

# Slate.com

## Table of Contents

---

### [ad report card](#)

The Super Bowl Special

### [Advanced Search](#)

### [architecture](#)

That Dogma Won't Hunt

### [books](#)

How Good Are We, Really?

### [change-o-meter](#)

Two Days Since Last Accident

### [change-o-meter](#)

Strings Attached

### [change-o-meter](#)

Tax Distractions

### [change-o-meter](#)

Homer Simpson's Washington

### [corrections](#)

Corrections

### [dear prudence](#)

Whack Off While You Work

### [dispatches](#)

Come Hell or High Water, the Burmese Junta Endures

### [dvd extras](#)

Return to Waterworld

### [explainer](#)

A Snake the Size of a Plane

### [explainer](#)

You're Trashing My Scene!

### [explainer](#)

Olympic-Size Bong Hits

### [explainer](#)

Who Decides Which Drugs Athletes Can Take?

### [family](#)

No, You Shut Up!

### [fighting words](#)

Farewell to a Much-Misunderstood Man

### [foreigners](#)

Israel Has Already Decided

### [foreigners](#)

What Is There To Laugh About in Gaza?

### [foreigners](#)

Remembering How To Cope

### [gabfest](#)

The Lack of Stimulus Gabfest

### [green room](#)

Date Local

### [green room](#)

Vulture World

### [hot document](#)

Like Daughter, Like Father

### [human nature](#)

Vaginal Innards Course

### [jurisprudence](#)

I Need a Hero

### [jurisprudence](#)

Law! Law! Law!

### [medical examiner](#)

Dying To Play

### [moneybox](#)

The King of Madison Avenue

### [moneybox](#)

Economic Know-Nothingism

### [moneybox](#)

Three Strikes and You're Bailed Out

### [moneybox](#)

Searching for an Optimist at Davos

### [movies](#)

Button Eyes

### [music box](#)

Great Composers, Lousy Reviews

### [my goodness](#)

All for ONE

### [number 1](#)

Monster Truck

### [other magazines](#)

Good Morning, Afghanistan

### [poem](#)

"Paradise"

[politics](#)  
Morning Joe

[politics](#)  
Bipartisaesmanship

[politics](#)  
Commercial Break

[politics](#)  
Tom Cries Uncle

[politics](#)  
Tomfoolery

[politics](#)  
He's Lincoln! No, He's FDR! No, He's Polk!

[press box](#)  
What Would Ann Landers Advise?

[press box](#)  
Who Should Replace William Kristol at the Times?

[press box](#)  
Alms for the Press?

[recycled](#)  
Hard-Core Fans

[recycled](#)  
Let Si Get This

[Science](#)  
I'm Plunging to My Death ... Now What Do I Do?

[slate v](#)  
Science News: Eco-Friendly Bombs?

[slate v](#)  
The Bike Valet

[slate v](#)  
Dear Prudence: Sexpot Daughter-in-Law

[sports nut](#)  
The QB That Saved Pittsburgh

[technology](#)  
Shop Till Everyone Else Drops

[technology](#)  
I Can Digg It

[television](#)  
43 Observations on the Super Bowl

[the best policy](#)  
Privatize Social Security?!

[the chat room](#)  
Withdrawal Symptoms

[the dilettante](#)  
He Should Have Played "The Wrestler"

[the green lantern](#)  
Clean Jar, Clean Conscience?

[the has-been](#)  
So You Had a Bad Day

[the oscars](#)  
The Batman Goes Bananas

[today's business press](#)  
A Slimmer Stimulus?

[today's papers](#)  
Centrists Take Knife to Stimulus

[today's papers](#)  
Obama: No More Mr. Nice Guy

[today's papers](#)  
Obama: "I Screwed Up"

[today's papers](#)  
Senate Takes Over Stimulus

[today's papers](#)  
Obama Wants Grand Bargain To Tame Deficit

[today's papers](#)  
A New Era In Iraq?

[today's papers](#)  
Daschle Forgets To Pay His Taxes!

[tv club](#)  
Friday Night Lights, Season 3

[war stories](#)  
What Are We Doing in Afghanistan?

[webhead](#)  
The 10 Things We Want To Know About "25 Random Things About Me"

[what's up, doc?](#)  
Crib Notes

[xx factor xxtra](#)  
More Stimulating

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ad report card  
**The Super Bowl Special**

Were the ads any good?

By Seth Stevenson

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 4:45 AM ET

Welcome to the annual Ad Report Card Super Bowl Special. With rates this year running as high as \$3 million for a single 30-second spot, the \$100,000-per-second barrier has at last been smashed. What did we get for all that marketing money?

*First quarter: We're off to an inauspicious start, as the first commercial break comes on a stoppage for a video-booth review. Dig that breakneck NFL action!*

Our [leadoff spot](#) involves a team of co-workers in a conference room, looking for ways to trim the company budget. When one fellow suggests they stop buying **Bud Light** to drink at all their meetings, he's immediately defenestrated, still sitting in his leather office chair. 1) This ad continues a long-running, increasingly irritating tradition: Bud Light always buys the first commercial slot and always fills it with a not-especially-funny ad. Next year, I'd love to see another brand get its shot at this prime real estate and start things off on a high note. 2) Dialogue like "We could cut back on marketing" and "We could eliminate bonuses" suggests that copywriters are attuned to the country's fearful economic mood. It'll be interesting to see if fiscal pessimism becomes a theme as the night goes on.

Action star Jason Statham appears in a spot for the **Audi A6**. He careens through different decades, driving iconic sports cars from the '70s (Mercedes), '80s (BMW), and '90s (Lexus) before at last hopping into the putatively superior, supercharged Audi sedan. I liked the grainy, washed-out film stock they used in the '70s bit. I enjoyed the pastel clothes, enormous cell phone, and billboard ad for mousse that appeared in the '80s section. And I thought the '90s part was funny—mostly because the only way the writers could think to signal '90s was by showing a movie theater playing *Tommy Boy*. (Are the '90s so recent that their aesthetics are not yet mockable?) One problem: What kind of car ad shows a celebrity endorser driving rival brands and looking great doing it? That '80s Beemer was pretty sweet. I think I'd rather buy one of those bad boys (used, with low mileage) than fork out \$50,000 for a shiny new Audi. Wintry economic climate and all.

A **Pepsi** ad boldly suggests that will.i.am is this generation's Bob Dylan. Hmm. Not buying. Nor am I fond of the ad's contention that Jack Black is this generation's John Belushi. Have we really run out of hugely talented iconoclasts? Also, I hesitate to ask, but: Was Bob Dylan heavily invested in financial stocks? He's on a revenue-raking tear, as this Pepsi spot comes hot on the heels of him [allowing a British conglomerate to desecrate](#) "Blowin' in the Wind."

Another celebrity unexpectedly cashes in: Conan O'Brien shows up in [Bud Light's second spot](#). A misguided agent convinces

him to appear in a beer commercial by promising it will air only in Sweden. I adore Conan, but I didn't love this ad. Jokes about American stars making ads for foreign markets are old hat. And the imagined Swedish beer spot was just a jumble of stale clichés. What's more, I've had quite enough of celebrities attempting to mitigate their "sellouts" (which may be regrettable but don't warrant an apology) with meta-joshing about the fact that they've sold out. The late great David Foster Wallace once described a tactic he dubbed the "Carson Maneuver." This refers to Johnny Carson's habit of inoculating himself against making bad jokes by letting on that he knew darn well the jokes were bad. Conan—perhaps inspired by the fact that he'll soon be taking over Johnny's old show—has apparently been studying this technique.

*Second quarter: Steelers up 3-0. That's already more points than were scored in the entire Liverpool vs. Chelsea match earlier today. Take that, non-American "football"!*

A [Cars.com](#) spot traces the life of an exceedingly confident young man. He shakes the obstetrician's hand when he's born, he rescues cuddly animals from fires, and he asks out girls much older than he. Yet when it comes time to buy a car, he freezes up. Cars.com is of course the solution. With its twinkly music, deadpan narration, twee vignettes, and overly self-assured protagonist, the ad's clearly striving for a Wes Anderson-lite vibe. I got roped in by the narrative, so I think the ad was a success. But I felt its payoff lacked kick: Nowhere does the consumer learn how exactly Cars.com makes the purchasing process easier.

[Cheetos](#) airs another of its moody, countercultural ads, in which brand mascot Chester Cheetah encourages grown adults to behave like mischievous 7-year-olds. The spot opens on a lady who's yammering loudly on her cell phone, annoying a nearby woman who's trying to read a book. Chester the foul-hearted feline prods the aggrieved second woman to throw some Cheetos at the loud-talker's feet, thereby attracting a flock of vicious pigeons. I loved the satisfied look on the Cheeto-tosser's face as she watches the cell phone shouter become engulfed in dirty, flapping feathers. I loved even more the closing moment when Chester nuzzles one of the pigeons, upon which he's placed a [falconry hood](#). One quibble: When I [wrote about this campaign last year](#), the people at Cheetos told me they were executing a two-tiered strategy. Ads for kids showed Chester as his regular, lovable self, and they aired during kid-friendly morning and afternoon programming. Ads like this one—aimed at adults who might be convinced to try Cheetos—aired only at night, so as to hide the more nefarious version of Chester from younger eyes. But this ad aired before 8 p.m., and lots of kiddies are watching the Super Bowl. Isn't there a danger Chester's distinctly targeted personalities might get blurred?

*Halftime: Suck it, haters—Springsteen was awesome. Granted, the Boss misjudged his powerslide and smashed his crotch into a TV camera. But these things happen as we age.*

A suite of 3-D ads, including a bizarre spot for [Sobe Life Water](#) (in which NFL players dance awkwardly with animated lizards) leaves me cold, as I somehow missed the bulletin about picking up 3-D glasses. I tried to watch the ads through a half-full beer bottle, but the effect was disappointing.

An ad for the **Toyota Tundra** shows the pickup driving through a tunnel of flames and emerging unscathed. I very much hope, for the sake of Tundra drivers, that this functionality never comes into play. Separately: I am puzzled by the announcer's contention that "truckers know towing 10,000 pounds up a steep grade ain't good for your tranny." I'm picturing a post-op sex change patient standing in the pickup's bed, hands on hips, displeased with the truck's towing power. What's that you say? He means *transmission*? Oh. I suppose that would make more sense.

*Third quarter: Cards down 10. If he can't lead a comeback, I hope Kurt Warner will at least challenge Roger Federer for [most tears shed during a postgame ceremony](#).*

A **Coca-Cola** spot shows a young man walking through a town populated solely by online avatars. These fantastical creatures, taking over the real world, represent the idea that people now conduct much of their social interaction over the Internet. At the end of the spot, a shared bottle of Coke helps a young gentleman realize that the jumbo-sized ogre sitting next to him is actually the avatar of a cute girl. This is the eternal message of the Coke brand: Pausing for a moment to enjoy our fizzy beverage will help you remember the simple, classic pleasures of life. Two thoughts: 1) I like online avatars and hope one day to achieve immortality by downloading my brain into the body of a computer-generated elf character. 2) This is the opposite of Pepsi's branding approach, which always rushes to embrace the newest fad (see, e.g., will.i.am). Pepsi would have happily shown two avatars enjoying a *virtual* cola together, somewhere out there in the cyber-ether.

A spot for **Monster.com** opens on an executive sitting in an expansive office, with a moose head mounted on the wall above him. The camera swoops around to the other side of the wall, where we see a lackey working at his far more humble desk—with the rest of the moose, and especially the nether-regions, protruding into his face. I thought this was the funniest ad of the night. It also felt timely, as it takes a shot at corporate fat cats and perhaps even references the John Thain office-decoration scandal. Seemed like a clever attempt to capitalize on America's stick-it-to-the-greedheads mood.

A **Budweiser** spot serves up an origin story for the Clydesdale mascot. This is the third hokey Clydesdale-centric ad Bud has

aired tonight. I wonder if there's a risk that—like Joe Camel before him—the lovable Clydesdale will be condemned as a Trojan horse (if you will) designed to attract children to the Budweiser brand. I also wonder why the ad's equine narrator, who says he's a third-generation immigrant Clydesdale, still retains a thick Scottish accent. Assimilate already.

*Fourth quarter: In which the game suddenly becomes a real game, and the referees attempt to set an NFL record for dubious, outcome-altering calls.*

Oh my, it's an ad for [Cash4Gold](#). Billing itself as "America's #1 Gold Buyer," this outfit, according to its [Web site](#), buys gold "strictly for its melt value." There was some pregame discussion among advertising types about whether this spot is the first "[direct response](#)" ad to air during a Super Bowl. Direct response means the ad urges consumers to contact the product's sales team directly—often via a 1-800 number, or, in this case, through a Web URL prominently displayed throughout the ad. It generally implies a down-market vibe.

This ad certainly reflected the desperate-ish tenor of the times. In the spot, ex-talk show sidekick Ed McMahon and ex-hip-hop idol MC Hammer (both known for having made and then lost fortunes) display the multitude of gold objects they plan to sell through Cash4Gold.com. Among these items: a set of gold golf clubs, a gold hip replacement, and (you knew it was coming) gold [Hammer pants](#). By my count, this is at least the third time MC Hammer has appeared in a Super Bowl ad as the corporeal embodiment of squandered fame and wealth. Great gig. But how much longer can he pull off the role? Haven't all these advertising paydays restored Hammer to solvency?

In the final big spot of the night, Web site registration service [GoDaddy.com](#) reprises its long-running marketing theme: boobs. Several chesty women are for some reason testifying before a congressional panel, arguing over which of them has been "enhanced." In the feeble punch line, racecar driver Danica Patrick says, "Yes, I've enhanced. ... I've enhanced my image with a domain and a Web site from GoDaddy.com."

GoDaddy has worked assiduously to make itself the laddish, soft-core porn brand of the domain registration category. This seems very limiting. No other domain-registration sites advertised during the Super Bowl, so GoDaddy had an opportunity to differentiate itself in any way it wished. Why go after *Maxim* readers? Do women not register Web sites? And are we to believe that a GoDaddy Web site—backed by bosom-centric marketing—is really the best way to enhance one's professional image? This ad actively drives me away from the brand.

And that's a wrap, folks. Nothing left but a thrilling finish to the game. For the second year in a row, the on-field action was more

entertaining than the commercial breaks. Let's hope this doesn't happen again.

No doubt I've left out your favorite ad. Or maybe your least favorite. You can tell me all about it—and also suggest other, non-Super Bowl ads you'd like me to review—by e-mailing me at [adreportcard@gmail.com](mailto:adreportcard@gmail.com).

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## Advanced Search

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

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### architecture

## That Dogma Won't Hunt

Why are architects so obsessed with schools and rules?

By Witold Rybczynski

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 11:18 AM ET

"Architecture is an art, not a religion—there are no dogmas," declared Robert A.M. Stern during a recent lecture in Washington, D.C., on the occasion of receiving the [Vincent Scully Prize](#), named in honor of the esteemed architectural historian. It was hardly an unexpected statement, coming from Stern, who is the least dogmatic of architects and whose work spans the stylistic spectrum. In my own Philadelphia, standing almost within view of one another, are Stern's small Federal-style campus building at the University of Pennsylvania; his modernist all-glass 57-story Comcast Center; and, under construction on Rittenhouse Square, his brick-and-limestone residential tower, which recalls a downtown apartment house of the 1920s.

Architecture, the pragmatic art of the possible, is always a compromise between the client's demands; the exigencies of the site; the taste of the moment; and the constraints of budget, technology, and building regulations. Consequently, you might think that dogma would be the farthest thing from an architect's mind. Not so. The history of architecture abounds in unbending pronouncements: "[Form follows function](#)," "[ornament is a crime](#)," "[less is more](#)," "[less is a bore](#)," and so on. These assertions are modern, but the doctrinal tradition is ancient. The first architectural treatise ever written, [Vitruvius'](#) Roman handbook, is essentially a compilation of rules: This is the proper way to design a temple, a Doric column must have these proportions, and so on.

Architects are unbending in their judgments. My Modernist friends hold multipaned windows, ogee moldings, and wallpaper beneath contempt; my Classicist friends deride bare walls,

uncomfortable furniture, and pipe railings. You'd think that in a world of shoddy and mindless building design—of ugly, big boxes and airports that resemble bus stations—*any* attempt to raise the architectural bar would be appreciated. Instead, the verbal rockets fly: self-indulgent, irrational, and trendy from one side; nostalgic, retrograde, and derivative from the other.

Why are architects so dogmatic? Partly, it's because architecture is a zero-sum game. A publisher of novels doesn't have to choose between Tom Clancy and Tom Wolfe, but a building client must choose one architect. Thus architects are obliged to compete. It helps to convey an air of inevitability about one's design. In fact, there may be many acceptable solutions to any particular building problem; architecture is not engineering, after all, but acknowledging diversity risks making the architect appear whimsical, a creature of fashion. To convince the client—and perhaps themselves—of the rightness of their ideas, architects are best off being dogmatic. There is only one right way—my way.

A tendency toward inflexibility is also the result of a need for consistency; even an eclectic architect stays within relatively rigid stylistic boundaries in any particular project. There is a place for tempered-glass railings and wrought-iron balustrades, but it's generally not side-by-side in the same building. Architects who mix and match—the mercurial British maverick [James Stirling](#) comes to mind—are few and far between. Most designers tend to develop a relatively narrow language of architectural forms, materials, and details—minimalist or articulated, light or heavy, purist or traditional, technological or hand-crafted—and stick to it.

The point that Stern, who is dean of the Yale school of architecture, was making in his Washington lecture was that while a tendency toward the dogmatic may be inevitable and even necessary in the architectural profession, it should not be allowed to infect teaching. Architecture students should be exposed to the widest possible range of contemporary ideas in order to find their own way. In the process, they will learn the most important lesson of architectural history: There are no right and wrong styles, only well- and poorly conceived buildings.

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### books

## How Good Are We, Really?

There's only so much science can tell us about human morality.

By Howard Gardner

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 12:29 PM ET

A thought experiment. You walk into a bookstore and see three stacks of books. The books are titled *Born To Be Good*, *Born To Be Bad*, and *Born To Be Good or Bad*. Which one do you pick

up first? Fast forward. You have now scanned the tables of contents of the three books. The first book has chapters called "Smile," "Love," and "Compassion"; the second features chapters titled "Anger," "Jealousy," and "Spite"; the third has chapters on "Love vs. Hate," "Altruism vs. Selfishness," and "Honesty vs. "Deceit." Which book do you buy? Which are you apt to believe?"

Dacher Keltner, a psychologist at University of California, Berkeley, and the director of the Greater Good Science Center there, is banking on an interest in a Rousseauian rather than Hobbesian view of human nature. In *Born To Be Good*, he argues that we are born as miniature angels, rather than marked by original sin. But presuming that readers have no patience for romantic mush, his subtitle—*The Science of a Meaningful Life*—promises hardheadedness, not faith or folklore.

The time certainly seems ripe for such a corrective. In recent decades, we have been barraged with broadsides emphasizing the dark side of human nature—books like Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*, Chris Hedges' *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, Philip Zimbardo's *The Lucifer Effect*, and Lance Morrow's *Evil*. Often these bleak views claim a basis in science, usually in the ever more influential theories of Charles Darwin. Survival entails a no-holds-barred competition among individuals within a species and among species within an ecosystem. Among Homo sapiens, those individuals who are most powerful, most attractive, most ingenious, most Machiavellian survive until childbearing age and sire the most offspring. Instances of altruism are reconstrued as efforts to pass on one's genes by advancing the chances of the group(s) to which one belongs. Even selfless acts are seen as selfish.

Logically speaking, there is no necessary link between the struggle for survival in the ecosphere and the operation of supply and demand in the marketplace. Yet among the chattering classes, particularly in the United States, there has been a virtual consensus that—like it or not—the world is best explained through a compound of Darwin on biology and Adam Smith, and his Friedmanite successors, on the economy. Courtesy of the laws of the marketplace, and with individuals pursuing their own selfish ends, the optimum economy and society will emerge. Or perhaps, paraphrasing Churchill on democracy, markets are the worst economic and political system—except for all the others.

As Keltner appreciates, such a reading of Darwin obscures more than it reveals, and the current economic meltdown has exposed the limits of the Friedmanite admixture. The thoughtful British savants of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries actually put forth more balanced views of the human sphere. Darwin, Keltner observes, was interested in the origins and endurance of benevolent human traits, such as sympathy, altruism, and love. For his part, Adam Smith saw himself as a philosopher of moral sentiments, as well as an explicator of the marketplace; he presupposed a civilized

world in which sympathetic actors could be counted on to do the right thing vis-à-vis others.

Keltner's book is a prototypical contribution from "positive psychology," a thriving new field that seeks to counter the earlier scholarly emphases on the less-admirable features of our species. In their more modest incarnation, positive psychologists conduct studies that explore what makes human beings often behave as good Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts: why, to quote the scout oath I memorized 50 years ago, human beings are trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. When they throw caution to the winds, positive psychologists argue that they are revealing the genuine, truer, deeper, side of human nature—not just how human beings should be, or can be, but how they are.

*Born To Be Good* aligns itself with the bolder version of positive psychology. Turning the conventional view of Darwin on its head, Keltner argues that human beings have survived as a species, and have gained dominion over the planet, because we have managed to control our most destructive and hostile impulses and instead have been rewarded for protecting one another, helping one another, being kind to one another. By this evolutionary logic, we aren't just biologically equipped to pursue cooperative behavior, according to Keltner, we are, in essence, wired for it. The initial, more daring (and more quotable) part of the book ends with a chapter on "the survival of the kindest."

In marshaling his brief on human goodness, Keltner puts forth some intriguing ideas. Drawing heavily on the pioneering research into facial expressions and emotion undertaken by his mentor, Paul Ekman, Keltner demonstrates that there are clear and measurable manifestations of positive human emotions—readily observed not just in facial configurations, but also through hand movements, broader gestures, bodily posture, and the like. And then, using a term he learned from his mother, Keltner embraces the Confucian notion of "jen"—roughly speaking, a proclivity in human beings to bring out the best in other persons and thereby to form your own benevolent character. The key to a good life, Keltner argues, is to have a positive jen ratio in every sphere of one's being. He even attempts to quantify jen: A happy scene at his daughters' playground yields a positive jen ratio of 1.5; an interminable line at the post office, replete with glares, sighs of exasperation, etc., has a minuscule ratio of .125. (I was reminded of my teacher Erik Erikson's view that a good life consisted of a positive ratio between trust and distrust in infancy and similarly positive ratios throughout the life cycle.) Just what such measurements tell us about our essential nature isn't exactly clear, though presumably all except masochists would rather be in situations marked by high jen ratios.

Something odd happens in the second and longer part of the book—eight discrete essays, each devoted to a single emotion-laden topic: embarrassment, smile, laughter, teasing, touch, love,

compassion, and awe. Keltner outlines the evolutionary origins of these not always fully appreciated human staples, how they operate physiologically, what prompts their appearance in human interactions, how they play out in everyday life, and how they have been studied by scholars.

For readers interested in how these facets of positive human nature emerge and operate, the essays constitute an excellent introduction. I was fascinated by the portrait of embarrassment. Embarrassment, it turns out, is actually an (often involuntary) effort to compensate for something that one has done (and should not have done) or has failed to do (and should have done). We signal our own regret by the characteristic appearance of signs of embarrassment, and others acknowledge (and perhaps accept) our regret when they observe the physical, behavioral (and, of course, any accompanying linguistic) signs of embarrassment. Embarrassment lays the groundwork for forgiveness and reconciliation. It is perhaps worth adding that individuals who—for congenital reasons or as a result of brain damage—are insensitive to signs of embarrassment cannot benefit from these exquisite signaling mechanisms.

Why, then, did I use the term *odd* above? Because these essays do not in themselves constitute an argument that we are born to be good. At most, they demonstrate that we have the potential to be good, to do good, a statement that no one, not even Thomas Hobbes or John Calvin, would have denied. Therefore, the larger part of Keltner's work is actually evidence for the more modest version of positive psychology, even though his title and his opening chapters promise the more grandiose version. As if to underscore his own ambivalence, Keltner's book has no conclusion—it simply ends with the final words on awe.

If they have not yet been signaled, it is time to put my own cards on the table. The book that I would have chosen to read has the title *Born To Be Good or Bad*. Its chapters would have titles like "Cain and Abel," "Hitler and Gandhi," "Mandela and Milosevic." And that is because I don't think that we are born with a tendency toward good or evil. Nor do I believe that we can derive morality, or immorality, from science. At most, given an agreed-upon definition, we can establish the antecedent conditions that lead to a moral or immoral life, a good or bad pattern of behavior, or, most often, shards of both. How and why and when good and evil behavior arises are human stories, grounded in history and culture. We could know everything there is to know about the genes and the brain of the newborn Hitler, but we could never have predicted what he would do, any more than we could have predicted the life course of Mahatma Gandhi or Joan of Arc or our contemporaries Nelson Mandela and Slobodan Milosevic. To some extent, the choice derives from our parents, our communities, and the particular historical era and cultural group in which we are born and grow up. But in the last analysis, the choice of what to be, and how to be, is ours and ours alone.

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## change-o-meter

### Two Days Since Last Accident

CIA pick discloses last year's finances ahead of Senate committee hearing.

By Chris Wilson

Thursday, February 5, 2009, at 2:31 PM ET

*The Change-o-Meter is [now a widget](#). You can add it to your blog, Web site, or profile with just a few clicks (shortcut for Facebook [here](#)). Each time we publish a new column, the widget will automatically update to reflect the latest score.*

While the economy crumbles at home, Russia continues to consolidate power in ex-Soviet nations. Also, raccoons have [invaded](#) the White House. But the news isn't all apocalyptic. The administration has gone 48 hours without a nominee dropping out because of unpaid taxes, and it has launched another transparency Web site for federal documents. A few small victories combine for a **20 on the Change-o-Meter**.

The administration's rocky two days of bad PR over the [failed nominations](#) of Tom Daschle and Nancy Killefer is a reminder of just how central ethics are to this White House's image. CIA Director-designate Leon Panetta disclosed more than \$1 million in earnings last year ahead of today's hearing before the Senate intelligence committee, though a spokesman was [quick to assert](#) that Panetta has not had to pay any back taxes since being nominated. While Panetta's finances are a reminder of the lucrative life of an ex-White House staffer—he was Clinton's chief of staff for several years—the nomination appears at the moment to be clean. Five points, borrowed against the assumption that Panetta doesn't suddenly recall any comped limo services.

Elsewhere at home, Obama [signed into law](#) an expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program, which extends health insurance to children in low-income families. We [awarded 10 points](#) for it when the Senate passed it, and it's good for another 10 today. Bush vetoed the legislation twice. And reader Rick Joyce points out that, at least [according to one Democrat](#) in the House, the administration is pressuring party leaders to take bipartisanship a little more seriously. We'll toss in two points for that, given that Congress' sausage-making process is in need of a little change, with more points to come if that story line flushes out. Another three go to the recently launched [search engine for federal documents](#), which currently indexes eight of 50 document collections. (It's been in progress since 2004.)

Things to watch: A U.S.-funded plan to [arm local militias](#) in Afghanistan, reminiscent of the "awakening councils" in Iraq, is making some queasy over the prospect of infusing more arms into the country. Obama's strategy for shifting war priorities

from Iraq back to Afghanistan is slowly coming into focus, but it's too soon to pass judgment on this one. Russia, meanwhile, continues to [strengthen security ties](#) with ex-Soviet nations, which will get interesting when the Obama administration addresses the touchy subject of [missile defense in the region](#).

*There's a lot to cover, so we want to [hear your thoughts](#) on what the Change-o-Meter should be taking into account. No detail is too small or wonky. E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.*

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## change-o-meter

### Strings Attached

Obama ratchets up accountability for some bailout beneficiaries, but stimulus stalls in Senate.

By Karen Shih

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 1:28 PM ET

*The Change-o-Meter is [now a widget](#). You can add it to your blog, Web site, or profile with just a few clicks (shortcut for Facebook [here](#)). Each time we publish a new column, the widget will automatically update to reflect the latest score.*

The Obama team is pursuing accountability on Wall Street for those receiving federal funds, making good on a campaign promise. But bipartisan support in Congress continues to elude the president as the stimulus package remains mired in politics in the Senate. Just a day after his hopes for a smooth transition were further scuttled by the withdrawal of two of his nominees, Obama faces new blows on the international front, as the war in Afghanistan gets ever-trickier to fight. Today's score is a **12 on the Change-o-Meter**.

[New message](#) for executives of financial firms: If you want help, be prepared to pay—personally. Salaries will be capped at \$500,000, including perks and bonuses, for top players at firms that have received the largest amounts of government assistance. But while this move may appease those who are angry with the government for bailing out failing companies, the dramatic move [doesn't actually affect very many companies](#), notes the *Washington Post*. Ten points for trying (details are still being worked out)—but at the moment, this new addition to the bailout plan seems to have more flash than substance.

The new stimulus bill is [stuck](#) in the Senate. Surprise, surprise. It's one thing to promise a new way of working in Washington. It's quite another to get enough support from the opposing party in the Senate to get any action on a bill. An [early attempt](#) by Democrats to add another [\\$24 billion](#) to the package, which would push the total to more than \$900 billion, missed the 60-

vote mark by two, with only two Republicans joining the motion.

As far as a replacement for Tom Daschle to head the Department of Health and Human Services, Obama [doesn't seem to have a second choice](#) in mind. Yesterday may have been tough for the president, but details of Daschle's [lavish lifestyle](#) during his absence from Washington made Obama's pick look like any other Washington insider. Obama was interviewed by major news networks immediately following the announcement, where he was forced to address his mistakes [over](#) and [over](#) and [over](#). At least he's willing to admit he can be wrong—an improvement over his predecessor. His contrition is good for a couple of points.

Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan announced [plans to close](#) the United States' only air base in Central Asia, throwing a wrench in the president's plans to focus on the war in Afghanistan. The base is in a key location, relatively safe from attack, something the U.S. military desperately needs because of instability and violence in Pakistan. And the recent bombing of a bridge on a supply route to troops in Afghanistan could be the [Taliban testing Obama's commitment](#) to the region. The shift in focus and resources he promised during the campaign may not be so easy to achieve.

*There's a lot to cover, so we want to [hear your thoughts](#) on what the Change-o-Meter should be taking into account. No detail is too small or wonky. E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.*

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## change-o-meter

### Tax Distractions

Two nominees bow out in another blow to the White House's new image.

By Molly Redden

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 4:33 PM ET

*The Change-o-Meter is [now a widget](#). You can add it to your blog, Web site, or profile with just a few clicks (shortcut for Facebook [here](#)). Each time we publish a new column, the widget will automatically update to reflect the latest score.*

Win some, lose some, keep some: It's the Obama White House Appointments Sweepstakes. Tom Daschle and Nancy Killefer will not be joining the administration, but Republican Judd Gregg will be, and the president is leaving Bush's Iran advisers at their posts. Mired in politics, **the Change-o-Meter registers a 10**.

The news that the Senate easily [approved Eric Holder](#) as attorney general was eclipsed by Daschle's withdrawal as the health and human services secretary nominee and [Killefer's](#)



[withdrawal](#) as the "performance czar" pick—and with good reason. Like Timothy Geithner, both Daschle and Killefer had muddied tax histories. Altogether, the damage these events do to Obama's promise of a squeaky clean White House racks up major negative points on the Change-o-Meter. The fact that he [waited for them to withdraw](#), instead of asking them to, doesn't help.

But the news isn't all bad. Obama recently [nominated Republican Sen. Judd Gregg](#) to the last open position in his Cabinet, commerce secretary. (Well, last open before secretary of HHS reopened.) If confirmed, the New Hampshire senator will be the third Republican to join the Cabinet, giving Obama three times as many opposite-party secretaries as George W. Bush had in his entire presidency. (Norman Mineta served as transportation secretary, the lone Democrat among Bush's overwhelmingly Republican Cabinets.)

The Obama administration's [refusal to speculate](#) about the political leanings of Gregg's successor is admirable—in fact, the job is likely to [go to a moderate Republican](#)—but it earns spare change in points for setting up an easier path to the Senate for Rep. Paul Hodes, a Democrat who is expected to [announce his bid](#) soon. Bipartisan points now, another Democratic senator (maybe) in two years.

Meanwhile, Bush administrators involved with the sanctions against Iran [will remain](#), indicating that the "flinty Chicago toughness" Obama [is so proud of](#) applies to foreign policy as well as inclement weather. "The move signals that Obama will continue to aggressively pressure Tehran, even as he offers engagement," [writes](#) the *Los Angeles Times*. Obama also [picked Christopher Hill](#), an experienced ambassador to European nations who also saw success pressuring North Korea to dismantle its nuclear program, to replace Ryan Crocker as ambassador to Iraq. It doesn't affect the Change-o-Meter much, but Hill's an odd choice for ambassador to Iraq—unlike his predecessor, he doesn't speak Arabic or have experience with the region—so he's worth watching.

*There's a lot to cover, so we want to [hear your thoughts](#) on what the Change-o-Meter should be taking into account. No detail is too small or wonky. E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.*

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## change-o-meter

### Homer Simpson's Washington

D.C. connections are the cause of Daschle's problems. Can they be the solution?

By Chris Wilson

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 2:48 PM ET

*The Change-o-Meter is [now a widget](#). You can add it to your blog, Web site, or profile with just a few clicks (shortcut for Facebook [here](#)). Each time we publish a new column, the widget will automatically update to reflect the latest score.*

As another Cabinet appointee [runs afoul](#) of the "pay your taxes" rule, Team Obama is playing defense as it strives to project an image of a squeaky clean White House. Obama's [bipartisan hopes](#) are renewed as the stimulus package moves to the Senate, but meanwhile the administration is [promising more oversight](#) of the remaining half of the \$700 billion TARP fund. Toss in the [conclusion](#) of the Middle East envoy's first visit to the region, and the **Change-o-meter starts the week at 15**.

Late Friday, news broke that Tom Daschle, Obama's nominee to head the Health and Human Services Department, had failed to pay \$128,000 in taxes on unreported income. (He paid the bill, plus interest, early last month.) Since then, the narrative has focused on the former Senate leader's deep Washington connections, both as the genesis of this problem—as the *New York Times* [details today](#)—and as the possible antidote, as the *Washington Post* [suggested yesterday](#). (To pinch from [Homer Simpson](#): Washington, the cause of—and solution to—all of life's problems.) This sounds a lot like the Washington Obama campaigned against, particularly coming on the heels of Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner's [tax troubles](#) and the [early brouhaha](#) over Obama's circumvention of his own ethics law to allow a former Raytheon lobbyist to serve as deputy secretary of defense. The Senate finance committee is meeting today to discuss Daschle's case. For now, that's zero points for change.

Rep. Barney Frank, chair of the House financial services committee, said over the weekend that the Obama administration is likely to attach more strings to the second half of the [TARP money](#), forcing banks that receive government funds to issue more loans. While the Change-o-Meter will await more detailed proposals for any major shift, Frank's promise is good enough for a nudge on the meter.

Former Sen. George Mitchell, now the administration's envoy to the Middle East, met with the king of Saudi Arabia yesterday in the last stop of his tour of the region, which included visits with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The trip was mostly uneventful, but it is a small step in the direction of the restored diplomacy that Obama promised on the stump.

*There's a lot to cover, so we want to [hear your thoughts](#) on what the Change-o-Meter should be taking into account. No detail is too small or wonky. E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.*

## corrections Corrections

Friday, February 6, 2009, at 7:09 AM ET

In the Feb. 3 "[Technology](#)," Farhad Manjoo originally misstated the number of stories that make it to the front page of Digg.com each day. It is around 150, not a few dozen.

In the Feb. 2 "[Dilettante](#)," Stephen Metcalf indicated that the fans on the field during Bruce Springsteen's half-time performance were paid extras. They were volunteers.

In the Feb. 2 "[Number 1](#)," Josh Levin originally and incorrectly stated that the United States' 25 percent import tariff on foreign-built trucks has been repealed.

In the Jan. 14 "[Architecture](#)," Witold Rybczynski misspelled Edward Durell Stone's name.

In the 2004 "[Chatterbox](#)" reprinted on Jan. 29, Timothy Noah wrote that Candlemas commemorates the baptism of Jesus. It commemorates the purification of the Virgin Mary and the presentation of Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem.

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

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## dear prudence Whack Off While You Work

My co-worker pleasures himself at the office, and HR doesn't care.  
Thursday, February 5, 2009, at 6:39 AM ET

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

### Dear Prudence,

I work in an office that I share with two other people. The desks are in a triangle with short partitions between us, but it is possible to see one another through the gaps. One co-worker is part-time, so I am frequently alone with the third. Lately, I have been hearing and then seeing him participating in a solo activity usually done in the bedroom. Once I figured out for sure what he was doing, I went to human resources. The manager told me that as she has only my word about this, I should go find her when he does it again so she can know for herself. The problem is, she is never around when it happens. He stops if I get up to go out the

door and starts when I sit down again. I feel violated, abused, and totally grossed out. What should I do?

—Nauseated

Dear Nauseated,

This HR manager says she wants you to tell your co-worker while he's [in flagrante](#), "Hold that thought!" as you scurry off to get her, so she can return and catch him, uh, red-handed. So now you have two problems: You sit next to a pervert, and your head of HR is an incompetent lunatic. I spoke to Philip Gordon, an employment law attorney in Boston, about your predicament. He was more astounded that HR put the onus of proving onanism on you than that there's a masturbator lurking in cubicle-land. You are not required to don latex gloves and do a forensic search through the guy's wastebasket for incriminating Kleenex. Once you reported this gross violation, HR's obligation was to investigate and act to address it. Gordon says the company can check the guy's computer to see if he's been downloading pornography while he's been unloading—that's enough to get him fired. If he doesn't confess and there's no evidence, then at the very least the company has an obligation to take your complaint seriously enough to relocate him to a desk far away from you—preferably one with a 360-degree view, so they can keep an eye on him. If it's just for internal investigative purposes, the company might also be entitled to secretly videotape your pod. Since your HR department is a joke, you must take this complaint up the chain of command and explain the situation you find yourself in. Surely one of the bosses will be interested that the jerk-off you sit next to is creating a hostile work environment (and that the HR department is run by a dope). No one wants to get into a lawsuit, but a company that won't address a problem like this is one that really wants to end up in court.

—Prudie

### [Dear Prudence Video: Sexpot Daughter-in-Law](#)

Dear Prudie,

I have been hit hard by the recession. I was laid off, my unemployment has run out, and I've had a difficult time finding another job. While I have no problem with scrimping, saving, and freezing my spending until things pick up, my girlfriend of five years, whom I love very much, has started to become very anxious about it. In more lucrative times, when we both had good jobs, we did a lot together. However, in the absence of funds on my part, her general demeanor toward me has become more acerbic and distant. Whenever she suggests we go out and do something, I calmly explain that I'm broke and can't afford any discretionary spending. She says I have a credit card and could use it if I really wanted to. I respond that that would be completely irresponsible. Then she gets mad and sulks about being bored. Now I'm worried our relationship was only good in proportion to our respective incomes. I'm also starting to worry

she's spending way more than she should, but when I bring it up, she tells me not to "parent" her. I would rather lose a job than lose the girl I love, but it seems being poor is easier when you're alone. How do I convince her to settle down without seeming like I'm lecturing her?

—Broke Beau

Dear Broke,

No, it's not easier being poor alone; it's only easier if your partner wants you to spend yourself into the poor house. Negotiating the stresses of this deepening recession is going to be an ever-more-important issue for romantic relationships, and many aren't going to make it. The unemployed person has lost both income and identity, and the still-employed person feels the pressure of being an emotional and financial support. And everyone is longing for things to quickly go back to the way they were. (Note: if you want to hang onto that hope, do not read anything by [Nouriel Roubini](#).) But you two need to recognize that the end of discretionary income doesn't mean nights of darning socks by candlelight. Find free or bargain ways to enjoy life. Join or start a book club (first selection: *The Grapes of Wrath*). Have potluck dinner and rental movie nights with friends. Go to museums during free or discounted hours. Check out speakers at the nearest college. Cook vats of soup together. Take hikes. Hey, being broke sounds so productive, maybe darning socks by candlelight is fun after all. If your girlfriend insists that having a good time requires offerings to the gods of [APR](#), then, sadly, she may not be the woman for you. And since she's not your wife, and your finances are separate, if she wants to get herself into debt, you can rightly enter this into your calculation about your future together, but she's also right that you can't stop her.

—Prudie

**Dear Prudence,**

For years, my older sister and I have been at each other's throats. She was my father's favorite, and he spent a great deal of time with her. He barely even spoke to me from the time I was about 12 years old. Of course, I was jealous. My sister and I are in our 50s now, and she recently revealed a secret she has kept for all these years. In a letter, she told me that she was a victim of sexual molestation by my father from early childhood until she was in her teens. When she told me this, I couldn't even speak because I was too hurt and shocked by the whole thing. My father has been dead for almost four years, so I can't confront him, and I feel too horrified and hurt to say anything further to my sister. What can I do?

—The Younger of Two Traumatized Sisters

Dear Younger,

Life rarely offers the kind of revelatory psychological key that novels and movies are so good at ("[She's my sister and my](#)

[daughter](#)"). You've just been given one, and you must feel you're standing on quicksand. You now know what it really meant that your sister was your father's favorite. You were a victim, too—it's hard to imagine the damage of having a father act as if you don't exist. But now you have the guilt of knowing his neglect was a form of salvation, and you were jealous of the attentions of a rapist. This is a lot to process, but you must start by becoming unfrozen and reaching out to your sister. It has taken her all this time, and your father's death, to be able to tell you about her life—and she couldn't even bring herself to speak the words. You must pick up the phone or get on a plane and reach out to her. How painful your silence must be now that she has finally broken through her silence of so many decades. Tell her you're so sorry about what she suffered, how you misunderstood her, about what you both went through. You both should look into support groups for victims of abuse and incest, and I hope you and your sister each find therapists who specialize in family trauma. You two can start trying to create for each other the bonds of love and trust that never existed during your childhood. Fortunately, your monstrous father is dead, but you don't mention your mother. She either knew or didn't want to know about the sickness that was happening around her. If she's alive, your relationship with her is never going to be the same.

—Prudie

**Dear Prudence,**

I am part of a very close-knit group at my college. My friends hug and kiss all the time, occasionally sleep in one another's beds, share food and drink, and entertain a general disregard for conventional personal boundaries. I appreciate our intimate culture, and while I am all for spreading the love, I am not so keen on spreading the germs. Last year, despite taking pretty good care of myself, I was frequently ill. (The gang came and visited me while I had the flu. A few of them attempted to climb into bed with me to cheer me up.) This year, I've made some changes in my daily routines, such as more hand washing and more sleep. I try to explain my health concerns when I recoil from the stuffed-up "Sylvia" or when I refuse a bite of the wheezing "Leonard's" sandwich. They don't take offense at what they call my germaphobia, but my social life has gotten awkward as a result of my precautions. What should I do?

—Head Health Honcho

Dear Honcho,

You must be matriculating at [Bonobo](#) University, or maybe Bonobo Nursery School, because the "let's all roll around in a mess of mucus" sounds more like pre-K than premed. As I've noted before, I admire your generation's ability to create intense, cross-gender, noncoupled gangs. But, folks, at least adopt the basic rules of personal hygiene posted at any decent day care center. If you're going to continue to hang out with your sneezing, wheezing pals, invest in some basic protection: Check with your doctor about the meningococcal vaccines, and get an

annual flu shot. And I will continue to assume that your generation's social life will start to get awkward if by the time you're in your 30s, you all haven't started to limit your intimate germ swapping to that one special host.

—Prudie

*Photograph of Prudie by Teresa Castracane.*

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## dispatches

### Come Hell or High Water, the Burmese Junta Endures

Aung San Suu Kyi is the world's most effectively sidelined leader.

By Jacob Baynham

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 1:05 PM ET

In a rare outing from the Rangoon home in which she is imprisoned, democracy leader [Aung San Suu Kyi met with U.N. special envoy to Burma Ibrahim Gambari](#) on Monday to discuss the possibility of political reform in her country.

This marks Gambari's seventh trip to Burma, a country locked in a military dictatorship since 1962. His efforts have had little effect. During Gambari's last visit, [Suu Kyi refused to meet with him at all](#), in apparent protest over the ineffectiveness of the United Nations' diplomatic brokerage between her and the military.

In their meeting, Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy party leaders trotted out their steadfast demands: that all political prisoners be released, [the new constitution](#) be reviewed, and Suu Kyi's 1990 election victory be acknowledged.

It must have been painfully evident to everyone that the elephant in the room was sighing. As long as the recalcitrant generals are at the helm in Burma, none of these demands is likely to be met anytime soon.

Suu Kyi's own history is evidence enough. She is nearing her 14<sup>th</sup> year of detention because of the political threat she poses to Burma's 47-year-old military junta.

Since her first imprisonment 19 years ago, Suu Kyi has received dozens of major international awards she could not collect personally, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. In January, Queen Noor of Jordan gave her the [Trumpet of Conscience Award](#) for her continued nonviolent fight for freedom. Perhaps most disappointing of all was the election she and the NLD won by a landslide in 1990. The military annulled the results, locked

up the party leaders, and plunged the country into another devastating era of martial law.

Military-ruled Burma is not a nation to which change comes quickly. In North Korean fashion, the xenophobic generals have isolated their country in a time warp to buttress their power. Pre-World War II commuter buses grumble along the streets of Rangoon. Political change in Burma comes slowest of all. Today, 16 months after crushing the monk-led pro-democracy uprisings in Rangoon and eight months after sabotaging the international aid effort to help the millions affected by Cyclone Nargis, the Burmese military junta has proved that neither hell nor high water can shake it from power.

Nor, apparently, can Aung San Suu Kyi, who at 63 remains the most effectively marginalized political leader in the world. Daughter of Aung San, Burma's independence hero, Suu Kyi has symbolized Burma's greatest hopes for democracy for the last 20 years. Educated at Oxford, Suu Kyi is a devout Buddhist, an artful writer, and a charismatic orator. To most Burmese, she is known simply as "The Lady."

The closest I got to Suu Kyi was in a paddleboat offshore from her lakeside home in Rangoon. Ironically, her house lies just opposite the crumbling residence of the late [Gen. Ne Win](#), who founded Burma's military regime in 1962. Guards keep watch over her house at all hours, and nine Burmese were recently arrested for venturing too close. But though Suu Kyi's physical presence is limited to her family's compound, The Lady was seldom far from the minds of the Burmese I spoke with.

"In Burma, human rights, no," a man named Nyein told me one afternoon in a tea shop, using all the English he had. Worried about being overheard by a government spy (one in four residents of Rangoon is thought to be a government informant), Nyein edged his stool closer to mine and looked away. "All people like Aung San Suu Kyi," he said. He folded his hands at the wrists under the table. "But talking, danger." And then he left.

As their lives go from bad to worse and the international community fails to put any meaningful pressure on their government, many Burmese are beginning to lose hope that the military will ever be vanquished. In Burma, little could be more dangerous than the status quo.

The majority of the population here lives on less than \$1 a day while almost half of the national budget is spent on the military. Underneath the government's propaganda billboards, beggars ply the streets by day. Prostitutes take their turf at night, dolled-up and doe-eyed outside the cinemas and under the bypasses, trawling for a livelihood in a country that is the source of four unique strains of HIV, according to a [Council on Foreign Relations report](#). In Burma, 360 children die of preventable

diseases every day because the junta puts only 3 percent of the budget into health care.

It's a situation so dire and persistent that Suu Kyi's vision of nonviolent resistance unraveling the generals' power can seem naively optimistic. ("There will be change," she has said, "because all the military have are guns.")

For the few remaining armed resistance groups fighting the military in remote swaths of jungle near the borders of India, China, and Thailand, the concept of nonviolent revolution is an idealistic luxury reserved for the cities. Here among the country's ethnic minorities, Burmese soldiers have been burning and looting villages and raping and killing their inhabitants for decades. In the age-old counterinsurgency tactic, they are trying to kill the fish by draining the sea.

When I sneaked across the Thai border to visit the Shan State Army, a threadbare rebel militia in northeastern Burma, I met a man who had been a monk for 20 years but recently exchanged his robes for a gun. He told me what he thought of the pacifism enshrined by Suu Kyi and the protesting monks in Rangoon. "Here, if you have no gun, it's like you're sticking your neck out for them to cut it," he said. "Without a gun, you will not see peace in Burma."

The key to the generals' longevity is keeping people fearful, whether in the jungle or on the city streets. Fear of government spies ensures that public conversations in the city never stray too far into politics. That fear is well-founded. The junta's draconian courts regularly impose massive sentences for petty crimes—just talking to a foreign journalist can earn a Burmese seven years in lockup.

Recently, a famous Burmese comedian known as Zarganar was [sentenced to 59 years in prison](#) after mounting an independent relief effort to aid the cyclone victims in the Irrawaddy Delta. In the raid on his home, police found several banned DVDs, including a film of the jewel-encrusted [wedding of Senior Gen. Than Shwe's daughter](#) and a copy of *Rambo 4*, in which Sylvester Stallone guns down the Burmese military in the eastern jungles single-handedly. U Gambira, one of the monks who organized the September 2007 protests, was sentenced to 68 years. A student activist in his 20s was given 104 years for his anti-military political activities.

In this way, thousands in Burma can directly relate to Suu Kyi's plight. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2,162 prisoners of conscience sit in Burma's jails as of Jan. 1, 2009. Thousands more came before them.

I gave the AAPP's office a call when I was reporting from Mae Sot, a town on the Thai side of the Burmese border. I asked the

man on the phone if he would be able to put me in touch with a former political prisoner.

"Maybe I can help," he said. "I was in jail for 14 years." I walked to the office and met Aung Kyaw Oo. Aung Kyaw was a frail man with a tired face. Like many Burmese in Mae Sot, he had escaped his homeland and was living illegally in Thailand. Aung Kyaw had been a student activist and was arrested three years after his role in the [massive pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988](#), during which the military killed thousands of people on the streets and Aung San Suu Kyi emerged as a national icon.

Aung Kyaw was abused and starved in prison. He wasn't allowed outside. "They treated me like a slave," he told me. "Like an animal." He survived by controlling his mind through meditation and learning English from scraps of newspaper smuggled in by the kinder prison guards. He read about the Internet and computers and told himself that one day he would learn about them, too.

Aung Kyaw was finally released in 2005. By that time he was very sick, and the free life offered him little consolation. "People were still poor," he said, "still working all day and not having enough to eat. I knew I had to do something to change my country." Fearing a return to jail, Aung Kyaw fled to the Thai border where he works with AAPP, keeping track of political prisoners back in Burma.

At the top of that list is Aung San Suu Kyi, still awaiting her "Mandela moment" when she will step out of her house and lead her country out of oppression. For many of Burma's disheartened, it won't come a second too soon.

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## dvd extras

### **Return to *Waterworld***

What if the legendary flop were an eco-parable whose message was ahead of its time?

By David Zax

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 12:04 PM ET

To rerelease *Waterworld* today on DVD takes daring; to market it as a "[2-Disc Extended Edition](#)" surely takes recklessness. Was the original, 136-minute theatrical cut not sufficiently extended? Wasn't *everything* about the film's production miserably drawn out? Its then-record expenditure (about \$200 million); its feuding between Kevin Costner and director Kevin Reynolds; its troubled, interminable, on-location-in-the-Pacific shoot? Even before the film hit theaters, the press had dubbed it "Kevin's Gate" and "Fishtar." It failed miserably in the domestic box

office (though it eventually recouped its losses in the foreign market). A few years ago, the film served as the subject (together with *The Postman*) of a chapter in [Fiasco: A History of Hollywood's Iconic Flops](#).

But has *Waterworld's* moment finally arrived? The movie opens with an image of the globe as we know it slowly being swallowed by blue while a narrator explains that in the future, "the polar ice caps have melted, covering the world with water." Something similar, if less dramatic, is happening right now on Earth. Global warming is causing seas to rise (though the polar ice caps have [little to do with it](#)). In its 2007 report, the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) projected a sea-level rise of between seven and 23 inches by 2100. While that might not seem like much, it could be enough to make a low-lying island untenable: Recently, the Maldives' new president [announced his intention](#) to buy land to relocate his entire nation if necessary. What if *Waterworld* were an eco-parable whose message was merely ahead of its time?

The survivors of the great flood that *Waterworld* imagines have banded together to form floating villages called "atolls"—dreary fortifications designed to keep out the marauding ruffraff who terrorize the post-apocalyptic seascape. When a nameless, taciturn drifter (Kevin Costner) arrives bearing a jar full of rare and precious dirt, the guards of one atoll eagerly admit him. But when the denizens of the atoll catch a glimpse of the gills behind Costner's ears, he is sentenced to death. (Not very tolerant of mutation, these atoll dwellers.) Just as Costner's man-fish is about to be executed, however, the atoll is sacked by a band of pirates searching for a girl with a precious map tattooed on her back (Tina Majorino). Costner escapes and becomes the grudging protector of the girl and her surrogate mother Helen (Jeanne Tripplehorn). Many explosions ensue.

In the lulls between the blasts, there runs through *Waterworld* a strong environmental current, one that was mostly overlooked or overshadowed in contemporary reviews but that has been noticed since ([by the Sierra Club](#), among others). The first thing we see our hero do in the film is recycle: The Mariner (as Costner's character is known) has a device that transforms his urine into potable water, which he shares with a small potted lime tree. Even when in a bind, the Mariner insists on piloting his three-hulled catamaran solely with a renewable resource, wind.

The Mariner's enemies are the aptly named Smokers, pirates who chain-smoke ancient cigarettes and favor gas-guzzling biplanes and jet skis. Their leader, the militaristic Deacon (a manic Dennis Hopper), is staunchly anti-science, declaring that God made "both man and fish, and no combination thereof. He does not abide the notion of evolution!" The car that he wheels around his supertanker sports a "NUKE THE WHALES" bumper sticker, and he worships "Saint Joe" Hazelwood, pilot of the Exxon Valdez. An enemy of sustainable living—he heads

something called the Church of Eternal Growth—he is obsessed with finding the mythical Dryland, which he plans to rape as soon as he gets his hands on it: "If there's a river we'll dam it, and if there's a tree we'll ram it," he sermonizes to his flock.

Of course, coming from this movie, such a critique of excess smack a bit of hypocrisy. *Fiasco* catalogs the production expenses: star's nightly accommodations, \$1,800; star's yacht transport to nearby set, \$800,000; construction of floating city, \$5 million; recovery of sunken floating city, \$400,000. (Priceless, though, was the rumor—which Costner disputed as "bullshit"—that the star had demanded that his hairline be digitally altered in postproduction.)

But if *Waterworld* opened viewers' eyes to the catastrophic possibilities of climate change, would that make the \$200 million seem like money better spent? (Consider that a former World Bank chief economist has advocated spending [\\$600 billion per year](#) to mitigate climate change.) Harvard psychologist Dan Gilbert has called global warming "[a threat that our brains are uniquely unsuited to do a damn thing about](#)." It has no poster child, it is slow-moving, and its worst effects won't be felt until the future. Attempts have been made to give global warming a face—the polar bear, New Orleans—and eco-thrillers like [The Day After Tomorrow](#) have imagined what sudden climate change might look like. But the task of making people care about the future is tougher. And few things can make the future more vivid than a good science fiction movie.

Is *Waterworld* such a film? I might as well come out and say it: I *liked Waterworld* in 1995, and I like it now. It's true, as critics noted, that Costner's dreary performance does little to make the first man-fish sympathetic. But the film has some strong supporting performances, several entertaining if superfluous action sequences, and no more plot holes than other films of its kind. One scene, in particular, has stayed with me. Helen believes the Mariner must have seen Dryland, as it's the only explanation for how he came by all that dirt. "You really want to see it?" he asks her. "I'll take you to Dryland." Ushering her into a diving chamber, they dive fathoms and fathoms, finally reaching the barnacle-strewn wreckage of a former metropolis, where the Mariner raises a handful of dirt from the ocean floor. Hauntingly beautiful, the wordless scene is also a marvel of economic screenwriting, at once explaining the Mariner's source of wealth, closing the arc of Helen's obsession with Dryland, and tying the fantasy world of the film to the real world of the viewer.

But despite being a better movie than most people remember, *Waterworld* has its limitations as an eco-parable. It doesn't begin, as does *The Day After Tomorrow*, with a standoff between a climate scientist and a Cheney-esque symbol of corporate greed, nor does it issue an implicit ultimatum, as did last year's remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (in which Keanu Reeves played an alien sent to Earth to assess whether

humans could change their planet-abusing ways or whether they should simply be exterminated). In fact, the film never even definitively pins the blame for the flood on mankind. The narrator's declaration that "the polar ice caps have melted" is a little vague. The film's apocalypse was so thorough as to destroy the very knowledge of how it came about; in *Waterworld*, it is heresy to claim that there even *was* dry land before the flood.

Only the wisest Waterworldians have a hunch the mess they've inherited is anthropogenic. An old, kindly inventor asks the Mariner early in the film: "The ancients, they did something terrible, didn't they? To cause all this water, hundreds, hundreds of years ago." The real villains of *Waterworld* are centuries dead—but who has time to hold a grudge when Dennis Hopper and his army of jet skis are splashing at the gates of your floating city?

In the end, what stymies the environmentalist who would tease a message out of *Waterworld* is this: It isn't grim enough. When the protagonists aren't in the middle of a swashbuckling set piece, they're patiently coping and demonstrating hope. "We'll just start over again," says that old inventor good-naturedly after his city is sacked. The film ends happily with the discovery of Dryland (Mount Everest, it turns out), an abundant paradise with cascading fresh water and galloping wild horses. Less an alarmist film than an oddly reassuring one, *Waterworld* seems to tell us that as bad as the coming apocalypse may be, a scrappy band of ([mostly white, English-speaking](#)) men and women will persevere. It offers the message of all summer blockbusters: Things will work out in the end. All we'll need to get by is floating architecture, decent windmills, and a healthy dose of stick-to-it-iveness. Oh, yes, and gills.

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## explainer

### A Snake the Size of a Plane

How did prehistoric animals get so big?

By Nina Shen Rastogi

Thursday, February 5, 2009, at 5:26 PM ET

In the Feb. 5 issue of *Nature*, a group of paleontologists announced that they've [found a fossil in Colombia](#) belonging to a 43-foot snake that lived some 60 million years ago. The massive boa, which dates from the [Paleocene Epoch](#), is the largest snake species ever discovered—it would have been [the length of a school bus and weighed as much as a Volkswagen Beetle](#). How come prehistoric animals were so much bigger than today's beasts?

They had more time to grow. Prehistoric animals weren't all enormous. [The horse's earliest known ancestor](#), for example,

lived around the same time as the giant boa and (at roughly the size of a fox) was much smaller than today's equine. And though many prehistoric creatures did get very, very large, they didn't all appear at the same time. The hugest dinosaurs, such as the plant-eating [sauropods](#) and the [giant predatory theropods](#), lived during the Jurassic and Cretaceous periods, about 65 million to 200 million years ago. Forty-five million to 50 million years ago, the Earth saw a wave of giant mammals like the [paraceratherium](#), a hornless rhino that could weigh between 10 and 20 tons. Woolly mammoths and [elephant-sized ground sloths](#), in turn, lived during the last ice age, between 12,000 and 5 million years ago.

In between those spikes, the Earth experienced large [extinction events](#). One of these massive die-offs [65.5 million years ago](#) wiped out the dinosaurs, and another [34 million years ago](#) killed off most of the large mammals. Big animals are especially vulnerable when these mass extinctions occur because they adapt and evolve more slowly, as they tend to live longer and reproduce less rapidly than other creatures.

After a large-scale devastation it can take millions of years for giant animals to reappear—it took 15 million for the giant mammals to crop up after the dinosaurs died. The last major extinction event took place roughly 12,000 years ago, not nearly long enough ago for new species of truly massive animals to have materialized by now. The biggest creatures on earth today—the American bison, elephants, rhinos—aren't new species but survivors of that catastrophe. Theoretically, there's no reason we couldn't see dinosaur-sized animals again in the future. After all, we already share our planet with the biggest mammal ever recorded—the [blue whale](#).\*

Why did some prehistoric animals get so big in the first place? No one knows for sure, but there are lots of theories. Being larger can provide many evolutionary advantages—bigger animals are less vulnerable to predators and can compete more assertively for resources. The existence of bigger herbivores also means that carnivorous animals have to grow in order to be effective hunters. A species' size may also shift in response to environmental factors. In cold climates, a bulky frame can be an asset to warm-blooded animals—the bigger they are, the better they retain heat. The opposite is true for cold-blooded animals—in a warm climate, a bigger mass can help insulate an animal and keep it from overheating. And in [this BBC radio show](#), a paleontologist suggests that some plant-eating dinosaurs might have gotten so big because the foliage in that era was extremely tough and woody: A larger body frame meant a longer digestive tract and more time for bacteria to do its work, allowing the dinosaur to extract as much nutritional value as possible from each bite.

Finally, there are some ecological characteristics that, while not necessarily stimulating to growth, may help support it. [Cockroaches in the Paleozoic Era](#), for example, might have been

able to get as big as house cats in part because there was more oxygen in the atmosphere.

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

*Explainer thanks Jack L. Conrad of the American Museum of Natural History and Ernest Lundelius Jr. of the University of Texas-Austin.*

**Correction, Feb. 6, 2009:** The original sentence mistakenly identified the blue whale as the baleen whale. Blue whales are a species within the suborder of baleen whales. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

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## explainer

### You're Trashing My Scene!

Was Christian Bale's *Terminator* tirade illegal?

By Christopher Beam

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 6:36 PM ET

A recording of Christian Bale's outburst at a cinematographer on the set of *Terminator Salvation* [leaked](#) onto the Internet Monday, causing great embarrassment for the actor and the production studio, Warner Bros. In a three-minute expletive-laced tirade, Bale yells at the director of photography for walking into the frame and threatens to "kick [his] fucking ass." (Audio [here](#); full transcript [here](#).) Is verbal abuse ever illegal?

Yes. The First Amendment protects all kinds of insulting language but not speech that qualifies as "[fighting words](#)." In the 1942 case *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, the Supreme Court defined fighting words as language that creates the threat of immediate physical conflict or that "by [its] very utterance inflict[s] injury." For Bale to be found liable in a civil suit, the plaintiff would first have to establish that the actor's words could easily have led to blows.

Litigious victims of verbal abuse generally sue for either assault or emotional distress. Assault is defined to include a threatening gesture that would lead a reasonable person to fear imminent harmful contact, like pointing a gun and saying, "I'll shoot!" To prove emotional distress, the plaintiff must show that the aggressor's behavior was "outrageous"—defined by one [law book](#) as a case "in which the recitation of the facts to an average member of the community would arouse his resentment against the actor, and lead him to exclaim, 'Outrageous!'" Secondly, he must demonstrate that the distress was absolutely unendurable.

Verbal abuse might also be punishable under broad rubrics like "disorderly conduct" or "disturbing the peace." But such statutes

generally only apply to public places. In a private setting, like a Hollywood set, there's no public peace to disturb.

**Bonus Explainer:** Did the leaked audio violate a confidentiality agreement? Almost certainly. Most production companies these days require actors, designers, grips, and everyone else on-set to sign contracts that include confidentiality or nondisclosure agreements. (Sample [here](#).) If the audio of Bale's freakout was leaked to the press by someone who worked on the film, chances are that person was breaching his or her contract. It's also possible the audio leaked after Warner Bros. [sent it to their insurance company](#). (Warner Bros. was concerned Bale might bail.) In that case, the leak would probably violate a confidentiality agreement written into the contract with the insurer. And even if there was no explicit nondisclosure provision, there's a reasonable assumption of privacy in the relationship between insurer and insured that could merit legal action.

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

*Explainer thanks Don Herzog of University of Michigan, Stephen Sheppard of Cowan, DeBaets, Abrahams & Sheppard, Stephen Solomon of New York University, and Eugene Volokh of University of California, Los Angeles.*

*Slate V: The Ultimate Celebrity Rant*

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## explainer

### Olympic-Size Bong Hits

Michael Phelps has extraordinary lung capacity. Does that mean he can get extraordinarily stoned?

By Juliet Lapidos

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 6:41 PM ET

The British tabloid *News of the World* published a photo Sunday of [Michael Phelps taking a bong hit](#) at a college party. The International Olympic Committee accepted the swimmer's apology for his behavior, and so far Phelps' [sponsors are making light of the incident](#). Meanwhile, on [blogs](#) and [chat forums](#), fans are wondering whether Phelps' abnormally large lung capacity means he can take monster bong rips. Can he?

He can. *Total lung capacity* refers to the volume of air contained in the lungs at the point of "maximal" inspiration—i.e., the biggest breath you can take. It's measured in liters. The greater a smoker's total lung capacity, the more he can inhale from a given joint, bowl, or bong. According to [some estimates](#), Phelps' lung capacity is twice that of the average human, or 12 liters rather



than six. So if he puts his mind to it, he can take a hit that's twice as big as that of the next partygoer.

Each time a smoker takes a puff of marijuana, **THC** is delivered to the circulatory system via the capillaries in the lungs. The rapidity with which a smoker gets high depends, in part, on how quickly he **absorbs the THC**, which depends, in turn, on the interval between puffs, hold time, and, yes, lung capacity. But this doesn't mean that Phelps gets twice as high, twice as fast as non-Olympians. Larger people need more cannabis than others to feel its effect. (Phelps is 6-foot-4 and weighs about 195 pounds.) How quickly a smoker gets high, and how high he gets, also depends on whether he's a regular user. Veteran tokers need to smoke more than novices to experience the drug's physiological and behavioral effects.

The long-term consequences of marijuana use are still hotly debated. But there's some evidence that users suffer from **decreased lung capacity** and may develop **chronic bronchitis and airflow obstruction**. Continued use would likely have an adverse effect both on lap times and bong-hit size.

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

*Explainer thanks Lester Grinspoon of Harvard Medical School. Explainer also thanks reader Greg Wymer for asking the question.*

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## explainer

### Who Decides Which Drugs Athletes Can Take?

Why Olympians can't get high.

By Brian Palmer

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 6:57 PM ET

On Sunday, a British tabloid published a November photo of **Olympic champion Michael Phelps smoking a bong**. Fortunately for Phelps, the World Anti-Doping Agency prohibits marijuana only during competition periods. How does a drug make it onto WADA's list of banned substances?

It gets approved by three committees in consultation with 1,700 governments and sports-governing bodies. The WADA list is updated annually. First, the WADA List Committee, composed of 12 toxicologists, pharmacists, lab directors, and physicians, evaluates substances that might be banned. To be considered, a substance must satisfy two of three criteria: the potential to enhance performance; significant risk to the athlete; and contravention of the spirit of sport (meaning it is illegal or could be construed as cheating). Once two criteria are satisfied, the

committee considers other factors, including ubiquity, usage trends, commercial availability, and whether the substance is detectable. (Caffeine, for example, used to be on the list but was removed because it became too difficult for WADA to police and for the athletes to avoid.) No single factor is decisive. Certain substances have been banned before laboratory tests could detect them, while in other cases the List Committee waited for reliable tests to emerge.

Once the List Committee decides what substances should be newly banned, it circulates its list to 1,700 governments and sports-governing bodies for comment. After reviewing any comments, the committee submits the list to the WADA Health, Medical, and Research Committee. If that committee approves the list, it must then be approved by the WADA Executive Committee. The two reviewing committees have the authority to make changes without further review by the List Committee. The revised list must be approved in October, but it takes effect in January so that athletes have an opportunity to adapt to rule changes.

The current [list](#) (PDF) contains three categories: substances or methods prohibited at all times (such as steroids and **blood doping**), substances prohibited during competition periods (including stimulants like methamphetamine), and substances prohibited for particular sports (no alcohol in auto racing or, oddly, bowling).

Marijuana, which has been on the WADA list since the first draft in 2003, is prohibited because it poses a danger to the athlete and is illegal in most jurisdictions. It is, however, something of a special case among substances prohibited only during competition. Unlike stimulants or **asthma drugs**, there isn't much evidence that pot enhances performance, no matter when it is used. The List Committee likely declined to prohibit it year-round because of its ubiquity in many countries.

An athlete with a condition requiring use of a banned substance can petition WADA for a therapeutic-use exemption. The petitioner must prove that 1) she has a medical condition and 2) there is no efficacious alternative to the banned substance. No athlete has sought a medicinal-marijuana exemption, but the petition would probably fail the second test.

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

*Explainer thanks Gary I. Wadler of the World Anti-Doping Agency.*

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## family

### No, You Shut Up!

What to do when your kid provokes you into an inhuman rage.

By Alan E. Kazdin and Carlo Rotella

Thursday, February 5, 2009, at 1:23 PM ET

If you're a parent, you are probably familiar with being provoked into a blood vessel-popping rage that instantly overwhelms any resolution you might have made to stay calm. That's because kids are amazingly good at refining behaviors that they can turn to when they're upset or angry, especially in public, to make their parents even angrier—in fact, insanely angry. Let's just stand back for a moment and appreciate the virtuosity of the 6-year-old who trails along behind you every morning on the way to school wailing that you're mean because you make him wear an uncomfortable backpack or wrinkly socks, or the 9-year-old who demonstrates her budding independence and wit by being rude to you in front of others, or the 12-year-old who during an argument over chores shouts, "You don't care about anybody but yourself! You just want me to do all this stupid stuff around your stupid house because you're so selfish and lazy!" It's as if they had commissioned a study of the most effective ways to set you off and then implemented the findings with great care and foresight.

And yet there you go, rising to the bait. What's your standard move? The hard come-along arm yank? The livid pinch-and-shake combo? The point-by-point counterargument? "*What? I'm selfish? I'm lazy? I changed your diapers and picked your nose and sat up with you all night long when you were sick! I work hard all day to support this family, and then I get home and I clean and I cook. ...*"

There's really no satisfying response, is there? Decreeing an extravagantly harsh punishment may immediately address your sense of justice, but it's unlikely to make the annoying behavior go away, and once you calm down, you're unlikely to stick with the punishment, anyway. Grabbing, shaking, hitting, or screaming at your kid may stop the behavior and be cathartic for you, but only for a moment (after which you may well begin to feel bad for losing control of yourself and overreacting), and over time such responses will likely lead to further behavioral problems. Ignoring the unwanted behavior and [finding ways to encourage its positive opposite](#) will be most effective in getting rid of the unwanted behavior in the long run, but this approach won't satisfy your overwhelming short-term urge to do something right now that addresses and fits the crime.

It's difficult to work out a satisfying response to flagrant disrespect because you're typically in the grip of at least four distinct, only partially overlapping, and often conflicting motives: an *emotional* urge to do something with the anger surging up inside you, a *moralistic* impulse to dispense justice in proportion to the offense, a *social* obligation to show yourself and your child and any others who might be watching that you don't tolerate such behavior, and a *practical* intent to get rid of

the problem so you don't have to put up with such hassles in the future.

When your child stages a scene in front of witnesses, the mixed motives—and the anger, now supercharged by humiliation—grow all the more complex and difficult to handle. Yes, sure, a vast body of psychological research tells you that *any* attention you give to a bad behavior, even if it's in the form of screaming and hitting and grounding your child for the rest of her life, will only reinforce that behavior, so it's best not to react, but your kid just called you an a--hole in front of the neighbors—unless you're B.F. Skinner or the Buddha, ignoring it is not an option. And, anyway, ignoring it won't make it go away. You need to *do* something.

So, what do you do?

Let's consider the immediate, long-term, and side effects of some common and not-so-common responses to a disrespectful provocation by your child.

**Shock and Awe:** Respond swiftly with justified fury and indignation. This is one of the most common and least effective responses.

**Immediate effect:** A rage-out on your part could instantly stop the disrespect by interdicting it with your own yelling, screaming, etc., but it's very likely to escalate the confrontation by inviting the child to continue a negative back-and-forth with you, which will in turn inspire further escalation by you—stronger comments, grabbing, slapping—and so on.

**Long-term effect:** Will not achieve a long-term reduction of the behavior, and its side effects could increase the occurrence of disrespect in the future.

**Side effects:** You will feel that you have held the line by not tolerating misbehavior, but this momentary satisfaction comes at a huge delayed price. Since the tone and content of your response model how to respond to others, through observational learning you will be teaching your child to do the same, and the force of your reaction (a tsunami of attention to your child's worst behavior) will train the child to continue and even increase the provocation.

**The Evil Eye:** Stare down your child with a dire expression and say nothing.

**Immediate:** The stare-down is likely to escalate and continue the child's behavior, and the struggle goes on.

**Long term:** Will probably not make things worse for very long, so in the long-term it's better than full-bore rage but not as good as walking away.

Side: If your child is doing the yelling and screaming, then your refusal to react at the same angry uncontrolled level provides a useful model and will actually help to develop calmer behavior on the child's part in the long run, but the harsh expression will still be inflammatory.

**The Rational Saint:** Exhibiting inhuman restraint, go to the child and in a gentle voice explain why what she is doing is not the appropriate way to treat her parents and/or ask her to explain why she's misbehaving so terribly. Like Shock and Awe, a common but largely ineffective response, and when serene self-control evaporates in the heat of battle, the Rational Saint often gives way to Shock and Awe.

Immediate: Your explaining will not make the crisis worse and will help to end it more quickly by not being provocative, which is better than a rage reaction but not likely to change the behavior. If you invite your child to explain, you will probably prolong the crisis, as she will take the opportunity to further elaborate her point: "Because you're a jerk! Didn't you hear me?"

Long term: Your modeling of calm in response to rage will have a positive influence over time, but the effect would be slow to occur, and few humans could keep it up for long.

Side: Your refusal to react may be calming, but that alone will not teach the child the proper behavior. Also, by moving in close to explain, you leave yourself open to being hit or pushed, and few parents can take that without reacting. Still, if you can restrain yourself, you will feel that you are wonderfully controlled and empathetic—and you are.

**The Ringmaster:** Divert your child's interest to something else to get him out of crisis mode. Hand him a toy or, if he's older, attempt to engage him in discussing whether anyone [shreds more rulingly than the guys in DragonForce](#).

Immediate: Not likely to work at all, but if you present some wildly novel gimmick it could reduce the duration of the misbehavior. Of course, next time you have to come up with a fresh gimmick. No human can keep this up for long.

Long term: No effect. Distraction does not change the likelihood of future occurrences.

Side: Avoids the task of teaching other ways to handle stress, but you do show restraint by not fanning the flames of rage.

**The Void:** Ignore the provocation and walk away.

Immediate: Withholding all attention de-escalates the child's behavior and so is likely to end the child's comments sooner than would be the case if you responded in a heated fashion.

Long term: Ignoring—known technically as "extinction"—could slightly decrease the likelihood of disrespect over the long-term, but its effect is still weak. The best benefit of this option is your modeling of a nonimpulsive reaction.

Side: You're modeling poise under fire, but you are likely to view it instead as a weak response that passively accepts abuse, so you'll be unhappy with it.

**The Mona Lisa:** Say nothing, show no emotional reaction, and deploy a slightly amused, faintly dismissive expression that says, in effect, "Pretty good for a novice, but nowhere near good enough to get to me." You have to practice this one in front of a mirror before you use it in action. This response will be relatively effective, but it requires great self-control to carry it off without being drawn into a confrontation or taking it too far into contempt or sarcasm.

Immediate: The Mona Lisa will de-escalate the child's behavior. The child may finish the current diatribe but will probably not go on beyond that.

Long term: Decreases slightly the likelihood of future battles. The Mona Lisa shows the child—more effectively than simple ignoring would—that provocative misbehavior will not get a satisfying rise out of you.

Side: You're asking a lot of yourself, in terms of restraint, because you will feel that you have not taught the child a lesson and that you permitted yourself to be abused, but you will have modeled restraint, the very behavior you wish to teach here.

**The Parking Ticket:** On balance, the most effective option. Take away a privilege according to a scheme that you have already discussed with the child and walk away. He already knows, because you went over it in a calm moment, that if he speaks disrespectfully to you, for instance, then he will lose a specific privilege that matters to him: a weekend event, a TV show, or computer time. The penalty should take place as close to immediately as possible—within 24 hours—and be brief in duration (no TV tonight, rather than no TV for a week). It should be significant but not harsh; accept in advance that it won't fully satisfy your ticked-off desire to throw the book at him with a prodigious, long-lasting, delayed penalty ("You can't go out for the football team next fall! Happy now?"). When he commits the offense, you say, "You lose X because of the way you are talking to me," and then go to another room, without turning your departure into a dramatic event. The tone is relaxed, almost bureaucratic, not hot or cold fury. When you cue up a reasonable consequence in advance, you're much more likely to end up with one you can stick to. When you improvise a punishment in a towering rage, on the other hand, you often have to renounce it later—when you're calm enough to realize that, for instance, taking away the cell phone for six months just isn't practicable.

Immediate: This option de-escalates by not fostering continuation. Your behavior does not invite a response, and the preordained character of the consequence discourages argument.

Long term: Likely to decrease slightly the occurrence of future provocations and battles.

Side: Although you may still pine to administer a stiffer punishment that more fully meets the severity of the crime, you will feel you have provided a consequence and not tolerated the misbehavior. Bear in mind that a more severe punishment would almost certainly have side effects that would make it harder for you to help improve your child's behavior. Also, you will have modeled a calm, controlled reaction rather than an impulsive, uncontrolled one.

None of these results offers a perfectly satisfactory response (because, in fact, there is none), but the Parking Ticket speaks most practically to the full range of a parent's mixed motives when provoked by a child's misbehavior.

And, of course, if you really want to change your child's behavior and not just endure it, you have to combine crisis-handling techniques with teaching better behavior to replace the problem behavior. Wait until a time when both you and your child are calm and then work with her on how to act when she is angry and in the mood to provoke you. You can decrease the likelihood, over both the short- and long term, that an undesirable behavior—such as flagrant disrespect—will occur. [Try some of these.](#)

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## sidebar

Return to [article](#)

**1. Problem solving:** When you're both in a good mood (out of the blue is fine), propose a problem to your child—"Let's say you're really mad at me"—and together identify a few possible ways he might respond. Three would be great. Discuss with your child in each case what the results of his response would be—that is, how you would respond to his response. A great deal of research supports the efficacy of talking with your child about problem situations and possible positive solutions. When you've discussed the possibilities in advance, the child is much more likely to use one of the solutions you've identified as positive.

**2. Point out positive models:** When you see (in public, on TV, wherever) good examples of children disagreeing with their parents, children expressing anger without losing it, or parents expressing disapproval, point it out. Label specifically what is

happening and why it's good. "You see how mad that kid is at his dad, he's really frustrated and angry, but look what he's doing: He said X and Y, but he didn't yell or scream."

**3. In a calm moment, have the child role-play being calm when she's angry—at you or anybody else:** It helps to simulate the hot-button situations when everybody's cool. Wait until a quiet moment and then say, "Let's pretend you're mad at me, and let's practice how you can tell me you're mad in a calm, respectful way, so we can make it better." Since your child isn't really mad, she will not find it hard to play her role properly by saying she's angry at you in an appropriate way that doesn't set off a confrontation. When she does it right, offer lots of praise and maybe even a small treat or extra privilege (it can be nominal; for a smaller child, extending bedtime by 10 minutes, for instance) to reinforce this positive opposite of disrespectful provocation. This kind of practice will give your child a repertoire of appropriate responses to which she can turn when she gets mad, in the same way that having a preordained routine and consequence ready to go (see [the Parking Ticket](#)) allows you to stay a little calmer and respond more reasonably when your child's behavior provokes you.

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## fighting words

### Farewell to a Much-Misunderstood Man

John Updike preferred to be wrong on account of the right reservations than right because of the wrong ones.

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 11:48 AM ET

Most of the celebrations and elegies for the great John Updike were abysmally bland, praising him as the bard and chronicler of the great American middle (middle-class, middle-minded, and so forth). One obituarist got it more nearly right, saying that Updike seemed like a paragon of the bourgeoisie to some while appearing as a worrying outrider of sexual liberation and subversion to others. A lot depends on how you first come upon an author—at my English boys boarding school in the 1960s, a copy of one of the early Rabbit works ([Rabbit, Run](#)) was passed around the dormitory with its covers ripped off as a "hot stuff" illicit text. To this day, I hardly dare go and look it up, but at one point "she" was apparently acting as if she wanted to turn herself inside out, while "he" could feel something like the inside of a "velvet slipper." Oh, sweet Jesus, what was all this? I burned and yearned to know, just as Alexander Portnoy might have done, and was amazed later to discover that both Updike and Philip Roth were considered to be literature in the United States.

Another apparent obstacle in the way of a full appreciation of Updike was his unabashedly WASP-like stance and character. This was never more awkwardly on show than in his much-

neglected essay "[On Not Being a Dove](#)," which at first glance makes him the least '60s person on record, even while trying—always the worst combination—slightly too hard to be hip:

I went to meetings and contributed to the NAACP and even lent a black man we slightly knew some money that he never repaid—I was all for people getting a break, if the expense to me wasn't inordinate.

This wasn't the way that most people chose to remember that decade, and Updike had landed himself, in addition, with the almost one-man commitment among the literati of being a supporter of the Johnson administration in Vietnam. The essay bears rereading today because, even if it doesn't contain any reasoned defense of the war itself, it does in a mild but brave and ultimately irreducible way insist that the United States is superior to its enemies, both foreign and domestic, and can therefore still be right even when it is in the wrong. (Asked how a "writer" should take a side on the war, Updike at first wished to say that the opinions of writers were of no more value than any other, yet ended by saying that "in my own case at least I feel my professional need for freedom of speech and expression prejudices me toward a government whose constitution guarantees it." So, either don't try to conscript writers, or don't mess with writers who can use understatement to such effect.

On the sole occasion that he and I met properly and had an interview and a conversation, I was mainly interested in the "race" question. Updike had just published [Brazil](#), his first step outside the boundaries of the United States since [The Coup](#) in 1978. Both novels dwelt upon exoticism and miscegenation, and the former had seemed to me when I first read it to contain a hint of prescience about the burgeoning Islamist loathing for America. (Read, if you will, the windy and scary diatribes of Updike's Hakim Ellellou, theocratic and military dictator of the land of Kush. They seem to raise the curtain on future screeds.)

Well, said Updike, with his usual and indeed as far as we know utterly unflinching geniality. His opinions on all such matters had undergone a bit of an update since 1978, and indeed since 1968. Of course he wasn't really a WASP to begin with—there can't be a more essentially Dutch name than Updike—but he added with typical diffidence that two of his children had married Africans and that he now had some genuinely "African-American" grandchildren. He appeared highly diverted and pleased by this thought, and I notice that the first edition of his memoir [Self-Consciousness](#), containing that original anti-'60s essay, is dedicated "To my grandsons John Abloff Cobblah and Michael Kwame Ntiri Cobblah." These names, which I would guess to be Ashanti/Ghanaian, make one wonder if President Barack Obama missed an opportunity, and we all missed an experience, in not inviting the whole Updike clan to be present while one of the country's finest writers could still give us an "invocation."

Perhaps Updike was too ill by then. And something seemed to have gone wrong with his confidence toward the end. His 2006 novel, [Terrorist](#), was a failure of nerve as well as a failure of style, making an absolute hash of the profile of a supposedly "home-grown" suicide-murderer in New Jersey. And his all-important "Talk of the Town" [piece](#) for *The New Yorker* about Sept. 11, 2001 (not reprinted by the magazine, I noticed, in its memorial salad of his best contributions this week), came as close as making no difference to saying that this assault on our civil society was not an event that was really worth fighting over. How incongruous of him, after maintaining for so long that Vietnam was a just war, to be so wavering and so neutral when a true crisis came along. And yet perhaps not so incongruous for a man of wry and reserved delicacy and elegance who would prefer very slightly to be wrong on account of the right reservations than right because of the wrong ones.

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foreigners

## Israel Has Already Decided

It doesn't like any of the candidates.

By Shmuel Rosner

Friday, February 6, 2009, at 7:14 AM ET

In the 2003 Israeli election, a party with the promising name *Shinui* (the Hebrew word for *change*) surged in the polls and ended up with 15 seats—out of 120—in the Knesset, Israel's parliament. It was a huge success for a party with no real grassroots organization, especially one with a simplistic message and no clear position on the most important issues of the day—war and peace, security and settlements, Palestine and Iran. Shinui rode a wave of anti-religious sentiment among the Israeli middle class. A vote for Shinui was a vote of protest against the ruling powers' tendency to pay a heavy political price for votes from ultra-Orthodox parties. It didn't last very long. In the next election, Shinui practically disappeared. Israeli voters—impatient, restless, disillusioned—had moved on to the next trendy cause.

It's a familiar phenomenon in the messy world of Israeli politics. The chaotic nature of the parliamentary system, compounded by complications related to Israel's state of affairs, multiplied by Israel's [leadership crisis](#) of [recent years](#), all have contributed to the rise of these one-hit-wonder parties.

In the run-up to the Feb. 10 election, the party that everybody's talking about is Israel Beitenu (Israel Is Our Home), headed by Russian-born strongman Avigdor Lieberman. The party mostly emphasizes a secular nationalist vision and demands that all citizens must demonstrate their loyalty to the principle of a "Jewish and democratic state" before they can enjoy the benefits of citizenship. Israel Beitenu's TV commercials boast that "only

Lieberman speaks Arabic"—that is, he is the only candidate who understands how to deal with the problem of disloyalty he attributes to many members of the Israeli Arab minority.

But there's an even more significant group—albeit a quieter one—and that's the party of the undecided. According to polls, Israel Beitenu is predicted to get 16-19 mandates, that is, around 15 percent of the vote. The undecideds have made a more impressive showing. On Wednesday, professor Camil Fuchs of Tel Aviv University, one of Israel's leading pollsters, told me that less than a week before election day, 20 percent of Israelis haven't yet decided who they are going to vote for. About one-quarter of them can be pushed into indicating a preference, but the rest will not budge: They just don't know. For a country like Israel—with its high voter turnout and tradition of strong political views—this is an unusually high rate of undecideds.

So, there are two apparently different groups: those who know exactly what they want—a strong leader ready to pick a fight with the world and especially with those he considers to be Israel's "enemy within," namely Israeli Arabs; a man of bluntness and toughness. And then there are those whom don't know what they want: Do they want a woman known for originality, honesty, and freedom from corruption (Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni of Kadima) or a man known for being a great speaker—a bright, if contrarian, thinker with an irresistible habit of making himself the enemy of all elites (Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu)? Fuchs told me that the largest group of undecideds is the segment of people who do not yet know if they'll vote for right-of-center Likud or centrist Kadima.

In fact, however, these seemingly different groups are really one and the same: They are all disillusioned voters. Just days before election day, Israelis have already made one decision: They don't like the candidates. That's why so many would vote for "something else" (Lieberman); that's why so many don't yet know who to vote for; that's why those who do know split their votes not between two main parties, as normal countries do, but among four or even five major parties. Likud, Kadima, Labor, Israel Beitenu, and possibly Shas, the Sephardic religious party, will be in the range of 15-25 Knesset seats. (The polls currently show Shas with 10 or 11 mandates, but the party traditionally performs better in elections than in polls.)

Of course, on election night the focus will not be on the undecided; all eyes will be on Lieberman. He is successful for many of the same reasons the other candidates aren't. Yes, his message of "no loyalty, no citizenship" has troubling undertones of racism, alienation, and the despair of people who no longer believe that Jews and Muslims can live together peacefully on the same piece of land. But it's also possible to find some encouraging signs in Lieberman's apparent popularity.

Israeli voters' political choices are very complicated, and Israel's strategic challenges can seem overwhelming. Lieberman's

message is straightforward and unapologetic. On Monday, I watched him speak at a conference. He sarcastically mocked the British for criticizing Israel—they traveled thousands of miles to fight for the goats in the Falkland Islands and have thechutzpah to question our battles! Lieberman's clear message and combative tone are an appealing contrast to the murky propositions of the three contenders for the prime ministership—Netanyahu, Livni, and Defense Minister Ehud Barak of the Labor Party. Lieberman has the appeal of the candidate willing to cut the Gordian knot.

Still, while Lieberman's rise is testimony to Israel's leadership shortage, it is also the best possible proof that the traditional Israeli right wing has been dismantled. Those people and parties who still believe in "greater Israel" and in "safeguarding the settlements" and in opposing the future Palestinian state are almost gone. There's still the National Union—which mostly represents settlers, classic right-wing voters, and religious Zionists—and some members of Likud and Shas still believe in the old slogans. But generally speaking, Lieberman is killing them politically. They are the past; he is the future.

That's because Lieberman realized that sentiments have changed. Israelis are still hawkish, skeptical, and suspicious of "the Arabs." But they are also realistic. They know that Israel will not be able to keep up the occupation forever; in fact, they long ago gave up on most of the settlements, and they couldn't care less if and when Palestinians have their own state, just as long as it is peaceful and minds its own business. Understanding all this, Lieberman founded the right-wing party for the post-occupation debate.

His message isn't about keeping the land—because most Israelis understand that game is over. Lieberman focuses on keeping a Jewish majority and a cohesive society after the land is gone. He wants Arabs (and radical ultra-Orthodox Jews) to demonstrate their loyalty or lose their citizenship. He wants Arab towns to be part of the Palestinian territory, and he hopes to exchange their territory for land with no people or for land mostly occupied by Jews.

The rise of this far-right, annoyingly in-your-face politician can be seen as a disastrously racist—some have even uttered the word *fascist*—turn in Israel's political life. But as ironic as it might seem, it's also possible to see Lieberman's message as a sign of maturity in Israeli politics: The right's causes have been updated. They no longer include holding onto occupied land.

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## foreigners

### What Is There To Laugh About in Gaza?

Not much, unless you're Palestinian.

By Alex Dziadosz  
Thursday, February 5, 2009, at 6:39 AM ET

Gaza is not a funny place. The air reeks of burning shopping bags, walls are pockmarked by gunfire, and the glum faces of "martyred" men glare down from street signs. Over the last month, one wretched wartime anecdote has crowded out another: [30 dead when troops shell a United Nations-run school, white phosphorous scars a mother and kills four of her children, tank fire slays a humanitarian doctor's three daughters](#). Nothing to laugh about here, right?

Unless, of course, you happen to be Gazan, in which case you might need to.

Like many foreign journalists, I recently toured the remnants of Jebalia, a border town pummeled by Israeli tanks and artillery during the latest round of fighting. As I passed a chicken cage crushed beneath a shelled coop, Khaled, my aggressively serious guide, smiled for the first time since I met him. "I am sorry, but it seems the chickens are dead," he said, gesturing to a mess of feathers jutting from a pile of wires and concrete. "We had hoped to make you broilers."

If tragedy and comedy are inseparable, as Eugène Ionesco believed, the Gazans are equipped to be among the world's funniest people. The strip is nowadays little more than a prison for its 1.5 million residents. The water is nearly poisonous, [travel is restricted even for Fulbright scholars](#), and what remains of the civil infrastructure is administered by a mirthless set of militant Islamists.

And, weirdly, rage and sorrow often did give way to laughter among Jebalia's erstwhile residents. One man, a half-blind veteran of the [British Mandate](#) years, swung seamlessly from excoriating the U.S. government to weeping over his lost home to cackling about the death of his donkey. Why would Israel want the beast dead, he wondered—it couldn't even hold a gun.

This is the flavor of a great deal of modern Palestinian wit, a brand of gallows humor so deep it could have only sprung from a strip of land so routinely trampled by plagues (1348, 1839), earthquakes (1294, 1903, 1914), and marauding empires from the Assyrians to the British. Under the particularly bleak circumstances of the last century, it's not surprising that many of the most famous and infamous Palestinians—Edward Said, Yasser Arafat, Sirhan Sirhan—are better known for their indignation than their humor.

But jokesters there are, and those who do make it into the limelight are often wry. The late [Emile Habibi](#) was particularly so. In his hallmark work [The Secret Life of Saeed](#), he described the misadventures of an Israeli Arab "pessoptimist" who, out of

self-concern, becomes an informant for the young Jewish state. As Saeed strives ineptly to placate his new masters, dodging conflict in a land beset by it, Habibi reads a lot like a Levantine Joseph Heller.

So it goes in Gaza. And this time around, war has yielded plenty of scenes Habibi or Heller could have appreciated. The atmosphere even penetrates the Al-Deera Hotel, an oasis of swank in grim Gaza City that is frequented by reporters, nonprofit workers, Hamas spokesmen, and the remnants of the Gazan elite. After filing morose copy, journalists recline in wicker chairs, puff water pipes, sip coffee, and trade war stories as a sort of collective therapy. Anything could be fodder: the Hamas policemen's blue coveralls, the Italian journalist shot at by Israelis while he was on the phone with their commander, the shuttered duty-free shop at the Egyptian border crossing.

After this, Cairo seems like Coney Island. Egyptians are renowned for their humor—reputedly rooted in millenniums-old Nile valley traditions—and today much of their comedy is straight vaudevillian slapstick, giving parts of the capital a circuslike ambiance. If Gaza is the Arab world's Euripides, Egypt is its Farrelly brothers.

Despite the repressive central authority—another millenniums-old Nile valley tradition—Egypt is still a land of ample silliness. Stretch-marked and asthmatic belly dancers wiggle under fluorescent lights, grizzled men shuttle taxis bedecked with fuzzy stuffed hearts, and fleshy bureaucrats snooze in state offices. Along downtown streets, fully veiled women ogle sexy underwear shops and droves of slick-haired youth lean against cars for hours, inviting more substantial comparisons to Arthur Fonzarelli than to any member of Hamas.

In one of the finest portraits of the city, [Cairo: The City Victorious](#), *Economist* correspondent Max Rodenbeck describes Egyptian jokes as "a kind of currency, such that a wisecrack from the most importunate beggar may bring instant reward." But this lust for distraction, Rodenbeck suggests, may well be rooted in generations-old poverty.

Recent years have only added to the list of troubles Egyptians might rather forget. Since Anwar Sadat was gunned down nearly three decades ago, the country has lived under a suffocating "emergency law" and watched many of its social services decay. Today, the Nile is murky, the traffic mind-bending, and the politics suppressed.

In both Jebalia and Cairo, wit is medicine, a sort of whiplash of the mind against trauma. Decades ago, absurdist dramatists pushed the idea that comedy exists to help us bear the tragedy of existence. But you don't need to read Samuel Beckett to get that. Khaled, my guide in Jebalia, said as much as walked past a group of chuckling men. "If they don't joke," he said, "they'll go crazy."

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foreigners

## Remembering How To Cope

Those who have forgotten how to shovel snow are doomed to wade through it.

By Anne Applebaum

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 8:05 PM ET

LONDON—This column is arriving late this week. It is arriving late because, among other things, my flight out of London Heathrow Airport on Monday was canceled. Not delayed, canceled. So were almost all other flights out of London Heathrow. This stunning disruption to one of the world's busiest transportation hubs was not caused by a terrorist attack or a catastrophic computer failure. It was caused by 5 inches of wet, rapidly melting snow.

Even for a native of Washington, D.C., the city that our new president recently described as in need of "flinty Chicago toughness" because of its pathetic response to the occasional snowflake, this reaction seemed excessive. So did the reaction of London's transportation network, which [grounded most of the city's vast underground system and all 8,000 of its buses](#), leaving [more than 6 million passengers stranded](#). So did the reactions of London schools (all canceled) and Londoners themselves. Walking down Piccadilly in the evening, I found no evidence that anyone had made use of anything resembling a snow shovel throughout the entire day.

In the past, when this sort of thing happened in Washington, it sent me into a kind of apoplexy, sometimes inspiring me to rant about the cosseted, pampered, litigious culture of modern American bureaucracy, [school systems in particular](#). But the discovery that London's reaction to a minor snowfall is *even more hysterical* than Washington's annual panic inspired a set of more serious, more philosophical reflections: Events really do look different to people who live in different places, after all.

It is perfectly true, [as one indignant Briton noted Monday](#), that the mothers of Oymyakon in Siberia allow their children to play outside until the temperature drops below minus 40 degrees Celsius. (Only at minus 52 degrees Celsius do they close school.) On the other weather extreme, mothers in Abu Dhabi [forbid their children to play in the extremely rare episodes of rain](#), lest they catch a chill. People in Bangladesh, where the annual monsoon comes as a welcome relief, surely find that reaction every bit as comical as I found the cab driver who, on Monday night, absolutely refused to drive through a short expanse of wet slush.

But it is also true that unexpected weather seems to cause the most chaos in the most temperate climates, precisely because

their inhabitants are the most unprepared, psychologically as well as practically, for any kind of extreme. A few years ago, a heat wave that would have been considered average August weather in Washington caused a national disaster in France. The English cope with the occasional warm spell as badly as they cope with the infrequent blizzard. And, yes, ice storms that would cause no comment in Chicago can paralyze the citizens of Washington, D.C., along with the entire federal government.

Trudging around snowy London, it was impossible to escape another thought: Surely what's true of the weather is also true of other kinds of unexpected changes. For example, people who no longer remember slow economic growth might not cope at all well with a severe recession. In London, it hasn't snowed much for 18 years, so no one owns a shovel—and if they do, they don't know how to use it. In the United States, the economy hasn't really collapsed since 1929, so no one knows how to save string and tinfoil—and if they did, they wouldn't know what to do with them. A whole set of skills, from cooking with leftovers to recycling bottles (not because it's green, but because it's cheap), has been lost during two generations of prosperity, in much the same way as the British have forgotten how to drive their cars through patches of slush. The last time I went to have some shoes re-soled in Washington, the cobbler told me he wasn't going to be in business much longer, so low had the demand for his services shrunk. Does anyone know how to repair toasters anymore? What about TV sets?

As I say, things look different to people in different places: I've no doubt that in those newly successful societies where folk memory of hardship nevertheless remains—Indonesia, say, or Ghana—plenty of people still fiddle with broken toasters and televisions in their spare time. That's why, when recession hits, they'll be better off than those of us who have forgotten how to shovel snow—or indeed have thrown away the snow shovel altogether.

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**gabfest**

## The Lack of Stimulus Gabfest

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

By Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz

Friday, February 6, 2009, at 11:46 AM ET

*Listen to the Gabfest for Feb. 6 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:*

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*Get your 14-day free trial of Gabfest sponsor Audible.com, which includes a credit for one free audio book, [here](#). This week's suggestion for an Audible book comes from David. It's Robert Fagle's translation of Homer's Odyssey, read by Ian McKellen.*

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week, they discuss the state of the Obama administration after its worst day so far, Tom Daschle's hasty retreat, and William Kristol's exit from the *New York Times*' op-ed page.

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

As Congress struggles to craft an economic stimulus package, [some Democrats are beginning to criticize](#) the original House plan as too costly. Some critics are blaming President Barack Obama, but John points out that the bill was produced by the Democrats in the House, not by Obama. David applauds the careful deliberation; the [258-page House bill](#) has a number of things that could be removed. Among them is money targeted for [Filipino World War II veterans](#), an addition David says makes the package smell like it's full of earmarks and special dealing.

The group briefly discusses a *Slate* "Moneybox" piece by Daniel Gross, in which he points out that Republicans are trying to take what they consider [a principled stand against the stimulus package](#), claiming that government spending has never created a job. David says it's important to understand Garrett Hardin's economic theory, "[the tragedy of the commons](#)," and how it relates to the current situation. There are some things the public needs and government should provide, but Obama needs to couch such spending proposals in terms of meeting the public good—as things like the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) already do.

Former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle [withdrew his nomination](#) to be secretary of health and human services this week because of tax issues. Obama [quickly accepted blame](#) in TV interviews, saying he screwed up in not recognizing how such problems would be perceived by the public.

Daschle was not the only nominee to face problems this week. [Nancy Killefer also withdrew her nomination](#) to be the government's chief performance officer, because of a failure to pay a relatively small amount of taxes for household help. There are now tax-related [questions concerning Rep. Hilda Solis](#), [Obama's nominee to head the Labor Department](#).

Conservative commentator [William Kristol](#) has [ended his regular column](#) in the *New York Times*. Now the speculation begins on [who should replace Kristol](#), but *Slate*'s Jack Shafer thinks [the answer is simple](#): no one.

David chatters about a [lawsuit filed against artist Shepard Fairey](#) by the Associated Press. Fairey is the artist responsible for [the now-famous Obama "Hope" image](#). Fairey acknowledges that he used an AP photograph as the basis of his work. The AP says it owns the copyright and wants the artist to provide the organization with credit and compensation for its use.

Emily talks about the health of [Supreme Court Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#). Ginsburg [has been hospitalized](#) for treatment of pancreatic cancer. She expects to be back on the bench in a few weeks.

John chatters about [the mystery surrounding a portrait](#) that appears to be of President Obama painted when he was in his early 20s. So far, the White House has not commented on the painting's authenticity. The back of the painting bears the inscription, "Barack Obama (casual attire)."

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

Posted on Feb. 6 by Dale Willman at 11:55 a.m.

**Jan. 30, 2009**

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*Get your 14-day free trial of Gabfest sponsor Audible.com, which includes a credit for one free audio book, [here](#). This week's suggestion for an Audible book comes from David. It's On the Origin of Species by Charles Darwin, read by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins.*

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week: the stimulus package, presidential drinking and legislative civility, and the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act.

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

The [financial stimulus package passed](#) the House of Representatives in a [vote along party lines](#). David says that's partly because the [rump Republicans](#) (those Republicans left after the 2008 election) are more conservative than the Republicans who lost their seats in November. The remaining Republicans don't want to be associated with the stimulus bill. Rather, they want to position themselves as fiscal conservatives.

Public opinion polls, meanwhile, indicate that the public wants [bipartisanship in Washington](#).

John talks about [a visit by members of Congress to the White House](#), where they were served appetizers and, more important, alcohol. He wonders whether [having drinks together](#) will break down some of the barriers between parties.

[President Obama signed](#) the [Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act](#) into law this week. The measure allows victims of pay discrimination to file a complaint within 180 days of their *last* paycheck, rather than within 180 days of their *first* unfair paycheck. Emily says the measure is a thrilling development for those concerned with employment discrimination.

Emily chatters about a [Slate piece by David J. Morris](#), in which he outlines why the United States should close the military's torture school, known by the acronym SERE. Morris is a former Marine officer who graduated from the SERE program.

David talks about how Pope Benedict XVI recently [revoked the excommunication](#) of four bishops from a traditionalist sect. One of the four, Bishop Richard Williamson, recently said that he believes no more than 300,000 Jews died during World War II and none of them in gas chambers.

John chatters about a provision in the House stimulus package that would have [prevented disgraced Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich](#) from spending any of the stimulus money that would go to the state. The provision became moot after [Blagojevich was removed from office](#) this week by the Illinois state Senate.

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Posted on Jan. 30 by Dale Willman at 11:25 a.m.

**Jan. 23, 2009**

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Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week: surviving the inaugural crush, Obama's first week in office, and sacrifice begins at home.

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

The group discusses their experiences in Washington, D.C., during Tuesday's inauguration. Emily [spent time in the crowd](#) gathered near the Washington Monument. John had a better vantage point from which to [watch the ceremony](#)—sitting on the risers along the Capitol steps.

There has still been no official estimate of the number of people gathered on the Mall. However, some people used [satellite pictures](#) in an attempt to [arrive at a number](#).

Some critics said [Obama's speech](#) didn't have enough soaring rhetoric at a time of crisis. John says [it's very difficult to say a great deal](#) in one speech.

The president quickly got down to business by issuing several presidential directives. Among them were orders to begin the process to [close the detention facility](#) at Guantanamo Bay and to restrict the methods available for [interrogation of prisoners](#). He also issued an executive order to [freeze the pay](#) of high-level government officials and [improve the ethics](#) of the White House.

A vote of the full Senate has now been scheduled for [Timothy Geithner's nomination](#) to be treasury secretary. On Wednesday, Geithner told senators that [he regretted the tax problems](#) revealed during his confirmation hearings.

David chatters about how [a former Russian KGB officer turned businessman](#) has purchased the [Evening Standard](#). The *Standard* is London's largest regional newspaper.

Emily talks about how Michelle Obama dancing with her husband made a wonderful statement for tall women around the world. The first lady [is more than 5 feet 10 inches tall](#) and [wore heels](#), not flats, to the inaugural events.

John chatters about a quick reversal by [Rep. Barney Frank](#), D-Mass. Frank had wanted a law that, among other things, [required any company](#) that receives government bailout funds to sell off its private aircraft and to remove all aircraft leases. Frank changed his mind when a fellow representative pointed out that many of those aircraft were made in America.

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Posted on Jan. 23 by Dale Willman at 11:30 a.m.

*Listen to the Gabfest for Jan. 20 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:*

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*To hear the question-and-answer period that followed the discussion, click the arrow on the audio player below:*

*Watch the [live Gabfest](#):*

On Inauguration Eve, Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talked politics before a live audience. They discussed the festivities, expectations for the first year of Barack Obama's administration, and the Obama BlackBerry.

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

The new president arrives on a wave of goodwill. John points out the latest *New York Times*/CBS News poll, in which even [58 percent of those who voted for John McCain](#) in November say they are optimistic about the country under an Obama administration.

John says Obama will focus on [a new era of responsibility](#) for the nation. He will ask people to do more for their communities and to be prepared for some level of sacrifice. Among the potential sacrifices could be cuts to some entitlement programs. Obama has announced a "[fiscal responsibility summit](#)."

Emily says Obama must balance pragmatism with principles. Many on the left worry that [Obama may be compromising too much](#) in his attempt to appeal to a broad group of people. David suggests it's possible that [Congress may push Obama](#) to the left.

Obama says he hopes to [continue to use his BlackBerry](#) to e-mail friends while in office. However, as John points out, such a move could be fraught with problems, among them [security issues](#).

The group discusses [a recent New York Times Magazine spread](#) with photos of more than 50 members of the new administration.

They also discussed Obama's audio book *Dreams From My Father*, for which [he won a Grammy](#) award (his first of two).

David chatters about the White House organic farm project, [the Who Farm](#).

Emily talks about a Google Map that [shows the homes of people who contributed money](#) in support of California's Proposition 8 last fall. Those opposed to the map call it [a major invasion of privacy](#). Others defend it on [free-speech](#) grounds.

John chatters about the CNN interview in which Obama talked about choking up while rehearsing his acceptance speech at last summer's Democratic Convention in Denver when he spoke about the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Obama said he would "[try to keep it together](#)" during his inaugural speech.

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Posted on Jan. 20 by Dale Willman at 11:45 a.m.

**Jan. 16, 2009**

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Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. In Barack Obama's final week as president-elect, the gang discusses the Treasury nominee's problems and the last days of the Bush presidency.

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

Obama [moved his family into Blair House](#), located across from the White House, on Thursday. Obama and his family also [visited the Lincoln Memorial](#), where he paid tribute to a president he says he turns to periodically for inspiration.

The group discussed [Obama's dinner with a group of conservative columnists](#) at the home of [George Will](#). David says the meeting has [symbolic significance](#) for the president-elect, and John remembers Obama's earlier comment that although he "may not have won their [conservatives'] vote," it's important to hear their voices.

Emily wonders whether [Timothy Geithner](#) will survive confirmation hearings to become treasury secretary. [Geithner's hearing was delayed](#) after he revealed that he had failed to pay self-employment taxes for the years 2001-04.

President Bush [held his final news conference](#) this week, in which he acknowledged making some mistakes but said he was at peace with what he had done while in office. Emily said he had not owned up to the real messes he has created, while John called it the best public indication of what Bush is really like in person.

David chatters about a work of art commissioned by the European Commission. Czech artist David Cerny created [Entropa](#), which bears the outlines of each EU nation on a grid. [Germany's autobahns form the shape of a swastika](#); France is shown as being on strike; and Bulgaria is shown to be a squat toilet. The [artwork has created a major controversy](#) in Europe. [Czech officials apologized](#) for the work.

John talks about Obama and Joe Biden's [visit to the Supreme Court](#). [They met with all the justices except Samuel Alito](#). Obama will be the first incoming president to be sworn in by a justice whose confirmation he voted against.

Emily chatters about a Bush administration official's statement [that a Saudi national was tortured](#) by the U.S. military in Guantanamo. [Susan Crawford](#) is in charge of deciding whether Guantanamo Bay detainees should be brought to trail.

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

Posted on Jan. 16 by Dale Willman at 12:09 p.m.

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## green room

### Date Local

The case against long-distance relationships.

By Barron YoungSmith

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 6:57 AM ET

You're sitting in the airport terminal, rolling your copy of the *Economist* into a sweaty tube and waiting to see a significant other who lives far away. You're excited. You're aroused. But there's something else, a nagging feeling that gurgles in your stomach and won't go away. Is it pangs of guilt? It should be: The planet is about to suffer for your love.

Perversely, we live in a world where the sustainability consultant in San Francisco is willing to fly in an exotic boyfriend every

month from Washington, D.C. All day, she helps companies "green their supply chains" and "internalize core social costs," yet that eco-savvy seems to vanish at night, when she e-mails: *Come visit!!!* You might say she's willing to be a [locavore](#) but not a locasexual.

Consider what happens when these two fly to see each other once a month. Since greenhouse gases [emitted from high-altitude airplanes](#) are thought to have [several times the impact](#) of ground transport, a carbon offset company would pin their romantic travels with the equivalent of [35 metric tons](#) of CO<sub>2</sub> each year. If that responsibility were divided evenly between the two, our sustainability consultant's lifestyle would be about six times worse for the environment than that of the average gas-guzzling American—and up to 10 times worse than that of the average San Franciscan. (Indeed, for her, breaking up would be about [10 times better for the environment](#) than going vegetarian.)

Or let's say she finagles a transfer to New York, so she can be within driving distance of her sweetie. Now the happy couple can see each other every couple of weeks—while their long, solo trips down I-95 spit out an extra 3.6 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> every year.

What's the aggregate impact of all this travel? The Census [tells us](#) there are about 100 million single people in America over the age of 17. We don't know how many of those folks are in long-distance relationships, but the [available research](#) suggests that at least a quarter of all college students are dating out of town. Since the rate is going to be much lower among the general population, we'll make a conservative estimate of 1 in 15 for all single adults. That gives us around 6.7 million unmarried Americans in long-distance relationships. Add in the 3.4 million married people who told the Census that they live separately but aren't "separated," and our total rises to more than 10 million individuals—or 5 million LDRs.

If all of these people made like our two-career couple and drove the distance from D.C. to New York City every two weeks, they would produce a total of about 18 million metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> a year. For comparison, 6.9 million metric tons would be added to the atmosphere if we suddenly eliminated [all the public transportation](#) in the United States. Eighteen million metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> is a third of what a national [renewable energy standard](#) (PDF) would save over 10 years—or 60 percent of the yearly emissions saved by "[moderate adoption](#)" of hybrid vehicles. And if even a small percentage of those relationships were bi-coastal—or even New York-Chicago or Los Angeles-Denver—the total would grow even more astronomical. Love lifts us up where we belong, as they say, but it does so at a steep price to the planet.

The same type of environmental logic has already been applied to our eating habits. The [Local Food](#) movement encourages us to

cut CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by calculating food miles—the distance a meal travels from production to the dinner table—and eating only what's produced within a 100-mile radius. Isn't it time for a Date Local movement, too? Let's start thinking about "sex miles": Just *how far* was this person shipped to hook up with you? And *how many times* more efficient would it be to date someone within a 100-mile radius? If the movement spread globally, mirroring either the decentralized development of Local Food co-ops or the manifesto-and-chapter model that built up to the [Slow Food movement's mega-confab](#) this summer, its environmental benefits could multiply many times.

A robust Date Local movement wouldn't just help the environment. Like other forms of economic localization, the decision to swear off Orbitz romance creates important spinoff benefits. For one, it makes people less anti-social. By spending all their free time out of town or staring at a webcam—that is, in their apartments or airline cabins, rather than in parks, bowling alleys, and pubs—long-distance lovers erode civic commitment and social support networks. They have fewer chances to meet new people. And they make their cities more stratified by inflating an über-class bubble of jet-set shut-ins who are—understandably, given their lifestyle—more worried about conditions at O'Hare than things going on outside their front door.

What's more, out-of-town daters have less sex than local couples—and long stretches of abstinence between visits could lead to [negative health outcomes](#) and thus higher health care costs. Distance also magnifies the impact of negative feelings like longing and suspicion; according to one study, intercity lovers are [more likely to be depressed](#) (PDF) and less likely to share resources or take care of each other when sick. And they spend money on travel that they might otherwise save and invest—leaving them vulnerable to economic shocks and wearing away their future standard of living. Every one of these demons could be banished by simply dating local.

Of course, like many eco-conscious attempts to instill social virtue, this proposal runs the risk of killing romance. Many a true human thrill—the high-octane cheeseburger! the long shower! the Chevy Suburban!—has been deflated by green evangelists out to render the personal political. And, in a way, long-distance dating is romantic precisely *because* it expends so much in the way of resources and effort. It's less exciting to date someone based on your shared love of canvas shopping bags than it is to pine for a partner who wants to meet in Arizona.

No, our Date Local movement won't be overbearing. It shouldn't try to break up every cross-country love odyssey. Instead, it will discourage this special type of conspicuous consumption at the margins, nudging people toward the realization that breaking up is in their own, and enlightened, economic self-interest.

For example, with fuel prices likely to [whipsaw upward](#) for the foreseeable future, many people currently in LDRs will end up questioning whether they want to keep timing their liaisons to coincide with oil underconsumption troughs—or whether it's better to call it splits. (The coming [death](#) of lucrative, globalized post-college jobs may force similar reconsiderations.) Date Local could educate them about the environmental and social benefits of breaking up and nudge them in the right direction. And the group would be there to cushion the brokenhearted by imparting newly minted locasexuals with a sense of noble self-sacrifice—not to mention a pool of cute, like-minded enviros who happen to live in the neighborhood.

So let's give it a try. Date Local's message is a simple one, in the best traditions of liberal reform. All you have to do is date here. Date now. Date sustainably. And if you absolutely have to date long-distance, do it via Amtrak.

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## green room Vulture World

From a continuing series on revolting creatures.

By Constance Casey

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 7:21 AM ET

A few weeks ago, I spent a surprisingly pleasant morning watching vultures in the "Birds of Prey" section of the Bronx Zoo in New York City. The birds, juvenile females named Patsy and Dolly, were calm and curious, dropping down to the front of the cage every time someone stopped. When lunch came, they used their big, flat feet to steady packages of recently thawed rat carcasses as they undid them with their hooked bills. (Zookeepers wrap the dead rats in paper, tightly tied with string, to make the dining process more interesting.) A point of contention with the zoo categorization of Patsy and Dolly: They aren't really birds of prey—they're birds of clean-up.

The eagles and hawks we admire, the real predators, tear their living victims apart. Vulture meals involve no frenzied chase or bloody kill—in fact, no haste or suffering at all. Vultures wait a couple of days till the spirit of the deceased has safely departed and gases begin to leak from the decomposing corpse.

It's unfair that this avian clean-up crew excites dread and disgust. School kids at the zoo that morning ran from the two vultures shrieking, "Ewww, gross." I refrained from reasoning with the little screamers: Would you rather have putrefying carcasses or nice, clean bones lying around?

Some visitors even stone the poor vultures, according to a zoo curator. Unjust though this is, it's understandable that we find the

carrion-eating birds gruesome. Most of us would rather not think of ourselves as meat, and the details of vulture dining are hard to get comfortable with. Vultures, whose name comes from *vellere*, Latin for *to tear*, begin their eating at vulnerable spots on the carcass—the anus and eyes.

Patsy and Dolly are king vultures, close cousins to the bald, red-wrinkle-headed turkey vulture that plies the skies from southern Canada to the bottom tip of South America. It's the turkey vulture we're most likely to see on the wing or on the carcass.

The distinctive red head on males and females is probably attractive to a potential mate, explains William Lynch, president of the Turkey Vulture Society. The society, 91 members strong, is a sort of vulture anti-defamation league set up to fight misconceptions and encourage appreciation. (According to an [FAQ](#) on their Web site: No, under the terms of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, you cannot keep a turkey vulture as a pet. You can attract them to your yard, however, if you're willing to cart home some roadkill. Tupperware is recommended.)

Lynch goes on to say that vulture baldness means not having to preen feathers after dipping into a bloody carcass. The society members write appreciatively about the turkey vulture's impressive 6-foot wingspan, its brownish-black plumage, and particularly its ruff of soft feathers with a purple sheen.

Turkey vulture advocates want us to know that the birds do not circle over dying things; the implication of the common cartoon image of vultures above the crawling man in the desert is slanderous, says Lynch. The birds circle as they ascend on thermals—columns of warm rising air. If, as choreographers say, grace is the elimination of extraneous movements, their flight is graceful. They ride air currents for hours with no flapping. They rock and sway, ranging over dozens of square miles, returning to roost sociably with their fellows in late afternoon.

It is not surprising to learn that vultures do not sing to one another with pretty songs. No warble or trill. Bird behavior books mention only three sounds: hisses, grunts, and a hoarse rattle. Lynch believes he's discovered a fourth vocalization—a kind of discreet cough, between *ack* and *ahem*—made by a parent upon returning to the nest. He hopes to publish his observations in an upcoming issue of [Vulture News](#).

As they ride the wind, vultures seek dead things, not dying things, using a sense of smell far more highly developed than any other bird's. They can detect a dead mouse under leaves from 200 feet up. They are discriminating, preferring corpses between two and four days dead. (The turkey vulture entry in the definitive [Birds of North America Online](#) does note, "Takes live prey occasionally in unnatural situations.")

Another misconception, and one that has caused farmers to shoot them, is that turkey vultures spread disease. In fact the opposite is true. Something in the vulture gut allows them to digest and destroy the agents of diseases such as cholera and anthrax. If another carrion-eater—rat or coyote or hyena or dog—disposed of the infected carcass, contamination would be spread.

To those who prefer not to have vultures pooping on their building ledges or roofs or decks, Lynch says, "Their waste is as clean as any waste can be." But there is some threat to human beings from the other end of the vulture digestive system. If adults are threatened when nesting, they throw up on the intruder or play dead. (The latter seems a poor strategic choice, given their companions.)

Vulture nestlings are also armed with vomit—but the downy-white chicks with sheeplike black faces are still vulnerable to raccoons, skunks, fox, and possums. After successfully repelling a threat, the vulture, ever a model of conservation, re-eats the spit-up food.

Under threatening circumstances, an angry bird can aim green vomit at you from as far away as six feet. Normally, though, a turkey vulture's sociability extends to human beings as well as to its fellows. The people who care for injured wild birds report that vultures are gentle, inquisitive, and smarter than hawks and eagles. Here's the bottom line, from Lynch: "Once they get to know you they don't regurgitate on you."

Like morticians, these dealers in death also die. In the wild, vultures live about 10 years. If death doesn't occur because of old age, it comes from starvation, electrocution at power lines, trapping, shooting, ingestion of lead from animals that have been shot, or getting run over by a car. (A turkey vulture, ungainly on land, has a hard time getting airborne quickly, a serious problem if it's working on road kill.)

What would happen without them? The major vulture news of the last decade gives a clue. A mysterious die-off of Asian white-backed vultures has led to a pileup of domestic animal carcasses and an increase in the population of rodents and feral dogs. It [turned out](#) that an anti-inflammatory drug—diclofenac—used on sick livestock kills vultures even in low doses. Though the Indian government is phasing out the veterinary use of the drug, the vulture population hasn't rebounded. One social consequence has been that members of the Zoroastrian Parsi community, who have used vultures to dispose of human corpses, now have to cremate their dead. But that doesn't solve the problem of animal carcasses in a vulture-free world. Let's be grateful the turkey vultures are keeping us from being awash in dead raccoons.

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More revolting creatures: the [tick](#) and the [jellyfish](#).

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## hot document

### Like Daughter, Like Father

Excerpts from Elizabeth Cheney's 1988 senior thesis on presidential war powers.

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 5:54 PM ET

Last week, *Slate* published an [analysis](#) of Elizabeth Cheney's senior thesis from Colorado College, which author Zac Frank discovered in a bin of discarded books at the college's library. Frank found Cheney's 125-page treatise on presidential war powers to be eerily similar to the philosophy of the unitary executive that her father would expound years later as vice president.

At the time this thesis was written, Dick Cheney was Wyoming's lone member in the House of Representatives. After graduating college, working in the State Department, and getting her law degree, Elizabeth Cheney would eventually become one of the top U.S. diplomats to the Middle East.

Below are five excerpts from Cheney's thesis:

- In the [introduction](#), she argues that, during wartime, Americans desire a policy "clearly set forth by one voice."
- In the [next excerpt](#), she defends Lincoln's decision to suspend habeas corpus during the Civil War as "an assertion of the power of the people."
- She is less sympathetic, in the [third section](#), toward Franklin Roosevelt, whose approval of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II flunks Cheney's standards because there were no efforts to determine the loyalties of those who were relocated.
- In the [fourth excerpt](#), she is disdainful of legislators who attempted to curb Nixon's authority to deploy the military in Cambodia.
- She concludes, in the [final section](#), that "the President must be given the latitude of occasional supremacy in foreign and military affairs."

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## human nature

### Vaginal Innard Course

Donating a kidney through your vagina or rectum.

By William Saletan

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 7:13 AM ET

Good news: You can now get a kidney from a vagina.

The kidney doesn't start in the vagina, of course. That's just where it comes out. For several years, doctors have been learning how to do this. It's called "transvaginal nephrectomy" or, more broadly, "[natural orifice](#)" surgery. They cut the kidney loose and pull it through an [incision in the vaginal wall](#) and out the other end.

Until now, all kidneys removed this way were unhealthy and slated for disposal. But on Friday, doctors at Johns Hopkins University added a [new twist](#). According to Dr. Robert Montgomery, head of Johns Hopkins' transplant division, "The kidney was successfully removed and transplanted into the donor's niece."

That's right: The kidney came out of one person's vagina and was put into another's abdominal cavity.

Why take it out through the vagina? To reduce external damage. If you can get the kidney out through the vagina, then the incision you cut through the abdominal wall only has to be big enough to insert narrow laparoscopic instruments. The smaller the cut, the less pain the patient suffers, and the faster she recovers. "That greatly reduces the inconvenience of donating, and we're hoping that will encourage more people to donate," says Montgomery.

Sounds great. But what about those of us who don't have vaginas?

No problem. Dr. Marc Bessler, a leading natural-orifice surgeon, has mapped an [alternative route](#):

Eventually, Dr. Bessler said, he expects to use the natural-opening technique on men as well as women, with instruments passed down the throat or into the rectum to cut through the wall of the stomach or intestine to reach the gallbladder or other organs. But first, surgeons have to develop techniques to make sure that the cuts in the stomach and intestine can be sealed completely after the operation so that they do not leak into the abdomen, which could cause serious complications. Incisions through the wall of the vagina rarely cause leaks, he said.

I'm sorry ... did he say *rectum*?

I'm afraid he did. And even the vaginal route may be hazardous. The Cleveland Clinic's director of laparoscopic surgery [warns](#), "There is the risk of infection having the kidney passing through

a contaminated area and then going to another patient who is immunocompromised."

[Not to worry](#), say the good doctors at Johns Hopkins:

Once the kidney is cut from its attachments to the abdominal wall and arteries and veins are stapled shut, surgeons place the kidney in a plastic bag inserted through an incision in the vaginal wall and pull it out through the vaginal opening with a string attached to the bag.

So, theoretically, in the case of a male donor, doctors would insert the bag into the rectum, pass it through an incision into the abdominal cavity, use laparoscopic instruments to put the kidney into the bag and seal it, and then pull it out through the anus via the string. Then they'd open the bag and transplant the kidney into the recipient.

Well, never look a gift horse in the anus. If you're the recipient, thank your donor and your lucky stars. And thank the doctors for coming up with the plastic-bag idea. You're protected.

But what if you're the donor? The inside of the plastic bag might be fresh as a daisy. But the outside? It's been pushed up your rear end and into your abdominal cavity. And you heard what Dr. Bessler said about leakage. Talk about risking infection.

I look forward to news that this problem, too, has been solved. Until then, if anyone needs a kidney from me, I'll take the scar.

(Now playing at the [Human Nature blog](#): 1. The [underworld](#) of Middle East tunnels. 2. [Body parts made from trash](#). 3. [Tobacco without nicotine](#).)

*Slate V: Water pollution that helps fish, China's latest efforts to save science, and a new kind of green explosion*

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## jurisprudence I Need a Hero

Seeking a bomb-throwing, passionate, visionary, liberal Scalia for a seat on the Supreme Court.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 7:04 PM ET

Folks are wondering what kind of thumbprint Barack Obama should be leaving on the U.S. Supreme Court. It's hardly a theoretical question. Justice John Paul Stevens will soon be 89. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg is 75. And while both have insisted they [aren't going anywhere](#) anytime soon, the rumor mill

continues to whisper that Justice David Souter (a mere 'tween at 69) is also thinking about packing it in.

The prospect of a liberal slot on the court being filled by a liberal president has some liberals dreaming big—as was evidenced in a [piece last weekend, by Adam Liptak](#), asking whether President Obama should appoint someone "who by historical standards is a full-throated liberal, a lion like Justice William J. Brennan Jr. or Justice Thurgood Marshall?"

Today's high court is balanced between four conservatives and four moderate liberals. Moderate-conservative Anthony Kennedy remains the deciding vote in hotly contested cases. But liberals have long fussed that despite this 4-1-4 lineup, the court has still lurched far to the right of mainstream American thinking. One of the most vocal proponents of this view is Harvard's [Cass Sunstein, who wrote in 2007](#) of a massive rightward tilt at the high court: "What was once on the extreme right is now merely conservative. What was once conservative is now centrist. What was centrist is now left wing. What was once on the left no longer exists." To those who doubt that the court is now more conservative than ever, a study (co-authored by Richard Posner) last year showed that four of the five most conservative justices to serve on the court since 1937 are sitting on the current Supreme Court.

But beneath the claims that the court has shifted radically rightward with each successive appointment lurks the sense that the remaining liberals have somehow let us down. Right or wrong, critics continue to insist that even though each team has four players, they have the lions and we have the [Aristocats](#). The University of Chicago's [Geoffrey Stone describes](#) the current court as "flying on one wing." As parlor games go, *What's Wrong With the Liberals of the Roberts Court?* only gets you so far. As Liptak's article makes plain, beyond vague assertions that the court's liberals are just too, well, Jarlsberg-on-mayo-on-white, it's never clear what seems to be lacking there. Indeed, the most consistent aspect of the liberal grouching about the court is that there is no left-wing counterpart for Justice Antonin Scalia.

This longing for a Scalia is often cast in purely acoustic terms. Liberals evidently want someone *loud*. Here's Geoffrey Stone telling Liptak that he's looking for "a really powerful, articulate, moral, passionate *voice* on the left." Nan Aron, president of the Alliance for Justice, echoed that wish when she [told the Los Angeles Times](#): "I think Obama would want to make a statement with his Supreme Court justices. We hope for a justice who can replace the lost *voice* of an Earl Warren or Thurgood Marshall or William Brennan." And my colleague [Emily Bazelon has also asked](#) for more noise from the left: "The goal should be to find someone who can speak with a roar that matches Scalia's."

This yearning for a more powerful progressive voice at the court itself encompasses several distinct criticisms. The first is that the court's liberals are just not very persuasive. As Stone explained



to Liptak, what's missing at the court is someone to "pull the other justices who are inclined to be sympathetic to that voice in that direction." Why, in other words, can't Ginsburg or Souter just get Justice Kennedy on speed dial? Whether they persuade by the force of their personality, a la Brennan; or their life story, a la Marshall; or their browbeating analysis, a la Scalia, the big justices tend to be the ones with the big ideas. Once in a while, Breyer or Ginsburg has a big idea. But for the most part, the court's liberals work the law as if they were working a crossword puzzle, "Um. Honey, what's a seven-letter word for 'suspend the right of habeas corpus?'"

It's sometimes said that in addition to being voiceless, or at least librarian-voiced, the court's liberals cannot see big. Thus we often hear that the court's liberals lack a revelatory constitutional vision. Sunstein, for instance, [once lamented](#) the "absence of anything like a heroic vision on the court's left." He writes longingly of Marshall and Brennan as "the Court's visionaries, offering a large-scale sense of where constitutional law should move." What Scalia has always done so much more effectively than anyone else at the court is [sell his view](#) of originalism and textualism. He has a coherent interpretive rulebook to which he almost always adheres. Oh, and he can explain it in 60 seconds on [60 Minutes](#).

Yet others have suggested that what's been lost at the left pole of the court is not grand vision but heat. The only difference between Scalia's originalism and Breyer's active liberty is that Scalia believes originalism will save us all, whereas Breyer thinks active liberty is, well, pretty darn neat. [Joan Biskupic made this point](#) about oral argument almost two years ago, noting that "when it comes to dramatic flair, the conservative duo of Roberts and Scalia has no counterpart among the four justices in the court's liberal wing." The liberals, she wrote, have "distinct styles, from polite yet pointed (Stevens) to professorial and rambling (Breyer)." But, she wrote, "they rarely come close to displaying the passion, intensity and frequency of questions of the conservative pair."

If, then, we're totting up all the qualities the current court's liberals ostensibly lack, we'd need to blend boldness with passion and persuasiveness with volume and then hope the next candidate also comes with some sort of just-add-water Sweeping Constitutional Vision kit. Preferably this persuasive, passionate constitutional bomb-thrower is also a woman, and, with any luck, an African-American or Latina or Asian-American as well. Putting it all together, it's hard to come up with even one Scalia-like candidate, although some cross between Rachel Maddow and Emma Goldman sounds like a good start.

My own guess is that moderate, centrist Barack Obama is unlikely to name any such creature to the high court, even if she did exist, and that we need to yank our wish list out from under the enormous shadow cast by Antonin Scalia, William Brennan, and Thurgood Marshall, anyhow. Yes, they are forces of nature,

and the court is a better place for having each of them. But pining for a liberal Scalia isn't the way to push the Roberts Court into the future. The day of the lions may be ending at the court. And that might not be a terrible thing.

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## jurisprudence

### Law! Law! Law!

The terrifying prospect of an America without lawyers.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Saturday, January 31, 2009, at 6:47 AM ET

So, what are we to do about all these lawyers?

Well, if Philip K. Howard, founder of Common Good and author of *The Death of Common Sense*, is right, the very last thing we want to be doing right now is watching as not one but two attorneys fill up all the sock drawers at the White House. In his new book, [Life Without Lawyers: Liberating Americans From Too Much Law](#), Howard argues that Americans are slowly being choked to death by law. We churn out more than 70,000 pages of new rules in the federal register each year, and the proportion of lawyers in the workforce has nearly doubled between 1970 and 2000. In Howard's view, our reliance on law, lawyers, and lawsuits has turned Americans into fat, neurotic cowards who "go through the day looking over their shoulder instead of where they want to go."

*Life Without Lawyers* is knit together with the kinds of stories that make law-school graduates want to laugh right along with that joke about what you call a busload of lawyers at the bottom of the ocean. (Answer: a good start.) He reminds us about the Washington, D.C., judge who sued his dry cleaner for \$54 million for losing his pants; the teacher sued for repositioning a student's hands on a flute; the schools that now ban running (running!?) at recess; and the 5-inch fishing lure with the three-pronged hook with a label cautioning, "Harmful if swallowed." Throughout, Howard paints a bleak picture of an America that is all "gray powerlessness"—a nation of broken-down citizens shuffling around in fear of litigation while municipalities tear down "dangerous" climbing structures and children comfort themselves with double-stuffed Oreos.

Howard's depiction of America as an ever-expanding sinkhole of laws and regulations actually echoes criticism recently leveled by former Bush administration lawyer, and my friend, Jack Goldsmith. Goldsmith, who ran the Office of Legal Counsel for a time, warned in his 2007 book, *The Terror Presidency*, of a post-Watergate government culture in which the act of conducting warfare was smothered by overregulation, inspectors-general, and fear. He describes a Bush administration

that found itself "strangled by law." Goldsmith's dismay over a pre-9/11 culture in which government officials were too terrified of potential future legal liability to act quickly or boldly perfectly echoes Howard's picture of an America that is now too scared of lawsuits to create, dream, or build.

Oddly, Howard's new book does not address the Bush administration's legal response to 9/11 at all. And that's too bad, because the "war on terror" actually provides a perfect natural experiment in his call to loosen the chokehold of law and allow lawyers to roam free and think big.

In the wake of 9/11, the decision was made, writes Goldsmith, to be more "forward leaning," more imaginative, and less risk-averse in the face of legal constraints on interrogation, information-gathering, and eavesdropping. And with a series of memos declaring that the laws of war did not constrain the president, followed by yet more memos setting out new legal guidelines, a bold—if wholly secret—new legal regime was born.

So the question one wants to pose to Howard in the wake of all this lawyerly liberation is whether the country was better off for it. Did America achieve any of the benefits he predicts? Howard urges, for instance, that liberating ourselves from law and regulation leads to a flowering of creativity. But that doesn't seem to have occurred in the legal aftermath of 9/11. In fact, when the Bush administration shucked off the rules and regulations governing warfare, the resulting ideas were anything but brilliant or new. It was by cutting and pasting random language from unrelated statutes authorizing health benefits that government lawyers like John Yoo created new definitions of torture. Instead of exploring the best ways to update U.S. interrogation methods, we just reverse-engineered techniques taught at the [Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape school](#) and pilfered bad ideas from [Fox Television's 24](#).

Howard further argues that if we could just get rid of the cumbersome web of laws and regulations that constricts us, the great untapped reserves of accountability and personal responsibility would flourish once more. In a column he penned last week in the *Wall Street Journal*, Howard wrote, "Accountability, not law, is the key to responsibility." And in his book he urges, "Accountability is the flip side of freedom. You will be free to act on your best judgment only if others are free to judge you." Yet, er, which lawyer has been held accountable for what amounts to the Jackson Pollock-ing of the rule of law over the past eight years? With the exception of former Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, not one Bush administration lawyer has been held responsible, or assumed a jot of personal responsibility, for his or her legal risk-taking.

To be sure, Howard mainly confines his criticisms of an overlawyered, rights-obsessed America to the realms of health care, education, public agencies, and the plaintiffs bar. But his

failure to address the brash risk-takers of the Bush Justice Department makes it difficult to read his book as anything beyond a spanking of America's tort lawyers. His failure to at least grapple with the reality of the eight years we've just spent in a constitutional freefall starts to feel like an omission that swallows the project.

I share a good deal of Howard's concerns about frivolous lawsuits and the ways in which the fear of legal liability can impede sound educational and medical judgment. Inexplicably, my neighborhood playground also lost its "good slide" to a toddler injury. But the cure for "too much law" should not be too little, and the charge to lawyers who feel strangled by the law should not be, "Well heck, then, take some risks and make some up!" If the last eight years can be made to stand for anything in the law books our grandkids will read, let it be for the proposition that the one thing scarier than a bus full of lawyers is a bus without them.

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

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## medical examiner Dying To Play

Why don't we prevent more sudden deaths in athletes?

By Darshak Sanghavi

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 6:41 AM ET

The tragic stories, it seems, keep on coming. A 38-year-old pediatrician and mother [collapsed and died](#) while running on a treadmill in Maryland. A 17-year-old Boston boy [died suddenly](#) during a pickup basketball game. Last year, National Public Radio [compiled a list](#) of professional athletes who suffered sudden cardiac arrests in the last few years, including an Atlanta Hawks center, a Denver Broncos running back, and a Toronto Blue Jays pitcher.

Preventing sudden cardiac death in athletes isn't a new challenge. Most doctors worldwide agree on how to do it. And yet authorities such as the American Heart Association have consistently opposed widespread adoption of the measures necessary to combat the problem. The fact that Americans continue to accept the preventable sudden deaths of athletes says a lot about our complacent attitude toward the problem. We don't lack good science. We lack the motivation to act on it.

The leading cause of sudden death in American athletes is a genetic disorder called hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, which by some estimates affects [roughly one in 500](#) people. Like weeds that overrun an unkempt yard, the heart muscle fibers proliferate rapidly and in a disorganized manner, often leading to a tripling or quadrupling in heart size during adolescence (see a picture

[here](#)). People with HCM usually have no idea this is happening until they're exercising one day and the electrical system in the heart [suddenly fails](#). The heart takes on the appearance of a bag of worms struggling to get free (a problem called ventricular fibrillation), and cardiac arrest occurs.

Back in the 1970s, the government of Italy began a radical experiment and passed the Medical Protection of Athletes Act, which mandated that every athlete between 12 and 35 years of age get a physical exam and an [electrocardiogram](#), a test that records on paper the athlete's heart rhythm pattern for a few seconds. The EKGs yielded a bonanza of interesting findings, and many athletes were found to have previously unsuspected heart problems that disqualified them from high-intensity participation. In 2006, [researchers determined](#) that sudden death in Italian athletes had dropped by an incredible 90 percent—because of the reduction in deaths due to HCM as well as some rarer conditions detected by the test.

Typically, American athletes get screened by a simple history and physical exam but no testing like an EKG. That's not good enough. In a [review of 158 sudden cardiac deaths in young athletes](#), for example, only 3 percent were suspected of having heart problems based on the history and physical exam alone. In the [largest study of seemingly normal American high school athletes](#), EKGs found serious cardiac problems in about one in 350 teens—yet the history and physical missed almost 19 out of 20 of these conditions. The principal author of the American Heart Association guidelines on athletic screening [wrote](#) that an athlete's history and physical exam alone "lacks sufficient power to identify important cardiovascular abnormalities consistently."

In 2004 and 2005, the European Society of Cardiology and the International Olympic Committee began [recommending universal EKGs](#) for athletes less than 35 years old. ("Athletes" means people participating in "competitive activities"; some argue that it includes anyone exercising regularly at high intensity.) Yet in 2007, the AHA issued guidelines that [broke with their European counterparts](#) and failed to endorse routine EKGs. Of course, scientific disagreements over evidence occur frequently. However, the guidelines offered a baffling, non-evidence-based justification for inaction. In a tortured passage, the American Heart Association argued primarily that "the framework" for EKG screening doesn't exist since screening would "have to be unusually efficient to process thousands of athletes"—an excuse that ignores the fact that Italy now screens millions of athletes routinely. The AHA claims that sudden deaths of athletes are "unlikely" to "achieve sufficiently high priority when competing with a myriad of other public health issues." The U.S. health care system, they conclude, is "already overburdened."

That's an odd argument from an organization that recommends all manner of fabulously expensive therapy for heart attacks, cholesterol problems, and other conditions. The AHA's rationale

inflamed Dr. Robert Myerburg, chair of cardiovascular research at the University of Miami, who co-wrote [a devastating critique](#) of the guidelines. "We need to lead," he recently told me, "and get away from the idea [that] screening isn't feasible." In particular, Myerburg assails cost-effectiveness figures of the AHA, whose estimated hospital costs fail to factor in any discount for mass screenings. Nor do the estimates take into account the potential savings of modern automated reading technology. Like [opponents of drug treatment for AIDS](#) in poor countries, he implies, the AHA has cooked the books to suit an anti-screening agenda.

Consider how the savviest, and wealthiest, organizations now protect their athletes. Ninety-two percent of American professional athletes get screening EKGs. Following the death of Atlanta Hawks center Jason Collier in 2005, all NBA players get a cardiac ultrasound—an even more reliable, if expensive, test than an EKG—to exclude causes of sudden death. Several college sports programs, such as those at Purdue, Ohio State University, and Georgia Tech, also perform echocardiograms. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some private high schools have begun offering routine EKG screening for athletes, since the AHA guidelines explicitly say they are "not intended to actively discourage individual local efforts." This contradiction between the AHA's population-wide and individual recommendation inevitably will lead to a two-tier approach to young athletes. (Already, more than half of all young athletes who die [are African-American](#).)

Why does the AHA really oppose screening tests, even though their statement plainly asserts that the tests "would have benefit?" Though not stated explicitly, widespread screening with EKGs, or even echocardiograms, threatens traditional, lucrative fee-for-service norms for expensive cardiac testing. According to Medicare reimbursements, an EKG scores about \$50, though it takes only minutes to obtain and a few seconds to read. An echocardiogram gets roughly \$400. What would happen if these tests were subjected to market pressures and economies of scale? Consider what Purdue's athletic department did: They [contracted with local cardiologists](#) to perform focused two-minute echocardiograms for only \$35 instead of \$400. Such creative solutions might save lives—but could also dispel the mystique (and monetary rewards) of many cardiologists' work.

Widespread screening, whether it's mammograms, blood pressure measurements, or other tests, is often [complicated and not always helpful](#). But the debate over expanded EKG testing largely concerns the politics, not the science, of the test. Ultimately, it would be better for America's young athletes if the scientists stuck to the science, the politicians handled the politics, and the entrepreneurs tackled the franchising.

moneybox

## The King of Madison Avenue

A podcast with Kenneth Roman.

By Daniel Gross

Friday, February 6, 2009, at 7:13 AM ET

*The Big Money* presents "Every Day I Read the Book," featuring Daniel Gross. Dan's guest today is Kenneth Roman, author of the new book [The King of Madison Avenue: David Ogilvy and the Making of Modern Advertising](#). Ken discusses this singular story of an immigrant waiter who became the most influential advertising executive of all time.

Listen using our audio player below or [download the MP3](#).

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moneybox

## Economic Know-Nothingism

The GOP's nutso claim that government spending doesn't create jobs.

By Daniel Gross

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 5:27 PM ET

There are three options government can pursue when the economy goes south. First, the Fed can cut interest rates, buy up assets, and extend credit, all of which the central bank has already done. Second, Congress can cut taxes on businesses and consumers in the hope they will spend more. The first effort—last year's tax rebates—didn't have the intended effect since consumers used much of the windfall to pay down debt or save. The substantial tax cuts that will be part of the Obama stimulus package would likely have a similarly muted effect. Businesses and consumers, facing a tough credit environment and needing to repair their balance sheets, will likely use proceeds from the tax cuts to tide themselves over. The third option is for the government to directly purchase goods and services, to substitute the demand that consumers and businesses aren't providing.

The Washington remnant of the Republican Party—40 senators and 178 representatives—is all for Options 1 and 2, cheap money and tax cuts. But they're having great difficulty with Option 3. They have forgotten Richard Nixon's famous line that "we're all Keynesians now." To them, spending government funds to goose the economy is unacceptable, not just because of the possibility of poor execution—i.e., pork. No, many are rejecting it as a matter of principle. Even though several Republican governors are pleading for assistance in the form of federal spending, Washington Republicans are saying no.

Newly elected Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele laid down the party line on [CNN](#): "Let's get this notion out of our heads that the government create jobs. Not in the history of mankind has the government ever created a job."

Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina succinctly [summed up his opposition](#): "We can't keep spending and borrowing to get us out of a recession." Sen. Kit Bond of Missouri concedes that some government spending—such as spending on highways—can create jobs but thinks that spending on mass transit or alternative-transit infrastructure isn't stimulative.

These claims are so peculiar that it's hard to know where to begin. Contrary to Steele's assertion, in the history of mankind, the government has in fact created many, many jobs (including the one he held for a few years: lieutenant governor of Maryland). Today, [government](#) accounts for 22.5 million of the nation's 135.5 million payroll jobs, or 16.6 percent. Those numbers include people who work for the federal, state, and local governments—doctors and nurses in public hospitals and teachers at elementary schools and public universities. Government also has created—and continues to create—all sorts of private-sector jobs, for defense contractors, the aerospace industry, medical-device makers, real estate companies, and construction firms. The economy of the Washington, D.C., area has boomed in recent decades not so much because the federal government has expanded its payrolls massively but because private government contractors have been thriving. As the Bureau of Labor Statistics [notes](#), in January, "the large areas with the lowest jobless rates in December were Oklahoma City, Okla., and Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, D.C.-Va.-Md.-W.Va."—a capital city, and *the* capital city.

Contra DeMint, borrowing and spending are pretty much how the government has pulled itself out of *every* modern recession. And contrary to what Bond argues, mass transit can be plenty stimulative. (Here's a report from the *New York Times* on the [economic impact](#) of the Second Avenue subway project in Manhattan.) For an example of how a little spending on mass transit might save jobs, Bond could look a little closer to home. The *New York Times* [reported](#) Wednesday on how St. Louis' inability to fund its bus system means hundreds of employees will find it impossible to get to work. In the case of St. Louis, several million dollars might help save a few jobs. That sounds defensive. But in a period when Americans are losing jobs at a furious clip, when the economy is shrinking rapidly, when monetary policy is near exhaustion, and when tax cuts aren't likely to work as they do in ordinary times, the highest priority is simply to stop the downward spiral.

There's plenty of legitimate argument over the stimulus—too much, too little, not fast enough, too fast, the proper mix of tax cuts and spending. Alan Blinder's op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* is an excellent guide to some of the debates. But the Republicans in Washington aren't reading Blinder. And it's almost impossible for the Obama team, or anybody else, to engage them in serious discussions. Virtually all the prominent Republican economists who were associated with the Bush administration in any way have fled Washington for the private

sector or academia. Today, the congressional Republicans are taking their advice from [Joe the Plumber](#).

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## moneybox

### Three Strikes and You're Bailed Out

Why Citi shouldn't cancel its \$400 million purchase of naming rights for the Mets new stadium.

By Daniel Gross

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 6:00 PM ET

Almost every taxpayer who isn't a New York Mets fan is [outraged](#) by Citi's \$400 million, 20-year deal for naming rights to the new [Mets](#) stadium, known as [Citi Field](#). It's true that shelling out that kind of money at a time when taxpayers are [bankrolling](#) the company and [backstopping hundreds of billions of dollars worth of its assets](#) may seem tone-deaf and stupid, even for a bank. And, historically, naming rights have been a classic vanity move. Corporations tend to make grandiose civic/corporate statements right when they are about to implode. If you had shorted Citi's stock when it announced the sponsorship deal in November 2006, you would have made a lot of money.

But there's a reasonable case to be made for preserving the deal, especially if Citi could get the Mets to extend the deal to 30 or 40 years. In order for Citi to weather the storm, recover, and pay back taxpayers (and insulate them from further losses), the company must invest for both the short- and long-term. For companies in highly competitive consumer markets, marketing and advertising are essential, entirely justifiable expenses. Companies—even companies getting bailed out by the feds—need to attract customers and to build their brand image. It's difficult to measure the value of any specific campaign or ad. But there's reason to think that for this company, at this stadium, in this location, a naming-rights deal might not be such a bad long-term move.

The cost is high—\$400 million over 20 years. But the present-day cost isn't quite as high as you think, especially if, as Darren Rovell of CNBC [suggests](#), it is paid out in annual installments. In 2029, \$20 million will be worth a lot less than \$20 million is today. And any type of advertising that reaches a lot of people is expensive. In this economy, NBC was [able to charge](#) \$3 million for a 30-second spot during the Super Bowl. Though the audience size for Mets games won't approach that of the Super Bowl, the location of the stadium guarantees that the Citi logo will be visible to hundreds of millions of people each year. Citi Field is a giant billboard that will be visible not just to the [4 million-plus people who attend Mets games each year](#) but to the tens of millions of people who drive past it on the Grand Central Parkway, the Van Wyck Expressway, and other roadways and

the [25 million or so passengers](#) who fly into and out of LaGuardia Airport each year.

And stadium naming deals generate a huge amount of free advertising. On the broadcasts of the team's 81 home games (and, sponsors hope, post-season games), announcers will repeatedly refer to the company's name in a nonadvertising context: "Welcome back to Citi Field." Likewise, newspaper, Internet, and television coverage will produce hundreds of millions of impressions of the company's name per year.

Naming-rights deals are most justifiable when the product or company doing the naming has an intuitive connection to the people who visit the stadium. The Montreal Canadiens used to play in the Molson Center, which made sense since hockey fans drink a lot of beer. Ditto for the Colorado Rockies, who play in [Coors Field](#). (When Internet company PSInet [planted its name on the Baltimore Ravens' stadium](#), it didn't make quite as much sense.) Citi would seem to be something of a natural for the New York Mets. It's a New York-based bank. The Mets are based in New York City. Baseball stadiums tend to attract a prosperous, heavily male clientele, including professionals, small-business owners, and corporate executives. Many companies use Mets games to entertain and schmooze prospective clients. In short, a lot of the sorts of people who are likely to utilize Citi's services will be attending games at Citi Field.

Of course, people who read about games at Citi Field on ESPN.com won't be learning much about Citi's mortgage rates. But naming rights, especially if they endure, can perform another vital function for brands. It can help make them part of the vernacular. The greatest desire of any marketer is for her product's name to work its way into conversations. When I was growing up, it was common to say, "I want a Coke" when you were referring to any kind of soda. People ask for a Kleenex when they mean a tissue, say they're going to Xerox a document even if they're using a Ricoh copier, and speak of Googling when they refer to an Internet search. Stadium naming rights can help products and brands gain that sort of status. Since 1926, baseball fans on the north side of Chicago have spoken about going to games at Wrigley Field. Does that make fans more likely to buy Wrigley's gum products? It can't hurt. "Meet me at Citi," doesn't quite have the same ring as "Meet me at Shea." But after 20 or 30 years, it might.

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## moneybox

### Searching for an Optimist at Davos

I spent three days looking for someone who doesn't think the world's going to hell.

By Daniel Gross

Saturday, January 31, 2009, at 6:48 AM ET

CNBC's Jim Cramer likes to say that there's always a bull market somewhere. When one region is down, the theory goes, another is up. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, however, the only bull market was in pessimism. On the Promenade, Davos's main drag, a woman accosted me, asked whether I knew what was in the Book of Revelation, and wondered whether I had been inscribed in the Book of Life.

Historically, such apocalyptic thoughts have been rare at this meeting of the world's financial and political elite. A Davos Man is an optimist by nature and profession. Ordinarily, self-assurance is so thick in the resort town, you can cut it with a Swiss Army Knife. But the only place I saw people laughing in the face of danger and wearing exhilarated expressions was on the sparsely populated ski slopes.

Armed with a notebook, Blackberry, flip camera, and laptop, I mounted a 72-hour effort to locate an optimistic CEO. A PriceWaterhouseCoopers survey of CEOs, released on the eve of the World Economic Forum, found that only one in five (21 percent) was confident their revenues would rise in the coming year. In theory, some of that 21 percent should have been here.

Yet many CEOs bore the harrowed looks of survivors of the Donner Party. Once they trickled in, many having endured the indignity of flying commercial for the first time in years, they were treated to an avalanche of doomsaying. Alarmists, from hedge-fund manager George Soros to historian Niall Ferguson, spun elaborate tales of catastrophe. Ferguson boldly concluded that the United States was destined for a decade of extremely lame growth. Economists were universally downbeat, which isn't totally surprising. (They don't call economics the dismal science for nothing.) Those who had successfully predicted the debacle, like Nouriel Roubini, New York University's Dr. Doom, were elevated to prime speaking slots. Last year, the hot topics were sustainability and decoupling—the notion that developed markets could boom even if the United States stalled. This year, failure and depression were the chief subject of discussion.

CEOs were easy to spot by their casual dress. In one of the strange anthropological twists of Davos, the more you make, the more you dress down. Journalists and intellectuals, thinking they're going to be around a lot of CEOs and money managers, wear suits and ties. CEOs and money managers, thinking they're going to be rubbing tweed-patched elbows with journalists and intellectuals, dress down. But the encounters I had with CEOs made me feel as if I were an undergraduate reading *Waiting for Godot* again: lots of non sequiturs, uncomfortable silence, and existential angst.

At a dinner for CEOs in the mobility industry—airlines, autos, logistics—participants joked about passing hemlock around the table instead of butter. Best Buy CEO Brad Anderson, whose biggest competitor, Circuit City, is in the process of liquidating,

put on a brave face. "You know, I'm a congenital optimist," he said. "But in the short term?"

I asked one private-equity titan whether he knew any optimistic CEOs. "Steve Schwarzman is pretty upbeat," he said, which was likely intended as a dig at a rival. Schwarzman, CEO of the Blackstone Group, has seen his company's stock fall about 75 percent in the past year. This being Davos, I was able to ask Schwarzman and a colleague whether they knew any optimistic CEOs. The response: Turkish manufacturers seemed to be holding up, and maybe Indonesia. "Look for an Indonesian," Schwarzman recommended.

I didn't find any upbeat Indonesian CEOs. But the CEO of an Indian manufacturer said the financial crisis was bringing down the cost of his supplies. Reid Hoffman, CEO of LinkedIn, a networking site for professionals, said he expects revenues and employment to rise in 2009. "Networking is cycle-resistant," Hoffman said. "It was interesting to see all the people from Lehman Bros. join" LinkedIn after the company went bankrupt in September.

Ditlev Engel, CEO of the Danish wind-turbine maker Vestas, was likewise cautiously optimistic. The United States wind-energy market, already the largest in the world, may be poised to get bigger with the prospect of more mandates and incentives for alternative energy. Vestas is opening plants in Colorado and plans to boost employment in the United States from 1,300 today to 4,000 by the end of 2010. "I could bring a lot of sub-suppliers from Europe to China to support our investments there."

In a gathering marked by the absence of U.S. political leaders—adviser Valerie Jarrett was the highest-profile member of the Obama administration—few summiteers had the audacity to hope. The overwhelming consensus was things are really bad and getting worse. But that, in and of itself, may provide a glint of optimism. At one session, one of India's wealthiest men noted that whatever "the consensus at Davos has been over the last many years, [it was] never right."

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

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## movies

### Button Eyes

*Coraline* will freak out your kids in both good and bad ways.

By Dana Stevens

Thursday, February 5, 2009, at 2:05 PM ET

*Coraline* (Focus Features), an animated feature based on the

[young-adult novel](#) by Neil Gaiman and directed by Henry Selick, sticks a colorful crazy straw into the well of children's literature and drinks long and deep. Like Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*, the heroine, an 11-year-old only child, goes down a hole and emerges in another world. Like the siblings in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, she discovers that portal in a forgotten corner of her own house. The alternate universe she visits at first seduces her with its seemingly unlimited pleasures—shades of *Pinocchio's* Land of Toys—but like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, she's soon desperate only to go home.

As it moves into its ghoulish second act, though, *Coraline* has less in common with these nursery classics than with *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. The world that Coraline Jones (voiced by Dakota Fanning) enters through that bricked-up wall is an uncanny double of her own, minus (or so it seems) all the bad parts. Her crabby and work-obsessed parents (Teri Hatcher and John Hodgman) have been replaced with jolly sycophants eager to satisfy her every desire: Suddenly, her mother whips up perfect dinners, her father has planted a fantastical garden in the shape of Coraline's face, and the dining room chandelier doubles as a milkshake dispenser. The Jones' eccentric neighbors, a Russian acrobat (Ian McShane) and two aged burlesque dancers (Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders) have been transformed into younger and kinder versions of themselves who put on fabulous shows each night for Coraline and her friend Wybie (Robert Bailey Jr.). The only downside to this [Land of Cockaigne](#): All of its denizens have flat, glossy black buttons instead of eyes. A detail Coraline's willing to overlook, until the "other mother" starts demanding that Coraline take a nice sharp needle and sew on some eye-buttons of her own: "Soon, you'll see things *our way*." Uh-oh.

*Coraline* is at its best in this middle section, before the somewhat muddled cosmology that links these twin universes begins to unravel. The film's groundbreaking animation technique—it's the first stop-motion feature film to be made in three dimensions—is uniquely suited to re-creating the sensory overload Coraline experiences as she steps into this brave new world. Unlike CGI, stop-motion animation is a tactile medium, its textures and volumes vividly palpable. The pink, gabled house in which Coraline and her parents live looks and feels like a dollhouse full of marvelous small objects (a tiny stuffed toy, a hand-stitched sweater) that the viewer wants to reach in and touch—and the subtly realized 3-D effects make that interaction with the image seem almost possible. The skinny-limbed, blue-haired Coraline and her castmates are actual dolls, figures that had to be moved against real (if computer-enhanced) backgrounds by human hands. For fans of the old [Rankin-Bass](#) holiday specials who've never quite been convinced by the shimmering gradients of computer-generated animation, this puppetry aspect of *Coraline* is deeply satisfying. While it's way more visually sophisticated than *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, it has a touch of that show's endearing wonkiness.

It's impossible to get into just why and how *Coraline's* last third falls apart without giving away too much of the story. But it's not revealing to say that Coraline's enchantment with the alternate universe needed a more gradual rate of decay for the shift to be convincing. When she discovers the real motivations of the other mother, the film abruptly turns from an allegory about childhood longing into a routine escape-from-the-bad-guy adventure (albeit one with fabulously nonroutine visuals, including a *Matrix*-like moment in which Coraline reaches the edges of the alternate universe and runs through a featureless, all-white no man's land). Moment by moment, the film is a font of pleasures, yet there's something about it that keeps the audience at an aesthetic remove. Like Coraline in the doppelgänger world, we swoon over all the neat stuff without ever making ourselves at home.

One last note: *Coraline's* PG rating should have come with an asterisk, specifying that it's up to each individual parent (or her psychoanalyst) to gauge whether her child is old enough to deal with the appallingly scary premise of a mother replaced by a fiendish, insatiable double bent on stealing her child's eyes. I'm 42, and I'm not sure I can handle that yet. Is there such a thing as PG-43?

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## music box

### Great Composers, Lousy Reviews

When music critics attack.

By Jan Swafford

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 10:04 AM ET

In the history of music, the glorious and benevolent Kaiser Joseph II is known for one transcendently stupid line. After the Vienna premiere of the comic opera *The Abduction From the Seraglio*, Joseph observed to its composer: "Too many notes, my dear Mozart!" With that, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire became an enduring symbol of philistine reaction to genius. Mozart's comeback was not as snappy: "Only as many notes as necessary, Your Majesty." In the coming years, he would hear more of the same from the press: "impenetrable labyrinths," "bizarre flights of the soul," "overloaded and overstuffed." The guy has too much imagination, connoisseurs agreed; he doesn't know when to turn it off. In other words: too many notes.

Toward the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, young Beethoven read in the paper that his first published violin and piano pieces were "[s]trange sonatas, overladen with difficulties. ... Herr Beethoven goes at his own gait; but what a bizarre and singular gait it is! Learned, learned and always learned and nothing natural, no song." Beethoven would have read those words with blood boiling. It was fortunate that he did not inhabit the later

19<sup>th</sup> century, when the art of incendiary reviews reached its golden age.

Those *mal mots* were gathered by conductor, theorist, and scholar Nicholas Slonimsky in his classic *Lexicon of Musical Invective*. First published in 1953, the book is still in print. The author himself had caught his share of slings and arrows as a young conductor who was determined to promote what the time called "ultra-modern" music. Now Slonimsky is remembered for premiering important pieces by Edgard Varese and Charles Ives, among others. After too many strange chords scuttled his conducting career, Slonimsky spent decades as a freelance writer, scholar, and theorist. His book on scale forms inspired a generation of jazz musicians, including John Coltrane. In his 90s, he was squired by Frank Zappa. But Slonimsky's most enduring achievement is the *Lexicon*, his encyclopedia of umbrage.

Critics got into full cry in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of Richard Wagner. No composer before or since has inspired so many fanatics, pro and con. People wrote whole books vilifying him. We can give only a short abstract of one example, the rabid fury of one J.L. Klein in his 1871 *History of the Drama*. His parade of epithets—racist, classist, sexist, species-ist, satanic, and medical—is symptomatic of the time's wordsmiths when they really, really didn't like your stuff:

This din of brasses, tin pans and kettles, this Chinese or Caribbean clatter with wood sticks and ear-cutting scalping knives ... [t]his reveling in the destruction of all tonal essence, raging satanic fury in the orchestra, this demoniacal lewd caterwauling, scandal-mongering, gun-toting music ... the darling of feeble-minded royalty, ...of the court flunkies covered with reptilian slime, and of the blasé hysterical female court parasites ... inflated, in an insanely destructive self-aggrandizement, by Mephistopheles' mephitic and most venomous hellish miasma, into Beelzebub's Court Composer and General Director of Hell's Music—Wagner!

These days, people tend to feel that Wagner's contemporary Chopin wrote nice tunes, but that was not the opinion of one Berlin critic: "In search of ear-rending dissonances, torturous transitions, sharp modulations, repugnant contortions of melody and rhythm, Chopin is altogether indefatigable." It's a marvel that Tchaikovsky, given his general self-loathing and neurasthenia, survived the animus that came his way. The most noxious page came from celebrated Wagner-bashing critic Eduard Hanslick, who climaxed one top-to-bottom mauling with, "We see plainly the savage vulgar faces, we hear curses, we smell vodka. ... Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto gives us for the first time the hideous notion that there can be music that

stinks to the ear." Tchaikovsky could recite that review word for word.

Well, everybody liked Brahms, right? In Boston they didn't. In 1885, the *Evening Transcript* reported, "It must be admitted that to the larger part of our public, Brahms is still an incomprehensible terror." Another critic suggested that egresses in the new Boston Symphony Hall should be labeled "Exit In Case of Brahms." By 1905, Boston seemed to be resigned to him, maybe because now they had Debussy to kick around: "Poor Debussy, sandwiched in between Brahms and Beethoven, seemed weaker than usual. We cannot feel that all this extreme ecstasy is natural; it seems forced and hysterical; it is musical absinthe."

Wagner survived his critics because 1) he actually was the towering genius he believed himself to be, and 2) he was a tougher and meaner son of a bitch than any of his enemies. With the coming of Wagner disciple Richard Strauss, the nausea of critics reached an almost ecstatic climax, after which, with the arrival of Modernism, the profession gradually lost its edge. I mean, what composer today could boast of anything like this: "Strauss has hitherto reveled in the more or less harmonious exploitation of the charnel house, the grave, and the gnawing worm." As for his opera after Oscar Wilde, "There is not a whiff of fresh and healthy air blowing through *Salome* except that which exhales from the cistern. ... The orchestra shrieked its final horror and left the listeners staring at each other with smarting eyeballs and wrecked nerves."

If Slonimsky's book is any indication, by the time Schoenberg and Stravinsky and their compatriots got Modernism into high gear, the critical profession was beating a weary retreat to sniping distance. The art of invective entered a sad decline. Of Stravinsky's most shattering work: "He who could write the *Rite of Spring*,/ If I be right, by right should swing!" He means Stravinsky should be hanged, but never mind. Hardly anybody could do better than that, though regarding Schoenberg there were moments of the old ferocity: "Schoenberg is the cruelest of all composers, for he mingles with his music sharp daggers at white heat, with which he pares away tiny slices of his victim's flesh. Anon he twists the knife in the fresh wound." Even Gershwin managed to get a rise once in a while: "*An American in Paris* is nauseous claptrap, so dull, patchy, thin, vulgar, long-winded and inane, that the average movie audience would be bored by it."

True, in their early years Schoenberg and Stravinsky inspired the bloodiest riots ever seen in the concert hall. But I think as the 20<sup>th</sup> century went on, critics' hearts weren't really in the grand abuse anymore. I also have a hunch that after Slonimsky published *The Lexicon of Musical Invective*, critics acquired a collective anxiety about appearing in the next edition. You don't want, like Joseph II re: Mozart, to be in print as a philistine for the ages.



In the prelude to his *Lexicon*, Slonimsky arranges his kitchen full of pans into themes: gastrointestinal, animal, anti-Semitic, and so on. And he proposes a general theory of acceptance of the unfamiliar: "It takes approximately twenty years to make an artistic curiosity out of a modernistic monstrosity; and another twenty to elevate it to a masterpiece."

Therein lies a fundamental shortcoming of the *Lexicon*. Reading it, one absorbs an impression that actually isn't the case: that great composers get only bad reviews and are appreciated only after they're dead. Stepping back from the melee, one discovers that while some splendid composers do take decades to sink in (and Schoenberg never entirely has), more often the true revolutionists of the past were hailed for their imagination, and their most radical pieces were quick to find an audience. Everybody knows about the pandemonium *The Rite of Spring* provoked at its Paris premiere. Few notice that the screaming had as much to do with Nijinsky's choreography as the music, and that after a concert performance of the *Rite* a year later, Stravinsky was carried through the streets of Paris on the shoulders of a cheering crowd. An earlier epochal work, Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony of 1803, was greeted by a chorus of incomprehension. But only two years after its premiere, the leading German musical journal declared *Eroica* "one of the most original, most sublime, and most profound products the entire genre of music has exhibited." Meanwhile, Slonimsky's *Lexicon* encouraged composers in their delusion that scabrous reviews are a badge of honor, that if you aren't denounced you aren't any good. When all is said and done, I'd wager that through history the majority of lousy reviews have been bestowed on lousy pieces, but nobody collects the notices of forgotten composers.

Still, Emperor Joseph was a dope, right? Not at all. Joseph was a capable amateur pianist and intimately knowledgeable about music. What he said to Mozart was what everybody said: too effusive, too many notes. The thing is, they were not entirely wrong. Mozart's operas are full of stunning throwaways. There's a heart-stopping orchestral eruption in the middle of *The Marriage of Figaro* that is evoked by nothing but a woman's name, *Marcellina*; in the story, there's no reason for anything nearly that glorious. It drove other composers of the time crazy that Mozart could toss off bits that were more beautiful than anything they ever wrote. (It was the arrival of Beethoven that made Mozart's notes seem frugal by comparison.)

On the whole, Mozart's critics viewed him about the same way we do, as an incomparable genius, though not an infallible one. One critic lambasted *Don Giovanni* for a story that "insults morality, and treads wickedly upon virtue and feeling." But let's face it, the opera *is* on the amoral side. (It's just that these days, unlike the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we *like* amoral.) As for the music, the critic went on, "If ever a nation could take pride in one of her sons, so Germany must be proud of Mozart. ... Never before was the greatness of the human spirit so tangible, and never has

the art of composition been raised to such heights!" Even some of Mozart's bad reviews called him the greatest composer who ever lived.

Really, this is a lament for a lost era. The great lousy reviews arose because critics and audiences truly cared about music and its future. Critics were sometimes reactionary, boneheaded, and cockamamie, but music mattered to them. If we no longer enjoy the uproars and the withering screeds of yesteryear, it's mainly because people no longer care passionately enough about what they hear in the concert hall to want to murder somebody over it.

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## my goodness All for ONE

Should I give to charities that raise awareness, or only to charities that take direct action?

By Patty Stonesifer and Sandy Stonesifer  
Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 6:58 AM ET

Dear Patty and Sandy,

Why should anyone donate money to charities that raise awareness about issues instead of charities that take action in correcting the world's problems? It seems like common sense to donate to a charity that funds breast cancer research instead of to a charity that raises awareness about breast cancer. What's the evidence to support advocacy rather than direct action?

Dylan

P.S. I raise the question because I notice that you're donating one-quarter of the proceeds from your column to [ONE.org](http://ONE.org), an awareness-raising charity.

**Patty:**

For the sake of this discussion, let's define advocacy as: efforts to bring about change through public awareness and activism and/or changes to public policy, public practice, or the law.

During the startup phase of the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](http://BillandMelindaGatesFoundation.org), I asked the same question Dylan is asking. At the foundation, we initially presumed, like Dylan, that our dollars and efforts should go directly to those creating change for the

neediest—a new drug for TB, a new vaccine for HIV/AIDS, a new school in Cleveland. It was our assumption that if we were lucky enough to support the development of a new and effective vaccine or educational approach that worked—and evidence backed it up—then governments, policymakers, and the public would respond to ensure that effort was spread where it would do the most good. In other words, we assumed that advocacy wasn't necessary because proven results would be just as effective. But we were dead wrong—and it didn't take us long to learn that. We saw that cost-effective vaccines that would save millions of children's lives were not being purchased or delivered by governments and donors, and that improvements in our schools were not happening at even a fraction of the appropriate pace. Why? Because the poor and the disenfranchised and the very young and the very old have far too little access to information that can help them help themselves—and far too little say in our political and financial systems that so often determine what services they will or will not receive.

History has shown that an informed, concerned, mobilized constituency is often a prerequisite to great social change. This mobilization ensures not only that the public is engaged—but also that policymakers understand the importance of the issues and have the information they need to take action. Scores of nonprofit organizations have proven how advocacy can be effective, from the [March of Dimes for polio](#), to the [NAACP for civil rights](#), to the [National Organization for Women for women's equality](#).

### Sandy:

Are all advocacy organizations effective? Of course not. You should treat the decision to donate to an advocacy group just as you would any other donation. Do you believe in the mission? Do they have the organizational capacity to achieve the mission? Are they doing it in the most effective way they can? Atlantic Philanthropies published a report that outlines [why foundations should consider funding advocacy](#) and what questions they should ask before funding advocacy, and gives several examples of successful advocacy efforts.

The benefits of advocacy can be harder to evaluate than direct service—so don't necessarily use the normal "child fed per dollar" metric. Organization Research Services' [Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy](#) does a good job of laying out the key outcomes we should care about when evaluating advocacy, including notable shifts in social norms and increased public support.

A recent study that used a more traditional methodology showed that for each dollar invested in a handful of advocacy groups in New Mexico between 2003-07, the [groups garnered more than \\$157 in benefits](#) for New Mexico communities. If ONE can get a return like that—in dollars donated to their causes, lives saved

from preventable diseases, or educational attainment for the most disadvantaged—I may give them a lot more of my money.

Do you have a real-life do-gooding dilemma? Please send it to [ask.my.goodness@gmail.com](mailto:ask.my.goodness@gmail.com) and Patty and Sandy will try to answer it.

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

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## number 1 Monster Truck

Is the Ford F-series' 27-year reign at the top of America's sales charts about to end?

By Josh Levin

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 12:19 PM ET

The pickup truck commercial circa 2009 has all the subtlety of a [peeing Calvin sticker](#). In a series of ads for the Chevy Silverado, Howie Long appears to argue that purchasing a Dodge Ram (which has a [heated steering wheel](#), ideally suited for those with manicures) or Ford F-150 (featuring a "[man step](#)" that allows for easier access to the truck bed) will turn you gay. Chrysler, seemingly more willing to court bankruptcy than be associated with effeminacy, is pushing its Dodge pickup with the "[Ram Challenge](#)," a Web reality series helmed by *Top Gun*'s Tony Scott that pits firemen, cowboys, contractors, and soldiers against one another in some pursuit that features both trucks and explosions. (Memo to creative: It might be easier to prove your product's masculinity with spokesmen whose occupations aren't cribbed from the Village People.)

In this automotive pissing contest, the ads for the Ford F-150 betray the least status anxiety. Sure, there are the requisite cracks at [hand models](#) and [math nerds](#), but the Denis Leary-narrated spots don't stoop to product endorsements from guys with T-shirts helpfully labeled "[MILITARY](#)." The F-150 ads have a more inward focus, emphasizing that the new pickup does "things no truck has ever done before," like [connect to the Internet](#). Why doesn't Ford take potshots at the competition? The same reason that McDonald's doesn't talk back to Burger King—it's the alpha dog. Ford F-series pickups were the [top-selling vehicles in America in 2008](#), the 27th consecutive year that the F-series has held that title. Still, Ford shouldn't be celebrating too heartily. It's looking increasingly likely that its amazing streak won't last another year.

John DiPietro, who's written [a comprehensive history of the Ford F-series](#) for Edmunds.com, says the F-150 was an instant hit upon its 1975 debut. The midsize pickup hit a marketing sweet spot between Ford's bare-bones, entry-level F-100 and the expensive, it-can-tow-your-elephant F-250. The F-150 could handle most work-vehicle duties—lugging tools and bales of hay—yet still maintained a smooth ride, as it lacked the stiff suspension of the heavy-duty F-250. It was the launch of the F-150 that catapulted the F-series to the top of the charts, and the pickup remains Ford's most popular model, accounting for about 70 percent of F-series sales. DiPietro says that Ford also distinguished itself in the mid-1970s by offering the most options across its entire truck line—an extended cab model with extra cargo room and jump seats for the kids, for example. While the competition eventually caught up featureswise, the legendarily [fanatical brand loyalty of pickup owners](#) has helped the blue oval maintain its lead.

Ford earned the top spot by jumping ahead early and never disappointing its faithful customers. This first-place position isn't just a point of pride; it's an economic imperative. The ascendance of the truck and the SUV was the best thing to happen to American automakers since the internal combustion engine. [One](#) reason for Detroit's prolonged success in the large-vehicle field is a 25 percent tariff on many foreign-built trucks, [an unintended consequence of a 1960s-era provision](#) designed to protect the American auto industry from a Volkswagen invasion.\* With so few manufacturers in the game—and with gas prices low after an early-1980s collapse—customer demand far outstripped the available supply. That simple equation persisted for decades, and it transformed Detroit into Trucktown, USA. This shift was good for business: According to David E. Cole, the chairman of the Center for Automotive Research, the [net profit on a full-size pickup](#) in 2007 ranged between \$4,000 and \$5,000. The net profit on a small car was [virtually nil](#).

The problem with a truck-based empire is that gas doesn't always stay cheap. As prices spiked above \$4 per gallon in May and June, the [F-150 was overtaken on the monthly sales charts](#) by a bunch of puny sedans with good fuel economy: the Toyota Corolla, Toyota Camry, and Honda Civic. With the 2008 F-150s failing to sell, Ford had to [delay the launch of the 2009 model for two months](#) while it pushed the previous year's trucks off the lot at deep discounts, cutting into those \$4,000-per-vehicle profit margins.

Doug Scott, the marketing manager for Ford's truck division, says that in his 31 years at the company he's never seen a segment take such a big hit so quickly. In a few months, he says, the market share for full-size pickups in America plummeted from 14 to 15 percent to 9 percent—not good news for a company in which light trucks have accounted for around 60 percent of sales in recent years. Scott says the great truck swoon of 2008 wasn't caused solely by potential new buyers flinching at the pump. The hefty gas prices also drove down the values of

trucks that were on the road—even people who wanted to buy new trucks couldn't afford them, because trade-in prices for used pickups were in the gutter.

According to Scott, Ford's research has shown that truck customers were less scared by the absolute price of gas than by the dizzying rate at which it increased. The numbers for the tail end of the year support his contention. As prices at the pump stabilized, then dipped, trucks once again ran over small cars to reach the top of the sales charts.

If you look at absolute numbers, though, the F-150 and its brethren are in a free-fall. In 2005, the first time that gas prices inched over the \$3 per gallon barrier, Ford sold [more than 900,000 F-series pickups](#). Last year, the company moved 515,000. In the same time period, sales of the Corolla, Camry, and Civic have remained flat. The F-150, then, isn't losing its sales lead because more people are buying sedans. It's because fewer people are buying trucks. Indeed, pickup sales were so dreadful overall last year that Ford actually [increased its lead over Dodge and Chevy](#). Unless things pick up, and fast, the F-150 will get lapped by the Camry in 2009.

Ford—which lost \$14.6 billion last year—wishes the F-series' troubles were as simple as expensive gas. There's also the problem that trucks are generally more expensive than cars. Times are good in Trucktown when people are buying pickups they don't really need. In a recession, there will be an inevitable falloff in purchases by the "I'm cool if I drive a truck" demographic. Even worse for the automakers, the economic crisis has cut into the base of customers who buy trucks they *do* need—if a contractor can't get any work, he's not going to need a new F-150 to lug around his tools.

The blue oval, too, no longer has the same grip on the American truck buyer. With Japanese companies building more trucks that aren't subject to the 25 percent tariff, Ford now has to compete against the likes of the Toyota Tundra pickup and the Honda CR-V crossover SUV. Cole, the Center for Automotive Research chairman, says that repurchase rates for pickups at one time ran as high as 60 percent. According to R.L. Polk's [2008 buyer loyalty figures](#), the leading full-size pickup came in at a mere 33 percent—and that was the Chevy Silverado, not the F-150. (GM, which makes both Chevy and GMC pickups, has been giving Ford a run for its money of late. As recently as 2005, the F-series nearly outsold the Chevy Silverado and GMC Sierra combined; in 2008, the Silverado and the Sierra beat out the F-series by a whopping 120,000.)

These certainly aren't the end times for the American pickup, but Detroit is dealing with some strange new realities. Scott now trumpets the F-150's best-in-class fuel economy. And though Ford set itself apart 30 years ago by offering the most styles and options, the company has reduced costs by [cutting back on configurations](#). Will a new marketing plan and streamlined

production be enough to save the venerable Ford pickup? They'll certainly help, but Ford needs more than a small boost right now. It needs a man step.

**Correction, Feb. 2, 2009:** *This piece originally and incorrectly stated that the United States' 25 percent import tariff on foreign-built trucks has been repealed. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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## other magazines

### Good Morning, Afghanistan

*Newsweek* on "Obama's Vietnam."

By Sonia Smith

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 5:51 PM ET

#### **Newsweek, Feb. 9**

The cover story [announces](#) that two weeks into his presidency, Obama already has a Vietnam: Afghanistan. While acknowledging that analogies to Vietnam can be "tiresome," the authors find plenty of parallels—both countries were "semi-failed" states before the United States arrived, and in Afghanistan, like Vietnam, we have no viable exit strategy. "We may now be facing a situation where we can win every battle and still not win the war," they write. ... In the past, stillborn babies were quickly whisked away and parents grieved in silence. Today, many parents cope with the "vast and sudden sadness" by holding their babies after death and having them photographed, an [article](#) says. Volunteer photographers with the group Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep are dispatched to hospitals around the country to photograph stillborn babies or those who are expected to die soon after birth. The pictures allowed one parent to "savor a face that was fading from her memory."

#### **Weekly Standard, Feb. 9**

The [cover story](#) sheds no tears over "our tragic national princess" Caroline Kennedy's failed attempt to get appointed to Hillary Clinton's Senate seat. The Clintons, angered by Caroline's endorsement of Obama, didn't want her to get the seat. The author wonders if this marks the end of the Kennedy dynasty. "Underlying the Kennedys' sense of entitlement ... was the unspoken belief that reparations were due them, that the tragically truncated lives and careers of Jack and of Bobby ought to be paid back to them in preferential treatment to other family members." ... A [story](#) wonders what will happen to the 100 or so Yemeni detainees at Guantanamo Bay, the majority of whom have strong ties to al-Qaida and other terrorist groups. (A dozen were alleged to have worked as Osama Bin Laden's bodyguards.) An expert claims that the Bush administration, in reducing the prison's population from 750 to 248, got rid of the

"easiest cases" a long time ago, leaving behind only dedicated jihadists.

#### **The New Yorker, Feb. 9**

Adam Gopnik [eulogizes](#) John Updike, who wrote for *The New Yorker* for almost 60 years. Updike's 23 novels took on the "full weight of American social history," Gopnik writes, "tracking our experience from the parched Truman era to gray-and-white Eisenhower and beyond to smiling Reagan and shaky Carter and even sexy Ford." Updike, whom he terms one of the first writers to fully express himself since Henry James, tried to describe the "American attempt to fill the gap left by faith with the materials produced by mass culture" and attempted to set down on the page "all the sweetness of our common life." ... George Packer travels to Florida, home to some of America's "big[est] and gaud[iest]" suburbs, now transformed into "ghost subdivisions" by the real estate crash. One professor terms Florida's economy a "modern Ponzi scheme"—there's no income tax, and its growth is entirely dependent on "real estate and sunshine." Much of the inflation in real estate prices can be attributed to speculators who had no intention of ever living in the homes. "[A]nyone buying and selling real estate in Florida in the middle of the decade must have known that the system was essentially a confidence game," Packer writes.

#### **New York, Feb. 9**

The [cover story](#) on Chesley B. "Sully" Sullenberger III, the US Airways pilot behind the "miracle on the Hudson," explains how the military-trained pilot may be one of the last of his kind. Today, "great aviators may be being bred out of the system" because of low salaries, poor benefits, and an overreliance on automation. "Some experts worry that today's pilots—with their lack of military experience, their aversion to risk, their reliance on automation—are perhaps less capable of improvising in an emergency." ... A touching [profile](#) describes the "slowly closing world" of 29-year-old Rebecca Alexander, a *New Yorker* with Usher's syndrome, a genetic condition causing her gradually to go deaf and blind. Alexander, who works as a psychotherapist and also teaches spinning classes, is determined to live her life as normally as possible. "If you were in my shoes, you'd do the same thing," she explains. "If these were the cards you'd drawn, you'd play them."

#### **New Republic, Feb. 18**

A [piece](#) on the Russian government's overseas PR blitz chronicles how the country is attempting to "whitewash its increasing authoritarianism." The country retains high-dollar Western public relations firms and has created a flashy, multilingual satellite channel, Russia Today. Even though these current efforts lack the heavy-handedness of Soviet-era propaganda, it will be hard to portray Russia as a warm and fuzzy bear as long as the country keeps bullying its neighbors

and suppressing press freedom and internal dissent. "Russia must sell a rotten apple by pretending it's *foie gras*," the author writes. ... Sam Tanenhaus [pens](#) conservatism's obituary in the cover story, arguing that the movement has "not only been defeated but discredited." Conservatism today has strayed from the ideals professed by the movement's founder Edmund Burke. Recognizing the movement is dead is the first step in taking conservatism back to its roots. "There remains in our politics a place for an authentic conservatism—a conservatism that seeks not to destroy but to conserve."

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## poem

### "Paradise"

By Emma Jones

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 6:37 AM ET

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

What you wanted was simple:  
a house with a fence and a kind of gulled  
light arching up from it to shake in the poplars  
or some other brand of European tree  
(or was it American?) you'd plant  
just for the birds to nest in and so  
the crows who'd settle there  
could settle like pilgrims.

Darling, all day I've watched the garden make its way  
down the road. It stops at the houses  
where the lights are on and the hose reel is tidy  
and climbs to the windows to look inside  
like a child with its eyes of flared rhododendrons  
and sunflowers that shutter the wind like bombs  
so buttered and brave the sweet peas gallop  
and the undergrowths fizz through the fences  
and pause at some to shake into asters and weep.

The garden is a mythical beast and a pilgrim.  
And when the houses stroll out it eats up  
their papers and screens their evangelical dogs.

Barbeque eater,  
yankee doodle,  
if the garden should leave  
where would we age  
and park our poodle?

"This is paradise," you said,  
a young expansive American saint.  
And widened your arms to take it in,  
that suburb, spread, with seas in it.

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## politics

### Morning Joe

In which Joe Biden drives to a train station and back.

By Christopher Beam

Thursday, February 5, 2009, at 6:00 PM ET

"Joe Biden knows you're freezing," says Joe Biden, huddled outside a train station in Laurel, Md., on a brisk Thursday morning. That's why Joe Biden is going to keep it brief. Joe Biden is also going to keep it brief because Joe Biden is now the vice president of the United States, and unlike a second-tier Democratic candidate—say, Joe Biden—the vice president can't go around shooting off his mouth at press conferences. But most important, Joe Biden is going to keep it brief because there's no time to waste. Congress has to pass the stimulus package *now*.

"Quite simply, we cannot wait," Biden says. "We cannot wait another two weeks, three weeks, four weeks. We cannot wait."

As Biden speaks, senators from both parties are hashing out the details of the recovery package on Capitol Hill. Barack Obama is visiting the Energy Department to make his case for the stimulus. Interest groups on both sides are lobbying to get their projects included and their rivals' cut out. Everyone, that is, except Joe Biden.

Why did Biden come all the way out to Laurel just to tell everyone back in D.C. to hurry up? Because the stimulus bill isn't about Washington, he says—it's about the states. "Over 400,000 jobs nationally will be created by the infrastructure investments that the Congress, God willing, is going to pass and the president is going to sign into law very shortly," Biden tells reporters. [About 70,000 jobs](#) would be saved or created in Maryland alone. Gov. Martin O'Malley and Sen. Ben Cardin, who flank Biden, nod as if to confirm this.

Another reason for the schlep: symbolism. It's commuter stations like this one, a rundown brick structure built in 1842 that is now the busiest station on the Camden line, that would benefit from the recovery package. (Indeed, the advance team did their homework: The station is literally on Main Street.) Workers would replace the rotting floorboards with some solid and shiny material. They'd waterproof the eroding brick. Maybe they'd

even install some of those outdoor heat lamps that warm doormen in the nicer hotels.

And it's ready to go "the minute the governor gets the money," Biden says. I ask if that means it's "shovel-ready." "This is more than shovel-ready," says John D. Porcari, Maryland's transportation secretary. "It's more like a backhoe, which has a shovel on it."

The symbolism of the event is somewhat undermined, however, by the vice president's commute. Joe Biden used to pride himself on taking trains. Every day, he [rode the commuter rail](#) from his home in Wilmington, Del., to his office in Washington, D.C. But today he drove half an hour to this MARC train station, held forth on the importance of public transportation in the new stimulus package, and then motorcaded back to Washington.

Actually, it's not a bad metaphor for the way transportation is being treated in the recovery bill. For all the talk about funding roads, trains, etc., only 5 percent of the \$819 billion House stimulus bill goes toward transportation. And of that, [only \\$1 billion](#) goes to public transportation, as opposed to highways, bridges, and ports. (It's telling that the Senate [added](#) tax breaks for car buyers Tuesday, while a \$25 billion provision that included funds for mass transit stalled.) If Biden wanted his event to reflect actual spending on transportation, he would have held it on a highway median.

Furthermore, public transportation might be one of the first stimulus items on the chopping block. Senators concerned about the ballooning size of the package—it has surpassed \$900 billion—are [targeting projects](#) that cost a lot to launch and even more to maintain. The \$850 million devoted to Amtrak qualifies. (Not to mention the billions more sought by [starving local transit systems](#).)

Still, there's hope for the rails. Many Republican congressmen objected to the House bill because it had too *little* infrastructure spending. Florida Rep. John Mica, the ranking Republican on the House transportation committee, has [called](#) the proposed infrastructure spending "almost minuscule." Rep. Peter King, too, [wants to see](#) "more money on infrastructure spending ... more on the infrastructure ... more on the infrastructure." They may prefer highways to Amtrak. But when it comes time for the House, Senate, and White House to convene and hash out a final draft, Joe Biden may find unexpected allies.

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## politics Bipartisansmanship

Obama needs to win over Senate Republicans without losing House Democrats.

By John Dickerson  
Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 7:27 PM ET

Barack Obama held office hours Wednesday. In 15-minute increments in the early afternoon, he met in the Oval Office with senators who want to modify his stimulus bill. Democrat Ben Nelson of Nebraska talked about removing spending provisions from the bill. He has a tentative list of cuts totaling more than \$50 billion that include everything from \$122.5 million for new and renovated polar icebreakers to \$198 million in military benefits for Filipino veterans of World War II. Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine got her own meeting, as did her GOP Maine colleague Sen. Olympia Snowe, who told Obama the bill didn't provide stimulus fast enough. Citing a CBO report that said only 12 percent of the appropriated money would be spent in the first year, Snowe told him, "Twelve percent is causing us 100 percent of the headache."

Obama is taking requests because his stimulus package is having a little trouble in the Senate, where, because the legislation would increase the federal deficit, it requires 60 votes for passage. Nelson and North Dakota's Kent Conrad, also a Democrat, have both said they would vote against the bill in its current form. A Senate Democratic leadership aide says at least three others are in that camp. So Obama is wheeling and dealing, looking for votes.

Once upon a time, the question about the stimulus package was how many Republican votes it could get in the Senate. The political dynamic has since changed. Last week, when House Republicans voted in unison against the bill, the White House and Democrats said it was a rank act of partisanship. But now that Senate Democrats are voicing their concerns, it undermines that line of attack. More than just partisan Republicans have qualms with the bill, and the critiques are growing. White House officials claim critics are quibbling about only a small portion of the bill, but the debate now revolves around a larger chunk of the bill that Republicans and Democrats claim doesn't provide stimulus fast enough.

Many Senate Democrats claim that the bill has too many provisions that don't meet the definition of "timely, targeted, and temporary." This irritates their House colleagues, in part because it echoes a line House Speaker Nancy Pelosi once used against Republicans in a previous stimulus debate and in part because it echoes the spin Republicans are using against this stimulus bill. Republicans hope to define the bill by its smallest and most absurd provisions even if they are a tiny fraction of its cost. When Democrats also single out those provisions, they are merely "repeating GOP talking points," as one Democratic House leadership aide put it.

Nelson and Snowe are taking the lead in working on a compromise between Republicans and Democrats. Over the last

few days, a group of about 20 senators has been sorting through the bill, trying to find ways to modify its provisions. Conrad, the chairman of the budget committee, is screening all spending to find anything that doesn't provide stimulus within the first 18 months. Any program that doesn't meet that test he wants removed, so that the money can be used to help those who are facing foreclosure. Extra money would also create a \$15,000 tax credit for middle-class families to buy a home during the 2009 calendar year.

Obama is also reaching out to others. Wednesday morning, he called John McCain, who has offered his own \$445 billion stimulus package heavily tilted toward tax cuts. The conversation was short, as Obama reiterated his commitment to working with Republicans, and particularly McCain. McCain said he looked forward to such cooperation, but the conversation was no more productive than that.

The tension for Obama is how far to go in accommodating the Senate without causing too much heartburn among Democrats in the House. House Speaker Pelosi met with OMB Director Peter Orszag and White House economic adviser Larry Summers Tuesday night in her House office and let them know her caucus could go only so far. It would be able to accept some of the tax-cut provisions being added to the Senate bill, like the adjustment that keeps the Alternative Minimum Tax from hitting middle-class families. But House Democrats were not going to see the bill they put together thoroughly undone.

The worry is not so much that Obama will lose the vote on the stimulus bill because of Democratic defections. It's that his allies in the House and Senate will have to swallow hard to support it, or that the process of getting to yes will be bruising. This will create resistance for the next tough vote Obama asks them to take. If he creates too much trouble for himself, by the end of the year the president's office hours will have to extend all day long.

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## politics

### Commercial Break

Will Judd Gregg destroy the Commerce Department in order to save it?

By Christopher Beam

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 6:23 PM ET

Picking a secretary of commerce isn't complicated. The president usually wants a close friend or business ally. He almost always chooses someone from the same party. And he would prefer someone who has not voted to abolish the Department of Commerce.

Sen. Judd Gregg, whom President Obama [named](#) as his nominee Tuesday, fits none of these criteria. He does not know Obama

beyond the occasional hello. He is a fiscally conservative Republican from New Hampshire. And in 1995 he voted to kill the department he will now lead.

All of which makes him a superb choice. From a political perspective, Obama gets to put another bipartisan notch in his belt—he's the third non-Democratic Cabinet nominee, in addition to Ray LaHood for Transportation and Robert Gates for Defense. Plus, he paves the way for a [more philosophically attuned, if not Democratic, senator](#) from New Hampshire and a possible political ally later.

From a policy standpoint, the appointment may make even more sense. In Gregg, Obama gets a guy who understands economic issues (he's currently the ranking Republican on the budget committee) and will likely rein in spending in his own agency. The commerce secretary must also play well with others, which Gregg apparently does (although perhaps not quite as well as Bill Richardson, who [withdrew](#) his name from the running in January). Says Barbara Franklin, a former commerce secretary under President George H.W. Bush: "He's a person who has always worked across the aisle on the Hill."

The job also requires superior management skills, since the secretary is responsible for overseeing the department's patchwork of [sub-offices](#). "If Judd Gregg is not a managerial type of guy, then he needs a managerially inclined deputy," says Franklin. An official at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce described Gregg as "not flashy, but he is one of the smartest members of the Senate and does not suffer fools gladly." Let's hope so: One of Gregg's first tasks will be [shepherding](#) the transition from analog to digital television—a logistical nightmare for which Obama is [trying to extend](#) the deadline.

Despite the job's reputation as a patronage gig, it's not particularly ideological. The secretary's main task is to promote U.S. business interests and talk up American exports in other countries. Nor are the sub-offices subject to much partisanship. The secretary oversees the International Trade Administration, the Patent and Trademark Office, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which runs the [weather service](#). It's hard to read the weather in a partisan way. In that respect, Gregg probably won't be hugely different from Richardson. "I bet in terms of broader philosophies, there's not much difference," says Mickey Kantor, commerce secretary under President Clinton. As a result, Obama gets credit for appointing a Republican without having to deal with the policy consequences of appointing a Republican.

There is still room for disagreement. (One of the areas they disagree on, Obama jokingly noted in Tuesday's press conference, is "who should have won the election.") The Cato Institute approvingly [calls](#) Gregg a "free trader" for consistently voting against trade barriers and trade subsidies. Gregg voted for the Central American Free Trade Agreement, whereas Obama

opposed it. On the other hand, Obama supported the Peru Free Trade Act, which many fellow Democrats opposed. During the campaign, Obama promised to "renegotiate" NAFTA—a sentiment Gregg's surely disagreed with. But in practice, Obama knows that was an overstatement, and Gregg must have signed on for revising labor and environmental standards before accepting the job.

There could also be drama over the 2010 Census. In the past, Democrats and Republicans have [battled](#) over whether to use sampling, which favors Dems because they tend to increase the count in urban areas, or headcounts, which favor Republicans since they tend to undercount minorities. Even then, however, it would be difficult for Gregg to put on his Republican hat without creating a firestorm.

Finally, there is Gregg's vote to abolish the Commerce Department. At the time, Congress was voting on the 1996 budget. A representative from Michigan added an amendment that would balance the budget faster by killing the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Education, Commerce, and Energy—an absurdity, but also an attempt to signal to Democrats that balancing the budget would require cutbacks. Every Republican senator [voted for it](#), plus a few Democrats. In a department with as many moving parts as Commerce, a conservative instinct to streamline could be a positive.

Now let's see if he knows how to file his taxes correctly.

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## politics

### Tom Cries Uncle

Would greater transparency have saved Tom Daschle?

By John Dickerson

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 3:27 PM ET

Tom Daschle's withdrawal as nominee for health and human services secretary will complicate the Obama administration's health care strategy. But Daschle's tax and special-interest problems, and the clumsy way the administration handled them, have already complicated its transparency strategy.

The Obama administration talks a lot about [transparency](#). It's a key element of the pitch behind the president's stimulus bill. "Sunlight is the best disinfectant," said the president last week in a typical remark. "I know that restoring transparency is not only the surest way to achieve results but also to earn back that trust in government without which we cannot deliver the changes the American people sent us here to make."

Obama and his aides believe that transparency is an end in itself—government should inform the public about its policies and the people carrying them out. But it's also smart politics. Transparency builds trust in government. And if people trust the government, they're more likely to buy into the policies it's promoting.

But when it comes to personnel appointments like Daschle's, the administration has fallen short of its own standard. Daschle's and Tim Geithner's tax troubles were first reported in the press. William J. Lynn and [Mark Patterson](#), exceptions to Obama's new ethics guidelines regarding lobbyists, were also discovered by the press. Because the administration failed to come forward on its own with this information, it looks as if it's trying to hide something and creates the distractions that predictably follow.

An administration that promises special interests will have no influence should have realized that the \$220,000 Tom Daschle received from health care interests may have affected public impressions about how he could perform his job as a regulator of health care. It was Obama who taught us all to be careful about those conflicts during his two-year campaign. By apparently hoping the news stayed buried until the press discovered it, the Obama team operated in the shadows, not in the sunlight.

Telling us about Daschle's problems before the press did would not have wiped them away. But if the White House had revealed them first, at least it would have reduced the feeling that it was trying to hide something. In addition to whatever credit they would have gotten for acting in good faith, early disclosure would also have allowed the administration to get the first crack at defining the debate on its own terms.

Instead, it tried the old Washington wiggle. Aides had the information, didn't release it, and then just tried to manage the fallout. This ensured a new degree of skepticism not only about the Obama team's vetting process but about its judgment and ability to live up to its ethics and transparency standards. This rolling day-by-day set of stories distracted from the administration's own message—[Hey, look at Tom Daschle when he didn't have a chauffeur!](#)—and created a pressure that makes it harder to deal with each new problem. This pressure is also what caused Nancy Killefer to resign before she could even take the job as administration performance officer.

The let-it-come-out-in-the-press approach proved fatal to Daschle's nomination. But it was also a problem with the exceptions to Obama's ethics policy. Early in his administration, the president announced that he was putting forward the toughest ethics laws in White House history, including the restriction that anyone who had lobbied for a company could not work in an administration post related to that previous lobbying work. Then we started to learn about the loopholes. William J. Lynn III, his choice for the No. 2 official at the Defense Department, recently lobbied for military contractor Raytheon. Mark Patterson, the



treasury secretary's chief of staff, was a lobbyist for Goldman Sachs.

The White House defended the exceptions on the grounds that these people were exceptionally qualified. This is such a reasonable argument that the White House easily could have made it on the front end. If the Obama administration's transparency practices were consistent, we might have expected to see the names of the exceptions to the ethics policy published on the White House Web site on the day the policy was announced. The "move right along, nothing to see here" defense is more plausible if the information is made available as a matter of course.

Not mentioning the exceptions up front feels sneaky. It raises suspicions that administration aides were trying to grab a few days of good press coverage for the new ethics rules and collect accolades so that when there were exceptions, no one would much care. And anyone who did care could be told that the ethics rules were universally praised by government watchdog experts.

This is, in fact, what happened. But the experts who heralded the measures when they were first announced [would probably never have been so complimentary](#) had they known there would be immediate exceptions.

The downside of releasing bad information is that it can create a political problem that overwhelms all reason. Release bad information about a nominee too early, and the story could grow to the point where it becomes impossible to balance a nominee's career properly against the mistake. Transparency, intended to further the cause of good governance, can unleash a feeding frenzy that can kill a qualified nominee, undermining the cause of good governance. But this is a question of timing. It shouldn't bias the system toward the least transparent act of transparency.

Earlier disclosure might not have saved Tom Daschle's nomination. But late disclosure certainly didn't. And by the administration's own transparency standards, sooner is always better. It's supposed to tell us about the good and the bad equally so that we can make our evaluations about people and policy based on all available information. Transparency about only good news isn't real transparency. It's just getting naked in the dark.

*Watch White House press secretary Robert Gibbs' briefing on Daschle:*

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politics  
Tomfoolery

Why Daschle's tax sins are worse than Geithner's.

By Christopher Beam

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 7:28 PM ET

Last week Tom Daschle became the second nominee to the Obama Cabinet to [jeopardize his confirmation](#) over his income taxes. The question is whether he will become the first to suffer for it.

Daschle, Obama's choice to head the Department of Health and Human Services and become the administration's health czar, had failed to pay \$128,000 in taxes for a car service he'd been using since 2005, plus on about \$80,000 of consulting income. That was two weeks after Tim Geithner, now treasury secretary, announced that he'd failed to pay \$25,000 in payroll taxes while working at the International Monetary Fund.

On the surface, Daschle's screw-up looks a lot like Geithner's. Both men underestimated how much they owed—or simply underpaid. Both situations involve gray areas or confusing aspects of the elaborate U.S. tax code. And, of course, both blamed their accountants.

But there are some key differences that may influence how the Senate finance committee views Daschle's case. When the news about Geithner's errors broke, Democrats on the committee rallied around him. Chairman Max Baucus [said it was a "given"](#) that he would be confirmed, and even [some Republicans](#) supported him out of the gate. The committee has been slower to defend Daschle. Baucus said in a statement Monday that "all issues raised will be considered carefully and thoroughly by the Finance Committee in the coming days." Translation: We're gonna let Daschle sweat this one out. They have yet to set a date for the confirmation hearing.

One big difference is the nature of the oversights. Geithner's mistake was procedural—he reported income incorrectly—whereas Daschle's was substantive—he failed to report some income at all. At issue in Geithner's case is the odd filing system of the International Monetary Fund, which, because it's an international organization, isn't required to pay payroll taxes. Payroll taxes are normally split evenly between employer and employee. Instead, the IMF gives its employees an additional payment equal to their half of the payroll tax and asks the employees to file those taxes themselves. Geithner didn't.

When the IRS audited him in 2006 and pointed out the error, Geithner paid the taxes he owed for 2003 and 2004. But he failed to pay the same taxes for 2001 and 2002. In his confirmation hearings, Geithner wouldn't say why. But the reason is pretty clear: He didn't have to. There's typically a [three-year statute of limitations](#) on tax audits. If the IRS doesn't catch you before three years have passed, you're off the hook. Unfortunately for Geithner, public officials are held to a higher

standard. So in November 2008, he went and paid the back taxes even though he didn't have to. (Fun fact: The IRS can't accept money it isn't owed—and after three years, you legally don't owe the money anymore. In all likelihood, the agency will return the unowed back taxes to Geithner.)

Daschle, by contrast, omitted income. Sure, there's a gray area around what constitutes a gift or a fringe benefit (on which you don't have to pay taxes) and a business transaction (on which you do). But the car service provided by InterMedia Advisors, for which Daschle sat on the board and earned more than \$2 million in consulting fees, doesn't seem particularly ambiguous. "Under Section 132 of the Internal Revenue Code, the value of transportation services provided for personal use must be included in income," the finance committee reported last Friday. "Senator Daschle estimated that he used the car and driver 80 percent for personal use and 20 percent for business."

Even less gray is the \$80,000 of consulting income Daschle simply failed to report. He's got a decent excuse—InterMedia screwed up its calculations and didn't include that income in its annual statement. But the disparity should have been clear in Daschle's books. (Apparently the IRS agrees: While the service didn't penalize Geithner, it did [slap](#) Daschle with fines.)

But the trickiest question for Daschle is one of judgment. If he had been using the car since 2005, why did it only occur to him to report it in 2008? If he makes it to a committee hearing, that will be the question of the day. Politicians tend to get religion as confirmation hearings approach. Did that happen with Daschle?

There's little reason to doubt Daschle when he [says](#) his mistakes were "unintentional." Harry Reid is probably right when he [declares](#), via a spokesman, that "Senator Daschle will be confirmed as secretary of health and human services." And Obama [said](#) Monday that he "absolutely" backs Daschle. But what ultimately matters is less the mistakes themselves than how far the nominee went to prevent them, when he discovered them, and how quickly he acted upon his discovery. If Daschle can answer those questions to the committee's satisfaction, he's in the clear.

*Watch White House press secretary Robert Gibbs' briefing on Daschle:*

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## politics

### He's Lincoln! No, He's FDR! No, He's Polk!

The battle over Obama presidential analogies.

By Christopher Beam

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 2:42 PM ET

Presidential comparison isn't the most rigorous form of political analysis. Bill Clinton was the next JFK, until he was Warren G. Harding, and then Jimmy Carter. George W. Bush was Teddy Roosevelt until he was James Buchanan. And Barack Obama, if you believe [everything you read](#), combines the best of every single ex-president, except perhaps Millard Fillmore.

The most common comparisons, of course, are between Obama and Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy. The Lincoln analogy stems from the Illinois origins, the out-of-nowhere rise, and the uncommon eloquence. (Obama hasn't exactly discouraged the comparison, launching his candidacy in Springfield, quoting Lincoln in speeches, and taking the oath of office on Lincoln's Bible.) Driving the FDR analogy is the corresponding economic crisis and the shared conviction that government can be a positive force. And the Kennedy comparison comes from Obama's youth, good looks, and optimism.

These analogies reflect well on Obama, given how history has smiled on these particular exes. But historical comparisons work the other way, too. Not only can they bathe the incoming president in the warm glow of a legendary figure, but they also can burnish the reputations of the old guys by making their legacies seem newly relevant. Obama may benefit from the Lincoln, FDR, and JFK comparisons. But so do Lincoln, FDR, and JFK.

It's no surprise, then, that groups dedicated to the upkeep of presidential legacies—the ex-presidents' lobbies—are likening their guys to Obama. [The Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt Institute](#) wasted no time in cutting a [video](#) that compares FDR's famous inaugural addresses with Obama's and featuring it prominently on its Web site. The Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, created by an act of Congress and based in Washington, D.C., has invited Obama to lay a wreath in Springfield, Ill., on Abe's birthday, Feb. 12. (Obama [accepted](#) today.) At its many panels on Lincoln's legacy, the Obama connection has frequently come up. Meanwhile, the Lincoln Home, a national historic site in Springfield, plans to stage a play for Lincoln's birthday that will draw a line from Abraham Lincoln to Frederick Douglass to Harriet Tubman to Martin Luther King Jr. all the way to Barack Obama.

As for JFK, the Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston [opened](#) a new exhibit two weeks before Obama's inaugural address featuring drafts of the ex-president's famous "Ask not ..." speech, with Kennedy speechwriter and Obama adviser Ted Sorenson driving home the comparison.

Andrew Rich, president of the Roosevelt Institute, welcomes the Obama analogies. "I think the attention people are giving to the comparison is phenomenal for us," he said. The institute can't take credit for the comparisons—it's not like they planted the

idea in people's heads—but, Rich said, they "certainly encourage" them. When *Time* featured Obama on its cover clad as FDR, Rich "happily bought five copies."

The Lincoln lobby acknowledges its own debt to Obama. "It's absolutely on some level eerie," says Eileen Mackevich, executive director of the Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, referring to the Obama-Lincoln parallels. "He's clearly studied the speeches. He's clearly studied the structure of [Lincoln's] Cabinet." Both men also share "the idea that you can be honorable and a master politician and of the moment, as well." The bicentennial would have been a big deal no matter who was president. (And, as Clark Evans of the [Abraham Lincoln Institute](#) pointed out, John McCain probably would have taken his oath on Lincoln's Bible, too.) But Obama's election makes it all the more notable.

The JFK Library hasn't made the Obama comparison explicit yet—the speechwriting exhibit would have opened no matter who was elected. But it could happen, says deputy director Tom McNaught. "I won't say we won't do it."

All three past presidents can stake some claim to the current one. But surely one is a better fit than the others. I posed this question to Rich, of the Roosevelt Institute. "Well, my feeling is the comparison to FDR is probably a stronger one in terms of what each man faces," he said, citing the economic crisis. The Lincoln analogy doesn't hold up quite as well. "The differences between [Obama] and Lincoln are so substantial," he said. "But you can see why they'd want to cultivate that one more."

Mackevich dismissed the notion of a rivalry between promoters of FDR and Lincoln. "No, in fact, one of our strongest supporters is a man ... who directed the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of FDR."

McNaught also rejected the rivalry idea. "I think they all are flattered that this idealistic, extremely intelligent young president has been compared by the public to FDR or JFK," he said. "It basically says their legacy is a lasting one, as opposed to saying Franklin Pierce is my role model, or Benjamin Harrison inspired me to run for president." That said, McNaught emphasized that "the country's very excited about a president who brings excitement back to office."

Of course, analogies aren't always a good thing. FDR was extremely effective during his first 100 days; if Obama doesn't accomplish as much as he wanted to, the comparison could start to hurt him. Same with Lincoln: Preserving the union is a tough act to follow. And the JFK analogy could be [damaging](#) if Obama turns out to share Kennedy's weaknesses as well as his strengths.

But for now, the Obama-analogy business is good. The Fillmore lobby should take note.

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## press box

### What Would Ann Landers Advise?

Ann's daughter, advice columnist Margo Howard, gets ugly with advice columnist Amy Dickinson.

By Jack Shafer

Thursday, February 5, 2009, at 6:15 PM ET

Syndicated advice columnist Margo Howard slapped syndicated advice columnist [Amy Dickinson](#) with an [open letter](#) yesterday, accusing her of exploiting her mother, Esther "Eppie" Pauline Friedman Lederer, who wrote a syndicated advice columnist under the name "Ann Landers" for almost 47 years until she died in 2002.

Dickinson started writing an advice column for the *Chicago Tribune*, Landers' "home" newspaper, in 2003 and drew barbs from readers.

Howard accuses Dickinson of having "allowed people, if not encouraged them," to consider Dickinson "the new Ann Landers" during recent appearances on *Good Morning America* and *The View*. Howard writes:

Well, you are not the "new" Ann Landers because there is no "new" Ann Landers. It is a copyrighted name and trademark, and what that means is that no one else can use it—not to write under, and not to promote themselves.

Dickinson tells *Editor & Publisher's* Joe Strupp that she's never billed herself as the "new Ann Landers" and cringes when she's introduced that way. "I can't correct the lead-in."

Dickinson sought to distance herself from Landers from the beginning of her entry into the advice racket. In a 2003 [interview](#) with the *New York Times's* Deborah Solomon, Dickinson fielded the opening question—"What's it like to be called the next Ann Landers?"—directly and competitively:

It is true that my column is replacing the Ann Landers column, but it's a whole new venture. It's the same format, but it's funnier and snappier and might be more fun to read. Without a doubt, it will be more entertaining.

Dickinson continued in this vein. "I always found the entertainment value came more from the questions than the [Landers] answers," she said. Declaring that she had nothing in common with Landers, Dickinson said, "I've been leading a really average life. She had a chauffeur. She lived in this palatial

apartment, like 14 rooms, on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago. She was the first diva ever! But I am a single mother who grew up on a farm in upstate New York. I ride the bus to work."

Landers fans took umbrage. How could they not? One [letter-writer](#) to the *New York Times* spoke for them by informing Dickinson that it was "gauche to dis her predecessor, especially when she is no longer with us."

I have no advice columnist in this fight. I've met Dickinson a couple of times, but I've never read her column. Howard authored *Slate's* "[Dear Prudence](#)" advice column for a number of years, but I didn't read it, either. Howard and I never worked together directly, but whenever we bumped into each other at *Slate* retreats and parties, we got along like nitro and glycerin. Many innocent bystanders were injured in the blasts.

As Howard and Dickinson work toward a resolution of their dispute, I would like to add a relevant debate point. Howard concludes her open letter with this shot:

By law, the only person who would have been able to become "the new Ann Landers" was me. And that was nothing I chose to do. You see, dear, even I knew that there could only be one Ann Landers.

Only one Ann Landers? Howard knows full well that Eppie Lederer was the *second* Ann Landers. The first Ann Landers was a registered nurse named Ruth Crowley, who was writing the syndicated Ann Landers column for the *Chicago Tribune* at the time of her death in 1955. Rick Kogan, author of the 2003 book [America's Mom: The Life, Lessons, and Legacy of Ann Landers](#), gives Crowley her due. He writes:

In the late 1940s, some newspaper syndicates had stopped offering advice columns altogether, and those columnists who remained in the field were far from being household names. One of the few who was well-known was Ann Landers, whose real name was Ruth Crowley.

Many Lederer obituaries ([New York Times](#), [Independent](#), [Chicago Tribune](#), [Associated Press](#)) acknowledge that she was the second Landers. According to the obituary that appeared in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Lederer's first paper, Crowley "originated the 'Your Problems' advice column under the pseudonym Ann Landers in the *Chicago Times* in the 1940s." When Crowley died in 1955, Lederer won a competition to become the newspaper's new advice-giver. She hit big. The *Sun-Times* reports that under Crowley the column never ran in more than 26 newspapers. Within the first 18 months of her tenure, Lederer boosted the number to 110.

Lederer was less hung up on the whole "Ann Landers" identity than her daughter is, if a column Lederer wrote in the early 1990s is any guide. In the 1990s, when a longtime reader of "Dear Ann Landers" sent a letter criticizing some decades-old advice that had appeared in the column, Lederer wrote, "I started writing this column on October 16, 1955. That was 37 years ago. The 'Ann Landers' who answered your letter was Ruth Crowley, who died in 1955."

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I read only one advice column: "[What's Your Problem?](#)" If you know of any better advice venue, send the link to [slate.pressbox@gmail.com](mailto:slate.pressbox@gmail.com). (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate's* readers' forum; in a future article; or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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press box

## Who Should Replace William Kristol at the *Times*?

Nobody.

By Jack Shafer

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 6:57 PM ET

Just because I think that the *New York Times* should leave vacant the opinion-columnist position just [evacuated](#) by [William Kristol](#) doesn't mean I think he's irreplaceable. He's *completely* replaceable: I can name a thousand bloggers who filed better copy daily during the year Kristol wrote weekly for the *Times*. Why did his work reek? He's a good writer, a smart thinker, well-connected, and a dazzling smiler. Was he being deliberately perverse about the gig, trying to test the crap-acceptance threshold of the *Times* with his copy? Or just lazy? That's my guess. Has any big-league columnist put less effort into his pieces than Kristol? If he labored more than 45 minutes on the average piece, I'd be astonished.

I take Kristol's failure personally because I [defended](#) him and the *Times* against the legion of liberals who, learning of his assignment, protested that such an "[ideological bully and thug](#)" had no right to appear in the paper's august opinion pages. In that earlier column, I hypothesized that he would use the "*Times* imprimatur to expand his source list to include Democrats of all

stripes ... traffic in political intelligence ... start political feuds ... attack his friends and reward his enemies ... [and] stir the animals up." He didn't, of course. Even though Kristol's poor performance wasn't my fault, I'm guilty of having built up expectations, and if you felt let down, allow me to offer my deepest apologies.

The first reflex at the *Times* will be to offer another conservative the Kristol slot. Although the paper has committed to ordering a refill, I've got a better idea: Why not drop the Kristol slot into a vat of boiling acid and turn the space over to the best copy Deputy Editorial Page Editor David Shipley can lasso on whatever turf he's wrangling that day.

Week in and week out, I'm impressed with the work done by the underexposed contributors to the *Times*' "Op-Extra" page on the Web. Both [Timothy Egan](#), who pops off about politics and the American West, and evolutionary biologist [Olivia Judson](#) (currently "away"), who channels her field for the layman, file brilliant work weekly. Egan comments on the West as if he were a foreign correspondent. Judson satisfies the science nerd in me with essays about everything from obesity to the cancer wiping out Tasmanian devils. I'm not a huge fan of [Stanley Fish](#) ("Challenges to entrenched ideas about politics, education and society"), [Judith Warner](#) ("... political and societal aspects of life at home"), or [Dick Cavett](#), all of whom write weekly for Op-Extra, but their work rarely falls as low as Kristol's.

The *Times* occasionally runs Op-Extra columnists in the print edition, which I consider a treat because I usually don't get around to hunting for them on the Web. If either Egan or Judson moved into Kristol's old space for a year, I wouldn't kick, nor would I protest if the space was reserved for the best of the Op-Extra columnists. (There are [others](#) besides Egan and Co.)

Or, instead of calling up talent from the bench, the *Times* could turn the column inches over to original contributions. At its best, the *Times* op-ed page reads like a good monthly magazine. Among my recent favorite pieces are Michael Lewis and David Einhorn on the [economic crackup](#), Russ Rymer on [George Wallace's political odyssey](#), Robert A. Caro's "[Johnson's Dream, Obama's Speech](#)," and Mark Penn's Hillary Clinton [post-mortem](#), just to name a few.

The *Times* doesn't have to treat Kristol's vacancy like an open Supreme Court seat, a lifetime sinecure filled once a decade according to political calculus. I want the *Times* to think more about what to publish than whom to publish.

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If the *Times* insists on appointing—please, anybody but [Roger Cohen](#) or [Ted Koppel](#). Send your "anybody but" nominations to [slate.pressbox@gmail.com](mailto:slate.pressbox@gmail.com). (E-mail may be quoted by name in

"The Fray," *Slate's* readers' forum; in a future article; or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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## press box

### Alms for the Press?

The case against foundation ownership of the *New York Times*.

By Jack Shafer

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 6:51 PM ET

We've finally reached the point at which some of the finest minds doing the biggest thinking about the battered news business believe the best eraser for red ink is ... charity.

Although they weren't the first to make the pitch for newspapers on the dole, financial pros David Swensen, the chief investment officer at Yale, and his colleague Michael Schmidt gave the idea a boost last week in a *New York Times* [op-ed](#). They posit that the best way to maintain the quality journalism of, say, the *New York Times*, would be to retool it as a nonprofit and run it from the proceeds of a \$5 billion endowment.

*New Yorker* staff writer Steve Coll, who first did the math on converting the *Washington Post* to an endowed nonprofit while serving as its managing editor earlier in the decade, immediately shared his enthusiasm for the concept in two blog posts ([Jan. 28](#) and [Jan. 30](#)). Coll surmises that the *Post* could fund a healthy newsroom with a \$2 billion endowment.

Missing from the nonprofit debate is any mention of why enough paying customers can't be found to support these news-gathering institutions if they are so vital to our "democratic constitutional system" (Coll) and "our democracy" (Swensen and Schmidt). The implication seems to be that political coverage, foreign dispatches, and investigative work are inherently noncommercial. If that's the case, has the publication of thousands of foreign, political, and investigative news stories ("quality coverage," to put it in shorthand) over the decades been an act of philanthropy by newspapers?

Of course not. The top dailies started to bulk up on quality coverage at about the same time they started to bulk up on entertainment and lifestyle coverage—during the 1970s and

1980s, as they cemented their positions as quasi-monopolies and revenues zoomed.

To be sure, some newspapers exercised greater commitment to quality than others, and some continued to pay for quality longer after the big advertising wave receded. But many of our notions of what a quality newspaper ought to contain are based on memories of recent decades, when many newspapers were printing money and had no trouble saying yes to proposals for new foreign bureaus, new national bureaus, new suburban bureaus, and new sections.

There is something arbitrary about the endowment brigade's wish to freeze newspaper newsroom size at its high watermark. There's also something disconcerting about wanting to divorce the newspaper from market pressures. (If I wanted that sort of news product, I'd watch *The NewsHour*.) Without some market discipline, how will a newspaper know whether it is succeeding or not, an idea Jonathan Weber explored yesterday in [The Big Money](#). And it's not as though endowments are "insulation against hard economic times," either, as *Times* Executive Editor [Bill Keller](#) put it yesterday. "Just ask universities," Keller continued. Blogger [Howard Weaver](#) calls foundation fans people "who wish some billionaire would endow newsrooms so they don't have to change."

Even if someone did establish a foundation-funded, nonprofit newsroom as large as the *Times*' or the *Post*'s, I'd still have misgivings about it. Who would appoint the directors of the foundation? To whom would the foundation be accountable? To whom would the editors and reporters ultimately report—the foundation directors or the readers? Under the current arrangement, you can blame the Graham family if you dislike the *Post*, the Ochs-Sulzbergers if you're peeved about the *Times*, Sam Zell if you hate the *Los Angeles Times* or the *Chicago Tribune*, or [genocidal tyrant](#) Rupert Murdoch if the *Wall Street Journal* lets you down.

But if the *Foundation Times* or *Foundation Post* irks you, whom do you yell at? Let's suppose Coll persuades Warren Buffett, Bill Gates, and others to endow a quality newsroom per his \$2 billion plan. I'd trust Coll to run such a foundation and pick directors who in turn would pick the editors who picked the reporters. All would be good for a year or two, but as foundation sleuth Martin Morse Wooster demonstrates in his 2007 book, [The Great Philanthropists and the Problem of "Donor Intent,"](#) foundations have a tendency to deviate from the principles of their founders. Wooster points to the philanthropic institutions started by John D. Rockefeller, Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie, John D. MacArthur, and J. Howard Pew as examples of organizations started by conservatives and taken over by liberals. "Why bother to set up a charity if, after you're gone, the people who run the charity with your name ignore your ideas?" Wooster says.

Foundations can evade ideological takeover by setting "term limits" on their operations, spending down their cash, and vanishing, as the [John M. Olin Foundation](#) did. But if the point is to stake the *Times* for perpetuity, the biggest problem will be keeping the foundation hustlers from taking over. In my experience, foundations that fund journalism directly—are opposed to journalistic education—are more interested in promoting what they consider "social justice" than promoting journalism. For them, a newspaper is just a means to an end. For a detailed look at foundations meddling with journalism, see Rick Edmond's timeless white paper from 2001, "How Foundations Use the News Media To Set an Agenda" ([PDF](#)).

This is not to say that such nonprofits as [ProPublica](#) ("journalism in the public interest"), the [Center for Public Integrity](#) ("Investigative Journalism in the Public Interest"), the [Center for Independent Media](#) ("independent online news network in the public interest"), the [Center for Investigative Reporting](#) ("Journalism dedicated to revealing injustice since 1977"), and others haven't published fine work. I know firsthand from working on the nonprofit magazine [Inquiry](#) that nonprofits are capable of creating excellent journalism.

The idea of the *Times* or *Post* ceding the commercial sphere for nonprofit aerie in which only democracy-nourishing journalism gets published gives me the willies. The *Times*, the *Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* earned their reputations by competing in the marketplace, not by stroking philanthropic billionaires or foundations in what my colleague [Adrian Monck](#) calls the "holy search for 'enlightened' money."

The impulse to preserve the best of the American daily newspaper is a laudable one, and it's almost sensible if you can do it with other people's money. But the foundation ploy ignores the reasons why big-city dailies have been dying a slow and profitable death since the advent of AM radio: wave after wave of new competition (TV, FM, cable, the Internet, smartphones, et al.), changes in commuting habits, changes in reader habits, changes in advertising strategies, changes in entertainment habits, the decline of the department store (an advertising mainstay), and the erosion of the classified market. As if that isn't bad enough, in the current downturn many car dealers, car makers, members of the real estate/finance complex, and banks—advertising pillars all—have stopped buying column inches.

The plans to "save" the *Times* and *Post* by rescuing their newsrooms from commercial pressure by sticking them inside protective domes strike me as conservative and futile. The market for news—and for ads—is trying to tell them it wants them to transmogrify into something new or, in the worst-case scenario, something gone. Turning any newspaper over to rich historic preservationists only postpones solving the problem of what newspapers need to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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I'd rather see Rupert Murdoch publish the *New York Times* than see it turned over to a foundation, and that's saying [a lot](#). Send your best newspaper salvation ideas to [slate.pressbox@gmail.com](mailto:slate.pressbox@gmail.com). (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate's* readers' forum; in a future article; or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

Track my errors: This [hand-built RSS feed](#) will ring every time *Slate* runs a "Press Box" correction. For e-mail notification of errors in this specific column, type the word *foundation* in the subject head of an e-mail message, and send it to [slate.pressbox@gmail.com](mailto:slate.pressbox@gmail.com).

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## sidebar

Return to [article](#)

To the best of my knowledge, nobody ever called Rupert Murdoch a genocidal tyrant until he introduced the useful image in a summer 2007 conference call. Here's how the [Washington Post](#) reported it.

Rupert Murdoch wanted the *Wall Street Journal* badly enough to endure a summer's worth of hurt feelings.

"That's ... why I spent the better part of the past three months enduring criticism that is normally leveled at some sort of genocidal tyrant," the 76-year-old global media tycoon said yesterday during a conference call on News Corp.'s fourth-quarter results. "If I didn't think it was such a perfect fit with such unlimited potential to grow on its own and in tandem with News Corp. assets, believe me, I would have walked away."

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## recycled Hard-Core Fans

Some Super Bowl viewers had their football interrupted by porn. It could happen to you, too!

By Josh Levin

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 10:22 AM ET

On Sunday, Comcast cable customers in Tucson, Ariz., [saw their Super Bowl interrupted by about half a minute of porn](#). Comcast says it is investigating the incident, which it called an "isolated malicious act," and has [offered offended viewers a \\$10 credit](#). In June 2007, Josh Levin wrote about how porn (and other content) can show up on your TV screen even when you don't ask for it—the key is having the right equipment. The full article is reprinted below.

I have a magical box that allows me to watch other people watch TV—their movies, their sports, their cartoons, and their hour-long procedural dramas. And sometimes, usually around 11:30 on Friday nights, their soft-core pornography.

My career as a TV freeloader began when I threw together an HDTV setup a few months ago. To [pull in locally broadcast HD channels](#), I bought a [Samsung HD tuner](#) and a set of rabbit ears. This setup was unstable—breathing on the antenna made the picture vanish. My girlfriend suggested that I try plugging in the Comcast cable line. (I get Comcast service but I don't have a cable box.) I screwed the cable in, and after performing the tuner's "auto channel search," I got all the D.C. and Baltimore broadcast networks in super-sharp HD.

But that wasn't all. Further up the dial, past PBS and the CW, I found a big clump of hyphenated channels. Channel 86-4 delivered an episode of *The Sopranos*—odd considering that I don't subscribe to HBO. The Leonardo DiCaprio movie *Blood Diamond* appeared on 87-5. And on 89-11 ... whoa, is that a nipple? These "premium" shows tended to appear and disappear in a flash—that *Sopranos* episode on 86-4 stayed on for five minutes, then transmogrified into *The Devil Wears Prada*. These programs also sometimes fast-forwarded and rewound spontaneously, as if an invisible hand were operating the remote.

At first, I assumed our tuner had formed a mind meld with a cable box a few apartments over. My girlfriend regaled our visitors with tales of our TV-obsessed neighbor, a heterosexual male who loved large-chested women and Hollywood blockbusters. But even the most ravenous viewer couldn't have this kind of appetite—some evenings I was getting free movies and porn on 20 channels at once.

I solved the mystery by consulting online message boards. At tech-y sites like [AVS Forum](#), other voyeurs described their adventures in freeloading. Apparently, I was intercepting video-on-demand channels through the power of my Samsung's QAM tuner.

To explain how my tuner harvested a TV bonanza, I need to give a short primer on cable-television tech. Generally speaking, if you subscribe to basic-cable service—a \$10 per month plan for around 20 channels, or a plan that gives you, say, channels 2

through 70—you receive nothing but analog signals. For more channels, you've got to go digital.

Depending on your cable company, "digital cable" service typically includes a mix of analog channels and channels sent digitally. QAM, or quadrature amplitude modulation, is the "[modulation scheme](#)" that cable companies use to transmit digital channels. Set-top boxes leased out by cable TV companies allow viewers to tune in to "QAM-ed" channels. The number of channels you receive depends on what level of service you've subscribed for and what switches they've thrown at the cableco for your account.

If you don't have a cable box but do subscribe to cable, you can usually receive some digital cable if [your television](#) or TV receiver has built-in QAM support. A standalone [QAM tuner](#), however, will let you tune in only *unencrypted* digital channels.

Which digital channels are unencrypted? Most cable companies don't encrypt the digital signals that they pick up from local broadcasters. That explains why I get the HD versions of Fox, CBS, ABC, NBC, CW, and PBS. My tuner also fields unencrypted digital channels that aren't broadcast in HD, like the local NBC affiliate's 24-hour weather radar and a music-video channel called [The Tube](#). Cable companies encrypt premium channels like HBO, ESPN-HD, and BBC America to prevent nonsubscribers from getting a free ride. The reason I can watch all that hot on-demand stuff is because Comcast doesn't encrypt it.

Here's how VOD works: If you want to watch an old *Sopranos* episode, you click a button that tells your set-top box to transmit a message to a server at the local cable facility. The box receives a message back from the server identifying the frequency—say, channel 86-4—where the stream will start playing. Only this particular cable box gets the message about the frequency, but the show itself still gets transmitted to other people in your service area. According to Comcast, each of its cable "nodes" serves roughly 450 houses. So, when Joe Blow dials up Episode 67 of *The Sopranos*, the signal goes to 449 of his neighbors. They could watch along if the cable company doesn't encrypt the show (which Comcast doesn't here in D.C.), they know what channel to flip to, and they have a QAM tuner. If someone in my node makes an on-demand request for *The Sopranos*, all I have to do is scroll around in the upper-80s region of my tuner, and I'll find it.

Here's a taste of what on-demand subscribers in my neighborhood watched during two recent one-hour sampling periods: an old episode of *Scooby-Doo*, several episodes of *The Office*, a Cinemax women-in-prison movie that was hard to follow plotwise thanks to the fast-forwarding, *The Da Vinci Code*, another soft-core movie (frequently fast-forwarded to the dirty parts) that focused on the salutary effects of bubble baths, an exercise show ("let's circle the rib cage up to the right"), a

scare-movie channel called [FEARnet](#), the Wilco documentary *I Am Trying to Break Your Heart*, *Something's Gotta Give*, *Just Like Heaven*, *The Break-Up*, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Children of Men*, *Borat*, *The Wicker Man* (Nicolas Cage version), *The Queen*, *The Good Shepherd*, *Deja Vu*, *Derailed*, *ATL*, and episodes of the HBO series *Big Love*, *The Sopranos*, *Sex and the City*, *Real Time With Bill Maher*, and *Da Ali G Show*.

Comcast insists that it scrambles all pay-per-view adult movies—that encompasses hard-core titles like *Exxtasy Island* and *Co-Ed Nymphos 31* (both cost \$11.99 to order). According to a Comcast spokesperson, the company has "begun to scramble VOD channels and is working toward scrambling all of our content on VOD in the future." The company's spokespeople also want me to tell you that its customers' privacy is not under siege—that it's impossible for QAM users to identify who requested the VOD content they're watching. (I should make it clear that I don't mean to single out Comcast. They just happen to be my cable provider. An acquaintance of mine who gets Time Warner Cable filches on-demand movies, too. According to Internet forums, most cable companies occasionally provide unencrypted content that QAM users can grab.)

Why doesn't Comcast encrypt all of its VOD streams? Again according to a spokesperson, it's not that it's more technically challenging than encrypting a regular channel. Rather, it's an issue of volume: Comcast has 9,000 programs in its VOD system each month, and that's a lot of stuff to scramble. Encryption also can't be implemented by fiat from corporate headquarters—it has to be done market-by-market at each local cable facility.

Perhaps the main reason cable companies haven't bothered to close the QAM loophole is that so few people know or care about it. Ken Holsgrove, an audio/video consultant and the lead moderator of the HDTV sections on AVS Forum, says there are three barriers to entry for the wannabe on-demand swiper. First, you have to know what a QAM tuner is. (That eliminates roughly 100 percent of the U.S. population.) Second, you have to buy either a standalone QAM tuner (mine cost \$170) or a TV with built-in QAM. Third, as cable companies add channels to their lineups, they tend to change QAM channel designations—the on-demand stream that appears on 86-4 today could be on a different channel tomorrow. In order to keep up with this movement, QAM users must rescan their channel lineup frequently. How many people have the patience to do that?

Besides, Holsgrove argues, it isn't that satisfying to watch secondhand on-demand. "The odds of you actually seeing a movie from beginning to end are virtually impossible to predict," he says. "That's stabbing an avid TV viewer right through the eyeball."

Other downsides: You can't control what's on. Not much of the content is in HD, which is unfortunate for those of us with



HDTV setups. The show you're watching also might suddenly stop or fast-forward, like you've wandered inside someone else's TiVo. If your neighbor pauses *Entourage* to go to the bathroom, you'll just have to wait until he finishes. If he wants to skip the exposition and go right to the sex scenes, then you're going to the sex scenes, too. And if he stops watching *Stranger Than Fiction* with five minutes to go—well, you're just screwed.

But you can't beat the price (free), and sometimes it's fun to cede control. My friend who grabs on-demand stuff from Time Warner calls it "mystery cable"—it's fun to flip around the channels and hope you get lucky.

There is a science to watching other people's on-demand. If you want to catch the latest *Sopranos* or *Entourage*, start looking on Monday night—some of your neighbors will be catching up because they missed their shows on Sunday. Browsing during prime time will yield more programs than snooping in the middle of the day. If you start looking around 9 o'clock on a weeknight and 11 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays, you'll generally find a well-stocked buffet of recent movies.

On-demand voyeurism works the best for guilty pleasures or movies that you've already seen. If you're dying to see *The Queen*, get the DVD. If you're in the mood for popcorn fare like *Deja Vu* or *Derailed*, you probably won't mind if the movie starts in the middle or if the action pauses for a few minutes. And don't worry: In my experience, only the porn viewers really lean on the fast-forward button. If you sit back on a Friday night to watch someone else's movie, there's a great chance you'll see it all the way through.

My magical box will eventually stop working. Comcast plans to scramble the VOD content from premium networks (HBO, Showtime, Cinemax) first and move on from there. In the meantime, I encourage the people of Washington, D.C., to continue to order on-demand movies. For one thing, I still haven't seen the beginning of *Deja Vu*. If someone could queue that up for me tonight, I'd appreciate it.

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## sidebar

Return to [article](#)

Since I don't subscribe to high-definition cable service, I needed to build my own HD setup. For a total of \$230, I bought [an indoor antenna](#) and an [HD tuner box](#). That equipment allowed me to tune in to over-the-air signals from eight local stations, including ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox. (That's right, you can pick up HD broadcasts without paying your cable company \$230 to

["watch HDTV for free."](#)) This isn't an ideal setup. I constantly had to warn guests not to touch, breathe on, or sit in front of the rabbit ears. It was good enough, though, to convince me that high-definition football is reason enough to buy a projector.

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## recycled Let Si Get This

The Condé Nast economy—all expenses paid, all the time.

By David Plotz

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 10:46 AM ET

*As the New York Times' David Carr [noted](#) last Sunday, the recession has taken its toll even on the once bottomless pockets of the Condé Nast empire. Its business model, based on spending money to bring in money, is taking a hit as the media conglomerate [struggles](#) to bring in luxury-product advertisements. In 1997, *Slate's* David Plotz's chronicled the gratuitous profligacy of those with Condé Nast expense accounts—an era that could soon be history. The article is reprinted below.*

During a typical lunchtime at the Royalton Hotel restaurant in midtown Manhattan, *The New Yorker's* Tina Brown might be installed at her usual table, and *Vogue's* Anna Wintour might be at her usual table (chewing on her usual meal—a \$25 hamburger). *Vanity Fair's* Graydon Carter might be there, too, although he has transferred his main allegiance to a place called Patroon. Filling out the room are other editors, publicists, and writers from these magazines and *GQ* and *House & Garden* and so on. And one man, who probably isn't there himself, picks up every tab. Some of the lesser fry may even utter the Condé Nast mantra—though it is hardly necessary at the Royalton—as they grab for the check: "Let Si get this."

S.I. "Si" Newhouse Jr. and his younger brother, Donald, control Advance Publications, one of America's largest privately held companies. (Estimate of their combined wealth: \$13 billion.) Donald tends to Advance's hugely profitable newspaper, radio, and TV holdings. Si runs the less profitable but more glamorous properties. These are the 15 Condé Nast magazines, including (in descending order of fabulousness) *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *House & Garden*, *Allure*, *Details*, *Self*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Glamour*; [The New Yorker](#); and Random House.

The expense-account lunch is a hallowed journalistic tradition. But consider a day in the life of an editor working for Si Newhouse. (Donald's editors are a different story, as they will be happy to tell you.) It's a closed economy where almost all human needs and desires can be gratified with a miraculous, unlimited currency called the Si.

A Lincoln Town Car is waiting outside your door in the morning to take you to work. The car, which costs \$50 an hour, is written into your contract. First stop, breakfast with a writer at the Four Seasons. The check may be as little as \$40. When you reach the office, you realize you're out of cigarettes. No problem—you send your assistant to buy a pack for you. She gets reimbursed from petty cash (\$3). (Could be worse for the assistant: She could be forced to pick up her boss's birth-control pills, or her boss's pet from the vet, or presents for her boss's children—regular duties for Condé Nast underlings.)

You've forgotten to return the video your kids watched yesterday, so you have a messenger take it back to Blockbuster. Si spends \$20; you save a \$1.50 late fee.

Then there's lunch. The magazines account for more than a quarter of daytime revenues at the Four Seasons and the Royalton. A modest lunch for two at the Royalton (no fancy wine or anything) might cost \$80. But Si's generosity extends to even assistants and sub-sub-editors, dining on sushi at their desks. If you spend \$10 or less on lunch, and claim you were working, Si pays. At *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, almost everyone has a "working lunch" every day. An editor at *Allure* says that "working lunches" there are limited to 10 a month.

Back at the office, you hear that a friend at another Newhouse magazine has been promoted, so you send flowers. The tab: \$100. Si pays. (One of my favorite Condé Nast stories is of an editor who had just been promoted to an extremely senior job. His office was jammed with congratulatory flowers and cards. All had been sent by fellow Condé Nast staffers. All had been billed to the company.) Four o'clock, and it's snack time. Your assistant joins the mob in the lobby newsstand. She bills your candy bar, juice, and cigarettes (as well as her own candy bar, juice, and cigarettes) to the magazine (\$15). After all, it's a "working snack." Later, there's a birthday party for your assistant. You order champagne and a cake—on the company, of course, and present her with *your* gift—a Prada wallet (\$200). Later, she submits the expense sheet for it. Finally, after a Random House book party at Le Cirque 2000 (estimated cost to Si: \$35,000), your car ferries you home.

Newhouse expense stories are a staple of New York literary-journalistic conversation. Stories about the \$10,000 in expenses that a *New Yorker* editor billed for a single month. About the interior-decorating costs for the fashion-magazine editor who likes to have her office photographs rearranged every few months. About the hotel tab for the big-name New York writer who spent three weeks in Washington's Hay-Adams (basic room: \$285 a night) researching a *Vanity Fair* story that will never run. About the *Vogue* editor who has furnished her summer house from items purchased for fashion shoots—beautiful furniture, designer pillows, coffee-table books. *Vogue* assistants have nicknamed the house "Petty Cash Junction."

None of the 39 past and present Newhouse employees I spoke to for this story would talk on the record, for [obvious reasons](#). And the nature of the subject makes it hard to separate apocrypha from the truth. Did Condé Nast pay, as sources insist it did, hundreds of thousands of dollars in back taxes on behalf of an editor who didn't bother to file tax forms? Did an editor really expense \$20,000 in a weeklong trip to Paris? The people who pay the bills are not talking. But every example of excess cited here was told to me by at least one source (and usually more than one) in a position to know.

Need a facial? Treat yourself and bill it to Si. This is what is called "scouting." It is also a great way to get free haircuts. To be fair, Si doesn't pay for all such treats. There is also a much-honored tradition of accepting tribute from companies that Condé Nast magazines cover. One magazine exec reportedly got so much loot last Christmas—Cuban cigars, "crates of wine," designer suits ("It was like a Spanish galleon")—that he needed three cars to cart it home. At yuletide, even midlevel fashion-mag writers and editors are inundated with "cashmere sweaters, Versace pillows, coats ...," recalls one ex-*Vogue* staffer wistfully.

At the top of the masthead, the perks are perkier. His Si-ness (their joke, not mine) does not expect his editors in chief to actually live on their seven-figure salaries. He also gives them clothing allowances (up to \$50,000 a year). He buys them cars of their choice and hires chauffeurs to drive them. He offers them low- or no-interest home loans. *GQ* editor Art Cooper reportedly received two \$1-million loans, one for a Manhattan apartment, the other for a Connecticut farm. Tina Brown and her husband, Harold Evans, former president of Random House, reportedly just took a \$2 million boost to buy a \$3.7 million Manhattan house.

Si's favorite courtiers lead lives of jaw-dropping privilege. When she was editor of British *Vogue*, Wintour commuted between London and New York—on the Concorde. Another Si confidant decided his office didn't feel right, so he hired one of the grandmasters of *feng shui* to rearrange it. Some editors prepare for trips by Federal Expressing their luggage to their destination. Why? "So you don't have to carry your bags. *No one* would be caught dead carrying a bag."

Condé Nast has also created a class of mandarin journalists, writers who live much better than they ever could if they wrote only for normal magazines. One freelancer tells of building much of a summer traveling with her husband in the West and Europe around a couple of Condé Nast assignments. Last summer, *The New Yorker* sent a staffer to Venice to cover the Venice Film Festival. The weeklong trip, which must have cost thousands, resulted in a short piece.

Writers, of course, are nowhere near as profligate as photographers. Stories of wasteful shoots abound: the matching

seaweed that had to be flown from California to the Caribbean for a fashion photo; the Annie Liebovitz *Vanity Fair* cover shot of Arnold Schwarzenegger that reportedly cost \$100,000; the *Vogue* shoot in Africa in which, an ex-*Vogue* editor claims, the photographer and his huge entourage wined and dined to the tune of "hundreds of thousands of dollars."

And then there are the parties. Last month *The New Yorker* spent—and this is not a joke—\$500,000 on a two-day "Next Conference" at the Disney Institute in Florida, in connection with a special issue on the same theme. In order to get Vice President Gore, who was traveling in California at the time, *The New Yorker* paid for him and his entourage to fly Air Force Two from California to Florida and back. And vice presidents are not the only things that Condé Nast flies in for parties. *The New Yorker* once shipped silverware from New York to Chicago for a dinner. ("What, they don't have silverware in Chicago?" asks a *New Yorker* staffer.) *Vanity Fair* toted food from New York to Washington for this year's party on the night of the White House Correspondents Dinner. (What, they don't have food in Washington?)

That annual Washington do has grown from an after-dinner gathering for drinks at a contributor's apartment to two huge blasts—before and after the dinner itself—at a rented embassy. *VF*'s annual Oscar-night party has become a similar institution in Hollywood. In addition to the parties themselves, Si also naturally pays to fly in *VF* staffers and to put them up at top hotels. (What, they don't have editors in Washington or L.A.?)

Some Condé Nast parties are so ridiculous that even other Condé Nasties make fun of them. This week's *New Yorker*, for example, mocks a recent *Vogue* party in honor of food writer Jeffrey Steingarten. According to *The New Yorker*, Wintour so detested the carpet at Le Cirque 2000 that she ordered the florist to cover it with autumn leaves (handpicked, of course).

The apogee of party absurdity is *Vanity Fair*'s sponsorship of an annual London dinner for the Serpentine Gallery in Hyde Park. As one observer puts it, "*Vanity Fair*, an American magazine, pays more than \$100,000 to a British art museum solely so that it can sponsor a dinner where Graydon Carter gets to sit next to Princess Diana." The princess was the museum's patron.

Actually, paying \$100,000 for face time with Princess Di may not have been a foolish investment for a magazine so dependent on peddling her image. And Condé Nast's excess has other plausible justifications as well.

Some top editors may earn their perks. *Vogue* and *GQ* make millions, according to industry analysts. *Vanity Fair* is enjoying banner years, and while it probably hasn't made back the millions Newhouse lost in starting it up, it is certainly in the black. *The New Yorker* loses money—how much may even surpass perks as a topic of Newhouse gossip and speculation. On

the other hand, *The New Yorker* is the most talked-about magazine in America, and Tina Brown is the most talked-about editor. That is worth something.

Public media companies such as Time Warner (or, for that matter, Microsoft) can entice and hold journalists with stock options. Advance is private, so Newhouse uses other golden handcuffs. He runs a lifestyle prison. Top editors stay because they could never afford to live in a house as nice as the one Si's interest-free loan bought them or to host parties as nice as the ones Si's party planners throw for them.

Condé Nast's magazines are all about glamour, wealth, prestige. To uphold that image, magazine editors need to circulate at the top of New York society. But the top of New York society consists of people who make *far* more money than magazine editors do—investment bankers, corporate chieftains, and fashion designers. Million-dollar salaries aren't enough to mix and equals with the Trumps and Karans. Si's perks are equalizers.

And they say it's not as good as it used to be. In 1992, according to Thomas Maier's biography of Newhouse, the editor of *Self* held a birthday party for Si Newhouse's *dog*. (Owners ate caviar; dogs drank Evian.) The lowliest assistants used to take car services home. But new Condé Nast CEO Steve Florio has restricted cars and catering. Editors who used to fly the Concorde now fly first-class; those who used to fly first-class now fly business. Expense accounts are scrutinized. Even so, today's Condé Nast is economical only by Condé Nast standards. The belt is tighter, but it's still hand-tooled, hand-tanned, and fashioned from the finest Italian leather.

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## sidebar

Return to [article](#)

*The New Yorker* is not organizationally part of Condé Nast. For brevity's sake, I use "Condé Nast" to mean Condé Nast magazines plus *The New Yorker*. Note also that this discussion does not apply equally to all Condé Nast magazines. *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *The New Yorker* are by far the most profligate. *Condé Nast Traveler*, *GQ*, and *House & Garden* are less lavish. Other Condé Nast magazines are positively restrained. *Glamour*, which is wildly profitable, is famously tightfisted. According to a former assistant, staffers couldn't even bring dates to the Christmas party. And, I should add, there are plenty of people at every magazine who eschew high living.

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## sidebar

Return to [article](#)

As someone put it, "We all depend on his Si-Ness. Even if you're not working for him now, you'll end up working for him someday. Midtown Manhattan is a company town."

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## Science

### I'm Plunging to My Death ... Now What Do I Do?

How to survive a sky diving accident (or any other crisis).

By Ben Sherwood

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 1:22 PM ET

*Why do some people live and others die? How do certain people make it through the most difficult trials while others don't? Why do a few stay calm and collected under extreme pressure when others panic and unravel? In [The Survivors Club: The Secrets and Science That Could Save Your Life](#), Ben Sherwood sets out in search of people who survived amazing ordeals—a woman whose heart was pierced by a knitting needle, a bicyclist crushed by a 21-ton truck, a pilot ejected from a jet traveling faster than the speed of sound—to figure out whether there's a formula for staying alive. In this piece, adapted from [The Survivors Club](#), Sherwood examines sky diving accidents—why do some people have the wherewithal to pull the cord while others freeze up?*

What would you have done? You're harnessed to an instructor for your very first tandem parachute jump at 13,000 feet. Plummeting from the airplane, you quickly sense that something isn't right. Your teacher has fallen completely silent. You call out, but there's no response. The instructor isn't speaking or moving. At 5,000 feet, you realize that your life is entirely in your hands. Would you freeze or stay cool?

This was [the scenario Army Pvt. Daniel Pharr faced](#) on Saturday when he jumped out of a plane over South Carolina. Pharr felt completely safe strapped to an experienced instructor with 8,000 previous jumps. But after the 49-year-old teacher—Chip Steele—pulled the chute, everything went quiet. "I knew something was wrong," [Pharr told ABC's Good Morning America](#). "My [survival instinct](#) just kicked in."

Using a few tips he learned from an instructional video on the ground and from watching parachutists on TV, Pharr pulled the toggles and managed to land safely in a field. The 25-year-old

quickly administered CPR to his instructor, but it was too late. Steele was dead of an apparent heart attack.

It's not easy for a newbie sky diver to land safely, especially with a dead man strapped to his back. If he had pulled on the handles too hard, for instance, Pharr might have gone into an uncontrollable spin. And yet, when everything went wrong, Pharr somehow did everything right. Over the last two years, I've interviewed hundreds of men and women like Pharr who beat the odds and survived extreme challenges. Each time, I asked: How did they do it? And what do they know that the rest of us don't?

To solve the mystery of who survives, it's useful to examine those who don't. In June 2002, a small group of people at the tiny municipal airport in East Troy, Wis., heard a terrible thud. It didn't take long to discover the reason. Near a hangar they found the crumpled body of Luca Bertetto, a 31-year-old engineer from Italy who had recently moved to the area. With 33 previous parachute jumps under his belt, Bertetto was last seen at an altitude of 3,000 feet plummeting toward earth. He was sky diving along with six other jumpers from the local Sky Knights Parachute Club.

No one saw him "go in"—the sport's euphemism for hitting the ground. Investigators found that the handles on his main parachute, emergency cutaway, and reserve chute were in place and had not been pulled. For some reason, the safety device designed to trigger the chute automatically at low altitude also had not fired. A coroner concluded that Bertetto showed no signs of medical problems during the jump and died of massive internal injuries. Why did this young man fall from the sky without opening his main or backup chutes? Did he simply forget to pull the handles? Suicide was ruled out as a possibility. The [U.S. Parachute Association](#) calls it a tragic mishap. Survival experts believe it's a case study of why too many people die when they shouldn't and how we can often fail to save ourselves.

James Griffith is one of the country's top experts on what goes wrong when people die sky diving. When we speak, he's just returned from a busy day in south-central Pennsylvania, where he jumped four times from 14,000 feet. At age 40, he's a veteran sky diver and part-time instructor with more than 3,000 jumps over the past 10 years. In his real job as a psychology professor at Shippensburg University, he has studied all of the reports of fatal sky diving incidents going back to 1993. "Every time you jump, you literally are saving your own life," he says. "Each time, you are cheating death in a way." Yes, with good training and equipment, the sport is reasonably safe, "but there's always an element that something could go wrong."

If you examine all of the accidents, Griffith says, it turns out what happened to Luca Bertetto isn't too surprising. There's even a name for it. It's called a "no-pull"—when the sky diver simply fails to deploy the main or reserve chutes. Another variation is

known as a "low-pull," when a jumper activates the parachute at a low altitude, often too late for survival. Every year, according to Griffith, around 35 people die in sky diving accidents out of some 2.5 million jumps. That's one fatality for every 71,000 leaps. (For comparison purposes, your chances of dying this year from a regular fall right here on earth—say, down the stairs—is one in 20,000.) Ten percent of all parachuting deaths—a small fraction—involve no-pulls or low-pulls. So, what goes wrong? In short, human error.

After you rule out suicides and physical problems like heart attacks and bumps on the head, 75 percent of no-pull and low-pull cases are caused by a loss of situational awareness. Sky divers don't realize their altitude because they're distracted by other things. Most people have very limited "attentional resources," Griffith explains. That means they can concentrate on only a few tasks at a time. If they're busy, say, practicing a new flying technique, they may simply forget to pull the handles. It seems hard to believe, but Griffith says sky divers get so preoccupied with one activity that they fail to deploy their chutes. In addition, "humans are absolutely horrible at telling time." Even when sky divers know to pull their main chutes 45 to 75 seconds after jumping from a plane, they're often way off judging the passage of time. When they finally take action, it can be too late.

Another, more disturbing reason for no-pulls is what sky divers call brain lock. Jumping out of a plane with your heart pounding and stress hormones pumping, it's no surprise that your mind can freeze up for a few seconds. You can literally forget where you are and what you're doing. It happens to all of us every day—our brains seize up for a moment—but we're usually sitting at our desks or pushing a cart through the grocery store. When you're speeding at 120 miles per hour toward earth, it can be fatal if you don't recover in time.

Friends and other sky divers suspect that Bertetto brain locked on his last jump. It can happen to any parachutist, although how quickly you recover is believed to be a function of how many times you've jumped before.

What, exactly, is brain lock? Lancaster University's Dr. John Leach, one of the world's leading experts on survival psychology, has actually tried to measure it. Along with his colleague Rebecca Griffith (no relation to James Griffith), he tested the memories of 40 parachutists at three different stages: right before a jump, after a landing, and on a non-sky-diving day. He found that people often display memory problems under stress. They seem to forget what they're supposed to do. On the surface, it appears their ability to remember gets overwhelmed by other thoughts, anxiety, and worry. But when Leach probed, he discovered their memories aren't actually impaired at all. They know exactly how to deploy their main and reserve chutes. So, what happens? Leach theorizes that their knowledge—how to save themselves—is stored in their long-term memory, but

under great stress, that information can't get across to the part of the brain where it's activated and put to use. Leach found that this happens to novice and experienced parachutists alike.

So, what lessons can you draw from the mystery of the unopened parachutes? Christian Hart, a psychology professor at Texas Woman's University and a veteran of more than 400 jumps, has worked with James Griffith to interview sky divers who didn't pull their chutes and were saved just seconds before impact by their automatic activation devices. He has also reviewed many reports that sky divers have filed about these harrowing incidents. He believes two kinds of personalities emerge under extreme pressure. The first type keeps trying to solve problems no matter what happens. They refuse to quit and sometimes die trying to save themselves. The second type gives up quickly. They resign themselves and surrender.

In May 2005, Hart watched an experienced sky diver named John Appleton jump from a Twin Otter at 13,500 feet. Well-known in the sky diving community, the 55-year-old Appleton had once participated in a world-record 357-person sky diving formation in Thailand. On that Sunday, after a routine free fall, Appleton encountered serious trouble. His main chute failed to deploy, and he took immediate action to cut it away and activate his reserve. For some reason, however, the main chute didn't fall away. Instead, it tangled up with the reserve. Watching from below, Hart knew that Appleton had no chance of surviving. And yet the sky diver kept moving his arms, trying to fix his problems and save his life until he hit the ground. In another euphemism of the sport, his snarled parachutes resulted in a "hard landing." He died on the spot.

Griffith and Hart believe that parachuting offers three survival lessons for those of us who don't jump out of airplanes. First, try to relax. Some sky diving instructors have a special signal when they're free falling with anxious students: They pat the top of their heads. It's a sign to stay calm. The simple act of remembering to loosen up can break you out of brain lock. Second, remember where you are. It may seem obvious, but situational awareness can mean the difference between life and death, whether you're hurtling toward earth at terminal velocity or driving 75 miles an hour on the interstate. Third, never give up. Many parachuting deaths could have been prevented if sky divers kept working on their problems. Human and mechanical errors might be fixable, but you'll never find out if you give up.

Daniel Pharr's sky diving story is a perfect illustration of these three rules. He kept his head, he understood his predicament, and he never gave up. "I had to assess the situation," he explained afterward. "And my military training kicked in. I didn't lose my cool because I knew it wouldn't do any good." He went on: "We're just taught to deal with adversity, whether it be on the battle front or at home or ... up in the air, and you just do what you have to do—assess the situation and keep a calm head about you, because it doesn't do anybody any good to panic."

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slate v

## Science News: Eco-Friendly Bombs?

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 10:06 AM ET

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slate v

## The Bike Valet

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 10:27 AM ET

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slate v

## Dear Prudence: Sexpot Daughter-in-Law

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 11:04 AM ET

TK

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sports nut

## The QB That Saved Pittsburgh

Ben Roethlisberger leads the Steelers to an amazing comeback win in Super Bowl XLIII.

By Robert Weintraub

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 2:35 AM ET

In last year's Super Bowl, the Giants stunned the unbeaten Patriots thanks to the [Manning-to-Tyree](#) helmet catch, one of the greatest plays in football history. This season's game-winner, from Ben Roethlisberger to Santonio Holmes with 35 seconds to go, was just as great in its own way. While the Tyree play was equal parts skill and fluke—a ball thrown up for grabs and miraculously hauled in—[Roethlisberger-to-Holmes](#) was a pure expression of football talent: a laser of a throw into a tiny window, a superb grab, and a tiptoe job in the corner of the end zone. Perfect throw, perfect catch, perfect outcome for Pittsburgh: a [27-23 victory over the Arizona Cardinals](#) and a sixth Super Bowl title.

Besides the fantastic final quarter, Super Bowl XLIII had another happy outcome: It's the game that will finally make the world forget Brett Favre. In winning his second NFL title, Roethlisberger proved he's a supersized successor to the grizzled, Wrangler-wearing NFL icon. If anything, the [motorcycle-crashing, spinal-concussion-getting](#) Steeler is even more reckless and "gunslinging" than the erratic Favre. The difference is that Roethlisberger, who doesn't look particularly fast or evasive, is uncannily efficient on plays that break down because of coverage or the pass rush. He's so good at getting out of trouble—and at making a good decision once he escapes—that opposing defenses are almost better off letting the Steelers' planned plays come to pass rather than give up one of Ben's backbreaking ad libs.

Arizona's Kurt Warner, who played well enough to complete his second Lazarus-like reclamation from the NFL scrapheap, made the mistake of throwing for the potential game-winning touchdown too soon. On what appeared to be the winning score, the Cardinals pulled both deep safeties toward the sideline, leaving a yawning chasm to be exploited up the middle. Once [Larry Fitzgerald caught a simple in-cut](#), he sprinted down the middle of the field, untouched, to the end zone. Had Pittsburgh not pulled the game out, all-pro safety Troy Polamalu would have been the goat—he should never have abandoned double-coverage duty on Fitzgerald, regardless of the outside route.

Before the furious final three minutes, Warner's interception at the goal line—and the [return for a touchdown by James Harrison](#)—had been the play of the game. It was a mistake by the Arizona quarterback not to suss out Harrison's drop into coverage, but the Cardinals' play-calling was far more questionable. The fade to Fitzgerald is the most unstoppable play in football, as was [proved later in the game](#). If the Cards' postseason run showed anything, it's that a great player like Fitzgerald can win games single-handedly. That he never got the chance to make a play at the end of the first half will haunt Arizona.

NBC, whose football broadcasts have been television's best all year, had another good outing. The network's graphics always stand out: Sunday's best on-screen stat revealed the astounding fact that the Steelers are 152-1-1 in the last 20 years when leading by 11 or more points. That made Arizona's comeback to take the lead even more amazing—and underscored the Steelers tendency to find a way to win. Make it 153-1-1. Al Michaels was his usual self, adept at finding a middle ground that satisfies the hard-core fan while playing to the large casual audience the Super Bowl brings. And John Madden has bounced back from a [mediocre stretch](#) on Monday nights with ABC—perhaps he just prefers to work weekends. He was quick to identify that the Steelers' rolling coverages, designed to stop Fitzgerald, were leaving the flats and middle of the field open.

The Peacock also scored with several excellent close-ups, including one of Fitzgerald mouthing, "no, no" as Holmes scored. One disappointment productionwise was that NBC had no conclusive angles on several extremely close plays. The lack of a perfect shot of Harrison's touchdown dive was bad luck more than ill preparation—with the mobile camera along the goal line all the way at the other end of the field, NBC had to rely on higher-angle cameras, which couldn't see around the tackler (Fitzgerald) to determine for sure if Harrison broke the plane before his knee touched down. NBC did better on the Holmes game-winner, but there was still a smidgen of doubt about that second toe touch. Next year: hi-def cameras in everybody's shoes.

The 2008 season will be remembered as a wacky, utterly unpredictable campaign—up through Fitzgerald's sprint past the Steelers secondary. The fact that Pittsburgh came back to win—and that the league's top defensive team won it all—restores a bit of normalcy to a league that was teetering on the brink of absurdity. The recent trend, dating back to last year's Super Bowl, has been that months of mediocrity can be trumped by a few weeks of strong play. The Pittsburgh victory does a bit to buttress the faltering concept known as the regular season. (A more unpleasant piece of status quo for the NFL: The big game's two biggest stars, Holmes and Fitzgerald, [have both been accused](#) of domestic assault. Perhaps Holmes can stop off for counseling on the way to Disneyland.)

This year's Steelers, with a fantastic defense and a mediocre offense, won't be remembered as one of the league's legendary champions. The team's legacy will likely be its head coach. The success of the 36-year-old Mike Tomlin now has every foundering franchise searching for a young, hungry, relatively unknown assistant. Tomlin, who appears far more genuine than his predecessor Bill Cowher, whose chin-first outbursts seemed concocted for maximum media effect, has cracked the door for young, talented African-American assistants like Tampa's [Raheem Morris](#). Tomlin is the youngest coach to win the Super Bowl. An older man may not have had the heart to survive Sunday's thrilling victory.

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## technology

### Shop Till Everyone Else Drops

How Amazon.com is thriving in a horrendous retail climate.

By Farhad Manjoo

Thursday, February 5, 2009, at 5:11 PM ET

On a conference call with financial analysts last week, someone asked Amazon.com CEO Jeff Bezos whether other companies' failures were the secret of his company's success. All around Bezos, commerce is plummeting. Many rival retailers have

reported their worst revenues in years; they're cutting workers or shutting down entirely. Yet Amazon is thriving: It just had its [best holiday season](#) in company history, with profits up 9 percent over last year. Bezos offered a diplomatic answer: "In the long term, fortunately the markets that we operate in are very large markets, and there is room for lots of winners." Perhaps he's right about the long run—but for now, he's being modest. In a retail desert—as [customers turn to frugality](#) and big-box stores turn to liquidation—Amazon remains an oasis: It's the one place that'll sell you stuff for a bargain without making you feel like you're slumming.

Bezos has been dabbling in so many markets lately that it's easy to forget how well he runs his main business. Amazon offers the Web's leading "cloud-computing" warehouse—it sells cheap online storage and processor cycles to Internet startups looking to save on overhead costs. The [Kindle](#), its year-old e-book reader, has become an [Oprah-certified phenomenon](#); Amazon is reputed to have [sold 500,000 of them](#), with demand far outstripping supply. (The company has scheduled a press conference for Monday at which everyone expects it will release an updated version of the device.)

But it's Amazon's retail business that's the heart of its success. Over the last couple of years, the company's retail arm has pursued a relentless expansion: It has launched a digital music store; added to its selection of [Latin music](#), [indie movies](#), and out-of-print books and [CDs](#); and started selling new products ranging from [fabric](#) to [motorcycles and ATVs](#). Just this week, Amazon launched a new PC video game store, selling hundreds of downloadable titles for less than \$10 each. As other retailers pare down their operations, Amazon keeps [hiring more people](#) and building new distribution centers.

All the while, it has kept prices low. Analysts say it can do so for one big reason: It owns and operates zero stores. While other retailers had to order their holiday inventory weeks in advance—and, therefore, guess at consumer demand, risking getting stuck with a lot of extra stock—Amazon could wait until late in the season to buy from producers. "Amazon was able to restock when nobody else was restocking," John Aiken, an analyst at Majestic Research, [told the Wall Street Journal](#) (subscription required). "As demand was falling off a cliff, they could get better rates."

As a result, Amazon offered some of the deepest discounts of the season, selling TVs that normally went for \$1,000 for just \$700. Of course, so did a lot of other stores. Indeed, Amazon isn't always the cheapest place to shop—real bargain hunters can almost always find better deals at Wal-Mart (which may explain why that company is the [other bright spot in retail](#) this season). Amazon isn't always the nicest place to shop, either—hey, who wouldn't prefer getting a Valentine's gift in a blue box from Tiffany's over a brown one with a smiley face? But a recession concentrates the mind: Customers want cheap stuff, but they also

want convenience, quality, and a friendly, hassle-free atmosphere. Amazon isn't Tiffany's, but it's not a chaotic, out-of-the-way discount zoo, either. Instead it occupies a sweet middle spot—it's the nicest place to buy cheap stuff. These days, that combination goes a long way.

I've been shopping at Amazon since shortly after it opened its doors in 1995, but I became a loyal customer just three years ago, when I signed up to its \$79-per-year Prime plan. I'd guess that between one-quarter and one-third of my retail purchases now come from Amazon. (I'm pretty friendly with my UPS guy.) Prime members get free shipping on most items in the store or overnight shipping for \$3.99; because you can share the plan with up to three other people, it's a steal for frequent shoppers. (Amazon requires everyone sharing the plan live in the same household, but in my experience it doesn't enforce that restriction very firmly.) If you and your housemates buy more than two items a month from Amazon, you should consider subscribing. Be warned, though, that Prime membership will alter how you think about shopping. These days, whenever I become cognizant of some need that would ordinarily require an unplanned trip to the store—when I want a bathroom hook, a shelving system for my closet, a new wireless router, or a discount pack of kitchen sponges—I check Amazon first. It's usually faster to order the item there and get it shipped for free than to add the thing to my shopping list. With Prime, you don't really need a shopping list.

I don't rely on Amazon just because it's cheap and convenient. For a store that aims to give you a bargain, it also excels at customer service. Here's something that happens often: I'll buy an item on Monday afternoon and be told to expect it to arrive Wednesday. Then, sometime Tuesday, the UPS guy rings my door—amazingly, Amazon has moved the product from its shipping center in Nevada to my apartment in San Francisco in less than a day, for no extra charge. The store even excels when something goes wrong. The Web abounds with stories of Amazon going above and beyond to make sure its customers are happy. Last year Joe Nocera of the *New York Times* wrote about how [Amazon replaced his son's Christmas present](#) for free after someone had filched the package from his building—which, of course, wasn't Amazon's fault.

I've got a story like that, too. Before Thanksgiving last year, I ordered a roasting pan for my parents, who live in Southern California—but I accidentally had the item delivered to my house, hundreds of miles away. What to do? I looked into shipping the roasting pan to my parents, but the cost was prohibitive. Then I thought about ordering them a new pan and returning the one that had come to me—but the sale on the item had expired, meaning that the pan was now \$10 more expensive.

So I did what any frustrated customer would do: I threw myself on the mercy of customer service. I called [Amazon's secret call center](#) and explained my problem to a friendly gentleman in a

foreign country. (Speaking of which, there is one way Amazon can improve its service—publicize their call center's number!) The Amazon rep fixed everything. Because I was a loyal customer, he said, he would sell me a new pan—shipped to my parents' house—at the now-expired sale price. He also offered to take back the pan that I'd had delivered to me for no charge at all—not even shipping.

Amazon can provide such great service because it's a retail behemoth. There's a feedback loop working here—as it gets more customers, it makes more money and can better afford to placate the small number who feel wronged, which of course helps it win even more customers. This also explains why Amazon is not only beating offline stores but is also stealing market share away from its online rivals. EBay had [a terrible holiday quarter](#)—its profits declined by one-third, and, for the first time in its history, its revenues were lower than the comparable period the previous year. The company is also warning that its numbers for the current quarter will fall below expectations.

This seems counterintuitive—as times get tough, you'd expect that people would turn to eBay both to sell their stuff and to buy other people's used items. But while you can occasionally get some amazing deals on eBay, shopping on an auction site requires a lot of work. Shipping costs vary widely depending on the merchant, which means you've always got to be on the lookout to avoid getting ripped off. Shipping times are inconsistent, too—buy something at Amazon and you can be sure you'll get it within the week, but a delinquent merchant on eBay could dither forever. And what if something goes wrong—if your package is stolen from your apartment's common area, or your kitchen sponges aren't as absorbent as you expected, or you accidentally got your product shipped to the wrong address? Some sellers on eBay might go the extra mile, but many won't—and you'll end up stuck.

In the past, all this was worth it—you could be sure that if you put in the work, you'd get a fantastic deal on eBay. But as Amazon has reduced its prices and expanded its selection, fiddling with eBay no longer seems necessary. At Amazon, you click once, and the item's on its way. No wonder people can't stop shopping.

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## technology

### I Can Digg It

Why MrBabyMan is the king of all social media.

By Farhad Manjoo

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 11:51 AM ET



Last week, the CBS affiliate in Hartford, Conn., reported on a new lead in the case of Molly Bish, a teenager who was abducted and murdered nine years ago. Tragic story, hilarious local-news blooper: Just as the anchor announced, "The possible suspect, Rodney Stanger, seen here ..." viewers' screens flashed to a mug shot of a hamster carrying a clapperboard, under a title reading, "Cold Case Suspect?" The hamster's expression was delicious—his small mouth and sunken eyes seemed to plead, "Save me, I was framed!" Naturally, someone recorded the station's mistake and [uploaded the clip to YouTube](#). There, it was spotted by Andrew Sorcini, a 40-year-old film editor who lives in Los Angeles and is better known online as [MrBabyMan](#), his moniker on the user-voted news site Digg. On Saturday, the clip hit Digg's front page, winning [more than 5,000 votes](#).

The same day, several other items became huge hits on Digg: [a report in the Telegraph](#) on the cloning of a Pyrenean ibex, a species of mountain goat that was long ago declared extinct (more than [2,200 Diggs](#)); a [Wired photo gallery](#) showing natural chemicals that pharmaceutical companies had re-engineered in the lab ([553 Diggs](#)); a [sublime collection of PhotoShopped images](#) by a Russian artist ([2,519 Diggs](#)); and [a sneak peek of robot images](#) from the next *Terminator* sequel ([1,324 Diggs](#)). This disparate bunch of stories had one thing in common: They, too, were submitted by MrBabyMan.

Digg is the Web's biggest popularity contest. People submit links, and the stories that win the most votes rise to the site's constantly changing front page. According to the Web traffic firm [comScore](#), about 7 million people visit Digg every month, and they're a clicky bunch—prime placement on Digg can drive tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of visitors to a story. But anyone who's ever put a link on Digg—not to mention blogs and news outlets that aim to produce Digg-worthy material—is familiar with the site's crushing odds. On any given day, [more than 20,000 stories](#) are added to Digg. A typical link gets just one or two votes. [The](#) vast majority never make it past 10, and on a given day, fewer than 200 make it to the front page.\* Yet as he did last Saturday, MrBabyMan can post five monster pieces during the span of a few hours, collectively winning 10,000 votes or more.

Andrew Sorcini is the Michael Phelps of Digg. Since joining the site in December 2005, he has submitted about 12,000 links; more than one-quarter—3,394 links as of Monday morning—have been voted to the front page. That works out to about three front-page stories per day. According to [SocialBlade.com](#), which keeps track of the most active Diggers, no other user in Digg's history has submitted more than 3,000 front-page links, and only one other Digger has crossed 2,000. (The second-place user is [Muhammad Saleem](#), a young, self-proclaimed "social media maven" who co-hosts a [weekly podcast](#) with Sorcini.)

MrBabyMan possesses a talent that's particularly valuable in an era of information overload. You can think of him as a one-man Google—he scours the Web in search of links you love—though a better comparison might be to that of an older archetype, the tabloid editor with an eagle eye for a story of mass appeal. I've been a fan of MrBabyMan's for some time, and I called him up last week in an attempt to unearth the secrets of his success. I didn't get very far—Sorcini is a genial, friendly fellow, but when I asked about his process, he confessed that he couldn't describe it very precisely. How does MrBabyMan get so many stories to Digg's front page? The short answer is that every morning, afternoon, and evening, he checks a long list of blogs and news sites for Digg-worthy stuff. He shoots for adding between 10 to 20 new links to Digg every day, a harvest that requires about four to five hours of Web surfing. (As a film editor, Sorcini is often waiting for computers to process his work, so he's got lots of spare time to check the Web.)

"The closest I can come to describing it is to say that it's like instinct," Sorcini says. "I'll look at an RSS list of stories, and I can instinctively tell which ones have the best shot at hitting the front page." He recently read [Outliers](#), in which [Malcolm Gladwell posits](#) that it takes 10,000 hours of practice for someone to become an expert at a certain task. Sorcini has been on Digg for about half that time, and he says he keeps getting better at his job. His earliest submissions were duds. "I used to add anything that appealed to me—and anything that appealed to me didn't necessarily appeal to the Digg community at large." Over time he's learned to consign his entries to those areas that are most attractive to Diggers. Judging by Sorcini's submissions, these seem to be composed mainly of links to amazing pictures; links focusing on malfeasance by authorities (cops [stealing money](#), cops [discriminating against minorities](#)); links [critical of Microsoft](#) or in praise of Apple or Linux; links praising Obama, critical of Bush, or [both](#); and, of course, links to funny videos.

Sorcini first came to Digg for the same reason that many others did: He was a fan of Kevin Rose, the site's co-founder, who'd gained a loyal following as an on-air host on the now-defunct cable channel TechTV. (Sorcini chose the username MrBabyMan after a pet name that a girlfriend once gave him in recognition of his "arrested development.") Sorcini had always been something of a news junkie, especially with technology news. "What turned me on to the way Digg worked was how quickly it processed the news," he says. "I would see a story on Digg that I wouldn't hear about elsewhere for a week or two. I feel like I get an inside track to news when it happens—I'm ahead of the curve." Though he still obviously loves Digg, he now betrays a certain disillusionment with how the site has changed as it's grown. Diggers are meaner and more juvenile than they used to be, he says; the site has become a lot more like 4Chan, [the anything-goes anonymous message board](#) where some of the Web's most notorious trolls take haven.

MrBabyMan isn't universally loved in the Digg community. Along with other top Diggers, he's been [accused of resubmitting links](#) that other people found first and of colluding with friends who'll automatically vote for his stuff. "I'm not going to say the criticism doesn't hurt my feelings," Sorcini told me. Indeed, he once threatened to [hang up his Digging boots](#) for good—but you get the feeling that he has too much fun scouring the Web to ever go through with such a thing.

Much of the criticism carries the whiff of jealousy. Just follow the [BabyMan feed](#) for a few days for proof of his talent at driving the Digg demo into click frenzy. Not only does he find the best stuff, but he packages it perfectly, often tightening up newspapers' original headlines and unwieldy [nut graphs](#). In MrBabyMan's hands, an obtuse [Sydney Morning Herald headline](#)—"We're not the bad guys: Google Earth boss"—becomes something [nearly impossible to resist](#): "Google Earth: Don't blame us for terrorist attacks." On Monday he found a [beautiful and bizarre Flickr photo](#) showing a dog named Pico leaping to catch a rubber chicken, the whole scene set against the backdrop of the Golden Gate Bridge. MrBabyMan's headline explains it all in 56 characters: "Golden Gate + Dog + Rubber Chicken = Pure Awesome (PIC)." As of this writing, that link had [1,492 Diggs](#).

Despite Sorcini's unparalleled Digging skill, you won't find any tributes to his talents on Digg.com. In 2007, after hearing reports that some marketers were paying the site's active users to post friendly stories, the site's management decided [to pull down its list of top Diggers](#). Sorcini and his allies suspect another reason for this action—that Digg was afraid that the contributors were getting too much attention, which would hurt the site in any future sale or investment deals. Digg wants to promote the idea that it's the content—not the submitters—that makes the site fun, Sorcini says. As a result, any celebration of top Diggers and their role in the site's daily success is frowned upon, he argues.

That doesn't mean Digg's top dogs don't have huge influence. Sorcini, the Digg seer, predicts that my story will get a lot of votes, but it'll also get a lot of Buries—essentially thumbs-down votes—from the site's anti-MrBabyMan wing. Consequently, it won't make the front page. But no matter the outcome of my story, MrBabyMan will still haunt the top of the Digg home page. After all, those dog-jumping-after-rubber-chicken photos don't find themselves.

***Correction, Feb. 4, 2009:*** This piece originally misstated the number of stories that make it to the front page of Digg.com each day. It is in the neighborhood of 150, not a few dozen. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

## television

### 43 Observations on the Super Bowl

The cute puppies, Al Michaels, Obama's fireside chat, and other moments you might have missed.

By Troy Patterson

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 4:00 PM ET

I. NBC's five-hour **Super Bowl XLIII pregame show** began yesterday at 1 p.m.

II. NBC Sports' Bob Costas led what he termed a "very deep active roster" of personalities from the NBC Universal family. Al Roker was in a place called the Super Suite, Tom Colicchio at the *Top Chef* tailgate party, and the Weather Channel's Jim Cantore up at the top of the stadium, promising "super weather."

III. After introducing all the key personalities, Costas turned to the hour's other momentous sports story. [Roger Federer](#) showing welcome signs of human emotion? No: the great [Michael Phelps](#) bong rip of '09. This was super comic relief of the day. It kind of stood in for the delinquent behavior of Super Bowl players of infamy. (Throughout the pregame show, reporters and analysts remembered the coke binges and paddy wagons of yore, not without nostalgia.)

IV. Keith Olbermann looked like an early favorite for the worst-dressed award. It was partly that he had the misfortune of reporting from the Cardinals locker room alongside the exquisitely sharp Tiki Barber, and partly that his suit jacket bulged as if concealing one or two vests. Explain yourself, sir.

V. Around 1:30 p.m. or so, Alex Flanagan reported on the spiritual health of quarterback Kurt Warner from the "undisclosed location" of the Cardinals' hotel: He was on schedule for Mass.

VI. The Super Suite was an intimate showbiz experience featuring a small studio audience. Al Roker brought all his jolliness to the fore for what looked like a modest, tastefully produced charity telethon.

VII. But instead of sick children, the Super Suite brought on the personalities of NBC Entertainment, which is ailing in its way. Stars dropped in and hyped their shows, with Jimmy Fallon mumbling by to promote his upcoming late-night show and Hayden Panettiere, the *Heroes* starlet, snatching the worst-dressed award from Olbermann. Panettiere was only dressed appropriately for a flight back from Sundance. "What's up with the Uggs there for Hayden?" wondered Costas.

VIII. Out at the *Top Chef* tailgate party, Dan Patrick and Tom Colicchio squinted in the sun and introduced a cooking challenge. Antonia and Andrew, honoring Arizona, whipped up

some roast pork tacos. Spike and Richard repped Pittsburgh, identified as the home of Heinz. Here, NBC missed a cross-branding opportunity: Olbermann should have been on the scene with a John Kerry joke.

IX. In other cross-branding news, there was a promo where the excellent Al Michaels touted CNBC: "The stock market is like fantasy football times 100." This was a curious claim on several levels—though it's true that in neither case do you want to get behind Detroit.

X. In other cross-branding news, Al Roker interviewed Will Ferrell about *Land of the Lost*.

XI. Then there was *Puppy Bowl V* (Animal Planet). This was counterprogramming for young children, wacky aunts, et al.

XII. *Puppy Bowl V* unfolded in a miniature football stadium, where shelter puppies romped and tugged at chew toys and (we saw through the water-bowl-POV camera) sated their adorable thirsts. It was really cute.

XIII. I didn't catch the final moments of the *Puppy Bowl*, but I imagine that one puppy triumphed as the cutest and got adopted, and all its inferiors were put to sleep.

XIV. Matt Lauer interviewed Barack Obama in the Map Room of the White House, literally a [fireside chat](#)!

XV. Lauer and Obama flirted at some length, the newsman warming the president up with a mother-in-law joke before turning to "sleepless nights" on the national security watch. We watched soldiers in Iraq watching this on a feed.

XVI. Obama, who picked the Steelers to win in a close game, is easing into the pop-ceremonial part of the job with great confidence. Lauer produced a copy of *Us Weekly* with the president's wife and kids on its cover, and Obama read to the nation about Jessica Simpson, wryly, like a sitcom actor—the tone somewhere between Bill Cosby and Bob Newhart.

XVII. The Jessica Simpson exchange cracked the soldiers up.

XVIII. The broadcast of Super Bowl XLIII—identified by Time Warner Cable with a fine simplicity as *NFL Football*—started at 6 p.m.

XIX. Faith Hill, getting away with too much eye shadow, did a crisp "America the Beautiful."

XX. Capt. Sully and his crew showed up to add an authentic touch to the pregame pageant of teamwork, community, and American power.

XXI. Capt. Sully is my new hero. To be precise, Capt. Sully's tailor is my new hero. Ditching a commercial plane in the Hudson is impressive, true, but what a sharp jacket!

XXII. Capt. Sully surpassed Tiki Barber to win the best-dressed award.

XXIII. Matt Lauer of NBC News interviewed Will Ferrell, but this time it was in a commercial for the movie that Al Roker of NBC News had interviewed Ferrell about earlier.

XXIV. By the way, Ferrell correctly predicted that there would be a safety in the game, though he had firmly said that the final score would be 2-0 after double overtime.

XXV. Jennifer Hudson, wounded but resilient like America herself, performed an excellent "Star-Spangled Banner."

XXVI. She reportedly lip-synced? So what? There are all sorts of authenticity. You wanna make something of it?

XXVII. By the way, I want to hear the good gossip about Ben Silverman's Super Bowl [party behavior](#).

XXVIII. I watched the game at home alone, so when I spontaneously shouted "OH MY GOD!!!" at the end of the first half, no one heard me except the neighbors in a 100-yard radius.

XXIX. What a run! What fun to watch replays, replays, *replaaays* of James Harrison heroically skipping and then skidding into the end zone on his neck.

XXX. In further branding news, Brian Williams of NBC News brought a sensitive reading to what could have been a stale line in a local promo: "I'm 4 New York. You got a problem with that?"

XXXI. At halftime, Bruce Springsteen told me to turn the television all the way up, and I did.

XXXII. Max Weinberg of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band began the set by laying down a martial beat, Larry Mullen Jr.-style.

XXXIII. Springsteen—who at times evoked Johnny Cash, James Brown, and Jerry Lee Lewis in his righteous cool—was sexier than Janet Jackson will ever be. Now I want to see a battle of the bands between the Boss and Prince, the only artists in the same class as half-time performers.

XXXIV. (Two years ago, playing in the heart-rending [purple rain](#) in Miami, Prince converted "All Along the Watchtower" into an epic squall, among other majestic tricks.)

XXXV. Politically active Springsteen was performing as a kind of co-president. When he lunged into the crowd, I found myself scanning the screen for his Secret Service detail.

XXXVI. Up in the booth, Al Michaels [was magnificent](#). He turned the word [alacrity](#) into onomatopoeia.

XXXVII. Best Al Michaels filler: When the camera spotted Cuba Gooding Jr. in the crowd, Michaels spoke of getting a [Jerry Maguire](#) residual check for \$28 in the mail.

XXXVIII. I wonder how many degenerates switched promptly at 10 p.m. to *Wipeout Bowl 1: Cheerleaders vs. Couch Potatoes* (ABC), which was either an astonishingly crass Japanese-game-show-type reality special or a devastating satirical critique of American culture ghostwritten by George Saunders.

XXXIX. Either way, it was hilarious. The cheerleaders were 13 young women in microminiskirts ("I'm 20, but everyone tells me I look 16"). The couch potatoes were 13 flabby guys. They fell in mud and bounced off foam-padded pillars and were pelted with paint-soaked Nerf footballs and that sort of thing.

XL. The knee socks on the *Wipeout* cheerleaders were an essential touch. Sadly, they switched into wet suits by the grand finale, which culminated in contestants braving a "1,000-gallon sports-drink tidal wave."

XLI. How perfect was the footage of Santonio Holmes in his No. 10 jersey? (Personal to NBC Sports and NFL Films: Let's sit down on the record some time and discuss the debts that you owe to [Leni Riefenstahl](#). It'll be fun, and everyone will understand that you do not intend any cross-branding with Nazis.)

XLII. How perfect was Cardinals coach Ken Whisenhunt in accepting defeat with grace? Forget all the macho posturing on and off the field on Sunday. The way Whisenhunt said, of his team, "This is a group of men ..." made you thrilled to be a man.

XLIII. STEELERS WIN!

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## the best policy

### Privatize Social Security?!

Can we finally kill this terrible idea?

By Eliot Spitzer

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 6:59 AM ET

"We told you so" is just about the most annoying sentence one can utter. But when it comes to the debate over Social Security,

this is a moment for Democrats to say: We told you so. Use your time machine to travel back four years: In his 2005 State of the Union address, delivered during a period of economic and stock-market growth, President Bush made the privatization of Social Security the centerpiece of his domestic agenda for his second term.

The grand domestic project of the Bush administration was to repeal the two major components of New Deal ideology: the regulatory apparatus of the federal government and the social contract embodied by social welfare programs—Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid. The effort to roll back the regulatory agencies—the SEC, EPA, OSHA—and place all faith in an unregulated market has been well-chronicled, as have been the ensuing market collapse and suffering. The effort to repeal Social Security, which is what privatization amounts to, was to have been followed by private health savings accounts.

Fortunately, the effort failed, and much damage was avoided. But it is worth taking a quick look at some of the debate about privatization, especially in the context of today's market turmoil, just to make sure the issue does not, like a bad sequel, return.

President Bush and all who support privatization began with the proposition that private accounts invested in an array of stocks and bonds would outperform the current formula based on wages earned and overall wage appreciation. Well, let's go to the videotape, as they say. Since Jan. 1, 2005, the year President Bush proposed the idea, the Dow Jones industrial average has dropped from 10,783 to around 8,000, a drop of more than 25 percent. OK, we are in a trough after a steep period of appreciation. Fine. Since Jan. 1, 2000, the Dow has dropped from 11,497 to 8,000, a drop of more than 30 percent. So what would this have meant to an average recipient of Social Security?

Let's try to quantify this, albeit roughly. Under the current system, a couple earning a household income of \$100,000-\$150,000 per year would get slightly more than \$3,000 every month in Social Security benefits. And their benefits would be inflation-adjusted every year. Suppose the couple were to invest for retirement in the private markets. With an income of that size, the couple would be able to save about \$500,000. As [Allan Sloan calculated in Fortune](#), a couple retiring at age 66 at the end of 2007, having accumulated \$500,000 in a private savings account, would have been able to purchase an annuity delivering \$3,000 per month until the death of the longest living of the two. In other words, that couple would get an annuity worth about the same amount as their Social Security benefits. A couple retiring at the end of 2008, by contrast, would have been able to purchase an annuity delivering only \$2,000 per month—a 33 percent loss.

In other words, if Social Security were in private accounts, the payout you'd receive would be more correlated to the timing of

your retirement than to anything else. With a privatized system, those retiring in 2007 would have been reasonably pleased—though they still wouldn't have made a windfall compared with normal Social Security benefits—while those retiring now would be devastated, receiving vastly smaller retirement payments.

If *insurance* against catastrophic economic loss and deprivation in one's retirement years is the underlying purpose of Social Security, we cannot permit the dramatic cyclical nature of market returns to place at risk a substantial portion of people's retirement accounts. The very purpose of the Social Security system is to have a guaranteed return, not one subject to the risk of a volatile market. Indeed, it is inconceivable that we would tolerate retirees descending into poverty after a cataclysmic market collapse such as what we have just seen. Suppose we had privatized Social Security before the recent declines: In order to prevent mass poverty among the elderly, we would have been obligated to re-create traditional Social Security to redress the failure of the privatized system.

Furthermore, as [Paul Krugman](#) has pointed out, the would-be privatizers make incredible—even impossible—assumptions about the likely performance of the market to justify their claim that private accounts would outdo the current system. According to Krugman, their worldview would require the price-earnings ratio in the market to be around 70 to 1 by midcentury. That would make the market at the height of the last bubble look grossly undervalued. Their performance numbers simply do not work.

Supporters of privatization also use the backdrop of impending Social Security bankruptcy as an argument for privatization. That, too, is a canard. Wherever one comes out on the urgency of Social Security's financing problem—and there is fair debate about it—privatization would undoubtedly make the problem worse, not better. Social Security is, as we all know, a Ponzi scheme that would make Bernie Madoff proud. Today's contributions by workers pay for today's payouts to recipients, with some being saved in a trust fund that, given changing demographics, will be exhausted several decades from now. If we were to create private accounts for current contributions, invest those accounts in the market, and thus withhold those dollars from the system for current payouts, the shock to the system would be enormous. Where would the money come from to pay current recipients? We would incur a "transition cost" to privatization, as it is politely called, in the trillions of dollars—money that would have to be borrowed in the market to cover the lost cash flow into the Social Security system.

And that fact makes clear the fallacy of the next argument often proffered by privatization supporters: They claim that the flow of dollars into the private accounts and then into the equity markets will stimulate the economy. The problem is that for every dollar put into the market through a private account, the government would have to borrow a dollar in the market to

cover existing payouts. Thus the supposed benefit is entirely eliminated, as the net impact on the capital available for investment is zero.

We surely want—indeed, need—to encourage greater savings and investment to re-energize our economy. Yet asking workers to sacrifice the certainty of a Social Security payment for the potential upside of a marginally greater return from a private investment account is the dead wrong way to do it. The market collapse should be the final nail in the coffin of Social Security privatization.

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## the chat room

### Withdrawal Symptoms

John Dickerson takes your questions on Tom Daschle's retreat and the tax problems of Obama's nominees.

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 4:11 PM ET

*Slate* chief political correspondent John Dickerson was online at [Washingtonpost.com](#) to chat with readers about [the withdrawal of health secretary nominee Tom Daschle](#) and the tax problems of Obama's other nominees. An unedited transcript of the chat follows.

**John Dickerson:** Hello everyone. I'm happy to be here and look forward to your questions.

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**Boise, Idaho:** Richardson. Geithner. The performance officer. Now Daschle. Too late for what should HAVE been done. Geithner has to go. Obama went from an A, to a B, to a C, then a D. He can get back to a B if Geithner resigns.

Kurtz says in this morning's paper that they think we don't have an attention span. That's David Brooks' contention, too. Maybe Republicans don't, but some Democrats do.

Geithner must resign.

**washingtonpost.com:** Howard Kurtz: [Daschle's Demise](#) (Post, Feb. 4)

**John Dickerson:** Interesting notion. I think Geithner won't resign but I think they are realizing the toll this has taken and that Daschle's departure doesn't solve the problem the White House has with people who feel let down by this special dealing.

And thanks for watching *Washington Week*!

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**Silver Spring, Md.:** My question is actually about Nancy Killefer. Her tax debt was only about \$950. Her position did not require Senate confirmation. Did she pull out voluntarily or was she "encouraged" to leave for appearances sake?

I wonder because I think she could have made a reasonable case that her debt was paid and handled years ago and that it was already reported in the press weeks ago.

**John Dickerson:** They knew about Killefer's tax problems and thought they could make it through—but that was before Geithner and Daschle. I don't have this reporting, but one of the papers reported today that the White House figured they couldn't handle another tax problem and so she had to resign.

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**Salt Lake City:** I want to see universal health care more than the next guy, but why was Daschle the poster-child for this? Just because of connections?

**John Dickerson:** Daschle knew the issue and he knew the players from his long experience in Washington. Plus, he and Obama got along very well.

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**Richmond, Va.:** I am glad *Slate* and *WP* have linked up. It's a good combo!

I realize there are contemporary perceptions about Republicans (real or exaggerated). They are perceived to be big money, desiring de-regulation for the sake of big profits to a few, etc. (Enron, Halliburton, etc...) Does the current Daschle controversy give legs to the perception that Democrats want OTHER big money people to pay taxes...BUT...not them?

**John Dickerson:** It certainly contributes to that. Remember Joe Biden said that paying your taxes is patriotic.

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**San Francisco:** Thank you for the great article. Openness does seem a no-brainer to encourage empathy and forgiveness for mistakes. (Who finds our tax code always easy to decipher?) I understand why Sen. Daschle needed to withdraw from consideration, but as a physician who believes our system desperately needs reform, I also worry we've lost a unique leader. Which compromise is better? Ideals or acumen? What about the ideals driving efforts to reform health care? Are they

lesser than immediate transparency concerns? I'd be grateful for your comments.

**John Dickerson:** It's an important balance and a good question. I think in the political context where you're talking about fairness the idea that someone got a special deal because of their inside access undermines the "we're all in this together so lets sacrifice equally" pitch. People think the rich and the well connected get to play by different rules and that hurts the legislative process.

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**Anonymous:** Should an influential government employee like a Sen. Daschle, who sold his influences to private companies, be allowed to come back into government? Who would or could keep him ethical?

**John Dickerson:** It seems to me the right answer is to set limits and be transparent. A president can make the case that a person is crucial to a project despite their mistakes but he has to make that case and spend that capital. If you do it up front I think you have a chance. When you're reacting to something as Obama and his White House were in this case, it's harder.

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**La Canada-Flintridge, Calif.:** The problem rests in poor screening prior to selection. If the tax problem had been picked up earlier, the rest of it would not have happened.

**John Dickerson:** They did pick it up in screening. The White House just thought Daschle's other qualifications would get him through.

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**Dallas:** Do you suspect that there is a possibility that President's Obama openness agenda may unintentionally hamper his efforts to effectively govern and execute his policies or do you think all this folderol will cause the administration to quietly abandon the policy of Open Government?

**John Dickerson:** I don't think Obama can abandon it. It was the central message of his campaign: change. Abandoning it would make the central message of his presidency: fraud. Not a word a president wants. And there's the fact that Obama really does believe this stuff about openness. He might have made a mistake here, as he admits, but it's a goal he's trying to get to.

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**Silicon Valley, Calif.:** We should have elected Hillary. She and Bill would never have let something like this happen. Experience matters.

We all wanted change and the Democratic Party's agenda, but failed to realize that the person at the top makes a huge difference. I still believe in and support President Obama but I'm extremely upset about him appointing so many Republicans and about him letting Tom Daschle twist in the wind.

Daschle made an honest mistake. Everybody who has a busy life depends on their accountant to do their taxes. Daschle's accountant screwed up. Every CPA I've talked to about this agrees.

It doesn't matter, though, because Republicans will keep running the show because Democrats never stand up to them. None of this would have happened if Hillary was in charge.

Sometimes, you just have to fight for what you believe in. Democrats need to learn how to fight and how to win when Republicans stir up tempests in teapots. You have to defeat an enemy first before you can turn them into a friend. Republicans view Democrats as "the enemy." Democrats would be wise to view Republicans the same way.

**John Dickerson:** This may all be true but this wasn't a Republican v. Democrat thing. It was people on Obama's side who thought Daschle was a pick that didn't live up to Obama's own standards. In the end, Obama seems to say that's what he believes too.

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**Grand Rapids, Mich.:** I don't believe there are any saints walking around this earth. Therefore, your transparency argument regarding Sen. Daschle begs the following question: how do you effectively involve the public (i.e. without the feeding frenzy you discuss) in deciding which ethical lapses of any candidate for public office or appointment are disqualifying? (For example, Captain Sullenberger's failure to return his library book on time would not be a disqualifier in public opinion. On second thought, perhaps he is the one saint among us...)

As a political matter, has President Obama addressed this question?

**John Dickerson:** I think the middle ground is that a president is up front about these problems and makes his case for why they shouldn't be disqualifying.

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**Chicago:** It is obvious that Obama is trying to reach back for some old-timers who can help bridge the partisan gap, like Biden.

On the other side of this is that most if not all old pols are tainted in some way and certainly do not represent "change".

I would rather see young, more idealistic people getting on his ship. If Obama is to make his regime transparent and make "change" one of his priorities, and not have business as usual in Washington, what do you suggest that he do to bridge the wide partisan gap?

**John Dickerson:** It's tricky. I'm not sure he has to only hire people with no experience. I just think he has to be up front about it to save himself the headaches that come when people realize that his candidates for these posts have problems. If he's up front people might not judge his motives and he'll be able to make the case for their merits.

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**Upper Marlboro, Md.:** I think as soon as the White House was informed about Daschle's tax problems, his name should have immediately been removed from the nomination. President Obama should have called a press conference to announce the problem and his decision; and reiterate because of his belief in a transparent government, he has chosen to remove Daschle's name.

This action would have sent a stronger message to the American people. The message that this new Administration will not wait on the media to expose corruption amongst any nominees, etc, but the President, when made aware of any potential corruption and embarrassment will move swiftly in addressing the issue; and removing people if necessary.

Since the media had to expose this corruption, I wonder just how effective is the President's team in vetting individuals.

**John Dickerson:** The vet was fine. The White House made a calculation: that Daschle's qualifications for the job would overcome the problems.

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**Audit them all:** Here's a thought. Audit all members of the Senate and House and make the results public. I think this would promote transparency, accountability and responsibility. Also, a few good headlines, no?

**John Dickerson:** And it would probably clear out half the House and Senate.

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**Chattanooga, Tenn.:** I was going to quit paying my taxes start using a limousine service to take me everywhere I went in an attempt to get the administration to consider me for a Cabinet level position like Sec. of Dereliction, but I sense that conventional wisdom in this regard may be shifting.

**John Dickerson:** Plus, with budget cuts that department is likely to be zero funded.

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**Anonymous:** I imagine the Obama Administration will take a while to come up with a new HHS nominee (and add a question such as, "Is there anything—I mean anything—that might serve as an obstacle to your nomination and make the President look like a chump for choosing you?"). Will they shy away from naming someone who has been a success in the private sector, since those with big bucks may use more tax loopholes to avoid paying high taxes (something Republicans are against, of course)? Does Obama need to choose someone currently in office, hoping they have at least been recently partly vetted? Arnold Schwarzenegger? Sarah Palin?

**John Dickerson:** It's going to take a while, I would think too, and I wonder what the standard is now that Daschle has gone. How will the next person with an issue be treated by the opposition and the press?

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**Washington, DC:** It may have been the accountant's fault for Daschle's taxes, but I still found it refreshing that Obama willingly said, multiple times yesterday to multiple news outlets, that he screwed up. As disappointing as most of this has been, I have to admit that made it a little more bearable.

**John Dickerson:** Yup. Obama said he would admit mistakes and he did. Refreshing and candid.

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**What does this say about the tax code?:** Is it so complicated that even the best and brightest in the country (including some who helped write the laws) can't totally understand it? Or are they flagrantly disregarding their obligations?

**John Dickerson:** Yes, you could almost imagine that it's a stealth effort to build support for the flat tax.

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**Clifton Forge, Va.:** Why in the world would Obama's check out group not look closely into every cabinet appointee's financial situation, especially taxes, before giving Obama the OK sign? Clinton's attempt to fill the Attorney General twice in his first term should have registered a reference area.

**John Dickerson:** They did look through the tax question. They knew about it and just thought they could handle the fallout.

btw, I love Clifton Forge.

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**I think Geithner won't resign but I think they are realizing the toll this has taken:** But he's the only one who SHOULD resign. Can we really be expected to play by the rules if the Secretary doesn't?

**John Dickerson:** This is the sentiment that is causing problems for Obama and the legislation he's putting forward.

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**Bronx, N.Y.:** Its just a little too precious to hear these hacks who didn't say didly when Abromoff was raiding the treasury, or who didn't care when Kenny Boy was vetting Bush's cabinet, to be giving their sanctimonious speeches now. Any recorded instances of a politician's head exploding from the weight of rank hypocrisy? Note to next Democratic president: Lose the 'restoring ethics' theme and wallow in the slime like the rest of them. The press likes it better.

**John Dickerson:** I'm not quite sure who the target here is but it seems overly ambitious to rail against hypocrisy while suggesting candidates should act hypocritically by running against things they believe in.

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**Philadelphia, PA:** The basic point in how to avoid making such a "mistake" as Geithner and Daschle made: be honest.

The second step is each of these "gentlemen" should buy themselves or their tax advisors a copy of TurboTax for about \$50 and use it—both of the points that these two, unfortunate, undereducated and inexperienced individuals made would have been picked up by TurboTax if they answered the questions HONESTLY.

It's interesting that none of these politicians have ever been accused of overpaying their taxes!



**John Dickerson:** Perhaps they could put money in the stimulus package for turbotax.

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**Santa Fe, N.M.:** I am more concerned with looking forward on reforming health care than with looking backward on mistakes made in vetting and appointments. If Sen. Daschle is such a good guy and so necessary to implement the President's health care reform package, why doesn't he repent by paying the usual 20 percent penalty on the taxes he neglected to pay and volunteer to serve his country by shepherding through the reform package on a pro bono basis?

**John Dickerson:** He's too damaged a messenger. The penalty wouldn't have fixed the notion that the well-connected are treated differently. There's also the special-interest problem which has nothing to do with taxes.

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**TurboTax:** Does it ask you if you have a car and driver? I use TaxAct and it never asked me that question.

**John Dickerson:** My guess is that it asks you if you receive any other form of compensation. The "honesty" point would come in if Daschle was being dishonest by thinking the car was a gift from a friend. TurboTax would not have helped him if he thought, as he says he did, that the car was a gift from a friend and not compensation.

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**Plano, Texas:** Love your column and insight on *Slate*; I'm an avid fan.

I'm wondering what your thoughts are on how much leeway Obama and the administration have in terms of the public perception. He's come in (rightly so, in my view at least) on such a wave of hope and change and likability, painted favorably for the most part by the news media and popular opinion. Do revelations such as these mean that his grace period with public opinion is ending? Does the snafu with Daschle just serve as a cold reminder that politicians are just politicians? (Or is it just too soon to tell?)

**John Dickerson:** Thanks very much for reading and your kinds words.

I think it's too soon to tell. This is a good sized bump but then so was Reverend Wright during the campaign. Obama is known for his equanimity and so he'll have to show that here. He'll move past this—which he partially did by admitting his mistake—and

then he'll have to show that he can put together a stimulus package that meets his goals. If he can do that, which essentially means performing a series of difficult consecutive dance maneuvers over a sustained period of time, then he'll be back to roughly where he was before the Daschle flap.

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**Washington, D.C.:** I think Obama is acting disgracefully with respect to Daschle. Daschle was one of the first seasoned politicians to support Obama's presidential run, and supported him every step of the way. Indeed, there's a decent argument that Obama would never be where he is without having gained the critical support of Daschle early on. Obama made a political calculation that he wanted Daschle for HHS and had no problem trumpeting his qualifications, all the while knowing that a tax issue lingered in the background. Then there's some public fallout over the issue and Obama goes on multiple national TV networks to say he "screwed up"? Obama is completely throwing Daschle under the bus, so that he can come off as this pious believer in change. What a joke. Obama could have handled this with a lot more class and dignity.

**John Dickerson:** Interesting. Thanks for that perspective. As a political matter it seems to me that after the guy throws himself under a bus, as Daschle did, Obama can follow on in doing so. This isn't to refute the point you make at the personal level. I'm trying to think it through.

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**D.C.:** For the record, Geithner said he WAS using TurboTax.

**John Dickerson:** This is right. He said he used it and didn't remember being prompted. The company never argued that he would have been. It said the software relies on accurate information from the person doing their taxes. In this case, Geithner.

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**Berkeley, Calif.:** Any ideas on who might be Daschle's replacement?

**John Dickerson:** I have no idea. I haven't been doing any reporting on that today. I'm trying to figure out where the stimulus package is going.

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**New York :** Obama couldn't win this one. For him not to give Daschle something would have been ingratitude, and a sign that he wouldn't reward his friends. Daschle mentored him when he

got to the Senate, and Obama owed him big time. Who told Daschle not to pay his taxes, or to lie about it to the voters? Or to wait until last month to pay the piper? And it would be nice if someone, anyone in the media reported that the Left is very very happy that this guy is not calling the shots on health reform. Or would that irritate the other sleezy characters in government?

**John Dickerson:** I've seen mixed views on Daschle from "the left" so perhaps that's why the piece hasn't been written. But it probably will be.

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**John Dickerson:** Okay, thanks everyone. I've got to run to do an interview. Thanks for your questions. Be well.

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## the dilettante

### He Should Have Played "The Wrestler"

Bruce Springsteen misreads the national mood in his halftime performance.

By Stephen Metcalf

Monday, February 2, 2009, at 10:21 AM ET

"Is there anybody alive out there?" Bruce Springsteen blues-shouted to an audience of tens of millions of presumably catatonic football fans, by way of introducing a 12-minute medley of "Tenth Avenue Freeze Out" (fan favorite), "Born to Run" (signature anthem), "Working on a Dream" (Please Proceed to Checkout), and the obligatory and eternally unfun romp known as "Glory Days." Springsteen has evolved, in the 35 years I've adored him, from an acquired taste that almost no one acquired to America's favorite karaoke act. (Is it possible to enjoy Springsteen's music without fantasizing that you are Bruce Springsteen?) Having grown older with Springsteen, one would hardly begrudge him the need to play the Bridgestone Halftime Show at America's pseudo-event extraordinaire. It is, as he put it, a "promotional outlet" not to be denied.

I love Bruce for the simple reason he is, from all appearances, a social phobe and a depressive. (Takes one to know one.) He may have been faking it for all these years, but he shrinks like a failing soufflé in the presence of an interviewer, and, in general, he speaks with the tiptoe pedantry of the unsure Everyman. Springsteen, the shy Jersey kid who comes alive only as a stage hound, first hit the big time during an energy crisis—of oil embargoes and, as legend has it, Carter-induced malaise—to which his four-hour shows were seen as an animal corrective. I've always admired him more, though, for his ability to [bring down the room](#) and was disappointed when he went for the Full Ya-Ya from the opening bars of "Freeze Out." Bruce mugged, pranced, japed with the Big Man; he brought in a gospel choir

and did a Pete Townshend windmill; he even winked at [Daniel Boorstin](#) by closing with "I'm going to Disneyland."

Nothing will ever compete for sheer tone-deafness with Paul McCartney playing a zealous Super Bowl rendition of "Live and Let Die" at the height of the Iraq war. But Springsteen would have put America on its ass—its mind shortly to follow—had he strolled out with a Martin and played "The Wrestler." (And how about a nice "This one's for Danny," aka Danny Federici, the recently deceased keyboardist who was with Bruce for more than 40 years?) The national mood is sober bordering on a galloping panic. Lively as he was, I wouldn't say the Boss did much to either banish or capture it.

The Springsteen persona was originally intended as a stand-in for a blue-collar working class living in an insular white ethnic neighborhood and working a job on more or less permanent offer from an industrial economy. He was the poet of their decline, but he's moved away from that specific community of origin as his persona has evolved into a bit of general-purpose kitsch Americana. Not coincidentally, Springsteen has flogged more and more a highly abstract idea of "community," one centered around Bruce Springsteen. "It's not just my creation at this point," [he recently told](#) the *New York Times*, referring to the Springsteen iconography's debt to its fans. "I wanted it to be our creation. Once you set that in motion, it's a large community of people gathered around a core set of values."

Pardon me if I don't hear a note of true reciprocity in these words. Springsteen concerts, when I first attended, were Atlantic Coast joy fests for a small community of like-minded fans. To discover that many other people share a taste for something oddball is a source of true shelter from the agglomerating powers of the mass. A Postmodernist would scoff and say nothing has changed, that Springsteen was always only merchandise. True, but in every possible way, Springsteen holds himself out as a force against such Postmodernist sophistication—on behalf of meaning, sincerity, and authenticity! As media outlets reported, the field seats for the halftime show were filled with extras, a crowd of "excited fans," as the [cattle call](#) put it, to be seen dancing and clapping by the real audience, the 90 million sitting at home.\* I'm glad that my oddball favorite from middle school has become a zillionaire and a living legend. But watching him play the Super Bowl, I couldn't help saying back to my flat screen, "Is there anyone alive in there?"

**Correction, Feb. 3, 2009:** The article originally indicated the extras were compensated for their work as "excited fans." They were volunteers. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

## the green lantern Clean Jar, Clean Conscience?

The environmental pros and cons of washing out your recyclables.

By Nina Shen Rastogi

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 6:39 AM ET

**I've always been dedicated to washing the peanut butter, Pepsi, and mayo out of my food containers before tossing them in the recycling bin. My sister, though, recently pointed out that I'm probably wasting gallons upon gallons of precious H<sub>2</sub>O! Is it worth it to soap up my tin cans and soda bottles?**

Not really. Recycling facilities are well equipped to handle dirty cans and bottles, so some caked-on tomato sauce and the occasional stray chickpea won't significantly hinder the process. (These facilities can even handle [that lime wedge you left in your Corona bottle](#).) Residue left on plastic or glass containers generally gets flushed out with water at some point in the process; most of the gunk left behind on steel and aluminum cans is burned away when those containers get melted down. So there's no need to waste water by running the faucet over your recyclables—even if you were to get them squeaky clean, they'd probably end up getting washed again, anyhow.

That being said, the Green Lantern doesn't advocate tossing cans and bottles immediately, and she *really* doesn't want you chucking half-full jars of mayonnaise or jelly. It's wasteful and it's just not sanitary—food scraps can lead to mold and bacteria growth, and the smell can attract insects and other vermin.

Once you put your recyclables on the curb, they aren't processed right away. Let's say your local collection agency picks up your bins once every two weeks—that's already plenty of time for stuff to start spoiling and rotting. Then your cans and bottles go to a consolidation facility, where they're sorted and baled, usually within 24 hours of arrival. At this point, they might sit around in a warehouse for weeks or even months before they're sold to a reprocessing facility, where they'll be cleaned before getting ground up, melted down, or chipped into flakes. (These days, those bales might sit around even longer than usual—prices for recycled material have gone down significantly in the last several months, which means some sorting facilities may be holding onto their goods, waiting for prices to rise again.)

Now imagine your bottle of half-eaten, four-month-old tartar sauce, lounging about in a stuffy warehouse and getting riper by the day. Not pleasant, is it? As one recycling center worker [put it](#): "It sure is appreciated when people take a minute or two to wash [their food cans] ... it's a real day-wrecker when someone throws up because of the horrible smell."

So out of deference to the health and safety of America's recycling industry employees, the Green Lantern suggests the following course of action. First, scrape out as much food residue as you possibly can—the Lantern recommends using one of those [skinny, flexible baking spatulas](#)—and then swish out the can or bottle in your leftover dishwasher. If you [use a dishwasher](#), don't take up valuable real estate with items meant for the recycling bin. Just fill a bowl with water and use it to clean out any food particles, ideally from several containers at once.

Rinsing is an especially good idea if your community participates in single-stream recycling, where everything from newspapers to detergent bottles are placed in a single curbside bin. Paper is easily contaminated by oil and grease, which is why pizza boxes usually aren't accepted unless they're in pristine condition. If you're really concerned about making the recycling process as efficient as possible, [read your community guidelines](#) so that you're not overloading the system with nonrecyclable materials.

Rather than worrying yourself into a tizzy over how to clean out your Coke bottles, here's an even better idea: Why not try cutting down on packaging in general? Recycling is only the third R in the [waste-management hierarchy](#), after all—reducing and reusing are even better. According to the EPA, Americans generated [254 million tons](#) (PDF) of municipal solid waste in 2007. (That's everyday, nonindustrial trash.) Containers and packaging made up the biggest fraction of that waste—30.9 percent, or 78.4 million tons. Nearly half of that amount ended up being recycled, but it would be better if we had less packaging to begin with. After all, disposal is only part of the equation—there are also significant environmental costs that come with manufacturing those boxes, cans, and bottles. In fact, a widely cited [1992 study](#) by the Boston-based Tellus Institute found that 99 percent of the environmental harm caused by packaging came from its production, not its disposal. Even when you factor in 17 years of greener design and fabrication, it's clear that reducing our dependency on individually wrapped single servings is a laudable goal. And—major bonus—if you don't buy it in the first place, you don't have to worry about cleaning it when you're done.

Is there an environmental quandary that's been keeping you up at night? Send it to [ask.the.lantern@gmail.com](mailto:ask.the.lantern@gmail.com), and check this space every Tuesday.

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## the has-been So You Had a Bad Day

Why Barack Obama is still better off than he was two weeks ago.

By Bruce Reed

Friday, February 6, 2009, at 9:53 AM ET

The morning after Inauguration Day, Maureen Dowd marveled at "[the patience that America is extending to Mr. Obama](#)." The day after President Obama lost two appointees to tax problems, she chastised him in a column titled, "[Well, That Certainly Didn't Take Long](#)." No matter how many times the president warns us that the nation's problems won't be solved overnight, the chattering classes are already buzzing, "But you've had two weeks!"

Don't let the "[Change-o-Meter](#)" get you down: While Tom Daschle's exit on Tuesday was a deeply painful loss for the Obama White House, the new president is still off to a good start, and the long-term prospects for his agenda are as strong as ever.

Every White House has its share of bad days—and Obama's first will not be his worst. Obama's presidential campaign had more good days and fewer bad ones than any campaign in memory. But a streak like that isn't possible in the White House. A president is lucky to break even; it's difficult to think of a modern president who had more good days than bad ones. An administration is in real trouble only when those dark days become the norm.

So, here are a few reasons to take heart that Obama is closer to his goals than he was two weeks ago, and not to despair that even Barack Obama can have a bad day:

**Obama showed he can take a punch, and learn a lesson.** Most Americans root for their President to succeed, and that's especially true for Obama. (On Wednesday morning, Meredith Vieira opened the Today Show with the heartfelt if sartorially suspect suggestion that after the day he'd just had, Obama might want to borrow Al Roker's [Snuggie](#).) Obama handled the first bad news of his presidency with class and candor. He took responsibility, took his lumps, and took the lesson to heart. "I screwed up," he told NBC. "The responsibility era is not never making mistakes. It's owning up to them and trying to make sure you never repeat them."

People expect their leaders to make mistakes, but they're surprised and delighted whenever leaders own up to them. In 1993, Janet Reno became an overnight sensation for taking responsibility for authorizing the FBI's botched raid at Waco. In 2005, by contrast, Michael Brown became a national punch line when Bush praised him for FEMA's disastrous response to Katrina.

**It's a gift to be humble.** In the early, heady days of the Clinton administration, Sen. Pat Moynihan once warned us, "Anyone willing to admit that they don't have all the answers is always welcome in my office." Moynihan worked a little too hard at teaching us that lesson, but his basic point was right: Most administrations learn too late that humility can be a president's greatest weapon. For example, both Bush administrations had

what turned out to be the grand misfortune of becoming too popular too early and overestimated their invincibility as a result.

Obama has already shown himself to be a master of self-deprecation on the stuffed-shirt circuit, joking at Saturday night's Alfalfa Club dinner that the first dog's arrival was delayed because "[the labradoodle we picked has some problems with back taxes](#)." That same sense of [genuine humility](#) can do an administration good throughout the work week.

**Obama's crusade for change is going strong.** A day after losing his HHS nominee, Obama signed into law [a sweeping children's health bill](#) that will provide coverage to 11 million children—the most progress Washington has made on health care in a decade. Daschle's wisdom and decency will be greatly missed in the tough legislative struggle to broad health care reform. But the ball is already in Congress' court, and [key congressional leaders](#) are prepared to hit the ground running. Obama will no doubt use his [Feb. 24 address to the nation](#) to up the pressure on Congress to get the job done.

Likewise, for all the sudden gnashing of teeth over the administration's economic message, the Senate is probably [on the brink](#) of passing a strong bipartisan bill. The House version left room for improvement, and despite noisy conservative attempts to kill the bill, more [well-intentioned grumbling](#) seems likely to produce the desired result: a bill that's harder to grumble about and destined to land soon on the president's desk.

**The Obama coalition is emerging.** In the long run, that may be the most important lesson of the past week: Slowly but surely, Obama might actually succeed in building the post-partisan working majority he promised, notwithstanding the skepticism and reluctance of some on both sides of the aisle.

Journalists were quick to invoke the "[rule of three](#)" about nominees' tax problems but overlooked a remarkable rule of three that few saw coming: With Judd Gregg's appointment at Commerce, Obama's Cabinet now includes three members of the opposing party (Gregg, Ray LaHood, and Robert Gates)—[which may well set the record](#). Nowadays, any president would be grateful for three strong defenders from the other party. Not only will Obama be well-served by hearing a broad range of views, but the new members of his team may help him persuade some of their former colleagues to resist the easy no and consider joining a coalition of the willing.

In fact, the economic recovery debate has already jump-started the makings of a promising post-partisan caucus in the Senate. The intense [bipartisan negotiations](#) led by Sens. Ben Nelson and Susan Collins could have lasting repercussions beyond the economic package. As Sen. Evan Bayh [suggests](#), that group "might be the president's best allies, helping him achieve his objective but honoring the reform message he stands for."

Obama's graceful rise to the White House left many with the hope that he could somehow permanently suspend the laws of political gravity. The president never harbored that illusion, nor should all of us who root for him. Obama's success depends not on making the job look easy but on reminding the country that the road ahead will not be.

On bad days at the White House, the sky always looks like it's [raining pianos](#). But Obama's quick recovery this week suggests there will be many better days ahead.

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## the oscars

### The Batman Goes Bananas

Does being a jerk prevent you from winning an Oscar?

By Dana Stevens

Friday, February 6, 2009, at 11:24 AM ET

Watching Jon Stewart's unsporting (if accurate) [assessment](#) of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* the other night on *The Daily Show* ("Hey, what happened to the old baby? Is the old baby OK? ... No, seriously, I loved that movie. It was *Forrest Gump* meets ... [audible snoring]"), all I could think was: "There go his chances of ever hosting again." Later in the same show, Stewart all but FedExed the academy a dead fish when he told his guest, *Slumdog Millionaire* lead Dev Patel, that the Oscars must not be happening this year, "because if they were I would obviously be hosting them."

Given that last year's Oscars, hosted by Stewart, were the [least-watched](#) in history, he has no doubt made the pragmatic calculation that currying the academy's goodwill is less valuable to him than getting a laugh.

A day after Stewart's *Button* mockery came the inconsequential-yet-irresistible viral tidbit of the week: the audio clip of Christian Bale losing his cool and profanely berating a director of photography who stepped into his shot on the set of *Terminator: Salvation*. ([Listen here](#), but be warned: Bale's rant goes on at excruciating, mortifying, God-let-it-end-now length.) Of course, Bale was not nominated for an Oscar this year for his turn as the Batman in *The Dark Knight*. (If there's one thing that movie gave me, it's the thrill of always referring to Batman as "the Batman.") In fact, in two decades of notoriously immersive screen acting, Bale has never yet been nominated, and [if you listen to today's show-business bloggers](#), he may have just blown his chances of ever getting that nod. This raises the question: If you want to get an Oscar, how should you act ... when the camera's not rolling?

In an [entry on the \*Los Angeles Times\*' Oscar blog, the Envelope](#), Tom O'Neil provides a mini-survey of the biggest assholes ever to have won an Oscar (Marlon Brando is one example) and those who were so jerky that they never won despite multiple nominations (Peter O'Toole, Richard Burton). By the time Russell Crowe got his bad-boy reputation, he already had his statue for *Gladiator* in hand—well, not literally, thank God, or it might have been the projectile he flung at that Manhattan hotel clerk. Between the phone-hurling and the grunting, Crowe has yet to win another Oscar, even though he's since appeared in much-recognized films such as *Master and Commander* and *A Beautiful Mind*.

You have to love Mickey Rourke for combining Russell Crowe's pugilism with [Richard Burton's bad taste](#). Ever since awards season began, he's been running around in [iridescent track suits](#), cradling overweight Chihuahuas. He's also granted more than his share of [self-immolating interviews](#), not to mention [challenging real-life wrestlers](#) to high-profile grudge matches on *Larry King Live*. And those are just the *well-sourced* ridiculous things he's done. Fox News has him [making out](#) with Evan Rachel Wood, the actress who plays his daughter in *The Wrestler*, and the Daily Beast's Gerald Posner claims to have been leaked a [text message](#) in which Rourke slags on his competition Sean Penn as an "average" actor and a "homophobe."

However overreported, Rourke's penchant for bizarre behavior seems as guileless as the [obviously unfaked niceness](#) of Richard Jenkins, a long-shot best actor nominee for *The Visitor*. Rourke is trying neither to help nor to harm his chances of winning an Oscar on the 21<sup>st</sup>. He's just ... Rourking. The best Oscar strategy seems to fall somewhere between Rourke's grandstanding and Jenkins' [hyper-discretion](#). (He lives in Providence, R.I., with his wife of 39 years, drives a Toyota Camry hybrid, and cheerfully told the ladies on *The View* that he stands "not a chance in the world" of winning.) You want to be humble and modest, yes ... but you want to be *seen* being humble and modest, in the right outfit, preferably while standing on a podium accepting some other award. ([Anne Hathaway](#) is a good example of how to do this with eyelash-batting panache.) Sean Penn, who skipped the Golden Globes ceremony entirely (and who, as the head of the 2008 Cannes jury, boasted that this year's festival would be "the opposite of the Oscars") is not exactly beloved by the academy. But since it's generally agreed that the best actor Oscar race is down to Penn and the flamboyantly self-destructive Rourke, all Penn has to do between now and Oscar time is to remain publicly sober and Chihuahua-free.

So then: Ixnay on the Chihuahuas, the flying telephones, and the leaked audiotaped browbeatings of crew members. But is it possible to go too far in the other direction? Kate Winslet's tearfully excessive acceptance speeches at the Golden Globes last month—she won best supporting actress for *The Reader* and best actress for *Revolutionary Road*—were regarded in the American press as sweet and sincere, the high point of a dullish

ceremony. But the British press [mocked](#) her for her abandonment of restraint and wondered whether her solipsistic bliss at the podium might hurt her Oscar chances. "A simple thank you would have done," [sniffed](#) the *Independent*, while the *Times Online* [saw](#) Winslet's gushing as a political misstep: "The actress has badly misjudged the changing mood of America." Of course, the definition of what constitutes correct behavior is always culturally inflected, but there may be a trace of gender bias at work in the Kate-bashing as well: Male performers, it seems, have to threaten (or carry out) violence against others to fall from Oscar grace. Women can do it simply by being too happy.

*Slate V: The Ultimate Celebrity Rant*

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## today's business press

### A Slimmer Stimulus?

By Bernhard Warner and Matthew Yeomans  
Friday, February 6, 2009, at 5:59 AM ET

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## today's papers

### Centrists Take Knife to Stimulus

By Daniel Politi  
Friday, February 6, 2009, at 6:17 AM ET

All the papers lead with news that a group of centrist senators is furiously working behind the scenes to try to cut the cost of the economic stimulus plan that now clocks in at around \$935 billion, give or take a billion or two. The bipartisan group hopes to trim as much as \$100 billion from the bill in order to make it more palatable to Republicans. Interestingly enough, as the *Los Angeles Times* points out high in its story, \$100 billion is pretty much the amount that the package has grown by [since it reached the Senate](#). But, of course, that has mostly been due to tax cuts, and the bipartisan negotiators want to slash some spending.

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* say that the negotiating team, which is being led by Democratic Sen. Ben Nelson and Republican Sen. Susan Collins, has already identified around [\\$80 billion to \\$90 billion](#) in cuts. The *WP*, which got an early look at the legislation, says "[a huge chunk](#)" of the cuts comes from education-related programs. *USA Today* highlights the tough stance taken by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who said he is still holding out hope for a compromise but is ready to move on the legislation without Republican support [if necessary](#). The *Wall Street Journal* points out that Democrats might be able to use the January jobs data scheduled to be released tomorrow to [pressure Republicans](#) into

action. Economists widely expect the U.S. unemployment rate for January to grow to 7.5 percent.

The *WSJ* points out that the bipartisan group of senators set their goal of getting the stimulus bill down to \$800 billion after Sens. Collins and Nelson met with President Obama and were told the package needed to be [at least that large](#) in order to give the economy a boost. According to the *WP*, [the biggest cuts](#) will be \$40 billion in aid for states that would have been used to bolster school budgets, \$14 billion in funds for education programs, and \$13.9 billion that was supposed to increase Pell grants for higher education. The *NYT* [adds](#) that the group would also cut \$4.1 billion to make federal buildings more energy efficient and \$1.5 billion to provide broadband Internet to rural areas. The senators emphasized that they want to cut out programs that wouldn't create jobs quickly or encourage more spending.

Early in the day, Reid expressed frustration at the discussions going on between the centrist senators, saying that [the group](#) "cannot hold the president of the United States hostage." But later he said he would give the senators until Friday to reach a deal. As the *NYT* points out, the bipartisan group "[essentially tied](#)" Reid's hands because he would need at least a few Republicans on his side in order to get to the 60 votes required to pass the measure. Democrats technically need two Republicans to go over to their side, but it will probably have to be three since Sen. Edward Kennedy has been away all week. And that's assuming that all Democrats stick with Obama. Reid might have been confused as to how far he should push because he might not have been receiving clear signs from the White House. While it seems Obama was [encouraging](#) the Senate negotiations, he appeared [a tad impatient](#). "The time for talk is over," he said. "The time for action is now."

As the centrists tried to come up with a compromise, the rest of the senators were busy in a debate that seemed to turn more heated and more partisan as the day wore on. The *WP*'s [Dana Milbank](#) characterizes it as a battle between the "workhorses" and the "showhorses" of the Senate. "Has bipartisanship been a failure?" [asked](#) Sen. Charles Schumer. "Well, so far it's not working. But it takes two to tango, and the Republicans aren't dancing." Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham showed off his vocabulary: "This bill stinks." And Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell showed off his [math prowess](#): "If you started the day Jesus Christ was born and spent \$1 million every day since then, you still wouldn't have spent \$1 trillion."

The *WP*'s [Steven Pearlstein](#) thinks that if we're going to be spending so much money to stimulate the economy, we might as well throw in another \$50 million or so to teach some economic basics to lawmakers. So far, lawmakers seem to be stumbling over each other to provide "silly arguments" against the stimulus bill. For example, it's ridiculous to say that money that's not spent within the next two years is "wasted," as is the argument that some spending won't stimulate the economy, or that

spending money on hiring civil engineers to build a bridge is somehow more stimulative than hiring doctors to carry out health-care research. "Spending is stimulus, no matter what it's for and who does it," summarizes Pearlstein. "The best spending is that which creates jobs and economic activity now, has big payoffs later and disappears from future budgets."

The *NYT* fronts a look at how, if the recession continues to deepen, women might soon be the majority [on the nation's payrolls](#). Around 82 percent of job losses have so far affected men, who are disproportionately represented in manufacturing and construction. If the numbers continue to rise, it means that more families would be dependent on women as the breadwinner and might consequently find it more difficult to make ends meet since women generally work fewer hours and earn less than men. But it might also bring about a change in gender roles. That hasn't happened yet though. Amazingly, it turns out that when women are unemployed, they double the amount of time they spend taking care of the children, but that doesn't happen with unemployed men, who end up spending more time watching TV, sleeping, and looking for a job.

The *Post* fronts, and everyone mentions, news that Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg underwent surgery for [pancreatic cancer](#). It is considered to be a particularly lethal form of cancer, but a statement released by the court said it was caught at an early stage and that Ginsburg had no symptoms. Only about 5 percent of those diagnosed with pancreatic cancer survive for [five years](#), primarily because it's so difficult to detect in its early stages. But the *LAT* talks to a doctor who says that since Ginsburg's tumor appears to have been [small and localized](#) she probably has a 30 percent to 40 percent chance of surviving for five years.

The *WP* goes inside with a new report by congressional investigators that will be released today that says the government overpaid for assets as part of its massive bailout plan to the tune of [\\$78 billion](#). The Treasury Department put \$254 billion into the financial companies, and in return received preferred stocks that, at the time, were worth \$176 billion. It doesn't necessarily mean that the government has lost money, since the companies will be required to pay the cash back, plus interest. Lawmakers are angry because former Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson had vowed that the government would buy the assets at market value.

The *WSJ* hears some updates on the administration's new plan to prop up the nation's ailing financial system, which will be [detailed on Monday](#). The paper warns that there could still be lots of changes, but it looks like the administration is moving away from creating a so-called bad bank that would purchase the toxic assets. (If you're still confused about what a "bad bank" is, the *LAT* has a [very helpful Q&A](#).) In order to deal with these troubled assets, the administration is considering expanding what is known as the Term Asset-Backed-Securities Loan

Facility, which was set up to boost consumer loans. The administration would also inject more cash into troubled banks, but they would likely have stricter terms and apply more to weaker banks rather than the healthier banks that were preferred in the first round of capital infusions. The *WSJ* says the plans continue to be fluid partly because officials want to create a plan that is markedly different from the one used by the Bush administration, but they're "running into many of the same thorny questions" encountered by their predecessors.

Obama plans to hold his first prime-time news conference Monday, and broadcasters are getting a little peeved at the president's talkative ways, reports the *Post's* [Lisa de Moraes](#). Network executives have been warned to expect three prime-time presidential appearances in three weeks, which would translate into three hours of lost programming. Adding salt to the wound is the fact that Monday is one of the biggest days of the week for broadcasters. In order "to accommodate Obamavision" this Monday, Fox will have to pull *House* at a cost of about \$3 million. "His economic stimulus package apparently does not extend to the TV networks," one executive said.

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## today's papers

### Obama: No More Mr. Nice Guy

By Daniel Politi

Thursday, February 5, 2009, at 6:38 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads, the *Wall Street Journal* banners, and everyone fronts President Obama imposing new limits on [executive compensation](#) for companies that get taxpayer money. The *WSJ* [calls it](#) "the most aggressive assault on executive pay by federal officials." Under the new rules, any company that receives "extraordinary assistance" from the government won't be able to pay its top executives more than \$500,000. The tough talk from the White House wasn't just reserved for Wall Street. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with a look at how Obama ["abruptly changed tactics"](#) yesterday when he used some of the most partisan language since taking office to blame Republicans for holding up the massive stimulus package.

*USA Today* leads with preliminary state data that show there was a [sharp drop in traffic deaths](#) last year in at least 42 states, as Americans drove less due to high gasoline prices and the ailing economy. Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia saw double-digit percentage declines. Experts say that while there could have been other factors at play, the decline in deaths was at least partly due to the plunge in miles driven. The *Washington Post* leads with a look at how people in the Washington area have been forced to wait longer for [unemployment benefits](#). At a time when unemployment is rising, many local government offices have been forced to cut staff and can't keep up with the

rising number of claims. The problem is hardly limited to the Washington area as "Web sites and phone systems in some states are buckling under the strain," notes the *Post*.

The new rules on executive compensation came amid [mounting public anger](#) over the huge amounts of money that some of the leaders of companies that have received money from Uncle Sam continue to receive. The move was seen as particularly important because it came [days before](#) the administration is expected to outline a new plan to deal with the continuing deterioration of financial institutions that will probably involve having to ask for more money from Congress. "This is America," Obama said. "We don't disparage wealth. ... But what gets people upset—and rightfully so—are executives being rewarded for failure."

The *WP* off-leads an analysis piece that says Obama has been trying to figure out how to best address the [anger that many Americans feel](#) "while not crossing into glib point-scoring that could spook the business class." It's clear that "his indignation has ratcheted upward in recent weeks," but he still has many supporters from the financial sector, and some of the top officials in his administration also hail from that world. While he has long decried Wall Street excess, he hasn't gone as far as other Democrats, and his statements pale in comparison with the anger expressed by President Franklin Roosevelt, who famously declared that "the money-changers have fled their high seats in the temple of our civilization" during his 1933 inauguration.

In addition to the salary cap, the firms receiving exceptional assistance wouldn't be able to offer additional compensation to executives except through company stock that can only be redeemed after the government money [is paid back](#). The new rules would also limit so-called golden parachutes for departing executives. Under what the administration is calling the "name and shame" [provision](#), the government will require companies that get government money to outline a policy regarding luxury items, such as corporate jets and country club memberships.

The new rules are not retroactive, so the big firms that have already received billions in order to stay afloat wouldn't have to abide by them. And for the vast majority of the companies that will receive taxpayer money but not ["exceptional financial recovery assistance"](#), the limits are largely voluntary. These companies could waive the restrictions on pay if they disclose their executive compensation package publicly and allow a nonbinding shareholder vote. And while they would still be a subject to a ban on "golden parachutes," it is [much less restrictive](#). That may still change, because the rules that apply to firms that don't receive "exceptional" assistance are subject to a public-comment process. Regardless, even companies that don't get a waiver could still provide as much restricted stock as they want.

In a front-page piece, the *LAT* warns of ["abundant loopholes"](#) that "could undermine any lasting effect" of the compensation

restrictions. Wall Street has been able to get around rules that limit executive compensation in the past, and there's little reason to think it wouldn't be able to do the same thing again. And it certainly won't be the end of multimillion-dollar salaries. The restrictions wouldn't apply to midlevel workers on Wall Street, who often get significant bonuses as well. Still, some worry that restrictions could hurt firms by making it harder for them to recruit top talent.

Even if plenty of loopholes are found, *USAT* talks to some compensation experts who say the new rules might permanently change the way Wall Street firms [pay their employees](#). It could lead to a move away from cash bonuses and a bigger focus on using stocks with long holding periods to reward workers.

The president angered many members of his party by crafting a stimulus package with lots of tax cuts to appease Republicans. Since taking office, he has publicly tried to strike a conciliatory tone. But yesterday, he made it clear that he's had enough and [accused Republicans of espousing](#) "the very same failed theories that helped lead us into this crisis." Obama not-so-subtly reminded Republicans, "and perhaps even some wayward Democrats," notes the *LAT*, that he won the election and has a high approval rating. "I reject these theories," he continued. "And, by the way, so did the American people when they went to the polls in November and voted resoundingly for change."

Obama repeats some of these same points in an [op-ed piece in the WP today](#), where he warns that if nothing is done to fix the country's problems, "[o]ur nation will sink deeper into a crisis that, at some point, we may not be able to reverse." The president criticizes those who think "that we can meet our enormous tests with half-steps and piecemeal measures" or that "our economy and our country can thrive" without tackling "fundamental challenges such as energy independence and the high cost of health care."

The *LAT* [points out](#) that Obama's "partisan turn entails a calculated risk." No one doubts that a failure to get a stimulus package through Congress in a timely manner would be a huge blow to the young administration. But at the same time, if he gets the bill by pushing the partisanship buttons that he has long decried, he could end up jeopardizing some of the long-term projects on his wish list, such as an overhaul of the health care system, that would require bipartisan support.

The *NYT* got its hands on what must have been a fascinating briefcase full of documents that belonged to Aribert Ferdinand Heim, the most wanted Nazi war criminal, who was commonly known as "Dr. Death" because of the viciously sadistic experiments he committed against hundreds of Jews. Although he was still believed to be at large, it turns out that [Heim died in 1992](#) in Egypt, where he had converted to Islam and was living under the name Tarek Hussein Farid. Heim was widely believed to be hiding in Latin America, and his case will surely "cast light



on the often overlooked history of [Nazis'] flight to the Middle East," notes the *NYT*. Despite all the evidence and the fact that Heim's son confirms much of the story, the case can't be definitively closed because he was apparently buried anonymously in a common grave.

In a dispatch from Israel, the *WP* points out that Obama has become a [key player in the country's electoral campaign](#). And it's not just about who can work better with the new president to forge a peace deal. The candidates also aren't shy about using his tactics and invoking his campaign. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni is the most conspicuous and openly talks about how she would bring change to the country since her main competitors have been prime ministers before. Her campaign distributes T-shirts with the word *Believeni*. Binyamin Netanyahu has his own T-shirt: "No, She Can't."

The *WP*'s [E.J. Dionne Jr.](#) notes that although Republicans may be "short on new ideas, low on votes and deeply unpopular in the polls," they have unexpectedly "been winning the media war over the president's central initiative." For most of the fight, Obama has refused to fight back and "cast himself as a benevolent referee." In the end, the new administration has been forced to learn a few Washington basics. "For starters, the media cannot be counted on to be either liberal or permanently enchanted with any politician," Dionne writes. "Arguments left unanswered can take hold, whether they make sense or not. And one more lesson: No occupant of the White House has ever been able to walk on water."

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## today's papers

### Obama: "I Screwed Up"

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 6:31 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with, the *Wall Street Journal* banners, and everyone fronts, Tom Daschle [withdrawing his nomination](#) as secretary of health and human services after days of mounting controversy regarding his failure to pay more than \$140,000 in taxes on time and his [lucrative work in the private sector](#) after he lost his Senate seat in 2004. Daschle's withdrawal came hours after President Obama's nominee to become the government's first chief performance officer, Nancy Killefer, also stepped aside because of a tax problem. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with an analysis that says "Obama is punching the restart button on his presidency." After two weeks in office, Obama pretty much admitted that the tax controversies surrounding three of his nominees had [taken attention away](#) from his efforts to boost the ailing economy. "I screwed up," Obama said.

The *Washington Post* leads with Senate Democratic leaders admitting that they don't have [enough votes](#) to pass the massive stimulus package and will have to cut some of its provisions in order to gain more support. Moderate Republicans want to cut as much as \$200 billion from a bill that has already passed the \$900 billion mark. *USA Today* leads with an inspector general's report that reveals military officials were well aware that the Humvee vehicle was a ["deathtrap"](#) almost 10 years before the Iraq invasion. Reports that were distributed throughout the Army and Marine Corps in the 1990s urged the military to develop new armored vehicles that would be able to better withstand roadside bombs and land mines. But the Pentagon waited until 2007 to significantly boost production of Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles. Even though the reports made it clear that Humvees fitted with extra armor were still inefficient, that is exactly the road that the Pentagon followed when the threat from roadside bombs escalated in Iraq.

The *NYT* says Tuesday [was](#) "the rockiest day yet for the new White House," while *USAT* [calls it](#) "the biggest crisis of [Obama's] young presidency." The news of Daschle's withdrawal came as a shock to many key lawmakers because on Monday night the former Senate majority leader seemed to be on track to win confirmation. But by yesterday morning, "that estimate had changed," [notes the LAT](#). While no one says Obama pushed Daschle to withdraw, it doesn't look like the White House tried to convince him to keep on fighting.

The two withdrawals were particularly ill-timed because Obama had already scheduled five Oval Office network-television interviews in which he planned to tout the economic stimulus package, "a decision that magnified the troubles at the White House by giving them increased prominence on the evening news," [notes the NYT](#). Obama was quick to take responsibility for the controversy that suddenly engulfed the White House. "I've got to own up to my mistake, which is that ultimately it's important for this administration to send a message that there aren't two sets of rules," Obama said. "You know, one for prominent people and one for ordinary folks who have to pay their taxes."

Considering that the withdrawal came a day after the president said he "absolutely" stood by Daschle, it [has the potential](#) to "dent the reputation for steadiness and managerial prowess that the 47-year-old president had cultivated," says the *WSJ*. The *WP* highlights that the White House had sought to get the new Cabinet in place at a [record pace](#), but now there are suggestions "that speed may have come at a cost."

Most of the papers focus their stories on Daschle's tax problems and give only a passing mention to his lucrative work with a lobbying firm. The *WSJ* gives the most prominence to the issue in its [main Daschle story](#) and points out that he was "increasingly being portrayed as a Washington insider who made a fortune by trading on his Beltway connections." In a separate

[front-page piece](#), the *WP* says that "some observing the debacle wondered if the capital's ways were changing." It's common for Washington insiders to parlay their government experience into lucrative work in the private sector, and the fact that it led to the undoing of a nominee who was regarded as a shoo-in for confirmation left many in shock. "It indicates that there are new lines," the president of advocacy group Democracy 21 said. "In some ways, this is a warning signal to the city that the rules are changing."

Everybody wonders how much Daschle's withdrawal will affect Obama's efforts to revamp the U.S. health system. Obama had entrusted Daschle with that massive task and even created a new White House health czar position for him in order to emphasize its importance. Everyone was so sure he'd be confirmed that Daschle had already [started unofficially working](#), and yesterday the White House was left scrambling trying to figure out who can take his place. While the *LAT* says that [the withdrawal](#) "is unlikely to derail" the efforts to reform health care, the process "likely will be harder without Daschle," who was seen as uniquely qualified to bring together lawmakers from both sides of the aisle. The *NYT* says that Obama's [health care initiatives](#) could be slowed down, and Congress could "step into the vacuum during that delay."

The *LAT* points out that Obama's acknowledgment that he had made a mistake was surprising partly because [his predecessor](#) "famously refused to admit error, at least until his final days in the White House." But it is seen as a sign that Obama recognizes that getting the stimulus bill through Congress has proved harder than many expected. Republicans have been surprisingly unified and have forced Democrats to assume a defensive posture. And the controversy over the tax troubles of three of Obama's nominees didn't help things, since it allowed Republicans to open up a new argument against Democrats by saying that they "are cavalier about taxing other people because they do not abide by the tax laws themselves," [as the NYT puts it](#).

While Republicans continue to criticize what they say is unnecessary and wasteful spending in the stimulus package, the *WP* [points out](#) that "unease also is stirring among moderate Democrats." The *LAT* cites a [new poll](#) that suggests Republican criticism of the measure has had an effect on the public. Even though most Americans continue to support a stimulus plan, only 38 percent said Congress should pass the plan "basically as Barack Obama has proposed it." Senate Democratic leaders emphasized they're willing to make some cuts to things that may not provide a quick boost to the economy, although it's unclear whether they'd be willing to sacrifice some of Obama's priorities. While senators voted down several amendments that would have increased the total cost of the package, they did approve others that pushed the cost of the legislation to more than \$900 billion.

The *NYT* fronts a separate story on, and the rest of the papers mention, word that the White House will announce a [\\$500,000](#)

[cap](#) on salaries of top executives at companies that receive a significant amount of money from Uncle Sam. Executives would not be allowed to receive bonuses, except for normal stock dividends. According to the *LAT*, any additional income would have to come from restricted stocks that would only be paid out once [taxpayers have been repaid](#). Most of the papers say it's still unclear whether the limits would apply to all companies that receive taxpayer money, but the *WP* [states](#) that "most firms that get federal aid would not face severe pay conditions."

The *NYT* fronts news that federal immigration officials have been rounding up more illegal immigrants [without criminal records](#). Even though Congress was repeatedly assured that the focus would be on arresting criminals and terrorism suspects, an internal directive in 2006 raised arrest quotas and removed a requirement that 75 percent of those arrested had to be criminals. This led to a surge in arrests of illegal immigrants who were discovered by chance and didn't have a deportation order. Although the trend appears to be reversing a bit, the impact of the internal directives "shows the power of administrative memos to significantly alter immigration enforcement policy without any legislative change," notes the *NYT*.

The *LAT* and *NYT* front Iran's first [successful satellite launch](#), which raised concerns in the United States about what this means for Iran's ability to [fire long-range missiles](#). While experts were quick to point out that the act was mainly symbolic because the satellite was very small, it still placed Iran "among elite company," as the *LAT* puts it, since only nine other countries have launched satellites into orbit.

It looks like those hoping to get their hands on a Sweet Sasha or a Marvelous Malia doll will have to [head to eBay](#). Although Ty Inc. had insisted that the dolls were not meant to depict Obama's daughters, they were "retired" soon after Michelle Obama complained about them.

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## today's papers

### Senate Takes Over Stimulus

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 6:10 AM ET

The *Los Angeles Times* leads with the Senate debate on the \$885 billion stimulus plan, which began yesterday and is expected to last for [more than a week](#). Everyone expects that it will receive at least a bit of Republican support, but not before some intense horse-trading sessions in which lawmakers will try to tack more of their priorities onto the package. President Obama will attempt to convince the public of the need for a stimulus package in interviews with five television networks, but most Americans don't need convincing. *USA Today* leads with a new poll that

shows two-thirds of Americans think the package would at least provide [a little boost](#) to the ailing economy. But that doesn't mean they expect to benefit personally. Fifty percent of people say that their own family finances would not be affected or could get worse.

The [Washington Post](#) leads with preliminary results from Iraq's provincial elections, which appear to have handed a [big victory](#) to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Dawa Party. Iraqis as a whole seemed to favor parties that emphasized nationalism and a strong central government. The [Wall Street Journal](#) leads its world-wide news box with Senate Democrats expressing support for Tom Daschle, the nominee to head Health and Human Services, who issued a [public apology](#) for his failure to pay more than \$100,000 in taxes. The [New York Times](#) leads with yet another look at how Obama's campaign rhetoric doesn't quite match his [governing style](#). You know the drill: He promised his administration would abide by high ethics standards and bar lobbyists from the White House, but he has hired many Washington insiders and two of his picks for Cabinet positions didn't pay all their taxes. Those who are disappointed now may not have been paying enough attention to the details. Even during the campaign, Obama's language "was always more sweeping than the specifics," notes the *NYT*.

As debate began in the Senate over the stimulus package, members of both parties have reservations that it devotes far too little money to [housing and infrastructure](#). To deal with these issues, there is talk about doubling the tax credit for first-time home buyers to \$15,000, as well as \$25 billion more for highway, transit, and water projects. The *LAT* notes a "seeming paradox": Many senators complain the bill is too large but will probably end up producing "a bill significantly more expensive than the House's \$819-billion version." Still, there seems to be general agreement that the package shouldn't extend beyond \$900 billion, meaning that some spending items would have to be nixed. Rooting out spending deemed inappropriate will be one of the Republicans' main priorities this coming week.

The Obama administration seems open to amending certain portions of the bill in order to get it moving through the approval process as quickly as possible. This urgency isn't just due to the need for speedy relief; it also shows that Obama wants to get the stimulus package out of the way before he goes back to Congress to ask for yet more money to prop up the nation's financial system. "Given the widespread anger over Wall Street bonuses and what are seen as other excesses, proposing to shell out more tax dollars could trigger extreme sticker shock in both parties," [notes the LAT](#).

*USAT*'s poll gives Obama an approval rating of [64 percent](#) and notes that two-thirds of Americans support several of the reversals from the Bush years. But only 44 percent of Americans support closing Guantanamo within a year, and only 35 percent approve of the move to lift restrictions on foreign aid given to

family-planning organizations that also provide abortion services.

The *NYT* gave some preliminary results of the Iraqi elections in yesterday's paper, but today the *WP* is much more thorough and details how [different parts of the country voted](#). Besides Maliki, Shiite cleric Muqtada Sadr also appeared to make gains in a few Shiite areas. Some Sunnis, particularly the leaders of the resistance groups that were funded by the United States, also appear to have done well. Overall, urban areas voted for more secular candidates, while religious parties continued to win big in rural parts of the country, "highlighting the ideological divide in the nation," notes the *Post*.

After meeting with the Senate finance committee, Daschle issued a [public apology](#) and said his failure to pay the appropriate taxes was "completely inadvertent." Democrats were quick to rally around Daschle, a former majority leader of the Senate, and say that the mistake was certainly embarrassing but understandable. Republicans aren't so sure, and some continue to raise questions that go beyond taxes and have more to do with potential conflicts of interest for a man who made so much money from health care companies [after he left Capitol Hill](#). But it seems clear "senators will almost certainly confirm the former member of their club," as the *WP*'s [Dana Milbank puts it](#).

Having friends in high places isn't just helping Daschle maneuver through the controversy; assuming he's confirmed, it will also be of great help once he settles into his new role in the Obama administration. "Daschle is likely to be one of the best-connected Cabinet secretaries in the administration, if not history," [declares the Post](#). Obama has depended on Daschle protégés and his former aides since his first days in the Senate through the campaign and transition. After Daschle lost re-election in 2004, he basically handed his team over to Obama, so the former Senate leader's "tentacles ... stretch far beyond the agency Obama picked him to lead." That means Daschle would be well-positioned to play a key role in the administration and ensure that his priorities get heard.

In other Cabinet news, the Senate confirmed Eric Holder as the nation's first African-American [attorney general](#) with a 75-21 vote. In addition, the White House confirmed that Obama is set to nominate Republican Sen. Judd Gregg for commerce secretary today, a move that would make him the third Republican in the Cabinet. But it looks as if Democrats can let go of their 60-seat dream, because Gregg emphatically stated he would not take the job if a Democrat were to [take his place](#).

When attention turns away from the stimulus package, a clash over how far Washington should go to reshape the nation's financial system is inevitable, notes the *LAT* [in a front-page analysis](#). So far, the discussions have been kept largely under the radar, but that will all change once Obama outlines why he wants more money to prop up the financial system and how he'll

prevent the problems from happening again. The debate that will ensue is unlikely to remain confined to the financial sector. In outlining its plans, "the administration will offer the first hints of how aggressively it is prepared to intervene in other damaged or seemingly dysfunctional sectors of the economy such as housing, healthcare, autos and energy," says the *LAT*. Many Democrats are arguing in favor of a more robust regulatory system that would undo much of the hands-off policies conservatives have been fighting for since Ronald Reagan's presidency. Republicans, on the other hand, want much more narrow legislation, and many believe that much of today's problems are due to an excess of regulation.

It's already well-known that many of the banks that have received money from Uncle Sam haven't increased their lending, but today the *Post* takes it a step further and points out that banks that got government money have [reduced their lending](#) more than those that didn't receive anything. According to new Fed data, banks across the country tightened their lending as the volume of outstanding loans decreased by 1 percent during the last three months of 2008. But the decline was almost twice as large among banks that received government money. One of the main reasons for this is that the government mostly decided to help out banks that needed money to solve problems, rather than trying to figure out who was in a better position to increase lending.

The deepening recession and increasing unemployment has turned out to be a boon for online entertainment sites, [reports the WSJ](#). Some sites claim business has never been so good, as more people with more time to kill are spending an increasing number of hours in front of the computer, looking for an escape. It seems the Internet has taken the place of movie houses, where many unemployed workers spent entire afternoons during the Great Depression.

The *WP*'s [Sally Jenkins](#) writes that while some people are surely disappointed to discover that Michael Phelps smoked pot, he merely got caught doing what 42 percent of Americans have done at one time or another. "No one is condoning illegal activity. ... But frankly, it's better than drinking and driving, which is what Phelps did last time," writes Jenkins. "And it's organic!" Those who "insist their champions be superhuman ideals" may never be able to forgive Phelps. "But it's absurd to expect Phelps to maintain his brand of physical and mental discipline 24-7, while the rest of us privately anesthetize our hearts' content."

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## today's papers

### Obama Wants Grand Bargain to Tame Deficit

By Daniel Politi  
Monday, February 2, 2009, at 7:01 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with a look at how the number of people receiving welfare has remained near historically low levels despite [increasing unemployment](#) and the ongoing economic crisis. A total of 18 states went as far as to cut their welfare rolls last year, which is raising fears that the government isn't doing enough to help those in need during turbulent times. The *Washington Post* leads with word that President Obama and Democrats want to strike a "[grand bargain](#)" with Republicans to decrease spending over the next few years. No word yet on whether this is anything more than a pipe dream.

*USA Today* leads with a look at how U.S.-funded reconstruction programs in Afghanistan continue to be [plagued with problems](#). Only one of the six audits conducted by USAID in the last year "found a program working largely as it was supposed to," reports the paper. The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with a look at how Tom Daschle is likely to face questions about whether he improperly took [gifts and trips from charities](#) when the Senate finance committee meets today to consider his nomination to be secretary of health and human services. These questions would come on top of the ones he is expected to face about the revelation that he failed to pay more than \$100,000 in taxes. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with a look at how California takes longer than almost every other state to resolve [unemployment appeals](#). Tens of thousands of Californians are currently in limbo after appealing a rejection for unemployment benefits and being thrust into a state appeals board that is "swamped with cases, hindered by delays, mired in bureaucracy and tinged with scandal."

When welfare was reformed under President Bill Clinton, many critics cautioned that while the new program might work well during flush times, it would fail to help those in need during an economic downturn. These critics now see the decreasing welfare rolls in many states as evidence of "an obstacle-ridden program that chases off the poor, even when times are difficult," [as the NYT puts it](#). Supporters contend that those in need often don't seek help right away, but 20 states expanded their welfare rolls last year. In addition, every state expanded its food-stamp program, suggesting "a safety net at odds with itself."

As the Senate begins to debate the massive stimulus package that would send this year's budget deficit toward a record \$1.4 trillion, more are beginning to fret about the national debt, which is increasing momentum to come up with a plan to move toward a balanced budget. But making it a reality "would require a kind of joint political suicide," [notes the WP](#), because Democrats would have to agree to cut social programs and Republicans would have to favor a major tax increase. Even with his high popularity, it seems unlikely that Obama will be able to usher in the type of "grand bargain" that has eluded previous administrations. It's still too early to know whether anything will

come out of these discussions, and, in fact, officials are still debating whether a special panel should be named to look into the issue. Several Republicans wanted Obama to create the task force as part of the stimulus package, but he resisted the idea, which has also faced opposition from Democratic congressional leaders.

Carrying out a grand bargain with Republicans should be much easier now considering that Obama has constantly talked about fostering bipartisanship, right? Well, it depends on what you mean by bipartisanship. In a front-page piece, the *WP* makes a valiant effort at explaining the White House view that the failure to garner a single Republican vote for the stimulus package didn't constitute a failure of Obama's [efforts at bipartisanship](#). Some say Obama's talk of bipartisanship has less to do with trying to find common ground with the other side than elevating the discourse so everyone can be nice to one another while they disagree. While Republicans welcomed Obama's outreach and have generally had very nice things to say about the popular president, that tune could soon change if they get the feeling that it's more about style rather than substance.

The *NYT* off-leads preliminary results from Iraq's provincial elections that suggest secular parties [gained significant ground](#). Although it will be several days until official results are known, it looks like Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Dawa Party made gains in most provinces. If the early trends hold, it could mean that Iraqis have grown "disillusioned with the religious parties that have been in power but have done little to deliver needed services," notes the *NYT*. Turnout was lower than expected, with 51 percent of Iraqis voting. The *LAT* focuses a story inside on the [low turnout](#) and blames it on widespread confusion over voter registration rules as well as apathy among many Iraqis. A recent government poll predicted 73 percent of Iraqis would vote in the elections.

The *WSJ* says that [working for Lehman Bros.](#) "has become one of the hottest jobs on Wall Street." Sure, the company may be bankrupt, but it still has plenty of assets that need to be managed, and there is no shortage of recently laid-off finance professionals who are hankering for a job. Surprisingly, one of the biggest benefits of working for Lehman may be the job security. Since it could take more than two years to close down the firm, it "promises the kind of job security that's a rarity on Wall Street today," notes the *WSJ*. Former Chief Executive Officer Richard Fuld has been allowed to keep an office at the firm. "We asked him to stay if he has nowhere better to go," Lehman's current CEO said.

The *WP* takes a look at how a number of historians are working to change the popular image of [Martha Washington](#) as a "frumpy, dumpy, plump old lady," as the paper puts it. These historians say that the popular view that George Washington married her for money and was really in love with Sally Fairfax ignores the fact that Martha was, well, hot and stylish. She had

another suitor while George was courting her. But it's not all about looks. Martha was also a well-read woman who apparently had a knack for business as well. "He was clearly sexually excited by her," one historian said, adding that George was no consolation prize: "He was a hunk."

Everybody notes that Olympic star Michael Phelps didn't [dispute the legitimacy](#) of a [photograph](#) that was published by a British tabloid and showed him using a glass bong. In a statement, Phelps said that he "acted in a youthful and inappropriate way" and "engaged in behavior which was regrettable and demonstrated bad judgment." The photos won't affect his swimming eligibility but could cost him dearly if his corporate sponsors decide to pull out.

The papers all give big play to last night's Super Bowl, in which the Pittsburgh Steelers won their NFL-record sixth title by beating the Arizona Cardinals 27-23. Just like the last Super Bowl, this one "came down to the final minute and to a winning touchdown pass," [notes USAT](#). Few are as excited as the *LAT*'s [Bill Plaschke](#), who says it "was the greatest Super Bowl ever, one whose Roman numbers should have been XXL for its double-extra-large helping of theatrics and dramatics."

As for the ads, the *WSJ* says that even though slapstick humor has always had its [place in the Super Bowl](#), "this year marketers included more feel-good ads in an attempt to lift the country's mood." In the end, "it was the Super Bowl's familiar belly-laugh formula that scored big." Indeed, the *NYT*'s [Stuart Elliott](#) was decidedly unimpressed and says that few of the commercials "offered viewers anything special." Although there was lots of talk of how the ads would address the current economic climate, many "would not have seemed out of place in any Super Bowl of the last decade or two."

Despite the old formula, there is a surprise in *USAT*'s famous Ad Meter. Yesterday marked the first time the best-liked commercial wasn't created by a professional ad agency, but rather by two unemployed brothers who came up with the idea for the Doritos spot as part of an [online contest](#). The ad managed to make *USAT*'s annual contest interesting again after Anheuser-Busch had won 10 years in a row. "A shot to the crotch is always a big winner," a marketing executive [tells the WSJ](#).

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## today's papers A New Era in Iraq?

By Roger McShane

Sunday, February 1, 2009, at 6:03 AM ET

The [New York Times](#) leads with an upbeat report on Saturday's provincial elections in Iraq, where the United States is "already

drifting offstage." Despite a decreased American presence on the ground, there were no confirmed deaths as Iraqis voted in 14 of the country's 18 provinces. The [Los Angeles Times](#) leads with Barack Obama preserving the CIA's authority to carry out renditions. Some intelligence officials think the tactic could play an expanded role in the war on terrorism, as other programs are dismantled. The [Washington Post](#) leads with news that Tom Daschle waited nearly a month after his Cabinet nomination before telling Barack Obama about his tax problems.

[The NYT is excited.](#) The paper says yesterday's provincial elections in Iraq point to a "new era"; "the mood has changed"; "the world is not the same"; "whatever happens next, Iraq will not return to the way it was." But wait! "This is not to suggest that the war is over," adds the *Times*, suddenly remembering how unpredictable the country can be.

The *NYT* obviously thinks something big is happening in Iraq, as American troops disengage and Iraqi troops step up. Yesterday's elections certainly provided reason for hope. In a separate article on the vote, the *Times* notes the "[generally joyous atmosphere](#)" and reports that it was "an almost violence-free election day." The *WP* concurs, calling the elections "[remarkable for the absence of serious attacks](#)." But the *Post* adds that the intense security—which included bans on driving in some areas—was "a reminder that Iraq is far from reaching a state of normalcy."

As for the vote itself, the *NYT* nicely summarizes what to watch for as the results come in over the next week: whether religious parties will be punished for their poor governance; who will win the battle between the two main Shiite parties, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and the prime minister's Dawa Party; and how much better Sunni candidates will do after after largely boycotting the last round of voting. On this last point, the *WP* has a nice piece from [Diyala Province](#).

In its [lead story](#), the *LAT* talks to intelligence experts who say "the CIA's controversial prisoner-transfer program may expand" because it is "the main remaining mechanism—aside from Predator missile strikes—for taking suspected terrorists off the street." But the story quotes only one anonymous administration official, who doesn't comment on the future of the program other than to say it's an "acceptable practice." So who's to say how Obama will use rendition? Still, the *Times* finds a clue hidden in the president's executive order instructing the agency to close its secret prisons. The instructions "do not refer to facilities used only to hold people on a short-term, transitory basis."

The *WP* headlines its lead "[Daschle Delayed Revealing Tax Glitch](#)," but the story is really about how Tom Daschle is the type of Washington insider that Barack Obama campaigned against. The *Post* outlines Daschle's "lucrative ties to private companies with Washington interests" that netted him more than \$5 million over the last two years. Nevertheless, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs says Obama stands behind his

nominee. Republican senators, though, are [preparing to grill him](#), says the *LAT*.

In other Cabinet news, administration officials tell the *WP* and *NYT* that Judd Gregg, the Republican senator from New Hampshire, "[is atop the list to fill the job](#)" of commerce secretary and "all but certain to be tapped."

The *NYT* goes below the fold with a story on [Barack Obama's e-mail](#), "the first used by a commander in chief while in office." Knowledge of the president's address has come to be seen as a new measure of elite access in the capital. Those who have it include Rahm Emanuel, David Axelrod, Valerie Jarrett, and Robert Gibbs. Those who don't include Robert Gates, Nancy Pelosi, and Mitch McConnell. Disappointingly, the *Times* couldn't uncover whether Hillary Clinton has the address.

While Barack Obama has e-mail to keep track of his deliberations, Richard Nixon had tapes. On its front page the *NYT* reports that some historians and authors are [accusing Stanley Kutler](#), the man who compiled the most authoritative transcripts of Nixon's Watergate recordings, of deliberately editing the tapes "in ways that painted a more benign portrait of ... the conspirator-turned-star-witness, John W. Dean III."

In international news, the *NYT* has a potpourri of reports on foreign leaders. In Chechnya, a slain exile detailed the [extraordinary cruelty](#) of the thuggish president (who apparently [thinks he's a Bond villain](#)). In Somalia, [thousands demonstrated in support](#)—yes, support—of the new moderate Islamist president. In Madagascar, it's not clear who's running the country, as the mayor of the capital [declared a coup](#) on Saturday. Outside of Tibet, the *Times* wonders if the Dalai Lama can [choose his own reincarnated successor](#) before his death.

The *WP* reports that the [weight of combat gear](#) is contributing to injuries that make some American troops undeployable. "In Afghanistan, soldiers routinely carry [loads of 130 to 150 pounds](#) for three-day missions," the *Post* says. TP's muscles hurt just reading that.

Last week the pope reinstated a Holocaust-denying bishop. This week, the *WP* reports, he has [promoted an Austrian pastor](#) who called Hurricane Katrina God's punishment for sin in New Orleans.

In his *NYT* column, Thomas Friedman compares the economic crisis to [a friend who can't digest wheat products](#).

**Super Bowl prep ...** Predictably, the papers have countless reports on all aspects of today's big game between the Steelers and Cardinals. So TP has picked out some of the more interesting tidbits that readers can use to impress their friends at tonight's Super Bowl party.

- "[More Americans watched the Super Bowl last year than voted in the 2004 presidential election.](#)"
- "[The 17 most-watched programs in TV history have all been Super Bowl games.](#)"
- "[Last year, 30 percent of Americans chose pro football as their favorite sport, compared to 15 percent for baseball and just 4 percent for professional basketball.](#)"
- Potential Hall of Famer Kurt Warner "[has only three seasons with 16 starts.](#)"
- Cardinal defensive tackle Darnell Docket has [scheduled a 10-hour appointment](#) on Tuesday in order to get a tattoo commemorating the game.
- "[Gen. David H. Petraeus, the head of United States Central Command, will toss the coin before the game.](#)"
- Five teams have never been to a Super Bowl. They are [Cleveland, Detroit, Houston, Jacksonville, and New Orleans.](#)

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## today's papers

### Daschle Forgets To Pay His Taxes!

By Barron YoungSmith

Saturday, January 31, 2009, at 6:42 AM ET

All the papers lead with a [report](#) showing the U.S. economy shrank at a rate equivalent to 5.1 percent last fall—the worst contraction since 1982. Businesses failed to cut production fast enough after the financial crisis hit in October, so now they're stuck holding vast inventories of unsold goods. (Truly vast: If you count unsold goods as GDP growth, the rate of shrinkage was only 3.8 percent.) In order to correct, they've begun aggressively closing factories and shedding workers.

The *Wall Street Journal* [says](#) there have been more than 70,000 layoffs this week alone, something President Obama called "a continuing disaster for America's working families." He urged passage of his stimulus bill, [issued](#) executive orders to increase the clout of unions, and [appointed](#) Joe Biden to head a task force on rescuing the middle class.

All the papers off-lead [news](#) that Tom Daschle, Obama's designated secretary of health and human services, didn't pay more than \$128,000 in taxes until six days before one of his confirmation hearings. Daschle realized belatedly that he had to pay taxes on \$182,520 worth of limousine services from Democratic power donor Leo Hindery Jr., who put Daschle on

the board of his hedge fund in 2005. The former senator also failed to report \$83,333 in consulting income and overstated the size of some charitable deductions.

None of the papers are sure if this will endanger Daschle's confirmation, though the White House says it will be fine. Daschle's spokesperson called the oversight a "stupid mistake" and highlighted his timely efforts to rectify the problem. (The *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* generously credit ABC News for the scoop, while the *New York Times* keeps that little fact to itself.) Everyone notes that Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner had similar problems.

The *NYT* goes above the fold with [news](#) that the U.S. Embassy may have pressured the International Republican Institute—an international watchdog organization—to withhold sensitive exit polls after last year's disputed Kenyan election. There isn't conclusive proof, but *NYT* interviews and a look at the IRI's internal e-mails made it sound like the group was successfully pressured to help Mwai Kibaki—a U.S. ally—defeat challenger Raila Odinga, who named his son after Fidel Castro.

The *WP* [fronts](#), and the rest of the papers stuff, the election of Michael Steele as the Republican National Committee's new chairman. Steele, the lieutenant governor of Maryland, campaigned as the GOP's answer to Barack Obama—a [telegenic, moderate outsider](#) who is the first African-American to head the "party of Lincoln." Some Republicans, however, are [concerned](#) that their party has embraced racial identity politics.

The *LAT* [fronts](#), and the other newspapers reefer or go inside with, Iraqi provincial elections—the first since Sunni Arabs boycotted the electoral process in 2005. Here's where it's nice to have multiple big papers (enjoy it while it lasts): The *LAT* profiles a Sunni insurgent group that has decided "elections are the sole way to succeed without violence", the *NYT* [provides](#) a by-the-numbers look at the mechanics of the election, and the *WP* [explains](#) how Muqtada Sadr is trying to revive his electoral fortunes while appearing aloof from politics.

The *NYT* [fronts](#) a look at what one interviewee calls "the end of the Fourth Amendment as we know it." As a lawyer in the Reagan administration, John Roberts launched a campaign against the exclusionary rule—a Supreme Court ruling that automatically removes improperly gathered evidence from consideration in a courtroom. Now, Chief Justice Roberts is edging toward a 5-4 majority for overturning it.

The *NYT* [fronts](#) a profile of Rod Blagojevich's successor, the "anti-Blagojevich." Amazingly, Gov. Patrick Quinn is mild-mannered, modest, self-effacing, and seemingly unconnected to any of Illinois' power brokers. (He and Blagojevich stopped speaking to each other after their 2006 election.) In normal times, these might be considered weaknesses—but after Blago, the *NYT* says, he's just what the doctor ordered.

The *NYT* also [fronts](#) a super-evergreen story about the use of social pressure to encourage conservation. A California utility has achieved big energy-conservation gains by telling people how much power they use compared with their neighbors (indicated by the number of smiley faces on your electric bill). Cool! But the *NYT* has been recapitulating this idea since [at least March 2008](#).

And the *WP* [fronts](#) a look at the last great glass ceiling for women (besides, oh, the presidency): professional sportscasting. As the paper illuminates, it's really hard for women to become professional sportscasters—though the *LAT*'s Web site [seems to have caught on](#), choosing today to exhibit a slide show hosted by "the first female correspondent for 'Inside the NFL'."

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## tv club

### ***Friday Night Lights*, Season 3**

Week 3: Helicopter parenting.

By Emily Bazelon, Meghan O'Rourke, and Hanna Rosin  
Monday, February 2, 2009, at 4:05 PM ET

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**From:** Hanna Rosin

**To:** Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke

**Subject:** Week 1: Mass Amnesia Strikes Dillon, Texas

**Posted Saturday, January 17, 2009, at 7:01 AM ET**

As anyone who has talked or e-mailed with me in the last couple of months knows, my obsession with *Friday Night Lights* has become sort of embarrassing. My husband, David, and I came to the show late, by way of Netflix, but were hooked after Episode 1. We started watching two, three, four in one sitting. It began to seem to me as if these characters were alive and moving around in my world.

David was happy with the football. I was into the drama. I worried about Smash, the sometimes-unstable star running back. I dreamed about Tyra, who was being stalked. When I talked to my own daughter, I flipped my hair back, just as Coach's wife, Tami Taylor, does and paused before delivering nuggets of wisdom. Once or twice, I even called David "Coach."

I was all set to watch Season 3 in real time when I heard, to my horror, that it might not get made. But then NBC cut a [weird cost-sharing kind of deal](#) with DirecTV, and the Dillon Panthers are back in business. The episodes have already aired on satellite, but I don't have a dish. So I'm just now settling in for the new season.

But did I miss something? The field lights are on again in Dillon, Texas, but the whole town seems to be suffering from a massive bout of ... amnesia. The previous season ended abruptly, after seven episodes got swallowed by the writer's strike. For Season 3, the writers just wipe the slate clean and start again. Murder? What murder? Landry is back to being the high-school sidekick, and we can just forget that whole unfortunate body-dragged-out-of-the-river detour. Tyra got a perm and is running for school president. Lyla Garrity's preacher boyfriend, rival to Tim Riggins, has disappeared.

Over the last season, the show was struggling for an identity. It veered from *The ABC Afterschool Special* to *CSI* and then finally found its footing in the last couple of episodes, especially the one where Peter Berg—who directed the movie adaptation of Buzz Bissinger's book *Friday Night Lights* and adapted it for TV—walked on as Tami Taylor's hyper ex-boyfriend. In Season 3, the show is trying on yet another identity. Mrs. Taylor has suddenly turned into Principal Taylor. With her tight suits and her fabulous hair, she is Dillon's own [Michelle Rhee](#), holding meetings, discussing education policy, and generally working too hard. Meanwhile, Coach keeps up the domestic front, making breakfast for Julie with one hand while feeding baby Grace with the other.

This strikes me as a little too close to home, and not in a way I appreciate. The beauty of *Friday Night Lights* is that it managed to make us care about the tiny town of Dillon. It drew us in with football but then sunk us into town life. The show took lots of stock types not usually made for prime time—a car dealer, an arrogant black kid, an ex-star in a wheelchair, a grandma with dementia, a soldier, lots of evangelical Christians—and brought them to life. It was neither sentimental nor mocking, which is a hard thing to pull off.

Now I feel as if I'm looking in a mirror. Tami is a mom juggling work and kids and not doing such a good job. Coach is trying his best at home but screwing up. The only town folk we see in the first episode are Tim's brother and Tyra's sister, drunkenly falling all over each other in a bar—the sorriest, white-trashiest bar you can imagine. Our heart is with Tyra, who, just like the children of the show's upscale fans, is trying to go to college. The final, inspirational scene of the episode takes place in a racquetball court. At least Smash has the good sense to note that it's the whitest sport in America.

That said, *Friday Night Lights* would have to do a lot to lose my loyalty. Just the fact that there was a high-drama plotline centered on the Jumbotron is enough to keep me happy. It's one of the show's great gifts, humor in unexpected places. Like when Tim's brother, looking half drunk as always, tells him Lyla will never respect him because he's a "rebound from Jesus." I'll give this season a chance.

*Click [here](#) to read the next entry.*



portraying women—and they are—they're leaving out a key part of our lives.

A question for both of you: What do you think of the surly version of Matt Saracen? I'm starting to feel about him as I felt at the end of the fifth Harry Potter book: past ready for the nice boy I thought I knew to come back.

Emily

**Click [here](#) to read the next entry.**

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**From:** Meghan O'Rourke  
**To:** Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin  
**Subject:** Week 1: Why Matt Saracen Got Surly  
**Posted Monday, January 19, 2009, at 12:33 PM ET**

Hanna, Emily,

For me, the genius of *Friday Night Lights* is the way it captures the texture of everyday life by completely aestheticizing it. The handheld camera, the quick jump-cuts, the moody [Explosions in the Sky](#) soundtrack laid over tracking shots of the flat, arid West Texas landscape all add up to a feeling no other TV show gives me. And very few movies, for that matter. Then there's the fact that *FNL*, more than any other show on network TV, tries hard to be about a real place and real people in America. This is no Hollywood stage set; it's not a generic American city or suburb; the characters aren't dealing with their problems against a backdrop of wealth, security, and Marc Jacobs ads. Most are struggling to get by, and at any moment the floor might drop out from under them. In this sense, the show is about a community, not about individuals. Football is an expression of that community.

That's why, Emily, I don't find surly Matt Saracen annoying; I find him heartbreaking. After all, his surliness stems from predicaments that he has no control over: a father in Iraq (how many TV shows bring that up?) and an ailing grandmother he doesn't want to relegate to a nursing home. Like many Americans, he finds himself acting as a caretaker way too young. And because he's not wealthy, when his personal life gets complicated—like when his romance with his grandmother's sexy at-home nurse, Carlotta, goes belly up—he loses it. (OK, I thought that story line was kinda lame; but I was moved by the anger that followed.) But your point about the lack of female friendships on the show is a great one. It's particularly true of Tami. (We do get to see a reasonable amount of Julie and Tyra together, I feel.) Like Julie, I had a principal for a mother, and

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**From:** Emily Bazelon  
**To:** Hanna Rosin and Meghan O'Rourke  
**Subject:** Week 1: Why Doesn't Tami Taylor Have Any Girlfriends?  
**Posted Monday, January 19, 2009, at 6:58 AM ET**

Hey there, Hanna and Meghan,

While we're complaining, isn't this the third year that some of these characters—Tim, Lyla, Tyra—have been seniors? The producers seemed to be dealing with this small lapse in planning by bringing on the soft lighting and lipstick. Tim looks ever more like Matt Dillon in *The Outsiders* (not to sound like that thirtysomething mom who was shagging him in the first season).

But I'm letting these objections go. I fell for this opener once Coach and Mrs. Coach had one of those moments that make their marriage a flawed gem.

You're right, Hanna, that the Taylors seem more like a typical two-career family as we watch Eric tending the baby while Tami comes home at 9:45 at night, tired from her new job as principal. Also, her sermon about how broke the school is descended into liberal pablum (real though it surely could be). But it's all a setup for a sequence that makes this show a not-idealized, and thus actually useful, marriage primer. He tries to sweet-talk her. She says, with tired affection, "Honey, you're just trying to get laid." Then she realizes that he's signed off on a bad English teacher for their daughter Julie and starts hollering at both of them. Oh, how I do love Tami for losing her temper, snapping at her teenager, and yelling loudly enough to wake her baby. And I love the writers for bringing it back around with a follow-up scene in which Mrs. Coach tells her husband she's sorry, and he says, "I could never be mad at my wife. It's that damn principal." Way to compartmentalize.

Much as I appreciate Tami, I'm puzzled by a weird gap in her life: She doesn't have girlfriends. I know that her sister showed up last season, but that doesn't really explain the absence of female friends. In fact, it's a pattern on the show: Julie's friend Lois is more a prop than a character, Lyla never hangs out with other girls, and although Tyra occasionally acts like a big sister to Julie, she doesn't seem to have a close girlfriend, either. Does this seem as strange to you as it does to me? In Lyla's case, I can see it—she often acts like the kind of girl other girls love to hate (and I look forward to dissecting why that's so). But Tami is the kind of largehearted person whom other women would want to befriend. The lack of female friendships on the show has become like a missing tooth for me, especially when you consider the vivid and interesting male friendships (Matt and Landry, Tim and Jason, even Coach and Buddy Garrity). It's revealing in its absence: No matter how good the show's writers are at

one thing I always liked was watching all her friendships at the school develop and evolve.

It's also true, Hanna, that the first episode of this season hammers home its themes—Tami's an overworked principal with a funding problem; Lyla and Riggins are gonna have trouble taking their romance public; and star freshman quarterback J.D. is a threat to good old Matt Saracen. But for now I didn't mind, because there were plenty of moments of fine dialogue, which keep the show feeling alive. Like the scene in which the amiable, manipulative Buddy hands Tami a check and says in his twangy drawl, "Ah've got two words for you: Jumbo ... Tron!" (Tami, of course, has just been trying to meet a budget so tight that even chalk is at issue.) Later, at a party, Buddy greets Tami in front of some of the Dillon Panther boosters—who are oohing and aahing over an architectural rendering of the JumboTron—by exclaiming, "Tami Taylor is the brain child behind all this!" Ah, Buddy. You gotta love him. He's almost a caricature—but not.

What keeps a lot of these characters from being caricatures, despite plenty of conventional TV plot points, is that ultimately the show portrays them in the round. Coach Taylor, who has a way with young men that can seem too good to be true, is also often angry and frustrated; caring and sensitive, Lyla is also sometimes an entitled priss; Tim is a fuckup with a heart of gold (at least, at times); and the raw and exposed Julie can be a whiny brat. In this sense, ultimately, I think the story *FNL* is trying to tell is fundamentally responsible, unlike so many stories on TV. When the characters make mistakes, they suffer real consequences. Think of Smash losing his football scholarship. I sometimes think the weakest feature of our entertainment culture is a kind of sentimentality about pain, if that makes sense—an avoidance of the messiness of life that manifests itself in tidy morals and overdramatized melodramas.

But what could make *FNL* better? I'm hoping for more football and atmosphere and fewer overwrought plotlines. Will the J.D./Matt Saracen face-off help this story, do you think? And, finally: Can the writers of the show figure out how to dramatize games without making them seem totally fake? It feels like so often in the last five minutes of an episode we cut to a game—that's-in-its-final-minutes-and-oh-my-God-everyone-is-biting-their-nails ...

Meghan

**Click [here](#) for the next entry.**

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**From:** Hanna Rosin  
**To:** Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke

Subject: Week 1: The Perfect Chaos of Tim Riggins' Living Room  
Posted Monday, January 19, 2009, at 3:59 PM ET

That's it, Meghan. What the *Sopranos* accomplished with tight thematic scripts and the *Wire* accomplished with a Shakespearean plot, *FNL* pulls off with moody music and some interesting camera work. It's not that these shows transform brutal realities into beauty. They just make them bearable by packaging them in some coherent aesthetic way that calls attention to itself. And the result is very moving.

The inside of Tim Riggins' house, for example, is a place that should never be shown on television. It's a total mess, and not in an artsy Urban Outfitter's catalogue kind of way. There's that bent-up picture of a bikini beer girl by the television and yesterday's dishes and napkins on every surface and nothing in the refrigerator except beer. This is a very depressing state of affairs for a high school kid if you stop to think about it. But whenever we're in there, the camera jerks around from couch to stool to kitchen, in perfect harmony with the chaos around it. So it all feels comfortable and we experience it just the way Riggins would—another day in a moody life.

I think part of the reason Peter Berg doesn't see these characters from such a distance is that he seems deeply sympathetic to their outlook on life, particularly their ideas about the traditional roles of men and women. The men are always being put through tests of their own manhood and decency. The boys have Coach, but hardly any of them has an actual father, so they are pushed into manhood on their own. Almost all of them have to be head of a household before their time, with interesting results. Matt is decent but can't fill the shoes. Riggins is noble but erratic. Smash is dutiful but explosive.

Emily, that insight you had about Tami is so interesting, and it made me see the whole show differently. At first I thought Peter Berg must love women, because they drive all the action and make all the good decisions. Then, after what you said, I realized that for the most part, the women exist only to support the men. They are wives or girlfriends or mothers but don't have many independent relationships outside their own families. Judd Apatow's women are a little like this, too. It's a male-centric view, and helps explain why a Hollywood director would be so in tune with the mores of a small conservative town.

It's also why this season could get interesting. As the principal, Tami is stretching the show in all kinds of ways. Buddy has shed his vulnerability and is back to being the town bully. Coach is stuck in the middle. All kinds of potential for drama.

**From:** Emily Bazelon  
**To:** Meghan O'Rourke and Hanna Rosin  
**Subject:** Week 2: Would You Let Your Kids Play for Coach Taylor?  
**Posted Saturday, January 24, 2009, at 7:04 AM ET**

[Meghan](#), thank you for reminding me of all the good reasons why Matt Saracen is a heartbreaking nice boy rather than a feel-good one. And now Episode 2 reminds us as well. Matt's grandmother doesn't want to take her medication, and the only way he can make her is to become an emancipated minor so that he can be her legal guardian, instead of the other way around. And then what exactly happens when it's time for him to go to college? No good answer. As, indeed, there wouldn't be.

One of the luxuries of adolescence is that you don't have to assume responsibility for the people in your family. Matt knows what it means to take this on. In the first season, he let Julie see him pretend to be his grandfather so he could sing his grandmother to sleep. Now when she asks whether emancipation means that he gets to "vote and drink and smoke," he brings her down to earth: "No, it means I get to take care of old people."

This is one of the moments that, for me, capture the strength of this show: In Dillon, kids with hard lives and kids with easier ones get a good look at each other, which doesn't happen all that much in our nation's class-segregated high schools. Lyla, Tim, and Tyra had one of those across-the-class-divide moments in this episode, when Lyla tried to get Tim to help himself with his college prospects at a fancy dinner and failed. Tim then came home and sat down in boxers to TV and a beer with Tyra while his brother and her sister snuck in a quickie (off-camera in the bedroom).

I was glad to see that the writers are back to making Tyra and Tim and their weary, beery sense of their own limitations the center of our sympathy. Maybe Tyra will make it out of Dillon, but not by acting like the Zeta girls in [The House Bunny](#). And it seems entirely in keeping with Tim's fragile nature that Buddy Garrity could destroy his confidence with a few slashing sentences. Speaking of, one of the honest and realistic assumptions of this show is that when teenagers date, they have sex. So I gave Buddy points when he warned his daughter away from Tim in a speech that ended with "Lyla, are you using protection?"

But enough about character development. Let's talk about some football. I entirely agree, Meghan, that *FNL* generally gives us too little gridiron, not too much. But in this episode, there is a lovely sequence on the field. Coach Taylor is testing Smash before a college tryout, and the former Panther star is cutting and weaving just like old times—until Tim levels him. We hear the crack and thud of the hit, and, for a moment, Smash lies heavy and still on the ground. In this show, when a player goes down,

the dots connect to the paralyzing hit that put Jason Street in a wheelchair. But Smash gets up, his rehabilitated knee sound, and it's a moment of blessed relief, because now we can go on rooting for him to regain his chance to ... play in college and turn pro? To write the sentence is to remember how long the odds are for such an outcome and to rue the role that the dangled dream of professional sports ends up playing for a lot of kids.

Given Jason's broken spine, you can't accuse *Friday Night Lights* of pretending otherwise. But what do we think about the way its best characters revel in the game and make us love it, too? I ask myself the same question when I watch football with my sons knowing that I'd never let them play it. In the [nonfiction book](#) on which the show is based, author Buzz Bissinger writes of a player who wasn't examined thoroughly after a groin injury: "He lost the testicle but he did make All-State." There are also kids who play through broken arms, broken ankles, and broken hands and who pop painkillers or Valium. Across the country, high-school football is also [associated with a frightening rate of concussions](#). Would you let Coach Taylor anywhere near your boys?

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**From:** Hanna Rosin  
**To:** Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke  
**Subject:** Week 2: The Indelible Image of Buddy Garrity Doing Yoga  
**Posted Monday, January 26, 2009, at 6:31 AM ET**

Indeed, Emily. It's a hallelujah moment when we're back to Tim, Tyra, Matt, the lovable, evil Buddy, and all the other things I treasure about *FNL*. This episode made me very hopeful about the rest of the season. I especially liked the Smash subplot and how it ties together what happens on the field with what happens off. Smash, who graduated but lost his college scholarship, is having a hard time remembering how to be Smash. Without the Dillon Panthers, he's just a kid in an Alamo Freeze hat who goes home every night to his mom. And that just about summarizes the driving theme of the show. On the field, class, race, and all the soul-draining realities of life in a small Texas town get benched. But off the field, you can have clear eyes and a full heart and still lose.

Despite their best efforts, Matt, Tyra, and Tim just can't seem to transcend. Instead of gender differences, what's emerging strongly this season is, as Emily points out, class differences. All the couples in the show are divided along class lines, setting up lots of potential for good drama. There's Tyra and Landry, Lyla and Tim, and possibly Julie and Matt again. Emily, you pointed out that great moment in the car where Julie and Matt have such different ideas about what the future holds. Buddy gives us another such moment, when he lectures Lyla about dating Tim:

"Tim Riggins going to college is like me teaching yoga classes." (I'm having trouble getting that image out of my mind, of Buddy Garrity teaching yoga classes. Buddy in downward facing dog. Buddy ohm-ing. Buddy saying "namaste" to his ex-wife in a spirit of love and peace.)

Then, of course, there's the absolutely awful moment when Tim orders squab, rare, at the dinner with the new freshman quarterback J.D.'s posh Texas socialite family. This was reminiscent of one of my favorite scenes in *The Wire*, when Bunny Colvin takes Namond and the other kids out to a fancy restaurant, after which they feel ever more alienated from their better selves.

I have high hopes for J.D. in this regard. He turns the Dillon Panthers formula on its head. His father is hellbent on mucking up the field with privilege and influence. He's a serious test for Coach and for Matt. Can't wait to see what happens.

One question, though: Does it seem right to you that Tim Riggins would use the word *schmooze*? Seemed out of place to me. (Ditto their conversations about Google.) It's not that I think he's "retarded," as he puts it. It's just that until now, the show has been intentionally claustrophobic, locking us in the town, never letting us see what's on Tim's TV (unlike, say, Tony Soprano, whose TV is always facing us). So we've been led to believe that Dillon reception doesn't pick up the CW or VH1 or any other channel that might infect teenage lingo.

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**From:** Meghan O'Rourke  
**To:** Hanna Rosin and Emily Bazelon  
**Subject:** Week 2: Is the Show Becoming Too Sentimental?  
**Posted Monday, January 26, 2009, at 3:19 PM ET**

Hanna, Emily,

One thing I've been thinking about is *Friday Night Lights*' distinctive brand of male sentimentality. This show seems singularly designed to make men cry. Its lodestars are comradeship on and off the field ("God, football, and Texas forever," I recall Riggins toasting with Jason Street in the very first episode); a modern blend of paradoxically stoic emotionalism (epitomized by Coach Taylor); and a recurrent, choked-up love of the tough women who make these men's attachment to football possible. This may be the West, but in Dillon, Texas, John Ford's American masculinity has been diluted with a cup of New Man sensitivity.

Take this episode's key scene between Matt Saracen and his grandmother: Debating whether to take his ailing grandmother to

an assisted-living home, Matt is shaken when she suddenly tells him how great he was in his last game. She spirals into loving reminiscence:

"You've always loved football, Matty. I remember when you were two years old you were trying to throw a football, and it was bigger than you were. And you were such a sweet baby, such a sweet, sweet baby. But here you are all grown up and taking care of everything. I don't know what I'd do without you. I don't know. Matthew, I love you."

"I know. I love you too, Grandma."

"You're such a good boy."

"If I am, it's only because you raised me."

The scene is very well-played—we haven't talked much about the show's acting yet, it suddenly occurs to me—replete with pauses and tears and a final hug between the two. But the emotion derives from a move in the script that occurs again and again in this series: A man is having a difficult time when his mother, his grandmother, or his wife describes how much it means to her that he is taking care of her, or accomplishing brilliant things on the field, or just plain persevering. Smash has had moments like this with his mom. Coach has moments like this with Tami. And here Matt is reminded of his duty—to take care of his grandma, even though he's 17—when she speaks about his masculine prowess, first as a tough little boy throwing a ball "bigger than you were" and now as a tough teenager trying to navigate another task much bigger than he is.

*Friday Night Lights* has gotten more sentimental over the years, I think, not less, and it has also embraced its women characters more than ever. (I'm not sure I think they really play second fiddle to the men, Hanna—though they once did.) The show is about relationships now; its investigation of male honor has made a quarter-turn to focus largely on male honor as it pertains to women. (Even wayward Tim Riggins has been domesticated.)

In this regard, the show is far more incantatory than realistic (to borrow Susan Sontag's labels for the two main types of art). That is, it trades on magic and ritual more than on gritty realism, even while it often pretends to be grittily realistic. And so while it does talk about class, unlike many network TV shows, and while it does portray a place that's geographically specific, as I mentioned in my last entry, it's also offering up a highly stylized story that is intended, I think, to serve as an emotional catharsis for men, while winning women over by showing that men really do have feelings, and it's going to translate them into a grammar we can begin to understand.

I like this episode, but it strikes me that we've come a long way from season one, when there was a bit more edge on things. (Remember how it almost seemed that Riggins was racist?)

And we're definitely a long way from Buzz Bissinger's book *Friday Night Lights*, on which the series and the movie are based. That book—so far, at least; I'm only 150 pages in—has plenty of sentimentality about the power of athletic glory to alleviate the mundanity of life off the field. But it also stresses the meanness and nastiness that fuels the talent of so many of the actual Panthers Bissinger met. Not to mention the racism that pervaded the town. On this show, we rarely see that meanness; Riggins used to embody it, but now he's a pussycat, trying on blazers to keep Lyla happy. On the field, it's the team's pure-hearted sportsmanship that makes it so lovable, not any player's manly violence. After all, their locker-room mantra is "Clear eyes, full hearts can't lose." And in Matt Saracen they had a scrappy quarterback underdog who really wanted to be an artist. Even J.D. is small and—can't you see it in those wide eyes?—supersensitive.

I love *FNL*, but sometimes I wonder: Is the show becoming simply too sentimental about its characters?

Meghan

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**From:** Emily Bazelon  
**To:** Hanna Rosin and Meghan O'Rourke  
**Subject:** Week 2: Where in Tarnation Is Jason Street?  
**Posted Monday, January 26, 2009, at 6:06 PM ET**

You're right, [Meghan](#), to call *FNL* on its spreading dollop of sentimentality. Doesn't this often happen with TV shows in later seasons? I'm thinking of *The Wire* (at least Season 5), and probably *The Sopranos*, too. You can see why the writers would be pulled in this direction. The friction of the initial plot line has been played out. As the writers—and the audience—get to know the characters better, do we inevitably want them to become better people? Even if that comes at the price of narrative tension and edge?

The best way out of the mush pit, I suppose, is to introduce new characters, who in turn introduce new friction. That's what J.D. is all about this season. If you're right that there's a puppy dog lurking behind his wide eyes, then the show is in trouble. On the other hand, if he's merely a two-dimensional touchdown-throwing automaton, that's going to be awfully pat—the Matt vs. J.D. contest will be good, humble working-class vs. evil, proud, and rich. I hope we get something more interesting than that.

In the meantime, a complaint from me that I see a reader in "the Fray" [shares](#): Why does this show keep flunking TV Drama 101 by tossing characters without explanation? First Waverly, Smash's bipolar girlfriend, disappears. Now Jason Street, whom we last saw begging an appealing waitress to have his baby after a one-night stand, is AWOL. What gives? Will Jason show up later this season, child in hand?

One more thing for this week: Another Frayster who says he (I think *he*) wrote for the show in the first season reports that Tami initially did have a girlfriend, played by Maggie Wheeler. But she got cut. More [here](#). And more from us next week.

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**From:** Meghan O'Rourke  
**To:** Hanna Rosin and Emily Bazelon  
**Subject:** Week 3: The Small Muscles Around Kyle Chandler's Eyes and Mouth  
**Posted Saturday, January 31, 2009, at 6:45 AM ET**

I'm glad that you pulled out that comment from the "Fray," [Emily](#). I've wondered the same thing about why the show so baldly ditches characters. Another one to add to the list: Landry's nerd-cool girlfriend. Whatever happened to her? Meanwhile, we know from entertainment news that the actors who play Street (Scott Porter) and Smash (played by Gaius Charles Williams) are going to leave the show, but I presume the writers will stage their exits with more grace.

At last, though, the season is swinging into gear. There's conflict. Tami and Eric's strong bond is fraying under the pressure of balancing work and home. He: "You know who I miss? The coach's wife." She: "You know who I'd like to meet? The principal's husband." There's love. How sweet are Matt Saracen and Julie? Somehow their romance got more real this time around. I find her much less annoying and more credible in her big-eyed, pouting awkwardness. E.g., that moment where she timidly says "We don't have to talk about football... or not." There's football. Again with the game being decided in a close call in the last 20 seconds?

Plus, Tami finally has a friend. Or does she? At the butcher counter of the supermarket, she's befriended by Katie McCoy, J.D.'s mother, wife of Joe—the man I love to hate. (I think I'd watch this season just for the catharsis of watching Coach Taylor stick it to Joe. Kyle Chandler is brilliant in these scenes—check out the way the small muscles around his eyes and mouth move.) It's not clear whether Katie is working Tami just as Joe has been trying to work Eric, plying him with scotch and cigars to no avail. Eric takes the cynical view; he thinks Tami's being "played." Tami protests. Hanna, Emily, I wonder what you two

think—is this a friendship in the bud, or a cynical play for power?

In either case, what's interesting to me is that it does seem more plausible for Tami and Katie to develop a friendship than for Joe and Eric to. As unlike as they are, Tami and Katie have something to offer each other. The women may be divided by class, but they connect subtly and intuitively, it seems, over understanding just how the other has to negotiate delicately around her husband to get what she wants for herself and her kids. As different as these marriages are, this, at least, seems alike. Even Tami, who has so much authority with Eric, has to push back in all sorts of ways. Take their argument about the football team's barbecue. It reminded me how new Tami's life as a working mom is: She complains to Eric about the team coming into the house and "messing up my floors" and "clogging up my toilet." That *my* is so telling. The long shadow of domesticated female identity falls over it. ... Or am I reading too much into it?

Finally, I was struck by how many scenes in this episode take place between two people. The party scene, the football game, and the fabulous, cringe-inducing scene when Lyla laughs at Mindy for using *Finding Nemo* as a bridal vow are exceptions, of course. But otherwise the show takes place in dyads, as if homing in on relationships rather than community as a whole. I wonder if this will extend through the show.

Curious to hear your thoughts.

Meghan

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**From:** Emily Bazelon  
**To:** Hanna Rosin and Meghan O'Rourke  
**Subject:** Deciphering the Bronzed Diaper

Posted Monday, February 2, 2009, at 7:18 AM ET

Yes, Meghan, Tami *is* being played by Katie McCoy. In part because she wants to be. I found their pairing off all too recognizable: They have that spark two women get when they see something in each other that they want and don't have. Their friendship, or maybe it will prove an infatuation, is a trying-on of identity. So, yes, Katie is using Tami to entrench her son's status on the team and to show off her wealth. And Tami refuses to notice, because it suits her purposes not to. A party at Katie's house means no clogged toilets at Tami's (and, oh yes, that *my* rang in my ears, too). I particularly loved the moment when Tami enters Katie's glittering, ostentatious house and her new friend and hostess puts an arm around her waist and they sail off together into the living room in their evening dresses, husbands

trailing after them. It captured exactly how women are made girlish by mutual crushes.

Tami's falling for Katie would be harmless enough if it weren't clashing with her husband's interests. It's that willingness to clash that's new, isn't it? And captured so well by that great exchange you quoted. The Taylors haven't just become a two-career couple. They're a couple with jobs that are at loggerheads.

The Tami-Katie spark was connected, for me, with the Lyla-Mindy debacle, in part because both of these dyads cut across class, a theme we've been discussing. Tami and Katie are flirtily using each other; Lyla and Mindy miss each other completely, in a way that causes real pain. How *could* Lyla have laughed at those poor, sweet *Finding Nemo* wedding vows? I mean, really. Then again, Lyla is completely out of her element, sitting there with two sisters and a mother who present a fiercely united front, at least to other people. Maybe she was nervous and blew it. Or maybe she wanted to hurt them because she envies their sisterhood.

And now a few questions, for you and for our readers. What happened at the end of that football game? Did Matt really fumble, or did he get a bad call—after all, it looked to me like he was in the end zone with control of the ball before he was hit. And was the pounding Matt took during the game just the show's latest realist depiction of the perils of football, or were we supposed to suspect that J.D.'s father had somehow induced the other team to take out QB 1? (I'm probably being paranoid, but the camera work had a sinister element to it.) Last thing: When J.D. catches Matt and Julie making fun of his trophies and comes back with that too-perfect zinger about how his parents also bronzed his diapers, is he just trying to make them feel small and stupid? Or is he also distancing himself from his parents and their pushy football worship? I couldn't quite decide how to read him in that moment.

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**From:** Hanna Rosin  
**To:** Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke  
**Subject:** Week 3: Malcolm Gladwell Comes to Dillon  
Posted Monday, February 2, 2009, at 11:01 AM ET

I read the relationship between Tami and Katie differently. Katie is obviously awful, with her blather about the Atkins diet and being a "connector." She is obviously playing Tami, as much for her husband's sake as for her own. And the fact that Tami doesn't see this is a sign that her judgment is off. Until this season, Tami has been the moral compass for her family and for the show. But now she's distracted. She's cutting corners, ducking out of her domestic responsibilities. She's worried about those clogged toilets, because her cup is full, and she can't handle one more

thing.

I empathize. When I'm in that too-much-work-too-many-kids-mode, I, too, lose it over minor housekeeping infractions. But it does not bode well for Dillon. When Tami is off, so is everything else. I read this episode as not so much about friendship, expedient or otherwise, as about missed connections. Tami is not picking up on Katie's cues. Lyla can't connect with Mindy and Billy. Tim Riggins does not make it on time to meet his date. And Saracen doesn't quite get that touchdown. The center is not holding in Dillon.

In David Simon's scripts for *The Wire*, money always crushes love, loyalty, family, neighborhood, and everything in its path. Something like that is going on here. Money is wreaking havoc in Dillon: the boosters' money for the JumboTron, the McCoy money, those copper wires that are hypnotizing Billy and making him corrupt poor Tim. (In *The Wire*, Bubs was always hunting down copper.) The result is the closing scene, which shows the very un-neighborly Dillon ritual of planting "for sale" signs on the coach's lawn after he loses the game.

I don't know what will triumph in the end: money or love. Emily, I couldn't tell either whether J.D. was pissed or chagrined or ironic in that last scene, so I can't tell if he's our villain or just a victim of his overbearing father. I'll bet on one thing though: Things do not end well for Billy Riggins.

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**From:** Meghan O'Rourke

**To:** Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin

**Subject:** Week 3: Helicopter Parenting

**Posted Monday, February 2, 2009, at 4:05 PM ET**

Hanna, Emily,

I thought J.D. was trying to make a joke that didn't come off. It's my guess, too, that we're not supposed to be able to read his reaction, because he's not sure himself. He's angry, but he also sees the ridiculousness of his parents' shrine to him. One thing we haven't discussed: With the McCoy's comes the *FNL*'s first depiction of that modern affliction known as helicopter parenting. I suppose, to be accurate, that Joe is actually a more specific type: a form of stage parent, the obsessed parent-coach. Here is a parent who is helping drive his son into developing his talents but who also just might drive him crazy by pushing too hard.

This introduces a new theme for *FNL*, right? Until now, over-involvement wasn't a problem for any of the parents on the show. In fact, the parenting problems all had to do with moms and dads who were notably absent (in the case of Matt and Tim,

say). Tami and Eric are attentive parents. So is Smash's mom. But you couldn't call them helicopter parents, that breed of nervously hovering perfectionists who busily cram their children's schedules with activities and lessons. In this case, that finicky sense of entitlement projected by Joe is associated, we're meant to feel, with his wealth, to get back to what you brought up, Hanna, about money and love. Katie, too. I'm curious to know how far the sports parenting issues will go. Is J.D. going to crack up? Or is Joe creating a sports equivalent of Mozart with all his proud pushing? I suspect the first, mainly because Joe is portrayed as such a jerk. (This dilemma might be more interesting if the writers had let Joe be a more complex figure—but maybe the whole point is these types are caricatures, almost.)

Meghan

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## war stories

### What Are We Doing in Afghanistan?

We're still figuring that out.

By Fred Kaplan

Thursday, February 5, 2009, at 6:59 PM ET

Not long ago, Afghanistan was known as "the good war." Now some are calling it "[Obama's Vietnam](#)." Both tags exaggerate. Across hundreds of years of sorrowful history, no war in Afghanistan has ever been good. And Vietnam was different in so many ways that parallels with the war against the Taliban tend to muddy more than clarify. (Ho Chi Minh was the legitimate leader of a unified polity, the United States violated international law by blocking countrywide elections, U.S. troop levels grew to 500,000 at their peak, etc.)

But the specter of Vietnam does, or should, haunt us in one compelling sense: the reasonable fear that we are about to step into a bigger, thicker pile of mud—a more all-enveloping quagmire, if you will—than the first step of escalation might suggest.

Unlike those who got us into Vietnam, today's top officials—including President Barack Obama and Defense Secretary Robert Gates—at least see the specter. Both have emphasized that their goals in Afghanistan are limited; daydreams of turning the place into a democratic republic—"some central Asian Valhalla," as Gates snorted in recent hearings—are over. Gates further stated at those hearings, before the Senate armed services committee, that he would endorse his commanders' request for three additional brigades—but that he'd be "deeply skeptical" of subsequent requests for more. The fighting needs to be done mainly by Afghan troops, he said, adding that if the Afghan

people begin to see it as an American war, "we will go the way of other imperial occupiers."

This is reassuring. However, even "limited" goals can justify a vast military expansion.

For instance, Obama and Gates have said that their "strategic objective" is to keep Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists who threaten the United States or destabilize the region.

However, military commanders need to translate that strategic objective into an "operational goal," and there are many, very different ways to do that—each requiring different levels of troops performing very different missions.

Some argue that the best way is to step up attacks on Taliban and al-Qaida forces directly, as—or perhaps before—they cross the border from Pakistan. Others say it's better to stop chasing terrorists all over the countryside and instead to protect the Afghan population, provide basic services, and build their trust. But since resources are limited, which segments of the population do you protect—those in the cities, where most of the people live, or in the villages, where the Taliban have made their deepest incursions?

President Obama has talked of sending three extra brigades to Afghanistan. That means about 12,000 combat troops. Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, talks of deploying 30,000 extra troops—doubling the 30,000 we have there now.

These numbers sound far apart, but they're not. Obama's three brigades would also require "enablers"—military jargon for the personnel who enable the combat brigades to fight. They would include an aviation brigade (already in place), a division headquarters, a support brigade, military police, medics, military engineers (to build the expanded barracks and bases), and so on. Add all this into the mix, and you get 30,000 extra troops. Obama and Mullen are talking about the same troop boost.

How did they come up with this number? This is where the cause for worry begins. It didn't come from any assessment of how many troops are needed for a particular mission. No decisions about a specific mission—an operational goal—have yet been made.

The request for three brigades stems from one fact and one fact only: That's how many brigades will be available this year, as more troops pull out of Iraq.

It's a number based on what we have, not on what we need. It has no substantive rationale.

There soon will be a rationale, and it may well be the product of systematic thinking. Three "strategic reviews" of Afghanistan are currently in the works, due to be finished this month—one by the National Security Council, one by the Pentagon's Joint Staff, one by Gen. David Petraeus' staff and advisers at U.S. Central Command. (Petraeus' review encompasses Afghanistan, Iraq, and the surrounding region.)

Each review is being conducted separately, but they are all dealing with the same questions: Given the president's strategic objective, what are the operational goals, and how much do we need—how many forces, of what kind, doing what, for how long, at what cost—to succeed?

Judging from press accounts and from my own conversations with officials and advisers involved in these reviews, a consensus seems to be developing that—in the medium to long term—we should put most of our efforts into a counterinsurgency campaign, along the lines of Gen. Petraeus' field manual on the subject. This conforms to the school of thought that the best way to defeat insurgents is not to chase them here and there, but to protect the Afghan population and help build loyalty to the government.

However, there are widely differing views—both between and within the review teams—over what to do in the short term (as well as over how long the short term might last). The problem, widely acknowledged, is that a certain level of security has to be attained before a full-blown counterinsurgency campaign can work—and that many Afghan cities, villages, and roads haven't reached that level.

When asked what missions the three extra brigades will perform, one Pentagon official said, "All of the missions." Some troops will chase terrorists, some will protect the population, some will train the Afghan army. ... But three extra brigades—which, again, is all we can muster in the next year—aren't enough to do all that. (Some officials say that the NATO allies have agreed to up their efforts a bit, now that the popular Obama has replaced the much-loathed Bush, but they're unlikely to muster more than a few thousand troops—perhaps a brigade's worth. The allies could help more in other ways, for instance, in special forces, government administration, and training police. Bush never made such requests; perhaps Obama will.)

So, choices will have to be made. The Joint Staff seems to be pushing for a more intense short-term drive to beat back Taliban guerrillas coming across the Pakistani border. The extra U.S. ground troops would make it possible to do that without relying so heavily on airstrikes, which have unavoidably inflicted civilian casualties, which have only driven more people—Afghans and Pakistanis—into the arms of the Taliban.

Analysts on other review teams advocate putting the extra effort into protecting the population or guarding roads—to bolster the



impression, among the Afghan population, that they can trust their government (and its allies) to provide security and that, therefore, they don't need to turn to the Taliban as an alternative.

David Kilcullen, one of the leading counterinsurgency analysts and author of the forthcoming book *The Accidental Guerrilla*, was a key adviser to Petraeus in Iraq and, for a while, to Condoleezza Rice in Bush's State Department. Appearing on Thursday before the Senate foreign relations committee, Kilcullen—a firm supporter of the basic objective in Afghanistan—emphasized that there were risks and caveats in all these approaches.

The critical "short term," to Kilcullen's mind, is very short indeed—between now and Afghanistan's presidential elections, scheduled for this coming August. "If we fail to stabilize Afghanistan this year," he told the committee, "there will be no future."

To stabilize Afghanistan this year, he went on, "we need to refocus the military and police on a single crucial task: protecting the population in advance of the elections," so that, whoever wins, their result "restores the government's legitimacy and with it the credibility of the international effort."

There aren't enough troops to protect the entire population. So, Kilcullen and others are trying to calculate where we could place the smallest number of troops to protect the largest percentage of the Afghan people. This is a challenge; census data in Afghanistan are sparse and unreliable. But certainly it means putting more troops in the cities—living among the people, setting up patrols (joint teams of NATO troops, Afghan soldiers, and Afghan police), building trust, getting intelligence.

Can this be done in time? Kilcullen makes no claims of certainty. He does express certainty, however, that the alternative approach—simply chasing terrorists—"won't work." Afghanistan, he noted, is a sovereign state. Why would its people tolerate being used "as little more than a launch pad for strikes against al-Qaida, while doing little to alleviate poverty, institute the rule of law, or improve health and education?"

But here's the rub. Assuming Kilcullen's approach works and the elections go well, the war will have only just begun.

"We need to be honest about how long it will take ... and how much it will cost," Kilcullen said. His estimates: 10-15 years, \$2 billion *per month* just for the extra 30,000 troops, still more for help with development and governance.

Stephen Biddle, an analyst with the Council on Foreign Relations and an adviser on the Central Command's strategic review, said in a phone interview on Wednesday that the time and expense might be reduced if we negotiate with

nonideological elements and allies of the Taliban. We could, for instance, tell some provincial warlord that if he abandons the Taliban and joins the fight against them, he can become the governor of the province and enjoy certain prerogatives. (And if he doesn't agree, we will destroy him and all his followers.) This is a delicate task; the sticks and carrots have to be designed specifically for each warlord; and of course there is no negotiating with hard-core Taliban.

**Gen. Petraeus**, too, has spoken several times of the need to strike deals with the "reconcilable" Taliban—in part because they can't all be killed or captured, no matter how many troops the West sends, in part because that's simply how most wars of this sort end.

But others are skeptical of these scenarios. In the past centuries of wars, the British, then the Russians, then the Americans have succeeded in turning some warlord or the other to their side—then watched as he shifts sides again a few weeks later, because he's been offered a better deal or to avenge the death of a relative or for no discernible reason.

Then there's the ultimate consideration: Even if everything goes splendidly in Afghanistan, it will count for naught unless the Taliban and al-Qaida are neutralized in neighboring Pakistan—a turbulent state that has nuclear weapons. There isn't much the United States can do about that problem militarily; it's a diplomatic puzzle to be worked out with other powers in the region. Gen. Petraeus will have a role to play in this; so, even more, will special envoy Richard Holbrooke. The issue of how many troops should do what in Afghanistan will be, by comparison, a sideshow—albeit an expensive, and perhaps a necessary, one.

How expensive and how necessary? This is where President Obama will have to make the decision—and then make the case before the public. If, in the spirit of open government, he goes on television and says, in line with Kilcullen's estimate, "We need to spend tens of billions of dollars a year for the next decade or two to keep Afghanistan stable," he'd better be able to make the case that we have some chance of succeeding—and that we'll face serious dangers if we don't. If he can't make that case at the outset, he shouldn't jump in.

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## The 10 Things We Want To Know About "25 Random Things About Me"

A *Slate* reader survey: What are the origins of the Facebook phenomenon?

By Chris Wilson

Friday, February 6, 2009, at 11:55 AM ET

In the past few weeks, a chain letter called "25 Random Things About Me" has wormed its way through Facebook at an alarming speed. The exhibitionistic format has remained surprisingly intact: In addition to rattling off 25 facts about themselves, "Random Things" authors are supposed to tag 25 of their Facebook friends, prompting them to write their own note and tag 25 more people, and so forth and so on.

Whatever your take is on the content of these notes, they do present a fascinating case study in how trends spread online. As *USA Today* noted Thursday, [it's difficult for Facebook to measure the trend](#) precisely because the letters are written using the generic Notes application, which can be used for any type of message. But a representative for the site did tell the newspaper that use of the Notes app has more than doubled in the past week.

In an attempt to get a handle on how the "25 Random Things About Me" phenomenon began and spread, *Slate* is running a simple survey for Facebook users. If you have written such a letter or noticed that any of your Facebook friends have, please take a second to answer the following questions, using the news feeds on your profile to determine when you were first swept up in this trend.

First, click on Notes in the Applications sidebar to the right of Facebook's front page. (You might need to click on "more" under Applications to reveal the Notes icon or to add the Notes application.) This will give you a list of every note your friends have written. We're interested in the earliest instance of a "25 Things" list.

Once you're done with that, click on the Profile tab at the top of the screen. That will display a list of items that just pertain to you. Here, you can track instances of other people tagging you in their notes.

We're also interested in gleaning information on how the "25 Things" chain began. If you're the man or woman behind the idea or just have a theory you want to share, we'd love to hear from you. Please write down everything you know in the box below or [send us an e-mail](#) directly. All information you submit via this Web form is anonymous and will be used only in aggregate. If you choose to send us an e-mail, it may be quoted by name unless you stipulate otherwise.

Name

E-mail address (will remain private)

What is the earliest date that one of your friends posted a 25 Things

note? (MM/DD/YY)

On what date were you first tagged in a 25 Things note? (MM/DD/YY)

How many times have you been tagged total?

How many Facebook friends do you have total?

Have you written a 25 Things note?  Yes  No

If so, on what date did you write it? (MM/DD/YY)

Zip Code (if within the United States)

Country (if outside the United States)

Do you have any information or theories about how the 25 Things phenomenon got started?

May we contact you if we have any questions?  Yes  No

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Thank you for participating in *Slate's* "25 Random Things About Me" survey. Check back with us in a few days for the results.

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## what's up, doc?

### Crib Notes

Is sharing a bed with your baby a good idea?

By Sydney Spiesel

Wednesday, February 4, 2009, at 7:00 AM ET

**Question:** Pediatrics has its share of issues that always give rise to strong emotional responses. No matter what position you take on, for instance, breast-feeding, pacifiers, or vaccines, someone is bound to come after you with a pitchfork. Exactly where the baby sleeps is another such topic. For years, most pediatricians have gently (or vigorously) urged parents to let their infants sleep in a crib, a bassinet, or, indeed, almost anywhere but the parents' bed. Parents—especially in the last few years—have pushed back against doctors, arguing that it is both natural and beneficial for babies to co-sleep with parents. The people who favor bed sharing believe that it promotes successful breast-feeding, strengthens mother-child bonding, and may even allow parents to detect and halt Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. But is there any evidence to support these claims—and the overall safety of co-sleeping?

**Answer:** Here come the pitchforks. Not only are there no good data to support these beliefs, but [a new study](#) supports what most pediatricians have been saying all along: There is substantial risk in infant-parent bed sharing, and parents should be aware of this risk before bringing babies to bed to sleep with them.

**Methodology:** The study tracked mortality patterns in the United States over a 20-year period ending in 2004. The researchers collected death-certificate information about all babies who died suddenly and whose deaths were unexpected. For many of the children whose deaths fell into this category, no definite cause could be assigned; these are the children who traditionally have been thought to be victims of SIDS. That number has been dropping dramatically during the 20-year period under study, almost certainly a result of the "[back to sleep](#)" campaign, which followed the discovery that the risk of SIDS goes up when babies sleep face-down. But there is another category of unexpected infant deaths, one in which death-scene analysis permits a plausible cause of death to be assigned: [accidental suffocation and strangulation in bed](#). Those numbers have quadrupled in the two decades under study.

Some of those cases obviously have nothing to do with bed sharing—like strangulation in a defective crib. (Among deaths for which the sleeping surface was known, about 15 percent occurred in cribs.) But in cases of sudden, unexpected infant deaths attributed to suffocation or strangulation, more than half occurred in co-sleeping circumstances (and where the sleeping surface was noted, more than 80 percent of the deaths occurred in an adult bed, a sofa, or a couch). A variety of causes were implicated in these deaths, including suffocation by bedding or soft materials and wedging between two objects, but the single most common cause was "overlying," in which a deeply sleeping parent rolled over and suffocated a baby.

**Conclusion:** This study doesn't really give us the answer about the safety or risk of co-sleeping—it just raises enough questions to make us very nervous. There are some ways that have been suggested to minimize the risk to the baby for those who want to continue co-sleeping, though there are no good studies to back them up. Putting the baby in a little outrigger attached to the side of the parents' bed or in a small canoelike device in the bed itself have been suggested as methods that might decrease the risk. (The sleeping chamber should have a firm bottom and not be filled with loose bedding or stuffed creatures.) Also, don't even think of bed sharing if you have been taking any medication, including antihistamines, which might make you sleep more deeply, or if you have been drinking an alcoholic beverage. But until we have a better study, I think it is important for parents to know that bed sharing, which might have some [benefits](#), could well also have some very significant risks.

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## sidebar

Return to [article](#)

The rate of "sudden unexpected infant deaths"—the broad category that includes suffocation and strangulation victims, infants whose deaths seem due to SIDS, and baby deaths whose cause is unknown—has been dropping in the United States since about 1991, roughly when warnings began to appear about the dangers in face-down sleeping. The rate fell for six or seven years and then reached a plateau at about 3,800 such deaths annually, roughly what it was by 2004, when data collection for the study ended. During the last eight years of the study period, the percentage of deaths attributed to SIDS dropped to about 60 percent, and the deaths attributed to suffocation or strangulation rose to about 13 percent.

For the study, the cause of death was taken from the death certificate and was based on autopsy results or findings of the death-scene investigation. We don't know (but can guess) the

details. A dead baby found under an adult in the morning or with mouth and nose blocked by a lot of soft bedding was probably thought to be a suffocation victim. A baby found with no apparent cause of death and nothing nearby to block breathing was likely thought to be a victim of SIDS. A baby found on a soft bed with nearby bedding but no evidence for suffocation was probably assigned to the "unknown" category. There could well have been some misassigned deaths, but between autopsy results and the standardized death-scene investigation methods provided by CDC, it's not likely that many of the cases thought to be due to suffocation or strangulation were really caused by SIDS.

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## sidebar

Return to [article](#)

I believe that there are some benefits to bed sharing. It helps prevent sleep disruption for mothers who otherwise would have to climb out of a warm and cozy place to feed the baby. It allows moms to have an uninterrupted, intimate, and intense relationship with a new baby, untroubled by the phone, sibling jealousy, or the practical demands of household life. And it's a great form of birth control.

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## xx factor xxtra More Stimulating

What if Obama's rescue package tried to address the gender gap in pay, too?  
By Jennifer Barrett  
Thursday, February 5, 2009, at 1:07 PM ET

Is the stimulus package really better for men than for women? That's what many prominent feminists, and even some [male economists](#), are saying. Their charge: That the bulk of the work created would be in testosterone-fueled fields like construction, manufacturing, and engineering. "Where are the new jobs for women?" a *New York Times* [op-ed](#) by Linda Hirshman asked of the 3.5 million jobs promised by the rescue package. Why not add more in female-friendly fields like [child care](#), education, and social services, asked Barbara Bergmann, vice chair of the Economists' Policy Group for Women's Issues, in an open [letter](#) to President Obama that has garnered more than 600 signatures.

But the problem for women with the stimulus bill isn't really that it's short on jobs for them. It's that many of the jobs being generated for women will probably come later and pay far less than the jobs being created in fields dominated by men. In

fairness, men could use more help now. They have been hit much harder so far in this recession. And some traditionally female sectors like health care are doing just fine without a cash injection from the government. But that may shift in the coming months; at least [2 million](#) more Americans are expected to get pink slips this year, and in a much wider range of industries. The stimulus plan being considered by the Senate, as it's written now, may make up for some of those losses, gender division aside. But it will do little to close the 20 percent wage gap between men and women or to address the sex segregation in the labor market that accounts for much of it.

Up to 49 percent of the jobs generated by the stimulus bill are expected to go to women, according to Christina Romer, chair of Obama's Council of Economic Advisers. Many of them will be created indirectly and are based on rather optimistic projections, as Hirshman [pointed out](#) in *Slate*. But the ratio still seems generous to women, given that men have accounted for about 80 percent of the job losses so far. (Nearly 800,000 factory jobs alone were lost in 2008, and almost 900,000 construction jobs have disappeared since the peak of the housing boom in 2006.) Altogether, about 1.1 million fewer men are working in the United States now than a year ago.

Women, on the other hand, have gained about as many jobs as they've lost, according to economist Andrew Sum. Female-dominant fields like health care have actually been hiring more than firing, and that's not likely to change. Nearly a dozen of the Labor Department's estimated 30 fastest-growing [occupations](#) are in health care—from home health aides to dental hygienists to physician assistants. Other traditionally female occupations make the fastest-growing list as well, including makeup artists, manicurists, and skin-care specialists. (The country will be poor, but well-groomed.)

The problem is that many of the jobs in these female-dominated fields pay far less than the jobs being created for men by the stimulus plan. By the Obama team's own estimates, nearly one-third of the jobs generated by the package will be in construction or manufacturing. These sectors pay above average in part because they're filled largely by union workers. The already small percentage of women who work in these fields tend to fill the positions that pay the least. Women in construction don't often go out in hard hats; they sometimes sit behind the desk and answer phones—about half of the jobs in the construction industry filled by women are low-wage clerical jobs. And these don't come with union membership. Similarly, the money for green energy is expected to produce more jobs that pay well above average, like electricians and engineers—and that typically go to men.

By contrast, many of the jobs that Obama's economic advisers expect to go to women are in leisure/hospitality and retail. According to their own numbers, both "pay below average." Though the bill includes direct investments in better-paying

pink-collar fields like health care and education, many of the funds will be used for activities like making medical records electronic, increasing funding for college loans, and renovating public schools—none of which are likely to create a lot of jobs for women.

To be sure, Congress isn't doing nothing to close the wage gap. The House included, in the version of the stimulus passed last week, \$80 million in enforcement funds for the branch of the Labor Department (called the Office of Federal Contract Compliance) that nudges employers who get government contracts to take steps to recruit and train more women. Federally assisted construction contractors with contracts worth more than \$10,000, for example, would have to show they've taken "affirmative action steps" to increase their female hires to at least 6.9 percent.

Still, Congress could do much more. Why not require some of the estimated \$800-plus billion to go toward creating more high-paying jobs in traditionally female fields rather than just any old jobs? Or specify that employers in sectors dominated by either women or men who get federal contracts make demonstrable efforts to fill 10 percent or 20 percent of the jobs with the opposite sex? Toward that end, the bill could direct more funds toward retraining women for traditionally male-dominated sectors and vice versa. Of course, libertarians might argue that this monkey too much with the market and requires a lot of unnecessary paperwork and extra hoops for employers to jump through. But if the government is handing over the money to create these jobs in the first place, it shouldn't be shy about trying to ensure that both sexes have an equal shot at getting them.

There are already some federal programs that help to do this. But they haven't had the money or teeth to be really effective. In 1992, Congress passed the [Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations Act](#), which set up a program that awards competitive grants to recruit, hire, train, and retain women, mostly in construction. But the Bush administration cut funding and then proposed eliminating the program altogether as of this coming July. A 2006 [law](#) for technical education allows states to use up to 10 percent of a total grant for "preparing students for employment in fields that are traditionally dominated by one gender." The Bush administration requested no funding for this, either, for the 2009 fiscal year.

The Obama administration and Congress can change that. Rep. Jared Polis, a Democrat from Colorado, wrote a letter to President Obama requesting an increase for both programs. But there's so far been no effort to include that in the stimulus bill. It's a missed opportunity. By pushing employers to look beyond their usual hiring pool, the stimulus could help both men and women looking for work—in different ways. Men, who have lost the majority of jobs in this recession, would have a better shot at finding new ones. And women would have more chances

to increase their pay. That sort of bill wouldn't just shrink the rate of unemployment. It could help shrink the gender gap in wages, too.

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