 2003.

Page 195: Some of Carolyn's stepdaughters were married to Jeffs, and she feared his temper. She writes: "One day he brought one of his wives into the [school] auditorium, which was packed with boys. Annette had a long braid that fell past her knees. Warren grabbed the braid and twisted and twisted it until she was on her knees and he was ripping hair from her head. He told the boys that this was how obedient their wives had to be to them."

Pages 216, 223, 231, and 234: As Rulon's deputy, Jeffs banned the color red; movies, television, and the Internet ("except for business purposes"); clothing with "large prints" or plaid; immunizations; and sex not for procreation.

Page 197: The Jeffs family had "a rigid rule … against becoming obese."

Page 307: The FLDS faithful didn't see anything wrong with the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. One of Carolyn's sister-wives "couldn't stop talking about how she and all the righteous people she knew saw the hand of God in the attacks. … Warren Jeffs had been preaching that the entire earth would soon be at war and all the worthy among the chosen would be lifted from the earth and protected, while God destroyed the wicked."

Pages 324-325: Jeffs began to kick young boys out of the community—"more than a hundred teenage boys" within a month's span, at one point—for crimes like "listening to CDs, watching movies, or kissing girls."

Time To Escape

Page 333: Carolyn decided to flee in 2003, soon after Jeffs finally became prophet. She took her eight children, including her profoundly disabled son, to Salt Lake City. As she and her family struggled to adjust to the outside world, Carolyn developed post-traumatic stress disorder. But as she worked to make ends meet, her polygamy background came in handy: An HBO costume director came to town, and Jessop says she made some money sewing costumes for *Big Love*, HBO's series about a suburban polygamous family connected to an FLDS-like cult.

Page 370: The transition to life outside the FLDS was toughest on Betty, Jessop's oldest daughter. After a visit with her father in FLDS-controlled Colorado City, Betty snapped. " 'You're an apostate, owned by the devil!' Betty said. 'He wants your soul and he wants ours.' " Two days after her 18th birthday, Betty returned to the FLDS fold.

Page 404: Jessop heard "rumors that children were being taken from their mothers and sent to the FLDS compound in Texas. … We heard they were being sent away to be raised the way Warren wanted them to be raised."

Page 409: Jeffs himself went underground to hide from the authorities after being accused of arranging the marriage of an underage girl to her cousin. Eventually, he was arrested—while in a car that was red, the color he forbade his followers to wear—and convicted. Still, "Warren's arrest was not the end of his power," Carolyn says. "They were not going to abandon their loyalty to him overnight because he was in the hands of the wicked." (Jeffs resigned as president of the FLDS in late 2007.)

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jurisprudence

Court Orders

Slate readers weigh in on how to fix Supreme Court reporting.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 6:59 PM ET

Last week Jack Shafer gave the *New York Times*' soon-to-be new Supreme Court reporter, Adam Liptak, his first homework assignment: Rethink the day-after-argument/day-after-opinion format that dominates Supreme Court reporting and find a more creative, possibly Webby way to report on the court. Intrigued, I floated some ideas about how the beat has already changed and how it might change more. Then I waited for your mail.

Over the weekend, the *Times*' public editor, Clark Hoyt, used, as an example of the dread "reporter-columnist," Liptak, whose recent Sidebar column about the broad powers afforded the Department of Homeland Security was somehow laced with "opinion—from a reporter, on the front page." (Oh, the humanity!) Conceding Shafer's point that "journalism that is mere stenography is of little use to readers and is often even misleading," Hoyt went on to say that it "may be one step too far to have the same reporter write a column with voice and opinion—explicit or implicit—and news articles that are supposed to be completely impartial."

Welcome, Adam Liptak, to the Supreme Court beat, where no good knowledge base goes unpunished!

Sifting through the thoughtful e-mails you sent in, it's clear most of you are also struggling with Hoyt's dilemma over finding the line between point of view and neutrality in reporting at the Supreme Court. Reader Paul Chapman summarizes the problem this way:

> My first reaction is that [more point of view] would be great, since objective journalism is a lie, everybody has a point of view, and the

> public is best served by being explicitly told what a given reporter's point of view is, rather than having it implicitly fed to them throughout the article. On the other hand, from my experience with human nature, I've learned that people often lose interest in what a person has to say once they see that the person holds views contrary to their own.

Steve Tatum wants to see SCOTUS reporters insert *more* opinion into their factual reporting:

> Reporters should feel more comfortable with a mix of straight reporting and opinion than they have been. For people who really want to form their own opinions, there are many available sources for the opinions themselves. For everyone else, to the extent they like to follow what the court is doing, reporters' viewpoints permit the lay public to have easier access to court trends that will allow them to be more intelligent voters every four years.

Charles Peltz couldn't disagree more:

> Court reporting has been one of the last refuges where the people and subjects covered by reporters seemed to positively influence the method they used. The slow deliberations and thoughtful analysis of the justices seemed to compel reporters to be themselves thoughtful and even handed. Please don't advocate that reporters express opinions in their stories. We have too much of that in all ways on (seemingly) all other topics.

Peltz points out that as the Supreme Court has shifted to the right, my own biases have seeped into my reporting and offers—as a conductor—this reminder: "The famous composer/conductor Richard Strauss admonished young conductors by saying, '[T]he audience should sweat, not the conductor.' "

Another expert Supreme Court watcher, David Garrow, writes from Cambridge University, concurring that "increased tolerance for 'a little point of view' in direct coverage of SCOTUS is likely to do significant damage to any 'MSM' institutions that allow it." There is also some genuine concern from some of you about mixing opinion and reporting—specifically at the high court—and the damage it may do to our reverence for the law. Reader William Chapman puts it this way: "I honestly don't know whether greater coverage of the personal side of Justices would increase or decrease the respect given to the Court, but I tend to assume it would decrease it—the more I learn about politicians, the less I tend to respect them." Another reader, who asked to remain anonymous, puts it this way:

> As interested as I am in what book is on Justice Scalia's nightstand or how long ago—exactly—Justice Ginsburg's ACLU membership lapsed, I can't think of a worse way for a Court reporter to spend his or her time. Not because it's not news, wouldn't make for interesting reading, or might not win somebody a Pulitzer. Rather, because that kind of reporting politicizes the Court in a way few carefully worded opinions ever could. Yes, the justices are undoubtedly political creatures, but the more we think we know about their political lives, the less likely we are to respect their rule as law.

Not so fast, writes Kevin Wright. Sure such opinion-based journalism

> may seem to make the court political, but it seems to me that the Justices, especially Scalia, Thomas, and to some extent Chief Justice Roberts, are getting away with a constant call for their pet theories ... while the press ignores the numerous cases in which their opinions completely ignore these theories.

Mark Obbie, who actually teaches about just this sort of thing at the Newhouse School, blogged a river of great ideas for improving court coverage, including a biggie I forgot to mention last week: "Go to where the cases percolate up from, reporting on the real people and places at issue in the briefs." One of the things Nina Totenberg, Jess Bravin, Warren Richey, Bob Barnes, and Mark Sherman (among others) do that's invaluable is hiking out to Kenosha to interview the old lady whose cat fell down the well. The old lady is invariably the one person who gets lost at oral argument and even more so in the written opinions.

Several readers call for more reporting about the atmospherics at court during oral argument. Harvard Law School's Mark Tushnet, whose book, *I Dissent*, is forthcoming, includes among his great suggestions "giving readers a take on the tone of argument without overpredicting outcomes from that tone." Reader Andrew Grossman similarly asks for SCOTUS reporters to offer "a bit more 'Monday morning quarterback' to the process":

> Too often I find that reports on oral arguments consist of rote recitation of the questions posed by the justices, followed by the attorney's response, with nothing more added until there

> is a broad analysis at the end. I'd like to see, especially for the more poignant questions in the argument, an analysis of either the Justice's question (Was it fair? If not, in what way was it unfair?) or an analysis of the attorney's response (was there a better way to answer that question? etc.)

Jose Cordero wants to see cameras at the high court. Reflecting on Justice Scalia's recent suggestion that only lawyers can understand what the Supreme Court actually does, Cordero writes:

> If we want to worry our "pretty little heads" over tax code or ponder arguments regarding whether the Constitution is a living document or whether soft money for campaigns is legal, it should be up to us, not him. He may work in an ivory tower, but we built it and we ought to be able to peek inside the windows should we so please.

Reader Jeff Morgan also insists that the court open itself up to public scrutiny:

> One of the most important effects of things like releasing SCOTUS audio arguments is their educational value. The court is an arcane institution that few average Americans understand. ... And most people don't realize how much the dynamics of personality and human irrationality steer the court to its final decisions. Listening to arguments reveals the justices for the humans they are and makes the whole process and procedure more accessible.

Paul Camp, on the other hand, is not interested in audio or video or anything that attempts "to reproduce the TV news experience online, with all its shallow, time-constricted talking headitude." That said, he cautions SCOTUS reporters not to fall captive to the myth of the neutral jurist: "Despite the pretense offered by people like Scalia that their words somehow descended unchanged from a Platonic realm of absolute truth, the fact is that personal histories and relationships, both within and outside the court, influence points of view in strange and subtle ways."

Danielle Goldstein wants us to do more to explain why cases matter. "The press corps are the only ones who can translate for the public—not just what the broad constitutional themes are, but also what the decisions mean in terms of people's actual lives. The courts are necessarily embedded in their own discourse, and it's one that isn't really tied, necessarily—or is tied in unpredictable ways—to real life."

Glenna Goldis makes a related point about journalists' reliance on experts:

> If you're looking for someone to go hand to hand with John Roberts, she can't have anything to lose. Professors believe they have everything to lose. They want the court to adopt their ideas. Their former students are clerking on the court and they want to get more students on the court, so that the students will implement their ideas. They want to be on the court. And they think they are this close.

It's a fascinating problem consumers of Supreme Court news may highlight: We want the court to be covered like any other political and human decision-making institution, but with a deep respect for and understanding of the ways in which the court is different. Yes, it needs to be demystified, but not so much so that it is disrespected. It should be analyzed, but not in ways that might damage it or its credibility. The justices should be covered like people, but not like ordinary, silly people.

I've always known that the reporters who cover the high court are the hardest-working folks out there, but this exercise helped me understand why their job is so hard: Perhaps for the rule of law to mean anything, Americans need to see the high court as both human and oracular, and the folks who cover it inevitably have to walk some invisible, unknowable line between two myths that are each partly true.

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jurisprudence

Trend It, Don't End It

Tracking the inscrutable social consensus on capital punishment for rapists.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Saturday, April 12, 2008, at 7:22 AM ET

This week, the U.S. Supreme Court will hear a case about whether—for the first time in decades—a criminal can be executed for a crime that isn't murder. Patrick Kennedy was convicted in 2004 for the rape of a child, his 8-year-old stepdaughter, and the state of Louisiana contends that his crime is tantamount to murder and worthy of death. Nobody in this country has actually been executed for anything other than murder since 1964, although five states, including Louisiana, have laws permitting capital punishment for the rape of young children. Several others are contemplating broadening their laws to do the same. The court must determine, in *Kennedy v. Louisiana*, whether the Eighth Amendment's prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment bars the execution of someone who didn't commit a murder but did violate a young child.

Kennedy is somewhat confounded by the quiet "moratorium" on executions the United States is experiencing, while the high court mulls another case. That one tests the constitutionality of the lethal injection procedures used in Kentucky and all but one of the 38 states permitting capital punishment. The court will decide the lethal-injection question this spring. But, in the meantime, there's been a pause in capital punishment since last September: a good opportunity to reflect on what life would be like without it and to take the public temperature on the death penalty in general.

Capital punishment in America has been in a slow—repeat, slow—decline for years. According to the Death Penalty Information Center, which compiles statistics on capital punishment nationally, the number of executions has dropped steadily since 1998. Even before the 2007 moratorium took effect, the execution numbers had hit a 10-year low of 53 in 2006. American confidence in the death penalty has also dipped slightly: A Gallup poll taken in 2006 showed that while two-thirds of Americans endorsed capital punishment for murderers, given the choice between the death penalty and a life sentence without parole, slightly more preferred life in prison for the first time in decades.

This dip has been variously attributed to the reported 127 death-row exonerations now logged by DPIC (though death penalty supporters strongly dispute that statistic), as well as popular books by the likes of John Grisham and pervasive evidence that racism still taints the capital sentencing system. Still, public opinion on the death penalty remains in favor of it—at least for murder. And while the number of states imposing or contemplating moratoriums on the death penalty grows, many seem bent on mending—not ending—the capital system with cleaner execution protocols and higher-quality capital defense.

All of the statistics, polls, and trends I've just cited would be utterly irrelevant to any legal discussion of whether a child rapist can be executed, were it not for the odd constitutional test that weighs "cruel and unusual" punishment against "evolving standards of decency." This is an exercise in molar-grinding frustration for members of the Supreme Court devoted to adhering to the Constitution's original text. When the Supreme Court ended the death penalty for mentally retarded offenders in 2002 and again for those who were minors at the time of their crimes in 2005, it did so via an elaborate interpretive dance that required putting one finger on the pulse of foreign courts and the other to the wind of American public opinion. For those of us who are not big fans of public hangings on the Pubclicke Square, the notion that standards of unusual cruelty can "evolve" has its appeal. But the new fight over executing child rapists reveals that attempts to measure the shifting winds of public opinion for some ephemeral "national consensus" often says more about which justice is doing the measuring than whatever it is that's being measured.

The Supreme Court tackled the death penalty with regard to the rape of a 16-year-old in 1977, in *Coker v. Georgia*, and prohibited capital punishment for the rape of an "adult." The majority found that "the death penalty, which is unique in its severity, is an excessive penalty for the rapist who, as such, does not take human life." *Coker* has since stood for the general principle that the death penalty is unavailable for nonmurder crimes, no matter how heinous. But Louisiana contends that child rape is different from adult rape, and its Supreme Court, in upholding the death penalty for Kennedy, wrote that "if the court is going to exercise its independent judgment to validate the death penalty for any non-homicide crime, it is going to be child rape."

Kennedy's lawyers measure the national discomfort with executing child rapists by counting to two: the number of people on death row for nonhomicide offenses. They also count to zero: the number of criminals executed for a rape since 1964. For its part, the state of Louisiana argues in its brief that public sentiment is tilting its way: "[S]ocietal awareness" and "outrage" over the sexual violation of children is rising, and the enactment of "Megan's laws" reflects a punitive new approach to child rapists. Louisiana also points out that "the rape of a child under twelve is a crime like no other," and that the physical and psychological effects of child rape are devastating. It also engages in some counting, i.e., the number of state legislatures trending toward making certain nonhomicide offenses a capital crime: Thirty-eight percent of death penalty states now punish some nonhomicide crimes with the death penalty.

International jurists and social scientists have also weighed in. A friend-of-the-court brief on behalf of Kennedy from British law scholars and former law lords includes citations to the Moroccan and Nigerian penal codes—a tactic guaranteed to send several justices into near-irreversible clinical despair. Another brief, from the National Association of Social Workers, warns that if child rape becomes a capital crime, victims will be less likely to report abuse, and rapists more likely to kill them. Several other states write in support of Louisiana, urging the court not to meddle with the independent state legislatures. Which leaves the high court in the unenviable position of having to measure whether the generalized public support for capital punishment may be canceled out by the slight recent decline in that support, which must in turn be weighed against efforts in some states to execute a broader range of criminals. All of which should somehow be tested against whatever the foreign courts might think.

Depending on how you look at it, and at which level of generality you elect to start counting, we are witnessing either a burgeoning new trend for executing rapists—or the last gasps of capital punishment.

The problem with measuring "evolving standards of decency" is that they tend to evolve and devolve in multiple directions at the

same time. Patrick Kennedy's lawyers are right about the broad American distaste for executing nonmurderers. Louisiana is also right that the trend is shifting toward expanding the types of crimes eligible for capital punishment. Americans generally support the death penalty but still worry it's applied unfairly and now seem to increasingly favor life without parole. They still want the option of capital punishment but apparently wish to exercise it a few dozen times per year only. For the high court, it's a monumental challenge: distilling all of these trends and counter-trends into some broad, workable constitutional rule, a rule that somehow reflects the emerging "national consensus" that we may like the idea of capital punishment far more than the reality of it.

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

low concept

Dirty Phone Tricks for the Presidential Campaign

Beware, some callers have hidden agendas.

By Hart Seely

Monday, April 14, 2008, at 12:34 PM ET

Hey there, Zeke, I'm calling on behalf of the Obama for President Yokel-Outreach Hotline, offering you a chance to climb out of your bitter, dead-end hole and do something right for once: Vote for Barack Obama! Now, before we get started, call Charlene in from the pen, and let's put down the gun …

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Hi, I'm calling on behalf of Senator Hillary Clinton. Sorry to wake you at 3 a.m., but that's exactly the point we're trying to make …

***

Hello, I'm calling on behalf of Senator John McCain. Please don't hang up. Oh, God, please, don't hang up! He'll scream at us again. He gets that look, you can't talk to—OHMYGOD, HE'S COMING …

***

Hi, I'm calling for President George W. Bush. According to our records, you are one of the 15 percent of the American public who believes this country is moving in the right direction. Because of that, we've been authorized to give you this one-time chance to buy $10 Rolexes from our special online value store …

***

Hi, I'm calling from the American Polling Institute. Would you approve of an intra-presidential race marriage between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama?

***

Hello there, I'm calling from the Republican National Committee in Washington, D.C. This call, like all your phone calls, is being monitored, not just for quality control but to learn what you're up to …

***

Hello, I'm calling on behalf of Senator Hillary Clinton, the most experienced candidate running for president. As you know, Hillary has overcome terrible tragedies and … (sniff) … sorry … forgive me … I just get emotional whenever I think of what *he* did to her …

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Hello? Hello? I'm calling from Septuagenarians for John McCain, and we're hoping that you'll support our … hello? Hello? I think I did something wrong again. Hello? I touched something, and the screen changed. Hello?

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Hello! I'm calling for Senator Barack Hussein Obama who—praise be to Allah!—shall bring the sword of justice to the infidels as our next president.

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Hello, this is Dick Cheney. I'm talking to you from a secure bunker deep within the earth. Through a blend of science and the dark, mystical arts, I have transferred my brain into pure energy, and I am speaking to you now, mentally, though it may seem like it's coming through the phone…

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Hi, I'm calling for Hillary Clinton. Please don't hang up. I'm the last one here. I'm all alone. They turned out the lights about an hour ago. I'm a little scared. That's why I'm calling you at 3 a.m.

map the candidates

The Stretch Run

The candidates both announce multiday tours through Pennsylvania.

By E.J. Kalafarski and Chadwick Matlin

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 3:36 PM ET

Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have spent a combined 38 days in Pennsylvania this election cycle. They're about to spend 11 more.

Both candidates announced closing-message tours yesterday, and both are planning to barnstorm the state in advance of the April 22 primary. The full schedules haven't been released yet, but Obama will spend five days there, starting in Erie, which he has never stumped in before. (Clinton has.) Obama's press release goes out of its way to brag that Obama is going to zip around by "rail, road, and air," implying that he's not too "elite" to travel by ground. This is what happens when you say that some Pennsylvania voters are "bitter."

Clinton, meanwhile, is spending seven consecutive days in the state, starting with last night's debate. No details on her mode of travel.

We've updated Map the Candidates' look to offer you even more information than before. Click here to explore the country's political landscape, and be sure to tap into the candidates' and states' statistics pages by clicking the popout symbols next to their names.

Map the Candidates uses the candidates' public schedules to keep track of their comings and goings. A quick primer on your new election toolbox:

- Do you want to know who spent the most time in Iowa or New Hampshire last month? Play with the timeline sliders above the map to customize the amount of time displayed.
- Care most about who visited your home state? Then **zoom in on it** or type a location into **the "geosearch" box** below the map.
- Choose which candidates you want to follow with the **check boxes** on to the right of the map. If you only want to see the front-runners, then uncheck all of the fringe candidates. *Voilà*! You're left with the cream of the crop's travels.
- Follow the campaign trail virtually with MTC's **news feed**. Every day YouTube video and articles from local papers will give you a glimpse of what stump speeches really look and sound like. Just **click the arrow** next to the headline to get started.
- Take a closer look at candidates by **clicking on their names** to the right of the map. You'll get the lowdown on their travels, media coverage, and policy positions.

Click here to start using Map the Candidates.

medical examiner

Natural Disasters

Why do we focus on the least important causes of cancer?

By Darshak Sanghavi

Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 1:00 PM ET

Last month, the *London Independent* ran a sensationalist story about cell phones causing brain tumors, and the Breast Cancer Fund released a comprehensive report on carcinogenic chemicals women should avoid. Other recent cancer-causing culprits in the news include pesticides, power lines, and solvents.

This thinking cleaves to a popular motif: The natural world is less toxic and more healthful than the industrial one. To avoid cancer, you should buy organic produce, drink unpasteurized milk from specialty dairies, eat more fiber to cleanse the colon of carcinogens, and avoid cheap cosmetics. To protect one's family, in short, become a paranoid consumer of everyday "artificial" products.

Unwittingly, we've seriously impeded cancer prevention with this not-so-useful distinction between the natural and artificial. It's distracted us from the uncomfortable truth that most cancers are caused by the natural environment around us. As a result, we expend great effort and ink on low-yield strategies to prevent cancer, even though the better ones lie within our grasp.

Take the popular example of asbestos, which is associated with a rare form of lung cancer called mesothelioma. Everyone knows asbestos is dangerous, and litigation related to the hazardous material is one of the longest-running U.S. tort actions in history (costing $70 billion, according to a RAND analysis). Yet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report only about 2,000 cases of mesothelioma per year, of which only a fraction can be attributed to previous asbestos exposure.

Or take diethylstilbestrol, known as DES, a drug used to promote fertility in certain women until it was shown to cause genital cancers in a blast of publicity in 1971. Ultimately, fewer than one in 1,000 exposed women got these cancers. Or consider the plant-ripening agent Alar, which was voluntarily withdrawn in 1989 after the American Academy of Pediatrics called for a ban and a *60 Minutes* report blamed it for cancer risks. No data have ever actually shown Alar to be harmful to humans. And

today no European country fortifies flour with folic acid, in part because of the unlikely possibility that the vitamin could cause colon cancer. As a result, many babies in Europe continue to be born with spinal defects, which the extra folic acid would prevent.

Of course, the women who endured genital cancers from DES or the asbestos workers who came down with mesothelioma deserve sympathy. But the dominant strategy of cancer prevention to which the DES and asbestos scares led—one-by-one alarmist publicizing of man-made carcinogens, regardless of their relative importance—is unlikely to make any serious dent in cancer rates. After all, half of all chemicals are carcinogenic in laboratory tests. A smarter strategy would simply focus on the most preventable exposures causing the most malignancies, without any regard for what's natural and what's man-made.

To begin with, that means paying more attention to common infections. Most women today are infected with human papilloma virus, which is a necessary precondition for about half a million cervical cancers worldwide (not to mention anal, penile, pharynx, and even skin cancers). These numbers dwarf those associated with DES exposure. To prevent HPV infection—and later cancer—people must be vaccinated before their sexual debuts, preferably as pre-adolescents. Yet several state legislatures have withdrawn bills encouraging vaccination, and fewer than half now have school-based requirements for HPV vaccination.

According to the CDC, roughly 50,000 Americans in 2006 were infected with hepatitis B, a key cause of liver cancer, despite the availability of a safe and effective vaccine. And the world's second-leading cause of cancer deaths (subscription required)—stomach malignancies—may largely result from an infection by corkscrew-shaped bacteria called *Helicobacter pylori*, which infects up to two-thirds of the world's population. No effective vaccine yet exists, but an intriguing 2004 study showed that treating the infection with cheap antibiotics in highly selected patients can eliminate future gastric cancers. Though well-designed, that study was in China, and no similar American research has been done. As a result, no clinical guidelines to prevent gastric cancer from the infection exist here.

Another "natural" cancer cause has a fix that's not a vaccine. According to the CDC, almost 5 billion humans are at risk of aflatoxin exposure. Never heard of it? It's a natural product of mold that grows in peanuts, grains, and milk—and like hepatitis B, a leading cause of liver cancer. Strategies to reduce the toxin, like proper crop storage, genetic engineering to produce resistant plants, and regular food testing, could save thousands upon thousands of lives. But they are underutilized and underfunded in much of the developing world.

With dubious links between cancer and cell phones offered as worry candy, we forget about more important natural environmental causes of cancer like sunlight, which is clearly linked to deadly melanomas. For years, manufacturers have touted the anti-cancer benefits of sunscreen (including a series of full-page magazine ads last year).* How many people realize that the principle cause of melanoma is UV-A radiation, which isn't blocked by sunscreen at all? The Food and Drug Administration doesn't even consider UV-A in its labeling requirements for the product.

The obsession with man-made toxins not only reflects a small-minded view of cancer's causes but hints at a worrisome theme in American public health. Our scattershot approach to preventing cancer subscribes to the cult of personal responsibility, albeit with a recent eco-friendly twist: To really help themselves, goes the thinking, people must simply take charge of their health and avoid cancer-causing, artificial products. Somewhat insidiously, we're starting to believe that cancer mostly is prevented by informing individuals to change their consumption habits—not by proactive, broad-based public-health measures like widespread vaccination or agricultural reform.

For example, we could continue worrying about the unlikely link of folic acid in bread with colon cancer and tell people to buy unfortified bakery goods. Or we could remember that a regular colonoscopy for Americans over 50 could drop colon cancer deaths from current levels by 60 percent and figure out why fewer than half of Americans get them. To lower breast cancer rates, we could tell women to buy hormone-free cosmetics or refrain from using deodorant. Or we could encourage mammography and further study medications like raloxifene, which may prevent breast cancer in selected high-risk women.

In the end, admitting that most cancers have natural causes rightly shifts the focus on cancer prevention away from individual consumers. That's a good thing, since in the end, you can't always shop your way to becoming cancer-free.

***Correction*, April 16, 2008:** *The original sentence incorrectly stated that the ad ran recently in the* New York Times. *(Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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moneybox

Spinning Through the Credit Apocalypse

Wall Street's head honchos say the crisis is nearly over. Don't bet on it.

By Chadwick Matlin

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 1:47 PM ET

Somebody must be giving out Magic 8 Balls on Wall Street,

because playing soothsayer is all the rage these days. Still trudging through the credit crisis, the bigwigs at several of the country's most important banks are saying that our long national nightmare is over—the credit crisis's end is nigh.

Maybe it is, but it's a curious time to start trusting these prognosticators. These are the same executives who got blindsided by the credit crunch, and when they failed to warn their companies (and the country) that the sky was about to fall on Wall Street, they lost their rights to the benefit of the doubt. They are the boys who failed to cry wolf: They didn't say anything before failed mortgage- and asset-backed securities arrived to devour the markets, so now they've lost the credibility to be listened to seriously.

But that isn't stopping them from talking. Consider:

Dick Fuld, CEO of Lehman Brothers: Earlier this week, on April 15, Fuld told shareholders that while the "current environment remains challenging," he thinks "the worst is behind us," and the credit situation will probably last for another two quarters before we return to normalcy. He no doubt hopes so. Lehman Brothers, the fourth-largest securities firm in the country, has written down $3.3 billion since the third quarter of 2007—$1.8 billion this year. Lehman's profits were halved in the first quarter of 2008.

John Mack, CEO of Morgan Stanley: Trotting out his most strained sports metaphor on April 8, Mack said that the credit crisis is in the eighth inning or "the top of the ninth." If that's the case, then Morgan's starting pitching was pretty dismal. Mack and the now-departed Zoe Cruz allowed Morgan to lose $3.7 billion from subprime losses in 2007. This, coupled with a $2.3 billion write-down in the first quarter of this year, doesn't inspire confidence in Mack's prognostications.

Lloyd Blankfein, CEO of Goldman Sachs: At Goldman's annual shareholder meeting on April 10, Blankfein said that "we're closer to the end than the beginning," and that "we're getting to that point where people are seeing the light at the end of the tunnel." Blankfein and Goldman have fared better than most throughout this fiasco. The firm's mortgage desk insulated them from the crisis, leading to profits at the end of 2007. But these days, not even Goldman has been spared—the company wrote down $2 billion in the first quarter, $1 billion of which was because of mortgage loans and securities.

William Rhodes, senior vice chairman of Citigroup:* Showing more restraint than his colleagues, Rhodes told the press on April 15 that we're only halfway through Wall Street's odyssey. "We're just getting into the eye of the storm at this particular point in time," he added. But given that the storm has lasted for about two or three quarters, we should be out of it in another six to nine months, according to Rhodes' metaphor. That's in accordance with his cohorts' predictions. Of our four honchos, Rhodes and Citigroup have been hit hardest of all. They've already written down $22 billion in 2007, and market analysts are expecting a new $11 billion write-down when it announces its first quarter earnings later this week.

There's a reason to try to offer hope in the midst of disaster. Rosy predictions from the corner offices can help spike stock prices, which in turn can try to kick-start some momentum for the markets. But even the sweetest talker can't mask nasty numbers, and it looks like that's what's coming for the nation's banks this week. JPMorgan's 50 percent earnings loss and the boardroom drama at Washington Mutual (not to mention its $1.14 billion loss) could be just the beginning of a bleak earnings-report season. If that's the case, then even John Mack might admit that Wall Street will have to play extra innings.

***Correction*, April 16, 2008:** *The sentence originally misidentified William Rhodes as Citigroup's vice president. He is the senior vice chairman. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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moneybox

Here Comes the Next Mortgage Crisis

Subprime was just the beginning. Wait until California's prime borrowers start handing their keys to the bank.

By Mark Gimein

Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 8:12 AM ET

California is to mortgage lending what Chicago is to pork bellies. For years, that meant it was a place with soaring house values; today, the foreclosure rate across the state is twice the national average and going up fast. Riverside County, outside Los Angeles, may be the foreclosure capital of the country, with a rate close to six times the national average. And housing prices are in freefall.

California should be the poster child for a mortgage-loan bailout. In few other places have so many taken on such onerous debts with so little equity. Unfortunately, the crisis in California is going to get much worse, and there is no bailout that will solve it. Why? Because if the first stage of the foreclosure crisis was about people who could not afford their mortgages, the next stage will be about people who have every reason not even to try to pay their mortgages.

Over the next several months, we're going to be subjected to a chorus of hand-wringing about the moral turpitude of people who walk away from their mortgages and pronouncements like last month's warning from Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson that people should honor their mortgage obligations. The problem with finger-wagging on what you "should" or "ought"

to do is that, when it comes to money, you're usually given the lecture only when it's in your interest to do the opposite. Certainly, that's the case for all the California homeowners who in the next year or two are going to find themselves with the choice of whether, faced with a huge new wave of interest resets and a historic decline in the value of their homes, they will simply walk away.

First, those home prices: For a weird few months of the mortgage crisis, statisticians came up with peculiar numbers about home values, rolling out comforting stats showing single-digit declines. Well, that's over.

Last month, the California Realtors' association (folks who in October managed to "project" that prices would fall 4 percent in 2008) reported that, actually, California house prices in February fell 26 percent from a year ago. In the places where the foreclosure boom has hit hardest, it's worse.

A quick, almost random survey of some foreclosure prices in Southern and Central California:

- In San Bernardino, a house bought for $310,000 in 2005 is now being offered by the bank for $199,900.
- A 2,000-square-foot ranch house in Rancho Santa Margarita is down from $775,000 to $565,000.
- A starter home in Sacramento, sold for $215,000 in 2004, is now down to $129,900.

These are not sale prices. They are asking prices. Don't doubt that they are negotiable.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the California crash, these striking numbers are not the end. They are the beginning. (To give Paulson his due, he said that, too.) Which brings us to the other scary part of the California story: a coming wave of interest-rate resets in prime loans given to people with good credit that are just as bad, or worse, than we've seen in subprime.

The most common subprime loans were known as "2/28" in the industry: 30 years, including a two-year teaser rate before the interest rate rose. Now these loans have reset, and we're seeing the fallout.

But prime borrowers, too, got loans that started out with low payments; if you bought or refinanced your house in the last few years, it's not unlikely that you have one. With an "option ARM" loan you have the "option" (which most borrowers happily take) of paying less than the interest; the magic of "negative amortization." The loan grows until you hit a specified point—the exact point varies with the lender; with Countrywide, it'll come after about four and a half years—when the payment resets to close to twice where it was on Day 1.

Just two banks, Washington Mutual and Countrywide, wrote more than $300 billion worth of option ARMs in the three years from 2005 to 2007, concentrated in California. Others—IndyMac, Golden West (the creator of the option ARM, and now a part of Wachovia)—wrote many billions more. The really amazing thing is that the meltdown in California is already happening and *virtually none of these loans have yet reset*.

Option ARM loans were heavily marketed to upper-tier home buyers in California. It's hard to know how bad the option ARM crisis will be before it actually happens, but Moe Bedard, an advocate in Southern California who advises homeowners on foreclosure and blogs about the crisis at Loansafe.org says that the difference in the time until the rate rises is the main reason that upper-middle-class Orange County (now facing foreclosures at a rate merely twice the national average) hasn't yet been hit as badly as places like Riverside.

When those dominoes start falling next year, we may or may not have a subprime bailout plan, and the discussion will start about how to bail out this next tranche of borrowers. The bailout plans on the table now, such as the one put forward by Barney Frank (one of Congress' genuinely cogent financial minds), are reasonably based on the principle of bringing payments down to a point that homeowners can afford.

But where prices fall 40 percent to 60 percent, all that goes out the window. Why? Because in expensive locales like San Diego, tens of thousands of people with 100 percent loan-to-value mortgages and option ARMs are living in homes in which they have no equity and on which they owe a lot more than the house is worth.

In these places, accepting a government "bailout" that pays them, say, 90 percent of the value of the house to keep from foreclosing will be very tough for lenders, who (if the appraisers don't fudge the numbers) could be forced to take 36 cents or 45 cents on the dollar for their loans. On the other hand, any plan that makes them pay more if they can afford it is hugely disadvantageous for the borrowers, who have option ARMs about to reset and are much better off handing the keys to bank—and maybe even scooping up the foreclosed house down the street.

If you're one of the "homedebtors" (a fantastic neologism coined by the anonymous blogger IrvineRenter on the Irvine Housing Blog) in this position, you might start thinking very seriously about just how attached you are to the wisteria vine snaking over the basketball hoop on your garage. That's what a lot of other California borrowers will be doing.

The luckiest of those are the ones who used option ARMs to buy a house. For them, walking away is easy: Their loans are "nonrecourse," and the lenders can't go after them for more than the value of the house. The choice is harder for those who used

the loans to refinance. The quirks of real-estate law regarding refi loans make it possible (though not necessarily easy) for lenders to try to get back more money even after taking the house.

If you think, however, that should make lenders a lot happier, forget it. LoanSafe's Bedard says that even in this group, most of the option ARM borrowers he talks to—some of them living in $800,000 houses—are already considering walking away from their deeply depreciated homes as soon as the rates reset.

Bet on this: Whatever moral qualms are being urged on borrowers to keep them from walking away from their mortgages, they'll count for a lot less than the economic reality facing borrowers whose homes have fallen in value by half. Lenders had no reservations about selling borrowers loans with rising payments that would be poisonous in a rising market. Now it seems borrowers have no reservations about leaving those lenders with the risks they begged to take.

Consider, too, that, yes, going through a foreclosure kills your credit rating and makes it a lot harder to buy a new house—but as more and more prime borrowers go into foreclosure, it's perfectly possible that buying a new home a year later will in the near future be as routine and unsurprising as the once inconceivable idea that you can get a whole batch of new credit cards two years after a bankruptcy.

Of course, all those people stuck between rising mortgages and falling prices are free to follow Paulson's advice: Keep making payments on an outsized mortgage, and take a bullet for the greater economic good. Fortunately for them, and perhaps unfortunately for the economy, a lot of them will come to the realization that they just don't have to.

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moneybox

Why I Love the Taxman

Owe the government money? The IRS could be your best friend.

By Mark Gimein

Monday, April 14, 2008, at 5:09 PM ET

If there is a day in contemporary American life that in any way approaches the Day of Hate in George Orwell's dystopian *1984*, it is April 15. We have holidays that make us come together as a country via our shared history or our admiration for its great figures (Presidents Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day). But it's only on April 15 that we are brought together by shared loathing.

But I won't participate in the collective scream. Over the last several years, I've come to have an amazing regard for the government's collection arm. Not because of all the wonderful things that government does that the IRS makes possible, but because my experience has been that of all the many organizations you can owe money to, the IRS may now be the most rational and easiest to deal with. Other financial institutions in my life arouse in me only indifference (at best, as with my bank) or annoyance and a vague sense that they are looking for a way to rip me off.

But the IRS I have come to view with something approaching affection. For each of the last several years, I have owed the IRS money at tax time. And each time, rather than hauling me off to prison, the IRS has done its best to make my life easier.

This love does not extend to state tax departments. A number of years ago, I moved to California and promptly began to have my wages garnished by the California Franchise Tax Board on the theory that since I had not paid any taxes to California the previous year, I must owe them money.

I called up the Tax Board, ready to explain that I didn't owe California any money from that year because I hadn't earned any money in California. This was because in that year I didn't live in California. The bureaucrat on the other end of the line told me that my explanation was fine as long as I lived in another state.

"Yes," I said, "I lived in Washington, D.C."

"So you lived in the state of Washington?"

"No, not Washington state. Washington, D.C."

"D.C.?"

"Yes, Washington, D.C."

A pause, then the triumphant response: "That's not a state!"

I finally resolved the issue by hanging up, calling back, and getting another state employee more willing to accept the possibility that the District of Columbia, while not a state, still falls comfortably in the zone of "places that are not California." For each of the next five or six years, I counted myself lucky that I had to have no further interactions with the tax authorities beyond filing the standard forms and getting my refund.

Unfortunately, the time came when this was finally no longer the case. Three years ago, I found myself looking at a tax bill that—no matter how aggressively I estimated the size of my home office, and however many times I went over my phone bills to make sure to count every call that was "business related"—was well beyond my ability to pay on April 15. Or Oct. 15. Or in any period that would somehow let me hope the IRS wouldn't notice.

This kept me up at night, as I envisioned the proverbial jackbooted thugs of the IRS seizing my bank account and hounding me into some modern-day version of debtor's prison. I began having fantasies that somehow Grover Norquist and his posse would dismantle the tax system.

This, however, did not happen, and so I found myself again on the phone with a functionary of the government's revenue-generating apparatus. I expected to have to beg and plead to keep whatever small amounts of cash I might have kept on hand to pay my rent.

But the reality turned out to be different. Years of IRS-collection horror stories and a powerful drumbeat of anti-tax rhetoric had, by the time this happened in 2005, transformed (or maybe cowed) the IRS into becoming a surprisingly customer-focused organization. It became clear after just a couple of minutes on the phone that I was not going to be treated as a scofflaw but as a client, and a surprisingly valued one at that. Yes, I was told I would have to pay interest and penalties. But the sum of those came to somewhere around 9 percent, a rate better than what I was paying on most of my credit cards. And the payments could be stretched out over a surprisingly long period, long enough that the monthly payment would put only a very moderate dent in the unsupportable standard of living I still wanted to maintain.

This was a win-win situation. The collection authorities got a pretty good rate of return on their money as long as I kept up my payments, and I got to pay my tax bill on fairly reasonable terms (and without the credit-card fine print about how the interest rate could change at any time for any reason). If it was possible to have a favorite creditor, for me, the IRS was it.

The next year I again found myself owing money (though this time, less) to the IRS, and I did exactly what you think. I called them up again, wondering whether it was possible just to add this new year of back-tax payments on to the slowly diminishing sum I owed. And, lo, indeed it was. Not only was it possible, but it could be done without even raising the monthly payment. So I gave the IRS its modest $45 fee for setting up a "new" payment plan and settled back into my regular mode of financial irresponsibility.

This had exactly the result you might expect: Last year, I yet again owed money to the federal government, this time a truly spectacular sum. I picked up the phone to call the IRS then put it down. Poured myself a scotch, drank it, picked up the phone again, put it down again. After several days of this, I finally reached the point where I could see no option other than making the call and throwing myself on the tax authority's mercy.

So again I found myself talking to a stunningly sympathetic federal employee, who told me that, yes, the situation was very serious. I would have to come up with a new payment plan.

"So, how much do I need to pay?" I asked.

"Well, how much can you afford?" he asked. His tone was grave enough that I envisioned a year of living on spaghetti and ketchup.

We went around like this for a couple of minutes, as I subtly tried to discern exactly how low a monthly payment would be acceptable. Clearly, I wasn't the first person to have tried to figure out exactly where that minimum was, and there wasn't going to be an answer until I ventured at least a guess about how much I could afford. So I did and came out with a number that I really could comfortably afford—which I was sure was going to be way too low.

It wasn't. Two more minutes, another $45 fee, and I had set up a new plan. This one let me stretch out my payments over an even longer period. Now, there are certainly those who will be shocked at the notion that I would actually want to stretch out my debt to the IRS for years in the future. These are the people to whom almost all financial advice is geared. They are not the people who have a running balance on their credit cards sufficient to pay a year's tuition at a prestigious private university. In other words, those people are not me. And if you are reading this on April 15 while putting a stamp on the thin envelope with your extension request and wondering how you're going to pay your taxes, they are not you.

If you fall into the category of the irresponsible and cash-flow-troubled, there is rarely going to be a financial column that offers you any advice. The people who have let their finances slip into a state of disarray and are the ones in most urgent need of financial advice do not get it. Or the rare times when they do, it is the kind of advice—tighten your belt, plan better for next year—that they are sure not to follow this year for the same reasons that they didn't follow it last year or the year before. The magic of the IRS payment plan is something that you're expected to find on your own, and only if you let things go way off the rails.

So if you're sitting at your computer wondering when the IRS will come for you, know that in this new customer-centric age of collections, you can go to them without quaking in terror. Yes, next year or the year after or some year in the future, you will get your act together and be in the black on April 15.

But if you're wondering what the hell you're going to do in the here and now, then calling up the IRS might be a much better option than emptying out your bank account or maxing out your credit cards. Fortify yourself with a drink if you need to, but know that owing money to the government is not the end of your life as you know it but, potentially, the beginning of a surprisingly amicable financial relationship.

moneybox

Clear Skies, Empty Runways

How the recession could be good for airline passengers.

By Daniel Gross

Saturday, April 12, 2008, at 7:21 AM ET

As I sat on a plane last year, covering my ears to block out the cacophony of a half-dozen deal jockeys barking into their cell phones and even more screaming children—as well as pounding my seat tray in rage as the captain informed us that our plane, parked on a LaGuardia runway, was 22nd for takeoff—a fellow passenger began singing the praises of a passengers' bill of rights. That sure sounded nice, I responded, but the only thing that will really improve the experience of flying in America is a recession.

Let me explain.

Despite all the obstacles—foolish security measures, rising delays, fuel surcharges, and airlines that made passengers pay for everything but oxygen—air travel grew steadily during the just-concluded economic expansion. As years of sustained prosperity caused the system to burst at its seams, policy wonks tried to craft incentives that would encourage airlines to stop cramming so many flights into the overtaxed aviation infrastructure. In recent months, the insanely high price of jet fuel ($3.22 per gallon last week), the credit crunch, and the slowing economy have done what regulators and politicians were unable to do: persuade airlines to give up valued landing slots.

When the economy goes south, as it is doing now, the green-eyeshade types reassert themselves. In corporate America, business trips are among the first budget items to get slashed. (I'm guessing the number of people flying to subprime-mortgage-broker conventions is waaay down this year.) Among consumers, travel (especially to visit in-laws) frequently leads the list of discretionary items sacrificed on the altar of frugality. Hundreds of Bear Stearns bankers surely downgraded spring break plans from a beach week at Paradise Island to a weekend at Grandma's.

In the fall of 2001, the last time the economy slumped—a state of affairs aggravated by the events of 9/11—the number of monthly aircraft departures plummeted about 15 percent from the prior year's totals. In January 2008, when the slowdown was just beginning, U.S. carriers operated 1.5 percent fewer flights than they had in January 2007, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics. January marked the third straight month of year-over-year declines in commercial flights. The trend has since accelerated as many airlines have involuntarily reduced capacity. In the past month, Aloha Airlines and ATA both filed for bankruptcy and ceased operations. When it went bust last week, discount airline Skybus knocked 74 more daily flights out of the system. (Frontier Airlines filed for Chapter 11 on Friday, though it plans to keep operating.)

The failure of these marginal airlines removed a few flights only. But larger, still-solvent airlines are following suit. US Airways has KO'd 30 percent of the overnight flights that had turned Las Vegas into a hot after-hours hub. Delta and Northwest have said they plan to cut capacity by 10 percent and 5 percent, respectively, later this year. And should the two airlines resume merger talks, the parking lots for mothballed jets in the Arizona desert could be expanding.

Since a Gulfstream V carrying a half-dozen fat cats essentially takes up the same amount of runway and airspace as a jet carrying 160 middle managers, the rapid growth in the private-jet market has also helped contribute to the misery of the middle-class flier. While data on the use of corporate jets are hard to come by, the FAA reports that "general aviation" flights (the category into which corporate jets fall) at airports with control towers fell 1.8 percent from January 2007 to January 2008.

That trend is likely intensifying as well. After all, many such planes are booked by deal-making executives visiting clients and kicking the tires on companies they want to buy. But mergers-and-acquisitions activity is way off, with the value of deals in the first quarter of 2008 down 50 percent from the first quarter of 2007, according to Thomson Financial. Far fewer hedge-fund managers are booking charters from New Jersey's Teterboro Airport to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, to celebrate the conclusion of a deal.

With fewer planes in the air and fewer passengers pushing their shoes through security machines, the flying experience should theoretically be improving. And in my half-dozen trips this year, I've noticed some improvement: smaller lines, four planes on the runway at LaGuardia instead of the customary two dozen. Two flights actually arrived early, sending several fellow passengers into a mild state of shock. In February, the on-time arrival rate of U.S. carriers rose modestly, to 68.6 percent from 67.3 percent in February 2007.

Of course, every trend can be taken to extremes. And it's possible that some companies may have become overzealous in their drive to free up gate slots. Last week, American Airlines canceled 3,000 flights, including nearly half of those scheduled for Wednesday, so it could inspect wiring on MD-80 planes. This voluntary effort surely did wonders for reducing aerial logjams and made it possible for thousands of fliers to reach their destinations on time. Alas, it did little for the hundreds of thousands of American Airlines passengers inconvenienced. The

airlines may succeed in reducing capacity, but they're going to have a more difficult time reducing air rage.

movies

Forgetting Sarah Marshall

The school of Apatow reaches a new level of emotional nakedness.

By Dana Stevens

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 5:41 PM ET

The two latest movies to come off the Judd Apatow assembly line have finally recognized a comic truth long known to women everywhere: The unerect human penis is inherently funny. The biggest laughs in *Walk Hard*, the Apatow-produced mock biopic that died an undeservedly quick death at the box office last year, involved John C. Reilly's debauched country singer phoning his wife from his hotel room as his nude bandmates strolled in and out of the frame, flaccid wangers a-wavin'. Apatow's latest production, ***Forgetting Sarah Marshall*** (Universal), directed by first-timer Nick Stoller, opens and closes with scenes that have full-length shots of the film's writer and star, Jason Segel, looking beseechingly into the camera as his wookerbill dangles wanly.

Baring the lead actor's junk in the first five minutes isn't the only way in which *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* exposes its manhood. Segel's character, Peter Bretter, is the most emotionally naked Apatovian hero yet. Peter doesn't bother to mask his insecurity with raunchy bravado, like Seth Rogen in *Knocked Up* or the foulmouthed seniors of *Superbad*. From the moment he's dumped by his TV-star girlfriend, Sarah Marshall (Kristen Bell), his coping device consists mainly of frequent and copious weeping. The crying, like the nudity, is funny in itself—not because the audience is insensitive to Peter's suffering but because his baby-bird vulnerability so thoroughly subverts our expectations of how a male romantic lead should behave.

After a few days of wallowing in self-pity and eating Froot Loops by the mixing bowl—the guy equivalent of ice cream straight from the carton—Peter decides to treat himself to a luxury vacation in Hawaii. But the resort he picks is a favorite of Sarah's as well, and no sooner has Peter checked in than he finds himself face-to-face with his ex and her new boyfriend, the sanctimonious British rocker Aldous Snow (Russell Brand).

The setup is familiar, but where Segel's script takes things isn't. For the next hour or so, Peter just sort of hangs around the Turtle Bay resort, becoming a favorite of the hotel staff as he's tormented by the presence of the canoodling lovers. A gorgeous desk clerk, Rachel (Mila Kunis), lets him stay in a $6,000-a-night suite for free. A spaced-out surf instructor (Paul Rudd) offers Peter some useless Zen advice ("Do less!"), while a needy maitre'd (Jonah Hill) takes pity on his single-guy status ("Man, if I were you, I'd be so depressed."). As Peter begins to emerge from his funk—on a date with Rachel, he shyly confesses his dream of writing a "rock opera about Dracula, with puppets"—his nemeses, the perfidious Sarah and the insufferable Aldous, start to seem less evil.

This middle section is a little loose and unstructured—scene by scene, it's nowhere near as gag-rich as, say, *Knocked Up*—but that very looseness allows for a level of character development that's unusual in a movie of this type. Even the female characters have personality traits beyond glossy hair and impossibly perfect bodies (of course, this being a Hollywood romantic comedy, they're contractually required to have those, too). Kunis' Rachel is a college dropout with a chip on her shoulder and a tomboyish sense of humor. Sarah's alpha girl mask slips just often enough to show us what Peter liked about her in the first place. And thanks largely to the on-set improvisation of British comic Russell Brand, the initially clichéd Aldous Snow becomes one of the movie's chief delights. He's a tribally tattooed free-love advocate who blathers about sobriety, but he's also a regular bloke who's not above extending his rival a genuine compliment or demonstrating his renowned sex moves on an outsize chess set.

Forgetting Sarah Marshall continues the post-*Wedding Crashers* trend of pushing comedies to the limits of the R rating, with lots of explicit dialogue and a few exposed boobs to go with that dangling member. But it avoids the gross-out one-upmanship of filth for filth's sake. The nude breakup scene that begins the movie is funny but also painfully intimate, like the moment in Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* when Julianne Moore confesses to a long-ago adulterous affair while naked from the waist down. A late scene in which Sarah and Peter have a miserably failed go at relapse sex is a good example of raunchiness that serves a narrative purpose. Other scenes, like the extended "pearl necklace" gag that's been so heavily peddled in trailers, are just dirty for the laugh-getting hell of it, and that's OK too.

Ultimately, this movie sets itself apart from other recent Apatow releases because of the strong script and central performance from Jason Segel, whose budding career rests on the twin foundations of earnestness and self-humiliation. As Nick on the cult TV series *Freaks and Geeks*, he memorably, and unsuccessfully, courted Linda Cardellini with an a cappella serenade of Styx's "Lady," and just this week, his character on the CBS sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* broke down in tears in front of his boss. Even Segel's physique is refreshing. Neither a washboard-stomached hunk nor a joshing fat guy, he's the first leading man in recent memory who's actually built like most men I know. Like its hero, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* is a little soft around the middle, but all the more loveable for that.

other magazines

The Republican Closet

Out on activists' threats to force right-wing congressional staffers from the closet.

By Morgan Smith

Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 2:53 PM ET

***Out*, May 2008**

An article investigates "Washington in the 21st century, where … many gay Republicans still cower in the closet until they trip themselves up with off-color instant messages to teenage pages. ..." Gay Democrats and gay Republicans have long feuded over right-wing attempts to "win elections by demonizing gay people." Now, activists are threatening to out gay Republican staffers—and many have left their congressional jobs to avoid the intimidation. **…** A piece knocks the "man-crush" trend, in which heterosexual men feign romantic attraction for men they admire, like Tom Brady or John McCain. The author writes that it's tempting to "praise how wonderful it is that American straight men finally feel comfortable enough in their own emotional skin to admit that they have attractions for other men"—but he's disappointed that "the only way straight American males can verbalize a possible sexual attraction to another man is to infantilize it."

***The New Yorker*, April 21**

A piece in the "Journeys" issue visits the Sundarbans, a watery mangrove ecosystem between India and Bangladesh, where "crocodiles, sharks, cobras, kraits, swimming tigers, and cyclones—make it one of the most dangerous places in the world." The area is also home to the globe's largest tiger population. Most tigers develop a "taste for humans" only when the tigers are "old or infirm." But the Sundarbans tigers eat humans more readily because they never learned to fear people. Despite their man-eating, the tigers are revered by locals who recognize that if the Sundarbans are lost, "the tiger episode on earth is over." **…** An essay meditates on elevators and explores their history, place in popular culture, and the tale of the man who "walked onto an elevator one night, with his life in one kind of shape, and emerged from it with his life in another."

***New York*, April 21**

The cover story profiles John McCain to discern "whether [his] maverick persona, which is deeply rooted in his renegade run in the primaries eight years ago, will hold up under scrutiny" in light of his lobbyist-filled staff, reversal on the Bush tax cuts, and "toadying" to conservative firebrands like Jerry Falwell. **…** In an essay, ***Slate*** contributor Amanda Fortini examines the possibility that Hillary Clinton's presidential bid has awakened a "fourth wave" of feminism in America. Right-wing and media response to her candidacy (like the "frat boys at MSNBC portraying [her] as a castrating scold") reveals that the "old gender wounds … had, to the surprise of many of us, been festering all along." But Clinton's campaign has also uncovered a defining rift among women, between "those [women] who have encountered gender-based hurdles and affronts as they pursued their professional ambitions and those who have not. …"

***Weekly Standard*, April 21**

The cover story calls for a "no-fault" boycott of the Beijing Olympics' opening ceremony and runs down the Chinese response to criticism of its recent Tibet crackdown. According to the piece, journalists are complicit in China's failure to improve its human rights record before the Olympics because of their "sporadic, selective coverage" of abuses. They have particularly neglected to document the "mindbending persecution" of Falun Gong members. **…** An op-ed derides the "vultures of the left," led by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who "habitually hover, waiting for bad news from Iraq." Such leftists reached their "conclusions about Iraq long ago [and] won't let new facts disturb their settled view." **…** A piece revels in the Max Mosley Nazi sex scandal: "[U]nlike Eliot Spitzer's pedestrian misdeeds, … this one has everything. Whips, chains, Nazi uniforms, role-playing, five hookers in a Chelsea basement 'dungeon' … and YouTube footage of the hanky-panky."

***Newsweek*, April 21**

The cover story checks in with people who grew up following the 1969 passage of California's "no-fault" divorce law. After interviewing several members of his high-school class, the author proposes that "the urge to stay married is stronger in my classmates' generation than the urge to get divorced was in my parents'." **…** An article reviews the history of the modern papacy's influence. It argues that in "quietly put[ting] his pontificate behind the forces of Islamic reform," Benedict will be a major player in the "potentially historic tectonic shifts going on, both within Islam and in the world of interreligious dialogue." **…** An interview examines Greenpeace co-founder Patrick Moore's rift with the environmental organization over nuclear energy. Moore left Greenpeace because it was moving into " 'pop environmentalism,' which uses sensationalism, misinformation, fear tactics, etc., to deal with people on an emotional level rather than an intellectual level"—part of which is equating nuclear energy with nuclear weapons.

***Men's Vogue*, April 2008**

A profile of Jeff Gordon, the "winningest driver in the history of Nascar's premier series," reveals he is also the "most gay-bashed straight man in America." It's difficult for the self-proclaimed "Prada shoe guy" to fit into the culture of the red states' favorite sport, but the backlash against him is more a response to the

commercialization of NASCAR: "its Californication, merchandizing, suburbanization, and feminization." **…** A piece details the anti-lawn crusade of Fritz Haeg, the architect behind a movement to replace homeowners' front lawns with vegetable gardens. Maintaining a lawn is an "antisocial" activity that wastes time and resources, according to Haeg. He hopes his "Edible Estates" movement will "address a host of issues, including water usages, pesticides, global food production, and human relationships."

poem

"[The line between heaven and earth]"

By Michael McGriff
Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 8:10 AM ET

Listen to Michael McGriff read .

The line between heaven and earth
glows just slightly
when a bear's gallbladder
is hacked out
and put on ice in California:
the line between
heaven and earth begins
with a ginseng root
and ends in an anvil:
the gallbladder rides
in a foam cooler
on a bench-seat
in a pickup heading north: the line
between heaven and earth
carries a crate of dried fish
on its back:
The man driving the gallbladder
used to sell Amway
and sand dollars blessed
by Guatemalan priests:
the anvil and the root
describe the body
in youth and in old age:
the crate of fish
also contains the stars,
which do not spill out
above the truckstop
on the Oregon side
of the border, where one man
counts another's money,
and the gallbladder passes hands:
this could be your father,
who drove two days
to spend all the borrowed money
he could find, who unpacks the organ,
lets it warm on a tin sheet
above his Buick's engine block
before he crushes
an ashy powder into the bile
and spoons it
into the mouth of a child
whose fevers grind
the teeth of rage:
this is how the stories
of all miracles begin.

politics

Slate's Delegate Calculator

With revotes unlikely in Michigan and Florida, Hillary Clinton's hope is fading.

By Chadwick Matlin and Chris Wilson
Friday, April 18, 2008, at 6:55 AM ET

Since the last time we talked in this corner of the Internet, Mississippi and Texas have refined their delegate allocations—and Barack Obama has widened his delegate advantage by six. First off, Mississippi added a delegate to Obama's tally and took one away from Hillary Clinton after party officials realized they'd miscalculated the original delegate distribution. In Texas, meanwhile, the caucus results were finally certified, giving Obama a five-delegate margin overall when the caucus- and primary-delegate allocations were combined—a gain of two from our previous estimates.

Play with our still-new Flash version of the calculator below.

Methodology

- The current number of pledged delegates comes from NBC News' tally.
- We estimate the number of delegates based on the overall state vote, even though delegates are awarded by congressional district as well. We felt comfortable making this approximation because in the primaries through Mississippi, there was only a 2.9 percent deviation between the percentage of the overall vote and the percentage of delegates awarded in primaries. The proportion of delegates awarded by congressional district, therefore, does not differ greatly from the statewide breakdown.
- The calculator now includes options to enable Florida and Michigan. When you check the boxes next to either or both states, you'll notice that the overall number of delegates needed for the nomination changes. With Florida and/or Michigan involved, there are more total

delegates to go around, so the number needed for a majority rises. Our calculator assumes that the DNC will allow both states to retain their entire pledged delegation, and not punish the states by halving their delegate totals like the RNC did.

- The calculator does not incorporate superdelegates into its calculations. Superdelegates are unpledged and uncommitted and therefore can change their endorsements and convention votes at any time. As a result, we've simply noted at the bottom of the calculator how many superdelegates the leading candidate needs to win the nomination in a given scenario.
- All of the calculator's formulas and data come from Jason Furman, the director of the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution.

politics

Campaign Junkie

The election trail starts here.

Friday, April 18, 2008, at 6:54 AM ET

politics

Clinton Wins, but Barely

She looked competent. He looked tired.

By John Dickerson

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 12:17 AM ET

Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama certainly did their homework before the 21st Democratic debate. Hillary Clinton knew what had been printed in the bulletin at Obama's church, and Obama knew the details of Bill Clinton's pardons. As Sen. Obama defended himself against elitism charges, he was clever enough to sneak in a reference to Hillary Clinton's famous 1992 line about how she didn't much bake cookies. This to prove that Yale-educated lawyers have just as much out-of-touch snob baggage as Harvard-educated lawyers do. Neither candidate had read up on the D.C. gun ban before the Supreme Court—because that way, they wouldn't have to take a stand on it? And they didn't want to get too specific about Social Security reforms, but on the details of the other's political vulnerabilities, they were quick like bunnies.

Good thing, too, because the first 40 minutes of the debate at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia were all about politics. The ABC News mailbox has probably already melted from angry e-mails about the questions' tit-for-tat focus. They concerned the gaffes and track-backs that we political elites obsess over but that inflame people who have ready access to e-mail and demand the candidates talk about substance.

Obama was asked about his allegiance to the flag, and Hillary Clinton was asked about her Bosnia-sniper fantasy. In response, the candidates exhausted themselves with passive-aggressive bickering, and afterward only barely graduated to exchanging the usual platitudes. Both made cast-iron pledges about never raising taxes and refusing to waiver from their campaign pledges on Iraq that we should all hope they don't mean if for no other reason than that kind of rigidity is not what we want in a president. In the Oliver Stone movie of the debate, the bronze statues of the country's founders in the lobby of the theater would be visibly weeping.

Much of the hardest sledding for Obama came during the period where the questioners and Sen. Clinton asked him to account for his associations with his former pastor the Rev. Jeremiah Wright and a former Weatherman, William Ayers. His answers seemed defensive and not very solid. It's hard to be full of hope when you're justifying your relationship—however tenuous—to domestic terrorists. In the exchanges, Obama also appeared to put forward a few fibs. He said his handwriting wasn't on a questionnaire about gun control when it was, and he said his campaign pushed the issue of Clinton's Bosnia fantasy only after reporters raised it. Not true. Obama also added to his penchant for troubling moral equivalencies when he equated associating with Ayers to talking with one of his conservative Senate colleagues, Tom Coburn, who once suggested giving the death penalty to abortion doctors. Not a good parallel.

Wait, though. I will now adjust my view of Obama's rough start to account for the personal weather system under which he apparently operates. Many things that looked like they would punish him during this campaign have not. Furthermore, it appears that he has made it through the initial aftermath of his ungainly remarks about Pennsylvania small-town folk without a slip in the polls. There was nothing tonight that had the potential to wound like those remarks did, so Obama may yet not be damaged as much as a normal candidate ought. On the other hand, the sheer number of questions may make the next round of primary voters wonder about Obama's foundation. Or they might wonder how he could, with a straight face, decry Hillary Clinton for taking snippets of his remarks out of context and blowing them up, when he has done the same so expertly and so frequently with John McCain's claim about America's 100-year commitment to Iraq.

If Obama's numbers hold, what might have saved him tonight? Every time the candidate was presented with a tough political question, he turned the question into proof of what he's running against: game-playing and politics as usual. He got two rounds of applause, and because I'd scooted my chair up right next to the television, I could hear viewers across the land saying "amen," too.

Early in the evening, the excuse for the questions about screw-ups was that they were framed in terms of how these liabilities might play out in the general election. In their answers, Clinton and Obama demonstrated their likely general-election techniques against McCain. Clinton kept after Obama, landing punches, glancing or not, while Obama deflected, always trying to move to the higher ground.

It's an upside for Obama that Hillary Clinton isn't especially attractive when she's on the attack. When she's trying to raise troubling questions over his associations without ever really saying what she means, she doesn't look presidential. More like a little shifty. Given how little voters trust her, this could matter.

Clinton was at her best in the second 45 minutes of the debate, when the e-mailers got their wish and the examination ended of the friends listed on Obama's Facebook page. Obama did well enough, but Clinton had sharper, more confident answers on the economy and Iran (although her idea of a new security umbrella to protect a new set of countries in the Middle East seemed alarming). That will help her if enough undecided voters resisted the urge to change the channel. But it's not so much that Clinton was thoroughly dazzling. She was just far better than the candidate who has appeared via sounds bites on the evening news in the 50 days since the last debate. Voters who consider the debates important have by overwhelming margins voted for Clinton in previous contests, because she comes across as competent in these settings. She may have reminded voters who once liked her, but then moved away, why they liked her in the first place.

Asked at the start of the debate if they would take up Mario Cuomo's unification suggestion—that they fight out the remaining contests but then promise to join forces as one ticket in the end—both candidates said it was too early to talk of such an arrangement. Given the glowing ill will beneath the surface tonight, it seems obvious that they're going to have to bicker and fight like a divorced couple before they can ever get married.

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politics

I Campaigned. I Won. I Governed.

Does a strong campaign machine make a good presidency?

By Jeff Greenfield

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 12:22 PM ET

"If she can't run her own campaign well, how can she run the country?" That's the question some of Sen. Clinton's critics have raised to undermine her candidacy. Outgunned in fundraising, outsmarted on delegate selection rules, buffeted by staff shake-ups and feuds, the Clinton campaign is offered as Exhibit A against her, recently by E.J. Dionne and Peter Beinart in the *Washington Post* and a lead piece in *Politico*.

So, how strong is the underlying assumption that campaign management is a reliable guide to performance in office? Not very. For one thing, the definition of a well-run campaign is less than clear. For another, a couple of presidents who rode excellent campaigns into office stumbled badly once they crossed the threshold of the White House.

History suggests, to begin with, that's it's a highly shaky proposition to assume that a campaign was run badly because its candidate didn't win. In 1968, Vice President Hubert Humphrey left the riotous Chicago convention with a bitterly divided party, virtually no money, and 15 points behind Richard Nixon in the polls. By Election Day, he closed the gap to 0.5 percent; if the campaign had gone on two or three days longer, Humphrey might well have won. When President Gerald Ford left the GOP's fractured Kansas City convention in 1976, he was trailing Jimmy Carter by double-digit margins, and nearly half the party wanted a different nominee. On Election Day, after a shrewd upbeat campaign ("I'm Feeling Good About America, I'm Feeling Good About Me"), Ford finished barely two points behind Jimmy Carter. It's likely that only his clumsy pronouncement of a liberated Eastern Europe during a debate kept him from an upset victory.

Consider another assumption: that staff shake-ups are proof of a badly run campaign. Depending on the timing, they can be the opposite—signs of a candidate's ability to change course. In 1980, Ronald Reagan fired campaign manager John Sears and two other top aides on the day of the New Hampshire primary, before the results were known. Al Gore shook up his campaign team on several occasions in the run-up to the 2000 primaries. John Kerry ousted Jim Jordan just before the 2004 season began and went from little more than an asterisk in the polls to a triumphal sweep through the primary calendar. (A later move, cutting loose media maven John Margolis after a turf battle with Bob Shrum, may well have been a huge self-inflicted wound, given Margolis' ability to connect with middle America. But that doesn't diminish Kerry's primary record.)

Another caveat: A candidate can, all on his or her own, undermine the most impressively disciplined campaign. We won't know for a while whether Obama's ham-fisted account of working-class blues will prove fatal. If so, it is his failure, not a failure of management.

But OK, let's assume a candidate's performance on the trail is thoroughly solid, and he has thus proved he can handle the political terrain. What does this tell us about his potential presidency? Sometimes, really nothing.

Take a look at Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign. By most measures, it was well-run, and not just because he won. There were no staff

upheavals (at least, none that made news). Midcourse corrections were effective (when the campaign realized that a lot of voters saw Clinton as elitist, it hit the biographical grace notes hard and put him on *Arsenio Hall* playing sax). The choice of Al Gore as a running mate, the bus tour through the heartland—these were exemplary political moves.

What followed, upon Clinton's election, were two years of political disaster upon disaster: a clumsy, chaotic transition (highlighted by the collapse of two attorney general nominations); a stumbling, unplanned focus on the service of gays in the military; a budget that passed both houses of Congress by one vote only and hung many Democrats in Congress out to dry by forcing them to commit to a later-scuttled energy tax; and Hillary Clinton's infamous health care initiative. It took a midterm Republican sweep in 1994, and the prospect of a one-term presidency, for the Clinton White House to stabilize. In short, the skills of the Clinton campaign proved essentially untransferrable to the White House, principally because campaigning and governing are *not* the same.

Or consider George W. Bush's 2004 re-election effort. Even with the inadvertent assistance rendered by John Kerry, it took a disciplined, focused effort to win a second term at a moment when thumping majorities said they preferred a new direction for the country. And Bush's team had that focus, evident in the utter absence of turf wars and staff feuds. Further, the "micro-targeting" that unearthed Bush voters in the unlikeliest of precincts—recounted in *Applebee's America*—showed that the Bush-Cheney campaign mastered new political tools far better than its rival.

And yet, Bush's second term? If you can find someone who regards it as a success, you will be talking to someone on the White House or Republican National Committee payroll. (Indeed, if you're having a sufficiently private, off-the-record talk, you're not likely to hear a whole lot of praise for the Bush record, even from that corner.) From failed Social Security reform to Katrina to the spending that disheartened so many conservatives to the management of Iraq, the incompetence level of this administration has been breathtaking.

What this means, I think, is that there's a fundamental flaw in the notion that a presidential campaign is a good gauge of a presidency. Campaigns test many things: the ability to raise money, to frame effective (and often simplistic) arguments in the 24/7 spin cycle, to survive on bad food and little sleep. But they don't answer the questions about a president—can he or she work with Congress? Deal with a political setback? Hold on to the public's trust?—that matter most after Jan. 20.

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politics

Hillary's Praise-Obama Tour

The work Clinton is making for herself if she loses.

By John Dickerson

Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 5:58 PM ET

Barack Obama says Hillary Clinton is resorting to Karl Rove-style tactics by distorting his bitter-cling riff about the behavior of small-town Pennsylvanians. She not only mentions his remarks at every campaign appearance, she's put them at the center of a new ad. Obama fans say Clinton's relentless hammering will benefit John McCain in the fall, assuming Obama wins the nomination, since it's always more powerful for a Republican to attack a Democrat with another Democrat's words.

Whether the new Clinton ad is out of bounds is a matter of debate. It is a typical man-and-woman-on-the-street spot in which people tut-tut with mild outrage about Obama's remarks. It seems bad more than outrageous. Clinton's decision to run it at all suggests that maybe the "good people of Pennsylvania"—as one of the stilted ad participants labels them—haven't gotten sufficiently exercised about Obama's remarks on their own. (Polls show it, too). When Clinton made up a whole Bosnia sniper-fire incident, Sen. Obama never mentioned it and never used it in an ad. He didn't have to, and besides, he and his team knew the episode would help them less if it looked like they were trying to milk it.

Effective or not, Clinton's new ad will add more evidence to fuel the claim that Clinton is trying not just to beat Obama but to destroy him—because if he loses against McCain, she gets an opening in 2012. If Clinton doesn't get the nomination, she's going to have to deal with this view or see her future chances in presidential politics severely damaged. She already suffers from high negative ratings. If she's pegged as a hope killer because she bloodied Obama, she may lose the chance to woo a bloc of Democrats forever.

Clinton's best chance to fix this problem is to suck up to Obama after the primaries by working hard for him in the general election. The more she dings him now, as she does with this new ad, the more work she's creating for herself in the fall. She's already going to have to do a lot more than just hold hands with Obama and smile at the party's Denver convention to make up for the 3 a.m. telephone ad and efforts some Democrats think she's made to highlight Obama's race.

John McCain had this sort of eye on the future when he put the brutal South Carolina campaign behind him and worked so hard for George Bush in 2000. McCain and his advisers knew that their shot at running the presidential gauntlet the next time rested on doing everything the Bush team asked for and more.

If Clinton ends up in this corner, you can imagine the assignments that Obama or his staffers will dream up as payback. If we see Clinton marching in parades in the heat of a Texas August or standing amid the swamps of Florida, we'll know what's up. Obama could even turn this into a fundraising gambit, with donors bidding for the chance to design Clinton's surrogate activities: "Today Hillary Clinton hung the screen porch for the Wilson family in St. Louis."

Clinton can console herself, if it comes to this, that she's not totally without leverage. Obama will need the women who have been so loyal to Clinton in his battle against McCain. This will inspire him to treat her kindly—no sending her on a monthlong tour of small-town gun shows. But that doesn't mean his supporters now have to support her when she runs again in 2012 or beyond, and they're the ones Clinton will need to court.

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politics

Big Snob or Little Snob?

Trying to figure out what Barack Obama was trying to say.

By John Dickerson

Monday, April 14, 2008, at 6:47 PM ET

There are so many problems with Barack Obama's comments about small-town America, it's hard to know where to begin. Lots of my colleagues have shouldered their pickaxes and chipped out smart deconstructions, with which I largely agree. The only open field left is trying to defend Obama's remarks. It is a hard trick to pull off. You have to be Houdini to get out of this quote describing the behavior of people who live in small towns:

> [I]t's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.

It's a triple whammy. Obama claims to speak for people, something folks don't like, whether they live in small towns or large ones. He touches on some of the most explosive issues in politics—religion, guns, race, and immigration—where voters tend to have deep-seated views. He then says something really tone-deaf, ascribing suspect reasoning to choices people have made about core parts of their daily lives.

Obama has not helped himself in his efforts at damage control. First, he said he was just telling the truth, but edited the truth he was telling. People are "bitter" because they've been let down by previous administrations, he said; his campaign seeks to take up their cause. This ignored the incendiary religion, guns, and xenophobia portions of his remarks.

Obama then argued that he was really complimenting small-town voters. At the CNN Compassion Forum Sunday night, he said, "you know, Scripture talks about clinging to what's good." This works only if you close your eyes to the rest of Obama's original sentence, since surely he wasn't saying it's a good thing to cling to xenophobia and racism. Which is to say it doesn't work at all. Obama also admitted that he didn't choose his words carefully when he spoke about small-town values in San Francisco. But this was more than a slip—it was an extended riff.

Since Obama's spin for himself isn't working so well, let's try to figure out if there were benign sentiments he may have been trying to express that just got mangled in translation. This isn't a trivial pursuit. Obama is offering voters his talent for empathy. But if he's going to bring the country together, he can't go pissing off huge swathes of it. He says the key to enacting the policies he thinks will help blue-collar whites is the rallying of the nation behind his candidacy. How can small-town regular folk rally around someone they don't trust?

Can we rehabilitate him? First up, guns and religion. The charge against Obama is that he thinks of gun owners and the religious as mindless slobs who have no legitimate basis for their views and come to them merely out of economic hardship. His salvation on this point may come in a 2004 conversation with Charlie Rose, in which he also talks about blue-collar workers who hunt and attend church. On the show, Obama gave little hint of condescension. He affirmed that people go to church and hunt for their own sake. Such activities, he said, became more central to their lives by lack of employment opportunity, but it wasn't bitter lack of employment that drove them to those pursuits. He goes on to say that Republicans, by appealing to people in their emotional comfort zones of church and the gun club, have made better inroads with these voters. Democrats, by appearing to condescend about the motives behind these activities, don't appear to credit the legitimate reasons people have for doing them, compounding the party's electoral problem.

This clip suggests that Obama isn't a thoroughgoing snob about guns and religion, which is the claim being made in the wake of his San Francisco remarks. In fact, he's making the anti-snob case. It's plausible then that Obama got caught shorthanding his more complex view about electoral behavior rather than let slip a hidden truth about his view of the way small-town people live their lives. This distinction, if you believe it, condemns him more as a bad pundit than as a potential president who will be incapable of forming policy for people who make less than $50,000 a year.

Now comes the harder task of trying to help Obama out of the ditch of the back half of his sentence, about small-town people

who cling to "antipathy" that amounts to xenophobia and racism. These hardly fit into the category of good things to embrace, as Obama's spin would have us believe. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, though, what Obama seems to have been trying to do is catalog the many ways politicians can play on voters made vulnerable by their economic conditions. They can play on the voters' heartfelt passions (guns and god) or they can appeal to their darker side (xenophobia and racism). Viewed this way, Obama is potentially rescued from a conflation that mixes racism with religion and makes more plausible his explanation that he was trying to talk about favorable aspects of small-town life.

That's the best I can do to unpack what Obama was trying to say. My defense would probably get me laughed out of the bar in Altoona, Pa., which is the problem Obama has trying to explain himself. (In the end, Obama will probably do better trying to remind voters of Hillary's flaws than defending his own remarks.)

Ultimately, in trying to explain what Obama was thinking, I run out of string. He wasn't expressing a sweeping view of the human behavior of small-town people. He was making a tactical point about how politicians appeal to voters at election time, but that tactical point about electoral behavior still relies on an unflattering view of small-town voters. No matter what helping hand you extend him, Obama still claimed that voters have been hoodwinked on Election Day, and no one wants to be told that in the past they've been duped into voting for the wrong person.

Obama supporters should know just how offensive it is to hear this line of argument. They've been on the receiving end of it for months, as Hillary Clinton and her allies have described them as deluded cult members who are marching behind the inexperienced senator because he gives a pretty speech. Obama supporters don't like it when their well-thought-out reasons for following Obama are dismissed as emotional, irrational, and thoughtless. They should understand, then, why people who don't support Obama—or in the past haven't voted for Democrats—don't like being told that they've drunk some kind of crazy Kool-Aid.

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politics

Fair-Weather Wolverine

Hillary Clinton wants to seat Michigan and Florida delegates. She sang a different tune last year.

By S.V. Dáte

Monday, April 14, 2008, at 3:33 PM ET

Scarcely a day goes by without Hillary Clinton exhorting fellow Democrats to *count every vote*—most particularly those cast in the disputed early primaries of Florida and Michigan, which she won. "I don't understand how you can disenfranchise voters in two states you have to try to win" in the general election, she said in Pennsylvania last week. "I don't think that is smart for the Democratic Party." Clinton, of course, has a strategic need to seat the Florida and Michigan delegates, who were denied entry to the nominating convention late last year by the Democratic National Committee after the two states scheduled their primaries earlier than the DNC wished. She needs these delegates to help close her gap with the front-runner, Barack Obama.

It was a different story in October. Back then, Clinton was far and away the national front-runner—by some 20 points in a number of polls. With much less at stake in the matter, she told a New Hampshire public-radio audience, "It's clear, this election [Michigan is] having is not going to count for anything." Clinton was unwilling to take her name off the Michigan primary ballot, as Obama and her other significant rivals did, but like them she agreed not to campaign in Michigan or in Florida before their primaries.

On Aug. 25, when the DNC's rules panel declared Florida's primary date out of order, it agreed by a near-unanimous majority to exceed the 50 percent penalty called for under party rules. Instead, the group stripped Florida of all 210 delegates to underscore its displeasure with Florida's defiance and to discourage other states from following suit. In doing so, the DNC essentially committed itself, for fairness' sake, to strip the similarly defiant Michigan of all 156 of *its* delegates three months later. Clinton held tremendous potential leverage over this decision, and not only because she was then widely judged the likely nominee. Of the committee's 30 members, a near-majority of 12 were Clinton supporters. *All* of them—most notably strategist Harold Ickes—voted for Florida's full disenfranchisement. (The only dissenting vote was cast by a Tallahassee, Fla., city commissioner who supported Obama.)

Six days later, when the party chairs in the DNC-approved "early" primary states urged Democratic candidates to sign a "four-state pledge" promising not to campaign in any state that violated the DNC calendar, Clinton did not object. She waited, with characteristic prudence, until the other candidates had signed, then signed herself. On Sept. 1, the Clinton campaign issued this ringing statement:

> We believe Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina play a unique and special role in the nominating process. And we believe the DNC's rules and its calendar provide the necessary structure to respect and honor that role. Thus, we will be signing the pledge to adhere to the DNC approved nominating calendar.

Some argue that Hillary had little choice. "She was forced to sign away Florida because her opponents would have used it against her in New Hampshire and Iowa," says Chris Korge, Clinton's Florida finance chair. But even with Michigan and Florida cutting in line, Iowa and New Hampshire still ended up holding their caucus and primary first. Would voters in the latter two states—as opposed to Democratic Party officials—really have cared about *how much* later Florida and Michigan voted?

In October, after Obama and some of the other candidates withdrew their names from the Michigan ballot, Clinton declined to do the same. Her stated reason, however, was *not* to dissent from the DNC's decision to disenfranchise wronged Michigan, but rather to mend fences with Michigan voters come November. Besides, Hillary said, there was no *reason* to remove her name if the results weren't going to count anyway. "I personally did not think it made any difference," she said. At the Dec. 1 meeting of the DNC rules committee, Ickes urged Michigan DNC member Debbie Dingell to put off Michigan's primary to the DNC-sanctioned date of Feb. 5. Dingell refused, arguing that the DNC shouldn't antagonize large states that would be important in the general election just to soothe egos in the early primary states. "It is an example of the message that is sent when Iowa and New Hampshire put guns at the heads of candidates to say that they will not campaign in this state," Dingell complained. Ickes and Clinton's other supporters on the rules committee ignored Dingell's plea and voted to strip Michigan of its delegates.

What a difference four months make. "We all had a choice as to whether or not to participate in what was going to be a primary," Clinton told NPR last month. "Most people took their names off the ballot, but I didn't." In other words, her refusal constituted a selfless pledge of solidarity with the Wolverine State rather than a tactical decision to seize what in October seemed the minor advantage of a momentum-enhancing likely victory in a Midwestern beauty contest.

Like every candidate except former Alaska Sen. Mike Gravel, Clinton stayed away from the Florida state convention in October. Irate Democrats stalked Walt Disney World wearing buttons that said, "Size DOES matter," a reference to Florida's large population compared with that of Iowa or New Hampshire. When Michigan subsequently received its penalty, Clinton agreed with the other candidates that she wouldn't visit there, either. It was a decision she had cause to regret as early as Jan. 3, when she lost the Iowa caucus to Obama, coming in third, just behind John Edwards. After ignoring Florida and Michigan for months, the Clinton campaign soon couldn't say enough nice things about them. "Tonight Michigan Democrats spoke loudly for a new beginning," then-campaign manager Patti Solis Doyle exulted over Clinton's victory there on Jan. 15. "Your voices matter. And as president, Hillary Clinton will not only keep listening, but will make sure your voice is always heard."

This was an absurdly celebratory statement given that Clinton's name had been the *only one* of the major Democratic contenders' that appeared on the Michigan ballot. (Even so, Clinton received only 55 percent of the vote against 40 percent for "uncommitted.") Two weeks later, Clinton herself appeared in South Florida after polls closed on her victory there (50 percent to Obama's 33 percent). "I could not come here to ask in person for your votes," she told the crowd. "I am thrilled to have had this vote of confidence."

Now Clinton feels that a failure to seat the Michigan and Florida delegates would besmirch the democratic process. With Obama ahead on pledged delegates and drawing growing numbers of superdelegates, Clinton will have only a limited ability to affect whether the DNC backs off from its decisions to penalize the two states. Last summer and fall, when the DNC made these decisions, she had a lot more clout. She exercised none of it.

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press box

Source Hygiene

If reporters practiced better "source hygiene," maybe they'd face fewer subpoenas.

By Jack Shafer

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 7:00 PM ET

Subpoena-defying reporters who dare judges to send them to prison are routinely portrayed in the press as First Amendment martyrs. This should come as no surprise. The guys writing the lionizing stories generally share their subjects' values. What else are they going to write, "Send the bum to jail"?

Although I have great admiration for some journalists who have held themselves above the law and committed acts of civil disobedience that have earned them a ticket to jail, not all subpoenas are created equal. And not every source arrangement outside of "on the record" should require conscionable reporters to go directly to jail if slapped with a subpoena.

Some reporters invite subpoenas by practicing what I call "poor source hygiene," granting confidentiality too liberally to sources who don't deserve it. Norman Pearlstine, former editor-in-chief of Time Inc., addresses this topic in his 2007 book about the Valerie Plame investigation, *Off the Record: The Press, the Government, and the War Over Anonymous Sources*. As the top editorial guy at Time Inc., Pearlstine was the one who gave the court notes that revealed *Time* magazine reporter Matthew Cooper's confidential sources.

Pearlstine writes that at the beginning of the case, he assumed that "long-standing rules for the press when dealing with sources and the public" existed. But no!

> In truth, there are no rules, and there is no common understanding of what qualifies as proper behavior. Ask a group of reporters or editors to tell you the difference between "confidential" and "anonymous," or between "not for attribution," "background," "deep background," and "off the record," and you will get a lot of different answers. As screenwriter William Goldman once said of Hollywood, "Nobody knows anything."

After spending millions from the Time Inc. kitty to quash the Cooper subpoena, Pearlstine ultimately decided that Karl Rove had not "demanded the confidentiality that Matt had unilaterally and, therefore, improperly granted him. By my reasoning, Rove was an anonymous source at best."

Pearlstine's view put him in opposition to Cooper, Cooper's bureau chief, Cooper's managing editor, and *Time*'s in-house First Amendment lawyer, all of whom "viewed Rove as a confidential source."

(Cooper took a very different view of the whole episode in this 2007 *Portfolio* feature.)

I dredge up the Plame case not to second-guess anybody at this late date but to illustrate the haziness of many of the sourcing relationships reporters enter. After the cows escaped, Pearlstine closed the barn door with editorial guidelines for Time Inc. that weren't completed until shortly after he left the company in 2006. Both Pearlstine's book and his personal Web site contain editorial guidelines based on the ones produced for Time Inc.

Pearlstine writes that the ground rules between reporters and sources should be explicitly stated or understood. Reporters should exercise self-discipline by getting sources on the record as often as possible. A promise to withhold a source's name is not automatically the same thing as a promise of confidentiality, which represents a higher commitment from the reporter and his publication.

Confidentiality should generally be doled out sparingly, he writes, "reserved for sources who are providing information that is important and in the public interest, and who, by doing so, are risking their lives, jobs, or reputations" and should not granted without pre-publication approval of the editor-in-chief. Pearlstine's guidelines continue:

> Reporters and editors should understand that they have no legal or moral right to promise confidentiality to a source beyond what is recognized in the law. … If a journalist expressly promises more than the law allows, the promise is legally ineffective, like any other promise that is contrary to public policy. A journalist who knowingly deceives a source by promising more than the law authorizes should be subject to professional discipline and civil liability to the source.

Had former *USA Today* reporter Toni Locy practiced better source hygiene, would she be in the fix she is today? Locy faces contempt charges for refusing to surrender to a federal court confidential sources who spoke to her about the 2001 anthrax attacks and Steven J. Hatfill. Hatfill is suing the government under the Privacy Act, saying that the anonymous FBI and Department of Justice sources damaged him with hundreds of leaks to the press and that his only path to justice is access to Locy's sources.

I don't want to be Locy's jailer, but the press owes Hatfill and its readers explanations for its coverage in the anthrax stories. Pearlstine's rule that confidentiality should generally be granted to sources who provide important information at some personal risk wasn't followed. Locy and other reporters published anonymous government leaks that have damaged the life of a seemingly innocent man. Hatfill's lawyers insist—with some justification—that in the Hatfill case confidentiality arrangements have helped to *hide* government wrongdoing, not *expose* it. (A similar observation can be made of press conduct in the Wen Ho Lee case.)

Editorials about Locy's legal dilemma tend to follow the absolutist view about confidential sources. For example, the March 24 *Washington Post* editorializes, "Reporters rely on regular confidential sources to burrow into their beats; if they can be arbitrarily required to identify all their sources, it's likely they won't have any." The editorial makes no mention of how the press allowed itself to be used.

Confidentiality isn't so sacred to the press that leading news organizations and reporters won't jettison those revered sources when it suits them. Press scholar Stephen Bates writes (PDF) that after Oliver North blamed others for his own leak in 1987, *Newsweek* identified him as the source. After a source on a Russian money-laundering story misled the *New York Times* in 2000, the paper dropped a dime on him. The *Boston Globe* put off-the-record comments made by President Jimmy Carter on the record after he covered some of the topics in his memoir. And after William Casey died, Bob Woodward outed him as a source. More recently, Woodward exposed Mark Felt as Deep Throat after *Vanity Fair* got the story through Felt's family.

Both the *Post* editorial and the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press conclude that the fix for the Locy mess is

the pending federal shield law. No doubt if a storm of asteroids was falling toward Earth, the *Post* and the RCFP would use the occasion to call for passage of a shield law. Self-scrutiny has never been the press corps' leading virtue, and its ability to imagine itself the victim is nonpareil.

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Maybe they should let Bruce Willis rewrite the shield law. Send suggestions to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," ***Slate***'s readers' forum, in a future article, or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: ***Slate*** is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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We Don't Need No Stinkin' Shield Law, Part 2

The First Amendment belongs to citizens, not the corporate press.

By Jack Shafer

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 8:31 PM ET

The federal shield legislation being considered by the Senate (S. 2035) wouldn't have protected Matthew Cooper and Judy Miller had it been law in the summer of 2005. And Department of Justice guidelines (PDF) already afford members of the press similar protection from federal subpoenas. So why are the major media companies and press associations so thrilled about seeing the law passed? Why is today's *Washington Post* editorializing so solemnly in favor of it? (See "We Don't Need No Stinkin' Shield Law, Part 1.")

It's not as though the oft-cited "chilling effect" has silenced whistle-blowers and leakers of classified information, making the law's passage paramount. Recent news stories exposing dubious NSA surveillance, the data sifting of financial information by the government, secret CIA prisons, a secret stealth satellite program, and torture at Abu Ghraib, just to name a few, present a press that's anything but cowed by the prospect of government subpoenas. The law is "a solution in search of a problem," as then-Deputy Attorney General Paul McNulty put it at a 2006 Senate hearing.

As I argued in Part 1 of this diatribe, the current legal ambiguities and discretionary guidelines may actually benefit the press, while codifying the subpoena machinery into law may work against those interests. For instance, in a sharply reasoned *Washington Post* op-ed last year advocating the defeat of the shield legislation, former special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald writes that a "threshold question lawmakers should ask is whether reporters will obey the law if it is enacted." Accusing some journalists of wanting their law and promising to defy it, too, he continues:

> They should ask because the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press calls for a shield law while urging journalists to defy the law when a court upholds a subpoena for source information. Any shield bill should require that a person seeking its protection first provide the subpoenaed information under seal to the court, to be released only if the court orders the information disclosed.

One great difficulty in crafting shield laws is deciding who is eligible for their protections and who is not. The Senate bill applies to individuals and companies (and their employees) engaged in journalism. "[T]he term 'journalism' means the regular gathering, preparing, collecting, photographing, recording, writing, editing, reporting, or publishing of news or information that concerns local, national, or international events or other matters of public interest for dissemination to the public," the bill states.

Although the language doesn't sound onerous, journalists from Third World and former Soviet bloc countries know all about the dangers of letting governments define who is a journalist. I'm not paranoid enough to believe that the clause in this bill will automatically lead to the mandatory licensing of journalists by the federal government, but it is an excellent foundation upon which to build such a card-issuing ministry of journalism.

Would a court decide under this law that Michael Moore's practice of journalism is "regular" enough to qualify him as a journalist? Or what about a blogger who set up his page two minutes ago? Or what about a commentator on a 900 telephone line? You laugh, but the U.S. 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals decided in 1998 that a professional wrestling commentator on a 900 line didn't qualify for protection under the Pennsylvania state shield law because, in part, his "primary goal is to provide advertisement and entertainment—not to gather news or disseminate information." In other words, "license denied."

Of the many flaws in the shield law, the most glaring is that it imagines that the highest wattage of the First Amendment belongs only to the guild that makes up the media industry. The amendment really belongs to anybody who decides to express themselves. The corporate media's effort to pass a law that

would expand their rights at the expense of those outside the guild reflects the delusion that journalists are the "Fourth Estate, the co-equal of the other three branches of government. The late British journalist Bernard Levin warned us about these Fourth Estate pretensions in a seething Nov. 25, 1980, London *Times* column, declaring that:

> It cannot be emphasized too strongly, nor indeed put too extravagantly, that the press *has no duty to be responsible at all*, and it will be an ill day for freedom if it should ever acquire one. The press is *not* the Fourth Estate; it is *not* part of the constitutional structure of the country; it is *not*, and must never be, governed by any externally imposed rules other than the law of the land.
>
> The law may demand that a newspaper's sources shall be revealed. The law is perfectly justified (though of course it may be wrong in any particular instance) in deciding as much; if an editor or other journalist then refuses to reveal his sources, he is a lawbreaker, and may quite justly be punished. The press occasionally claims a legal right to keep such confidences, likening itself in doing so to doctors or even priests; my own view is, and always has been, that the claim is not only untenable but abominable, precisely because it would … make the press part of the Establishment, which it must not be. … [W]e are, and must remain, vagabonds and outlaws, for only by so remaining shall we be able to keep the faith by which we live, which is the pursuit of knowledge that others would like unpursued, and the making of comment that others would prefer unmade. [Emphasis in the original.]

Levin counsels journalists not to believe they possess a right that doesn't belong to all citizens. Media outlets can't expect the public's support if they engage in special pleading before Congress for laws that mainly benefits them and their employees. If they expect anyone outside their business and professional circles to give a damn about the First Amendment, they should affirm the *universality* of the right to free speech and a free press. It's not a privilege reserved for the few with money and clout. It's a right for all.

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Thanks to Alexander Cockburn for keeping the Bernard Levin column alive in his book *Corruptions of Empire: Life Studies and the Reagan Era* and in his newspaper work. Send your own Levinisms to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," ***Slate***'s readers' forum, in a future article, or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: ***Slate*** is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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We Don't Need No Stinkin' Shield Law, Part 1

The Free Flow of Information Act would be a nightmare for journalists.

By Jack Shafer

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 6:13 PM ET

Beware of anything that unites 60 of the nation's top media organizations and press associations. This ordinarily quarrelsome lot has set aside their differences to support a pending federal shield law—the Free Flow of Information Act (S. 2035)—designed to help journalists protect their confidential sources from federal subpoenas.

Everybody (PDF) from the *Washington Post* to Reuters to the Newspaper Guild to Bloomberg News to Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. to NPR to the New York Times Co. is backing the bill, whose House analog, H.R. 2102, cleared that chamber 398 to 21 last October. The Newspaper Association of America and the National Association of Broadcasters produced an ad touting the legislation, and the ad ran in both the *Post* (a full page) and *Times* (two full pages!) this week in donated space.

A federal shield law has long been on the to-do list of many news organizations. But what really got the First Amendment lobby's engine running were two events from the summer of 2003. First, a decision by Judge Richard Posner of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit, upset the media-friendly legal consensus that had grown out of the 1972 Supreme Court decision in *Branzburg v. Hayes*. Without getting too legal on you, Posner's reading of *Branzburg* essentially convinced his fellow judges that journalists had no right, qualified or absolute, to withhold testimony when subpoenaed.

Second, a Robert Novak column that named undercover CIA officer Valerie Plame resulted in an investigation by a special prosecutor that produced subpoenas for several Washington journalists. After the Supreme Court refused to hear the appeal of the subpoenaed reporters who refused to answer federal grand

jury questions (*Time*'s Matthew Cooper and the *New York Times*' Judith Miller), news organizations' lust for a shield only grew.

Although federal shield law advocates like to invoke Cooper and Miller when talking about the need for such a law, the current legislation wouldn't have helped them much because it's no "get out of court" card for subpoenaed journalists. The proposed law would merely require the government to show why reporters must be forced to testify, a bar that is by no means insurmountable under the current regime. Judge David S. Tatel found in the Cooper-Miller case that special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald had "met his burden of demonstrating that the information is both critical and unobtainable from any other source." In other words, with a shield law, Miller still would have gone to jail.

Are federal subpoenas really so numerous that a new law is needed? The First Amendment lobby would have you believe that journalists are being buried alive in them, but that's not the case. In a 2006 op-ed, Department of Justice official **Michael Battle** wrote, "In the past 15 years, in only 13 cases have subpoenas been issued to reporters for 'confidential source' information—an average of less than one case a year. It's difficult to conceive of a 'chilling effect' on legitimate journalism from this record." Under Department of Justice guidelines (PDF), which date back to the Nixon administration, before a federal prosecutor subpoenas a member of the press, he's supposed to file a request with the attorney general. The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, a press advocacy group, learned via a FOIA request that the attorney general had approved 65 media subpoenas between 2001 and 2006—13 in 2001, seven in 2002, 16 in 2003, 19 in 2004, seven in 2005, and three in 2006. Hardly a landslide of subpoenas.

(The RCFP stipulates that these numbers do not include subpoenas issued outside of the guidelines. Also, special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald functioned as a mini-AG in the Plame investigation, so he didn't have to file subpoena requests.)

For better than 35 years, the guidelines have made prosecutors think twice before bothering the AG with press subpoenas. The current Bush administration may have blustered a lot about the damage done to national security by classified information appearing in *Washington Post* and *New York Times* blockbusters, but it has yet to follow the big talk with investigations and subpoenas. Why, you ask? As former Attorney General Richard Thornburgh said in 1998, "Most prosecutors are very wary for a practical reason: You don't want to get the media mad at you."

With the exception of the recent subpoena issued to *New York Times* reporter James Risen, demanding the confidential sources for his book *State of War*, I am unaware of any new flood of federal subpoenas. From my reading of the Free Flow of Information Act, I doubt it would have provided Risen with any additional legal harbor. The "balancing act" that a shield law would allegedly provide is already in place, and it's working—it's called the federal guidelines.

Could the Free Flow of Information Act actually *increase* harassment of reporters? Despite the clarity of Judge Posner's decision, legal murk still abounds. For instance, the current federal guidelines do not have the force of law. Yet this vagueness and their discretionary status give the Department of Justice just enough murk to conceal themselves whenever they decide not to go after reporters' confidential sources—which is almost all of the time.

A federal shield law would reduce this helpful murk by legally codifying the process of subpoenaing journalists. Prosecutors and judges could now say to the press, *We have this new law that balances the First Amendment with the government's need for important and sensitive information that you hold. We're going to walk through it very slowly, and no bellyaching if we tell you to give up a source. You wrote the goddamn thing and lobbied Congress to pass it!*

Joining me in opposition to the Free Flow of Information Act is every Bush administration notable with access to a keyboard—but for very different reasons, of course. Writer Gabriel Schoenfeld agrees with the administration, only he's more adamant in his ire than they. (See his pieces in *Commentary* and the *Weekly Standard*.)

But I'm not alone in taking a free-press tack against the allegedly "pro-press" bill. Former *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis casts a skeptical eye on press privilege in Chapter 6 of his new book, *Freedom for the Thought That We Hate*, and late last year *Washington Post* national-security reporter Walter Pincus attacked the shield law in the Neiman Watchdog.

But I'm only getting started on this topic. Tomorrow, I'll be back to discuss what really irks me about this bill: It serves the corporate press to the detriment of other First Amendment practitioners, and it begins a process that could lead to the licensing of journalists.

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Read Part 2 of my rant against the shield law. What about Toni Locy? I don't think she fits in this piece. Send your gripes about the bill to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," ***Slate***'s readers' forum, in a future article, or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: ***Slate*** is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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subject head of an e-mail message and send it to slate.pressbox@gmail.com.

reading list

Your Papal Homework Assignment

Prepare for the pope's America visit with these books, articles, and Web sites about him and the Catholic Church.

By Melinda Henneberger

Saturday, April 12, 2008, at 7:20 AM ET

My biggest complaint about how religion is covered in the media, and I certainly don't exempt myself from this criticism, is that journalists will go to almost any length to avoid writing about—how to put this?—God. So, in honor of this week's visit of Pope Benedict XVI, I'm going to buck both convention and my own inclination to slink in through the side door and recommend Benedict's *Jesus of Nazareth*. It is not a quick read. But it is subtle and revelatory and scholarly in the best sense. So much so that it made me wonder how much Joseph Ratzinger ever really enjoyed his work at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where until three years ago, as the old T-shirt I have says, he'd been "putting the smackdown on heresy since 1981."

Another must-read for those interested in a nuanced view of John Paul's successor is David Gibson's biography of him, *The Rule of Benedict: Pope Benedict XVI and His Battle With the Modern World*, and, in particular, his fascinating chapter "A German Soul": " 'The Germans,' Goethe once said, 'make everything difficult, both for themselves and for everyone else.' … The thread running through all things German, however, is an obsessive quest for the *authentic*, the authentic German, the authentic emotion, the authentic philosophy, the authentic esthetic, the authentic faith. Germans want to know where the truth is to be found, and they will risk anything and betray anyone, even themselves, to get it." Gibson makes me feel for the young Ratzinger, who was born in Bavaria two weeks before Hitler held his first Nazi rally and grew up attending Mass three times each Sunday and moving from one village to another "because his father 'had simply said too much against the brownshirts.' " (Gibson is also keeping an all-Benedict-all-the-time blog through the end of the pope's visit. It's called Benedictions: Blogging the Pope in America, at Beliefnet.com.)

Commonweal recently published a terrific cover story by Robert Ellsberg based on his introduction to *The Duty of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day*, due out later this month. The Catholic Worker founder's journals were sealed for 25 years after her death. In them, she writes of traveling to Cuba at the time of the missile crisis, fasting for peace in Rome during the Second Vatican Council, and getting thrown in jail at age 75, along with some picketing United Farm Workers.

For a history of the Catholic Church in America, you cannot do better than the thrillingly evenhanded (not an oxymoron just this once) *Catholicism and American Freedom* by John T. McGreevy. If I had not been a cradle Catholic, George Weigel's *Letters to a Young Catholic* might make me want to convert. And though spending time in Rome has been known to have the opposite effect, spiritual tourists might want to pick up *A Catholic's Guide to Rome: Discovering the Soul of the Eternal City*, by Frank Korn, a pocket-sized encyclopedia of some of the most undeservedly overlooked churches in Christendom.

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Haggadah Better Idea

Let's stop improving Passover.

By Mark Oppenheimer

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 12:57 PM ET

As Passover approaches, millions of Jews will bring out their dusty Haggadot and commemorate the exodus of their ancestors from Egypt. Last year, Mark Oppenheimer questioned whether the plethora of different versions of the Haggadah (more than 4,000 by one count) dilutes the significance of the sacred Hebrew text. The article is reprinted below.

According to a March 23 article in the *Forward*, a Jewish weekly newspaper, novelist Jonathan Safran Foer is editing a new version of the Passover Haggadah, the short book that Jews read every year to commemorate the exodus from slavery in Egypt. "The themes are so important, so relevant, so exciting," Foer tells the *Forward*. "The Haggadah begs us to make it new." He and about 20 collaborators are aiming to produce a Haggadah that's at once a literary success and a "beautiful book with awesome artwork, not little kitschy scribbles like so many Haggadahs."

Foer and his collaborators will no doubt produce a Haggadah that is smart and gorgeous and indubitably progressive. It may even rank among the best of the "more than 4,000 known versions" of the Haggadah, to cite the article in the *Forward*. (The *Forward* tells us elsewhere of "nearly 3,500 versions.") Though he's most famous for his novels, Foer happens to be a very fine editor: To my mind, the most interesting thing he's done is edit a little-known volume of essays inspired by artist Joseph Cornell. Foer's Haggadah, by contrast, will be widely known. But while Foer's Haggadah may well be a triumph, it will still be yet another Haggadah—and that's a problem. There are only four or five important translations of the Bible into modern English, and each generation needs at most two or three

translations of Homer. We couldn't possibly need so many Haggadot—the Hebrew plural—and it's worth interrogating why we think we do.

Whether there are 4,000 or 3,500 versions of the Haggadah out there, it's safe to say that Jews in modernity have often felt the need to reinvent the book. Theologically speaking, there's no problem with multiple Haggadot. While most of the Haggadah consists of Bible verses and traditional prayers, passages of interpretation constitute a significant portion of the text, and there's nothing sacrilegious about altering them or quarreling about them at the Seder, the Passover meal. Though incorporating practices commanded in Exodus, the Haggadah was compiled by rabbis between the first and fourth centuries. It's a work of the "oral Torah," human teachings subject to commentary and development, as opposed to "written Torah," the immutable books of the Hebrew Bible. Thus a raft of modern Haggadot (and supplements to them) have been designed to provoke disputations and appeal to different ideologies: feminist, liberationist, Zionist, humanistic, multicultural, and so forth. Many people create their own Haggadot, often with themes like "freedom" or "diversity"—there's even an open-source project to customize yours. And while many Haggadot are devoted to political ideals, several are famous instead for their visual motifs, like the Ben Shahn Haggadah and the Marc Chagall Haggadah.

Diversity within a religious tradition can be a source of strength, but it can also be a weakness. One of the inarguably great aspects of religion is how it gives communities of people shared experiences: Jews the world over know about the Haggadah's "four questions," the singing of the rousing hymn "Dayeinu," and the traditional foods on the Seder plate. Although traditions vary from region to region—and the Seder, conducted in the vernacular, thus comes in as many versions as there are languages Jews speak—there are certain common Passover rituals that most Jews will recognize.

The question, then, is how diversified and variegated a cultural tradition can get before it loses meaning to the people who invented it. It's one thing to add an orange to the Seder plate, an innovation meant to honor Jewish women. But what if one family uses a Haggadah that focuses on vegetarianism, while another reads from one about Palestinian liberation? Both noble causes, to be sure—but are the families celebrating the same holiday? If they're not, then when their children marry someday (after a touching courtship commenced when they were counselors at a Jewish summer camp), will they see Passover as shared cultural patrimony, something that unites them, or will they have fraught quarrels about which version of the holiday to pass on to their children?

All traditions splinter, and the good fragments will survive while others eventually prove ephemeral. And a Judaism that was hard and unbending would be worse than one that's too flexible. But there is a deeper problem, I believe, with Haggadot popping up like matzo balls in April. The diversity of Haggadot is a symptom of the unease that many Jews feel about Judaism. For some, the unease is political: Passover is a holiday about liberation, so the Haggadah has special meaning to those who feel that Judaism today is insufficiently attentive to left-wing political causes. For others, the unease is just a species of what all secular Americans feel around religious tradition, and Jews like this are always looking for a Haggadah that is "contemporary" or "relevant" enough to produce religious sentiment with a minimum of embarrassment.

Many Jews think that if only they could tweak the liturgy just so (or associate the religion with enough Hollywood stars) they would feel better about Judaism. Such longings misunderstand the complex nature of religion. Liberals' desire for religion purely in service to social justice is as wrongheaded as conservatives' conception of religion as social control, and "relevance" is not the only test to apply. Religion makes some of us better people some of the time, but that's not all it's good for. You could found a religion whose core teachings included universal health care and a woman's right to choose, but it would have all the aesthetic grandeur—and durability—of the Green Party. I try to work for peace, animal rights, and higher taxes, but while my Judaism supports those values, I got them from my secular mom and dad. Judaism, to me, is other things: a reminder of my grandmother when I say the mourner's prayer in her memory once a year, a closeness to my neighbors, several of whom will attend a Seder at my house. It helps me appreciate the art of Genesis, say, or Bernard Malamud. Religion is richer, and more interesting, than its implications for public policy. Passover is, too.

The Haggadah I like best is the old Maxwell House Haggadah, filled with the "little kitschy scribbles" others find objectionable. According to Maxwell House, nearly 40 million of these handy little booklets have been distributed since 1934, when the coffee company first hit on an ingenious way to win Jewish customers' loyalty. The 2007 edition is, like all its antecedents, apolitical and middlebrow, geared for mass appeal. But it's clear and concise, and, most important, my parents and my in-laws all grew up on it. What it lacks in poetry, it makes up in ubiquity. It's the Haggadah most evocative for my extended family, and there's majesty in that simple claim, a claim that no better, smarter, more beautiful edition could ever make.

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Anti-Gay Auto-Da-Fé

The perverse and vicious campaign to ban homosexuals from Catholic seminaries.

By Michael Sean Winters

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 4:19 PM ET

Pope Benedict XVI, who is visiting the United States this week, is gaining attention for apparently drawing a distinction between homosexual priests and pedophile priests: "I would not speak at this moment about homosexuality, but pedophilia, which is another thing. And we would absolutely exclude pedophiles from the sacred ministry." In 2005, Michael Sean Winters argued against the "hypocrisy of trying to hang the sexual abuse crisis around the neck of gay priests, most of whom are celibate and hardworking."

Last year, I stumbled upon the Web site of a Catholic parish church, the pastor of which has been a friend of mine since we were in seminary together in the 1980s. Among the sermons on the site was one dealing with the sexual abuse scandal that roiled the church in 2002. In this sermon, the priest repeated the conservative line that the scandal was largely the result of homosexual men failing to keep their vows. This did not surprise me because I knew my friend was conservative.

But I also knew he was gay. I was undisturbed because I have long believed that the accident of being gay should not prevent someone from holding whatever ideological inclinations they find compatible with the complex yearnings of their minds and hearts. I considered my friend's analysis facile and wrong, but not offensive per se until he used the pronoun "they" to describe gay men. It was with genuine concern and in a spirit of fraternal correction that I wrote my friend a note calling his attention to the fact that in English, when referring to a group of which one is a part, "we" is the proper pronoun.

I thought of this exchange last week, as news reports filled the airwaves that the Vatican was about to ban gay priests, and my e-mail inbox and answering machine were jammed with messages of alarm, anger, and frustration. Not all messages came from gay priests; all asked me to join them in calling or writing to anyone who might be able to prevent this disaster, which I happily did. News of the purported ban seems to have been spread by right-wing gossips in the church who were trying to advance a document on seminary practices that has been in the drafting stages for years. According to the *New York Times*, the document would declare that gay men are unfit for orders and should not be permitted to enter seminary. Pope Benedict has not yet signed the document, but anonymous church officials quoted by the *Times* say the Vatican will soon finalize it. Church conservatives assert that the ban would represent no real shift because—they claim—barring gays from seminaries has long been church policy. In practice, the American church has been receptive to chaste, gay seminarians.

Benedict's allies have been pushing such a ban for years. Some claimed that the document was in the final stages when John Paul II's health went into steep decline last spring. But John Paul II never permitted anti-gay witch hunts. The Communists had used such tactics to smear clerics it did not like, and John Paul never permitted similar whispering campaigns to prosper. Since the election of Benedict, the right-wingers in the church have been clamoring for this document. In addition to restricting the priesthood to their own, they want to use it to help lay the entire blame for the sexual abuse crisis on homosexual priests.

The problem with such a ban is twofold. First, banning gay seminarians will only drive the issue underground, precisely the situation before the sexual revolution permitted people—even priests—to be more honest about their sexuality. The most notorious clerical child molesters were all ordained before the sexual revolution and before the changes wrought in the church by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Secrecy and silence encourage immaturity and duplicity, necessary precursors for inappropriate sexual behavior. Second, as my exchange with my friend indicates, many of those priests the right wing considers "their own" are also gay, and only a willful ignorance would fail to see it.

Such a willful ignorance must exist. When I was in the seminary in the mid-1980s, a local bishop came to visit. The bishop dressed for mass in the rectory next door. We seminarians were a bit late in arriving and were met by the bishop's secretary who said, "Come on boys, get into your dresses. Grandma is coming." Grandma was the bishop. The secretary had a feminine nickname, which, I am told, his intimates still use. To complete the screenplay quality of the experience, one of the priests who was in attendance that day left the priesthood shortly thereafter to become a flight steward or, as he called it, "a waitress in the sky." This kind of campiness was common both in the seminary and in my experiences with those already ordained. As for the secretary, he is now a bishop much in favor with conservatives.

The anger about the ban among priests, gay and straight, was more visceral than anything I have ever seen. It is an unwritten rule of gay life that you never, ever "out" a closeted gay person. Everyone has the right to come to terms with their own sexuality in their own way. (I need hardly add that Christians take their name from the master who famously warned against judging others.) Yet, there were threats of outings last week. The hypocrisy of trying to hang the sexual abuse crisis around the neck of gay priests, most of whom are celibate and hardworking, was too much. I know some gay priests who have truly wrestled with their sexuality. As with straight priests, some have fallen from their vows on occasion or on holiday, but most have been largely faithful. Some gay priests are liberal and others are conservative. Some are still conflicted by their sexuality and others are not. What they all share is an almost heroic sense of integrity. To try and blame them for the shiftless careerism that caused bishops to look the other way while children were being abused is beyond the pale.

The last thing the church needs is an anti-gay auto-da-fé.

Reform of the church must always draw upon our tradition, and if Pope Benedict wants to truly address the source of the sexual

abuse scandal, he will reinstate the ancient tradition of the church that prevented bishops from being transferred (the technical term is "translated") or promoted from one bishopric to another, more important, diocese. In a stroke, he would remove the careerism that fueled the sweep-it-under-the-rug-at-all-costs syndrome that fostered the crisis. If a man wants to be the bishop of Bridgeport, let him be the bishop of Bridgeport for the rest of his life. But do not tempt him to fail to face problems in the hopes of becoming the archbishop of New York. This would be a useful first step.

I hope my e-mails (and this article) help persuade the powers that be in the church to back off. When I approach my death, I want a kind priest at hand, and I frankly don't care what his sexual preference is. I suspect that most Catholics feel that way. It is a thing that the right-wingers hate to admit, but the Christian Gospels do not suggest a culture war. They suggest that we be on the lookout for hypocrisy, especially our own.

Science

The Paranoid Style in American Science

Contrary imaginations.

By Daniel Engber

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 1:53 PM ET

From: Daniel Engber
Subject: A Crank's Progress
Posted Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 2:14 PM ET

This is the first installment of a three-part series on radical skepticism and the rise of conspiratorial thinking about science.

Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins has a name for all those books that aim to refute his popular treatise on atheism: With a nod to Yeats, he calls them "fleas." The latest flea at which he deigns to flick his tail is *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions*, published (in earnest) on April 1. But this one may have more legs than its Bible-press kin. Billed as "the definitive response to the New Atheists," it's the first such book to come from a mainstream publisher, the Crown Forum division of Random House. An extended excerpt has already earned a prominent spot in the April issue of *Harper's*. And its author—the erudite and infuriating David Berlinski—isn't anything like a Christian doctrinaire.

Berlinski is a critic, a contrarian, and—by his own admission—a crank. But he is not a religious man. He's a zealous skeptic, more concerned with false gods than real ones. According to *The Devil's Delusion*, the emergence of the New Atheists—i.e., Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and the others who have lately ridiculed the belief in God—marks the consolidation of science as its own religion, a hateful "militant church" that demands strict adherence to the First Commandment. The scientists speak of incontrovertible fact, but Berlinski wants to show otherwise; he subjects scientific belief to his own rigorous investigation and finds it riddled with uncertainty. Like the theorists of intelligent design, he sees little in the fossil record that would account for sudden leaps in biological complexity. He considers the evidence for the Big Bang and learns nothing about the origins of the universe. In short, he assesses the evidence for the death of God and reports back with reasonable doubt. This is his book-jacket promise: to "turn the scientific community's cherished skepticism back on itself."

Forgive me if I don't pause here to defend the conventional wisdom on evolution and cosmology. (Click here or here for a more expert appraisal.) That would be beside the point. Berlinski's radical and often wrong-headed skepticism represents an ascendant style in the popular debate over American science: Like the recent crop of global-warming skeptics, AIDS denialists, and biotech activists, Berlinski uses doubt as a weapon against the academy—he's more concerned with what we don't know than what we do. He uses *uncertainty* to challenge the scientific consensus; he points to the evidence *that isn't there* and seeks out the things that *can't be proved*. In its extreme and ideological form, this contrarian approach to science can turn into a form of paranoia—a state of permanent suspicion and outrage. But Berlinski is hardly a victim of the style. He's merely its most methodical practitioner.

A secular Jew born in New York City, the 66-year-old began his career in academia. After earning a Ph.D. in philosophy from Princeton, he spent time teaching at Stanford, working as a management consultant, and completing postdoctoral work in mathematics and biology. Nothing took—as he describes it, he "got fired from almost every job [he] ever had." And then, at some point in the last few decades, he decided to remake himself as a maverick intellectual operating out of a flat in Paris. He's built a reputation writing contentious magazine articles, a series of somewhat less contentious detective novels, and, most notably, an extended run of whimsical and well-reviewed books on mathematics and the history of science. (His children Mischa and Claire are esteemed novelists in their own right.)

The work on math and science is characterized by a peculiar, mischievous style: Berlinski mixes long, discursive explanations with strange asides, historical re-enactments, and ironic fables; every page is caked over with elaborate metaphors. Some reviewers—including this one—are dazzled, if not exactly charmed, by his excess. (Click here for some examples from *The Devil's Delusion*.) Others, like ***Slate***'s Jordan Ellenberg, are not so moved.

In any case, Berlinski's flamboyance helps to distinguish him from fellow Darwin skeptics. So does his professed disinterest in religious dogma: Unlike his colleagues at the Discovery Institute—a religious think tank that sponsors his work and promotes intelligent design—Berlinski refuses to theorize about the origin of life. He describes his attitude towards ID as "warm but distant. It's the same attitude that I display in public toward my ex-wives." He calls himself an agnostic and claims to live life only by the stricture "to have a good time all the time." And while he has attacked evolutionary theory over and over again, by his own pen and through his tutelage of Ann Coulter, he's always quick to point out that he has no particular agenda beyond skepticism.

This peculiar stance—or pose—has kept him at the blue heart of the endless flame war between scientists and evangelists. The creationists see him as a powerful ally who bolsters their case by mounting a putatively irreligious critique of natural selection. The atheists, meanwhile, can't stand him: According to Daniel Dennett, Berlinski exudes a "rich comic patina of smug miseducation"; Richard Dawkins implies that he may be wicked to the core; and blogger-ringleader P.Z. Myers has called him a "pompous pimple" and a "supercilious snot." (Berlinski, for his part, makes no effort whatsoever to remain above the fray; he delivers some colorful rejoinders in the course of this interview he conducted with himself for an intelligent design blog.)

Berlinski loves to point out that he has no stake in the big questions. It's this quality in particular that most infuriates scientists, for whom curiosity is a moral—or at least professional—imperative. His 1996 essay in *Commentary*, "The Deniable Darwin," cast doubt on the theory of natural selection, and produced 35 pages of angry letters demanding to know what alternative explanation he might provide for the history of life. Berlinski responded by saying that "the thing is a mystery, and if there is never to be a naturalistic explanation, I shall forever be content to keep on calling it a mystery." At the beginning of *Black Mischief: Language, Life, Logic, Luck*, he confesses, "I have never been particularly eager to know how it is that the universe was formed, or how a magnet works, or why, for that matter, water flows downhill. … There it is—a certain implacable lack of physical curiosity."

This pure commitment to skepticism, seemingly unadulterated by curiosity, religion, or indeed any other convictions, has seduced some freethinking Americans. ***Slate*** contributor (and defender of traditional values) Ron Rosenbaum wrote adoringly of Berlinski for the *Observer* in 1998, marveling at his youthful looks and "rather debonair figure." He is, says Rosenbaum, "that rara avis, a True Skeptic, one of the most provocative—and courageous—of contemporary writers and thinkers. To me, Mr. Berlinski is a genuine intellectual hero."

Indeed, Berlinski's unwavering critique of the conventional wisdom does share at least some family resemblance with the core style of this magazine. But let's chalk that up to convergent evolution. His iconoclasm may be entertaining, but it's not heroic: Whether he likes it or not, Berlinski the skeptic has become a war machine in the struggle over the limits of scientific knowledge. As a freewheeling critic, he speaks for everyone who bristles at the scientific consensus—creationists, oil executives, and organic farmers alike. He spews doubt into the atmosphere and feeds a cloud of uncertainty that grows more stifling every day. When even the most venerated theories are called into question, what are we to make of anything?

From: Daniel Engber
Subject: An Uncertain Truth
Posted Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 11:09 AM ET

This is the second installment of a three-part series on radical skepticism and the rise of conspiratorial thinking about science.

In 1969, a series of historic memorandums began to circulate at a tobacco company in Kentucky. The documents addressed growing public concern over the health risks associated with smoking and outlined a brazen response: The cigarette manufacturers would "establish—once and for all—that no scientific evidence has ever been produced, presented or submitted to prove conclusively that cigarette smoking causes cancer." To support this ludicrous assertion (which the tobacco executives knew to be false) would require a spin campaign of monumental proportions. That campaign's inaugural words have now become a slogan for corporate connivery: "Doubt is our product," read one infamous memo, "since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the mind of the general public."

This corporate strategy of "manufactured uncertainty" has become only more refined in the last 40 years. According to former Assistant Secretary of Energy David Michaels, whose startling new book, *Doubt Is Their Product: How Industry's Assault on Science Threatens Your Health*, comes out this week, manufacturers routinely hire "product defense" firms to challenge scientific findings and stave off government regulation. Scientific consultants are brought in to dust off and reanalyze data sets, group and regroup subject pools, and dream up confounding variables—all so that a given study can be discredited as inconclusive or, worse, labeled as "junk science."

Indeed, corporations now use the manufactured-uncertainty strategy in almost every debate over environmental and public health. Energy companies wage doubt campaigns to delay action on climate change. Drug companies undercut results from

clinical trials. Even the Indoor Tanning Association has lately gotten in on the action—touting the lack of "compelling evidence" that links UV exposure to melanoma. But the exploitation of uncertainty has become something larger and more significant than an industry PR tactic. It's now a political instrument, even semi-official White House policy. And ideological groups—bible-thumpers and tree-huggers alike—embrace its doubt-spewing rhetoric.

What makes this mode of thinking so effective—and so prevalent? Like David Berlinski, the doubt-mongers swear by the foundational motto of organized science, first pronounced by the Royal Society of London in 1663: *Nullius in verba*, "on no man's word." They show a deep commitment to the evidentiary record, always testing the established theories and demanding more data; they attempt to undermine science from within, by aping its vaunted incredulity. But in practice their contrarian mode amounts to something like the opposite of science—a tireless search for nonanswers, a quest for the null hypothesis.

Michaels gives a detailed history of how the beryllium industry, for example, has put this anti-science to work. By 1991, academic researchers had gathered enough data to conclude that the metal was a potent carcinogen and a danger to factory workers. But a team of scientists hired by the manufacturers looked at the same studies and disagreed. The cancers, they argued in their own peer-reviewed study, might have been caused by sulfuric acid mist on the factory floor, not beryllium. When no evidence materialized to support the acid-mist hypothesis, the industry team shifted tactics: Beryllium may cause cancer, they said, but what if not all forms of the metal were equally toxic? What if particles of one size were more dangerous than others? After more than 10 years of debate, the federal government once again put off tightening the standards for workplace exposure—at least until more data could be collected.

The success of these programs shows how the public's understanding of science has devolved into a perverse worship of uncertainty, a fanatical devotion to the god of the gaps. Nowhere is this more apparent than the debate over global warming, where the irresolute terms of responsible research have been a large liability: According to several major polls conducted last year, about 60 percent of Americans believe there's no scientific consensus on climate change. "Therefore," wrote Republican strategist Frank Lutz in a 2003 memo, "you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue in the debate." Now the scientists have launched a counterattack: Self-appointed "uncertainty cops" on the U.N.-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have persuaded their colleagues to buttress their statements of belief with arbitrary numerical values: Where once they said that a human cause for global warming was "very likely," now it's the more precise-sounding "90 percent."

Meanwhile, environmental activists draw from their own ample reservoir of skepticism. If private industry can bewitch the government with contrarian science, so, too, can they. The greens pursue an equal-but-opposite approach: They warn of hidden dangers and put uncertainty in the mind of the consumer. If the PR flacks says there's no proof that beryllium is a carcinogen, the activists point out there's no proof it isn't. Doubt is their product, too, in the form of the "precautionary principle."

According to this moral and political dictum—which, like all visionary environmental legislation, has been embraced in the past few years by the European Commission and the city of San Francisco—the manufacturer of a new technology carries the sole burden of proving its safety. So if you wanted to introduce a genetically engineered crop into the wild, you'd first have to demonstrate, beyond any possible doubt, that it does no harm. That sounds reasonable enough. But let's say your crop had the potential to feed thousands or millions of people? If the precautionary principle were law, someone who wanted to stop you from sowing this golden rice would only have to produce the whisper of uncertainty and the suggestion that more studies were needed.

Thus the eco-advocacy groups play Big Tobacco's game: They call for data and rest their case. The Center for Science in the Public Interest alleges that diet sodas are a health hazard and modestly claims that "questions have been raised about the safety of aspartame." The Center for Food Safety says of animal cloning, "[N]ot enough research has been done"; of GMOs, they "could pose serious risks"; of food irradiation, it "can do strange things" that "scientists still do not fully understand"; and so forth. These scare tactics may be venerable, but the vigor with which they're now pursued—and the scientific language used to promote them—owes something to the success of the corporate style.

Indeed, at this point it may be entirely rational to be suspicious of mainstream science. Since 1999, Congress has served up two industry-friendly laws—the Data Access Act and the Data Quality Act—that make it easier to hamstring legitimate research. At the same time, pharmaceutical companies conduct 70 percent of all our clinical drug studies and pay half the operating budget of the Food and Drug Administration. Universities own and sell patents derived from federal grants. Science journals rarely publish negative results, but they do run pages of industry advertisements. With all this room for doubt, it's hard to blame an outsider for throwing up his hands—just what do we know about anything?

Some of our most brilliant and persuasive science journalists have succumbed to this atmosphere of suffocating uncertainty—and written off entire fields of research. In the *New York Times Magazine* last September, Gary Taubes cast damnation on the whole practice of epidemiology for its confounding variables and meaningless correlations. Eight months earlier, Michael

Pollan had graced the same pages with an excoriation of nutritional science and the writers, doctors, and executives who profit from its claims; he seems to want to abandon research and return to traditional knowledge.

It's no surprise that suspicion of science has grown distended in recent years and now looks a bit like paranoia. Each new uncertainty campaign further degrades our faith in science and softens us up for the next one. The doubt-mongers tend to divide and proliferate. Skepticism breeds more skepticism.

From: Daniel Engber
Subject: Contrary Imaginations
Posted Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 1:53 PM ET

This is the final installment of a three-part series on radical skepticism and the rise of conspiratorial thinking about science.

Until Richard von Sternberg took over as the editor of the tiny, peer-reviewed *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington*, no argument for intelligent design had ever appeared in a respectable scientific journal. In the summer of 2004, Sternberg published just such an attack on the theory of evolution, and—in the midst of a controversy over whether he was fired as a result—became a cause célèbre for the religious right. Now the Sternberg affair has become the centerpiece of a documentary feature film to be released in theaters around the country this Friday.

Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed takes the form of Michael Moore agitprop, with Ben Stein playing the rumpled and outraged interlocutor. As Stein presents it, the dangerous notion of a created universe has been suppressed by the overlords of mainstream science. He intersperses snippets of dialogue with evolutionary biologists with public-domain footage of goose-stepping fascists. In the movie version of reality, the mild-mannered Sternberg dared to challenge the power structure of American academia and soon "found himself the object of a massive campaign that smeared his reputation." The same fate befalls others who question the Darwinian dogma: According to the *Expelled* blog, "Big Science's elite brands them as heretics and their careers are systematically destroyed." That is to say, they've been subjected to "the unseen silent hand of repression." (Click here for more information on the Sternberg affair and other exaggerated claims from the film.)

With the world out to get them, the film's producers have been more than a little cautious in how they've marketed the film. When I attended a screening for religious college students in February, we were all asked to sign nondisclosure agreements; guards stationed at the theater door double-checked compliance. (The producers later backtracked from these demands.) At a screening in Minneapolis a month later, the *Expelled* security team kicked out science blogger P.Z. Myers, who appears in the film and is thanked in the credits, and threatened him with arrest. This paranoid style gibes with the content of the film, which is less an attack on evolution than a conspiracy theory about the evolutionists who control our government. Go watch the trailer: "The media's in on it, the courts, the educational system. …"

Needless to say, Ben Stein doesn't provide much evidence of this conspiracy. (Perhaps, as a former speechwriter for Richard Nixon, he knows 'em when he sees 'em.) Nor does he dwell on specific arguments for why the theory of evolution might be wrong. Thus far, the strategy of the creationists has been one of radical skepticism: They look for signs of uncertainty, gaps in the fossil record. Like the tobacco companies, the drug manufacturers, and the environmentalists, they need only the shadow of a doubt to make their case: If evolution might be wrong, then God might be right. And if God might be right, then why tempt His wrath with unbelief?

Expelled extends this contrarian approach with one more question: If God might be right, then *why are scientists trying so hard to deny His existence*? The suppression of faith starts to look like a concerted effort, and so doubt gives way to paranoid science. A skeptic cites bad evidence and sloppy data; the paranoid finds the books have been cooked. A skeptic frets over thoughtless conformism; the paranoid grows frantic about conspiracy.

The proponents of intelligent design are far from the only critics of mainstream science whose skepticism has taken on the trappings of conspiracy theory. In a 2005 article for *Salon* and *Rolling Stone*, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. reported on a top-secret meeting in rural Georgia where high-level government officials and pharmaceutical executives worked to cover up the link between children's vaccines and autism. (No such link has been found.) The public utilities are still accused, as they have been for more than 50 years, of conspiring against America's youth by fluoridating the water supply. And skeptics of the obesity epidemic point out that the media collude with pharmaceutical companies to feed a booming weight-loss industry. Paranoid science reveals nonmedical conspiracies, too—impenetrable ballistics data form the basis for a theory of the assassination of JFK, and the calculations of structural engineering cast doubt on the official story of 9/11.

Or consider another line of conspiratorial thinking in science, which made it into *Harper's* in March of 2006. Celia Farber's essay, "Out of Control: AIDS and the corruption of medical science," displays all the classic signs of paranoia: Over the course of 12,000 words, she argues that the syndrome we call AIDS has not been linked definitively to the HIV virus—and

that our commitment to treating it with anti-retroviral drugs reflects a deadly and deliberate misconstruction of the facts.

Like the producers of *Expelled*, Farber portrays mainstream, government-funded science as a repressive regime intolerant of dissent. The victimized academic in this scenario is University of California-Berkeley virologist Peter Duesberg, who wonders why AIDS sometimes appears without any sign of HIV infection, and why no one has yet demonstrated the mechanism by which the virus kills off our immune system's helper T-cells. (He proposes instead that AIDS is a "chemical syndrome," resulting from heavy drug use; for ample evidence to the contrary, click here.)

According to Farber, this challenge to the conventional wisdom cost Duesberg his government funding, his lab facilities, and his graduate students. He was also denied pay raises, disinvited from scientific meetings, and barred from publishing in certain scientific journals. Who's behind all this? Some combination of the FDA, the NIH, the pharmaceutical companies, and even the AIDS nonprofits. In short, Duesberg ran afoul of "a global, multibillion-dollar juggernaut of diagnostics, drugs, and activist organizations."

Harper's has shown a peculiar affinity, over the years, for contrarian science: In addition to the Farber piece, the magazine has run repeated attacks on the theory of evolution from former Washington editor Tom Bethell, not to mention last month's excerpt from David Berlinski. But it's also the place where Richard Hofstadter laid out his seminal thesis on "the paranoid style in American politics"—an analysis of the conspiracy-minded, radical right that might just as well describe today's radical skeptics of science. The essay first appeared in November of 1964, the same year as the first surgeon general's report on the dangers of smoking, and not long before the tobacco companies geared up the machines of manufactured uncertainty.

The paranoid style, Hofstadter wrote, "is nothing if not scholarly in its technique." In his mainstream enemies, the conspiratorial thinker sees "a projection of the self"—he's just like them but more discerning and more rational. Indeed, for the paranoid skeptics, it's not that science is wrong but that the scientists *aren't scientific enough*. So, Farber complains that AIDS researchers have abandoned the most basic principles of skeptical inquiry; excepting herself and Peter Duesberg, "moral zeal rather than skepticism defines the field." Meanwhile, the doubt-mongers defer to the credentials of academic science even as they question its authority. The 9/11 conspiracy theorists rally around a physics professor at a major university; when David Berlinski turns up in *Expelled*, attention is lavished on his Ivy League bona fides.

The scholarly paranoid, says Hofstadter, is also an apocalyptic thinker, "always manning the barricades of civilization." At least one-third of *Expelled* is given over to the idea that evolutionary theory caused the Holocaust, via government-sponsored social Darwinism. (In pondering this terrible legacy, Ben Stein weeps at Dachau.) If the paranoid style in politics worried over the end of democracy, the paranoid style in science sees evolution as the end of values, antidepressants as the end of emotion, and genetically modified crops as the end of biodiversity.

These catastrophic fantasies may be an inevitable result of skepticism run amok. If nothing can withstand our critical scrutiny, then everything seems equally probable. (You can't prove a conspiracy … but you can't prove anything, can you?) Thus manufactured uncertainty has devalued the real thing: The less sure we are of the world, the more precision we crave. Skepticism sells itself, and the scientific consensus—no matter how considered or probable—starts to seem a little cheap.

Exactitude may sound like good science—atomic clocks, sub-micron optical tweezers, and all that good stuff we use to keep satellites in orbit and Web sites streaming. But an obsessive fear of uncertainty is the opposite of science. In Part 2 of this series, I cited the Royal Society's motto from 1663 and called it the inspiration for the radical skeptics: *Nullius in verba*, "on no man's word." But as historians of science Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer have shown, the first society members were just as dedicated to the notion that organized science engenders trust, and that it requires the acceptance of some degree of doubt. The contemplation of nature, wrote a society historian in 1667, "gives us room to differ, without animosity; and permits us to raise contrary imaginations upon it, without any danger of a Civil War."

Expelled may not bring the nation to the brink of war, but the rise of the paranoid style forecasts something worse for science than mere animosity. In February, a measles outbreak turned up among California schoolchildren whose parents had rejected the MMR vaccine. Until 2006, the South African government was using beets and lemons to treat AIDS patients. And the United States has yet to ratify the Kyoto Protocol for reducing carbon emissions. In the face of *this* uncertainty, it's worth taking a moment to do just as the doubt-mongers suggest, and turn skepticism back on itself. Good science requires moderation in all things. Immoderate doubt is paranoia.

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In *The Devil's Delusion*, Berlinski's passion for simile begins to take on the qualities of an obsessive compulsion. Here's one rather well-defined symptom:

- "It is as if the liver, in addition to producing bile, were to demonstrate an unexpected ability to play the violin." (Page 17)
- "It is rather as if an accomplished horseman were to decide that his chief task were to learn to ride without a horse." (Page 35)
- "To ask of the physical science that they assess the Incarnation, or any other principle of religious belief, is rather like asking of a powerful Grand Prix racing car that it prove itself satisfactory in doing service as a New York taxicab." (Page 60)
- "Physicists thus find themselves very much in the position of a master couturier obliged to allow one of his finest creations to appear on the runway with its basting lines and tacking pins still affixed." (Page 115)

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On a Web site devoted to "the skeptical examination of the claims of self-proclaimed skeptics," author Ted Dace considers how corporations and rationalist ideologues each exploit the rhetoric of doubt. "Where corporate skeptics dismiss evidence they don't like as 'junk science,' " he says, "ideological skeptics favor 'pseudoscience' as the term of abuse." In both cases, they're appealing to a philosophy of reductionism—to naked capitalism on the one hand and mechanistic biology on the other.

slate v

Attacking Barack With the Boss

Slate V imagines an anti-Springsteen, anti-Obama ad.

By Bill Smee

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 7:56 PM ET

Bruce Springsteen has come out for Barack Obama. You might think the working-class rocker's endorsement is the perfect tonic for those "bitter" fumes engulfing Obama, following his recent ill-chosen remarks about small-town America. Certainly the timing seems great, with a critical primary in blue-collar Pennsylvania just days away.

Or, if you're Hillary Clinton, you might try to turn the Boss' show of support for Obama into a big fat negative. ***Slate V*** imagines what the attack might look like.

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Kids and Vaccines: Opting Out?

A daily video from ***Slate V***.

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 9:59 AM ET

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Interviews 50 Cents: Online-Poker Bloke

A daily video from ***Slate V***.

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 1:20 PM ET

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Obama Backpedals, Voters React

A daily video from ***Slate V***.

Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 11:40 AM ET

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Dear Prudence: Secret Romance

A daily video from ***Slate V***.

Monday, April 14, 2008, at 2:22 PM ET

sports nut

Top 10 Dumbest Sports Trends

No. 1: meaningless rankings, power polls, and "MVP races."

By Neal Pollack

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 7:13 AM ET

As we come to the end of the Greatest NBA Regular Season Ever™, I think we all have to admit that we're a little disappointed with the wind-down. All the playoff berths were decided before the season's final day, and, though the standings ended very close, there wasn't a seven-way tie for first place in

the Western Conference, the winner determined by some obscure tiebreaker like second-half free-throw percentage. Those of you seeking some sort of transcendent season-end thrill need not worry, though. I've been informed repeatedly, by dozens of near-literate people, that this was all just the first act for the most thrilling race of all. No, not the NBA Playoffs. The MVP race.

All season long, this "race" for MVP has dominated the basketball conversation. LeBron James, whose ticket is punched for the next decade of MVP speculation, was, of course, part of it. Kobe Bryant, some argued, deserved consideration for finally recognizing that basketball is a team game. The Celtics would have been nothing without Kevin Garnett, and who could really dispute the contention that Chris Paul has overtaken Steve Nash as the game's best point guard?

Within the last week, this glorified bar argument has gone from an inevitable, annoying story line to the only story anyone deigns to write about. Mark Kriegel of Fox Sports thinks Paul is the MVP because a 50-plus win team in New Orleans is "not supposed to happen." Important outlets like the *Canadian Press*, which favors LeBron James because no one is more important to his team than LeBron James, have also made their opinions known. Even Henry Abbott, ESPN.com's generally excellent basketball blogger, caught a virulent strain of the disease. Abbott called last weekend's Hornets-Lakers game "The World's Most Unlikely MVP Showdown." "Chris Paul is the insurgent," he wrote. "The new kid. The future that may or may not be here yet. And Kobe Bryant? He's the people's champ. …"

Never mind the fact that I am, technically, a person, and Kobe Bryant will never be my champ of anything. Please consider that last Saturday's Hornets-Lakers game was for the top seed in the West. This was an important game, played in real life, on a basketball court. Does anyone else think it's strange that so few cared to opine on how that game, won by the Lakers 107-104, might influence or help predict what happens in the playoffs? Meanwhile, 8,000 sportswriters, bloggers, and talking heads chimed in on the huge consequences MVP-wise. In the next day's *Los Angeles Times*: "Competition appears to lean toward Bryant, who hasn't been MVP yet, although Paul makes his case too in a game of wild swings."

Perhaps this is too obvious to say, but what the hell: The MVP race isn't real. Stephen A. Smith may think that if Kevin Garnett pulls a triple-double against the Sixers, it will suddenly become clear that he's more valuable than Chris Paul, but I can pretty much guarantee that K.G. isn't thinking the same thing. Bill Simmons, in his typically entertaining spastic-puppy hyper-referential novella-length style, recently ranked the four greatest *MVP races* ever. I wonder whether Bob Pettit, Bill Russell, Oscar Robertson, Elgin Baylor, and Wilt Chamberlain knew that they were in an MVP race in 1961. Somehow, I think that the three guys who covered the NBA back then may have been concentrating on reporting on the actual games, or race-baiting, or both.

Tim O'Sullivan of the *Concord Monitor* may have unwittingly summed up the situation's gross absurdity in his April 13 column. "Presenting the winner with his trophy isn't the pinnacle of the MVP matter," O'Sullivan wrote. "We're living the pinnacle right now. It's all about the race, just like it is for any MVP in any sport. And the current race is, well, MVP-worthy." I shouldn't really fault a guy for enjoying his job and all, but is deciding whether Kobe is more MVP-worthy than LeBron really "living the pinnacle"? Well, maybe if you can't get a press pass to the NBA Finals.

If stupid arguments were outlawed, then nobody would ever talk about sports, and we don't want that to happen because then we'd have to think about our actual problems. Still, this MVP race talk is far more annoying than the typical pointless sports discussion. For one thing, few fans actually care. Sure, people chant "MVP" whenever a worthy candidate plays an outstanding game, but that's only because "we think you're a great player who wears our favorite uniform" doesn't have the same lilt. We all remember the great playoff games, and most of us can recite the last 30 years of NBA champions from memory with reasonable accuracy. I know that Michael Jordan won six titles with the Bulls, but I'd have to look up how many MVP trophies he won. Three? Four? Five? Two, God forbid?

Sportswriters and pundits, on the other hand, are treating the MVP race with the gravitas of a presidential election. That's because they make up the Electoral College. When they're debating who's going to win the award, they're not really talking about who they think the best player is; they're talking about whom *they should pick* as the best player. It's the ultimate circle-jerk of sports-guy self-regard. Sportswriters can't affect the outcome of the games—only David Stern can do that—but the MVP race is theirs to decide, and it's the most thrilling part of their season. "In the 23 years I've been an MVP voter," writes Mike Monroe of the *San Antonio Express-News*, "there never has been a more difficult choice than that faced by this year's selection panel." Fascinating, but I'd prefer to read about a basketball game.

All of this blather would probably be less irksome if it were confined to the end of the season. But NBA.com, among many, many others, has been updating the "Race to the MVP" every week, all season long. (Your Week 1 "leader": Tracy McGrady.) ESPN.com spent all season ranking the NBA's Top 50 rookies, about 10 of whom have ever seen significant playing time. It's not just pro basketball that's become the Golden Globes with cheerleaders and T-shirt cannons. This is the year that our national obsession with pointless sports rankings reached its absurd zenith. On television, Fox ranks the "50 Best Damn Sports Blowups" and ESPN has sunk so far as to rank the "greatest highlight." The Web is loaded down with Heisman

watch lists, draft rankings, and power polls. If you look around, you can find the "Ten Phoniest Baseball Injuries," America's "Top Sports Cities," "Most Desperate Sports Cities," and "Most Fan-Friendly Franchises." The day the 2008 NFL schedule came out, ESPN.com listed the "top 40 games," including the Sept. 21 Texans-Titans match-up. "Matt Schaub, Albert Haynesworth square off," was the reasoning.

The "power rankings" phenomenon isn't new, but the Web has put it into hyperdrive. The Internet demands frequently updated content, and lists and rankings are incredibly easy to put together and require no original thought. There's no need to come up with a new idea every week: Just shuffle a few teams or players around, write a one-sentence caption, and you're ready to publish. Maybe people really care about this stuff, and sports sites are simply fulfilling our desire to assign rankings to "Baseball's Top 20 Young Pitchers." I'd prefer to think we're getting our sports fix from these columns because nobody bothers to writes about anything else.

This is all but a symptom of our rank-happy world. We're determined to manufacture competitions between things even if they don't exist. *21* "beat" *Leatherheads* at the box office to become the "No. 1 movie," and then they both "lost" to a remake of *Prom Night*. Meanwhile, the richest of the rich NBA stars, who smoke cigars rolled with our hard-earned money in fraternal ignorance of our opinions, "compete" for the NBA trophy. It's a shameful waste in which we're all complicit. Besides, everyone knows that Amare Stoudemire has got next year's MVP trophy in the bag.

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sports nut

The Boys of Late Summer

Why do so many pro baseball players have August birthdays?

By Greg Spira

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 7:16 AM ET

In Major League Baseball, there are a lot more Juan Pierres than there are players like Alex Rodriguez. Yes, Pierre is a light hitter, and A-Rod is one of the greatest sluggers of all time, but there's another important difference between the two: Pierre was born in August, and Rodriguez was born in July.

In 2000, John Holway argued in a book called *The Baseball Astrologer* that the sign under which an individual was born played a significant role in whether he made it in pro ball. Holway identified a real phenomenon, but the explanation does not lie in the stars. Since 1950, a baby born in the United States in August has had a 50 percent to 60 percent better chance of making the big leagues than a baby born in July. The lesson: If you want your child to be a professional baseball player, you should start planning early. Very early. As in before conception.

The table below lays out the full month-to-month data. As of the 2005 season, 503 Americans born in August had made it to the major leagues compared with 313 American born in July. (In this article, the United States refers to the 50 states and the District of Columbia but not territories like Puerto Rico. And again, these are players born since 1950, and the data are current through 2005.)

The pattern is unmistakable. From August through the following July, there is a steady decline in the likelihood that a child born in the United States will become a major leaguer. Meanwhile, among players born outside the 50 states, there are some hints of a pattern but nothing significant enough to reach any conclusions. An analysis of the birth dates of players in baseball's minor leagues between 1984 and 2000 finds similar patterns, with American-born players far more likely to have been born in August than July. The birth-month pattern among Latin American minor leaguers is very different—if anything, they're more likely to be born toward the end of the year, in October, November, and December.

The magical date of Aug. 1 gives a strong hint as to the explanation for this phenomenon. For more than 55 years, July 31 has been the age-cutoff date used by virtually all nonschool-affiliated baseball leagues in the United States. Youth baseball organizations including Little League, Cal Ripken/Babe Ruth, PONY, Dixie Youth, Hap Dumont, Dizzy Dean, American Legion, and more have long used that date to determine which players are eligible for which levels of play. (There is no such commonly used cutoff date in Latin America.) The result: In almost every American youth league, the oldest players are the ones born in August, and the youngest are those with July birthdays. For example, someone born on July 31, 1990, would almost certainly have been the youngest player on his youth team in 2001, his first year playing in the 11-and-12-year-olds league, and of average age in 2002, his second year in the same league. Someone born on Aug. 1, 1989, by contrast, would have been of average age in 2001, his first year playing in the 11-and-12-year-olds division, and would almost certainly be the oldest player in the league in 2002.

Twelve full months of development makes a huge difference for an 11- or 12-year-old. The player who is 12 months older will, on average, be bigger, stronger, and more coordinated than his younger counterpart, not to mention more experienced. And those bigger, better players are the ones given opportunities for further advancement. Other players, who are just as skilled for their age, are less likely to be given those same opportunities

simply because of when they were born. Alex Rodriguez would've been a star no matter his birth month, but a player like Juan Pierre, who has less natural aptitude for the sport, might have gotten a small leg up over similarly skilled players because he's an August baby. It's clear from the chart above that this small advantage can have an impact that lasts a lifetime.

This phenomenon will not come as news to social scientists, who have observed the same patterns in a number of different sports. The first major study of what has become known as the "relative age effect" was published in the *Journal of the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation* in 1985. This study, by R.H. Barnsley, A.H. Thompson, and P.E. Barnsley, determined that NHL players of the early 1980s were more than four times as likely to be born in the first three months of the calendar year as the last three months. In 2005, a larger study on the relative age effect in European youth soccer was published in the *Journal of Sports Sciences* by Werner F. Helsen, Jan Van Winckel, and A. Mark Williams. This study found a large relative age effect in almost every European country, though it seems to shrink in adult leagues and is less significant in women's soccer. (Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Levitt of *Freakonomics* fame wrote about the age effect in European soccer for the *New York Times Magazine*.)

Interestingly enough, the relative age effect doesn't appear in the two other major American sports leagues. (These data on NBA and NFL players born since 1950 were provided by Sean Lahman, who has edited encyclopedias on pro football and basketball.)

The relative age effect might not be prevalent in the NFL and the NBA because size is a bigger factor in those two sports than in baseball and hockey. Since an athlete's ultimate height and weight aren't clear until fairly late in his youth, league cutoff dates aren't as important in determining one's athletic destiny. Another possibility is that (men's) basketball and football are much more popular high-school sports than baseball is. Since the cutoff date for high-school sports is more variable than that for organized youth sports, the influence of birth month in youth basketball and football leagues is relatively minor.

If you find all this data convincing, perhaps you're already planning an August birth for your little slugger. Not so fast. In 2005, USA Baseball, the nation's governing body for amateur baseball, announced it was shifting the "league age determination date" from July 31 to April 30. This change was made so the age-cutoff times more closely jibed with the baseball calendar: Under the previous rules, a player who turned 13 on July 30 would've been ineligible to play in that summer's 12-and-under league despite the fact that he would've been 12 years old for the entire season.

At first, this change was fiercely debated by the various youth baseball organizations, many of whom couldn't even agree on one date internally. It looked possible, then, that parents might be able to shop among different youth baseball organizations, blunting the impact of the relative age effect. However, this year, for the first time, all the major youth baseball organizations have fallen in line and will be using the April 30 cutoff date. Future Juan Pierres, take note: If you want to make it in the majors, forget about August. Make sure you're born in May.

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supreme court dispatches

The Capital Gang

The Supreme Court jump-starts the machinery of death.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 6:53 PM ET

It must have been a tough morning for Jeff Fisher. There he was, sitting at counsel table, silvery mane blowing in the breeze, poised to argue against the state of Louisiana's efforts to extend the death penalty to include nonhomicide rapists. Fisher, it seemed, has the better of the argument. The national consensus has recently been to limit rather than expand the death penalty; no one has been executed for rape since 1964; and of the just four other states that allow executions for child rape, Louisiana alone permits the death penalty for first-time offenders. Since these trends and consensus measurements are all part of the test for "cruel and unusual" punishment barred by the Eighth Amendment, one might have thought today's argument was heading toward contracting the use of the death penalty yet again, or at least not expanding it.

But as the lawyers sit around waiting to begin argument, shuffling their notes and fiddling with their pens, Chief Justice John Roberts says he will be announcing from the bench the court's opinion in *Baze v. Rees*, the big case from earlier this term testing the constitutionality of Kentucky's lethal-injection protocol—the same protocol used in all but one of the 38 death-penalty states.

The opinion Roberts reads offers up a rousing 7-2 endorsement of lethal injection. And suddenly, the shifting breezes of death-penalty opinion have shifted yet again. True, two of the seven justices who voted to uphold lethal injection this morning did so unhappily—Justice John Paul Stevens went so far as to dismiss the death penalty as "the pointless and needless extinction of life with only negligible social or public returns." But to the extent *Baze* was supposed to be a sort of test drive for doing away with capital punishment altogether, this morning it seems to have been driven off a cliff.

Happy birthday, pope.

All of which brings us back to today's argument, which begins directly after Roberts finishes reading *Baze*. Patrick Kennedy was convicted for the rape of his 8-year-old stepdaughter, and the state of Louisiana wants him executed for it. Fisher, Kennedy's lawyer, gamely opens with the observation that Louisiana's effort to "reintroduce" the death penalty for rapists violates the "long-standing national consensus against it." It also offends a line of cases that require states to very narrowly define the class of offenders eligible for the death penalty. Justice Antonin Scalia interrupts him to ask how one might further narrow a class of "child rapists" and whether any rape of a child under 12 could fairly be described as not "particularly heinous."

Fisher lays claim to a 1977 case, *Coker v. Georgia*, in which the high court prohibited capital punishment for the rape of an "adult" (the victim was 16). *Coker* has been interpreted as barring capital punishment for all rape. But Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg stops Fisher to say she doesn't read the opinion in *Coker* to mean that "in any and all circumstances, rape that leaves the victim alive cannot be punished by the death penalty." Fisher says if you count the two justices in *Coker* who opposed the death penalty under every circumstance, there were, in fact, *seven* votes for that proposition.

"That's a strange way of making a majority, isn't it?" asks Scalia, doubtless practicing for the upcoming Passover Seder and its exercise in ritual strange counting. Scalia says you can't count the two justices who oppose all capital punishment as opposing capital punishment for rapists. Fisher replies, "I'm not aware of any wrinkle in this court's jurisprudence that says that if a justice is too far out of the mainstream, then their vote is discounted."

Scalia shoots back that he's just not counting those two justices in that majority and that, "if that wrinkle isn't there, we should iron it in pretty quickly." Oh, good. In a case about counting broad, unquantifiable national trends in public opinion regarding the death penalty, we can't even manage to count the votes of nine justices from 1977.

Fisher says that if you look at the pair of recent cases that banned capital punishment for mentally retarded offenders (in 2002) and juvenile offenders (in 2005), it's clear the social consensus is trending away from the death penalty. Then, Roberts jumps in to argue that the "evolving standards of decency" test should not be a one-way ratchet. Does this trend "only work one way?" he asks. "How are you ever supposed to get consensus moving in the opposite direction? … Do 20 states have to get together and do it at the same time?"

Scalia says this high bar against reversing the prevailing trend would put the court in the position of "prohibiting the people from changing their mind." And Roberts says the clear trend that matters is not the one Fisher points to but rather that "more and more states are passing statutes imposing the death penalty in situations that do not result in death." Scalia almost chortles. "Did you ever hear the expression 'hoist by your own petard?' The trend here is clearly in the direction of permitting more and more … capital punishment for this crime!"

Roberts continues in this vein: The cases declining to allow capital punishment for minors or the mentally retarded, he says, are "qualitatively different" from the distinction here between child rape and murder, because they focus on the "culpability of the offender" as opposed to the nature of the offense. And Kennedy adds that "even the countries of Europe which have joined the European Convention on human rights" permit the death penalty for treason. He says that on the continent, "You can slaughter your fellow citizens, but if you offend the state, you can be put to death." Then, Scalia asks Fisher if he thinks "treason is worse than child rape." Fisher replies that all the professional sex-assault groups and social workers have lined up against making child rape a capital crime.

Justice Samuel Alito quotes a line from *Coker* opining that "life is over for the victim of the murderer. For the rape victim, life may not be nearly so happy as it was." He asks, incredulously, is that "something that would be written *today*?" Ginsburg adds that the attitudes toward rape that animated *Coker*—that women were the property of their husbands or fathers and were "spoiled" after a rape—have "no parallel with child rape." There was a lot of race and gender bias under the surface of the *Coker* case that isn't immediately present in this one.

Juliet L. Clark is an assistant district attorney from Louisiana, and she opens with the most graphic description of a sex crime I have heard at the court. It is so awful that Justice Stevens finally stops to ask whether the victim's injuries were permanent.

Justice Stephen Breyer observes that he can imagine many such "horrible" circumstances. But, he cautions, "I am not a moralist. I am a judge." He worries that if the court reverses itself after decades of confining capital punishment to homicide, the court will rapidly find itself in the business of creating some highly complex "moral categorization of crime."

"Just the way they used to," grins Scalia.

"Perhaps 200 years ago, that's true," retorts Breyer.

Clark gets involved in a long discussion with Justice David Souter about whether the class of child rapists is sufficiently narrow. Stevens asks her what she thinks of a brief from the British law lords suggesting, in effect, that evolving standards of decency can only evolve away from cruel punishment, and that you can't really "change gears and go in the other direction." Clark says the "turn-around" over child rape is based on a

"unique understanding of how this crime gravely, seriously affects children."

Finally, Ted Cruz, Texas' solicitor general, has 10 minutes to show that Louisiana is right, and the court's recent trend away from expanding the death penalty is, in fact, over. He opens forcefully with the claim that "few evolving standards of decency are more pronounced than the growing understanding in modern society of the unique and irreparable harm caused by violent child rape." He urges that *Coker* dealt with adult rape, expressly leaving open the question of child victims. He adds that part of the reason states now want to penalize child rape with execution is that today, "we're seeing crimes that 20, 30, 40 years ago, people wouldn't imagine."

Cruz says the experts and social workers who have all weighed in against his side should bring their policy arguments before the state legislatures, not to the court. Describing Patrick Kennedy as a "300 pound man who violently raped an 8-year-old girl," Cruz says he is "exquisitely culpable."

If you're looking for some light reading tonight, check out John Paul Stevens' concurrence in the lethal-injection case. For the first time in years, a sitting justice is taking the position that capital punishment "[is] patently excessive and cruel and unusual punishment violative of the Eighth Amendment," just as Harry Blackmun wrote near the end of his life that "the death-penalty experiment has failed. I no longer shall tinker with the machinery of death." You can spend tonight weighing the competing trends in favor of executing rapists against the trends away from it, or—for the ambitious among you—trying to count five justices who can agree on which of these trends counts for more.

Me, I am going to pour myself a big old drink and try to count the number of jurists who, after a lifetime on the court, have concluded that the death penalty in America simply cannot be fixed. Then I'll weigh them against the number who started off opposing capital punishment and became increasingly certain that the system works. Maybe this is yet another trend that doesn't matter. And Justice Scalia would tell me that the death penalty needn't be perfect to be constitutional. But it's probably not an accident that judges who have stood watch over hundreds of executions eventually need to believe that they are evolving toward a system that's at least better than what came before.

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technology

The State of the Google

First-quarter revenues strong; economic apocalypse averted.

By Chris Wilson

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 8:34 PM ET

In late February, an Internet analytics firm claimed that slightly fewer people were clicking on Google ads. Investors and analysts saw this as a sign of the end times—that perhaps even Google wasn't immune to the nation's mega-recession. ***Slate*** contributor Henry Blodget called it a "Google Disaster"; the company's previously unsinkable stock took a nose dive. But as I wrote last month, all of this teeth-gnashing was based on sketchy data. ComScore's numbers are merely an estimate, and its methodologies are opaque—a savvy investor should never use an ambiguous Web traffic report to forecast a company's growth or decline. Today's report on Google's first-quarter earnings would be the more telling announcement. Has the company really succumbed to the recession, or has it remained a mistake-proof colossus?

Definitely closer to the latter. On a conference call with investors, CEO Eric Schmidt announced a 42 percent revenue increase compared with last year's first quarter. He also—in a classic, Googlier-than-thou, above-the-fray response—told comScore to shove off. "Paid click growth has been much higher than has been speculated by third parties," Schmidt said. Compared with the first quarter of 2007, Schmidt said, "paid clicks"—simply, the number of clicks on Google ads—had increased by 20 percent.

We can't say definitively that comScore had it all wrong. Google's figures for paid clicks include international data as opposed to comScore's strictly domestic numbers, so we can't precisely measure one company's version of events against the other's. (ComScore's reports got more bullish after its January claim of a 0.3 percent year-over-year decline; the firm reported 3 percent growth for February and 2.7 percent growth for March.) Still, the fact that we're talking about Google's earnings—that is, the fact that declining clicks did not bring about the end of life as we know it—is good evidence that those who put a lot of stock in comScore bailed too soon. Sleep well tonight, shareholders: Google will be with us for a long, long time.

The other headline from Thursday's earnings report is that 51 percent of the company's earnings came from international markets. This quarter is the first time that Google has made more than half of its money abroad. (For reference, foreign revenues were at 42 percent two years ago.) In questioning the lineup of Google bigwigs on today's call, which included founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page, investors focused on this newfound internationalism. In response to two separate questions, Schmidt held that the company's impressive growth worldwide wasn't concealing a domestic slowdown, arguing that "targeted advertising does well in most scenarios," even a recession. Another Google exec claimed that categories you'd expect to be faltering in a slow economy—cars, travel, and even mortgages—have been getting increased clicks.

Even though Google's still raking it in, there was enough bad news on Thursday for worrywarts to feed on. As Blodget noted immediately after the announcement, Google did not grow as rapidly this quarter as it has in the past, "enough to justify some of the mid-quarter concern." The investment community didn't share that concern, showing it could be just as capricious about potentially sort-of-good news as dubiously sourced sort-of-bad news. As of 8 p.m., Google stock was up $76 in after-hours trading.

television

The Tracy Flick of Journalism

A wonderful new villain adorns MTV's *The Paper*.

By Troy Patterson

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 5:38 PM ET

Rarely does reality television produce a character so rich as Amanda, the lead on ***The Paper*** (Mondays at 10:30 p.m. ET), MTV's new high-school journalism soap. She's all about being both the Eve Harrington and the Margo Channing, or, should *The Devil Wear Prada* be more your thing, the Miranda Priestley and the Andy Sachs. She's brassy—not just a prissy word maven rising from copy editor to editor-in-chief but also a musical-theater geek who won't shut her trap. She's driven—on Monday's debut, while her competitors for the top spot on the masthead were out for the weekend getting wasted like normal kids, she sat in her Hello Kitty-festooned bedroom and polished her application essay. Most importantly, her behavior is so unyieldingly superior that she's an absolute delight to hate. "Procrastination is a foe that I have not met yet," she gloated to the camera. "You wench," I yelled at the screen. For a fuller idea of the range of inexcusably vile names I pelted at the young lady, please see George Carlin's seven dirty words routine and Page 80 of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.

"Journalists are the most important part of world. They really are," goes another Amandaism, a statement that all the reporters on this show and in the real world agree with. Every journalist who is not too stupid to notice what's going on knows that he's full of himself, and that is why we make such delectable reality-show figures—as I mentioned in my essential piece about Bravo's Tabloid Wars, still the journalist-reality-TV subgenre's most worthy endeavor. The self-importance of reporters is also, unquestionably, why MTV has not only launched *The Paper* (even after the failure of its second intern competition, *I'm From Rolling Stone*) but also given it a plum time slot behind *The Hills* (whose mute and gilded sylphs provide vivid contrast to this show's chattering neurotics): Buzz is business, and there is no surer way to get an undue volume of coverage for a reality show than to center it on people who cover the things.

Exactly what it is that the news hounds and camera hogs of *The Paper*—most of whom are off-puttingly over-prepared—will be covering is not yet clear. The debut told us less about their newspaper than it did about the eternal rites of secondary schools (the cliquishness, the hustling, the crowding into restaurant booths), and the montage of the coming season's highlights was mostly concerned with the high-school drama of freak-outs and hissy fits. It was rousing, in its modest way. There's no shortage of juvenile behavior to be seen on the many reality shows devoted to celebrities and aspiring performers; Hollywood, as everyone says, is like high school with money. But high school is like high school with high schoolers, and that's good for something.

Amanda shares her career ambitions, in rough outline at least, with two of the characters on ***The Real World XX: Hollywood*** (MTV, Wednesdays at 10 p.m. ET). (Get a load of those Roman numerals, by the way—*The Real World* both aspiring to the iconicity and institutional force of the Super Bowl and hinting at an unrepentantly sleazy pornographic quality it will indeed deliver.) "I want to be a journalist," says Kimberly, a bartender who imagines herself working the Lohan beat for E! "I'm *soooooo* passionate," says Sarah, who majored in broadcasting at Arizona State and just wants to be on TV. I don't know anything about their credentials or the networks of sources they've cultivated, but both of the girls take their clothes off in tonight's episode, and I can say confidently that each would be a welcome addition to Fox News, where the producers seem always in want of something pert and tender.

That said, neither is quite so hot as honey-skinned Brianna, the aspiring singer with a background in stripping and a warrant out for her arrest. Tonight, she calls up her boyfriend to sweet talk him into dropping the assault charges. "What'd you do last night?" he asks. "We sat in the hot tub," says she, stating the obvious. Bleeping ensues, and *The Real World XX* begins to set the stage for its explosive fourth episode, which will find Bri returning to her old place of employ and where the producers discuss, on camera, how to address a castmate's alcoholism, having already exploited it with much exuberance. The show is tawdrier than ever. Stop the presses.

the audio book club

The Audio Book Club on *Beautiful Children*

Our critics discuss Charles Bock's first novel.

By Stephen Metcalf, Troy Patterson, and Katie Roiphe

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 1:41 PM ET

To listen to the Slate Audio Book Club discussion of Charles Bock's* Beautiful Children*, 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, Stephen Metcalf, Troy Patterson, and Katie Roiphe sink their teeth into Charles Bock's first novel, *Beautiful Children*, which John Burdett, writing in the *Washington Post*, described as a novel that "deserves to be read more than once because of the extraordinary importance of its subject matter and the sensitivity with which [Bock] treats it."

The Audio Book Club members were less impressed. Although they conceded that it was a "flavorful, powerfully written book," they largely agreed that it failed to deliver on the promise of its early sections. The conversation runs about 35 minutes.

If you'd like to get an early start on the next book-club selection, we've chosen Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, specifically the 2004 translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. We'll post that discussion in mid-May.

You can also listen to any of our previous club meetings by clicking on the links below*:

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
Saturday, by Ian McEwan
The Year of Magical Thinking, by Joan Didion

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the browser

Laughing Baby vs. the YouTube Commenters

A battle of Internet good and Internet evil.

By Michael Agger
Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 1:23 PM ET

What happens when pure good meets pure evil? I exaggerate, but only slightly. A year and a half ago, a Swedish father posted a video of his son laughing on YouTube:

A few months later, the video was reposted by another YouTube user. This second version of the video has racked up 45 million views, putting it ninth on the All-Time Viewed list, behind Alicia Keys and ahead of Akon. Two weeks ago, "Laughing Baby" achieved nerd immortality by appearing in an episode of *South Park*.

Like many baby videos, "Laughing Baby" was placed on YouTube to share with friends. But I'm always surprised that parents put these videos up, considering what fate awaits them: YouTube commenters. It's like dipping a bunny into acid.

In our time, Internet commenting has become its own special form of social idiocy. The best demonstration of this is a series of brilliant skits by College Humor that imagine what real-life situations would be like if people spoke as Internet commenters. (In "Internet Commenter Business Meeting," for example, a guy yells "First!" every time a new graphic is shown.) YouTube comments are harsher than those on message boards—something about watching a video inspires noxious responses—and also more random. It's as if there were unwritten commandments: No woman's boobs shall go unjudged; no man shall not be called gay; no popular video shall not be spammed with "KKK FOR LIFE!!!"

What happens when a sweet laughing baby encounters the YouTube commenters? To find out, I powerbrowsed the 57,840 comments (and counting) for "Laughing Baby." Things start off well with "lol. when people laugh, i tend to laugh so i was cracking up" and "Cute, cute, cutee!!!" Soon, however, the malcontents appear: "This child is possessed by satan. Exorcism needs to be performed." And more insidiously: "Guaranteed there are perverts watching this." And more emphatically: "INSANE DWARF."

To be fair to YouTube, the majority of comments salute Laughing Baby's cuteness, adorableness, and all-around joy-bringing abilities. (My favorite was this grudging praise: "DUDE IM A GUY AND IM SAYING HES CUTE.") The noncute comments cluster into these areas of inquiry:

Armchair pediatricians: Many people think that Laughing Baby is sick: "The baby is very sweet, but he sounds asthmatic.

They should have him checked out." Even better: "I read a scientific study that had to do with dopamine levels in toddlers and how they affected their personality. This little guy obviously enjoys the dopamine 'high' he's getting out of laughing this much. Unfortunately, children like this have very high rates of drug use later in life. Strange, but true." The armchair pediatricians also declare a persistent belief that people can die from laughing too hard.

Drugs: The majority of drug commenters use their wisdom to discern that Laughing Baby is obviously high, or that the father must have smoked up just before the video was shot. Other suggested influences include crack, nitrous, and peaches with crack in them. The notion that Laughing Baby *himself* could be used as a drug is often aired.

Actual analysis: Very rare. " 'Bing' appears to be more humorous than 'Dong' " being the most astute observation that I came across.

Good wisecracks: Also rare. "Birth of a Dane Cook fan" and "Better Than Cats" are the highlights.

The horror: Many commenters write that the baby's laugh is evil and not funny or joy-bringing. Laughing Baby is "like a Scottie dog with rabies" or the "son of Hitler," and watching him will lead to nightmares. Closely related to these commenters are those who say they watch Laughing Baby and wish never to have children.

Sounds like: Laughing Baby's cackle is compared to smoker's cough, an old man laughing, Conan O'Brien, the guy in *Saw*, "Chucky and Exorcist combined," and Joe Pesci.

Predictions: Laughing Baby will ... be a 350-pound American, grow up to be a cheerful person, be the next Jim Carrey, have a great personality, be a "freaking awesome person. maybe annoying at times. but freaking awesome," be a comedian, be a rapist or something, be an actor, be a politician, be a zookeeper, find a cure for cancer.

Sell-out advice: Laughing Baby should be on *America's Funniest Home Videos*. Laughing Baby's laugh should be sold as a ringtone.

Look at me: The slightly craftier spammers offer praise for Laughing Baby before plugging their own videos. This guy had the best pitch: "if you have 14 seconds. I have a life changing video on my profile. (you will never forget it until the day you die, and maybe even after that)."

Mean: The occasional commenter will get provoked by all the cute remarks and say that Laughing Baby has a "bigass forehead" or that he'd like to see Laughing Baby laughing "while engulfed in flames." These comments typically set off little wars, such as, "Don't hate on the baby," "You obviously have no life and no children," and so on.

Religious: Some commenters speculate that Laughing Baby might be the voice of God. I assume this is not meant literally, but rather that Laughing Baby was sent to YouTube by God to make us all happy. One commenter suggested that Laughing Baby "must be a jewish baby" (because he has a sense of humor?), while others assumed he was Buddhist, while still others asked that Allah make him a Muslim.

Insane: "Retarded human infant!!! I will destroy you all!!!!" and "Imagine the US president being honest like this baby—the world would be more peaceful, I think!"

After reading a few thousand comments, they begin to fade into similar patterns: cute, cute, cute, evil, spam, I think the baby is ugly, How can you think that!, cute, cute, I want to have a baby, cute, baby is high, look at my videos, cute, just like my kid, cute, LOL, cute, cute, etc., etc. It's soon overly clear that the comments aren't a conversation or debate. Laughing Baby has become an Internet monument, and posting a remark is like tagging your name on the Statue of Liberty.

Still, there is one meaningful debate that can be gleaned from the tumult. There are those who complain that Laughing Baby is a pointless waste of time, while others respond that happiness is made up of small, simple pleasures like the laughter of a little boy. It's a debate that speaks to the essence of YouTube itself. Do these little video distractions buoy our spirits and connect us to our fellow humans, or are we frittering away our time and talents with two-minute diversions? Do we laugh at the Laughing Baby, or is the Laughing Baby laughing at us?

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the chat room

Class Action

Timothy Noah takes readers' questions about the Democrats and working folk.

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 4:23 PM ET

Slate *"Chatterbox" columnist Timothy Noah was online at Washingtonpost.com on April 17 to chat about the Democrats' relationship with the white working class. An unedited transcript of the chat follows.*

Timothy Noah: Hello, Timothy Noah here. I'm a senior writer for ***Slate*** magazine. I write a column called "Chatterbox." A few days ago I used the occasion of Obama's now-famous "bitter" remark concerning small-town Pennsylvanians to review the literature on how the Democratic party is faring with white working class voters.

Bethesda, Md.: Perhaps candidates should expand their base of advisors to include lower-level ones working within their own campaigns. Surely they all have people like me who currently straddle both worlds—who grew up working-class in a small Pennsylvania coal-mining town and then went on to college, graduate school and life in Washington—who could have told them, over coffee for an hour, how difficult it is for one world ("elites" and "working class") to understand the other. I have found each group to be equally intolerant of the other based on nothing more than obvious stereotypes, and for those of us caught in the middle it can be exhausting.

Timothy Noah: I agree. There is quite a lot of mutual misunderstanding between the upper middle class and the working class. Reviewing what's been said about the white working class and the Democrats, I realized that there's even a lot of disagreement about who the working class IS.

New Orleans: As a working-class gal who knows the areas of "Pennsyltucky" like the back of her hand, I have to say that Obama was pretty well on target in my experience. Have you read *Deer Hunting With Jesus* by Joe Bageant, which provides a great illustration of just how this situation has developed and what can be done about it?

Timothy Noah: I have not. I wish I'd heard about it before I wrote my column on this topic!

Portland, Ore.: Mr. Noah, please explain the media fixation on Obama's "bitter" comment. Folks in my neighborhood are working-class, professional or retired. Everyone of them is bitter after nearly eight years of the Bush nightmare. How about some reality instead of pundit porn?

Timothy Noah: I must agree with you that the media is overplaying the story. Possibly it's an overzealous attempt to dispute claims that the press is pro-Obama. I see that Tom Shales had some harsh words in today's *Post* about Charlie Gibson and George Stephanopoulos hammering away about it at last night's debate.

Woburn, Mass.: Filing early—the problem isn't that rich people can't "feel the pain" of the middle class. I think most people don't care if you're worth $10,000, $10 million or $100 million—if you are patronizing, you clearly don't feel our pain. Game over. To the *What's the Matter With Kansas?* problem—Republicans may not govern in a way aligned with middle-class economic values (necessarily), but they are at least less likely to be on tape patronizing the middle class.

Timothy Noah: *What's the Matter With Kansas?* is a book by Thomas Frank that argues that "values issues" are driving the white working class into the arms of the Republicans. It appears to have influenced Obama's thinking on this matter, though I have no idea whether Frank would condone Obama's particular remark, and Obama has not to my knowledge said whether he's read the book. One beneficial result of Obama's remark is that it's gotten people looking at this question—are former Democrats rallying to the Republican party because of social issues? Larry Bartels, a political scientist at Princeton, has challenged Frank's thesis and has an op-ed in today's *New York Times* about it. He says that the voters most influenced by social issues aren't the white working class, but the wealthy. Frank has a response to similar criticism Bartels made earlier posted online.

Clifton, Va.: Lefties: define working-class? Is it based on job or income level? Many tradesman plumbers, electricians, carpenters and auto techs make more than $100,000 a year. When you take your Lexus into the dealer, the tech gets half the labor rate, and the typical tech bills 45-50 hours a week with ease.

Timothy Noah: That's the crucial question. Bartels defines it as anyone whose family income is $60,000 or less. The trouble with that, many people (including Frank) argue, is that you end up including students, retirees, stay-at-home moms, and all sorts of other people who really are upper-middle class folks who have left the work force for one reason or another. Also, some argue, it excludes people who make more than $60,000 but nonetheless conform to what we think of as working class, and see themselves that way.

Rochester, N.Y.: It's absurd to be having this debate without discussing the nefarious role of the media in all of this. How did it get to the point where people making $5 million to $10 million dollars a year—I'm referring to Matthews, Russert and Williams—spend their time calling the son of a Luo tribesmen an "elitist." Is it time just to give up on our media, and thus our democracy?

Timothy Noah: Great point. Though the Luo tribesman went to Harvard. In the United States, class questions get really complicated really fast.

Arlington, Va.: Who is in this working class? I make $150,000 a year and my wife makes $100,000 a year. I work 50 hours a week and my wife works 45 hours a week. We have investments we have made, but we do not live off these investments. We are both first in our families to be college-educated and have worked hard to get where we are at 32 and 31. Why are we not considered working-class?

In addition, Obama and Clinton want to increase the Social Security, income and investment taxes. Where in the Constitution does it say that people like my wife and I have to support people who did not plan wisely (housing bailout, retirement and health care). I don't mind paying my fair share, but my family is not living off inheritance, and has worked hard to get where we are. Why are we not being viewed as working-class for having some self-made success? Will this class warfare work? It blew up on the Democrats in '00 and '04.

Timothy Noah: This gets into another question. Is your class status determined by your present economic situation (which in your case makes you upper-middle class)? Or is it determined by your origins (which, from what your saying, seems like it's working class)? I disagree that when a candidate wants to increase taxes he's engaging in "class warfare," incidentally. Shouldn't those who earn the most money bear the greatest tax burden? That's the theory of progressive taxation.

Seattle: You're funny. You're "reviewing the literature" to see how the working class feels about stuff? How about you admit you and your peers are out of your element and move on to something worthwhile?

Timothy Noah: The only way to find out how a large group of people feels about this or that is to look at the statistics. I'll grant you that it is also valuable to talk to individual people. The fallacy there, however, lies in believing that the people you talk to are representative of the whole. Both approaches are worthwhile. Please don't sneer at me for the method I chose, and I won't sneer at you for preferring contact with individual people.

Woburn, Mass.: Me again. I'm familiar with *What's the Matter With Kansas?*, but I guess my follow up is—so what? If people want to make the decision that social issues are more important to them than economic ones, so be it.

Timothy Noah: The fallacy is that politicians don't really do much about social issues, many of which don't even lend themselves particularly well to government action. They just demonize their opponents as elitists and reap the benefit. It's a stupid way to do politics. Economic issues can more often be addressed concretely, and it would seem logical for people to vote their interests in this area. According to some theorists, they do. According to others, they don't.

Class issues: I didn't find much wrong with his remarks, when taken in context. What I have a problem with is how you (and many of his supporters) have misconstrued his statements so grossly. Worse yet, more than a few of his supporters misconstrued his statements and *agreed* with the misinterpretation. He wasn't calling anyone "deranged." Take another look at what he said—he said that after 25 years of being ignored on one issue (the economy), working-class voters feel that they don't have a say on that, so they become more vocal on the issues where they do have a say. Some of those issues happen to be gun control, religion, immigration and outsourcing.

The guy who worked with religious organizations for half his adult life isn't putting down the religious; the guy who's wary of NAFTA isn't scoffing at people whose jobs may have left because of it. The worst things you can say is that he doesn't get hunting culture, and that he suffered from clumsy wording. So why is it that in your piece you assume he's calling people "deranged"? Why is it that so many of his supporters think he was condescending so-called rednecks—and agreeing with that course of action? I think the fallout says a lot less about his class issues and a lot more about everyone else's.

Timothy Noah: In my piece I said that Obama used the term "bitter" and that Frank used the term "deranged." I do not think Obama is an elitist. I think he said something impolitic, and is paying the price. What really interests me in this isn't Obama at all. What interests me is the question of whether the Democrats have lost the working class—the core constituency of the New Deal coalition—and, if so, why?

Shouldn't those who earn the most money bear the greatest tax burden? : A flat tax is the solution.

Timothy Noah: In other words (you're saying), "No, they shouldn't." I disagree. The progressive income tax was relatively uncontroversial for most of the 20th century. I don't really understand why it's a hot potato now.

Not changing social policy?: Not to nitpick, but the Republicans are within one Supreme Court vote of having very serious consequences on social policy in this country. It is erroneous to say Republicans don't do much about changing

social issues. They may not legislate them, but look at how the court has ruled recently. The changes are there.

Timothy Noah: Point taken.

Princeton, N.J.: What does "class warfare" Arlington, Va., thinks about the three hedge fund managers who "earned" more than $2 billion (with a "B") each last year and paid a lower rate than their janitors—and, undoubtedly, Arlington? Were they practicing "class warfare" when they hired people to lobby Congress to protect their low rate?

Timothy Noah: Good point.

Rural America: To me, the real question should be why isn't anyone taking advantage of all the technological advances to allow people who want to live in small-town America but keep their big city jobs to do so? Home-shoring, telecommuting—it could revitalize large sections of the country, relieve stress on the cities, save gas, let people stay near aging parents ... an economic mix in all areas of the country, rather than an "us" and "them." Then there would be viable communities for people at all income levels.

Timothy Noah: I agree. But my sense is that these opportunities are more readily available to people in higher income brackets.

Prescott, Ariz.: If Barack Obama had done the following instead of saying Americans are "bitter," do you think his coverage would be more or less negative? Left his ill first wife after multiple affairs; participated in the "Keating 5" scandal; gotten so friendly with a young and blonde lobbyist that his staffers felt they had to intervene; done legislative favors for the clients of said lobbyist; voted against the "Bush tax cuts" then later supported them; actively courted the support, and made campaign appearances of a man who calls the Catholic Church the "great whore"; constantly blurred the difference between Shia and Sunni Muslims even while claiming that foreign policy is his strong suit; admitted he didn't know much about economics.

Timothy Noah: You forgot, "Gave a speech this week about what he was going to do for the working class and then announced tax cuts that benefit almost exclusively the rich."

Misconceptions: Bush before he became president had less money budgeted for the military and military families than did either Gore or, subsequently, Kerry—both of whom actually served in a combat zone. Yet military folks voted overwhelmingly for Bush. I bring this up because more and more we see that the reality of what the candidates do flies in the face of what people believe.

Hardly a day goes by that a conservative doesn't say "I'm here to show that the liberals are wrong about there being class warfare between the rich and the poor." Yet, through each Republican administration, the gap between those with wealth and those without widens. Republicans use every bit of evidence of wealth on the liberal side to say: "They are wealthy. We're just like you, we're not the intellectually elitist. Wouldn't you rather sit down to a beer and barbecue with us?" Having been born and raised in the country in both the public and private school system, I have been troubled by one question: Since when did stupidity become a virtue in the U.S.?

Timothy Noah: Since a certain western politician got himself elected president. I'm going to resist the urge to say who.

Chicago: What amazes me is comparing 1994 to 2008. That was "the year of the angry white male," and there was no bigger foe than Hillary Clinton. I think Sen. Clinton's ability to capture the white working-class vote (even if it's only in the Democratic primary so far) shows amazing resilience on her part.

Timothy Noah: Yes, her self-reinvention is quite remarkable. She's going around singing the praises of the 2nd Amendment, when in fact her position on firearms (lukewarm support for gun control and a strong disinclination to discuss the subject) is identical to Obama's. To me, the most appalling thing she's done in courting Pennsylvanians is sit down with Richard Mellon Scaife, who during the 1990s was the key funder of what Hillary Clinton then called the "vast right-wing conspiracy." As I wrote in an earlier "Chatterbox" column, it's preposterous to denounce Jeremiah Wright's "hate speech" while making peace with a world-class hater like Scaife. This is a guy who once accused the Clintons of killing Vince Foster, the deputy White House counsel who killed himself in Bill Clinton's first term. He is also an unbelievable misogynist. There is no chance I could repeat here the word he once called a female reporter from the *Columbia Journalism Review* who was seeking an interview. He went on to say that she was ugly and that her mother was ugly.

Fairport, N.Y.: Let's be blunt here: a large part of this problem—the problem of working-class whites voting against health care and other services for themselves—stems from

expensive media campaigns intended to bamboozle them into keeping the corporate party in power. Why don't people like you ever discuss this? Most of our media is owned by large corporations with outside business interests that dwarf the size of their media division. Of course they're going to use their media division to fool working-class voters into voting the interests of their corporate masters. Isn't that just common sense?

Timothy Noah: That's true, but we, the voters, have a duty not to let ourselves get bamboozled by such propaganda.

San Diego: Above you mention the possibility that the media's fixation on Obama's "bitter" comment may be a way for them to dispute that they are pro-Obama. This is slightly off-topic, but how about if the media did something similar to dispute that they are pro-McCain? He is his party's nominee for president, after all, so the media's tendency to shift focus from him to the Democratic race, as if Obama and Clinton were the only candidates around, is weak.

Timothy Noah: The media did do something to combat the accusation that it is pro-McCain. The *New York Times* ran a piece alleging that McCain got too close to a young female lobbyist. The story was poorly sourced and pretty smarmy, I thought.

Washington: Is there a difference between a Democrat and a progressive (who almost exclusively are Democrats)? I think the progressives—who certainly come across as very elitist—sort of have become the face of the party, whether or not they really are the majority of Democrats.

Timothy Noah: I really hate that word, "progressives." For one thing, it's historically faulty. The real progressives of the early 20th century more closely resemble today's center-left Democrats. I think the best word to describe these folks is the much-reviled term, "liberal." I don't mind calling myself a liberal. Anybody care to join me?

Chicago: To me, Obama's "bitter"/"cling" comments didn't sound so out-of-the-ordinary compared to what else I have heard Obama say throughout this campaign. When I hear him speak about the middle class or working class or even the poor, I never get the feeling that he is showing empathy for others, for people who are suffering. I get the sense from him that he sees it as an academic exercise. Maybe the word I am looking for is "aloof"? I can't really explain it well, but basically, instead of seeming to be interested in solving those specific (economic) problems, he too often uses those as examples of something "bigger"—the need for "hope," etc. It seems that the economic problems are secondary to another goal.

But those are the things that people want from a president ... they want the president to create jobs, improve the economy, etc. This impression only increases when I hear comments from Mrs. Obama (the idea that "our souls are broken"). Bill Clinton always was mocked for his "I feel your pain"; maybe Obama's afraid of similarly being mocked. Your thoughts? Have you heard similar reactions?

Timothy Noah: A lot of people have compared Obama's appeal to that of JFK. One quality they share is a certain coolness. I think that coolness is mostly a positive quality—Obama, like JFK, tends not to get hot under the collar and say stupid things, as McCain will occasionally do—but it probably hurts him a little in this context. A lot of people have brought up Obama's comment earlier in the campaign about the price of arugula at Whole Foods, which reminded many of Mike Dukakis' elitist-sounding suggestion that farmers plant Belgian endive. Dukakis is sort of the counterexample to JFK, a candidate whose coolness came to be seen as coldness and aloofness.

Baltimore: I wonder how much the "working class" even goes to the polls now? Barbara Erenreich, who spent a lot of time working marginal jobs as background for her book *Nickeled and Dimed* said that, by the time her months among the working class and/or working poor we're over, she was surprised to find out how angry she was at their near total apathy about politics and their unending discussions of TV shows and pop culture.

This certainly contrasts with the working class of the 1920s-1950s, the heyday of unionism and political involvement. A good friend of mine, a Georgetown graduate who lives in Canton, Ohio and who spent his summers in the 1960s working in a steel mill there, truly believes that the ruling elites deliberately have let the public schools decay nationwide in order to produce millions of working-class people who don't have enough education to ask questions. Paranoid? Maybe.

Timothy Noah: I do think that's a little paranoid. The ruling elites suffer, too, when their workers lack sufficient education to do their jobs well. However, this gives me an opportunity to plug Barbara's excellent entry about Obama's "bitter" flap in ***Slate***'s XX Factor blog.

Washington: I think Thomas Frank in *What's the Matter With Kansas?* hits the nail right on the head when he argues that the Democratic Party has veered to the right on economic matters to

the point it is virtually indistinguishable from the Republican Party. If this is the case, it should come as no surprise then that working-class voters acutely recognize that no political party is looking out for its interests anymore despite the populist rhetoric that politicans employ come election time to lure voters their way.

What is missing from your ***Slate*** analysis, however, is the argument of what can be done by working-class people about this situation by working within the democratic system. I always have believed that working people need their own political structure that looks out for their own interests and that is independent of both Republicans and Democrats—yet such attempts always have failed in the U.S. or have been coopted by the major parties. I think the time is ripe for a wide-ranging discussion of this option. I wonder what your thoughts are on such a bottom-up, grassroots, uprising strategy for working-class folks?

Timothy Noah: I think the answer is a revival of unionism, and the best start would be to pass legislation removing some of the barriers to union organizing and activity put in place over the past 50 years. Tom Geoghegan's *Which Side Are You On?* speaks to this point (and is a great book on its own).

Northeast Liberal: Maybe I'm just bitter, but I see a double standard underlying the analysis of Obama's remarks in (of course) San Francisco. It appears that Obama (and people like me) are accused of not understanding small-town Americans and of being condescending toward them, and that the burden is on us to understand them better. No one ever suggests that "real Americans" do not understand us and our own cultural and philosophical backgrounds and leanings, and no one puts any burden on small-town Americans to learn more about us and try to understand us better. Why is that?

Timothy Noah: Because, I'm guessing, you belong to the upper-middle class, and government doesn't really exist to serve the needs of the upper-middle class. Nor should it, in my view.

Timothy Noah: Thanks, everybody, for a stimulating hour of questions. I wish I had more answers for you.

the green lantern

Not in My Back Yucca

What are our alternatives for storing radioactive waste?

By Brendan I. Koerner
Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 8:11 AM ET

It seems like the good citizens of Nevada would sooner elect an orangutan as governor than let the federal government fill Yucca Mountain with radioactive waste. Can't blame them, I guess, but that spent nuclear fuel has to go somewhere. What, then, are the alternatives to stashing it beneath Yucca Mountain?

For the moment, the only real option is to leave the waste where it was created, encased in metal cylinders and stowed in concrete bunkers. Barring the machinations of some truly ingenious evildoers, that approach should get us safely through the next century or so. Unfortunately, we'll still have another 9,900 years to go until the waste becomes no more radioactive than unmined uranium. So, we better hope that over the next 100 years, our nation's best and brightest figure out a feasible workaround—one that may involve proton beams or (the Lantern kids you not) extremely hardy microbes.

Before we get to the gee-whiz proposals, though, a little Yucca Mountain background is in order. Though the facility has been in the works since the Reagan administration and has already cost upward of $8 billion, there's a good chance it will never store a spoonful of waste. The state of Nevada has vowed to litigate the project to death, citing concerns over the potential for groundwater contamination and the prevalence of earthquakes in the area. (Nevada's point-by-point anti-Yucca dossier can be found here [PDF].)

Strict rationalists pooh-pooh the Silver State's concerns, pointing out that the odds of a catastrophe are vanishingly small. But when it comes to the specter of radiation, people are rarely comforted by actuarial arguments. Unless the government can prove that Yucca Mountain's storage casks won't leak a speck of waste over the next 10 millenniums—a scientific impossibility—Nevadans generally want nothing to do with the project. (The Lantern sees both sides of the argument—he likes to think of himself as a proud man of reason, but he also remembers being seriously freaked out by Chernobyl as a child.)

As a result of Nevada's litigiousness—as well as Democratic Sen. Harry Reid's political maneuvering—the opening of Yucca Mountain has already been delayed for a decade. The best-case scenario now has the facility opening sometime around 2020; the Lantern guesses, however, that the project is kaput, especially if there's a Democrat in the White House come January. (Both Clinton and Obama are opposed to Yucca Mountain; McCain is not.) But Yucca Mountain's woes may not be a great tragedy, seeing as how the project would solve little over the long term: According to a high-ranking official at Argonne National Laboratory, the nation will need nine Yucca-sized waste

repositories by 2100, assuming that nuclear-power generation increases by 1.8 percent annually.

The good news is that we've got a viable stopgap solution: dry-cask storage. After nuclear fuel rods have been used up, they're cooled in pools of water. After five years of such cooling, they can be placed in sealed casks made of heat-resistant metal alloys and concrete. This technique is currently used at 31 locations nationwide, all of which must be licensed by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The NRC asserts that there has never been a single incident at any of these sites.

The conventional wisdom is that these dry-cask storage sites will suffice for at least the next 100 years. But they'll fill up at some point, and some worry over their vulnerability to terrorist attacks, natural catastrophes, or theft. The whole rationale for Yucca Mountain was to secure all high-level nuclear waste in a single, safe location; with that project now imperiled, what's a nuclear nation to do?

Trust with every fiber of our beings that science keeps marching forward. Nevada's anti-Yucca dossier neatly summarizes this optimistic attitude: "It is almost inconceivable that progress in waste treatment and disposal methods will cease over the next century." There are several promising techniques in the pipeline, starting with accelerator-driven transmutation of waste, in which proton beams are used to reduce a substance's half-life. ATW is a favorite of Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., who gives it a shout-out on his anti-Yucca Mountain page. But skeptics claim that ATW is far too expensive and laborious, and will never be able to handle anything more than a token amount of waste.

There is also great interest in using microbes to either trap dangerous isotopes in calcite deposits or cleanse uranium from groundwater. And chemists at Northwestern University recently announced that layered metal sulfides show promise for the remediation of certain types of nuclear waste.

While these cleanup techniques are at least several decades away from commercial viability, we already know how to recycle nuclear waste. Nuclear recycling is every bit as controversial as Yucca Mountain, however. Several European nations currently use the PUREX process, in which spent fuel is bathed in nitric acid so that uranium and plutonium can be extracted. But PUREX isn't used in the United States because of its high cost, as well as the perceived risk of weapons proliferation.

Many in the American nuclear-power industry favor the development of UREX+, a recycling process that ostensibly addresses these concerns. The end products could then be used in advanced burner reactors. But UREX+ has plenty of critics (PDF), who contend that the process is neither as clean nor as proliferation-resistant as it's cracked up to be.

Perhaps our best hope for resolving all this he-said, she-said rancor is the development of nuclear fusion plants, which will theoretically produce waste that remains extraordinarily lethal for mere decades, as opposed to millennia. Hey, you never know—though the Lantern puts the odds at slightly less than those of a robotic horse winning the Kentucky Derby.

Is there an environmental quandary that's been keeping you up at night? Send it to ask.the.lantern@gmail.com, and check this space every Tuesday.

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the undercover economist

Steal This Book! Please!

Why software and media companies should *encourage* piracy (sometimes).

By Tim Harford

Saturday, April 12, 2008, at 7:20 AM ET

What should record labels, software giants, and other media companies do about digital piracy? There are two obvious options: Get tough and defend intellectual-property rights with every legal and technological trick in the book, or tolerate some illegal copying in the hope of generating buzz and making money in some other way.

This is a debate that generates strong opinions, and where you stand seems to depend on whether you're an industry accountant or a new-economy guru. It was Chris Anderson, the editor-in-chief of *Wired*, who coined the phrase *freeconomics* to describe giving cheap things away for free in order to create buzz.

But look closer and you realize that the corporate suits aren't all adopting the same strategy. The music industry doesn't seem able to make up its mind: First it turned a blind eye to traditional mix-tape piracy, then it cracked down on illegal file-sharing while raising the price of CDs, and finally it slashed the price of CDs in an attempt to compete head-on with downloads, legal and illegal.

Even more perplexing, Microsoft seems to hold two opinions at once: doing its best to prevent piracy on the Xbox console but (as far as this outsider can tell) accepting that piracy of its Office suite of software is a fact of life.

Karen Croxson is a young economist at Oxford University who claims that there is method in the madness. In an article called "Promotional Piracy," she argues that there will never be a single correct trade-off between sales lost to piracy and sales generated by the buzz from pirated copies in circulation. That is because there are different kinds of potential consumers in different markets, or even in the same market at different times. A

company's most profitable response to piracy depends on what sort of consumers it is facing.

For example, the consumers who would pay for console games if given no alternative are probably the type of consumers who are happy to use pirated copies: tech-savvy youngsters. That means that an extra pirated copy in the console market is quite likely to mean a lost sale.

But the customers who will pay most for corporate software are, well, corporations. They won't want to risk being caught and sued for piracy, so an extra pirated copy in the corporate software market probably isn't a lost sale at all. The guilty party isn't a customer, but a home user or a student who would never have stumped up full price. Thanks to piracy, though, that home user is now learning how to use Word and PowerPoint and making the legal copies of Microsoft Office more valuable.

Croxson can even make sense of the record industry's apparent volte-face with the pricing of CDs. When Napster was starting up and piracy was still a marginal activity, it made sense for record labels to write off a few cheapskate customers as a marketing expense and raise average prices to everyone else—presumably the older, more prosperous customers who were willing to pay for legal music. But as the pirated sector embraced even those customers, the best strategy was to fight back by slashing prices.

In Croxson's world, then, "promotional piracy" is an alternative to discounted pricing. Both approaches are a way for companies to advertise their products or expand their user base. And as with discounted pricing, promotional piracy makes sense only if there is a decent supply of customers who will eventually pay full price, which is not always true.

Corporations may be able to do more to maximize the gains or minimize the losses from piracy. It is already common for software producers to offer a free demonstration version of their products. Perhaps we should now look out for another variant on freeware. Sandwiched in between the giveaway and the maximum-security offering would go the compromise: a medium-quality product at a decent price that is not too hard to steal. If Croxson is right, for some industries, piracy is a wonderful distribution channel.

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today's blogs

Worst. Debate. Ever.

By Michael Weiss

Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 6:22 PM ET

Worst. Debate. Ever. Bloggers are all over Wednesday night's Democratic debate in Philadelphia. Was it Obama's worst performance ever? Or were ABC News moderators George Stephanopoulos and Charlie Gibson devilishly underhanded in pressing him about his "bitter" comments, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, and his relationship with Weather Underground member William Ayers?

At his personal blog, *Philadelphia Inquirer* columnist **Dick Polman** does an extensive debate postmortem, opening with: "Just how bad was Barack Obama's debate performance last night? Not as bad as Britney Spears' song-and-dance routine at the MTV Awards. Not as bad as Bill Buckner's legendary error during the '86 World Series. Not as bad as Bob Dylan's music during his God phase. Not as bad as John Travolta's Scientology cinema experiment in Battlefield Earth. Not as bad as Mike Dukakis' fateful ride in a military tank." But he advises Obama to "get real." Obama supporter **Andrew Sullivan**'s initial reaction is less kind: "It was a lifeless, exhausted, drained and dreary Obama we saw tonight. I've seen it before when he is tired, but this was his worst performance yet on national television. He seemed crushed and unable to react. This is big-time politics and he's up against the Clinton wood-chipper. But there is no disguising the fact that he wilted, painfully."

The *New Republic*'s Noam Scheiber at the **Stump** gives Obama some credit: "[T]he real story of the night was the crazy gauntlet of questioning ABC put Obama through. The first half of the debate felt like a 45-minute negative ad, reprising the most chewed over anti-Obama allegations (bittergate, Jeremiah Wright, patriotism) and even some relatively obscure ones (his vague association with former Weatherman radical Bill Ayers)." Todd Beeton at liberal **MyDD** sighs: "Although it was somewhat redeemed in the final half hour, I feel like taking a shower after that debate. It was tabloid hour on ABC, and certainly Obama did get the bulk of the more disgusting questions."

Michael Tomasky at the *Guardian*'s **Comment Is Free** is appalled: "The main point is how poorly the inanity and irresponsibility of this approach serves a country in which people are genuinely worried about genuinely important things." And the **Huffington Post**'s Greg Mitchell calls it a "shameful night for the U.S. media." But at the *New York Times*' **Campaign Stops** blog, David Brooks says no picking on the media: "I thought the questions were excellent. The journalist's job is to make politicians uncomfortable, to explore evasions, contradictions and vulnerabilities. Almost every question tonight did that. The candidates each looked foolish at times, but that's their own fault. We may not like it, but issues like Jeremiah Wright, flag lapels and the Tuzla airport will be important in the fall."

Case in point: Brian Faughnan at the conservative *Weekly Standard*'s **Blog** suggests Obama lied about a 1996 gun rights questionnaire, which he says he did not fill out in his own

handwriting: "Short of a handwriting expert weighing in, it probably ought not matter that much. Obama has a voting record on guns now -- not a very good one as far as gun rights advocates go, but he has one. If he then supported outlawing guns, he ought to acknowledge that he has changed his mind." And **Marc Ambinder** says if Obama can't stand the heat, well, you know the rest: "Obama's going to be the next president of the United States, maybe. The most powerful person in the world. And questions about his personal associations, his character, his personal beliefs, his statements at private fundraisers — the answers to these questions tell us a lot."

At **Majikthise**, Lindsay Beyerstein, a freelance journliast, says: "Bigtime pundits have a glaring conflict of interest when it comes to setting the national agenda. They like the symbolic issues because they're good at free-associating about them. Should the discussion shift to substantive issues, the pundits might have to cede the floor to experts."

Ann Althouse does our job for us, scanning the collected wisdom of the 'sphere and finding that: "1. It was bad of ABC to trouble Obama with questions about his attitudes and character instead of offering him opportunities to expound policy. 2. Obama is tired. Lackluster. 3. Hillary was intense. AND: Let me reveal what I think. 1. It was *good*." She adds: "Hillary bloomed with bright energy in the environment of ABC's questions. She can reel out the policy when that's what's required. But cruel political fighting unleashes her super powers." Greg Sargent at **TPM Election Central** praises Obama's day-after tactics: "One thing Obama has been very adept at doing: When he takes a political hit, he neutralizes it by decrying it as the very sort of negative politicking he's trying to rise above. In this case, he did this by describing the debate as 'precisely why I'm running for president -- to *change* that kind of politics.' "

Read more debate reactions. In ***Slate***, John Dickerson called it a win for Hillary, but just barely. **Trailhead** offers a postmortem.

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today's blogs

Legal Injection

By Bidisha Banerjee
Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 5:32 PM ET

Bloggers react to a Supreme Court decision sanctioning lethal injections, ponder President Bush's global-warming plan, and scrutinize the battle between Rob Lowe and his nanny.

Legal injection: The Supreme Court has upheld Kentucky's right to use its current lethal-injection practices in a 7-2 decision that featured seven different opinions. Executions across the country have been on hold since the court took up the *Baze v. Rees* case in October but could resume soon.

"If defense lawyers do now mount new challenges, they will have to seek new court orders delaying specific executions, because the Supreme Court had not issued a formal moratorium on executions, even though — as a practical reality — it had not allowed any scheduled execution to occur while it was considering the *Baze* case. Thus, states would be free to schedule new execution dates," notes **SCOTUSblog**'s Lyle Denniston.

Supreme Court junkies are weighing in on the "fractured majority" backing the opinion. Pointing to the disagreement between Justices Antonin Scalia and John Paul Stevens on whether the death penalty is a deterrent, **Concurring Opinions**' Dave Hoffman, a law professor, emphasizes, "Supreme Court Justices don't have the training or staff necessary to sort through competing empirical studies and reach a definitive conclusion. … And even were the Court to appoint a 'special statistics master,' can a constitutional question of this magnitude turn on econometric rabbit-holes?"

Commenting at the **Volokh Conspiracy**, TomB writes, "Justice Stevens delivers a rare and refreshing thing -- an honest, straightforward opinion. He shockingly admits that he opposes the death penalty for his own personal reasons, and can't support his opinion in a legal or constitutional way."

Xenophilia's Xeno blasts the decision: "The current system is a drug induced paralyzed torture resulting in a very slow painful death. Some innocent people have been executed this way. Guilty or not, ANY revenge killing, where no life is at currently risk from the convicted person, is the filthy work of a barbaric uncivilized society. Two wrongs make two wrongs." In a similar vein, **EconTech**'s Computer Economist muses, "I'm still waiting for the AMA to strip the license of any physician that participates in the development of execution technologies or executions themselves for breach of oath." And **American Nonsense** concludes, "So the Court's not getting rid of the death penalty, or of this particular method. Instead, as that three-Justice plurality writes, it's up to us if we want to eliminate the death penalty, or make its infliction less barbaric."

Read more about the Supreme Court decision. Read the opinion. **Ann Althouse** summarizes the different opinions.

Climate change: In a speech Wednesday, President Bush called for "realistic long-term and intermediate goals" to stem carbon emissions, setting 2025 as a target date for stopping the growth of greenhouse gases. Liberals say it's not enough; conservatives say it's too much.

Calling Bush's announcement a "political earthquake," Iain Murray fumes on *National Review*'s **Corner**, "[A]ny mention of

mandatory emissions limits amounts to an invitation to a cap and trade regime at the very least. Once you've conceded that, then you have an open invitation not to something weaker, but to something stronger than Lieberman-Warner. And it's just crazy to propose something that will raise energy prices when we stand on the brink of a recession!" **Real Clear Politics**' Tony Blankley shudders to think how this can empower Democrats: "This is important. Whatever restraint likely to be exercised by the Democratic Party majority next year will be induced by the political fear that the Republicans would be able to say I told you so if the Democrats' policies contract the economy and put yet more people out of work. That will give them political cover for the entire program, which, whatever it may try to do regarding 'global warming,' certainly will give governments and international organizations vastly more control over the United States economy."

But liberals are just jaded. Quebec socialist **Abdul-Rahim** worries, "Reduction targets would be preferable, but that cannot be expected from an American president, not at this stage. Let us hope that in the long run this will be the beginning of a long-term, hard-hitting strategy to help remedy climate change." And Kate Sheppard at the *American Prospect*'s **Tapped** dismisses the speech as "more hot air," pointing out that Bush is calling for decisions about emissions control to be made by politicians, not scientists.

Read more about Bush's global-warming plan.

Hang Lowe: Bloggers have been dishing on the competing lawsuits between Rob Lowe and his nanny ever since April 7, when Lowe wrote in his **Huffington Post** blog, "No one intimidates my family. My wife and I have many former and long term employees, all of whom know this woman, who can and will refute any claims of anything inappropriate in our home, or anywhere else. We will defend ourselves with vigor and without fear." Lowe filed suit against Jessica Gibson and two other employees for breach of contract and other allegations; Gibson has since sued Lowe, claiming he groped her. She went on the *Today Show* Wednesday with uber-lawyer Gloria Allred.

Bloggers are split about how to interpret the brouhaha. "[W]e have our suspicions about Lowe's claims of extortion, but Gibson's shaky performance this morning hasn't lent her much credibility either," suggests **Jossip**.

"Unless she has a videotape, it sounds like a bunch of he said - she said to me," opines **TalkLeft**'s Jeralyn, who goes on to point out that Lowe's pre-emptive strike against Gibson shows that blogs are serving as a new form of press release.

"Jessica smirked and smiled after every question was asked. In my opinion, Jessica appeared to be lying," claims the **Hollywood Grind**. "Gloria's presentation seemed like she is abusing the sexual harassment laws to try to get her client money, even though the Lowe's appear innocent in my opinion."

Read more about Rob Lowe v. his nanny. Watch Jessica Gibson's appearance on the *Today Show*. Peruse her legal complaint.

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today's blogs

Bitter Aftertaste

By Michael Weiss
Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 6:07 PM ET

Bitter aftertaste: A host of new polls have been released since Obama's "bitter" remarks in San Francisco. Gallup has him maintaining his commanding lead nationally over Hillary Clinton (51 percent to 40 percent). SurveyUSA shows that if the Pennsylvania primary were held today, Hillary would wallop Barack by double digits. Quinnipac University concludes that Obama's traction in Pennsylvania has been halted (Clinton leads him 50 percent to 44 percent), with no noticeable change in his favor since its April 8 poll. However, one-fourth of the state's Clinton supporters say they'd back John McCain if Obama were the nominee.

Responding to the Gallup poll, **Andrew Sullivan** wonders if it was taken too soon after the "bitter" comments: "Sometimes it takes a while for an event to permeate and be absorbed by voters. Clinton, for example, just began using the Obama comments in a negative ad yesterday. That could amplify the impact." But, assessing an America Research Poll that finds Clinton leading Obama in Pennsylvania by 11 points, Ed Morrissey at **Hot Air** concludes: "Prior to calling small-town middle America a bunch of xenophobic bigots who cling to guns and religion out of economic bitterness, Obama had made headway in taking those voters away from Hillary Clinton. He had succeeded in convincing them that Hillary was trying to destroy the Democratic party by creating unnecessary divisions. His sop to the Frisco liberal elite has completely undermined that argument and left him vulnerable once again to the overall electability counterargument."

At **Below the Beltway** Doug Mataconis says: "Clinton needs a big win in Pennsylvania to maintain a credible campaign. If she has a small win and then loses big in North Carolina and Indiana two weeks later, then the logic for continuing becomes harder to accept. If by some chance she loses Pennsylvania, then the race is over and she just needs to accept it." Justin Gardner at **Donklephant** concurs and concludes, "But just because it should be [over] doesn't mean Hillary won't take this thing to the convention … which is seeming more and more likely as the days go by. I think her campaign honestly believes that Obama

can't win it in the Fall so they'll continue to bloody him up until he's actually as unelectable as they think he is."

Joe Gandelman at the **Moderate Voice** writes of the Quinnipac study: "What's shaping up: the increasing likelihood that John McCain—still is a strong 'brand name' among Democrats and independents for his past history of independence from his party line on many issues—will benefit from a large chunk of Democratic voters or stay-home Democrats as he continues to rally his party's base."

Read more about the latest polls. In ***Slate***, "Election Scorecard" analyzes the latest data, and our delegate calculator lets you figure out Clinton's odds. John Dickerson analyzes Hillary's response ad.

All dressed up and no one to meet: All major Israeli politicians from the prime minister to the opposition leader have declined to meet with Jimmy Carter on his planned a tour of the Holy Land, which includes a controversial meeting with Khalid Mashaal, the political head of Hamas, in Damascus later in the week. The U.S. State Department and all three presidential candidates have rebuked Carter for his upcoming kibitz with the terrorist organization.

Marty Peretz at the *New Republic*'s **Spine** slams Carter: "According to the Associated Press, the former president was welcomed in Ramallah by one Hamas official, Nasser al-Shaer. Jimmy Carter executed the two kiss ritual, one on each cheek. This is not lust in the heart. This is mischief in the brain, as only Carter can do mischief."

Rootless Cosmopolitan Tony Karon applauds Carter, adding: "I'd say Carter has reason to suspect that despite the pro-forma criticisms of his Meshal meeting from Secretary of State Condi Rice as well as the McCain-Clinton-Obama roadshow, the backlash won't be anything like the firestorm created by his apartheid book."

Commentary's **Abe Greenwald** laughs at Carter's self-portrayal as a "private citizen," noting he's been granted access to places, like Arafat's tomb, that no private citizen would be: "He's just Joe Sixpack on vacation. It's not as if he'll be a keynote speaker at the 2008 Democratic convention or anything. If he was, he could work wonders. Not only does his family respect Arafat—Carter says they like Obama, too. A regular guy who's able to do so much could really sway people with an endorsement like that."

Meanwhile, **Meryl Yourish** plucks this chestnut from an interview Carter gave with *Ha'aretz*: "In a democracy, I realize that you don't need to talk to the top leader to know how the country feels. When I go to a dictatorship, I only have to talk to one person and that's the dictator, because he speaks for all the people. But in a democracy like Israel, there is a wide range of opinions and that counterbalances the disappointment that I have in not meeting with the people shaping Israeli power now in the government." To which Yourish replies: "Did he really just say that he doesn't have to talk to people in a dictatorship because their opinions don't count? That explains completely how he can hobnob with dictators and think so highly of them. That explains a whole lot, actually. Either that, or the man is going senile."

Read more about Carter's trip.

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today's blogs

Bitter Business

By Susan Daniels
Monday, April 14, 2008, at 3:43 PM ET

Bloggers are debating Barack Obama's "bitter" words and wondering about Texan polygamists.

Bitter business: Barack Obama struggled to explain himself this weekend after comments he made about small-town Pennsylvania voters ignited a flap promptly dubbed "Bittergate." (See the original **Huffington Post** item here.) At issue is Obama's comment that when faced with economic hardship, small-town Americans "get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations." Democratic rival Hillary Clinton and Republican nominee-apparent John McCain immediately responded, with Clinton calling the comments "elitist," "demeaning," and "out of touch."

"I don't see how anyone known to have uttered these words can be elected President," says an outraged John Hinderaker at conservative **Power Line**. Mike Allen at **Politico** lists "12 reasons 'bitter' is bad for Obama."

But perhaps "Bittergate" is a misnomer. "While the description of small town Pennsylvanians as 'bitter' is certainly impolitic, many political analysts say it's what follows that adjective that is potentially so alienating," says Jake Tapper at ABC News' **Political Punch**. At **Ankle Biting Pundits**, Patrick Hynes concurs: "The only other angle the media seems interested in covering is the unfolding drama of how well or how poorly Sen. Obama is handling the crisis," he says. "No one is passing judgment on the content of what he has said; a sure plus for Sen. Obama." And Alan Stewart at **Donklephant** shifts the discussion to a different adjective: "I don't know how else to interpret the use of the word 'cling' but as condescension. It's a word of pity—we feel sorry for those who have to cling."

Ed Morrisey of conservative **Hot Air** spells out Obama's real gaffe: "He assumes that gun ownership, religious faith, and a desire to enforce border security grows out of a mental defect or simple petulance. … His cure is a huge, whopping dose of government intervention to replace all of it. *That's* the hubris, the condescension, and the elitism rolled up into a precise point." Also at **Hot Air**, Allah Pundit reacts to Obama's admission that "I didn't say it as well as I could have": "If his original statement boiled down to 'religion is the opiate of the masses,' think of this as adding, 'and what wonderful things opiates are.' "

Still, not everyone is mad at Obama. "He's explaining how the American experience has gotten steadily worse because of the bitter partisan battles we've been fighting throughout the last three decades," argues Justin Gardner at **Donklephant**. "[I]t was bad politics to frame his perfectly banal point in the precise way that he did," allows Obama supporter Scott Lemieux at **Lawyers, Guns and Money**. "But wealthy urban conservatives and quasi-liberal pundits pretending to be offended on behalf of working-class rural people *is* a stupid kabuki, as well as considerably more condescending than anything Obama said." Bitter Jonon at the brand-spanking-new **Bitter Voters for Obama** offers a translation for the confused: "[W]hat Obama was saying is that in times when you can't trust the government, people turn to issues and comforts that they can depend on. Period. Any other interpretation is a failure of comprehension." (And while you're at it, don't forget your "I Am Bitter" T-shirt.)

Steve Benen at the liberal **Carpetbagger Report** is worried that the long primary process and resultant issues like this are bad for the party. "We now have two dominant forces—the Republican machine and the Clinton machine—simultaneously arguing, vehemently and loudly, that the likely Democratic nominee is an elitist, out-of-touch liberal who doesn't like working families and embraces un-American values."

Read more about the Obama flap. Follow the discussion on ***Slate***'s XX Factor. Also in ***Slate***, **Mickey Kaus** explains the four big problems with Obama's comments.

Yearning for what, now? The raid on a polygamist compound outside Eldorado, Texas, earlier this month continues to spark discussion among bloggers as custody hearings begin this week. In what may be the largest child-welfare case in U.S. history, 416 children were removed from the Yearning for Zion ranch and placed in protective custody. The raid was originally sparked by phone calls from an unidentified 16-year-old girl to a domestic violence hotline reporting sexual and physical abuse by her 50-year-old husband.

"Imagine if everything in our computers, cameras, cell phones, and videotapes were discovered by Martians. That is pretty much what this is: an enormous time capsule of a way of life. I think there will need to be an anthropologist and genealogist and perhaps a few former FLDS folks or religious studies experts called in to make sense of the evidence from this society and what it actually means," says Hari Sreenivasan, a Dallas correspondent for CBS on **Couric and Co**, writing about the mountains of evidence carted away. Gadfly at the **Mountain Moderate**, in a no-nonsense post titled "Texas Busts Perverts Utah Wouldn't Touch," writes that the sect members didn't count one thing when they moved to Texas from Utah: "What they didn't figure, though, was that the Texans had no motivation to look the other way … so the Rangers kicked the door in and hauled the kids out." At **Nuts & Boalts** Patrick, a UC-Berkeley law student, is looking for volunteers to help represent the children.

Not everyone is lining up against the polygamists, though. Scott Henson at **Grits for Breakfast**, his blog about Texas criminal law, points out that the 16-year-old caller has not been identified and that Texas laws may have unfairly targeted the sect. Madcap at **sacrilicio** observes, "So the sect told their children that the outside world was 'hostile and immoral' and what does the outside world do? Take them from their homes and families and crowd them into social services facilities, and then threaten to place them with foster families. Say what you will about Joseph Smith and his magic stone goggles, but the sect seems to have nailed at least one prediction."

Commenting on it all at **Jezebel**, a stunned drunkexpatwriter remarks: "Wow. It sorta makes Scientology look sane."

Read more about the polygamist sect.

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today's papers

It's About Time

By Daniel Politi

Friday, April 18, 2008, at 6:18 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with a look at how the number of hours worked by people in the United States has been on a downward spiral lately. Although attention is usually paid to the official unemployment number, which has remained pretty constant, the truth is that many are having trouble making ends meet because they're being forced to work fewer hours and there's less overtime to go around. In addition, the number of people being forced to pursue part-time employment is on the rise. *USA Today* leads with an interesting in-house analysis that shows flights are taking longer than 20 years ago. In 2007, the average flight traveled at about 342 mph, while in 1998 the number was 358 mph. The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with word that U.S. commanders in Iraq have already begun releasing detainees. It's all part of a process to clean house that could set more than half of the 23,000 prisoners free.

The *Washington Post* has its second pope-related lead in as many days and focuses on how Pope Benedict XVI met with a small group of people who were sexually abused by priests. The unannounced meeting was held after the pope's huge Mass at Nationals Park, where almost 50,000 people gathered, and the pope, for the third time this week, talked about the sexual abuse scandals. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with news that the California government will review health insurance policies that were canceled in order to determine whether companies acted inappropriately. The practice is particularly controversial because companies usually carry it out after a patient falls ill and submits medical bills. If an independent arbiter finds that the policy was canceled unfairly, then the patient would have to be reinstanted, and the insurer would be responsible for the medical bills during the time that a patient was without insurance.

A decline in the number of hours worked "is a critical indicator that the nation may well be on the verge of a recession, if not already in one," says the *NYT*. The last time there's been a decline in the total hours worked it was right before the 2001 recession. Meanwhile, earnings are also decreasing and are not making up for the increases in the cost of food and fuel. Of course, this is all a vicious cycle, because as people have less money to spend, they have to give up certain purchases they might have made before (restaurant meals, piano lessons), which, in turn, means these providers also start facing economic hardship. Adding to the hardship is that credit, which would have been a natural response to make ends meet in previous years, is much more difficult to obtain.

The United States is trying to reshape its detention facilities and policies in Iraq, and as part of this redo, it's releasing thousands of prisoners. Some estimate the number of prisoners remaining after this process will be as small as 2,500, which, of course, raises the question of why the other 20,000 have remained incarcerated for so long. The detention facilities have helped stir up anti-American sentiment, particularly since a suspected insurgent could be held for years without ever seeing the inside of a courtroom. The paper says the U.S. military hopes these mass releases will encourage Sunnis to be more active in the Iraqi political process.

The *NYT* goes inside with a look at how the United States is building a concrete wall that would divide Sadr City. The idea is that the side of Sadr City closest to the Green Zone would be turned into a protected area so reconstruction projects can take place. The paper reminds readers that concrete barriers have been used in other parts of Iraq, and they "have often proved to be an effective tool in blunting insurgent attacks."

Everyone points out that a suicide bomber killed more than 50 people in a village that is about 90 miles north of Baghdad. It was the second major bombing this week in a northern province that supposedly had been pacified by U.S. troops. The *LAT* says the bombing was "the latest strike in an internal war among Sunni Arabs, some of whom have aligned themselves with the Americans and others with the group al-Qaida in Iraq."

The *Post* goes inside with a report by the Defense Department's inspector general that says officers in the Air Force lobbied for an unknown company, SMS, to receive a $50 million contract, even though its price was more than double what a competitor had bid. The whole contracting process seems to have been full of improper favoritism. But the most shocking part comes in the story's fifth paragraph when the *Post* reveals that a high-ranking Air Force officer, who is now vice director of the Pentagon's Joint Staff, even included President Bush in his efforts, and he apparently played along. The officer arranged for the commander in chief "to record a video testimonial in the White House Map Room that was included in the SMS contract proposal, demonstrating the company's credibility and access."

USAT contacted "dozens" of uncommitted superdelegates and says most aren't going to make up their minds after Pennsylvania. Although they all recognize that Pennsylvania is an important state, they seem to be emphasizing that it's hardly the only one that matters from now on. But they say they won't be undecided forever and will have chosen their candidate by July 1 to try to prevent the fight from reaching the convention. The *NYT* also contacted superdelegates (15), and most of them said they haven't been swayed by Clinton's attacks on Obama and his qualifications for office. In addition, these superdelegates say they don't think his gaffes and personal relationships that came up in this week's debate are really that important.

Speaking of the debate, the *LAT* fronts, and almost everyone has a piece on, the intense criticism of the performance by ABC's moderators that was evident in the blogosphere yesterday. The main complaint was that the first half of the debate was almost exclusively devoted to targeting controversies surrounding Obama's personal associations and gaffes rather than substantive issues. George Stephanopoulos, one of the moderators, seems to concede that point but says that it's because Obama is the front-runner. Despite all the valid questions that can be raised about the debate (particularly those stupidly frequent commercials), TP can't help but think there's something else here besides media criticism. For example, everyone cites the *WP*'s Tom Shales, who called the debate "despicable," but he had already come out as a certified Obama backer when he swooned over the Illinois senator's performance after the NBC debate in February (TP joked then that Shales was angling for the job of Obama Girl). There was also much criticism from the Huffington Post, which is pretty much pro-Obama all the time, and a column by Will Bunch ("the utter phoniness of the Clinton campaign is kind of old news right now"). Here's what troubles TP: Almost by definition, Obama's core base consists of highly educated people who'd be more willing, and have the interest, to express their opinions online, right? So is this a case of people really complaining about the debate? Or just complaining because their

candidate did poorly (even some of his most fierce cheerleaders seem to agree with this), and they're hoping that complaining about the debate itself will hide the news of his performance? Yes, it's possible to hide behind the whole "We want more policy" argument, but didn't many of these same people (Tom Shales included!) complain that there was too much health care discussion in the last debate? Ultimately, is there really a lot of outrage or is the outrage louder because it's being done by those with the megaphones?

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today's papers

There Will Be Executions

By Daniel Politi
Thursday, April 17, 2008, at 6:23 AM ET

The *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* lead with the Supreme Court ruling that lethal injection is a humane, and therefore constitutional, way of executing prisoners. The decision effectively lifts a de facto moratorium on lethal injection, which is the method used by pretty much all the states that have the death penalty, and clears the way for executions to resume across the country. The *LAT* points out that the decision came with a "surprisingly large 7-2 margin," though the *NYT* notes that six of the members of the majority wrote separate opinions, and "there was considerably less agreement among the justices than the vote of 7 to 2 might indicate."

The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with the 21st Democratic debate, which took place less than a week before the crucial Pennsylvania primary. It was a contentious affair, with lots of questions dedicated to personal issues and political back-and-forth as each candidate tried to make the case for why he or she would fare better in a general-election contest against Sen. John McCain. The *Washington Post* leads, while *USA Today* goes across the top, with Pope Benedict XVI acknowledging that the sexual-abuse scandal that involved the Catholic Church wasn't handled properly. The pope made an appearance at the White House, where he met with President Bush, praised American democracy, and talked about the importance of faith in public life. But most significantly, he talked about the sex-abuse scandal for the second day in a row and told bishops they must work hard to bring Americans back into the church.

Many opponents of the death penalty have argued that the three-drug combination used in lethal injections has the possibility to cause excruciating pain if improperly administered. But Chief Justice John Roberts made clear that if the death penalty is constitutional, then there must be a way to carry it out, and "some risk of pain is inherent in any method of execution." Just because there's a risk of pain, it "does not establish the sort of 'objectively intolerable risk of harm' that qualifies as cruel and unusual," wrote Roberts. Justice John Paul Stevens held up the method as constitutional but said that his long tenure at the court has led him to believe that there's no good reason to continue using the death penalty.

In a separate analysis, the *NYT*'s Adam Liptak says that many opponents of the death penalty see "the decision [as] little more than a roadmap for further litigation." Although the justices did leave the door open to future challenges, and some aspects of the decision were left vague, Roberts emphasized that a prisoner can't challenge an upcoming execution simply because a new method would give a "marginally safer alternative."

In yesterday's debate, Obama, the party's clear front-runner, found himself constantly on the defensive for the first part of the debate as the moderators hit him with question after question relating to his past associations and gaffes. The *NYT* says that the ABC moderators "presented a mirror image of earlier debates in which two NBC moderators … repeatedly pressed Mrs. Clinton with tough and provocative questions." Obama had to field questions about his "bitter" remarks, his former pastor, why he doesn't wear an American flag pin, and his association with members of the Weather Underground.

Clinton also clearly was ready for these openings and used whatever opportunity she was given by the moderators to pound away at Obama's candidacy and insist that she's been vetted. Obama also got some criticisms in there and managed to mention Clinton's infamous gaffe in the 1992 campaign (when she said she didn't want to stay at home and bake cookies) as an example of how everyone misspeaks during the campaign (he was also clearly ready for the Weather Underground comment because he brought in a President Clinton pardon to the table). "And I think Sen. Clinton learned the wrong lesson from it, because she's adopting the same tactics," Obama said. The *NYT*'s Alessandra Stanley points out, "If last night was any of measure of success, the tactics work." Overall, most agree that it was a bad night for Obama and one of his "weakest debate performances," as the *NYT* puts it. ***Slate***'s John Dickerson notes Obama has been good about deflecting these sorts of attacks in the past, but "the sheer number of questions may make the next round of primary voters wonder about Obama's foundation."

Besides talking of the "deep shame" of the sexual-abuse scandals, the pope offered nothing in the way of a critique of the church for how the problems were investigated, notes the *WSJ*. He also took a broader look and said the abuse should be seen as a larger pattern in a society that devalues human dignity. The pope warned against growing secularism in general and said it is not enough to go pray once a week because religion must be practiced every day in both private and public.

And the award for the most over-the-top, flowery language to describe the pope's visit goes to the *Post*. "Despite the pontiff's

strong Bavarian accent, some people were surprised by the softness of his voice and his gentle, even shy, demeanor, so at odds with his image as a fierce defender of Catholic orthodoxy."

The *WP* fronts word that the government plans to collect DNA samples from anyone arrested by a federal law-enforcement agency. DNA samples would also be collected from foreigners who are detained, although the details on who precisely it would affect are still unclear. Currently, DNA samples are collected from convicted felons, and privacy advocates are concerned that people would be included in the DNA database even if they haven't committed a crime. One part that seems unclear is whether DNA profiles would be removed from the database when there's no conviction. The *WP* seems to suggest that's the case but then says the Justice Department spokesman says an individual has to request to have his or her information removed.

Both the *NYT* and *WP* front the story of a Chinese student at Duke who got caught up in a dangerous Internet frenzy. She's 20 years old and apparently tried to get pro-Tibet and pro-China demonstrators to talk. Of course, she failed, and the next day a photo of her showed up on the Internet and people began calling her a "traitor." One thing led to another, and soon directions to her parent's house in China were published, and Internet users threatened her life, as well as that of her family. The *Post* takes it a step further and says this is part of a trend where nationalist sentiment is so strong on the Internet that it frequently gets violent and threatening toward anyone who is seen as insulting China.

Seemingly proving that anyone can start over in Dubai, the *NYT* details how Derek Khan, who was sent to prison in 2003 for selling expensive jewelry that he borrowed, "is again a star." He used to be a famous stylist to some of the biggest stars in hip-hop and fashion but quickly fell from grace after his downfall. But he was well-received in Dubai, where media saw his arrival as a sign that the city is blossoming into a fashion capital. "They've never brought it up," Khan said. "A lot of people who have a background come here. It's like a new Australia."

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today's papers

Sneaky Feelings

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 6:29 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with a look at how the bill senators approved last week to help Americans deal with the foreclosure crisis gives big benefits to a wide variety of businesses in the form of tax breaks that could be worth billions of dollars. This is the latest example of how must-pass legislation can be a great opportunity for lobbyists to sneak measures into legislation, and it's particularly evident in this case because many consider it to be the last chance to get anything big passed before the elections take over. *USA Today* leads with two new studies that claim Merck was deceptive in the way it marketed the painkiller Vioxx. Using thousands of pages of documents unearthed in lawsuits that give a rare look into the inner workings of a drug company, the researchers say Merck played down the risk of death in human trials and also wrote dozens of studies that it then passed off as the work of independent doctors.

The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with word that President Bush will propose setting a deadline of 2025 to stop the growth of greenhouse-gas emissions. In a speech today, he also plans to signal that he would be willing to accept legislation to rein in power-plant pollution. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with a new poll that suggests Sen. Hillary Clinton might not be headed for the kind of big victories that she once expected in the upcoming primaries. Her lead in Pennsylvania has now shrunk to five percentage points, and she is behind Sen. Barack Obama by the same number in Indiana. But even if Clinton were to lose Pennsylvania, a vast majority of her supporters (79 percent) say she should keep on fighting, the *Washington Post* reveals in its lead story. In fact, almost 60 percent of Democrats agree that they should keep on fighting "until one of them wins a clear victory" (whether they understand that such a thing is impossible without the input of the superdelegates seems less than clear).

The fact that the Foreclosure Prevention Act included big tax breaks for home builders is hardly news. But today the *NYT* points out that a wide range of "struggling industries," including airlines and automakers, would also be eligible for tax breaks. And in another example of how a bill can become full of measures that are unrelated to its original purpose, it also includes a provision to encourage the production of alternative energy that could add up to around $6 billion over 10 years. It's unclear how far these measures will get, because Democratic leaders in the House have vowed to remove corporate tax breaks from their version.

The *WP* minces no words and says the two articles that will appear today in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* effectively "accuse one of the world's biggest pharmaceutical makers of various forms of scientific fraud." One of the articles says two studies sponsored by Merck to find whether Vioxx could be effective in combating Alzheimer's progression found that those taking the painkiller were three times more likely to die. But Merck reported lower numbers to the FDA and didn't publish the studies until years later.

The other article to be published tomorrow suggests Merck was active in ghostwriting dozens of Vioxx-related studies that then appeared in journals. This seems to show how journals are an important part of the marketing strategy for drug companies, and the editor of *JAMA* says these revelations are "just the tip of the

iceberg." Merck dismissed the studies as a "trial brief masquerading as scientific debate" (most of the authors were paid consultants to plaintiffs' lawyers in lawsuits relating to Vioxx), and doctors whose studies are questioned also deny that they simply signed on to the research that had already been written.

The *WSJ* says today's speech marks a recognition by the administration that the United States is likely to adopt a comprehensive system to curb greenhouse-gas emissions in the next few years. Bush will specifically call for power plants to stop the growth of emissions within the next 10 to 15 years. But despite all the hoopla, he won't actually put forward any specific suggestions or proposals. Regardless of what he does, though, it's clear that Bush will be criticized from both sides of the aisle as environmentalists are likely to portray it as another example of the president dragging his feet while conservatives don't want him to show any kind of flexibility on the issue.

Tuesday marked another deadly day in Iraq, where two bombings killed almost 60 people. Significantly, the deadly bombings were not in areas that have recently seen an increase in violence but rather in cities "that American forces say they had largely taken back from Sunni insurgents," notes the *NYT*. In a Page One story, the *NYT* describes how a company of Iraqi soldiers abandoned a critical position in Sadr City. It's an interesting story, and the paper says it was a "blow to the American effort to push the Iraqis into the lead," but isn't that a stretch considering that it involved 50 soldiers? Of course, if the desertions that were seen earlier this month are continuing, that is certainly significant, but there is no sign that this was part of a larger pattern in Sadr City. An interesting side note: One of the complaints of the Iraqi major was that he had no way of directly communicating with the American troops. The American captain said that was just an excuse, but is this lack of direct communication normal?

Probably the most significant revelation in the *WP*'s new poll is just how much this presidential campaign has hurt Clinton's image. Obama now holds a 10-point lead over Clinton among Democrats, and not only do people widely see him as more electable, 54 percent claim to have an unfavorable view of the former first lady. While 52 percent of Americans considered Clinton "honest and trustworthy" in May 2006, that number has now fallen to 39 percent. The drop is slightly steeper among Democrats, 63 percent of whom now consider her honest, which marks an 18 point decrease from 2006.

USAT fronts a look at how even though Obama claims to receive no money from lobbyists, his campaign has plenty of ties to them. There are 38 people in his fundraising team who work for law firms that lobby the federal government, and most of them are partners who would receive some sort of percentage from the lobbying fees. Obama's spokesman says that while the senator's refusal to take money from lobbyists "isn't a perfect solution … it does reflect Obama's record of trying to change the way that Washington does business."

While some continue to be concerned that the battle between Democrats has gotten too negative and will hurt the party's prospects in November, Douglas Schoen writes in the *WP*'s op-ed page that the negativity hasn't gone far enough. If Clinton has any hope of getting the nomination, "she needs to completely abandon her positive campaign and continue to hammer away at Obama."

In a completely unrelated campaign story, the *NYT* points out that each side is carefully analyzing how their potential supporters eat in order to target them as specifically as possible. The paper's dining section compiled an interesting list of the overarching themes that can help identify supporters. For example, Clinton's like fruit-filled cookies, while Obama's, strangely enough, "intensely dislike vanilla wafers." McCain voters are partial to Hardee's, while Clinton's like Church's Fried Chicken, and Obama's skewed toward Panera Bread. How about snacks? Clinton's supporters prefer Newman's Own Pretzels, McCain's like Sun Chips, and Obama's are partial toward Kettle Chips. Of course, exceptions are plentiful, but these comparisons are more than a little addictive.

The *LAT* points out that new declassified memos show that al-Qaida, for all its reputation as a lean terrorist network, can be as bureaucratic as any government agency. Documents "depict an organization obsessed with paperwork and penny-pinching and afflicted with a damaging propensity for feuds." In a particularly amusing memo for a terrorist organization, an al-Qaida leader accused a militant of stealing money and not submitting the proper "voucher to the accountant" while also reminding him that "furniture ... is not considered private property."

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today's papers

The Power of Two

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, April 15, 2008, at 6:05 AM ET

The *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today* lead with news that Delta Air Lines and Northwest Airlines agreed to merge in a deal that would create the world's largest airline. The companies had been going back and forth for months, and last night the announcement came that they had reached a deal. The new combined airline, which would keep the Delta name, would have more than 800 planes and 75,000 employees. The value of the combined airlines would be approximately $17.7 billion.

The *New York Times* leads with a look at how the slowdown in the economy, coupled with the credit crunch, is leading to a

number of bankruptcies in retail stores across the country. So far, at least eight "midsize chains" have filed for bankruptcy protection, but the trouble is expected to spread to larger stores. The paper gets word that Linens 'n Things, for example, may be preparing to file for bankruptcy. And even companies that can stay out of bankruptcy are closing down stores to make ends meet. The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with the continuing debate between the Democratic presidential contenders over Sen. Barack Obama's remarks that rural voters in Pennsylvania "cling to guns or religion." The paper points out that as Obama and Sen. Hillary Clinton continue to discuss guns and family values, Republicans clearly see an opportunity. Sen. John McCain said he would use Obama's remarks to paint him as an out-of-touch elitist.

The Northwest-Delta deal is far from a foregone conclusion, as the companies still have to get the approval of shareholders as well as pass an antitrust review by the Justice Department. The merger could also come undone becuase of labor problems that almost killed the deal in February (while Delta has come to an agreement with its pilots, the same can't be said for Northwest). Democrats have vowed to hold hearings on Capitol Hill to analyze the effects of the merger. The *LAT* is the most clear in saying that the merger might be good for the companies but not customers, who will probably end up paying more for tickets. "More concentration means higher prices and less service. No matter what they say, you're going to see layoffs," a professor tells the paper.

Everyone points out this Delta-Northwest merger could be the beginning in a long line of airline consolidations. Next up on the list: United Airlines and Continental Airlines. The *NYT* points out that the rush to merge is at least partly because companies want to take advantage of the little time there is left in Bush's administration, which has normally been sympathetic to consolidations.

Retailers are being hit by a double whammy, as not only are consumers spending less but no one will extend credit to the companies, so many are finding themselves stuck. Although retailing might seem like an incredibly profitable business, the truth is that its seasonal nature means many retailers need to borrow money to make ends meet. Without available credit, many are being forced to close their doors. To make matters worse, when these stores close, they also directly affect other companies because many keep on owing money to their suppliers.

As the Democratic presidential contenders prepare for Wednesday's debate in Philadelphia, Sen. Barack Obama spent a fourth day trying to explain his now-infamous remarks where he said voters in small towns in Pennsylvania are "bitter." Clinton kept on pounding on Obama for the statement and released a television ad that shows voters saying they were "insulted" by the comments. But yesterday it moved beyond infighting among Democrats as McCain picked up Clinton's line of attack and used the "bitter" statement to portray Obama as out of touch with the everyday realities of small-town life. Meanwhile, the *WSJ* points out that McCain continues to "raise and spend money" despite the legal questions surrounding his fundraising. The paper says it's a sign that the McCain camp is confident the race will be over by the time election officials actually take action.

For those interested in a little McCain history, the *LAT* fronts a look at how he went from being a POW to a lawmaker, representing a state where he had never lived. The key was his position as the Navy's liaison to the Senate. The job didn't have much prestige ("a glorified valet"), but it helped him see how Congress worked from the inside, and he befriended some of Washington's most powerful lawmakers, who were ready to help him once he decided that he wanted to go into politics.

The *NYT* fronts, and everyone mentions, that Silvio Berlusconi scored a comeback in yesterday's election, two years after he was voted out of office. As the leader of a center-right coalition, Berlusconi will almost certainly become prime minister for a third term. The *NYT* says it's not clear whether Italians voted for Berlusconi "out of affection" or if he was simply seen as the "least bad choice" after two years of a government that was particularly stagnant.

The *WP* fronts an unsigned dispatch from Lhasa and reports that since violence broke out a month ago, Chinese police officers, who are armed, have set up a "relentless" patrol and stop people randomly to ask for identification. Life is slowly returning to normal, and shops are reopening. Although the Chinese government says tourism is returning to Tibet, it seems most major temples remain closed and tourist hotels are relatively empty.

In an interesting Page One story, the *NYT* says two scientists have new evidence to back up their theory that the Titanic sank quickly after hitting an iceberg because of faulty construction. The company dismissed this theory when it was first brought up years ago, but in *What Really Sank the Titanic*, the authors use a combination of physical evidence from rivets recovered from the Titanic as well as archive material from the builder to show how the time pressures were so great on the builders that it led to the use of these substandard rivets. Not only that, but there was also a shortage of qualified riveters, which compromised the quality of the ship. The scientists say that better rivets could have kept the *Titanic* floating long enough for rescuers to arrive.

The *LAT* fronts some bad news for California residents. According to a new report from the U.S. Geological Survey, California will almost certainly be hit by a strong earthquake by 2028. And those living in Southern California are even worse off because the chance of a 6.7 magnitude quake is 97 percent. The outlook is slightly better for those living in Northern California, where the chances drop to 93 percent.

The *WP* and *LAT* note that former president Jimmy Carter is "getting the cold shoulder" (*WP*) in Israel. None of Israel's top officials will meet with him, and Israel's security service will not protect him. Israeli officials are unhappy that Carter said he would meet with the leader of Hamas, and for his book in which he sharply criticized Israel. "A meeting like this gives some semblance of legitimacy to those who do not deserve it," one Israeli official said. "The book doesn't help him, either."

The *NYT* publishes word that Donald Rumsfeld, the former defense secretary, will write his memoirs. Rumsfeld has apparently chosen to forgo an advance and will donate the profits to a nonprofit foundation.

In the *NYT* op-ed page, Richard Conniff says that the word *tax* has become one of the most reviled words in the English language and needs a change. Instead of calling them *taxes*, we should call them *dues*. The word *tax* has "punitive overtones … as if wage-earners have done something wrong by their labors." But *dues* "is rooted in social obligation and duty."

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today's papers

Your Money or Your Life

By Daniel Politi

Monday, April 14, 2008, at 6:14 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with a look at how some health-insurance companies are asking clients to pay more for expensive medications. Instead of charging a fixed fee for prescription drugs, more insurers are starting to charge a percentage of their value to offset the cost of these high-priced medicines. *USA Today* leads with word that more states are taking DNA samples from suspects arrested on felony charges. DNA sampling used to be restricted to convicted felons, but now 12 states permit some kind of sampling from suspects, and 21 more are considering it. The paper points out that most laws call for the samples to be destroyed if charges against the suspect are dropped. Still, civil liberties advocates criticize these laws, which are seemingly becoming more popular every day, because they characterize the system as nothing more than "a clumsy forensic dragnet," says *USAT*.

The *Los Angeles Times* leads with a look at the way environmental groups consistently fight against the construction of any new coal-fired power plant. In order to send a message about global warming, lawyers use all kinds of legal tactics at their disposal to stop the construction of these plants. The *Wall Street Journal* leads its worldwide newsbox with the weekend meetings of finance ministers, where the rising price of food was the No. 1 issue. The *Washington Post* leads with a look at how the Supreme Court will consider this week whether a person who rapes a child should be eligible for the death penalty.

The system of charging a percentage of the cost of medicine started out with Medicare and now it's creeping into other plans that people either purchase individually or receive through an employer. Although the companies are required to inform customers before they change the pricing system for drugs, many say the change caught them by surprise. Now some have to fork over thousands of dollars a month for essential medicines that they used to receive for a nominal fee. Some experts say this new system is changing the traditional idea that insurance is supposed to spread the cost so that sick people aren't stuck with huge bills. "Those beneficiaries who bear the burden of illness are also bearing the burden of cost," a health expert said.

Environmentalists are fighting against new coal plants in an effort to try to get Washington to act on the issue of global warming and set federal limits for carbon dioxide emissions. Utility companies complain that the environmental groups pursue a one-size-fits-all strategy and take advantage of weaknesses in the judicial system to push their case. The litigation costs the companies a significant bit of money and usually ends up at least delaying the project. So these companies are now fighting back with a PR campaign, and the *LAT* points out that the clash over coal "rivals the environmental and legal fights over nuclear power decades ago."

The president of the World Bank warned that more than 30 countries are at risk of descending into chaos due to rising food prices. This weekend, many of the world's financial leaders took particular aim at the U.S. policies toward corn-based ethanol and biofuels in general, saying it was inhumane to divert food toward energy when there is such a great shortage of food around the world. The *NYT* emphasizes that the finance ministers seemed to agree that the rising food prices pose a greater threat to the world economy than the continuing credit crisis. Still, the *WSJ* notes that despite all these expressions of concern, the meeting "produced few concrete results," as there seems to be little agreement over what should be done to stop this inflation.

More than 30 years ago, the Supreme Court determined that rape involving adults could not result in the death penalty because the punishment is too excessive for someone who doesn't take a life. But now Louisiana prosecutors will argue that child rapists are so heinous that they deserve the ultimate punishment. Other states are joining Louisiana in arguing that they should be allowed to reflect the moral principles of their citizens who see child rapists as deserving of death. But experts warn that expanding the death penalty could result in fewer cases being reported and might even encourage the rapist to kill the victim.

The *LAT* fronts, and everyone mentions, news that the Iraqi government fired 1,300 soldiers and policemen who refused to fight during the recent offensive against Shiite militias. The *NYT*

gets word that the fired included 500 soldiers and 421 policemen in Basra. The *LAT* notes that the large number of desertions is seen as another example of how the recent crackdown was poorly planned and involved deploying security forces who didn't have the appropriate training and weren't ready for the frontlines.

The *LAT* fronts last night's forum on faith, where the Democratic presidential contenders continued fighting over a recent comment made by Sen. Barack Obama in which he said that small-town voters are "bitter" and so they "cling to guns or religion." The *NYT* does a little analysis of the candidates' body language and says they exchanged "frosty glances" when "their paths briefly crossed on stage." The issue quickly came up again last night as Sen. Hillary Clinton called Obama's comments "elitist, out of touch and, frankly, patronizing." Clinton said Obama would once again make people think that Democrats feel superior and don't understand the plight of regular Americans. Obama tried to clarify the statements and called his wording "clumsy." In a separate campaign event, Obama said he expected these kind of tactics from Sen. John McCain but not Clinton. "She knows better. Shame on her," he said.

Meanwhile, the *Post* fronts a look at how two prominent anti-abortion Democrats have endorsed Obama, a candidate who has been a big supporter of abortion rights. Sen. Robert Casey Jr. of Pennsylvania and former Rep. Timothy Roemer of Indiana are campaigning for Obama and saying that he could help create some common ground in this incredibly divisive issue. The endorsements could help Obama in Pennsylvania and Indiana, although some anti-abortion groups are making sure to send out information to supporters that spells out Obama's abortion views. "For people who are not really digging into the background, support from someone like Roemer could have quite an impact," the head of Indiana Right to Life said.

The *Post* notes that during this week's visit by Pope Benedict XVI, the White House will hold a dinner in his honor. Only problem is that the pope won't actually be there. "I'm sorry, the pope doesn't attend a dinner in his honor?" a reporter asked. "How does that work?" The White House spokesman helpfully explained, "He doesn't come into the building."

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today's papers

Secret Weapons

By Ben Whitford

Sunday, April 13, 2008, at 5:37 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with word of a secret arms deal in which Iraqi officials sought to obtain $833 million worth of guns and aircraft from Serbia; officials say the deal underscores the corruption and inefficiency that have plagued the army's efforts to procure military equipment. The *Los Angeles Times* eyes heightening tension in Afghanistan, where both insurgents and NATO troops are girding for a spring offensive. The *Washington Post* leads with a look back on the tenure of Housing Secretary Alphonso Jackson, who leaves office this week; officials say he'll likely be remembered for encouraging policies that exacerbated the current mortgage crisis.

U.S. officials say the Iraqi army has still got a lot to learn about how to spend its money wisely. Back in 2005, the army squandered $1.3 billion on shoddy military equipment, much of which was never delivered; now officials have inked a secret deal with Serbia that appears designed to sidestep anti-corruption measures. "You can only explain it in two ways," said one Western official. "A desire to avoid oversight, and a desire to offer opportunities for graft and corruption." Officials said the deal raised questions about the Iraqi military's readiness to stand alone; it also came as a snub to the Pentagon's military sales program, which has struggled to deliver equipment fast enough to meet demand.

In Afghanistan, troops are preparing for an uptick in violence as Taliban fighters return from their winter shelters in Pakistan. Nearly 2,300 U.S. Marines have been deployed at the country's main NATO base, in the hope of striking a conclusive blow against insurgents in Helmand province, an opium-production hotspot. Taliban commanders say they aren't worried about the Marines' arrival. "We have heard all about these Americans, and we are waiting - let them come," said one. "They will learn what others before them have learned."

The *Post* goes above the fold with a splashy look at the state of America's "impassioned but independent" Catholic Church ahead of Pope Benedict's U.S. tour. "Christianity is stronger here than anywhere else in the West, but we are at the frontier of the encounter between faith and modernity," says one U.S. Catholic theologian. The *NYT* also fronts a look ahead to the pope's visit, predicting that the doctrinal hard-liner will seek to win over Americans by showing his softer side.

Barack Obama attempted yesterday to dampen the row over his claim that economic problems had driven small-town voters to "cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them." The *NYT* fronts a report noting that the Illinois senator admitted his phrasing had been clunky, but he stood by his central point about the economic plight of small-town America. That might not be enough to kill off the Clinton campaign's criticism; the *Post* points out that the brouhaha is likely to set the tone for Wednesday's debate between the two candidates in Pennsylvania.

Still, Hillary has problems of her own: The *LAT* fronts word that Bill Clinton had a "fundraising relationship" with a Chinese Internet company accused of abetting government censorship

and collaborating with the Chinese government's crackdown on Tibetan protesters. The news came as Chinese President Hu Jintao defended his handling of the Tibetan demonstrations, saying the protesters had sought to undermine Chinese sovereignty. The *Post* notes that China showed a degree of restraint in using police, not soldiers, to rein in protesters; still, the clashes have kept China and Tibet in the spotlight ahead of this year's Olympic Games. On the *NYT*'s op-ed page, Matthew Forney writes that many young Chinese people strongly support their government's suppression of the Tibetan uprising, while Elliot Sperling recaps the historical justification for Tibetan independence.

Haiti's President René Préval announced new food subsidies yesterday, reports the *NYT*, hoping that a 15 percent drop in the cost of rice would be enough to put an end to the violent protests that have rocked Haiti in recent weeks. Still, as the *LAT* notes, the move wasn't enough to keep Haitian lawmakers from sacking Prime Minister Jacques-Edouard Alexis, a close ally of the president, in protest at the recent chaos.

Schadenfreude alert: The *NYT* has word that Alberto Gonzales, the former attorney general who was forced to quit earlier this year, has so far been unable to convince any private law firm to hire him.

Recession-hit restaurants are looking to make a quick buck by cutting portion sizes, reports the *Post*, using tricks that range from skewering shrimp ("It straightens them out so when you cook them they look bigger!") to shaving an ounce or two off expensive steaks.

The world could end this summer, according to the *LAT*, when European scientists power up a massive new particle accelerator. The boffins hope to gain new insights into the sub-atomic particles that make up our world—but some fear the vast amounts of energy at work could create a miniature black hole that would grow and ultimately swallow the Earth. "That would be an extremely spectacular result," says one of the project's researchers.

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today's papers

Irate Over Iran

By Jesse Stanchak

Saturday, April 12, 2008, at 11:28 AM ET

The *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*'s world-wide newsbox both lead with the growing worry that Iran is now the dominant threat to Iraq's security. The *New York Times* leads with the credit crunch affecting the availability of student loans. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposing to nearly triple health care spending for California prisons.

With al-Qaida in Iraq on the run after successful U.S. offensives, attention has turned to Iranian influence in the region, says the *WP*. President Bush said yesterday that Iran must stop arming and supporting Shiite militias in Iraq or "we'll deal with them"—though he added that he isn't looking for a war with Iran and would prefer an international diplomatic solution.

The *NYT* reports that lenders are backing away from offering student loans, leaving families in the lurch over college costs. Families still have other options, and the paper says it may be late summer before the situation becomes clear. Regardless, it's another sign that the tightening credit market isn't just a Wall Street problem.

It may be a local story, but the *LAT*'s piece on Gov. Schwarzenegger's plan to raise prison health care spending has some national interest, as prisons across the country face similar problems: aging inmates and health care facilities that simply are not up to meeting prisoners' needs.

The *NYT* offleads with General Electric's stock plunging 13 percent Friday, on the heels of an unexpectedly bad quarterly earnings report. Because of its diverse business interests, the paper takes GE's faltering earnings as a sign that the problems of the financial-services sector are trickling down to the wider economy. The *WSJ* says that analysts expected certain parts of GE's operations to do poorly but were caught off-guard by the weakness of its health and consumer products divisions.

The *WP* offleads with bureaucratic obstacles to implementing alternatives to animal testing of pharmaceuticals. The interagency committee in charge of approving alternatives to animal testing has approved just four tests in 10 years, compared with 34 tests from its European counterparts. E-mails obtained by the paper seem to indicate that the panel's members are strongly biased toward animal testing, a bias that may be keeping new humane tests from seeing the light of day. Meanwhile, the *LAT* offleads with the uncertain fate of research monkeys in Abkhazia, the break-away region of the former soviet-bloc republic of Georgia.*

The *WP* fronts a panic in the Philippines over the exploding cost of rice. Rice is seen as a sign of stability in many Asian countries, so the government has resorted to flashy moves like tough sentences for rice thieves and police raids of rice warehouses. The cost of the grain is up 80 percent since January of 2007. The paper indicates that there may be little the government can do, as rice prices abroad have been primed for a cost increase for years, and the Philippines simply doesn't have enough farmable land to grow rice for all of its people.

The *WSJ* reports that U.N. regulators are questioning the environmental value of projects funded by a U.N. program designed to curtail global warming.

The *NYT* fronts a feature on the logistics of preparing for Pope Benedict XVI's visits to New York and Washington, D.C.

Why didn't Bill Richardson, with his long ties to the Clinton administration, back Hillary? In part, he says, because Clinton supporters told him he had to. It's all there on the front page of the *LAT*.

The *WP* fronts a piece on Sen. John McCain's presidential run, positing that independent of any political leanings or past actions on the candidate's part, McCain has become a sort of consumer brand, an identity to be sold to voters, "part Ford pickup, part Wrangler jeans and part Timex watch."

Under the fold, the *NYT* covers the stagnation of Freedom's Watch, a conservative group meant to balance the influence of groups like MoveOn.org.

***Correction*, April 14, 2008:** *This piece originally stated that Abkhazia is a former Soviet-bloc country. While it has declared its independence from Georgia, it is not internationally recognized as a soverign nation. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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war stories

I Don't Know. Go Ask Petraeus.

McCain's appalling answer to a question about national-security policy.

By Fred Kaplan

Wednesday, April 16, 2008, at 5:24 PM ET

The question must be asked: When it comes to national-security affairs—the heart of his campaign, the center of his career—does Sen. John McCain know what he's talking about?

He raised doubts a few weeks ago when he said, more than once, that Iran was training al-Qaida terrorists. The confusion (his new best friend, Joe Lieberman, had to correct him) suggested that the Republicans' presumptive presidential nominee doesn't recognize the difference between Sunni and Shiite extremists—or, worse still, that he regards all anti-American Muslims as fundamentally the same. This is not merely a "gaffe" but a severe blind spot. It reveals that he may be incapable of even considering the idea of playing our enemies off one another.

This week, McCain sent further shudders through the body politic (or perhaps he would have, had the mainstream media covered the event) by pretty much promising, if elected, to abrogate his constitutional responsibilities. At the Associated Press' annual meeting on April 14, McCain was asked whether he would divert U.S. troops from Iraq to Afghanistan in order to quash the resurgent Taliban and capture Osama Bin Laden. McCain responded: "I would not do that unless Gen. Petraeus said that he felt that the situation called for that."

There are three things wrong with that answer.

First, Petraeus is not in a position, formally or otherwise, to make such an assessment. Petraeus himself was asked that very question at hearings earlier this month before the Senate armed services committee (which McCain attended, at least for a while), and the general—properly—begged off, noting that he is merely the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq and that such broader issues must be decided by higher authorities.

Second, the right officer to field that question is the commander of U.S. Central Command, who has responsibility for Iraq, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, and all South Asia. That commander, until recently, was Adm. William Fallon. He was canned last month after publicly calling for just such a shift of troops from Iraq to Afghanistan. If McCain is keen to defer to top military officers, would he—unlike President Bush—have followed Fallon's advice? If not, why not?

Third, and more to the point, this is a question about policy and priorities, not battlefield strategy or tactics. In other words, it's a question that only the president can answer. He can, and should, ask his top military officers—not just Petraeus, but also the other commanders in the region and the Joint Chiefs of Staff—for advice on the potential risks and benefits of redeploying troops. But the decision would be his.

McCain would probably acknowledge this point, if pressed. Most likely, he doesn't know the answer to the troop-movement question (it *is* a tough one), and deferring to Gen. Petraeus is the standard gambit these days for politicians who don't want to think about the problem or take responsibility for a solution.

Five-and-a-half years ago, in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, President Bush was occasionally seen carrying a copy of Eliot A. Cohen's book *Supreme Command*, which argued that, throughout American history, wartime presidents have often overruled their generals, sometimes with fortunate results. Bush's message was clear: The Army's generals were telling then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that they needed more troops for the invasion, but he and Rumsfeld were running the show.

Then, when everything went to hell, the two civilians started piling the burden on the very generals whose advice they'd dismissed. The war plan was "Tommy Franks' plan," Rumsfeld said over and over five years ago. Similarly, Bush now says the

surge and everything about it is "Dave Petraeus' plan." How many troops he needs, and how long they stay there—that's strictly up to Dave.

Petraeus is too smart not to know that he's being used in this game. He's also been shrewd enough to cultivate warm relations with the Hill and the press, in part to build support for his strategy, in part to ensure that, if the war turns irreparably south, he doesn't go down with it. (By any objective measure, he *has* performed extraordinarily well, given the hand he's been dealt.) Still, it's easy to imagine him sometimes shaking his head and wondering whether any of his political masters will step up to the plate and *own* this war.

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