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The Mecca of the Mouse

Advanced Search

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

architecture

The Architecture of Edward Hopper

Exploring the painter's buildings, from his famous diner to his cottage on Cape Cod.

By Witold Rybczynski

Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 8:09 AM ET

Click [here](#) to read a slide-show essay about the architecture of Edward Hopper.

books

The Liberation of Lying

What Tobias Wolff gets and the frauds don't.

By Judith Shulevitz

Monday, March 24, 2008, at 7:18 AM ET

One of the best stories in *Our Story Begins*, a collection of new and selected older stories by Tobias Wolff, is called "The Liar." It's about a teenage boy who regales strangers with dark fictions about his family—appalling accounts of misfortune and disease. These drive his mother crazy; a concrete, pious person, she can't stand dishonesty, and she sends him to the family doctor. The charm of the story lies in the likability of its characters. The mother is a good woman and a fine parent; the doctor is an understanding sort who doesn't make too much of the boy's misdeeds; the boy is mature enough to appreciate his mother's concerns and his doctor's efforts on his behalf. But he can't stop lying. Eventually, we learn that he started the day his father died, after a struggle with cancer, in his favorite chair. The boy, finding the corpse, got a friend to help him drag it upstairs to bed. His mother was relieved—"Thank God," she said, "at least he died in bed"—until she discovered what her son had not told her. The end of the story finds the boy on a bus that has broken down in a storm, recounting a magnificent whopper. He was born in Tibet; he was raised by missionaries; he is fluent in Tibetan. Soon he starts singing his fellow passengers to sleep in made-up Tibetan, "surely," he says, "an ancient and holy tongue."

To read a collection of Wolff's work that spans the years is to realize that he is obsessed with the act of lying. Asked in an interview why so many of his characters lie, Wolff replied, "The world is not enough, maybe? ... To lie is to say the thing that is not, so there's obviously an unhappiness with what is, a discontent." A recent outbreak of faked memoirs has set off a storm of outraged pontification about why people pass off false histories as their own, so it's satisfying to read about liars who lie for interesting reasons rather than the usual despicable ones. Wolff is, in fact, a genius at locating the truths revealed by lies—the ancient and holy tongues, you might say, the otherwise inexpressible inner realities that lies give voice to.

The protagonist of his novel *Old School*, for instance, gets kicked out of boarding school for passing off someone else's short story as his own. But he doesn't plagiarize to advance himself, or at least that's not his dominant motive. He does it, in

some not entirely fathomable way, to expose himself—to borrow the story's frank discussion of its heroine's hidden Jewish identity, and her shame about it, in order to own up to the same shame in himself. The young Wolff, in Wolff's sublime memoir *This Boy's Life*, is stumped for anything to say at his first confession; his "sense of being at fault" goes too deep, is too generalized, to articulate. So, in one of the funnier bits in the book, he borrows someone else's sins to confess. This is lying, of course, but it is also a sincere admission of guilt, the best he can make at the time.

And in "The Deposition," a new story in the collection, Wolff asks us to consider whether telling the truth can also be a way of lying. A schoolgirl in a crumbling postindustrial town in upstate New York accuses a big-city lawyer of sexually harassing her, and though his denial of guilt is factually accurate—he looked at the girl while passing her at a bus stop—we know that she's not telling an untruth. The lawyer, just flown in from San Francisco to take a deposition in a worthy malpractice case, is a do-gooder filled with liberal intentions, but he is also a predator, eager to nail down his witness and suffused by an unpleasant mix of pity and disgust for the residents of the town he is strolling through. These people, he thinks, are too passive to wrest their due from the corporations that have abandoned them. The place makes him feel guilty; it reminds him of the town in Ohio he fled as soon as he could. Having convinced a policeman that he did nothing wrong, he is about to move on when a woman who has taken up the girl's cause suddenly slaps him in the face: " 'Liar,' she said." She didn't actually see the incident, but she's right, and he knows it. There was an exploitative hunger in the way he walked behind and stopped before the girl, a lust to use her beauty and sexual un-self-consciousness to wipe away the feeling of having been complicit in the creation of all this ugliness.

As the story suggests, there's a political edge to Wolff's recent fiction. This is not new—his other excellent memoir *In the Pharaoh's Army* was set in that most political of places, Vietnam—but Wolff seems even angrier now. Two of the new stories deal with military life in the age of Iraq. One of them addresses Muslim-American cultural conflict. Nearly all of them play out against the backdrop of small towns ravaged by negligence, greed, and indifference to history.

Rage, however, does not bring out the best in Wolff. Too many of these new stories score obvious points about the causes of American decline, rather than perform the scalpel-sharp dissections of conflicted, shifting consciousness that Wolff has shown himself capable of. Wolff's characters, at their most opalescent, don't just lie to others; they lie to themselves. Then, suddenly, they achieve self-knowledge. Then, suddenly, they betray the people they love most in the world. Betrayal, as it happens, is another of Wolff's obsessions: Just as his characters lie to express themselves, they betray to discover who they are. You never know when or how the young Wolff of *This Boy's*

Life will let his mother down next, despite being deeply connected to her and aware of her struggle to do right by him. But you do know that he has to disappoint her. He has to preserve his childishness in the face of her tacit plea that he understand too much and forgive too readily.

The young Wolff, it must be said, is the writer's greatest character. It is as if Wolff needed the mess of real life to achieve the inexhaustible freedom of superb mimesis. Few protagonists in fiction have managed to combine lying, candor, sweetness, cruelty, loyalty, treachery, and pure adolescent contrariness into as thrillingly unpredictable a package.

Of the protagonists in the recent stories, only the lawyer in "The Deposition" and the father in "Nightingale" shed layers with the jarring speed of the earlier characters. In "Nightingale," the father, Dr. Booth, gets lost in backwoods while driving his son to a military academy he has forced the boy to enroll in. In the first third of the story, he anxiously rehearses the reasons for his decision: the boy's laziness and lack of initiative, especially when compared with himself at that age. In the second third of the story, he drops the boy off at school, and it quickly becomes clear that the school is a sadistic boot camp, a strangely empty nightmare of a place. Dr. Booth registers the creepiness, yet, as if in a dream—and here the story moves out of realism and into absurdity—he can't act on his perceptions. He asks to see the headmaster, the headmaster refuses to see him, and Dr. Booth drives away meekly, leaving his son behind. In the last third of the story, he gets lost again, stops the car, and is flooded with a horrifying realization: The lies he has told himself about himself have caused him to steal from his son what is rightfully his—the dreamy unproductiveness of childhood. These lies, beaten into Dr. Booth by a brutal father, amount to a hatred of himself as a child, of his own child, of childhood itself. There's nothing novel about a father reproducing the abuse he suffered as a child, but Wolff turns a stale situation into a fresh study of self-betrayal, and how it passes from generation to generation.

Fiction lies, Frank Kermode has written, because it ends. Wolff's more memorable stories, as well as his remarkable memoirs, thwart that sense of closure. They spin the illusion of open possibility. Kermode quotes the philosopher Ortega y Gasset, "Whether he be original or plagiarist, man is the novelist of himself. ... To be free means to be lacking in constitutive identity, not to have subscribed to a determined being, to be able to be other than what one was." It does not seem coincidental that Wolff's most protean narratives draw heavily upon his autobiographical experiences. Wolff, at his best, is truly a novelist of himself. His feats of self-invention offer a compelling rebuttal both to the fabulists whose stories fall so short of reality that they have to borrow the truth guarantee of memoir—if the lies rang truer, they could be published as fiction—and to those who denounce the faking of memoir as some sort of heinous crime, rather than the failed act of literature it is.

bushisms

Bushism of the Day

By Jacob Weisberg

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 12:42 PM ET

"Soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen, and Coastmen—Coast Guardmen, thanks for coming, thanks for wearing the uniform."—the Pentagon, March 19, 2008

Click [here](#) to see video of Bush's comments. The Bushism is at 2:04.

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

chatterbox

Hillary's Rev. Wright

His name is Richard Mellon Scaife.

By Timothy Noah

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 6:47 PM ET

Hillary Clinton [has told the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*](#) that *she* would have left *her* church if *her* pastor had made divisive comments like those of Barack Obama's minister, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. "He would not have been my pastor," sniffed La Clinton. "You don't choose your family, but you choose what church you want to attend."

The obvious reply is that you also choose which ministers receive the honor of an invitation to a White House prayer breakfast addressed by the president of the United States. Well, OK, maybe *you* don't, but the *Clintons* did, back in 1998, when Bill Clinton was seeking political absolution for his affair with a White House intern. As the Obama campaign is all too happy to point out, Wright was invited to that breakfast. (Click [here](#) for a picture of Wright shaking President Clinton's hand.)

But I hope this riposte doesn't obscure a larger question. What the hell is Clinton doing meeting with reporters and editors of the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*? The *Tribune-Review* is a [money-losing fringe publication](#) published by Richard Mellon

Scaife, a bilious and wealthy crank who spent the 1990s manufacturing vile innuendo about the Clintons. If the "vast, right-wing conspiracy" on which first lady Hillary Clinton famously blamed her troubles can be said to exist, its chairman and chief executive officer was Scaife. Scaife gave the *American Spectator* [\\$2.3 million](#) to dig up dirt on Bill Clinton, and he used the *Tribune-Review* to spread, among other things, the reprehensible allegation that Hillary Clinton killed Vince Foster, a clinically depressed deputy White House counsel who committed suicide in 1993. Scaife was quoted more than once [calling](#) Foster's death "the Rosetta stone to the Clinton administration," adding in an interview with *George* magazine, "Once you solve that one mystery, you'll know everything that's going on or went on—I think there's been a massive coverup. ... Listen, [Bill Clinton] can order people done away with at his will. He's got the entire federal government behind him. ... God, there must be 60 people who have died mysteriously."

"Hate speech [is] unacceptable in any setting," Hillary Clinton today told the *Tribune-Review*. We turn now to [this excerpt](#) from a 1981 *Columbia Journalism Review* profile of Scaife by Karen Rothmyer, in which the reporter describes a conversation with the distinguished publisher and philanthropist:

"Mr. Scaife, could you explain why you give so much money to the New Right?"

"You fucking Communist cunt, get out of here."

Well. The rest of the five-minute interview was conducted at a rapid trot down Park Street, during which Scaife tried to hail a taxi. Scaife volunteered two statements of opinion regarding his questioner's personal appearance—he said she was ugly and that her teeth were "terrible"—and also the comment that she was engaged in "hatchet journalism." His questioner thanked Scaife for his time. "Don't look behind you," Scaife offered by way of a goodbye.

Not quite sure what this remark meant, the reporter suggested that if someone were approaching it was probably her mother, whom she had arranged to meet nearby. "She's ugly, too," Scaife said, and strode off.

For whatever reason, Scaife decided last summer [to extend the hand of friendship](#) to Bill Clinton, whose post-presidency he professes to admire. Perhaps Scaife was looking to burnish his image with the judge then presiding over his extremely [nasty divorce](#). Maybe he wanted to get even with the former Mrs. Scaife, who apparently prefers Obama. (She [gave](#) Obama's campaign \$2,300 in February.) Bill Clinton overcame whatever

scruples he might harbor to raise money for his foundation. Hillary Clinton is now doing the same in the interest of her candidacy. She is free, of course, to associate with whomever she pleases. But she is not free, while paddling the sewers with Scaife, to judge Obama publicly for belonging to Wright's church. Compared with Scaife, Wright is St. Francis of Assisi. The only possible reason why any Pennsylvanian might judge Wright more harshly than Scaife is that Scaife is white and Wright is black. That must be obvious even to Hillary as she cozies up to this repulsive billionaire.

[*Update, March 26: On National Review's "The Corner,"* Byron York [observes](#) (from watching a [video](#) of Clinton's interview at the *Tribune-Review*; I couldn't get my computer to download the damn thing) that Scaife himself attended the interview, and sat on Hillary's right.]

chatterbox

The Clairvoyant Times

The Obama Messiah Watch, Part 11.

By Timothy Noah

Monday, March 24, 2008, at 8:12 PM ET

Is Barack Obama the Resurrection and the Life ? To answer this question, *Slate* has periodically gathered gratuitously adoring material from newspaper, television, and magazine coverage of the [U.S. senator from Illinois](#), [best-selling author](#), [Harvard Law Review president](#), [Men's Vogue cover model](#), [two-time Grammy winner](#), [efficient note-taker](#), [physics wunderkind](#), [descendent of George Washington's great-great-great-great-great grandfather](#), [teenage jazz enthusiast](#), [possible telepathic communicator with space aliens from distant galaxies](#), [improvement on all civil rights gains since 1957](#), [calmer of turbulent Iownas](#), [bearer of photographic halos](#), and [front-running candidate](#) for the Democratic presidential nomination.

In today's installment, we consider the following Page One headline in the March 23 *New York Times*: "[Obama's Talk Fuels Easter Sermons](#)." This headline is a miracle no less bedazzling than Christ's resurrection. Consider: In order to make this Easter Sunday edition of the *Times*, it had to be written, *at the very latest*, on Saturday evening. From this I conclude that *Times* reporters Laurie Goodstein and Neela Banerjee, or perhaps their assignment editor, were blessed with a holy vision of sermons yet to be recited.

But wait, you saith. Goodstein and Banerjee interviewed a number of ministers *in advance* about what they intended to put into their sermons. This is Reporting, not Divine Revelation. But I defy any and all unbelievers to identify a *single minister* quoted or paraphrased in this story, by name or even on a not-for-

attribution basis, who actually says he or she *intends to discuss Obama's March 18 speech on race* (much-praised by commentators within the secular realm, [including me](#)). All we get is an unspecified "many pastors" who told the *Times* that "they felt compelled to talk about it." When an unspecified "many" is said to have said or done something in a news story, and not a single one of these "many" is cited thereafter, that sets off my miracle detector.

Let's take a closer look, shall we?

The first minister quoted is the Rev. William H. Curtis of Mount Ararat Baptist Church in Pittsburgh. He saith:

"At the end of the day, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ makes it possible for even an African-American and a female to articulate the hopes and dreams of America, and do so with the hope of becoming president. Isn't that wonderful?"

"It's possible because we do believe that humanity has redeeming qualities, and the resurrection of Christ gives us that faith," said Mr. Curtis, who is president of the Hampton Ministers Conference, a national association of black ministers.

Well said. But there's nothing in that quote to indicate what the good reverend actually *intends to say* in his Easter sermon, much less that he will talk about Obama's speech.

Moving on to Philip L. Blackwell, senior pastor at the First United Methodist Church at the Chicago Temple, from whom we learn that he will "weave an anecdote into his sermon about a black friend of his who had been stopped by the police, who were suspicious because he was driving an expensive car, which he owned":

"The church needs to be a community within which the pain can be shared," said Mr. Blackwell, who is white and leads an urban, racially mixed congregation. "The grievances can be aired, and the power of that can be directed toward the 'new creation' that is portrayed in the Resurrection."

Here we make a little progress. The Rev. Blackwell *does* tell us something that will be in his Easter sermon. Unfortunately, he doesn't say *anything* about Obama's speech or even more generally about the Democratic field (as the Rev. Curtis did). He just says he's going to talk about racism, as ministers often do. We hear much the same from Monsignor Patrick Bishop, of Transfiguration Catholic Church in Marietta, Ga., and from the

Very Rev. Tracey Lind, dean of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Cleveland. Lind, at least, is willing (perhaps after a desperate plea from one of the four other *Times* reporters corralled into contributing to the story; they're listed at its bottom) to credit Obama with rolling away from Jesus' tomb the "pervasive stone of racism." But Lind doesn't say she's going to mention Obama in her sermon and says nothing to indicate that Obama's speech inspired her to discuss racism in the sermon.

"Many ministers," we learn a few paragraphs down, "said they would preach without explicitly mentioning Mr. Obama because they wanted to avoid alienating politically diverse congregations. They are also aware that some churches accused of making political endorsements have seen their tax-exempt status investigated by the [Internal Revenue Service](#)."

Would that be the same "many pastors" who "felt compelled to talk about" Obama's speech? If so, then what we've learned is that a lot of ministers *would like to* ("feel compelled to") talk about Obama's speech but *aren't going to*, except elliptically. But the *Times* doesn't cite any individual ministers saying even *that*.

The tone of the story grows ever-more desperate: "The Wright controversy is a natural topic for those in the United Church of Christ, a predominantly white denomination that includes Mr. Obama's and Mr. Wright's church, Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago (the largest church in the denomination)." But not even the minister slotted to preach *Trinity's* Easter sermon—the Rev. James A. Forbes—will supply the *Times'* desperately sought confirmation that he intends to talk about Obama's speech. *And this is where the whole controversy started!* Talk about ingratitude!

In the entire *Times* piece, the only minister to be found addressing head-on the question of whether he'll preach about Obama's speech is the Rev. Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals and lead pastor at Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minn. Unfortunately, Anderson's definitive answer is that he *won't* mention it, because Easter is about Jesus, not politics, and he doubts other evangelicals will, either. Rats.

A small breakthrough near the story's end: The Rev. Kenneth L. Samuel, pastor of Victory Church in Stone Mountain, Ga., says he *might* discuss ... *the Rev. Jeremiah Wright*, whose controversial utterances supplied the occasion for Obama's speech. "The basic thrust of much of my preaching resonates with Dr. Wright," Samuel tells the *Times*. "I don't think I'm necessarily trying to preach people into anger, but I am trying to help people become conscious, become aware, to realize our power to make change in society." I interpret this to mean that *if* the Rev. Samuel mentions Wright, it will be to do precisely what Obama *didn't* do, i.e., *defend* Wright's angry and divisive statements.

In sum, we have an intensively reported Page One story that fails utterly to provide any evidence of its very appealing premise. Hence, divination. Perhaps the angel Gabriel came down from heaven to tell *New York Times* Executive Editor Bill Keller that the nation's ministers would discuss Obama's speech. Or maybe the *Times* just figured that with all the Christian houses of worship that dot this great and good land, surely *some* of them would end up devoting *some* of their Easter sermons to Obama's speech. One man's "some" is another man's "many." If examples couldn't be scared up until after the fact, so be it.

Obama Messiah Watch archive:

Jan. 29, 2007: [Took very few notes in class!](#)

Feb. 5, 2007: [Mastered laws governing universe!](#)

Feb. 7, 2007: [Shares ancestor with George Washington!](#)

Feb. 9, 2007: [Dug jazz when he was still a middle-schooler!](#)

Feb. 13, 2007: [Communicates \(possibly\) with space aliens!](#)

Feb. 14, 2007: [Better than civil rights!](#)

April 4, 2007: [Accept no substitutes.](#)

Sept. 12, 2007: [Calms turbulent Iowans!](#)

Feb. 13, 2008: [Michelle Obama's halo!](#)

March 2, 2008: [Reuters Claps Horns on Hillary](#)

Convictions

Secrecy Smackdown

Clashing over the wisdom and legality of newspaper articles about domestic surveillance.

Friday, March 28, 2008, at 10:14 AM ET

corrections

Corrections

Friday, March 28, 2008, at 7:21 AM ET

In the March 26 "[Press Box](#)," Jack Shafer mistakenly stated that a drug party described in a *Time* magazine story took place on Cape Cod. It took place in New Jersey.

In the March 26 "[Television](#)," Troy Patterson misidentified Troy Aikman as Troy Aiken.

In the March 25 "[Other Magazines](#)" item on *Vogue*, Morgan Smith gave the wrong first name for Evelyn Nesbit's benefactor Stanford White.

In the March 22 "[Today's Papers](#)," Morgan Smith misidentified a region between Pakistan and

Afghanistan as a "border with Pakistan." It should have read a "border with Afghanistan."

In the March 21 "[Culturebox](#)," Paul Collins incorrectly referred to New York Telephone as NYNEX in pre-1984 references.

In the March 21 "[Explainer](#)," Michelle Tsai understated the relative density of water to air. Water is more than 800 times denser than air.

In the March 21 "[Politics](#)," John Dickerson incorrectly said that the branch of the military being spoofed in the movie *Stripes* was the Marines. The correct branch is the Army.

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

dear prudence

Generation Y Me?

My perfectionist boss is a tightwad with praise. Plus, should my parents help pay off my student loans?

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 7:40 AM ET

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

Dear Prudence,

I'm an ambitious recent college graduate. Six months ago, I moved to Washington, D.C., and was lucky enough to land a well-paying job with great career prospects as an assistant at a law firm. The problem is that one of the partners I assist is particularly challenging. She's intelligent and distinguished, but she is also a perfectionist. She's an extremely daunting supervisor—especially for a legal neophyte and nonperfectionist like me. I'm functioning in high gear all day long, but I struggle to keep up. What's worse is that she is heavy on the criticism and light on the positive reinforcement. A simple mistake like forgetting to put the "Northwest" at the end of a Washington, D.C., address in her appointment schedule will set off a string of negative interactions, while a perfectly orchestrated event will maybe muster an e-mail saying "Tks." Our exchanges often leave me fuming yet stuck without a venue for venting. At what point can I turn to my boss and say, "Hey, I need things to be different around here" without sounding like an ingrate for the great opportunity that I have.

—Deterred in the District

Dear Deterred,

At any point, you can turn to her and say, "I need things to be different around here." She will likely agree and respond, "Let's start by having you clear out your desk by noon." Sure, your job's daunting, but you have chosen to work in a high-pressure field in which every detail counts. (And if she has an appointment, she doesn't want to get in a cab without knowing what quadrant of the city she's headed to.) You may have picked up by now that people don't get to be top partners at law firms because of their "Don't worry, that's close enough" and "Let's put it off until *mañana*" attitudes. But it turns out your frustration with your boss is part of common generational miscommunication. Jeffrey Zaslow had a [column](#) in the *Wall Street Journal* describing young workers' need for and expectation of constant praise, and how some employers are realizing that they'd better be generous with the stroking if they want to retain them. But the essential problem for you is that given your boss' personality and demands, she doesn't think "I'm a nonperfectionist" excuses you from doing things perfectly for her. You've only been out of school for a few months, so why don't you think of working for this partner as legal boot camp? It's going to be tough and sometimes unpleasant, but if you stick with it, you will come away with a set of skills no amount of flattery will provide. And when you get one of her "Tks" messages, realize it's the equivalent of getting a smile out of a drill sergeant.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence Video: Virtual Teen Romance

Dear Prudie,

I am a 26-year-old just out of college, and I recently started my first full-time position. I have been paying my school loans back on my own since I graduated, but I'm not able to save much month-to-month. My parents are divorced and somewhat low-income. My dad supported me a little through school, and my mom gave me a little money when I needed it. Neither has offered to help pay back my loans, although they both stressed the importance of getting a college education. I want to bring this topic up with them to see if they are willing to help, but I hate talking to them about money, especially because of their financial situations. I'm worried that they will say I should be capable of making the payments since I have this new job. But I really feel that they should offer to assist with these loans. Am I wrong? If not, how do I ask my parents to help?

—Needs Help With Loans

Dear Needs Help,

I don't want to sound like this is Dump on Millennials Day, but I'm with your parents. I do have a lot of sympathy for young people who come out of college with sometimes crushing debt.

But your parents were right to encourage you to get your degree, and it sounds as if they stretched financially to do what they could to help you. But now that you've got it and have landed your first big job, they must feel their efforts and yours have been vindicated. You mention that they are both alone and have little income. But think of what happens down the road when they're retired, or develop health issues, and don't have any financial cushion because they kept giving to you to make your young life a little easier. It's actually in your personal interest to keep your parents as solvent as possible—won't it be you they turn to if they find themselves old and in financial need? Appreciate that even if things are tight now, your parents have done all they could to ensure you have a more prosperous life than theirs.

—Prudie

Dear Prudie,

I have been dating a wonderful young woman for over a year. We just got engaged. She is smart and witty, and I am very much in love with her. The only real issue I have is her constant need to correct, contradict, and one-up me. Usually, her ubiquitous arguments have no bearing on the subject matter or are without any logic or reason. This isn't about me being right; this is about me not being able to express any sort of opinion or observation about anything without being contradicted. Some days, it's a real mental beat-down. I've talked to her about this before, and I have no doubt she is aware of the problem. I'm starting to think she does it just to further inflate her ego. How can I deal?

—Not Always Wrong

Dear Not Always,

My husband says since he's gotten used to this, you can, too. But, of course, I think he's wrong. I suggest several possible approaches: You could develop a [dissociative disorder](#), which would allow you to enter a state in which either your fiancée or yourself ceases to seem real. Or you could say, "I realize I've made a terrible mistake. The wedding is off, but I want you to keep the engagement ring." Or you could tell her, "I love you, you're smart and witty and wonderful. But I cannot live with your unrelenting put-downs. Either we solve this problem now, or we can't go on." Whichever approach you take, it would be worth it to find out why you have decided you should spend the rest of your life with someone who constantly lambastes you.

—Prudie

Dear Prudie,

I recently had breast-enhancement surgery, and there is a noticeable difference. My question is, How do I respond when people make remarks about it? I know that it is an obvious change, and people do notice, but it is not as if I'm flaunting it in revealing tops. How do I respond when someone says, "Wow, you got a boob job!" I find it very rude when mere acquaintances

make such comments, as I would not comment if they got dentures!

—Newly Enhanced

Dear Newly,
There's a Bible verse for every situation, and [Psalms 23.5](#) seems appropriate here. But what a bunch of jugheads your acquaintances are if they feel the need to keep abreast of your personal developments. Don't get into a tit for tat with them. Just turn away as you say, "Ta ta."

—Prudie

Deathwatch The Hillary Deathwatch

Gauging the odds that Clinton will win the nomination.

By Christopher Beam, Chadwick Matlin, and Chris Wilson
Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 6:47 PM ET

Hillary Clinton is as good as dead. This became the consensus over the past week, when the media awoke en masse to the dual reality that 1) Clinton can't close the pledged-delegate gap and 2) Obama has her beat in the popular vote. But the Clinton campaign shows [no signs of slowing](#)—she said herself she's prepared to compete for [at least three more months](#). So the question now is not just "How dead is she?" but "When will she realize it?"

In the tradition of *Slate's* [Saddameter](#) (gauging the likelihood of invading Iraq), the [Clintometer](#) (measuring the chances of a Lewinsky-related ousting), and the [Gonzo-meter](#) (charting the attorney general's demise), we bring you the **Hillary Deathwatch**, a daily update on Hillary Clinton's dwindling chances of winning the Democratic nomination.

To start off, we're putting her odds at a generous **12 percent**. (Last week, a Clinton campaign official [gave her](#) one-in-10 odds.) At the moment, polls indicate that Obama has survived the Jeremiah Wright flap (for now). Clinton's Bosnia blunder has metastasized from a headache into a five-day circus. Bill Richardson finally climbed down from his fence onto Obama's side. And a Michigan court yesterday [deemed](#) the state's Jan. 15 primary unconstitutional and declined to order a revote, effectively smothering the last glimmer of hope for a *deus ex Michiganana* bailout. Meanwhile, a [new poll](#) puts her favorability rating at 37 percent—its lowest since March 2001.

That said, Clinton does have a shot. A heroic margin of victory in Pennsylvania and every subsequent primary, an implosion of

the Obama campaign, a sudden mass epiphany on the part of superdelegates, or some combination of the three could lead to a Clinton nomination. But to be honest, we don't expect Hillary's chances to climb much higher than 20 percent. Hence the sinking ship.

We'll adjust Clinton's odds as polls waver, surrogates resign, superdelegates bail, and, of course, voters vote. We'll also keep an eye on indicators like fundraising, political futures, media coverage (always reliable), and the windchill factor in Scranton, Pa. Check back every day for updates, and send your own prognostications to hillarydeathwatch@gmail.com.

did you see this?

New Footage: Hillary Wasn't Lying

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 6:59 PM ET

dispatches

"Iraq Is Not a Suitable Place To Live as a Human"

Why more than 1 million Iraqi exiles remain in Syria.

By Deborah Amos

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 7:49 AM ET

DAMASCUS, Syria—Five years after the invasion of Iraq, the U.S. and Iraqi governments claim the country is becoming a less dangerous place. For most Iraqi refugees in Syria, the upbeat assessments don't count for much. Regional refugee communities are linked to Iraq by cell phone, text messages, and Internet chat lines. Whatever the Iraqi government's sunny assessment, the opinions that count are reports from the ground: family members who warn that it is still not safe to return.

There has been some movement over the past six months. In Damascus, the number of new arrivals has leveled off. The refugee neighborhoods are less crowded than a few months ago, and rents have dropped, but more than 1 million Iraqi exiles remain in Syria.

Precisely how many Iraqis are here and how many have gone back to Baghdad is hard to say. In every other refugee crisis, "we would count the tents and multiply by five to get the number of refugees," says Mark Schnellbaecher of Catholic Relief Services. But this refugee population is different. More than 70 percent of the Iraqi exiles in Syria are from Baghdad's middle class. There are no refugee camps here; Iraqis are permitted to rent

apartments, most often in the poorest suburbs, which can mask the severity of their troubles.

"There will be a large number who will continue to stay, and that is part of our problem," says Laurens Jolles, head of the [UNHCR](#) office in Damascus. He is exasperated by the donor community's demands for exact numbers. "There is wishful thinking that this population is going home, and there is less and less inclination for the donor countries to continue [giving]."

Waleed Arshad says he's never going back to Baghdad. He lives with his wife and two children on the outskirts of Damascus in a small apartment at the top of a winding, uneven set of concrete steps. The tiny rooms are separated by nylon curtains. Arshad's oil paintings are the only decoration on the peeling walls. His art supported him in Baghdad, but it finally drove him out of the city for good, he says.

Arshad was happy when American tanks rolled past his family home in the Dura neighborhood of Baghdad in the spring of 2003. "Art was a lie during Saddam's time," he says. Arshad decided to work with the Americans and signed on in November 2003. A graduate of Baghdad's Institute of Fine Arts, his first endeavor as an artist in post-Saddam Iraq was painting Arabic-language signs that read, "Halt, do not come closer than 100 meters. Deadly force will be used." He hated the job.

"After I started working inside the base, I suggested I could paint portraits. I soon became famous, because every soldier wanted one." Arshad says he painted thousands of oil portraits at the U.S. Army base near his home. When he became overwhelmed with the work, he farmed out portrait commissions to his friends from art school. The American soldiers even allowed him to have a small gallery on the base, he says. But the dangers of working for the U.S. military forced him to live on the base and travel home only sporadically.

In the summer of 2005, two unfamiliar men with long, unkempt beards pulled alongside him in a car as he left the base. "Are you dealing with the unbelievers?" one barked out in an Arabic accent that was not Iraqi. Arshad told the men he was visiting because his cousin had been arrested by the Americans, but one of the bearded men warned him he would be killed if he ever came near the base again.

Arshad was afraid. He says he stayed at home for 10 days, until pleas from U.S. soldiers who wanted portraits convinced him to return to work. When he escaped a second threat from the same bearded man, the soldiers urged him to paint his would-be assassin. This time, intelligence officers at the Army base made sure Arshad's art received a wider audience, turning his work into a "wanted" poster that soon appeared on traffic circles and blast walls around Baghdad.

"Six weeks later, there was an explosion in the heart of Baghdad. I was shocked that it was the same guy who threatened me," says Arshad. "He was a Saudi." His tormentor had blown himself up and killed dozens of Iraqi day laborers waiting for work. Arshad had escaped one threat, but he knew his troubles were far from over.

Within a few weeks, members of the Mahdi militia, followers of Muqtada Sadr, arrested Arshad at a checkpoint. His "crime" was having two full cans of beer in the back seat of his car.

"I was taken to an Islamic court inside a mosque and held for four hours. There was a judge in this prison, and he was handing out sentences: flogging for some, death for others."

Arshad begged them to let him go, promising to repent. They knew nothing about his portrait work with the U.S. military. But this was one warning too many, and Arshad says he was determined to flee the country. He took his wife and two children to Syria on May 18, 2005. Within a few weeks, his parents were forced out of their home in Dura. This was a mixed neighborhood, and Shiites were being "cleansed" from the area by radical Sunni militants.

Since he had been threatened by both Sunnis and Shiites, I asked Arshad whether he identified himself as a Sunni or a Shiite.

"I don't really know, but you have to know to live in Iraq," says Arshad, who has a Sunni father and a Shiite mother—not unusual among Baghdad's urban elite. "This is one of the reasons I left. One reason I won't go back. I have to feel myself as a human being, and I can't be a real human being if I have to declare whether I am Shiite or Sunni."

This is a common fear among Iraqi exiles. Returning to Iraq means choosing to live in Sunni or Shiite enclaves divided by high concrete walls. It means choosing a side and staking your life on that decision. The real-estate dilemma dictates the choice. Arshad's family home is now lost, because it is occupied by another family, which is likely to have been cleansed from yet another neighborhood. Moving back to Baghdad means choosing a new neighborhood, a new Iraq.

As difficult as it is to survive in Damascus, Arshad says he will wait things out in Syria. He has joined thousands of other Iraqis hoping for resettlement, a rescue that may never come.

Sam, a lawyer from Baghdad, has another plan for his future. We meet in a busy cafe, where Sam, in a leather jacket and a Dolce & Gabbana T-shirt, chain-smokes as he describes his life in Damascus over the past two years. Inflation is rampant; even potatoes are now expensive for the poor. The Syrian government does not permit Iraqis to work, although there is a thriving illegal job market, especially for child labor in factories,

restaurants, and street markets. Sam tried to open an Internet cafe, but he ran afoul of the security police. Now, he says, he wants to use what little savings he has left to pay a smuggler to take him to Greece.

Every Iraqi here knows someone who has made it out by the smuggling routes. They also know someone who has been arrested on arrival or cheated out of his or her life savings for a chance at escape. But the underground route is a gamble those Iraqis who can afford it are willing to take.

Greece has become the preferred destination. Sweden was once considered the safest haven, but in February, the Swedish government rejected 72 percent of Iraqi asylum applicants. This winter, Sweden signed an agreement with the Iraqi government to allow forced repatriation, and more than 11,000 Iraqis are likely to be sent back to Baghdad after their asylum claims are rejected. The backlog of Iraqis is still flowing through the illegal pipeline. A new U.N. report shows that Iraqis were the largest group seeking asylum in the European Union.

"Iraq is not a suitable place to live as a human. There are no dreams left in Iraq," says Sam, who didn't tell me his last name. "Everything is broken there." For Sam and thousands of other Iraqi exiles in Damascus, the recent lull in the killings in Baghdad is not enough to entice them home. They have middle-class values and middle-class dreams. As long as Iraq cannot accommodate their vision for an ordinary future, they will struggle in the uncertain life of exile.

drink

A History of the Hangover

Their prevalence during recessions; baseball and the hangover; the search for a cure; are all hangovers bad?

By Inigo Thomas

Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 8:06 AM ET

There is no such thing as the perfect hangover, although anyone who has known more than one of them seems to have the perfect hangover cure. The roast beef sandwich, I've heard it said repeatedly, can't be matched.

Hangovers are not serious enough to be considered a medical condition, and there is, actually, no remedy for them—apart from old wives' tales and roast beef. They're neither a bad cold nor the flu, though they're serious enough to keep some in bed. But are hangovers always bad?

Hangovers were for a long time associated with stock market crashes; the 1929 crash has been written about as if it were the

hangover after the wild 1920s. Whether or not traders are more likely to hit the bottle after precipitous falls in the value of their shares is hard to say—not least because it isn't clear what's going on with markets. Are the fallen masters of the universe at Bear Stearns drinking away what remains of their portfolios? One hopes that an enterprising sociologist is doing fieldwork in the bars near the bank's headquarters.

It's easy to understand why, after a swift turn of fate, some men would resort to drink to numb the pain of the losses. But is it possible that it's not so much the drunkenness these men are after as its aftermath? A hangover provides something less intangible and more felt to consider than the horror of newfound poverty. One opinion has it that in circumstances such as those, a hangover isn't a disaster; during one, you decide to begin life all over again, swearing that, no, there will never, not ever, be another experience like this one. The born-again movement has always seemed to be an alcohol-related phenomenon.

Life-changing hangovers are part of popular myth. In the movie *The Philadelphia Story*, if it weren't for a hangover and how it was arrived at, there would be almost no twist to the plot. Tracy, played by Katherine Hepburn, realizes she's not in love with the man she's about to marry in the midst of such a bad hangover that she can't remember what happened the night before. In the movies—or some of them, at least—the hangover is often a form of punctuation or a paragraph shift, a moment of blistering agony but also of remarkable clarity. (In real life, the clearest of thoughts don't always emerge when you're trying suppress the throbbing going on inside you head.)

How many hangovers there are in the United States a year is an impossible question to answer: Different people react to drink in different ways. In Scotland, a country famous for its drinking, the hangover remedy bought in shops, Irn Bru—iron brew—is known by some as the true national drink, more than the scotch that has you drinking Irn Bru the next morning. It is said to be made from girders and, like spinach, gives you enormous strength—so much of it that you can will yourself out of any old hangover.

Edmund Wilson said he once inflicted a hangover on T.S. Eliot. "I gave him bootleg gin," Wilson told a friend about an evening he spent with the poet. "He is so shy that you have to drink with him to talk to him—and we both got into bad condition. The next morning he had an awful hangover and said his joints creaked, and I felt as if I had wantonly broken some rare and exquisite vase. I have felt guilty about it ever since." Remorse is one reaction to a hangover, even when it's not your own. And though the hangover itself always dissipates, the remorse sometimes does not, often because it's about neither the hangover nor the drink but something else—such as a broken vase or a lost friend.

But if remorse is one part of the hangover, so is resolve—the refusal to give into the worst of it. This resolve isn't always there; capitulation is just as common. But the refusal to give in, or give up, isn't uncommon, and it's not always fueled by Irn Bru. Years ago, the story goes, an English cricket team toured India, and a maharajah believed he could influence what would be a five-day game by getting two of the players drunk. So he did, and the two men woke up the next morning with bad hangovers. Worse, when the game began, they were the first two players to bat. Yet they survived the entire day—all six hours of it. The adversity of their hangovers appeared to introduce further circumspection to their playing. As in baseball, keeping your eye on the ball is essential for a batsman, and I've heard this tale told to numerous players feeling the worse for wear before the start of a game—to remind them that this may be, improbably, their best day.

Kingsley Amis, for some the hangover godhead, knew all about the resolution associated with hangovers. He said of them that they exerted "a great restraining influence" on life. He also laid down the principle that anyone who says they have a hangover has no hangover, an observation that others less experienced than he might disagree with. Then again, it's not as if experience or another person's wisdom is tremendously helpful in identifying a hangover, and being told about hangovers worse than your own is really no cure.

The Scots, the Irish, the Welsh, and the English seem to have special relationships with the hangover. Why do societies drink? The answer is obvious, in a way, but not entirely. Several years ago, *Nature*, the science journal, published a report suggesting that drink was, from a biological point of view, engrained among the British. There are historical reasons for that. Fermented drinks contained none of the bugs that could be found in water. In Dublin in the 1940s, it wasn't unusual for people to give the young children Guinness when the water wasn't potable. Contamination-free water is one of the greatest public-health achievements of the last 150 years, and although a glass of water is often the last thing anyone with a hangover wants, it's the absence of water that's [partly responsible](#) for the hangover.

Not that there was any peculiarly Irish, Scottish, English, or Welsh about bad water or about drinking brewed or fermented drinks—or about the hangover. F. Scott Fitzgerald was a bit of an expert. "The hangover," he said in a description of New York in the 1920s, "became a part of the day as well allowed-for as the Spanish siesta." The test pilots Tom Wolfe wrote about in *The Right Stuff* operated on conditions of a near-permanent hangover. It was their fuel. Flying and drinking and drinking and driving was the military ethos—that's what you did. That's easier to understand among people for whom there really may not be much of a tomorrow. Not everyone is a test pilot living with the prospect of their next and potentially fatal crash.

Drinking and hangovers were for years part of the legislative process on Capitol Hill. In Sean Wilentz's *The Triumph of American Democracy*, 850 pages pass with barely a drink mentioned. That's a remarkable achievement; in reality, congressional committee chambers in the first half of the 19th century were stashed with liquor every night when there were to be deliberations over a bill, as Joanne Freeman, an immensely witty historian at Yale, pointed out in a recent talk about the violence among congressmen in antebellum Washington. Much of the violence on Capitol Hill during that period—and there were an immense number of fights within Congress before the Civil War—was fuelled by drink and hangovers. And much of the drinking, one suspects, was to fulfill that old Scottish piece of drinking wisdom known as the hair of the dog: The drink to get you out of this hangover and into the next one.

Christopher Hitchens has written memorably about smoking and drinking; in fact, there's almost no better place to begin a consideration of the hangover than with an essay he wrote in the early 1990s on drinking and smoking, which appears in his book *For the Sake of Argument*. As Hitchens points out, there has been a nicotine ingredient in the modern hangover, and quite a few people swear that it wasn't the drink that did them in the night before; it was the cigarettes. "Only a fool expects smoking and drinking to bring happiness," Hitchens wrote, "just as only a dolt expects money to do so. Like money, booze and fags are happiness, and people cannot expect to pursue happiness in moderation." In the absence of moderation, there will always be hangovers, and when one has finally receded there will sometimes be the elation at having seen it off—sometimes not.

Hangovers are typically of the morning, but they can last all day. Eventually, they pass. Life moves on. *Never again* is something that you say.

election scorecard

They Like Me, They Like Me Not

Hillary Clinton's unfavorable ratings spike to their highest ever.

By Mark Blumenthal and Charles Franklin

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 4:41 PM ET

After weeks of the Rev. Wright controversy swirling around cable news, it's Hillary Clinton—not Barack Obama—whose unfavorability ratings are at their highest since she became a senator. According to an NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll ([PDF](#)), 48 percent of the country has somewhat negative or very negative opinions about Clinton. That number includes Republicans and Democrats, but far outstrips Obama's 32 percent and John McCain's 25. Obama's negatives have barely moved since March 7, before Wright's comments started making the rounds.

Posted by Chadwick Matlin, March 27, 4:41 p.m.

Delegates at stake:

Democrats	Republicans
Total delegates: 4,049 Total delegates needed to win: 2,025	Total delegates: 2,380 Total delegates needed to win: 1,191
Delegates won by each candidate: Obama: 1,611; Clinton: 1,480; Edwards (out): 26	Delegates won by each candidate: McCain: 1,325; Huckabee (out): 267; Paul: 16
Source: CNN	Source: CNN

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

explainer Is Sunbathing Good for You?

Fact-checking new claims from the Indoor Tanning Association.

By Nina Shen Rastogi

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 7:06 PM ET

On Wednesday, the Indoor Tanning Association ran [a full-page ad](#) (PDF) in the *New York Times* claiming that "there is no compelling scientific evidence that tanning causes melanoma." It went on to say that "recent research indicates that the benefits of moderate exposure to sunlight"—namely, increased levels of vitamin D—"outweigh the hypothetical risks." Wait, is sunbathing good for you?

Only for a few minutes. Exposure to sunlight (or the UV lamps in a tanning bed) does cause the skin to produce vitamin D, which has [a host of salubrious benefits](#), including the maintenance of normal blood levels of phosphorus and calcium and the promotion of healthy bones. Studies have shown that many segments of the population [aren't getting enough](#) of the vitamin, which may even aid in the [prevention of cancer, diabetes, and HIV](#). According to almost all experts, most people could cover their bases by getting just five to 15 minutes of sunlight two to three times a week. (You'll need a little more if you're darker-skinned, a little less if you live near the equator.) [Supplements](#) are also an option. So even the palest sun worshipper doesn't need to get a tan for a vitamin fix.

So, does tanning cause melanoma? First, to be clear, it isn't tanning that's the problem—it's the sun exposure that causes both the suntan and, as most dermatologists believe, the cancer.

Second, there are two kinds of skin cancer: melanoma and nonmelanoma. [Nonmelanoma skin cancers](#), by far the more common variety, usually aren't fatal, though their removal can be painful and cause scarring. Because these lumpy, scaly areas usually appear on parts of the body that get regular sun exposure, and because they are found on outdoor workers more frequently than on indoor workers, most doctors assume that solar radiation is a leading cause of nonmelanoma cancer.

Melanoma is the deadlier of the two, responsible for [4 percent](#) of skin-cancer diagnoses but [75 percent](#) of all skin-cancer deaths. Most doctors believe that excessive exposure to the sun (even in relatively short, intense bursts) and, consequently, to UV radiation are the major risk factors for melanoma. Studies have shown that the more sunburns you've had in your life, the higher your chance of developing the disease. However, the exact causes of the disease aren't fully understood. People who doubt the sun-cancer link point to the fact that melanoma can sometimes appear in areas that get zero sun exposure, such as the bowels and the soles of the feet. They also note that melanoma is more common among indoor than outdoor workers, though other doctors counter that this is because cubicle dwellers are more likely to go on vacations where they spend hours baking in the sun.

Along with its full-page ad, the Indoor Tanning Association submitted a letter to the *Times* that attempted to substantiate the health claims, sentence-by-sentence. However, the evidence provided is rather selective: For example, the [paper](#) from the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences that the ITA uses to provide sole support for its claim that "the benefits of moderate exposure to sunlight outweigh the hypothetical risks" also concedes that "solar radiation is the main cause of skin cancers." Meanwhile, indoor tanning isn't any safer than outdoor sunbathing—in fact, the [FDA](#) notes that it may be more dangerous, since tanning-bed users expose their entire bodies at once to a uniform amount of UV radiation. The [American](#)

[Academy of Dermatology](#) has called for a ban on all indoor tanning equipment used for nonmedical purposes.

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

Explainer thanks Marie-France Demierre of the Boston University School of Medicine, and Sarah Longwell and Justin Wilson of the Indoor Tanning Association.

explainer

Airwaves Up for Grabs

How much free space is left in the broadcast spectrum?

By Chris Wilson

Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 7:27 PM ET

Just a day after [Verizon Wireless spent nearly \\$10 billion](#) in its bid for a valuable slice of the airwaves last week, Google [asked](#) the Federal Communications Commission to open up other unused pieces of the spectrum for wireless broadband. [The plan](#) (PDF) calls for allowing companies like Google and Microsoft to beam wireless Internet access on frequencies between those allocated for television channels—in the so-called "white space"—as well as frequencies reserved for channels that don't exist in a given area. How much of the broadcast spectrum is still up for grabs?

It depends where you are. The "broadcast spectrum" refers to a portion of the full [electromagnetic spectrum](#) that is ideal for telecommunication, with frequencies much lower than infrared or visible light. Federal law [grants the FCC the authority](#) to determine who can broadcast on which frequencies between 9 kHz and 400 GHz, i.e. the entire range of radio waves and microwaves, to prevent interference between stations. For example, the 410 MHz band is reserved for radio astronomy, while the range from 88 to 108 MHz is for FM radio, as detailed in [this chart](#) (PDF). (If the government didn't keep track of who broadcast in which frequencies, there would be tremendous interference between broadcasts, making a clear signal very difficult to find in congested areas.) But frequencies allocated by the FCC aren't always in use. Whether a given region of the spectrum is occupied depends on the size and demand of the local population. An urban area with a lot of broadcast stations might fill up most of the spectrum allocated for radio and television, while a rural area would leave much of it unused.

Google's white-space plan concerns television broadcast frequencies, which are divided up by channel throughout the spectrum. The chunks that the FCC just auctioned off to Verizon

and others, in the [700 to 800 MHz range](#), have long been reserved for television stations broadcasting analog signals. But once TV broadcasting goes fully digital in February 2009, the stations will clear out of those frequencies. Meanwhile, companies are interested in using parts of the spectrum that are already allocated, but not always occupied. To accomplish this, they'd need to produce devices that can search for competing signals and suss out any frequencies that happen to be vacant. Proponents like Google say the vast majority of the airwaves go unused most of the time and will remain so until these devices are widespread.

So far, early testing of these "White Space Prototype Devices" has not gone particularly well. In an initial round [conducted in July 2007](#), two prototypes were either unable to detect competing signals or detected signals that were not actually present. (Microsoft claims they [sent a defective version](#) of their model to the FCC.) This poses a real problem for the white-space plan: If a device tries to initiate a broadcast at the same frequency as an existing signal that it failed to detect, it could cause interference. Digital broadcasts might begin to skip or freeze, like a scratched DVD. Opponents of the white-space plan, including the [National Association of Broadcasters](#), cite these reports as evidence that the technology is not ready for public consumption.

The FCC is currently conducting a [second round of tests](#).

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

explainer

Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow

Why do suicide bombers shave their bodies?

By Juliet Lapidus

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 6:31 PM ET

U.S. Forces raided [a suicide-bombing network](#) in Iraq over the weekend, killing 12 men in the process. Six of the dead had shaved off their body hair, which military officials said is "consistent with final preparation for suicide operations." Why would a terrorist shave before blowing himself up?

So he's clean when he enters heaven. Traditionally, Muslims purify corpses by washing the skin and nails and sometimes by shaving the pubic hair. But suicide attackers are deprived of a proper burial, since there are usually no remains. To compensate, the attackers shear themselves ahead of time, both to guarantee some level of cleanliness at the time of instant incineration and to prove extreme devotion to personal purity. Some scholars offer an alternative explanation: They believe that

suicide terrorists adopted the no-hair practice from the [Pashtun](#) tribesmen of Afghanistan, who shave their bodies before going into battle.

Hair removal is mentioned in Islamic law as a method of maintaining personal hygiene. In addition to nail clipping, the [sunnah](#) instructs Muslim men and women to shave or trim pubic hair regularly and to remove underarm hair. Men must also clip their mustaches. In some circumstances, Muslims are encouraged to shave their heads. For example, [Al-Bukhari](#), a ninth-century Muslim scholar who spent years collecting [hadith](#), quotes the prophet as saying "May Allah bless those who shaved" during the Hajj (pilgrimage); and the Quran states that "ye shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if Allah wills, with minds secure, heads shaved, hair cut short, and without fear."

Readers may recall the shaving custom from the media coverage of 9/11. In the aftermath of the attack, law enforcement agents discovered [a four-page document](#) in [Mohamed Atta's](#) baggage. He instructed his followers to "shave excess hair from the body and wear cologne" on the "last night." The application of perfume, like shaving, is often part of postmortem treatment in the Muslim world.

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

Explainer thanks Mushegh Asatryan of Yale University; Leor Halevi, author of Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society; Bernard Haykel of Princeton University; and Richard Wachtel of the Middle East Media Research Institute.

explainer

What's in a Passport File?

All the information your bank tells you to keep secret, and more.

By Juliet Lapidus

Monday, March 24, 2008, at 6:26 PM ET

The State Department revealed last week that the passport files of all three major presidential candidates [have been accessed improperly](#). Obama's records were breached on three occasions, including Friday, March 14, while the other two candidates' files were each compromised at least once. What's in a passport file?

All the information requested in a [passport application](#) (PDF). Specifically, the applicant's name, sex, marital status, mailing address at the time of application, occupation, and Social Security number. There's biographical information, including the applicant's date and place of birth; a brief physical description detailing the applicant's eye color, hair color, and height; and

basic data about the applicant's parents—i.e., names and place(s) of birth. The file also contains photocopies of identifying documents like marriage certificates, birth certificates, and passport-sized photographs.

Applicants who complete the optional section on their applications risk providing future hackers with access to a bit more information—namely, their e-mail address, employer, travel plans at the time of application, and the name, address, and telephone number of an emergency contact.

Additionally, passport records contain information on any attempts made by the applicant to change the status of his or her citizenship. Readers may remember this detail from [the last passport flap](#). During the 1992 presidential race, a rumor went around that Bill Clinton had sought to give up his U.S. citizenship while a student. In an effort to prove the rumor true, a George H.W. Bush appointee at the State Department, Elizabeth Tamposi, asked three aides to search Clinton's file for a renunciation letter. They never found one.

Some passport records also include investigative reports compiled before granting or denying an application. For example, State Department officials may call up court orders, arrest warrants, or financial reports as part of a background check to verify that the applicant has a right to a passport, and then attach copies of these documents to the file.

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

family

Death to Stuffed Animals!

The genius of Webkinz.

By Emily Bazelon

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 4:34 PM ET

Do stuffed animals have souls? Snort, and then consider how much energy is spent prompting children to look deeply into the glass eyes of the curly haired dog or bunny that will forever sit on its haunches before them. As the Skin Horse instructs in [The Velveteen Rabbit](#), the promise made to stuffed animals, urged on by the adults who give them as presents, is, "When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

Right. And so when the old bunny in the story becomes "a mass of scarlet fever germs" threatening the health of a sick and actually real little boy, the lesson is that his bunny should not be safely replaced by a nice, clean, new bunny. Oh, no. This would be an act of betrayal, because as every good child knows, you

are supposed to love your stuffed animal no matter how worn and dirty, and reject any shiny cheap-date substitute. This story doesn't grow old. Check out [The Jamie and Angus Stories](#), an updated (and, admittedly, quite lovely) rendering of the classic stuffed animal/child coupling.

All this anthropomorphizing is harmless, isn't it? Or even sweetly helpful, because it prods kids to form attachments and play make-believe? Stuffed animals do have that effect. My son Eli collected a soccer team's worth of them last night and propped them against each other at the head of his bed for a group photo, with Leo the small lion atop Gerry the large giraffe. Yes, cute. But also the prelude to rivers of tears. Because when stuffed animals get lost or destroyed, they are damnably hard to replace. Kids don't buy that they're fungible, just like a green Lego, because we've taught them that devotion to an artfully covered hunk of sawdust is a test of character and loyalty. Until now, when we will be delivered from all of this, by the genius of Webkinz.

Products like Webkinz are not, generally, my thing. The plush animals—OK, OK, [here's the link](#)—would seem, at first glance, to be a cunning and ever more commercial version of the old-fashioned variety. Each bear or tiger comes with its own code, which its kid companion/caretaker enters into the Web site. Next, the kid decorates his pet's house by earning points in inane game-playing followed by even more inane shopping. And *voilà*, there you are, fighting with your 8-year-old or even your 6-year-old about screen time. Or, worse, taking advantage of their preoccupation to make dinner, only to find that they've turned into bad-tempered, Web-addled mush.

Don't try to console yourself with the mantra that they're learning skills that will later serve them well in our technology-driven world. Using a mouse isn't like learning to ski. If you ask me, there's no need to do it from birth or even elementary school. [I agree with Emily Yoffe](#): Watching kids go online for more than five minutes makes me want to shoo them outside. (Even if I admit [Michael Agger is right](#) that they're just prepping for the real computer indulgences of the adult office.)

In any case, there have been no Webkinz at our house. Eli has a group of friends who trot out their animals with the special "W" symbol at recess, but since he'd rather play football, he hasn't much seemed to care. Until this week, when he flung himself at me and muttered two syllables over and over into my ear, which, upon repeated requests for translation, turned out to be the W-word. It was time for reconnaissance. I checked in with a few friends, who said they'd decided that Webkinz wasn't worth saying no to. The computer-based quizzes and shopping were silly and a time waster, but the whole thing seemed mostly harmless and not worth taking a stand on, given that everyone else around them was caving in.

This didn't seem likely to convince my husband, who is more of a screen-time stickler than I am. But then I called my friend Rachel. She has two daughters, Eva, who is 7, and Charlotte, who is 5. They saved up their money and bought a couple of Webkinz. Charlotte's was a white bunny named Easter—perfect, for a Jewish kid. The girls were happily playing with their new self-selected purchases as the family whizzed down East River Drive on a visit to Manhattan, and in a moment of breathtaking yet inevitable folly, Charlotte dangled Easter out the window. Then let go. Tears. Pandemonium. No way in hell to mount a rescue mission.

This is precisely the stuffed animal death that parents fear. Except that Eva made Charlotte see that it wasn't in fact a death—thanks, let me say it again, to the genius of Webkinz. The real Easter, she convinced her weeping sister by the time the car had reached Connecticut, was not the lost bunny who was already road soup. The real Easter was *in the computer*. The run-over toy didn't matter, really, because it was just that, a toy, "like there could be a toy of you and me, but that wouldn't be the real you and me," as Rachel, with Eva's words, explained it.

I like this definition of real a lot more than the Skin Horse's. So did Charlotte. Without a fuss, she ordered up another toy Easter. The box arrived yesterday and was opened with no hint of grief. The new Easter had its own soul, I mean code, so the girls decided to hand off the numbers for the road-soup incarnation to one of their friends. Now she is the keeper of the first Easter's soul.

The immortality of Webkinz may not make up for the incessant demands of your kid's bunny. "A 6-year-old turned my 4-year-old onto it, and now I spend MY time earning money for her online Tamagochi-like alley cat to buy it food, etc., and keep it from DYING!" my colleague Vivian Selbo laments. It's a trade-off: the beauty of instant replacement for the demands of online upkeep. I'm not sure where I come out. But I love the idea that even as Webkinz wreaks new havoc, the latest naked marketing ploy can at least kill off the false appeal of other stuffed animals. Sorry, Velveteen Rabbit, but that kid was better off with you in the trash heap.

fighting words

Blind Faith

The statements of clergymen like Jeremiah Wright aren't controversial and incendiary; they're wicked and stupid.

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, March 24, 2008, at 12:09 PM ET

It's been more than a month since I began warning Sen. Barack Obama that he would become answerable for his [revolting](#)

[choice of a family priest](#). But never mind that; the astonishing thing is that it's at least 11 months since he himself has known precisely the same thing. "If Barack gets past the primary," said the Rev. Jeremiah Wright to the [New York Times](#) in April of last year, "he might have to publicly distance himself from me. I said it to Barack personally, and he said yeah, that might have to happen." Pause just for a moment, if only to admire the sheer calculating self-confidence of this. Sen. Obama has long known perfectly well, in other words, that he'd one day have to put some daylight between himself and a bigmouth Farrakhan fan. But he felt he needed his South Side Chicago "base" in the meantime. So he coldly decided to double-cross that bridge when he came to it. And now we are all supposed to marvel at the silky success of the maneuver.

You often hear it said, of some political or other opportunist, that he would sell his own grandmother if it would suit his interests. But you seldom, if ever, see this notorious transaction actually being performed, which is why I am slightly surprised that Obama got away with it so easily. (Yet why do I say I am surprised? He still gets away with absolutely everything.)

Looking for a moral equivalent to a professional demagogue who thinks that AIDS and drugs are the result of a conspiracy by the white man, Obama settled on an 85-year-old lady named Madelyn Dunham, who spent a good deal of her youth helping to raise him and who now lives alone and unwell in a condo in Honolulu. It would be interesting to know whether her charismatic grandson made her aware that he was about to touch her with his grace and make her famous in this way. By sheer good fortune, she, too, could be a part of it all and serve her turn in the great enhancement.

This flabbergasting process, made up of glibness and ruthlessness in equal proportions, rolls on unstopably with a phalanx of reporters and men of the cloth as its accomplices. Look at the accepted choice of words for the ravings of Jeremiah Wright: *controversial*, *incendiary*, *inflammatory*. These are adjectives that might have been—and were—applied to many eloquent speakers of the early civil rights movement. (In the *Washington Post*, for Good Friday last, the liberal Catholic apologist E.J. Dionne lamely [attempted](#) to stretch this very comparison.) But is it "inflammatory" to say that AIDS and drugs are wrecking the black community because the white power structure wishes it? No. Nor is it "controversial." It is wicked and stupid and false to say such a thing. And it not unimportantly negates everything that Obama says he stands for by way of advocating dignity and responsibility over the sick cults of paranoia and victimhood.

That same supposed message of his is also contradicted in a different way by trying to put Geraldine Ferraro on all fours with a thug like Obama's family "pastor." Ferraro may have sounded sour when she asserted that there can be political advantages to being black in the United States—and she said the selfsame

thing about Jesse Jackson in 1984—but it's perfectly arguable that what she said is, in fact, true, and even if it isn't true, it's absurd to try and classify it as a racist remark. No doubt Obama's slick people were looking for a revenge for Samantha Power (who, incidentally, ought never to have been let go for the [useful and indeed audacious truths that she uttered in Britain](#)), but their news-cycle solution was to cover their own queasy cowardice in that case by feigning outrage in the Ferraro matter. The consequence, which you can already feel, is an inchoate resentment among many white voters who are damned if they will be called bigots by a man who associates with Jeremiah Wright. So here we go with all that again. And this is the fresh, clean, new post-racial politics?

Now, by way of which vent or orifice is this venom creeping back into our national bloodstream? Where is hatred and tribalism and ignorance most commonly incubated, and from which platform is it most commonly yelled? If you answered "the churches" and "the pulpits," you got both answers right. The Ku Klux Klan (originally a Protestant identity movement, as many people prefer to forget) and the Nation of Islam (a black sectarian mutation of Quranic teaching) may be weak these days, but bigotry of all sorts is freely available, and openly inculcated into children, by any otherwise unemployable dirtbag who can perform the easy feat of putting *Reverend* in front of his name. And this clerical vileness has now reached the point of disfiguring the campaigns of both leading candidates for our presidency. If you think Jeremiah Wright is gruesome, wait until you get a load of the next Chicago "Reverend," one James Meeks, another South Side horror show with a special sideline in the baiting of homosexuals. He, too, has been an Obama supporter, and his church has been an occasional recipient of Obama's patronage. And perhaps he, too, can hope to be called "controversial" for his use of the term *house nigger* to describe those he doesn't like and for his view that it was "the Hollywood Jews" who brought us *Brokeback Mountain*. Meanwhile, the Republican nominee adorns himself with two further reverends: one named John Hagee, who thinks that the pope is the Antichrist, and another named Rod Parsley, who has declared that the United States has a mission to obliterate Islam. Is it conceivable that such repellent dolts would be allowed into public life if they were not in tax-free clerical garb? How true it is that religion poisons everything.

And what a shame. I assume you all have your copies of *The Audacity of Hope* in paperback breviary form. If you turn to the chapter entitled "Faith," beginning on Page 195, and read as far as Page 208, I think that even if you don't concur with my reading, you may suspect that I am onto something. In these pages, Sen. Obama is telling us that he doesn't really have any profound religious belief, but that in his early Chicago days he felt he needed to acquire some spiritual "street cred." The most excruciatingly embarrassing endorsement of this same viewpoint came last week from Abigail Thernstrom at *National Review Online*. Overcome by "the speech" that the divine one had given

in Philadelphia, she [urged us to be understanding](#). "Obama's description of the parishioners in his church gave white listeners a glimpse of a world of faith (with 'raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor ... dancing, clapping, screaming, and shouting') that has been the primary means of black survival and uplift." A glimpse, huh? What the hell next? A tribute to the African-American sense of rhythm?

To have accepted Obama's smooth apologetics is to have lowered one's own pre-existing standards for what might constitute a post-racial or a post-racist future. It is to have put that quite sober and realistic hope, meanwhile, into untrustworthy and unscrupulous hands. And it is to have done this, furthermore, in the service of blind faith. Mark my words: This disappointment is only the first of many that are still to come.

food

Fish Foam and Spherified Mango Juice

Will Spanish avant-garde cuisine stand the test of time?

By Lisa Abend

Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 8:07 AM ET

Here in Spain, the avant-garde culinary season has just come to a close. [Madrid Fusion](#), that exuberant annual showcase that brings cutting-edge chefs to the Spanish capital to muse on the state of contemporary gastronomy and show off their latest tricks, ended a month ago. [BCN Vanguardia](#), its less well-known Catalan counterpart, wrapped up on March 14. The program for each was pretty much what I've come to expect. In Madrid, [Marcos Morán](#) cooked up a fine plate of fish blood, and [the Roca boys](#) painted swabs of truffle, hare, and dirt across a plate and called it "Winter." In Barcelona, Angel León used algae to clarify soup, Ramón Freixa turned liquid-nitrogenized pineapple into dessert, and Martín Berasategui talked about something called "synergetic elaboration."

And so, I have to ask: Isn't anybody tired of this stuff by now?

Nearly two decades ago, Ferran Adrià started a revolution at his El Bulli restaurant that thoroughly transformed modern cooking, not only propelling Spain's chefs to the pinnacle of culinary acclaim (displacing France's in the process) but spreading a manifesto of high-impact, scientifically informed cuisine through top kitchens around the world. Mango juice "spherified" with hydrocolloids until it looks like caviar, olive oil frozen with liquid nitrogen until it forms lingot-shaped "butter," Parmesan cheese spun into a cotton-candy-esque "air," and everything from espresso to squid ink turned into foam—it's all part of a cooking style that places a premium on innovation. At its best, the Spanish version of "[molecular gastronomy](#)" stokes the emotions, shocks the senses, and, in the words (if not exactly the

intentions) of that hedonistic gourmand Claude Lévi-Strauss, is "good to think." It's also often delicious.

But, from the beginning, some critics have scorned a mode of cooking that relies, in their opinion, too heavily on technology (as if an oven weren't a machine) and often chooses form over substance. Twenty years into Adrià's revolution, those criticisms have only grown. In a recent e-mail, Gerry Dawes, an American expert on Spanish food and wine, wrote, "I am getting a little weary of the Catalan-driven techno-cuisine. Many of these 'experiments' would be better off if they didn't show up anywhere but at chefs' conferences." His words sum up the critical attitude: It was fun at first, but enough with the chemistry kit! I'd like some real food now, please.

So, is it over? At the very least, Adrià and his cohorts are no longer quite so avant-garde as they once were. In fashion, you know your haute couture is no longer haute when you see it in the Gap. In food, there are different indignities, all of which the Spaniards have suffered as of late. To wit:

1. Death by foam

Adrià hasn't served a foam in years, but that hasn't stopped most everybody else from whipping up their own versions of flavored, stabilized air. A couple of weeks ago, I had lunch at an utterly nondescript hotel restaurant in the industrial-warehouse outskirts of Salamanca. There, in a place that a few years ago would surely have been serving stewed chickpeas with salt cod, I had sous-vide hake topped with chorizo foam. It wasn't bad. But that's hardly the point. Culinary trends are like peak oil: Demand hastens decline. (In this, the role of the California Pizza Kitchen franchise in the demise of California cuisine is surely instructive.)

2. Death by scholarship

Spanish journalist Pau Arenós has gotten a lot of attention lately for coining a new name for the kind of cooking that Adrià and his disciples do: *techno-emotional*. At Madrid Fusion, he elaborated 10 points that define techno-emotional cuisine ("Addresses all five senses." "Initiates dialogue with scientists, but also with visual artists, novelists, poets ...") and traced its origins back to turn-of-the-20th-century French chef Auguste Escoffier. It was all very interesting, but it made me wonder: If we're talking about the history of avant-garde cooking, doesn't it mean it's not avant-garde anymore? And worse: If being avant-garde includes prescriptions like "Diners are not passive but active," doesn't retrogradeness suddenly look a lot more appealing?

3. Death by democracy

If, as Barbara Kafka has said, the food processor spelled the end of that classic French dish the [quenelle](#) (the machine made it

possible for any home cook to do the once-labor-intensive work of finely pureeing fish or meat with a touch of a button), one can only shudder at the impact that [Texturas](#) will have on dinner parties around the world. A handy kit that includes attractively designed tins of algin (sodium alginate) and Xantana (xanthan gum), it allows the amateur to spherify mango juice and solidify squid ink right in her own kitchen.

4. Death by popular demand

In an episode of his TV show *No Reservations*, Anthony Bourdain visits Adrià's workshop and undergoes a grudging conversion—from molecular skeptic to gaga techno-emotionalist. José Andrés, of Washington's Minibar and Café Atlántico, who whips up "cotton candy avocado" in his occasional appearances on the Food Network, has a new show coming out on American television. Mario Batali spent last fall traveling around Spain with a camera crew, *New York Times* food writer Mark Bittman, and Gwyneth Paltrow. According to Batali's blog, the show, which will air on public television, confines itself in the main to [cocido](#) and stewed pig's ears. But an episode at Carme Ruscalleda's Sant Pau includes "a cube of gelatin with royal shrimp head in a lozenge." And if Batali is gushing about gelatin cubes, isn't it just a matter of time before Rachael Ray pulls out a jar of Xantana and calls it "yum-o"?

5. Death by news cycle

Daniel Patterson, chef and owner of San Francisco's Coi, told me he had detected signs of a backlash against Spanish avant-garde cuisine. When I asked for an example, he replied, in a tone that managed to be mostly unaccusing, "Well, articles like this one." He's right: Food writers have to write about something, and if we can't write about a new trend, we might as well tear down an old one.

The press and the public have officially caught up to the Spanish revolutionaries: Adrià's kitchen is no longer the source of the new new thing. But I won't sound the death knell on techno-emotionalism, because food movements often prosper long after journalists have lost interest. The Asian fusion craze passed years ago, but miso-glazed salmon has become a staple; California cuisine is woefully unhip, but I still find alfalfa in my sandwiches. Perhaps the most relevant comparison is nouvelle cuisine.

That movement started in the late 1960s and early 1970s and emphasized color, lightness, and freshness over the heavy sauce-based cooking that had characterized French—and therefore upscale—cooking for the previous century. Nouvelle cuisine was a kitchen upheaval that coincided historically with the upheavals going on in the streets of Paris in 1968 and that

likewise took as its inspiration the overthrow of old ways (in this case, cream- and butter-laden old ways). It found an eager reception in the United States. But by the 1990s, it was showing all the signs of stagnation I listed above—clichéd dishes, academic analysis (one sociological study actually counted the number of nouvelle dishes, like salmon in sorrel sauce, that appeared on French menus), overexposure, and a culinary press that seemed to gleefully celebrate its imminent demise in the form of comfort food. By the turn of the millennium, nouvelle cuisine's reduced portions and sometimes unlikely combinations had become a joke.

But the food itself never really went away. The techniques are still there, in every cream-free sauce that daubs a salmon filet, in every plate made colorful by steamed vegetables, even in that delicately flavored sous-vide hake I had in Salamanca. We may laugh at the excesses of nouvelle cuisine, but we eat it all the time.

The same, I would hold, is true of modern Spanish cuisine. What lies at its heart is not a particular dish—not even the emblematic foam. Rather, it's a spirit—a vigorous, often intellectual search for new flavors that takes place not just in gardens and pantries but in landscapes and art exhibitions, and, yes, in the laboratory. And that isn't going away. As Arenós told me in an interview, Spain's top chefs have plenty of staying power. "Ferran [Adrià] is the most influential chef in the world, and he was born only in 1962. ... All the other guys, [Andoni](#) [Aduriz], [Quique](#) [Dacosta], they're in their 30s. We can't talk about decadence when they're all so young."

They're not just young; they're motivated. Andoni Luis Aduriz, the chef of two-starred Mugaritz, is often hailed as Adrià's more serene but equally talented dauphin. For the past two years, he has been working on using ultrasound to achieve more precise cooking times and, in collaboration with [Aponiente](#) chef Ángel León, is developing a cooking fuel made from olive pits. "There are people who say, 'this is over, let's put it behind us,' but that's just marketing. I can tell you from my own experience that there is more research going on, more energy, than ever before."

That's the thing. The pressure to innovate (and among Spanish chefs, that pressure is largely self-imposed) means that Spanish techno-emotional cooking, if that's what we're calling it now, is going to keep changing, producing new and ever-wackier techniques and ingredients. Some of them, like Dacosta's platinum-coated oyster, will perhaps, mercifully, not withstand the test of time. But others, like that now-ubiquitous foam, will seep into the culinary vernacular, forever augmenting the range of possibilities chefs have at their disposal.

foreigners

Boycott Beijing

The Olympics are the perfect place for a protest.

By Anne Applebaum

Monday, March 24, 2008, at 8:15 PM ET

"We believe the Olympic Games are not the place for demonstrations and we hope that all people attending the games recognize the importance of this." [Thus spake Samsung Electronics](#), one of 12 major corporate sponsors of the Olympics, when asked last week whether recent events in Tibet were causing them any concern. Coca-Cola, another Olympics sponsor, has stated that while it would be inappropriate "to comment on the political situation of individual nations," the company firmly believes "that the Olympics are a force for good." The chairman of the International Olympic Committee, Jacques Rogge, was also quick to declare that "a boycott doesn't solve anything"—just as quick as he was to dismiss the demonstrators who waved a black banner showing five interlocked handcuffs, in mockery of the Olympic symbol, at Monday's lighting of the Olympic torch in Greece. "It is always sad to see such a ceremony disrupted," he declared, rather pompously.

And no one was surprised: Companies that have invested millions in sponsorship deals and Olympic bureaucrats who have invested years trying to justify their controversial decision to award the 2008 Olympics to Beijing are naturally inclined to use those sorts of arguments. But that doesn't mean that the rest of us have to believe them.

Look a bit closer, in fact, and none of those statements holds up.

A boycott doesn't solve anything. Well, doesn't it? Some boycotts do help solve some things. The boycott of South African athletes from international competitions was probably the single most effective weapon the international community ever deployed against the apartheid state. ("They didn't mind about the business sanctions," a South African friend once told me, "but they minded—they really, really minded—about the cricket.") The boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics helped undermine Soviet propaganda about the invasion of Afghanistan and unify the Western world against it. I don't know for certain, but I'm guessing that from the Soviet perspective, the Soviet bloc boycott of the Los Angeles Olympics four years later was successful, too. Presumably, it was intended to solidify Soviet elite opposition to the United States in the Reagan years, and presumably, it helped.

The Olympics are a force for good. Not always! For those who don't remember, let me remind you that the [1936 Olympics](#), held in Nazi Germany, were an astonishing propaganda coup for Hitler. It's true that the star performance of Jesse Owens, the

great black American track-and-field star, did shoot some holes in the Nazi theory of Aryan racial superiority. But Hitler still got what he wanted out of the games. With the help of American newspapers such as the *New York Times*, which opined that the games put Germany "back in the family of nations again," he convinced many Germans, and many foreigners, to accept Nazism as "normal." The Nuremberg laws were in force, German troops had marched into the Rhineland, Dachau was full of prisoners, but the world cheered athletes in Berlin. As a result, many people, both in and out of Germany, reckoned that everything was just fine, and Hitler could be tolerated a bit longer.

The Olympic Games are not the place for demonstrations. Aren't they? Actually, the Olympics seem an ideal place for demonstrations. Not only is the world's press there with cameras running, [the modern Olympics were set up with a political purpose](#): to promote international peace by encouraging healthy competition between nations. Hence the emphasis on national teams instead of individual competitors; hence the opening and closing ceremonies—since copied by other sporting events—as well as the national flags and national anthems.

These elements make the Olympics special, different from other international competitions, but they also sometimes give the games a nasty edge. The old United States vs. Soviet Union basketball rivalry; the parade of East German women with husky voices; the lists of who has won how many medals—all of that is evidence of the decades-old politicization of the Olympics. There were black power demonstrations at the 1968 Mexico City Games. A Palestinian group attacked and killed Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Games. Australian aborigines protested at the 2000 Sydney Games. And everything associated with the 2008 Olympics, from the massive Beijing building program, to the Olympic torch that is due to be carried across Tibet, to the [Chinese Olympic Committee's Web site](#) (it describes China's commitment to promote "mass sporting activities" on an "extensive scale, improving the people's physique, and spurring the socialist modernization of China") is blatantly designed to promote the domestic and international image of the Chinese state.

No wonder, then, that everyone who hates or fears China, whether in Burma, Darfur, Tibet, or Beijing, is calling for a boycott. And the Chinese government and the IOC are terrified that they will succeed. No one involved in the preparations for this year's Olympics really believes that this is "only about the athletes," or that the Beijing Games will be an innocent display of sporting prowess, or that they bear no relation to Chinese politics. I don't see why the rest of us should believe it, either.

gabfest **The Cultural Gabfest, Schadenfreude** **Edition**

Listen to *Slate's* new show about the week in culture.
By Stephen Metcalf, Meghan O'Rourke, and John Swansburg
Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 8:17 PM ET

Listen to Cultural Gabfest No. 4 with critics Stephen Metcalf, Meghan O'Rourke, and John Swansburg by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

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

In this week's Cultural Gabfest, our critics discuss whether Barack Obama was channeling Walt Whitman, whether the head of JPMorgan was channeling Gordon Gekko, and whether English professors should be channeling Wal-Mart associates.

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

Barack Obama's "[A More Perfect Union](#)" speech
Walt Whitman's [Song of Myself](#)
New York magazine's [profile](#) of Jamie Dimon
Michael Douglas as [Gordon Gekko](#) in *Wall Street*
Joseph Schumpeter's "[Creative Destruction](#)"
The *New York Times*' "[You Say Recession, I Say 'Reservations!'](#)"

[NOBU](#) restaurant in New York City
Gerald Graff's [Professing Literature: An Institutional History](#)
Meghan's pick: [The Hakawati](#) by Rabih Alameddine
John's pick: [Dispatches](#) by Michael Herr
Stephen's pick: *Boys and Girls in America* from the [Hold Steady](#)

Posted by Andy Bowers on March 26 at 8:16 p.m.

March 21, 2008

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

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

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson and David Plotz discuss Barack Obama's speech, the fifth anniversary of the Iraq war, and the guns case before the Supreme Court.

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

Posted by June Thomas on March 24 at 12:10 p.m.

March 14, 2008

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

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

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz gather in *Slate's* Washington, D.C. studio to discuss the impact of New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer's resignation, how Geraldine Ferraro's comments can help or hurt each Democratic candidate's campaign, and the ongoing murmurs about a Clinton-Obama dream ticket.

Eliot Spitzer's involvement with a prostitute and subsequent resignation dominated the discussion. Of particular note, the Gabfest team explored the possibility that Spitzer [did not pay enough](#). They discussed a post on "The XX Factor" that argues that finding sex [may not be easier for powerful men](#). They also looked at the consequences of Spitzer's resignation on [his superdelegate vote](#).

A roundup of *Slate's* coverage of the Eliot Spitzer scandal can be found [here](#).

The discussion then turned to Geraldine Ferraro's racially loaded comments and the [impact they will have on each campaign](#). Emily conceded that Ferraro's comments [held some truth](#), although her phrasing was deeply flawed.

Finally, the Gabfest panelists doubted the possibility of a dream ticket between the two major Democratic candidates. Emily was particularly taken with Clinton's recent ads, which, she believes, have successfully planted the seed in voters' minds that Obama is the ["unready"](#) candidate.

To include those who will not be drinking, John Dickerson introduced this week's supermarket-aisle chatter in place of the usual cocktail chatter. Emily pointed out an upcoming Second Amendment case before the Supreme Court; David marveled at Marion Barry's political resilience; and John introduced this week's best listener-submitted [sports metaphors](#).

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

Posted by Alex Joseph on March 14 at 3:30 p.m.

March 12, 2008

Listen to Cultural Gabfest No. 3 with critics Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and John Swansburg by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

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

Our newest podcast, the Cultural Gabfest, is back just in time to take on the Eliot Spitzer meltdown and how it's echoing through the media. Critics Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and John Swansburg also discuss the recent rash of fake memoirs and a breakout blog that claims to shed light on stuff white people like.

Here are links to some of the items mentioned in this week's episode:

"[The Fake Memoirist's Survival Guide](#)" on *Slate*
[A Fan's Notes](#) by Frederick Exley
The [Stuff White People Like](#) blog
[Stuff White People Like](#) on NPR's *Talk of the Nation*
Dana Stevens' recommended movie: [Chop Shop](#)
John Swansburg's recommended fake memoir: [Amazons: An Intimate Memoir by the First Women To Play in the National Hockey League](#) by Cleo Birdwell (aka Don DeLillo)
Stephen Metcalf's recommended TV show: [Top Gear](#) from BBC America

Posted by Andy Bowers at 11:55 a.m.

March 7, 2008

To play the March 7 Political Gabfest, click the arrow on the audio player below:

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

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz gather in *Slate*'s Washington studio to discuss Hillary Clinton's comeback, John McCain's White House photo-op, and Margaret B. Jones' fake memoir.

Here are some of the stories mentioned in the podcast:

David Greenberg's "History Lesson" on how [Democrats always take forever](#) to pick a nominee
A *Slate* **V** [discussion of Tuesday's results](#), featuring Emily

Bazelon, Dahlia Lithwick, and Melinda Hennenberger *Slate*'s [coverage of fake memoir week](#) (check out the links at the top of the page)

Charlotte Allen's "Outlook" [essay](#) and the [outraged response](#) on "XX Factor"
"Trailhead" on [Yes, Pecan ice cream](#) and the [hijacked conference call](#)

Gabfest listener Neal Jahren was nice enough to set up an unofficial Facebook fan page for the show. If you'd like to join the discussion there, [here's the link](#).

If you have ideas for the most appropriate sports metaphor for the Democratic slugfest, or if you'd just like to tell us what you think about the show, our e-mail address is gabfest@slate.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.) **Posted by June Thomas at 6:16 p.m.**

Feb. 29, 2008

To play the Feb. 29 Political Gabfest, click the arrow on the audio player below:

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

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz gather in *Slate*'s Washington studio to discuss whether Hillary can stage a comeback in the race for the Democratic nomination, how McCain can confront Obama on Iraq, and the death of conservative legend and regular *Slate* reader William F. Buckley Jr.

The Gabfest begins by exploring the perilous delegate math that faces Hillary Clinton and how *Slate*'s [delegate calculator](#) can help you sort it out. It continues with a discussion of Hillary's appeal to women. Emily Bazelon points to [Tina Fey's defense](#) of feminism, and John Dickerson alludes to Cokie Roberts' [explanation](#) on ABC's *This Week With George Stephanopoulos*. Finally, the *Slate* editors discuss how Obama has grown throughout the campaign—both in his [debate performance](#) and in his ability to handle [incoming fire](#) from political opponents.

The discussion then turns to John McCain and Barack Obama's weeklong quarrel over the Iraq war. David Plotz believes Democrats would be wise to stay away from the topic of Iraq during the general election.

Finally, the Gabfest panelists offer their memories of conservative icon William F. Buckley Jr., who died this week. Buckley had a close relationship with *Slate*: He was a regular

reader, kept a [Slate "Diary,"](#) and engaged in a "Dialogue" with the magazine's founding editor, Michael Kinsley.

Things turn grim during the Gabfest's cocktail chatter. John Dickerson highlights a [new study](#) showing that one in every 100 American adults is in prison. David Plotz recaps a [Newsweek article](#) on stagflation, and Emily Bazelon laments the [retirement](#) of legendary *New York Times* Supreme Court reporter Linda Greenhouse.

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

Posted by Andy Bowers on Feb. 29 at 2:30 p.m.

Feb. 28, 2008

Here's the sophomore outing of our newest audio program, the Cultural Gabfest, with critics Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner. To listen, click the arrow on the audio player below:

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

In this edition, the panelists discuss the aftermath of the Oscars, the challenge Barack Obama poses for comedians, and Lindsay Lohan's Marilyn Monroe impression. Here are some of the links for items mentioned in the show:

[Daniel Day-Lewis' Oscar acceptance speech.](#)
[Saturday Night Live's Obama/Clinton debate sketch.](#)
[Lindsay Lohan's New York magazine photo shoot.](#)
[Julia Turner's Oscar fashion dialogue with Amanda Fortini.](#)
[The Encyclopedia Baracktannica.](#)

Posted by Andy Bowers on Feb. 28 at 3:07 p.m.

Feb. 22, 2008

To play the Feb. 22 Gabfest, click the arrow on the audio player below:

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

John Dickerson beat back his flu and joined Emily Bazelon and David Plotz in *Slate*'s Washington studio for a discussion of John McCain's "bad day," the latest developments in the Democratic race, and the wide world of foreign affairs.

The top story on this week's agenda was the widely assailed [New York Times article](#) describing advisers' concern about the appearance of impropriety in the relationship between Sen. John McCain and lobbyist Vicki Iseman during the 2000 presidential campaign. David said that while you feel for a guy who is wrongly accused, McCain's constant claims of ultrahigh [ethical standards](#) are also becoming a mite tiresome.

Then came the [Texas debate](#) between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. The Gabfesters felt both candidates put in a strong performance and gave credit to Clinton, who instantly had the audience in the palm of her hand when she [said](#), "Everybody here knows I've lived through some crises and some challenging moments in my life." But Clinton also lost points when she brought up the [plagiarism accusation](#) against Obama and was booed.

The Gabfesters talked about [emotion and reason](#) in campaign rhetoric. David said there was something frightening about Obama's ability to wield emotion so effectively in his speeches.

Finally, the world seems to be teeming with upheaval, with Page One stories appearing about [Cuba](#), [Kosovo](#), and [Pakistan](#) in recent days.

Our e-mail address is gabfest@slate.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.) **Posted by Jonathan Rubin on Feb. 25 at 2:35 p.m.**

Feb. 15, 2008

To play the Feb. 15 Gabfest, click the arrow on the audio player below:

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

John Dickerson has the flu this week, so Christopher Beam joined Emily Bazelon and David Plotz to discuss presidential politics after the Potomac primaries and the latest news from Guantanamo.

Here are some of the *Slate* stories mentioned in the podcast:

Chris' "Trailhead" posting on the myth of "[shmoshmentum](#)"
Jack Goldsmith and Eric Posner on the [Guantanamo trials](#)
"[Obamamatopoeia](#)"—the English language, Obamafied

Our e-mail address is gabfest@slate.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.) **Posted by June Thomas at 3:16 p.m.**

Feb. 8, 2008

To play the Feb. 8 Gabfest, click the arrow on the audio player below:

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

On today's agenda: Mitt Romney exits the race, the Democrats remain in a stalemate, and the Gabfest finds a slogan, sort of.

Here are some of the *Slate* stories mentioned in the podcast:

John reflected on Romney's [best speech](#)—unfortunately, the one in which he announced the suspension of his campaign.

Our Gabfesters talked about [who emerged victorious](#) after the Democratic primaries and caucuses held on Super Tuesday, and the precarious future of the race as the specter of a brokered convention looms.

Emily's piece on [what the exit polls said](#) about Super Tuesday voters who supported Hillary Clinton.

William Saletan on [Barack Obama's breakthrough with white voters](#).

Emily also spoke about the [controversial essay](#) by Robin Morgan that apparently resonated with Chelsea Clinton, which she discussed in a ["XX" Factor post](#).

A *Slate* piece about [how mobsters get their colorful nicknames](#).

Our e-mail address is gabfest@slate.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.) **Posted by Alex Joseph at 2:10 p.m.**

gaming Smashing Failure

Super Smash Bros. Brawl: a great game—and another fiasco for the Nintendo Wii's pitiful online gaming service.

By Jack Patrick Rodgers

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 6:11 PM ET

The Nintendo Wii brings people together. Fun, easy-to-learn games like Wii Sports have taught the joys of gaming to a wide variety of would-be players: women, little tykes, grandparents, even the [Queen of England](#). There's one place, however, where Nintendo actively discourages its fans from enjoying each other's company. Hop online to play along with your Wii-owning friends, and you're guaranteed to be disappointed.

The current gold standard of online gaming services is Microsoft's Xbox Live. Xbox owners can download classics like Paperboy and Street Fighter II, games that include the option to compete against other players online or compare high scores. It's easy to keep track of your friends via their "gamertags," online identities that include a profile photo and a list of game-related achievements. The Xbox 360 also has a wireless headset that lets players communicate before, during, and after every online match.

Nothing can replace playing against someone on the same couch, but Xbox Live comes close. Log onto a Halo 3 match, and the TrueSkill ranking system will select opponents that are deemed to be your equals. Annoyed by another gamer who keeps shouting obscenities over the voice chat? The mute button lets you silence him. Find yourself trading *South Park* jokes with the gunner who's watching your back? Send a friend request, and you can keep in touch later.

The Wii, by comparison, doesn't have a consistent online network, forcing each developer to devise its own solutions. A game created by a third-party company like Electronic Arts, for example, might use [an entirely different login system](#) than the one designed by Nintendo for online play. What the Wii's online games all have in common is that they're shamefully primitive. While Xbox Live makes it easy to set up a match with a friend, most of the games on the Wii (including every title made by Nintendo rather than a third party) require you to trade 12-digit Friend Codes before launching a multiplayer game. Even worse, you have to swap codes *again* if you want to play the same friend in a different game. Since the Wii doesn't have a microphone peripheral, you can only talk to your friends by text message, if at all. (Some games don't even allow text messaging.) This functionality is roughly equivalent to what you could achieve in 1998 by connecting to someone else's computer via modem.

In fairness, you must invest in a premium membership, at a cost of \$50 a year, to use Xbox Live's online multiplayer functionality. All of the Wii's online services, by comparison, are free. But the Wii's threadbare online system is terrible even taking into account that it costs nothing.

This month, Nintendo had the chance to change that. Two weeks ago, the company released [Super Smash Bros. Brawl](#), a multiplayer game that sold [1.4 million copies in its first week](#), making it the fastest-selling title in Nintendo's history. The Smash Bros. series is one of Nintendo's oddest franchises, a collection of fighting games in which beloved mascots like Super Mario and Donkey Kong beat the stuffing out of each other with baseball bats and land mines. Although these games might look like standard-issue, button-mashing beat-'em-ups, Smash Bros. distinguishes itself with two trademarks of Nintendo's game design: It's easy to learn but surprisingly complex, and it's an ideal party game because up to four people

can play at once. Brawl doesn't involve the same sort of gymnastics as other popular Wii games—it's played sitting down, with a controller firmly in hand. Nevertheless, this massively popular title could have boosted the Wii's online service, helping to bring to the virtual world the sense of living-room camaraderie that has made the system the [world's top-selling console](#).

Unfortunately, Brawl's online features are just as shallow as those for Nintendo's other games. Smash Bros. has two basic online modes: With Friends, which matches you against anyone you've exchanged Friend Codes with, and With Anyone, which sets you up against randomly selected opponents. The first thing you'll notice when you choose a With Friends match is that without a microphone, you can't talk to the other players. While the game isn't so complex as to require communication between teammates, trash talk is a major part of the fun. Nintendo does allow players to prerecord four short (20-character-or-fewer) text messages for your character to spout. [Brawl's official Web site](#) lists "Want more?" as an example—I'm guessing most messages will be far more profane. Four-letter words or not, a pop-up text message is a poor substitute for shouting in someone's face when a well-timed Bob-omb sends him flying off-screen.

The lack of communication has other side effects. Since you can't talk things over with your friends, the game uses a voting system to set the rules—which arena to play on, which items to use, etc. Once the votes are in, the computer then makes a selection based on the votes cast. It's not a terrible compromise, but wouldn't discussing the options make a lot more sense?

Nintendo, at least, does allow you to interact with your friends by trading screen shots, game replays, and custom-designed stages. That doesn't apply to the With Anyone mode, though. When you're assigned to a match, you don't see anyone else's name, text messages are disabled (in order to block foul language from strangers), and there's no record of your wins and losses. And forget about more advanced features like wide-scale tournaments or the ability to add someone as a friend after playing a match together.

Nintendo has stated that it has a three-part goal for online gaming: "[M]ake it free, make it easy, make it safe." There's no doubt the company deserves high marks for the first two. Its desire to keep players safe, though, is ridiculous overkill. In trying to keep kids from talking with unsavory characters, Nintendo removes any trace of human contact. The Wii's With Anyone mode is designed to be so anonymous that if one player's Internet connection fails, the computer will take over and none of the other players will notice. [Brawl's official Web site](#) cheerfully describes this as a special feature. If the goal is to play against an army of automatons, why bother having an online mode at all?

Nintendo's overpolicing even extends to protecting players' self-esteem. In [an online interview](#), Nintendo President Satoru Iwata explained that the Wii's online service doesn't have a leader board because he didn't want less-skilled players to feel bad: "Those in the top five might feel pretty good about themselves, but what happens if you're number 15,398 in the rankings?" My guess: You'd try to move up to 15,397, and you certainly wouldn't unplug your Wii and run away crying.

It's legitimate to ask whether the Wii needs an online service as rich and powerful as Xbox Live. (I'll ignore the question of whether *any* system needs features as obsessive as having your friends' high scores [sent to your cell phone](#).) Much of the Wii's charm comes in watching your friends and family make fools out of themselves by swinging the remote like a baseball bat; that sort of amusement would be lost online. But it's important to note that many of the Wii's games (including Brawl) don't require physical exercise and are similar to the games on Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3. And while Nintendo could be forgiven for designing a more streamlined network than Live in order to appeal to casual gamers, the one they've given Wii owners makes it difficult to do even the most basic things, like interact with your friends. If it isn't feasible to re-create a living room online, Nintendo could at least give gamers the feeling they're playing against actual people.

What Smash Bros. Brawl and the Wii are missing is a sense of community. It's telling that one of the unique features of the Wii's online service is the Everybody Votes channel, which allows users to send in answers to simple questions—"If you had a time machine, would you go to the past or the future?"—and then check in and see how others voted. It's an amusing time-waster, but strip away the sight of your [Mii](#) avatar standing in a crowd of other people, and you've got a simplistic two-question survey that doesn't even tell you how your friends voted.

Shigeru Miyamoto, Nintendo's legendary game designer, likes to compare his games to miniature gardens. For Miyamoto, it's important that players have the freedom to explore on their own and test the rules of their environment. Nintendo's online philosophy, on the other hand, demands that players act in a rigidly circumscribed way and interact only within a strict set of rules. Nintendo deserves credit for making video games more accessible to the masses, but the truth is that playing the Wii online makes gaming feel lonelier than ever.

Special thanks to Anthony Leong and Geoff Dorshimer for helping test Super Smash Bros. Brawl's online modes.

hot document
Obama's Tax Returns

Adjusted gross income: more than \$900,000.

By Bonnie Goldstein

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 6:40 PM ET

Posted Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 6:40 PM ET

From: Bonnie Goldstein

Posted Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 6:40 PM ET

Calling on his opponent for the Democratic presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton, to [do the same](#), today Barack Obama [posted](#) on his [campaign website's "answer center"](#) 103 pages of federal and Illinois state tax returns covering the years 2000 through 2006. In addition to the basic [1040](#) forms, Obama (occupation: US SENATOR) and his wife [Michelle Obama](#) (occupation: HOSPITAL ADMINISTRATOR) also released copies of attachments reflecting that they withhold Social Security taxes for household help and claim tax credits for child care expenses (the Obamas have 2 daughters, Malia and Natasha). The campaign redacted private information from the returns, such as the family's Social Security numbers and home address.

Posted Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 6:40 PM ET

The last two years have been prosperous for the Obamas. As recently as 2004, their income was a relatively modest \$200,000 (see pages 8-9), but the would-be first couple's most recent income tax return (see below and on the following page) shows that their combined salaries (more than \$430,700), when paired with Obama's royalty earnings as an author (another \$500,000), brought their adjusted gross income to well over \$900,000 (see Pages 3-7.)

Posted Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 6:40 PM ET

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This document was first disseminated publicly this month by the Web site [Wikileaks](#).

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Posted Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 6:40 PM ET

hot document
A Car-Bomb Primer

Read the State department report, *When Broken Down Vehicles Go Boom!*

By Bonnie Goldstein

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 9:17 AM ET

Posted Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 9:17 AM ET

From: Bonnie Goldstein

Posted Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 9:17 AM ET

In December 2005, the [U.S. State Department](#) published a color brochure about "vehicular-borne improvised explosive devices" (VBIEDs), or car bombs. The six-page document reported that the VBIED (known as "the poor man's cruise missile") is "far and away the weapon of choice" for terrorist attacks, "especially when operated by a suicide bomber" (see Page 4).

The pamphlet bore the catchy title "When Broken Down Vehicles Go Boom!" (below). It included photos of car-bomb remnants (Pages 2 and 6) and a chart measuring the "typical container" size (e.g., "school box," "small lunch pail," "deluxe special service bag") against the "possible weight of explosive contents" (Page 4). Conclusion: "Concealing a 200-500-pound bomb in a sedan is relatively easy." VBIEDs are also the most likely devices "to cause mass casualties," because of flying glass and structural collapse, but "healthy individuals can withstand blast forces" (Pages 4-5). Though a 500-pound car bomb "will demolish buildings well beyond a hundred feet," an exposed person "out in the open" will likely only "suffer eardrum rupture" (Page 5). Security-coded "sensitive but unclassified," the brochure was intended for security personnel who protect members of the diplomatic services and [U.S. contractors overseas](#). Don't miss the anarchist's recipe book of explosives (Page 4) and the detailed explanation of the three "general methods of detonation" (Pages 5-6).

Posted Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 9:17 AM ET

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idolatry

***Idol* Meets the Beatles**

Whitesnake's adaptation of "Day Tripper," the curse of the upbeat song, *cooliosis*, and other highlights you may have missed.

By Katherine Meizel

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 11:40 AM ET

That's a lot of Beatles songs. Don't get me wrong, I was psyched when I heard that *American Idol* finally acquired the performing rights from Sony/ATV. But four hours, 23 solos, two medleys, and a Katharine McPhee/David Foster collaboration later, I'm ready to let the singers get back to their regular *Idol* fare. It wasn't all bad—though it's maybe not their *thing*. The Top 12 worked the hard-won Lennon-McCartney songbook two weeks ago in some innovative and fairly satisfactory ways. And then the producers couldn't just "Let It Be," so there was a second Beatles night last week (this time including songs by the Other Beatles!). Has this ever happened before—two successive weeks of the same theme? The answer is no, and now we know why.

While it did provide a second chance to a few who faltered the first time, the reverse situation prevailed. Chikezie, who turned out my favorite performance during Lennon-McCartney night, tried unsuccessfully to replicate the success the following week. His bluegrass-*cum*-Little Richard rendition of "She's a Woman" had been lively and so full of sh-sh-sh-showmanship that it drew rave reviews from the judges and sent Ryan running around the stage in a Beatlemaniaic frenzy. But his second attempt at the country vibe, an odd dual-tempo arrangement of "I've Just Seen a Face," found Chikezie trying to board the instrument-playing bandwagon with an ill-advised harmonica solo—it was pretty much just that [ingressive-egressive](#) thing your toddler does with his Fisher Price model.

Likewise, Brooke White initially shone with "Let It Be," and then when she wasn't allowed to repeat the performance the next week, she seemed to founder without a piano in "Here Comes the Sun." After a sparkling "Come Together," Simon compared Carly Smithson to Kelly Clarkson, and while the subsequent "Blackbird" inspired Randy to invent either a new word or a new disease (*cooliosis*—it's catchy, Randy, but it's no "[toe-jam](#)

[football](#)"), Simon thought it was an indulgent song choice. Then there was a whole discussion about blackbirds and broken singers beaten down by the music industry, and Paula found a [kindred spirit](#), and Carly got a Season 7 tattoo, and is it just me, or is there a *lot* more *Idol* chatter happening onstage this year? No more diffident Melinda Doolittle and her humble smiles. This year the singers are *taking back the mic*.

The second show did have its moments, offering a reprieve to David Archuleta after he dropped some lyrics in "the Stevie Wonder version" of "We Can Work It Out." In his pre-performance video package he confessed to some discomfort regarding the Beatles theme, a stress that manifested itself onstage as "why see it your way ... *nuh nuh nuh nuh* love will soon be gone." I'd make an effort to scoff a little if I hadn't recently made precisely the same noises during a page-turn disaster at the church where I sing ("washed in the blood of the ... *nuh nuh nuh* ..."). I'll let you decide which of us is facing a higher trinity of judges.

His Stevie Wonder allusion wasn't the only cover of a cover. David Cook rocked [Whitesnake's rockin' adaptation](#) of "Day Tripper" with a startling [Framptonesque talk box](#) moment, and even though Simon mocked it, I think David's performance was far better than his noisy, thoughtless interpretation of the intimate "Eleanor Rigby." Save it for [Guitar Hero](#), David. But, really, what's the deal with the layered covers? We are heading into copy-of-a-copy simulacrum territory here, a situation that Simon Cowell [once compared](#) to a "ghastly Xerox machine." When will it end? Will we turn on the TV one Tuesday night and find Michael Johns performing [Chris Daughtry's rendition of Live's version of Johnny Cash's "Walk the Line"](#)? Speaking of Michael, he sang two of my favorite Beatles songs, "Across the Universe" and "A Day in the Life," with lovely but lackluster vocals and some decidedly odd pronunciation of the *jai guru deva om* mantra. And speaking of pronunciation, Jason Castro sang an adorable "Michelle" with perfect just-learned French and the same air of slight embarrassment he's exuded ever since his rocky high note at the end of "Hallelujah"—a gaffe he unwisely reminded us about in his "my most memorable moment so far" clip.

Those clips seemed out of place. There was an awful lot of nostalgia on display for a show that still has two months to go. And Ramiele Malubay sang a pretty but uninspiring "In My Life," dedicated to the contestants who have gone home already—OK, it is sad when people leave, but at this point in the competition, we didn't know them well enough to require a tribute like that. That's what we have [Ruben Studdard](#) for. The finalists who made their exits during the Beatles weeks fell victim to the perennial curse of the "upbeat song." It's hard to pull off these nonballad songs on *American Idol*; peppy songs are rarely about showing off competitive singing chops, so you have to be hugely energetic and entertaining to make an impression. While Chikezie and Carly managed this in the first

Beatles episode, Syesha Mercado, Kristy Lee Cook, David Hernandez, and Amanda "Ballads Are Boring" Overmyer did not. David and Amanda were sent home, and now we have our Top 10 for the tour, coming soon to a giant half-filled arena near you!

So are you ready for Beatles Night, Part 3? Just kidding! Before you go get your *Revolver* to end the agony, tonight's theme has the Top 10 belting out "Songs From the Year They Were Born." Wait, didn't we already *do* the '80s theme? That's a lot of Whitney Houston songs ...

map the candidates Picking Up the Pace

With less than a month until Pennsylvania, Hillary Clinton's schedule is getting cluttered again.

By E.J. Kalafarski and Chadwick Matlin
Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 2:28 PM ET

Pennsylvania's primary is less than a month away, so the Democratic candidates are hitting the road hard after weeks of relaxed campaigning. Obama is in New York today for a major speech, TV appearance, and fundraiser and then goes to Pennsylvania tomorrow before launching an event-filled "Road to Change" bus tour around the state on Saturday.

But Hillary Clinton is the one who has really hit another gear. She made eight stops over the past seven days—a puny total compared with the four per day she was averaging in Iowa. But over the next three days, she'll make more stops (nine) than she did last week.

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

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

- Do you want to know who spent the most time in Iowa or New Hampshire last month? Play with the timeline sliders above the map to customize the amount of time displayed.
- Care most about who visited your home state? Then **zoom in on it** or type a location into the **"geosearch" box** below the map.

- Choose which candidates you want to follow with the **check boxes** on to the right of the map. If you only want to see the front-runners, then uncheck all of the fringe candidates. *Voilà!* You're left with the cream of the crop's travels.
- Follow the campaign trail virtually with MTC's **news feed**. Every day YouTube video and articles from local papers will give you a glimpse of what stump speeches really look and sound like. Just **click the arrow** next to the headline to get started.
- Take a closer look at candidates by **clicking on their names** to the right of the map. You'll get the lowdown on their travels, media coverage, and policy positions.

Click [here](#) to start using Map the Candidates.

moneybox The New New Deal

Roosevelt-era reforms are saving capitalism—again.

By Daniel Gross
Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 3:29 PM ET

In the 1930s, Franklin Delano Roosevelt saved American capitalism from its own self-inflicted wounds by erecting a new financial infrastructure—often over the vociferous opposition of the bankers and investors whose poor judgment had helped precipitate the Great Depression. During the New Deal, the government reacted to a disastrous systemic failure by creating the sort of backstops, insurance, and risk-spreading mechanisms the market had failed to develop on its own, such as deposit insurance, federal securities registration, and federally sponsored entities that would insure mortgages.

Despite sustained efforts to tear down the New Deal—from the [repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act in 1999](#) to President George W. Bush's ill-fated 2005 efforts to dismantle Social Security—the 1930s-vintage infrastructure has proved remarkably durable. And this crisis has elicited new experiments in policy, just as the Great Depression did. The Federal Reserve has been systematically lowering its standards for what it will accept as collateral for loans. This week, Hillary Clinton [called for](#) a national panel to recommend solutions to the housing morass. (She said the group should include former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, which is a little like Chicago appointing a cow to a panel on preventing disastrous fires.) But as the nation once again confronts a systemic failure in housing and housing-related credit, the Bush administration is going back to the future, using New Deal-era agencies as the cornerstone of its response.

Although the Tennessee Valley Authority has yet to pitch in, four 70-year-old agencies are helping to cushion the blow of the housing bust. Let's count them.

1. The [Federal Home Loan Bank](#) system. Last year, the model of originating and securitizing mortgages began to break down in the wake of the subprime debacle. Mortgage companies that relied on the capital markets (rather than deposits) to raise the money for mortgages suddenly found themselves starved for cash. Many of them turned to the FHLB, which was [created in 1932](#) (so let's give that one to Herbert Hoover) and provides capital to lenders. Indeed, had it not been for the FHLB, it's possible that the nation's largest mortgage lender, Countrywide Financial Corp., might have gone under. Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., noted last fall that Countrywide [borrowed a whopping](#) \$51.4 billion from the Atlanta FHLB as its troubles mounted. On Monday, the FHLB [pitched in again](#), relaxing regulations on member banks to allow them to double the number of mortgage-backed securities issued by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac that they can hold on their books for the next two years. The FHLB noted that this measure could allow member banks to purchase more than \$100 billion worth of such securities.

2. The [Federal Housing Authority](#). The FHA, which was [created in 1934](#), insures mortgages made by approved lenders to borrowers who are creditworthy but not particularly affluent. As the mortgage market grew like Topsy and subprime lenders peddled credit to underserved markets, the FHA may have seemed outdated. But in the wake of the subprime debacle, the FHA has suddenly become an important part of the effort to stanch the rising tide of foreclosures. Last summer, it [created FHASecure](#), a program that lets certain borrowers switch from adjustable-rate mortgages into fixed-rate mortgages. "From September to December 2007, FHA facilitated more than \$38 billion of much-needed mortgage activity in the housing market, more than \$15 billion of which was through FHASecure, FHA's refinancing product." As part of the recently passed stimulus package, the FHA is also temporarily jacking up the size of the mortgages it will insure (in high-cost housing areas) from \$362,790 to \$729,750.

3. The [Federal National Mortgage Association](#) (Fannie Mae), which was [created in 1938](#). Fannie Mae purchases so-called conforming mortgages (mortgages under a certain size) made by other lenders and packages them into securities, which it effectively insures. (Here's a [historical table](#) of the conforming loan limit, which was \$417,000 for a single home last year.) Fannie Mae and its brother government-sponsored enterprise, [Freddie Mac](#), are playing a central role in the federal response to the housing crisis. The stimulus package boosted the size of the loans [Fannie and Freddie can buy](#), from \$417,000 to "125 percent of the area median home price in high-cost areas, not to exceed \$729,750." And then earlier this month, [OFHEO](#), the body that regulates Fannie and Freddie, [said](#) it would lift the cap on the amount of capital they could use to buy mortgage-backed

securities and make loans, providing "up to \$200 billion of immediate liquidity to the mortgage-backed securities market."

4. The [Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.](#) The FDIC, which was [founded in 1933](#) and insures bank deposits, is playing more of a passive role. Many of the financial institutions that have failed or suffered near-death experiences in the current crisis—subprime lenders, jumbo lenders like Thornburg Mortgage and Bear Stearns—essentially fell victim to runs on the bank. Once customers and counterparties came to believe that it wasn't safe to do business with these firms, their days were numbered. But one sector has been largely immune from runs on the bank—banks themselves. Even as banking companies have racked up significant losses on soured loans, and even as some tiny banks [have failed](#), Americans haven't rushed to yank their cash out of their checking and savings accounts. The reason: In the event of a failure, depositors with \$100,000 or less at FDIC-insured institutions are made whole.

other magazines

Funny Money

New York, The New Yorker, and the Weekly Standard tackle the economy woes.

By Morgan Smith

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 4:23 PM ET

New York, March 31

An [article](#) in the cover package on the Bear Stearns buyout profiles Jamie Dimon, the chairman and CEO of JPMorgan Chase, and provides a rundown of the last-minute negotiations between the financial giants. While determining a per-share price, the piece reveals, original bids "were reportedly considerably greater" than the rock-bottom \$2 a share. But the Fed rallied with JPMorgan for a lower price "to ensure that Bear shareholders, not the government nor JPMorgan's shareholders, bore the brunt. ... That was [their] way of averting the moral hazard of bailing out reckless bankers." ... A second [piece](#) focuses on the employees of Bear-Stearns. The cheap sale comes as a big blow. According to the article, many of Bear's workers "feel the Fed forced the fire sale to JPMorgan to prove a point" because "the government needed to pin the housing meltdown on someone."

The New Yorker, March 31

An [essay](#) traces the history of the slowly choking newspaper industry and asks whether an "Internet-based news culture" will be able to fill its void. While news blogs like the Huffington Post leverage "the knowledge of their readers to challenge the mainstream media narrative," they also lack reporting resources; instead, they frequently become an aggregation of partisan

commentary based on "journalistic work that originated in newspapers." A world without print media is one "in which we can no longer depend on newspapers to invest their unmatched resources and professional pride in helping the rest of us to learn, however imperfectly, what we need to know." ... In the well-timed "Money" issue, an [article](#) addresses the vexing coin conundrum: It costs more than 1 cent to produce each penny, with a yearly "penny deficit" of about \$50 million, so why are they still in circulation?

Weekly Standard, March 31

In view of the upcoming Beijing Olympics, an [editorial](#) calls attention to China's "dismal" human rights practices. It notes that rather than giving Western democracies sway over the communist superpower, hosting the games has "emboldened the Chinese dictatorship in its constant quest to obliterate any chance the country has for a real politics." ... As part of a cover package on the economic crisis, a [piece](#) explores how John McCain might counteract his hazardous admission that he "knows nothing" about economics. Though he "will be tempted to demonize the financial sector and support new overregulation," the senator should ensure "the United States remains an attractive destination for investment." To this end, his policy should call for an international summit with China, India, and oil-producing countries "to address issues of savings and trade imbalances" and also advocate a high level of transparency in financial transactions to prevent risky market schemes.

New Republic, April 9

The [cover op-ed](#) predicts that "[e]ven without a messy convention, the current trajectory of the [Democratic] primary campaign could easily destroy the party's White House prospects." But superdelegates don't want to be seen as overriding the will of the people, so they will wait to pledge themselves until after the primary contests in June, unless an attack between the candidates creates lasting harm. "But, by then, the damage will have already been done." ... An [article](#) explains the Catholic Church's basis for its liberal stance on immigration, noting that this position places even the conservative Pope Benedict XVI to the left of both Democratic candidates. ... A [piece](#) asks why the Rev. Jeremiah Wright didn't tone down his rhetoric Obama after withdrew his invitation to give his campaign's inaugural benediction. It's not just that Wright is "self-centered," it's "also that his worldview doesn't recognize firm boundaries between religion and politics, or really between religion and anything."

Vogue, April 2008

The cover is an Annie Leibovitz photo spread that pairs athletes with supermodels to display the world's "best bodies," with LeBron James and Gisele Bündchen reigning supreme. The photo has come under attack from some bloggers and

commentators for allegedly depicting *King Kong*-esque racial stereotypes. ... A piece reviews a biography of "femme fatal and unlikely sexual anarchist" Evelyn Nesbit, the turn-of-the-century model and professional beauty. [Nesbit's](#) husband, coal-and-rail baron Harry Thaw, murdered her former benefactor (Stanford White, who "one champagne-fueled evening ... relieved Evelyn of her virginity—while she was unconscious"), resulting in salacious, public murder trials.* After Thaw's acquittal by reason of insanity, Nesbit attempted suicide several times and concluded in her memoirs, "Plain girls are happiest."

Newsweek, March 31

Drawing from sources who knew the candidate during his childhood and college years, the [cover story](#) looks to Barack Obama's past to depict his coming to terms with his mixed racial identity. The piece doesn't dredge up any details that differ from the image Obama already presents. But its conclusion suggests that there could be more to add: "The punch line [of Obama's campaign stories] is generally the same: blacks and whites have more in common than you might think, and he knows it because he *is* it: black and white, together as one. Or so his story goes." ... An [article](#) speculates on why more female politicians aren't brought down by sex scandals. (Going back to Catherine the Great's stable of "well-trained lovers," the piece notes the liaisons of Spitzer and Paterson "pale when compared with tales of the Russian Empress.") The sins of more modern female pols are less colorful—most amount to admitting to an extramarital affair. One explanation for the sexual-scandal gap is that traditionally, wayward women have been punished more than men for sexual exploits. Also, there just aren't as many female elected officials—or as one source puts it, "men stow their brains in their crotches."

Correction, March 28, 2008: This column originally gave the wrong first name for Evelyn Nesbit's benefactor Stanford White. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

poem **"Houseflies"**

By Kevin Barents

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 7:27 AM ET

Listen to Kevin Barents read .

I knew you all when you were young.
I tried to drown you in the garbage bin

with bleach and hose-water, but you floated up
and swam, jerking little grubs,

like bloated rice, or someone punching from inside a tiny body bag.

And now you circle overhead—small, neat, glossy with newness,

helping yourselves to what was mine, angels from the man-made world.

politics

Campaign Junkie

The election trail starts here.

Friday, March 28, 2008, at 7:18 AM ET

politics

The Education of a 9/11 Reporter

The inside drama behind the *Times'* warrantless wiretapping story.

By Eric Lichtblau

Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 7:08 PM ET

This article is adapted from Eric Lichtblau's upcoming book, [Bush's Law: The Remaking of American Justice](#), to be published next Tuesday, April 1, by Pantheon. He and fellow New York Times reporter James Risen won a 2006 Pulitzer Prize for breaking the story of the National Security Agency's wiretapping program.

For 13 long months, we'd held off on publicizing one of the Bush administration's biggest secrets. Finally, one afternoon in December 2005, as my editors and I waited anxiously in an elegantly appointed sitting room at the White House, we were again about to let President Bush's top aides plead their case: why our newspaper shouldn't let the public know that the president had authorized the National Security Agency, in apparent contravention of federal wiretapping law, to eavesdrop on Americans without court warrants. As *New York Times* Editor Bill Keller, Washington Bureau Chief Phil Taubman, and I awaited our meeting, we still weren't sure who would make the pitch for the president. Dick Cheney had thought about coming to the meeting but figured his own tense relations with the newspaper might actually hinder the White House's efforts to stop publication. (He was probably right.) As the door to the conference room opened, however, a slew of other White House VIPs strolled out to greet us, with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice near the head of the receiving line and White House Counsel Harriet Miers at the back.

For more than an hour, we told Bush's aides what we knew about the wiretapping program, and they in turn told us why it would do grave harm to national security to let anyone else in on the secret. Consider the financial damage to the phone carriers that took part in the program, one official implored. If the terrorists knew about the wiretapping program, it would be rendered useless and would have to be shut down immediately, another official urged: "It's all the marbles." The risk to national security was incalculable, the White House VIPs said, their voices stern, their faces drawn. "The enemy," one official warned, "is inside the gates." The clichés did their work; the message was unmistakable: If the *New York Times* went ahead and published this story, we would share the blame for the next terrorist attack.

More than two years later, the *Times'* decision to publish the story—a decision that was once so controversial—has been largely overshadowed by all the other political and legal clamor surrounding President Bush's warrantless wiretapping program: the dozens of civil lawsuits; the ongoing government investigations; the raging congressional debate; and the still-unresolved question, which Congress will take up again next week, of whether phone companies should be given legal immunity for their cooperation in the program. Amid the din, it's easy to forget the hits that the newspaper took in the first place: criticism from the political left over the decision to hold the story for more than a year and from the right over the decision to publish it at all. But the episode was critical in reflecting the media's shifting attitudes toward matters of national security—from believing the government to believing it less.

After all, the fear and trauma that gripped the country in the months and years after 9/11 gripped the media, too; the country's outrage was our outrage. Coverage of 9/11 and its aftermath consumed all else for reporters in Washington. As federal officials scrambled to avert the much-feared "second wave" of attacks, reporters likewise scrambled to follow any hint of the next possible attack and to put it on the front page—from scuba divers off the coast of Southern California to hazmat trucks in the Midwest and tourist helicopters in New York City. One example of the shift: On Sept. 12, 2001, another major newspaper was set to run a story on the extraordinary diplomatic maneuverings the U.S. Secret Service had arranged with their Mexican counterparts to allow Jenna Bush, then 19, to make a barhopping trip south of the border. (She had just been charged with underage drinking in Texas.) A few days earlier, a scoop about a presidential daughter's barhopping trip getting special dispensation from the Secret Service and a foreign government might have gotten heavy treatment. But the story never ran, and the Secret Service's maneuverings remained a secret until now. In the weeks and months after 9/11, there was no longer an appetite for such stories.

At the same time, in the first few years after 9/11, stories that have now become frequent front-page fodder—about waterboarding of terrorism detainees and other aggressive

interrogations tactics, about CIA "black site" prisons overseas, or about covert eavesdropping or other surveillance programs that stretched the limits of the law—simply didn't get written by most of the mainstream media. If we had known about them, which in most cases we didn't, there would have been a reluctance to publicize them in those early days of the war on terror.

I wasn't immune to the shifting in attitudes after 9/11. In early 2003, then-Attorney General John Ashcroft appeared at a congressional hearing I was covering and announced, with dramatic aplomb, the unsealing of indictments against two Yemeni men, including a radical cleric accused of personally delivering \$20 million to Osama Bin Laden. There was more: The cleric, Ashcroft revealed, said he had received money for jihad from collection at the notorious al-Farooq mosque in Brooklyn. I didn't wait for a break to rush out the door of the hearing room and call our assignment editor, who would soon be preparing the story list for the next day's front page. "This is big," I told the editor. "Ashcroft says Bin Laden was getting money from a mosque in Brooklyn."

Sure enough, the story ran at the top of the front page of the next day's paper. But among my colleagues in the paper's New York metro section, there was much less enthusiasm: The story, our Brooklyn reporter thought, was overblown, the evidence of an actual link between the Brooklyn mosque and al-Qaida thin. His skepticism was borne out: While the Yemeni cleric was ultimately sentenced to 75 years in prison on terrorism charges related to his support of Hamas, the sensational charge that the Brooklyn mosque was used to raise money for al-Qaida and Bin Laden had melted away to all but nothing by the time the case concluded.

For me, the story about the Brooklyn mosque, along with others, like the justice department's wobbly case against "dirty bomber" Jose Padilla, were eye-openers. By 2004, I had gained a reputation, deservedly or not, as one of the administration's toughest critics in the Justice Department press corps; the department even confiscated my press pass briefly after I wrote an unpopular story about the FBI's interest in collecting intelligence on anti-Iraq war demonstrations in the United States. To John Ashcroft and his aides, my coverage reflected a bias. To me, it reflected a healthy, essential skepticism—the kind that was missing from much of the media's early reporting after 9/11, both at home in the administration's war on terror and abroad in the run-up to the war in Iraq.

That shared skepticism would prove essential in the *Times*' decision to run the story about Bush's NSA wiretapping program. On that December afternoon in the White House, the gathered officials attacked on several fronts. There was never any serious legal debate within the administration about the legality of the program, Bush's advisers insisted. The Justice Department had always signed off on its legality, as required by the president. The few lawmakers who were briefed on the

program never voiced any concerns. From the beginning, there were tight controls in place to guard against abuse. The program would be rendered so ineffective if disclosed that it would have to be shut down immediately.

All these assertions, as my partner Jim Risen and I would learn in our reporting, turned out to be largely untrue. Jim and I had already learned about much of the internal angst within the administration over the legality of the NSA program at the outset of our reporting, more than a year earlier in the fall of 2004. Still, the editors were not persuaded we had enough for a story—not enough, at least, to outweigh the White House's strenuous arguments that running the piece would cripple a vital and perfectly legal national-security program. It was a difficult decision for everyone. I went back to writing about more mundane terrorism and law-enforcement matters, poking around discreetly to find out what had happened to the NSA's eavesdropping program. Risen went on sabbatical to write a book about intelligence matters. Then, one night in the spring of 2005, he called me out to his home in suburban Maryland and sat me down at his computer. There on the computer screen was a draft of a chapter called simply "The Program." It was about the NSA's wiretapping operation. "I'm thinking of putting this in the book," he said. I sat and stared at the screen in silence. "You sure you know what you're doing?" I asked finally. He shrugged.

Risen spoke with our editors about what he was contemplating, and so began weeks of discussions between him and the editors that ultimately helped to set the story back on track. Risen's book was a trigger, but we realized we weren't in the paper yet. We still had to persuade the editors that the reasons to run the story clearly outweighed the reasons to keep it secret. We went back to old sources and tried new ones. Our reporting brought into sharper focus what had already started to become clear a year earlier: The concerns about the program—in both its legal underpinnings and its operations—reached the highest levels of the Bush administration. There were deep concerns within the administration that the president had authorized what amounted to an illegal usurpation of power. The image of a united front we'd been presented a year earlier in meetings with the administration—with unflinching support for the program and its legality—was largely a façade. The administration, it seemed clear to me, had lied to us. And we were coming closer to understanding the cracks. By the time we met with White House officials in December 2005, Keller had all but made up his mind: The legal concerns about the program were too great to justify keeping it out of public view. The only real question now was not whether the story would run, but when.

That decision was helped along by a chance conversation I had soon after our White House meeting. The administration, I was told, had considered seeking a Pentagon Papers-type injunction to block publication of the story. The tidbit was a bombshell. Few episodes in the history of the *Times*—or, for that matter, in all of journalism—had left as indelible a mark as the courtroom

battle over the Pentagon Papers, and now we were learning that the Bush White House had dusted off a Nixon-era relic to consider coming after us again. The editors in New York had already decided they would probably print the story in the newspaper for that Friday, Dec. 16, 2005, but when word of the Pentagon Papers tip reached them, they decided they would also post it on the Internet the night before. That wasn't routinely done at that time on "exclusive" stories because we would risk losing the scoop to our competitors, but the editors felt it was worth the risk. The administration might be able to stop the presses with an injunction, but they couldn't stop the Internet.

Phil Taubman called us into his office to hear the official word: We were publishing the story, Keller told us. Smiles washed over the room. Rebecca Corbett, who edited the story and had been a strong champion of it, inquired about the play it would get. There'd been talk of a modest one-column headline on the front page. She wanted to know whether we might be able to get two columns, maybe even three. This seemed like a story that would have legs. Keller demurred. He wanted the story to speak for itself; we would be discreet without looking as if we were poking the White House in the eye with a big, screaming headline about NSA spying. This wasn't the moment to quibble over the size of the headline. After all this time, after all the White House's efforts to derail it, we were happy to see the story in the paper at all; in the back of the A section, among the bra ads, would have been fine.

politics

How Barack Uses Bill

Turning Hillary Clinton's husband against her.

By John Dickerson

Monday, March 24, 2008, at 6:26 PM ET

How much of a rhetorical genius is Bill Clinton? He could find wiggle room in the word *is*. He could issue stern denials about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky while looking straight into the camera. Sen. Bob Kerrey once described him as "an unusually good liar." Clinton is considered such a master of the art of political speech that during this campaign, his every remark is scrutinized for hidden agendas, motivations, and lucky lottery numbers.

He has been effective. When Clinton railed against the press for giving Obama kid-glove treatment, he got the message across in a way campaign aides hadn't achieved, despite months of jawboning the media. When Clinton brought up Jesse Jackson's 1988 campaign after Obama's South Carolina victory, he interjected a parallel that accentuated Obama's race and framed his victory as a black thing. This matched the argument Clinton aides were making behind the scenes that Obama won only

because he had such big African-American support. Bill Clinton says he got a bum rap for drawing the Jackson parallel, but it is hard to imagine that a man with his skill, even if he wasn't trying a deliberate stratagem, would be ignorant to the effect his remarks would achieve.

But Clinton can't possibly be angling as much or as often as people give him credit. Like Karl Rove, the former president is inevitably assumed to be playing games he may not actually be trying to play. What's intent and what's reputation doesn't matter to Obama campaign aides, though. They have effectively used Clinton's reputation as a political master against his wife's campaign.

The latest attempt to turn Bill Clinton into an Obama surrogate comes after Clinton's talk last Friday in North Carolina about what a Hillary vs. McCain race might look like:

I think it would be a great thing if we had an election year where you had two people who loved this country and were devoted to the interests of this country. ... [P]eople could actually ask themselves who is right on these issues, instead of all this other stuff that always seems to intrude itself on our politics.

Because Clinton is such an evil genius, the Obama campaign argued, his remarks could be interpreted only in the most politically diabolical way: By stressing McCain and Hillary's love of their country, he was suggesting Obama, whom he never mentioned, didn't love his country. One of Obama's top military advisers, Gen. Tony McPeak, promptly compared Clinton to Joe McCarthy. [Maureen Dowd](#) and [Martin Peretz](#) saw it this way, too.

Other observers saw even worse. "[Clinton] also, notably, pushed the race button there again," said a veteran Democratic strategist who supports Obama, referring to Clinton's talk about "all this other stuff." The "other stuff," goes this theory, is Obama's recent trouble with his former pastor Jeremiah Wright. The powerful message: If you don't want to have a debate about race all day long, vote for Clinton.

Is that the right interpretation? Bill Richardson, who last week came out in support of Obama, didn't think Clinton was making any claims about Obama's patriotism. Though Richardson may be tender after [cries that he betrayed The Family](#), I agree with him that if you look at Clinton's full remarks, another interpretation is possible. Clinton appears to be imagining a post-nomination world and characterizing the debate among two senators (Hillary and McCain) as respectful because—as he had just finished explaining to the crowd—his wife and McCain had traveled the world together working on the issues like global warming. When he refers to "the other stuff that always seems to intrude," it's plausible to assume—if you strip him of the horns

and pitchfork for just a moment—that what Clinton was talking about was the "stuff" that intrudes in general-election fights—swift-boat ads and Republican claims that Democrats aren't patriots.

Clinton would want to characterize a Hillary vs. McCain debate as civil and respectful in this way precisely because the Obama campaign has been arguing strenuously that she is so divisive that in a general election, she'd rip the country apart. Bill might just have been saying, *Hey, these senators like each other, so don't be worried about the general election. It'll be a civil debate.*

Call me a hope-monger, but I tend to lean toward that more generous interpretation in this case. I'm not arguing that Bill Clinton doesn't have the capacity to play the angles or that it's a certainty he wasn't trying to be sneaky here. I'm arguing that in this instance, those facts aren't in evidence. I don't think there's a definitive deconstruction to be done. Given the thousands of words he says every day, you can find something to stuff with meaning every day if you hunt. It's plausible to see Clinton's remarks in another context than the one in which the Obama campaign has framed them.

Perhaps I've been listening to Barack Obama too much. In his book *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama argues that "political caricatures and nuggets of conventional wisdom lodge themselves in our brain without us ever taking the time to examine them." As an example of false narratives, he cites none other than those that attach to his challenger: "[A] vote or speech by Hillary Clinton that runs against type is immediately labeled calculating." If I'm inclined to think the worst of Hillary Clinton and her husband, it's the senator who reminds me to recognize alternative interpretations.

Though Bill's remarks are murky, the Obama campaign pronounced judgment by embracing the conventional wisdom that insists the Clintons are always calculating. In recent days, Obama's campaign manager has repeatedly said that Clinton will "say or do anything to get elected," hoping to play on the very caricature his candidate once eschewed.

No battle plan survives contact with the enemy, so it's probably too much to expect the Obama campaign to match the Obama book (though campaign aides would like us to see no space between). Shouldn't Obama supporters let him off the hook—because politics requires a little trimming of standards now and again, and, after all, doesn't Bill Clinton deserve it for his past wrongs if not this one? If you're inclined to that view, Obama's remarks last week should give you pause. In his speech on race, he renewed his covenant with voters about a new kind of politics. He warned against just the kind of thing his campaign seems to now be doing by linking Clinton and McCarthyism. "We can pounce on some gaffe by a Hillary supporter as evidence that she's playing the race card," he said. "We can do

that. But if we do, I can tell you that in the next election, we'll be talking about some other distraction. And then another one. And then another one. And nothing will change."

If progress can happen only if we stop pouncing on every little thing, then why is the Obama camp madly pouncing? They obviously think it's a dead certainty Clinton was challenging Obama's patriotism. It's not, and Obama's own call to higher political standards should bias the assessment in Clinton's favor. So, either the Obama campaign is consciously overplaying the moment for political benefit, or it is incapable of seeing anything benign coming out of the mouth of Bill Clinton the evil genius—or the evil machine that is the Hillary campaign. The latter would suggest a weakness in judgment that can't distinguish what's really sneaky from what isn't, and Obama is running on his precise judgment.

You may think I'm being picky for taking all of this so seriously. It's just politics, after all. But if we're not supposed to take all of Obama's speeches seriously, we're stuck embracing the Clinton claim that he offers "just words" and doesn't mean what he says. To believe in the full measure of Obama's words then is, perhaps, to be too hopeful.

press box

Biggie Mistake

How Chuck Philips and the *L.A. Times* could have dodged the Tupac hoaxer.

By Jack Shafer

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 6:08 PM ET

A jailbird named James Sabatino appears to have duped the *Los Angeles Times* and its reporter Chuck Philips according to a withering [Smoking Gun](#) investigation published yesterday.

The *Times* apologized today for its March 17 story about the roots of the deadly feud between [Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G.](#) by Philips. Philips and his editor have expressed their remorse for relying on now-discredited FBI documents. An internal investigation of the investigation has also been announced by the paper's top editor.

How did a [Pulitzer Prize](#) winner like Philips and an excellent paper like the *Times* get snowed? What precautions should they have taken? We won't know the full story until the *Times* or some other news organization completes a postmortem and more is learned about the allegedly forged documents. But what happened at the *Times* isn't unique to newspapers. Con men have forged documents to perpetrate financial swindles, scientists have forged laboratory results and published their "findings" in the best journals, and police have manufactured evidence to

convince juries to imprison innocent people. So don't be quick to claim that you could never be similarly hoodwinked.

Like most disasters, the *Times*' could have been avoided, which is easy for me to say in retrospect. Here are a few general suggestions for journalists, investors, scientists, juries, and other targets of how to avoid getting swindled by your sources.

Avoid confirmation bias. It's a universal human trait to seek evidence that confirms what you already believe, to interpret the evidence you've collected to bolster your existing view, and to avoid the evidence that would undermine your notions. "Philips said in an interview that he had believed the documents were legitimate because, in the reporting he had already done on the story, he had heard many of the same details," the *Times* reports today. Did Philips' willingness to believe what the documents said blind him to the typographic clues that the Smoking Gun says point to forgery? "[The documents] confirmed many of the things I'd learned on my own," Philips said in an [interview](#) before the debunking.

Know the provenance of your document. Sources who leak documents to reporters are often sketchy about how they obtained them. Until proved otherwise, every document should be assumed to be fake. In the *Times* case, Philips trusted the documents because they had been filed in court. That they were filed by Sabatino, currently doing time on fraud charges, should have raised red flags. That he filed them in a lawsuit against Sean Combs—long rumored to have some role in the feud between Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. that ended in the murders of both—should have raised red flagpoles. That the story names Sabatino as one of two individuals who set up an attack on Shakur should have sent the flagpoles into orbit. According to the *Times*, Philips did not ask the FBI about the documents that are so instrumental to his story. A former FBI man appears to have thought the documents genuine.

Don't trust documents, trust evidence. A document is only a piece of paper with writing on it. Even if authentic, a document is not necessarily true. The FBI, just to mention one organization, has produced hundreds of thousands of authentic documents whose combined truth content is less than zero. In the *Times* case, the discredited documents appear to have been prepared with a typewriter, not a computer, which should have revealed them as counterfeit.

Enlist outside experts. Many newspapers conduct their investigations inside a tiny, bias-confirming box because they fear an information leak will get them scooped. If the *Times* had brought in outside experts—even other experienced *Times* journalists—to "[murder board](#)" the story before publication, the paper might not have a tractor-trailer-load of eggs on its face today. The less a stake an outside source has in a story, the better his critique will likely be. According to the *Times*, the only people to review the story prior to publication were the primary

editor and two editors on the copy desk, which is low by *Times* standards.

Always ask, "Why now?" When new and startling evidence surfaces to help solve an ancient mystery, as happened in the *Times* story, a journalist must always ask, "Why now? Why hasn't this evidence appeared before?" Is it because the source of the evidence stands to gain financially by its publication? Because the evidence will spring them from jail? Because they're a notorious liar who loves to lie? Cui bono, baby, cui bono.

Never trust a flimflam man. Sabatino possesses a long rap sheet. From the Smoking Gun: "The *Times* appears to have been hoaxed by an imprisoned con man and accomplished document forger, an audacious swindler who has created a fantasy world in which he managed hip-hop luminaries, conducted business with Combs, Shakur, Busta Rhymes, and The Notorious B.I.G., and even served as Combs's trusted emissary to Death Row Records boss Marion 'Suge' Knight." Also, "[From jail], Sabatino worked with a raggedy group of accomplices—most of whom he never met—and defrauded firms of upwards of \$1 million."

The *Times*' Tupac-Biggie story fell apart so quickly because, like CBS News' 2004 story about George W. Bush's [service record](#) (PDF), its primary evidence was quickly shredded by Web critics. In the CBS case, bloggers aggressively disputed the veracity of the "Kilian documents." In the *Times* case, the Web wizards at the Smoking Gun uncovered a host of suspicious typographic and factual anomalies in the purported FBI documents, which the paper [posted](#) (PDF).

Seeing as the Smoking Gun broke the story, we should pay extra attention to the wisdom of its editor, William Bastone. The story simply violated his investigative instincts. "The whole thing did not pass the smell test," he told the [New York Times](#). "Here you have this white teenager from Boynton Beach, Fla., who was in the middle of all these events and no one has ever heard of him."

If your mother says she loves you, check it out. First, find documentary evidence of her love (an expensive gift, perhaps). Next, find a witness who can vouch for her love. After that, get a signed affidavit from your mother. But she could still be faking it. Does your mother love you? Send evidence to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate*'s readers' forum, in a future article, or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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

hospitalized, and one is still in serious condition, in a coma.

press box

The '60s Version of a Pharm Party

"Fruit salad parties." You think I'm kidding. I'm not.

By Jack Shafer

Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 7:45 PM ET

Like the kid with a mouthful of loose teeth won't stop believing in the tooth fairy, the press just can't release itself from the fantasy of "pharm parties."

Since the middle of the decade, scores of news organizations—major and minor—have run pieces about "pharm parties," events at which teenagers purportedly dump into a big bowl the pills they've pilfered from their parents' medicine cabinets and then gulp them down at random. (I wrote about the pharm-party coverage [yesterday](#) and twice in 2006.)

I've failed to locate a single human source or article that documents a single such festivity, let alone proves that they're commonplace, as the media would have you believe. [The](#) closest anybody has come to finding a pharm party is *Time* magazine's Carolyn Banta, who in [2005](#) wrote about attending a party in New Jersey where teenagers swapped drugs and called it a "pharming party."* But kids swapping drugs is nothing new, and it's nowhere near as sensational as teens playing Russian roulette with mixed lots of pharmaceuticals.

I've resisted calling pharm parties an urban legend in previous pieces, but no more, thanks to reader (and [Slate contributor](#)) Nancy Nall Derringer, who e-mailed me a terrific tip this morning. She [recalled](#) reading warnings about similar get-togethers in Ann Landers' advice column back in the 1960s, only the kids called the drug sessions "fruit salad parties." My search for a Landers mention of fruit-salad parties failed, but I did find six news stories alleging their existence. Each is as apocryphal and ridiculous as anything you've read about pharm parties.

The March 30, 1966, *Lowell Sun* was the earliest clip I located, and it is a classic of the genre. In a general piece about drug use, the *Sun's* reporter confided:

In Medford, several months ago, a group of teen-agers had a "fruit salad party." Each person brought three pills. The pills were mixed together in a bowl, and each person took three. Most of the takers were

Observe the journalistic rigor practiced by the *Sun*. No sources. No names. No mention of specific drugs. How do you gauge the truth value of such a paragraph?

Next up: The *Tucson Daily Citizen* alleged in a Dec. 9, 1969, article that the "old fashioned potluck supper had taken on a new twist." Instead of sharing food, young partygoers were throwing "fruit salad parties" in which "the pills are combined into a colorful mixture, and young Tucsonians gulp them by the handful" with no idea of what they were swallowing. The *Daily Citizen's* source was a registered nurse who had written about the topic for the *American School Board Journal*. (Here's is a [snippet](#) about fruit-salad parties from the *Journal*.) Her sources? "[D]rug seminars and lectures she has attended as well as interviews with law officers, professional men and prosecutors from throughout the United States." Not exactly primary sourcing.

The *Charleston Daily Mail* published its own thin story about "fruit salad parties" on March 13, 1970, reporting:

Ingredients for the party included students, plates of fruit salads and pills from the family medicine chest.

Each student brings a pill, conceals it in a fruit salad and the salads are passed from student to student until no one knows whose pill he's getting.

Neither does the student know what kind of pill he's going to swallow.

Pills are water-soluble so they can dissolve in your stomach. Wouldn't the fruit melt the pills before they could be spooned up? This piece, which names no sources, doesn't add up, either.

Ohio's *Coshocton Tribune* got a medical-center official on the record for its Oct. 8, 1970, fruit-salad-party expose. I leave to your good judgment whether the paper's account stands up:

Fruit salad parties are also very popular with the younger sect. Six or seven pills are taken out of a couple of bottles in the medicine cabinet. When everyone reaches the party destination, the pills are all put together in a large bowl. The bowl is passed around until it is empty, with each taking a different pill each round until they are out. [George Bates, clinical chemist at Dayton Medical Center,] recalled six youngsters brought into his

hospital recently, all victims of a "fruit salad party."

The *Billings Gazette* sounded the fruit-salad alarm in a Jan. 17, 1971, piece that cited the director of the state's alcohol and drug commission. And California's *Hayward Daily Review* ran a brief UPI wire story on Dec. 9, 1971, that sourced the National School Public Relations Association about the menace:

"Young people take different kinds of pills out of the family chest—tranquillizers, aspirin, barbiturates, hot pills, liver pills—and bring them to the party," the organization said.

I don't know what a "hot pill" is, but it sounds like a buzz kill, especially in a fruit salad.

And there my fruit-salad party investigation ended, only to be restarted by Robert M. Stutman, a retired Drug Enforcement Administration special officer who has been [telling anybody who'll listen](#) in recent years that fruit-salad parties are real.

But Stutman appears to think fruit-salad parties are a *new* thing, according to a recent [Baltimore Jewish Times](#) report (Oct. 19, 2007):

In the 1960s and '70s, [Stutman] reiterated, teens would never take these pills, because they would be associated to the very people they were rebelling against, their parents. Now, according to Mr. Stutman, the rebellion is over, and the pills are part of addictive behavior.

What kind of pomegranates has *he* been chewing?

Ever been to a FSP? Send e-mail to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate*'s readers' forum, in a future article, or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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Correction, March 27, 2008: *The original version of this story mistakenly stated that a drug party described in a Time*

magazine story took place in Cape Cod. It took place in New Jersey. (Return to the corrected sentence.)

press box

Down on the Pharm, Again

Debunking "pharm parties" for the third time.

By Jack Shafer

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 6:03 PM ET

Do pharm parties exist?

Back in 2006, I concluded "no" after investigating a smattering of press stories about teenagers raiding their parents' medicine cabinets for pharmaceuticals, gathering to share their booty in a big bowl, and swallowing the pills at random like "trail mix." My two pieces ran on [June 15](#) and [June 19](#) of that year.

My efforts to discredit pharm parties failed horribly, as everybody from the [Wall Street Journal](#) to the [New York Times](#) to the [Washington Post](#) to the [Birmingham News](#) to [ABC News](#) to the [Sacramento Bee](#) to the [Los Angeles Times](#) to [Marie Osmond on Larry King Live](#) has continued to report as if the medicinal revelries not only exist but are common.

Now, I don't dispute that young people take drugs, or harvest them from medicine cabinets, or even swap whatever pills they score with friends. They did in the 1960s when I was a kid, and I have no reason to believe that they'll ever stop. I even agree that certain kinds of pharmaceuticals are used more frequently today than yesteryear. And I'm prepared to believe that somebody, someplace, sometime had a pharm party without first hearing about the phenomenon from the press or a [TV show](#).

But what I found preposterous in 2006 and still find preposterous today is the notion that having gotten their hands on drugs, today's users would randomize both their drugs and their dosages. Today's *Journal* reports that kids "mix the drugs up in a big bowl and eat them like candy" and attributes the detail to the Drug Enforcement Administration.

The *Journal* isn't alone in pharm-party reportage. "Teenagers scoop everything they can find out of a medicine cabinet, pile it all on the table and then just start swallowing stuff," a California medical worker tells the *Sacramento Bee*. Kids swallow the pills "indiscriminately," writes the *Birmingham News*. Noted drug authority Marie Osmond told Larry King that kids—not her kid in rehab, mind you—dump the drugs "in a bowl and they just take them until they pass out."

Yet pharm parties fail to pass my stink test. As dumb as kids may be, they know how to read the labels from the vials they boost from their parents' medicine cabinets. If the drug labels don't provide sufficient information, the thieving little bastards can always consult the Web for effect and potency data. So upon arriving at a hypothetical pharm party, how many young pill-poppers are going to throw their fistfuls of pilfered OxyContin in the bowl on the chance that a random scoop will yield several over-the-counter antihistamine tablets?

I'm not saying that it's *never* happened, but I doubt it. It's as big a long shot as persuading cookout guests to pluck their beers blindfolded from an ice chest containing Milwaukee's Best, Budweiser, Stella Artois, Stone IPA, and Mirror Pond Pale Ale. If few adults will play Russian roulette with beer, how many kids will do the same with stolen drugs?

Rusty Payne, the DEA press officer who assisted the *Journal* reporter in her story, cites reports from state and local law enforcement to insist the parties exist.

Yet pharm parties barely register on the DEA's Web site. The only mention I could find was a [2007 report](#) referencing "North Carolina news sources." In a July 2007 [congressional hearing](#) (PDF), the DEA's Joseph T. Rannazzisi gave this testimony:

What these kids are doing, basically, are acquiring drugs from either their medicine cabinets, their doctors or friends—their doctors—their relatives or their friends. And they're taking the drugs and they're coming to these parties where they throw the drugs into a bowl and then they systematically take the drugs out and take them.

They really don't know what they're taking. It could be a benzodiazepine. It could be a narcotic. It could be anything. And they just take them.

And so they don't know what they're ingesting, and this is a form of—just a form of adolescent partying now.

When Rep. J. Randy Forbes, R-Va., asked, "It's becoming a widespread concern?" Rannazzisi responded weakly, "We've had *several* reports throughout the country, yes." [Emphasis added.]

I polled three reputable scholars on the topic of pharm parties. Berkeley scientist [David Presti](#) responded, "I am only familiar with this term through various references in the media." [Mark A.R. Kleiman](#), drug-policy expert at UCLA, e-mailed, "New one on me, but that doesn't convey much information one way or the other." [Richard Rawson](#), associate director of UCLA Integrated

Substance Abuse Programs and professor-in-residence at the UCLA Department of Psychiatry, had this to say:

I have heard rumors of pharm parties for about three years and have seen reports on the Web. However, I have never spoken with an actual kid who has ever actually attended one of these events. I have no doubt that kids are using/abusing prescription drugs and this is concerning, but about these parties, they make a good story.

Phun Pharm-Party Phact: The first Nexis hit for *pharm parties* is a reader's comment in the Aug. 9, 2005, *Louisville Courier-Journal*. The earliest mention I located ran in the March 8, 2002, Chambersburg, Pa., [Public Opinion](#). Here's what it said:

With prescription drug abuse, the scene could be much different. In some communities, kids have "pharming" parties. They go to their parents' or grandparents' medicine cabinets and take whatever drugs are there. At the parties, they throw the pills in a bowl and take a handful, [Pamela] Bennett [a flack for Purdue Pharma, makers of OxyContin] said. The pills could be Viagra, antibiotics, blood pressure medication or anything else.

The last time I visited this subject I asked readers to send e-mail if they had ever attended a soiree under the pharm-party rubric. Nobody had. I renew the request: Send e-mail to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate's* readers' forum, in a future article, or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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press box Bloggy Monday

Murdoch gets beat; a *Portfolio* blog item mysteriously vanishes; and do TV minutes matter?

By Jack Shafer

Monday, March 24, 2008, at 7:29 PM ET

Rupert Murdoch has promised that his *Wall Street Journal* will be a tidier, briefer, and more general read, one that concentrates on [breaking news](#). And in the opening weeks of his ownership, the newspaper has largely conformed to that vision, as I commented in [January](#). But in broadening the *Journal*, is Murdoch taking the newspaper's eye off the franchise, namely business news? This morning's (March 24) *New York Times* scoops the *Journal* with an Andrew Ross Sorkin [Page One](#) piece about JPMorgan negotiating to quintuple its offer for Bear Stearns. Murdoch can't be happy about getting trounced on the month's biggest business story. By softening the *Journal's* editorial focus, isn't he making this sort of humiliation inevitable? Imagine being the editor on the receiving end of a phone call from the rotten old bastard, demanding to know why his paper got creamed on a beat that it is supposed to own. ...

The **blog item vanishes!** On March 20 at 9:50 a.m., *Portfolio's* Jeff Bercovici posted an item about *New Yorker* writer Malcolm Gladwell, and in its last line stated, "I emailed Gladwell yesterday to confirm this account but haven't heard back." By Friday evening, the piece had disappeared from the magazine's site. Bercovici referred my questions about the deletion to the magazine's publicist, Perri Dorset. Over the weekend, she said via e-mail that the posting had been removed until Gladwell responded to Bercovici. Today, Dorset waved away additional questions, stating in an e-mail, "We have not heard back from Malcolm. We also don't talk about pieces before publication—either on-line or in the magazine." The fact that the Bercovici piece had *already* been published did not move Dorset to further explication. *Portfolio* and *The New Yorker* are owned by Condé Nast. ... **Addendum, March 25:** [Gawker](#) follows the story.

Is the [number of minutes](#) devoted to a topic on the evening network-news programs a strong indicator of anything anymore? Back in the day, when whole families parked themselves in front of the tube to watch David, Chet, and Walter—and whoever drew the short straw that month at ABC—the metric had meaning. If the nightly news covered a subject, the nation knew all about it. But that has not been the case ever since the collapse of the nightly news ratings, which this [Project for Excellence in Journalism](#) chart documents. In 1980, the three programs combined earned about 42 Nielsen ratings points. By 2007, that number was down to just 16.9 rating points. Even so, some in the press keep trumpeting the importance of TV minutes. This weekend, [On the Media](#) cited [Tyndall Report](#) calculations to note the reduced coverage of Iraq by network TV: According to the Tyndall stopwatch, the total number of Iraq minutes has declined from a peak of 4,162 minutes in 2003 to 1,888 minutes in 2007, with a very steep drop coming in the last three months of the year. Those in search of a better metric should consult the Project for Excellence's 2007 "All Media" [measurement](#) (PDF) of "percent of newshole." That survey calls "Iraq Policy" the No.

2 most covered story, "Events in Iraq" No. 3, and the "Iraq Homefront" No. 8. The sum of the three slices of the Iraq story towers over the survey's top-ranked story, "2008 campaign." (Also in the top 10 are "Iran" and "Pakistan.")

Thanks to reader Elon Green for the Murdoch pointer and to Joseph Weisenthal for the one about *Portfolio*. Make my life easier by sending additional pointers to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate's* readers' forum, in a future article, or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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reading list

Recession Literature

The best books, articles, and Web sites about the economic collapse.

By Daniel Gross

Saturday, March 22, 2008, at 7:50 AM ET

For connoisseurs of financial folly, commercial irrationality, and general fiscal inanity, these last several weeks have been an all-you-can-eat buffet. In New York, the implosion of Bear Stearns and the serial failure of billion-dollar hedge funds have induced a combination of schadenfreude (*I knew those guys never deserved their big salaries*) and foreboding (*What will this do to the price of that co-op I just bought?*). And across the country, the bursting of the real-estate and housing-credit bubble is destroying personal balance sheets.

So what am I, a business/finance journalist and a self-proclaimed expert on bubbles, reading to keep up?

For starters, the article in the February issue of *Harper's* magazine by Eric Janszen, a former venture capitalist and founder of iTulip.com, on how "[the bubble cycle has replaced the business cycle](#)." It's literate, smart, and accessible—the sort of article that every issue of *Harper's*, alas, contains only one of.

[Irvinehousingblog.com](#) is an exemplary Internet mashup. Irvine, the master-planned community in Orange County, Calif., was in many ways the epicenter of the housing boom. Many of the now-defunct ambitious subprime lenders were based there. And the O.C. housing market was a hothouse of speculation and

refinancing. Today, it's the "seventh circle of real estate hell." Using realty listings, public records about debt, and YouTube videos of popular songs, an anonymous blogger who goes by IrvineRenter skewers homeowners who paid too much and are now desperately trying to recoup their investments. Realtors who post lame photos, misspell words, or engage in silly promotion-speak also come in for ridicule. At the end of each entry, the blog calculates precisely how much a homeowner—or the bank that foreclosed on his or her property—will lose if the house gets its offering price.

For a macro view of the credit pileup, I rely on [Calculated Risk](#), a blog written anonymously by "a senior executive, retired from a public company, with a background in investing, finance and economics" and "a former bank officer and mortgage lending specialist who is currently on extended medical leave." The blog distills the news (most of it bad) from the credit world and includes occasionally acid dissections of mainstream financial journalists. Trademark line: "We're all subprime now."

We may not all be subprime when it comes to credit. But when it comes to decision-making, we're all suboptimal. Economic theory tells us that markets—housing markets, stock markets, political markets—are supposed to be efficient machines populated by rational actors. Reality and psychology tell us otherwise. Dan Ariely's best-selling new book, [Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions](#), may seem at first blush to be just a *Freakonomics* knock-off. But Ariely, an MIT professor who has Ph.D.s in business and psychology, has done a huge amount of firsthand research on decision-making, and he demonstrates that emotions, expectations, contexts, and social norms all play a huge role. My favorite study is one in which he twice asked male Berkeley undergraduates to answer a series of questions relating to their interest in certain sexual activities—first while imagining they were sexually aroused, and then again when they were actually sexually aroused. (The results can't be fully described on a family Web site.)

If Ariely's book is very much of the moment, John Brooks' [Once in Golconda: A True Drama of Wall Street, 1920-1938](#) is very much timeless. The longtime business correspondent at *The New Yorker* was an elegant master of long-form magazine pieces and books. (The closest analogue working today is Roger Lowenstein of the *New York Times Magazine*.) *Once in Golconda* is the rare bubble book that doesn't end with the inevitable pop. It brilliantly tells the story of the 1920s madness and the great crash, but it also explores the denouement and the seeds of recovery that followed. However bad it may get, Brooks reminds us, we've been there before.

This article also appears in the Washington Post's "Outlook" section.

readme

Lost Time Making Up

The political costs of primping.

By Michael Kinsley

Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 4:45 PM ET

The conversation was about how tiring it must be to run for president, and someone—a woman—said that on top of everything else, Hillary Clinton has to spend an hour and a half getting ready for each day's campaigning. She didn't mean studying her notes and making sure she knows the name of the mayor of McKeesport, Pa. She meant doing her hair, putting on her makeup, deciding what to wear—or at least thinking about it, even if she has someone else to decide for her. And so on. Other women ridiculed the notion of an hour and a half, but the bottom offer was 40 minutes. And that's just in the morning. Shorter versions of the morning ritual go on throughout the day.

And how long does it take Barack Obama—or even John McCain, with his war injuries—to shower, shave, and put on one of a dozen identical dark-blue suits, a white shirt, and a red tie? Ten minutes? Fifteen? Let's not be completely naive, and let's posit that these men also take a dab of makeup here and there. So let's say 20 minutes.

Any man who has twiddled his thumbs waiting for his wife or opposite-sex partner to get ready to go out should not have been surprised by this. But all the men in this particular conversation were taken aback—and so were the women, as the reality sunk in. Every day, seven days a week, for almost two years, the candidates campaign. The average day is probably 15 to 20 hours. The average amount of sleep could be four hours. And yet every day the male candidates can sleep an extra precious half-hour or more—or spend the time cramming for the day—simply because our culture doesn't impose the same rules on them about their appearances.

And these really are rules. Sure, there are women who take no more trouble about their appearance than most men do and men who take more than the average woman. But a middle-aged woman who is the first of her sex to make a serious run for the presidency is not going to be a pioneer in indifference to looks. One revolution at a time. She has got to look put-together, all day, every day. Hillary Clinton is not especially vain about looks, whereas Barack Obama has dropped hints that he may well be. Nevertheless, if it ever came out that Obama was spending an hour primping every morning, it would hurt him, not help. Whereas if Hillary Clinton were known to spend an hour dressing and primping, no one would be surprised. And if she looked as if she had spent much less than that, it would hurt her.

A year ago, the big dinner-table question was whether it is a bigger disadvantage in running for president to be an African-American or a woman. It seemed for a while as if neither one was a particular disadvantage. In fact, the prize for biggest burden of prejudice to be lugging around the primaries went to Mitt Romney for being a Mormon. Cautiously, we were starting to congratulate ourselves on having moved beyond race and sex. Then came the Rev. Jeremiah Wright and Geraldine Ferraro, and we were plunged into a "conversation about race." Ferraro said that Obama's race might actually be an advantage.

This is implausible. But let's go back to sex: What about his advantage in being a man? And I don't mean anything fancy and psychological. I don't even mean the double standard that allows the press to report on how a woman candidate dresses while ignoring this crucial issue regarding male candidates. We'll get past that someday. But even then, it will take a woman candidate longer to get ready to campaign than it will take a man. In most occupations, this 20 minutes doesn't make much difference—especially compared with the disproportionate time that women still spend housekeeping and child-rearing. It will make no difference after the election: No one will care whether the president is well-coiffed when answering that 3 a.m. phone call. But in a close-fought election campaign, every minute counts. If you figure 20 minutes a day over a year and a half of 14-hour days and six-day weeks, it comes out to an extra two weeks of campaigning or sleep for a male candidate.

This issue goes back to the early days of "women's lib," of course, when opponents talked about "bra burners" and made crude jokes about unshaved legs. It was considered an advance when it became established that a woman could dress like a woman and still be a business executive or lawyer. And Hillary Clinton, even if she loses, has established beyond all doubt that a woman can be a credible candidate for president. But she'll have to be one who needs even less sleep than her opponent.

recycled

Should I Sell Grandma's Locket?

Why high gold prices don't mean it's time to sell your jewelry.

By Daniel Engber

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 7:31 AM ET

Gold prices have seesawed in the last month, peaking in mid-March at a [record high of more than \\$1,000 per ounce](#). Even after a mild decline, the [value of gold](#) is still more than \$200 higher than it was a year ago. In a 2006 [Explainer](#), reprinted below, Daniel Engber detailed why this doesn't mean you should [sell off all your jewelry](#).

Investors pushed the price of gold [above \\$600 an ounce](#) on Thursday, up from around \$500 at the end of November. Gold hasn't been this valuable in 25 years. Does that mean it's time to sell your gold jewelry?

No. The American jewelry market isn't really set up for investment buying and selling. When you buy a gold necklace at the retail store, a major portion of the bill covers the jewelry's design and manufacture. That means the 20 percent increase in [international gold prices](#) translates to a much smaller increase in the value of your necklace. The markup is less significant overseas, where many people do consider gold jewelry an investment.

If you have a gold necklace, you probably don't know how much gold you have to sell. Retail jewelers almost never tell you how many grams of gold you're getting when you buy an item. They might tell you the purity of the gold used in the necklace—that it's 14 karat and not 18 karat—but not the quantity.

The amount of gold used in a standard piece of jewelry fluctuates with the market. Jewelry manufacturers use more gold per item when gold is cheap and less gold when it's expensive. That way they're able to keep the price of a gold necklace stable, even when gold prices fluctuate wildly. Casual consumers expect to pay a certain amount for a piece of jewelry. If the gold market forced jewelry prices higher, they'd stop buying.

You might wonder why a jewelry retailer wouldn't mark up the necklaces in the window when the newspapers report that gold has become more valuable. After all, [that's what gas station owners do](#) when oil prices rise. This difference in behavior can be explained in a couple of ways. First, gas station owners aren't selling a luxury product that customers expect to buy at a certain price. Second, it's much easier for a gas station owner to physically change his prices—all he needs to do is slide a new digit onto the sign and adjust the pumps. If a jewelry retailer wanted to raise his prices even a small amount, he'd have to retag every little item on the shelves.

But all of this goes out the window when [the price of gold gets high enough](#). The political turmoil of the late 1970s helped to push gold from \$215 an ounce in 1978 to well over \$800 in early 1980. The Associated Press reported mass sell-offs in London and New York: "People formed long lines outside jewelry stores, clutching old coins, candlesticks, watches, bowls—anything that contained gold or silver."

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

Explainer thanks Jeff Christian of CPM Group and Toni Logan of Oxford Assaying & Refining Corp.

shopping Pop Off

What's the best popcorn popper?

By Torie Bosch

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 7:49 AM ET

Popcorn is the snack to beat all snacks. It's tasty, high in fiber, and you can season it with everything from butter and salt to [wasabi](#). (There's even [Simon and Garfunkel](#) popcorn—made, of course, with parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme.) The advent of the microwave meant more for popcorn than perhaps any other food, and these days most of us satisfy our popcorn cravings by just nuking a bag of Pop Secret. But microwave popcorn has its downsides: It's [high in calories](#) and [relatively pricey](#). Plus, until recently, microwave popcorn was manufactured with a chemical called diacetyl, which caused some popcorn-factory workers—and even one [consumer](#)—to develop a serious disease called [popcorn lung](#).

Admittedly, that guy ate two bags of microwave popcorn a day, and after his story came to light, late last year, manufacturers removed diacetyl from their recipes. Still, the popcorn lung reports got me thinking about a return to homemade popcorn. I decided to test out popcorn poppers to find the best way to satisfy my snacking urges without adding cost, calories, or chemicals to what should be a nice, natural food.

Methodology

I tested six popcorn poppers, three that used hot air and three that cooked the popcorn in oil. For each, I used plain-old store-brand popcorn kernels. I used corn oil for the poppers that required oil, because it's a relatively healthy fat and because it seemed appropriate. I evaluated the poppers using three criteria:

Popability (10 possible points)

Does the popper produce fluffy popcorn, or does it tend to burn it? Do all of the kernels pop, or does the popper leave behind old maids and half-popped kernels to wreak havoc on your teeth? Is the popcorn ready quickly? Ideally, a popper shouldn't take any longer than a microwave.

Usability (10 possible points)

Is the popper easy to set up, both the first time and on subsequent uses? Does it come with any extra features, like a butter melter, a scoop to measure out the popcorn, or a built-in bowl to eat out of? Is it easy to clean? I also factored into this category the price of the popper.

Taste (10 possible points)

Is the popcorn light and crunchy or heavy and chewy? It should

be noted that among popcorn aficionados, there is a sharp divide over hot air vs. oil. Hot-air-popped corn is healthier, but because it's drier, it's tempting to pour a lot of butter on it. Popping in oil gives the corn a little taste and cuts down on the dryness but can leave the popcorn soggy. I brought to my testing four years of popcorn-popping experience from my high-school job at a movie theater concession stand, but I didn't have a preference for one method or the other.

Here are the results, listed from "stick with the microwave" to "pop on!"

[West Bend Stir Crazy Popcorn Popper](#), \$40.99

My first thought on seeing this popcorn popper was that it looked as if it belonged on the set of *The Brady Bunch*. There's something very '70s about its awkward plastic dome and cumbersome shape. The popcorn and oil go in the curved base of the popper, where a metal arm stirs the kernels to keep them from burning. Once it's done popping, you flip the entire thing over, leaving the popcorn in the plastic dome, which doubles as a bowl. The West Bend also features a butter melter that, in theory, coats the popcorn in butter as it pops. The plastic dome has vents in the top that are supposed to let hot air escape and melt the butter onto corn.

Sounds great, right? Only, it didn't work. The stirring arm kept getting caught on the kernels, so the heat wasn't evenly distributed. It took about five and a half minutes to pop all the corn, longer than I'd like to wait. And even though it took a while to get the kernels popping, the butter wasn't melted by the time it was done. Instead, half-melted globs of butter sat atop the bowl, which I had to clean up before I could flip the popper and begin eating. It was messy and inconvenient. As for the popcorn: It was chewy. And there were lots of unpopped kernels.

Popability: 3 (out of 10)

Usability: 3 (out of 10)

Taste: 4 (out of 10)

Total: 10 (out of 30)

[Progressive Microwave Popcorn Popper](#), \$12.99

This product promises to combine the ease of microwave popcorn with the healthiness of a hot-air popper. You place the kernels on the heating circle at the bottom of the popper using a built-in measuring cup and stick it in the microwave for a few minutes. When it's done, you've got a nice batch of popcorn in a built-in bowl—and at \$12.99, it's the cheapest popper I could find. Ease, healthiness, and affordability—we should have a winner here.

Except it just doesn't pop the corn. The Progressive produced popcorn that was simultaneously burned and undercooked—about one-third of the kernels didn't pop. The kernels that did

pop popped small and tasted almost stale. The Progressive is dishwasher-safe—but if you never use it, it will never need cleaning.

Popability: 1 (out of 10)
Usability: 6 (out of 10)
Taste: 5 (out of 10)
Total: 12 (out of 30)

Toastess International Hot Air Popper, \$24.99

This squat little hot-air popper is easy to store even in a cramped kitchen. Like the West Bend, it features a butter warmer, which doubles as a scoop for measuring out the corn. Setup was a cinch: Put the popcorn in the base, put the lid on, and you're ready to go. In just three minutes, I had a piping-hot bowl of popcorn. A little *too* fast, perhaps, because once again the popcorn was ready before the butter melted. The taste of the popcorn was just OK—it wasn't as fluffy and light as I would have liked, and I kept biting down on half-popped and unpopped kernels. The Toastess is not dishwasher-friendly and lacked an on/off switch, a feature I'd gladly pay a little extra for—my kindergarten teacher taught me never to turn off an appliance by yanking its electrical cord out of the wall.

Popability: 6 (out of 10)
Taste: 6 (out of 10)
Usability: 4 (out of 10)
Total: 16 (out of 30)

Cuisinart Popcorn Popper, \$59.95

This is one good-looking popcorn popper. The basic design is similar to the West Bend, but it's more 21st-century—it looks more like one of Cuisinart's food processors than a popcorn popper. Alas, despite its sleek design, this machine somehow manages to make popping corn complicated. It required too much assembly, particularly given its steep price—I didn't want to pay *this* much more for an on/off switch.

The popcorn was ready in about four minutes. Because this is an upside-down popper—the popcorn pops from the bottom up into an overturned bowl—it was hard to determine that the popping was complete. I probably left it on a little too long, as some of the kernels tasted a tad charred. The rest were a bit soggy from the oil, though I used the recommended amount. I think that if I got to know the Cuisinart, we could make some tasty popcorn together. But I'm not sure you should have to work at your relationship with your popcorn popper.

Popability: 7 (out of 10)
Usability: 6 (out of 10)
Taste: 6 (out of 10)
Total: 19 (out of 30)

Whirley-Pop Stovetop Popcorn Popper, \$19.99

This old-timey popcorn popper, which uses oil, doesn't require an electrical outlet. You just put it on your stove (it's safe for both electric and gas) and crank the handle slowly while the kernels pop. I confess I thought it looked a little goofy at first—is this a popcorn popper or a hurdy-gurdy?—but this little popper surprised me. It took only three minutes to pop the corn and left just a half-dozen old maids, though there were a good many half-popped kernels. The popcorn was crunchy and tasty. The Whirley-Pop has its downsides, however. It's not dishwasher-friendly, and there was a little burn mark on the bottom of mine after just one use. It would be fun to use with little kids—this is how they made popcorn *before there were microwaves!*—but it also seems a little dangerous to have children so near a hot stove.

Popability: 9 (out of 10)
Usability: 5 (out of 10)
Taste: 9 (out of 10)
Total: 23 (out of 30)

Presto PopLite Hot Air Corn Popper, \$16.94

The Presto PopLite looks exactly like the hot-air popper I used as a kid—right down to the ugly yellow top. But it gets the job done, popping all of the popcorn in just about a minute and half and leaving just a few unpopped kernels. Like the Toastess, it came with a useless butter warmer—is melting butter really this hard?—and no on/off switch. But it's also cheap, costing little more than a few boxes of the microwave stuff. And the taste was great: The kernels were airy and crunchy and were perfectly complemented with just a touch of salt and butter. I think the Presto and I will be very happy together.

Popability: 9 (out of 10)
Usability: 6 (out of 10)
Taste: 9 (out of 10)
Total: 24 (out of 30)

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Pop Off

A 2-pound bag of kernels from my grocery store sets me back just \$1.79, or just 6 cents per ounce, while a three-bag box of

microwave popcorn costs around \$3 (depending on the brand and flavor), for a price of about 30 cents an ounce—five times the cost of the plain-old corn.

slate v

The Stupidest Bike Lane

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 12:43 PM ET

slate v

Interviews 50 Cents: Fond Memories

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 3:56 PM ET

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Vacuum-Cleaner Convention

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 2:19 PM ET

slate v

Dear Prudence: Virtual Teen Romance

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Monday, March 24, 2008, at 12:26 PM ET

sports nut

Otto von Bismarck at the Bat

The fight for the soul of my fantasy-baseball league.

By John Swansburg

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 5:06 PM ET

This week, I begin my fifth season as a player of fantasy baseball. I humbly submit that I am entering my prime. Over the past five years, I have learned how to plot a smart draft, work around the inevitable injuries, and keep an eye out for the late-season call-up who can spark a flagging team. (I'll never forget you, [Zach Duke](#) of August '05!) As this season approached, however, I found myself contemplating an early retirement. It wasn't that I'd grown tired of the game—on the contrary, I'd spent February happily poring over [PECOTA](#) projections. The problem was that a nasty dispute had riven my league—and threatened to destroy it altogether.

What set off this existential crisis? A proposal to switch the league's seventh pitching category from complete games to [holds](#). The choice between these two relatively obscure statistics may seem like a trivial matter to the uninitiated. Actually, even I didn't anticipate that it would be a big deal. But by switching from complete games to holds, our league commissioner forced us to confront a fundamental question we had never properly considered: Is it more important that fantasy baseball be fun, or that it be realistic?

Over the years, the league had struck a tacit balance between the two, and had it not been for the brinkmanship of this year's commissioner, this dispute might never have come about. As is the case with most fantasy-baseball leagues, ours is a democracy, though were our unwritten rules to be set down, they'd look more like the [Articles of Confederation](#) than the Constitution. The commissionership rotates from player to player each year, and in essence he is merely a functionary: He has the power to veto lopsided trades, for instance, but the league can override that veto with a simple majority vote.

This year, the league commissioner is my college roommate Simon, who has been playing fantasy with friends from his hometown of Port Washington, N.Y., for more than a decade. This is not Simon's first stint as commissioner nor his first brush with controversy. The last time he held the office, he brought with him a [theory of the unitary executive](#) that would have made Dick Cheney's look meek by comparison. Here's how he described his first term in office, in a recent e-mail to the league that served as his second inaugural address:

A few years back, as many of you remember, I approached the commissionership of this league with the realpolitik that was the hallmark of Otto von Bismarck's tenure as chancellor of Prussia, and then later, Germany. This "iron and blood" philosophy led to a couple of major initiatives, first and foremost, the timely arrival of all league funds prior to the start of the league.

Getting the league finances in order had been [a major accomplishment](#), and, as a result, Simon was remembered by most members as an enlightened despot. Emboldened by the achievements of his first term, however, he endeavored to make more drastic changes during his second.

Traditionally, our league has used seven hitting categories and seven pitching categories; the higher you rank in each category, the more points you're awarded, and the guy with the highest cumulative point total at the end of the season wins. The titanic change that Simon envisioned? Dumping complete games from the list of pitching categories in favor of holds, an arcane statistic that's awarded when a middle reliever comes into a game and doesn't cough up the lead.

Major changes to our league are typically put to a vote. Simon made a show of respecting this convention, but when holds failed to carry the day in a ballot measure, he simply instituted them by fiat. The responses to Simon's move were swift, profanity-laced, and almost uniformly ungrammatical. But the message was nevertheless clear: The other managers were apoplectic that Simon had thwarted the will of the people. They also really, really liked complete games.

The argument for using the complete game as a fantasy-baseball category is that complete games are fun. Even the CGs fiercest supporter didn't make the case that the complete game is a good measure of a player's skill. While it's certainly an accomplishment any time a pitcher throws a CG, in the era of the pitch count, it has become increasingly rare for a starter to last all nine innings. Whether a pitcher earns a CG has as much to do with the state of the bullpen as it does with how much gas he has going into the ninth. It's like the pitching equivalent of the grand slam—you have to be able to hit the ball out of the park to get one, but you also have to come up with the bases loaded.

No one has ever won the complete game category because of their fantasy-baseball acumen; you win CGs by luck. But getting a CG is undeniably a blast. There is nothing quite like the rush of realizing one of your pitchers is headed into the ninth having thrown just 98 pitches—so long as he doesn't put anybody on base, the CG, and the big spike in points that comes with it, is surely yours. Last year, the team that won the category had 12 CGs; I finished second, with nine, having paid no attention to the category all season long.

The hold, by contrast, is not fun. It's like a save, but without the glamour that attends the final inning of a game. No one roots for holds. Major League Baseball doesn't recognize them, and most fans aren't even aware they exist. But holds do make you pay attention to middle relievers. In the past, my league has used six pitching categories in addition to complete games: wins, losses, saves, ERA, strikeouts, and WHIP (walks plus hits per inning pitched). This means that while starters and closers are highly sought after, only the elite middle relievers—the Hideki Okajimas and Joba Chamberlains—are typically on anyone's roster. But if fantasy is a test of how well you know baseball, should you really be able to dismiss a group of players so key to real-world success?

Simon argued no, and, I confess, I shared his opinion, which I guess makes me his [Albrecht von Roon](#). For Simon and me—and I think for many players of fantasy—the game long ago stopped being "fun." I invest an unhealthy amount of time and energy in my fantasy team; its successes buoy my spirits, certainly, but its failures can ruin my day. In this sense, *fantasy* has become something of a misnomer—it suggests an escapist pursuit, when this league is in fact very much a part of my everyday reality. There are more edifying, more useful ways I could spend my time. But if I'm going to spend hours reading up

on Kelvim Escobar's [supraspinatus](#), I at least want to be able to entertain *this* fantasy: that if Theo Epstein were to be hit by a bus tomorrow and John Henry decided to shake things up and bring in someone from outside the organization, I might be a plausible candidate for the job. If I went in there and prattled on about the importance of letting Red Sox starters go the full nine, no way I'd make it to the second round of interviews.

Running a fantasy team will always be at best a rough approximation of what it's like to run a real one. Because it's based purely on statistics, fantasy distorts the value of players who might dominate a certain category. If a real-world GM put together a team with [Mariano Rivera](#), [Takashi Saito](#), [Brad Lidge](#), and [Kerry Wood](#)—as one player in my league has—he'd be run out of town on a rail. Still, in an era when no front office is complete without a sabermetrician, managing a fantasy team can feel close to what the guys in the big leagues do—if you could only make a few changes to how your fantasy league is scored ...

Alas, that's not how the majority of the managers in our league saw it. Simon, recognizing he didn't have the political capital to push his change through—and, indeed, that he was flirting with being deposed—struck a conciliatory note and reinstated the old league settings. But if I know Simon, this is far from over. The whisper campaign for a splinter league next season has already begun. We'll use holds instead of complete games. No second utility spot. Fielding percentage. Watch your back, Epstein.

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It is a league tradition that after each season, the last-place and second-to-last-place managers must dress up in a bunny suit and a banana costume, respectively, and spend the night barhopping in Manhattan. The buy-in for the league is a steep \$300, and back before interest rates dipped below Jake Peavy's ERA, the league kept its funds in a dedicated savings account, using the not-insignificant interest earned over the course of the season to purchase and maintain the costumes. Having all managers pay up by Opening Day was therefore of material importance to the league.

sports nut

How Davidson Slayed Goliath

The diminutive Stephen Curry leads his team past Georgetown and into the Sweet 16.

By Robert Weintraub
Monday, March 24, 2008, at 4:49 PM ET

Let me guess—you were shocked by Davidson's second-round [upset of Big East powerhouse Georgetown](#) on Sunday. Well, I saw it coming. Feel free to start a chant of *Bullshit! Bullshit!* at your office, but I cannot tell a lie. I actually thought the Wildcats had enough Cinderella potential to contact the school's athletic department this past fall in the hope of following the team for a book about the season—right to the Sweet 16, if all went well. Like every other elite private school in America, Davidson turned me down. So, I watched the Wildcats dismantle the Hoyas with wistfulness and a soupçon of bitterness. It's like seeing the band you've been following down at the local dive make it big. Now everyone can claim my little mid-major.

The star of this group is Stephen Curry, as pure a shooter to grace the hoop landscape since his father, Dell. Curry the elder's role in the NBA was to come off the bench, spot up behind the 3-point line, and drain jumper after jumper; he did this well enough to stick in the league for 16 seasons. Stephen may be an even better shooter—you can hear a gasp of surprise in the arena when he misses. And even those misses look beautiful, dropping halfway down before rimming out. Curry's stroke is so pure that he's the rare jump shooter who can dominate without a strong drive-it-to-the-hoop game.

Incredibly, none of the Tobacco Road schools—or even Dell's alma mater, Virginia Tech—showed any interest in Curry. Perhaps this is because the scrawny sophomore looks less like a ballplayer than like poker player [Phil Ivey](#). You would think that Duke, in particular, could use a player like Stephen Curry. The Blue Devils, with eight McDonald's All-Americans on their roster, look and play like an undermanned mid-major squad. Duke [should have lost](#) to tiny Belmont in the first round, then were played off the court by Big East mid-packers West Virginia. Upon leaving the arena, one Mountaineer reserve was told that Duke point guard Greg Paulus was one of the team's many high-school all stars. [His reply](#): "Oh my God. Are you kidding?"

While Duke's players seem to peak in 10th grade, Curry and his Davidson teammates have shown remarkable improvement since [last year's near-miss against Maryland](#). Against the Hoyas, Curry played less like his father than Reggie Miller, running through screens for 36 minutes and outlasting a wave of defenders assigned to guard him. Despite a frustrating first half in which he struggled to get open and get his shot off, he never stopped running. He also set a lot of screens himself and made smart passes to open teammates when double-teamed. When Curry finally did pop open behind the arc, he set and fired incredibly fast, launching high-arching rainbows that seldom touched the iron. Unlike many deep threats, who score wide-open looks when their teammates get double-teamed, Curry is option one,

two, and three for his team—and everybody knows it. That's why his 70 points in two games (55 in the second halves!) ranks among the greatest accomplishments by a guard in tournament history.

Davidson isn't a one-man team, though. Forward Andrew Lovedale, who had an effective but quiet regular season, has turned into Xavier McDaniel in the postseason, complete with shaved head and bullying demeanor in the post. Davidson also has another key component to March success, a senior point guard who can score and create. Jason Richards, the nation's assists leader, had 15 points and nine dimes in the tourney opener against Gonzaga and 20 points and five assists on Sunday. More important, he maintained an even keel in both games, even when the 'Cats were down double digits in the second half. Announcer types like to talk about "not playing too fast." Richards brings the cliché to life, rarely breaking the team's natural rhythms. And he knows how to get the ball to Curry in the shooting guard's favored spots.

Last year it was Butler that made a surprising run to the Sweet 16, and the small Indiana school barely missed this time around. On Sunday, Butler took No. 2 seed Tennessee to overtime before succumbing. The Bulldogs actually have the superior team to Davidson—a back court of A.J. Graves and Mike Green that is just a shade below Curry/Richards and a much better group of front-court threats, led by freshman Matt Howard and long-range gunner Pete Campbell. Davidson's lack of complementary offensive threats makes Curry's heroics that much more remarkable. It's also a reminder of the importance of matchups in the tournament. While it's hard to imagine that Davidson could've stayed close to ultra-athletic (if often out of control) Tennessee, Georgetown plays much closer to the level of its opponent, giving the Wildcats the chance to get hot and pull out a close game.

Davidson is a fantastic story, but I'm not sure they can pull a George Mason and get to the Final Four. First up is [hated Wisconsin](#). Like Georgetown, the Badgers won't be able to pull away, but they're a smart, defensive-minded bunch who won't get frustrated by slow play. Should the Wildcats survive that one, they'll likely take on an even tougher member of the menagerie—the Jayhawks of Kansas, my [pretourney selection](#) to win it all. Kansas features an array of fast, talented players and more depth than any squad in the country. Seems like the kind of team that should rout a 10 seed from a nowhere conference, even one with the best player in the tournament. I'd sure love to watch Davidson give it a go, though—even if someone else is going to end up writing the book.

supreme court dispatches

Jail of Two Cities

The Supreme Court gives the right to habeas corpus a swirly.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 7:23 PM ET

We have known each other for a long time, so I'm going to ask you to indulge me in the war against "enemy combatant fatigue" (the medical condition wherein each court case about the "war on terror" warrants exponentially less outrage and attention). This dispatch is about two U.S. citizens named Mohammad Munaf and Shawqi Omar, being held by a coalition led by U.S. forces in a U.S. military prison in Iraq. But I'm going to ask that you pretend their names are Morgan and O'Hara instead. Because it's always easy to throw Munaf and Omar under the constitutional bus. Morgan and O'Hara have American kids and wives, and sometimes they even serve in the Minnesota National Guard.

Munaf/Morgan is a dual U.S.-Iraqi citizen with a noncitizen wife and three small U.S.-citizen kids. He claims he went to Iraq as a translator for three Romanian journalists, who were then kidnapped. He was kidnapped, too. After the Romanians' release, Munaf was charged with plotting in the kidnapping, then he was convicted and sentenced to death in the Iraqi Central Criminal Court. Munaf confessed to the plot but recanted at trial, claiming his confession had been coerced under the threat of abuse. He petitioned for habeas corpus relief in the U.S. courts—Latin for "get me outta here"—but was turned down there and again at the federal appeals court for the District of Columbia, chiefly because he'd already been convicted in the Iraqi system. Three weeks ago, an Iraqi appeals court overturned that Iraqi conviction.

Omar/O'Hara is a dual U.S.-Jordanian citizen, married to a U.S. citizen, with six American children. He served in the Minnesota National Guard. In 2002, Omar traveled to Iraq, seeking work in the reconstruction. In a 2004 raid on his home, U.S.-led forces allegedly discovered an Iraqi insurgent, four Jordanian jihadists, and explosive materials. Like Munaf, he's being held at a U.S. military prison at Camp Cropper, near Baghdad. Before he could be transferred to the Iraqi courts, Omar's wife filed a habeas corpus petition, alleging that as a Sunni Muslim he'd likely be tortured in custody. The federal district court found it had jurisdiction to hear his habeas corpus petition, then enjoined his transfer to Iraqi custody. The federal appeals court for the District of Columbia agreed. The two cases were [consolidated for argument](#).

The Bush administration's main argument in this case is a simple one—a variation of which you may remember from the golden days of lawlessness at Guantanamo: Sure, the military authority in Iraq might *look* like it's composed of U.S. soldiers, the prisons may *appear* to be U.S. military jails, the whole effort may *seem*

to be led by the U.S. president, but really these "enemy combatants" are not under U.S. jurisdiction. Why? Well, just as American troops are merely renting out Gitmo from the Cubans, the authorities that captured and held Omar and Munaf are actually just part of a U.N.-mandated international force.

Never is the president's respect for foreign nations greater than when they're holding the legal bag for him. Under this theory, as long as a French chef serves up some crepes in Baghdad once in a while, it's a multinational, not a U.S., army. Oh. And the reason we must allow the Iraqi courts to have their way with U.S. citizens captured there? Because the president worries that if American courts intervene, "other nations would inevitably take offense."

Wouldn't want to offend other nations.

Deputy Solicitor General Gregory Garre has the unenviable task of defending this principle. He must explain why American citizens held by American forces abroad don't actually have a right to habeas corpus relief, comparable to that established in *Hamdi v. Rumsfeld*. The more relevant case, urges the government, is actually a 1948 case, *Hirota v. MacArthur*, which determined (in about nine opaque sentences) that American courts had no habeas jurisdiction over Japanese nationals captured, held, and tried by Allied forces in World War II. Of course, those guys weren't citizens like Morgan and O'Hara.

Almost as soon as he mentions *Hirota*, Justice David Souter clocks Garre with the fact that "you've got American citizens here." And Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg hastens to add that the other difference in *Hirota* was that there had already been "convictions and sentences" in the foreign court, whereas Omar's case "has not even been investigated by the Iraqi courts, certainly no conviction," and Munaf's conviction was quashed.

Garre replies that *Hirota* wouldn't have come out differently even if the habeas petitions had been sought before conviction and with the equally unsupported assertion that the fact that it was an international authority trying the prisoners was "key to the court's finding that there was no jurisdiction." Souter replies that if the president acting alone can simply "make an agreement for an international force" and thus suspend all judicial habeas jurisdiction over American citizens, well, that's "a little scary."

Garre suggests the forces in Iraq aren't really there under color of U.S. authority, but Souter cuts him off: "You've got an American commander and straight-line authority right through." Garre responds that the "United Nations controls the strings." Ginsburg asks, "How many people are being held in the custody of this multinational force the U.S. controls?" Twenty-four thousand, replies Garre. And they all have an American judge on speed-dial.

Chief Justice John Roberts asks for some limiting principle here:

Should U.S. citizens be turned over to foreign courts in which "they won't receive anything resembling due process and will be subject to abuse"? Garre opts to brazen it out with the claim that when American citizens go abroad, "they have to take what they get." Justice John Paul Stevens asks if they can thus "be released to a lynch mob." Garre wisely says that question can be reserved for another case.

Justice Anthony Kennedy says (Kennedy-like), "But habeas corpus is concerned with the safety of the prisoner to the extent it's controlled by our authorities." (He doesn't think people should be released to lynch mobs, but adds—for the benefit of our foreign friends—that this is "just a hypothetical question.") Roberts practically erupts that Garre should not "concede that habeas is concerned with the safety of the individual as opposed to his custody." This leads Garre to go all doe-eyed about the "sovereign right and jurisdiction" of foreign countries. You know, the same foreign countries we like to invade and occupy?

Ginsburg points out the "high risk that [Munaf and Omar] will be subject to torture and abuse," quoting Iraq's deputy justice minister, who admits in one of the briefs that "we cannot control the prisons." Garre replies that the torture and abuse in Iraq comes out of the Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Defense and not the Ministry of Justice (it's good to specialize), but he warns that it's not for the courts to engage in fact-finding about the nature of the lynch mobs awaiting prisoner release. "These are matters for the executive to assess." Garre asks the court to respect the determination of the executive branch and the "justice systems of other sovereign nations." Priceless.

Joseph Margulies represents Munaf/Morgan and Omar/O'Hara. His first few minutes of argument are impressive. He's in the middle of distinguishing *Hirota* from his clients' case when suddenly Justice Stevens kind of hurls himself at his head like an enraged bobcat in a bow tie. "Does your case depend entirely on the fact that these are American citizens?" Margulies tries to reply, but Stevens cuts him off again and then again. And yet again. Stevens beats on him like a drum about whether or not the detainee's citizenship matters and then about whether or not the place of detention matters, and by the time Kennedy gets his mitts on Margulies, it's no longer clear what matters at all. Ginsburg kneecaps him with yet another hypothetical, and Justice Samuel Alito starts up again with the citizenship.

At some point, both Souter and Stevens are hollering at once, and Roberts is grinning that there is no bright-line rule left at all. Roberts contends that "the historic purpose of the Great Writ was to challenge custody," but habeas relief isn't really even what Margulies' clients want. This leads Margulies to draw an invisible imaginary four-box-decision grid that obscures rather than clarifies an invisible theoretical discussion about prisoner releases versus transfers. Most of the rest of the argument bogs down in whether the transfer of prisoners is lawful or unlawful, and what relief they could possibly be seeking in the first place

(three points [for Eric Posner](#)). It finally runs aground when Margulies and Kennedy lock horns over whether there is a due-process restriction on release by the United States to another sovereign nation. Margulies thinks yes. "That's just got to be wrong," Kennedy says flatly.

I stopped counting the number of times I heard someone claim to be "confused." But the government somehow managed to make a difficult case easier, and the opposing side turned a rather clear-cut case into a roller derby. That's probably why Justice Stephen Breyer steps in during the last few moments to ask Margulies whether he needs all this extraneous stuff to win this case. "You've been arguing for all sorts of things that seem far broader than that."

Not a pretty day at the high court and not at all clear whether a baffling oral argument helped wrest defeat from the jaws of victory for Munaf and Omar.

television

Road Kill

Was HBO right to cancel a new show before it aired?

By Troy Patterson

Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 12:47 PM ET

HBO's recent flops—the sitcom *Lucky Louie*, the supernatural surf epic *John From Cincinnati*, the XXX-istential marital-counseling drama *Tell Me You Love Me*—have, after debuting to the customary discharges of public-relations confetti that greet the network's new shows, had the good grace to skulk away discreetly, like a first wife after a favorable divorce settlement or Fred Thompson after South Carolina. Not so with *12 Miles of Bad Road*, a comedic family saga set in Dallas. Since the news emerged last week that HBO canceled the show after sinking \$25 million into it and before any of its six completed episodes had aired, the series has raised a fuss worthy of a spurned Southern belle.

Indeed, producers Harry Thomason and Linda Bloodworth-Thomason are responsible, most famously, for two twinkling fantasies of the New South: *Designing Women* (CBS, 1986-93) and "The Man From Hope" (Democratic National Convention, 1992). They've been trying to convince me and anyone else who will listen that HBO is so myopically focused on the slicksters of Manhattan and Los Angeles that it doesn't know what to do with a show about little ol' Texas. They've prodded Aaron Barnhart, TV critic at the *Kansas City Star* and proprietor of the well-respected blog [TV Barn](#), into serving up a saber-sharp epithet for HBO: "edgy PBS." And they've mailed copies of those half-dozen episodes to the press along with a cover letter expressing

the "hope that some critical reassurance might prompt [HBO] to reconsider their decision or at least help us move the show to a more receptive environment."

I wish I could help. Who wouldn't, given that the series presents a clan of plutocrats—the Shakespeares—whose adventures easily outclass the candy-coated Page Six antics of the Darlings of *Dirty Sexy Money*, goof gently on the immortal exploits of the Ewings of *Dallas*, and, in two or three instances of high farce and broad nonsense, even outdo the blunderings of the Bluths of *Arrested Development*? But I also wish that *Bad Road* weren't all over the road, confusedly mixing the sharp and the moist, the sincerely ridiculous and the ridiculously sincere, hard-biting satire and chick-flick pap that you could safely ingest with a set of bare gums. It's a cool show that invites Kinky Friedman on to play himself—and a witless one that then fails to give him a single line to read.

The series begins with a helicopter tour evoking, unhelpfully, the openings of *La Dolce Vita* and *Short Cuts*. The Shakespeare sisters—Amelia (Lily Tomlin) and C.Z. (Mary Kay Place), "queens of Dallas real estate" selling "epic homes for epic lives"—are showing the town to the Cowboys' new star running back. Here's the mansion that some hopeless nouveau riche have modeled on Versailles: "We thought *that* was in poor taste," says Amelia and C.Z.'s cousin Kenny (Leslie Jordan, mincing broadly as a late-middle-aged queen), "until they put real Mexicans in their manger scene."

Farther down this millionaire's row, there's the house where Amelia's daughter Juliet stalks one wing and Juliet's soon-to-be-ex-husband practices tantra with his fiancée in another. (The first appearance of Juliet's special-needs teenage daughter reveals that the girl has swiped the fiancée's mink kneepads and worn them to field-hockey practice.) A bit farther yet, we find the mansion inhabited by Amelia's son, Jerry, and his bitchily pious wife and a brood including a daughter whose weekly routine includes "toddler pilates." And there's the flame-orange bus that Amelia's black-sheep daughter, Gaylor, has parked in front of Jerry's place. While no TV critic worthy of his couch could reassure HBO that *12 Miles of Bad Road* has the makings of a surefire hit, it's obvious that Gaylor, played superbly by newcomer Eliza Coupe, deserves her own spinoff. She's a fantastic floozy. She's unemployed (probably because she's unemployable), and I'm enchanted by the way—at once nonchalant and predatory—she pokes at a housekeeper's unattended purse. When the family lodges a complaint about Gaylor's habit of passing out on the lawn with her skirt up and her thong on view, she bows to propriety by purchasing full-bottomed panties.

The Shakespeares' bit of comedy and drama involves deb balls and restrictive country clubs, mega-church pastors and Neiman Marcus conspicuous consumption, flings with exchange students and rugged horsemen. The tone is so peculiar—wavering between an upper-class take on *My Name Is Earl* and a dry-

martini version of *Desperate Housewives*—that it's hard to see where on your dial it might land. Showtime is not in the running. *Variety* says that Lifetime "kicked the *12 Miles* tires but eventually passed." [Fox](#) comes to mind—not least because NFL announcers Troy Aikman* and Joe Buck appear as themselves in a notable dumb scene set at Texas Stadium—but there would seem to be a mismatch of brow height between this literate show and the network that brings you *Til Death*. Is it entirely ludicrous to suggest that the Thomasons take a meeting with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting? Why not? The debate over its uselessness is in the air again, and *12 Miles of Bad Road* is classy enough to get by on those gray airwaves. Tomlin would be a smash at pledge time. What better revenge on the edgy PBS than an attempt to make the actual PBS a bit edgy?

Correction, March 26, 2008: The article originally misidentified Troy Aikman as Troy Aiken. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

television

A Unified Theory of *The Hills*

Pretending to be yourself isn't easy.

By Troy Patterson

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 2:54 PM ET

The Hills (MTV) is about the lives—the square-one jobs, the rock-stupid romances, the pricey-looking highlights—of some young women living in greater Los Angeles. These are, principally, Lauren, Heidi, Whitney, and Audrina—though Audrina, being a brunette, might not really count. *The Hills*, one supposes, *is* the lives of these women in the most complete way that a television show could be. These are real people pretending to be themselves and making a virtue of banality. *The Hills Premiere Party: Live and Glamorous in Gotham* aired last night in celebration of the show's return. This featured Mariah Carey, whose missions were to hop octaves, make patter, show a lot of leg, and add some old-fashioned showbiz sizzle to the cold fire of this newfangled reality show.

When *The Hills* left off, Heidi—who now resembles an actress in a big-budget romantic comedy, not the cuddly lead but the uptight rival or the workaholic sidekick—had called off plans for her wedding to Spencer, presumably because his narcissistic shiftiness renders him absolutely unmarriageable. The show picked back up with her jaunting to her family's house in Crested Butte, Colo., where she put matters into perspective during après-ski heart-to-hearts with her mother. Spencer arrived unannounced at the ancestral home. Heidi's stepfather cast skeptical glances—eyes brimming with wariness, baffled stares garnished with pity—at the poor boy. Spencer played with his phone. They all went out to dinner. Heidi told Spencer off. Crested Butte looked like a very dull town.

Meanwhile, Lauren and Whitney jetted to Paris. Their internships at *Teen Vogue* required attendance at a debutante ball. Said Lauren of the City of Light, "It's so pretty here," which counts as an incisive comment, the dramatis personae of *The Hills* not really being verbal creatures. They communicate in a language of dropped jaws, desperate gapes, nonbelieving double takes, and plastic reaction shots. They don't need dialogue. They have faces! Thus, my favorite among the girls is not button-nosed queen bee Lauren, but Whitney, on account of the hints of Modigliani around her doe eyes.

Lauren was on the phone with Audrina, who reported seeing Lauren's putative boyfriend, Brody, out with another girl at a prominent dumb nightclub. In retaliation, Lauren called down to central casting for a stock Frenchman to flirt with. "We should go to the Eiffel Tower," he said, for real. He gave her a ride on his Vespa, truly. He smoked almost as well as Belmondo. Lauren weathered an incident—an actual incident!—concerning a scorched gown but made it to the ball on time. Later, live and glamorous in Gotham, Mariah commiserated with a story about a 110-volt curling iron, a 220-volt outlet, and the aroma of burnt hair.

For my money, that random anecdote was the highlight of the evening. But my money's no good here. *The Hills*—flat as fact, intentionally pointless—presents distinct problems of critical practice. The questions it means to inspire include "Is Heidi's behavior toward Spencer consistent with her earlier statements?" and "Is Lauren hot?" We are supposed to discuss these people as we would our own friends. They're just like us, and, for that, they are stars; and I guess the episode's signature scene—it looked at once totally phony and luridly hyperreal and perfectly ultramundane—caught Whitney and a Brilliantined *Teen Vogue* editor in cerulean-blue light, a luscious and alien glow, in the ballroom of the Hôtel Crillon. Young zillionaires waltzed in the background, extras attending Whitney's statement that, though she will remain forever grateful for the many doors her internship has opened, what she really wants to do is be a stylist.

the browser

Hulu Hoopla

Is a new site the future of television?

By Michael Agger

Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 2:29 PM ET

For the past couple of years, TV and the Internet have existed in a pleasant state of harmony. If forced to watch live television (by breaking news, by sports), you could surf the Web during commercials and dull moments. The laptop-TV combo was ideal, enfolding you in a narcotic halo of constant information.

That ideal is becoming a memory, though. Web sites have sprouted video arrows where paragraphs once stood, and television is trying to figure out how to fit in online—where the kids hang out and the advertising dollars increasingly flow. Meanwhile, the people who run the television networks have had a chance to see what happened to the music labels. Because of MP3s, an entire generation expects to get songs for free. Television shows, which can be encoded into relatively small files, have long since fallen into the hands of peer-to-peer networks and the BitTorrent brigades. It's only a matter of time before Average Joe Internet starts downloading his favorite shows commercial-free.

But just as the Internet is poised to destroy commercial television, it may also rescue it. The life raft is called [Hulu](#), a site that debuted this month. It demonstrates how TV might thrive in the Web environment of comments, ratings, and the wisdom of the crowds.

Back when YouTube launched in 2005, the site became a playground of copyrighted content, one that spurred new viewing habits. Missed *The Daily Show*? You knew that Jon Stewart's monologue would be on YouTube the next day. The site effectively functioned as a user-driven highlight reel of television, music videos, sports, and movies. It was on its way to becoming a vast content cloud of any visual moment that someone had a notion to upload. YouTube wasn't TV—it required you to lean forward into the screen rather than lean back and vegetate—but it was a lot more fun, and there weren't any commercials.

Enter the lawsuits. Viacom, et al., soon put the kibosh on most of the copyrighted content. If you wanted to watch the latest Andy Samberg *SNL* short, you had to go to [NBC.com](#). Jon Stewart and Colbert moved to the [Comedy Central site](#). The professional stuff was split up between places that often required registration and different kinds of players. Meanwhile, the loss of copyrighted content made YouTube seem more amateur and bizarre—the camgirls and the near-porn that had lurked on the margins were suddenly the main course. The site also lost its aura of totality. YouTube was no longer the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Video Universe*.

Once the networks succeeded in getting their content pulled, they promised to launch a "YouTube killer." That turned out to be an empty and inexact threat. YouTube didn't really need the "real" shows and movies to sustain itself. It soon developed its own freaky internal chemistry. (At this point, it's probably best to think of YouTube as a genre unto itself.) What we the people and the networks really wanted was a YouTube Pro—a site that would aggregate television shows and movies in one place and stream them in high-quality video.

With [Hulu](#), Fox and NBC (and their partners) have launched the best YouTube Pro yet. The site puts the shows and movies front

and center. No registration, no special players. Click on *The Simpsons*. Get *The Simpsons*. You can watch in full screen. Recently, I couched myself with my laptop for a few episodes of *30 Rock*. Hulu placed two ads in each episode at appropriate times—standard 30-second spots for Priceline.com (starring William Shatner). It was a pleasant way to watch TV—almost Swiss in its subtle consumerism. There was also an efficiency aspect that appealed, as I powered through a half-hour episode in 22 minutes. But, for someone raised on the old tube, it's somehow disconcerting to see TV on the computer screen. It's as if you're in college, and your friend who's the biggest partier shows up for the 9 a.m. econ lecture.

Hulu has been available to knowledgeable Web users for a while ([people figured out the URLs for all the shows](#)). And most computer-literate folks can watch anything they want on the Web, anyway, whether through BitTorrent or some other means. Hulu is about putting TV on the Web for the so-called "silver surfers" (aka old people), the lazy, the clueless, and the [lunchtime prime-time](#) crowd. Both the site's content and presentation are resolutely mainstream. The "price" you pay is that Hulu's offerings are limited to Fox, NBC, and their partners, and that the site sneaks commercials into and around the shows in a modest way.

If Hulu catches on, there will be more ads and a less pleasant viewing experience—especially considering the trend that the more time you spend on the Internet, the less TV you watch. But what's most tantalizing about Hulu is how it throws shows such as *The Simpsons*, *House*, and *American Dad* and movies such as *The Big Lebowski* and *Some Like It Hot* into the wilderness of Web 2.0. Hulu users can rate the content and leave comments. Like YouTube, the shows are collected in lists of "Most Watched Today" and "Most Watched All-Time." The movies are broken into clips that can also be rated and compiled into most-watched lists.

For Hulu to become a true YouTube Pro—a site with complete movie and television archives—would require a historic level of corporate cooperation. For now, the site reminds us of the joys of television as a communal experience—One Nation, Under Pop Culture. With TiVos and DVDs, everyone is time-shifted. You've got one friend who's watching *The Office* Season 2 and another who's savoring every season of *Gilmore Girls*. What Hulu could do is create a global top 10 list. Here are the shows and clips that everyone is watching. Discuss.

So far, the most popular episodes reflect the limited offerings and the geekiness/maleness of the early adopters: *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *The Girl Next Door*. But when the voting and commenting crowds arrive, and more women show up, and more shows and movies get added, Hulu has the chance to be a fascinating microclimate. What's the all-time best episode of *The Simpsons*? What's the [most exquisite moment in *Bring It On*](#)? If I

were to watch only one *Facts of Life* minisode, which should it be? No more will these questions trouble us in our sleep.

the chat room

The Walking Debt

Daniel Gross takes readers' questions about the mortgage crisis and the government's age-old weapons for fighting it.

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 5:28 PM ET

Slate business columnist Daniel Gross was online at *Washingtonpost.com* on March 27 to chat with readers about the Roosevelt-era safety net that is [saving the economy from itself](#). An unedited transcript of the discussion follows.

Daniel Gross: Hi everyone—Dan Gross here, the Moneybox columnist at *Slate* and Money Culture columnist for *Newsweek*. Happy to entertain questions on the recent volatility on Wall Street, the candidates' economic plans, and anything else on your mind.

Anonymous: Just a comment, We are ignoring the role that Fannie, Freddie and FHA all played in running up the housing market. Fannie and Freddie were the largest single buyers of subprime MBS, helping to drive that market. FHA continues to lose money, and started the trend toward low or no down-payment lending. It is insane that the House has passed a bill allowing FHA to insure zero down-payment loans—it is the lack of equity and extreme leverage on the part of borrowers and lenders that got us where we are today.

Daniel Gross: There's no question that Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac played a significant role in contributing to the boom—by essentially guaranteeing that they would purchase mortgages that conformed to their standards. And there's no question they did end up with a big chunk of subprime debt on their books, much of which was rated AAA (thank you, credit rating agencies.) But as a total percentage of all assets, subprime was a drop in the bucket at Fannie & Freddie. In addition, while it's easy and popular to bash the two GSEs, it is worth noting that their presence in the marketplace does result in lower interest rates for people who qualify for so-called conforming loans.

Re: the FHA. It has emerged as one of several levers the government is now pushing in an effort to bring some life back to the mortgage market.

Silver Spring, Md.: More of a personal finance question but it ties into some recent trends: I am about to take out loans to pay for business school abroad, after which I'll hopefully repay them on a Euro- or Pound-denominated salary... Should I go with a government-backed Sallie Mae loan, or succumb to the low interest rates of private loans? How stable is the student loans market going to be in the next few years - not very, right?

Daniel Gross: An interesting dilemma, and I'm no way qualified to give advice on something like this. The student loan market isn't particularly stable right now, but that is something that is likely affecting investors and the issuers more than people who are getting MBA programs. When comparing loans, I don't think the source matters as much as the fees, the interest rates, etc.

Chicago: In his commentary on the Federal Home Loan Banks, the author might have confused the action taken this week. The regulatory change allowing "member banks ... to double the number of mortgage-backed securities issued by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac that they can hold on their books for the next two years," was taken by the Federal Housing Finance Board, which regulates the FHLBs. Thus, the 12 FHLBs were extended this authority, not their commercial bank and thrift members.

Also, as correctly noted, the FHLBs are creatures of Herbert Hoover, not President Roosevelt. Freddie Mac, however, was created in 1970 by the FHLBs and later spun-off as its own entity in 1989. At that time, the FHLB underwent a significant transformation, shedding their regulatory oversight of the thrift industry and emerging as purely wholesale lenders to their member financial institutions, which now include commercial banks and credit unions, as well as thrifts and insurance companies.

When Fannie Mae was created in 1938, it was today's Ginnie Mae, charged only with purchasing government-guaranteed mortgages. The current Fannie Mae, created in 1968, is a publicly-traded, privately-capitalized, profit-making corporation—a corporate form seemingly at odds with the New Deal philosophy.

As these three entities exist today, they are unique examples of quasi-governmental organizations that successfully blend both free-market and liberal attributes to perform their missions of promoting housing finance while generating reasonable profits for their shareholders.

Daniel Gross: Thanks for the comment. And, yes, my sentences on the FHLB could have been more clear. In referring to "member banks" I was referring to the actual Federal Home Loan Banks, not to the private banks that access credit through them.

I agree with everything you say, with the possible exception of the last line about Fannie & Freddie generating "reasonable profits" for their shareholders. Of late, they've been generating truly massive losses, with the possibility of more. And it's worth noting that the market's implicit assumption that the government—i.e. the taxpayers—will stand behind the GSEs should they fail, keeps their borrowing costs low and prevents the type of confidence-draining actions that hampered Bear, Stearns.

Falls Church, Va.: So, does whatever help that the FHLB is providing in this economic crisis make up for the huge damage it did to the economy (and taxpayers) in the S&L crisis? Essentially, it stood by while the industry developed a huge mismatch between loan interest received and deposit interest paid out, and then it failed so badly in the handling of this crisis that a whole new agency (the RTC) had to be created to fix the mess, essentially by spending a vast amount of taxpayers' money.

Daniel Gross: I'm not sure how one would compare the costs of the S&L crisis with today's subprime crisis. There were definitely multiple government agencies involved in both.

Arlington, Va.: What New-Deal style agencies would you suggest setting up today?

Daniel Gross: One possibility would something like a Resolution Trust Corp. (from late 1980s or early 1990s) that would buy up the bad debt and take ownership of foreclosed properties—and work them out or sell them over time, rather than dumping them on the market en masse as is being done today. The way the foreclosure dynamic works in the private sector, there's no way the lenders can handle the sort of one-on-one negotiations necessary to modify mortgages, etc.

Harrisburg, Pa.: If we are going back to the New Deal, might it also be worth noting that if Americans are ready to sacrifice for war that we don't accept tax cuts during wartime?

Daniel Gross: Definitely a point worth noting.

Capitol Hill: Would it be fair to say the housing-market collapse also serves as a sort of market correction? Ultimately as

a result of this downturn, real-estate prices will drop, which needs to happen because home prices had been allowed to get too high, leading people to take out excessive mortgages for homes that they couldn't really afford.

Daniel Gross: There's no question that the collapse—which in most markets has been a relatively small decline—is functioning as a needed correction. Prices rose at an unsustainable pace for several years. The problem is that housing—unlike stocks, or other assets—is almost always bought with a huge amount of leverage (i.e. debt), which means that prices only have to fall a small amount in order for people's equity to get wiped out, with all the negative consequences that brings.

Chicago: As your article points out, Fannie Mae was created in 1938 as a government agency. But in 1968, under LBJ, it split into two parts: Ginnie Mae, which remains a government agency, and Fannie Mae, which is a publicly-traded, shareholder-owned corporation. What would FDR think about the current structure of Fannie, under which taxpayers bear the risks, but private shareholders reap the profits?

Daniel Gross: There's no question that Fannie Mae evolved in a way that would have surprised FDR. His preference at the time was obviously for the government to handle this. And this situation in which profits go to shareholders while liabilities revert to the taxpayer probably wouldn't have pleased him.

Boston: Do you see an expanded role for the FHLBanks going forward?

Daniel Gross: I think their role has been expanded a great deal already. Further expansion depends a great deal on how things pan out. Countrywide, as I noted in my article, accessed tens of billions of dollars of credit from FHLB. If Countrywide (or Bank of America, which is about to acquire Countrywide) doesn't make good on that debt, I think there will be widespread calls for FHLB to rein in its activities.

Baltimore: It is my understanding of financial conservatism that the U.S. government is, per our Constitution, only charged with printing money, managing national defense by paying for and managing an army, etc., and the regulatory type functions provided by government that we are discussing here (the government backing bank loans, the government backing student loans, the government managing health insurance through Medicaid and retirement through SSA) are anti-free market and anti-Constitutional.

What would REALLY happen if the government discontinued "big government" as we know it ... ended transfer payments to individuals in the form of SSA payments, food stamp and other welfare payments, discontinued HUD and the Dept of Education (which was a goal of the Contract with America in the 1990s) as well as discontinued all of the regulation of markets which came out of the post Depression era?

Daniel Gross: What would really happen? In a word, chaos! The practices you describe may be anti-free market in some sense, but I don't see them as being unconstitutional.

I don't have much to comment on with today's column...: but just wanted to say I enjoy your writing and always appreciate your ability to break down fairly complex financial issues so they can be understood easier.

Daniel Gross: thanks, mom!

Daniel Gross: Thanks for all the questions!

the green lantern Should My Baby Wear Huggies?

Going diaper shopping for the Little Green Penlight.

By Brendan I. Koerner

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 7:35 AM ET

I'm about to have my first child, and my husband and I are vigorously debating our diaper options. Old-fashioned cloth nappies seem like a greener choice than plasticky disposables, but I've heard this isn't necessarily the case—washing machines don't run on pixie dust, after all. Can we put Huggies on the tyke without feeling too guilty, or is cloth the clear environmental winner?

This is a timely question for the Lantern, who joined the fatherhood ranks last month. In the weeks leading up to the Little Green Penlight's joyous birth, the cloth-or-disposable conundrum vexed his parents to the edge of madness. After copious number crunching, we decided that cloth is, indeed, the greener option. Yet for the time being, at least, the 6-week-old Penlight is doing his business in disposables. Should you follow our wicked lead? That all depends on your specific circumstances as well as your ability to weather the disapproval of your high-minded friends.

It's pretty clear that disposable diapers require more resources to manufacture than cloth diapers, even when you take into account the vast amounts of water and energy involved in cotton farming. A [1992 study](#) from [Franklin Associates](#) estimated that producing a year's supply of disposables, which are composed largely of plastic, consumes roughly 6,900 megajoules of energy, vs. around 1,400 megajoules for a year's supply of cloth diapers. Yet the study concluded that cloth ended up being 39 percent more energy-intensive overall, given the electricity needed to wash load after load of dirty diapers.

That conclusion is now woefully outdated, however, given the major advances that have occurred in [washing-machine efficiency](#) (PDF). For a washing machine made in 1985, an 11-pound load of cottons washed in warm water used up 1.68 kilowatt hours of electricity and 34 gallons of water; for a machine made two decades later, the relevant figures are just 0.95 kilowatt hours and 12 gallons.

A [2005 study](#) (PDF) by Britain's [Environment Agency](#) took into account some of these technological advances. In making their calculations regarding cloth diapers, the study's authors used average energy-consumption figures for machines made in 1997. They concluded that there was "no significant difference" between the environmental impact of cloth and disposable diapers. Keeping a child clad in home-laundered cloth diapers for 2.5 years emitted 1,232 pounds of [carbon dioxide equivalent](#), vs. 1,380 pounds for disposable diapers.

Critics of the study—and there [were many](#)—pointed out that cloth diapers would have enjoyed a more notable triumph had the authors taken into account the latest washing machines' technical specs. The critics also contended that the study underestimated the resilience of cloth diapers and didn't properly stress the waste-management consequences of disposables. Indeed, there's no question that single-use disposables require more landfill space than multiple-use cloth diapers. (In the United States, disposable diapers make up about 2 percent of all garbage.)

The bottom line is that cloth diapers are greener than run-of-the-mill Pampers and Huggies, as long as you're committed to an energy-efficient laundry regimen. But that commitment takes more than just an EnergyStar washing machine and a clothing line for air drying. It also takes time, a commodity which will be in startlingly short supply once your offspring drops. And thus we must delve into the ceaseless conflict between idealism and reality.

Trust the Lantern when he says those first few weeks of Junior's life will be a sleep-deprived jumble, and that you may be grateful for the small respite provided by disposable diapers. Your washing machine will already be running several hours a day, chock-full of milk-encrusted onesies; there's a chance you may not have the fortitude to double that laundry burden by

doing cloth diapers, too, especially if you plan on getting back to work pronto. (Also note that cloth diapers generally soak through more quickly than disposables, and so have to be changed more frequently.)

The Lantern and his wife both work full-time, albeit partly from home. Taking care of the Penlight is an exhausting, 24/7 assignment, so we opted for disposable diapers in order to make these first months a smidgen easier. We did, however, select [chlorine-free diapers](#), since the chlorine used to bleach regular disposables is associated with dioxin emissions. We plan to use disposables until the Penlight is roughly three months old, at which point we'll give cloth diapers a try—not only for environmental reasons but because of some [purported health and financial benefits](#). If we can't deal with the ensuing laundry deluge, we may try an alternative such as flushable [gDiapers](#).

Ultimately, you'll have to make a deeply personal judgment call as to whether you're willing to forgo a modern convenience in the name of being a little kinder to the planet. Whichever way you go, just make sure you'll feel comfortable explaining your choice to your child in, say, 2024.

Regardless of your decision, it's worth noting that the diaper debate too often overshadows other wasteful aspects of baby care. It's curious how people feel so guilty about using Huggies but not about all the fossil fuels that went into making and transporting their brand-new bouncers, swings, and diaper pails. Really, would it be so awful if your young 'un inherited a secondhand [Diaper Genie](#) or crib mattress from a friend? But for the moment, alas, giving used baby-shower gifts seems to be a serious faux pas.

Is there an environmental quandary that's been keeping you up at night? Send it to ask.the.lantern@gmail.com and check this space every Tuesday.

the spectator

Welcome to the Hotel Hiroshima

Has the ground zero of the nuclear age become too "normal"?

By Ron Rosenbaum

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 1:46 PM ET

Welcome to the Hotel Hiroshima. That's what my AmEx travel itinerary called it: "Hotel Hiroshima." I don't know whether this was the official name of the hotel I was booked in to. It may, more mundanely, have been shorthand for "Hotel *in* Hiroshima." Or it may have been the name before it was changed to what it calls itself now: "The Crowne Plaza Hiroshima," part of the

global chain that has joined other American chains in this shiny rebuilt city.

There's a Hiroshima KFC, a Hiroshima Mickey D's (perfect place for a Happy Meal, right?), a Hiroshima Starbucks, and a Hiroshima FedEx-Kinko's.

There is a special kind of bleakness in the fluorescent hell of the all-night Hiroshima Kinko's, believe me. I spent a sleepless predawn hour there beginning to write this column.

Just try saying it—"The all-night Kinko's of Hiroshima"—and you'll see what I mean. Unfortunately, you can't read what I wrote there, because when I tried to save a draft of my lede on this dual-language keyboard, I discovered you can't save in English, and this is all I found:

h, ", ", ^, ..., ', ...?@, ??@, ,, E, ..., <, ?, ..., '?@, ?, E, ?, f, ...?@, ?, Ž?@, ..., '?', ", ^?@, ", ^, ?, Ž?@, ", ^, ...?@, ?, E, E, Ž, %, †, ^, "?@, j, %, Ž, <, "? @, %, Ž?@, g, %, ', "?", ^, %, ?, ??H, h?@, ^, ?, ?, ...?@, Ž, ?, "?D?@

I was never able to recapture the original lede, which is perhaps best for all concerned since I believe it sought to evoke the doomed romanticism of the 1960 Alain Resnais new-wave classic, *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, and Hiroshima no longer seems to have the hold on our imagination it did back then, during the Cold War balance of terror. Not in the Beckett-like bleakness of the Hiroshima FedEx-Kinko's. Still, the name (Hiroshima, not Kinko's) has a disturbing numinous power.

My Amex itinerary listed my room in the Hotel Hiroshima this way: "1 KING BED SMOKING CITY." SMOKING CITY! Turns out "CITY" was shorthand for "city view." But do I need to spell out why I find the name Hotel Hiroshima so resonant? Sure, you hate the Eagles. It's practically a cultural requirement that you do (sometimes I think everybody but me does, but then again, the Eagles seem to sell a lot of music). Still—admit it—there are some lines that will last. Like the one from "Hotel California": "You can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave."

So it is with the Hotel Hiroshima. We checked in to a metaphoric Hotel Hiroshima—"we" as a culture—on Aug. 6, 1945, when the 16-kiloton atomic weapon detonated about 800 meters over a hospital here. (The hospital wasn't the ostensible target; a nearby bridge was, but needless to say, the hospital and all those in it were vaporized.) Nearly 100,000 people died instantly or within hours from the original blast and the firestorms that followed (by the end of 1945, 140,000 were dead). Estimates of those who died over a longer period from radiation sicknesses, from radiation-induced cancers, and other disease sequela range far upward.

We checked in to the First Nuclear Age that day in 1945, and yes, sometimes we check out, in the sense of repressed memory, willed or unconscious denial, cultural amnesia. It's happened for prolonged periods after the end of the Cold War. That all-too-brief "holiday from history" some called it.

So yes, we've checked out, but it doesn't look like we're ever going to leave: The nuclear weapons are still there—thousands of them under the badlands of the Dakotas and the trans-Ural steppes and the sands of the Middle East, all still armed and ready. As they say in "Hotel California," in a phrase that never made sense to me until now, "We are all just prisoners here/ of our own device."

And Hiroshima is still here to remind us of what happened when we first unleashed our "device" and how it can never happen again—supposedly.

That's what everyone says after visiting Hiroshima, the statesmen and citizens who sign the guest book at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial. We will never forget. But maybe we will. The very fact that Hiroshima is thriving with its KFC and Starbucks, with the carefully manicured lawns of its "Peace Memorial Park"—the only evidence that hell was unleashed here—may have the opposite, anodyne effect. This is not John Hersey's Hiroshima, the Hiroshima of the horrific immediate aftermath, but is to a certain extent a Hiroshima that says a nuclear detonation is a transient thing, something that's eminently recoverable from with a little time and some good landscaping.

And it's true that after 60 or so years, one 16-kiloton blast can be virtually erased, physically at least. But not metaphysically, since it represented the moment the bright line that separated war from nuclear war had been crossed for the first time.

That's why the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, set in the middle of an otherwise "normalized" city, on the very site of the blast, seems strained at times. It bears a disproportionate responsibility: to the memory of the victims and to legions of potential victims that stretch into the nuclear future.

No nuclear weapons have been used in war since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Is it because Hiroshima and Nagasaki were so horrific? Some will even say many more "devices" *would* have been used by now or millions more people would have died in conventional wars had not Hiroshima and Nagasaki been savagely sacrificed in a way that showed the world a glimpse of the horror that awaits us if we don't remember what happened to those two cities.

At the time of Hiroshima, one nation had nuclear weapons. Now there are upward of nine, not counting "nonstate actors" who may or may not possess some kind of nuclear device, stolen or purchased from the notorious A.Q. Khan's nuclear bazaar. And

nuclear threats have once again become common currency, as have the terms "World War III" and "Third World War."

The resurgence of nuclear-war talk and nuclear-war threat has been preoccupying me lately in [various forms](#). And so when another obligation brought me to Tokyo, it was impossible to resist the temptation to visit the place where the bright line was crossed, a place that has shadowed my life but long been subsumed in mythology ever since Hersey's matter-of-fact immediate postwar reportage was eclipsed—in some respects, anyway—by the aestheticizing atmospherics of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, a film in which a Japanese architect and a French woman fall in love in postwar Hiroshima. (Mass nuclear death can really cause *problems* in a relationship.) The film gave us Hiroshima as a metaphor of romanticized doom. I wanted to see it as a city.

Indeed, I admit my surprise when the first thing that happened as I entered the lobby of the Hotel Hiroshima was that I blundered into a bridal party: It turns out the Hotel Hiroshima is a big bridal center featuring banquet rooms, photo studios, and wedding chapels. The bride was beautiful in a dark blue dress—life goes on and all that. But the city is cursed with irony: I couldn't resist the words of '50s horror-movie lingo intruding themselves into my consciousness: "Bride of Hiroshima!"

It's the unfortunate truth that no matter how big and bustling and modern this city has become, it will always be *Hiroshima*. When I reached my SMOKING CITY room in the Hotel Hiroshima and found myself hungry for a snack before proceeding to the Peace Memorial Park, I found the room service menu listing an entree described thusly: "Hiroshima's famous fried vegetable and meat pancakes." Oh, so *that's* what the city is famous for—the pancakes.

But seriously, being here in Hiroshima in the 21st century in what you might call the Second Nuclear Age (the First ended when the Cold War did) raises or exacerbates questions I've been thinking about. How much did what happened here (and three days later in Nagasaki) shape our age? It did once, certainly, but does Hiroshima as a metaphoric city of nuclear death still reign over the age in the same way? Do we still think of it as the future the way it was/is in all those bad Beat poems of the '50s and '60s? Or did Hiroshima's fallout, so to speak, turn out to have a shorter half-life than we imagined? Does it only half-live in memory now, unlike the way it did in the age of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*? Or have recent events restored its power to disturb?

The city still raises questions about the nature of the nuclear age. What made the bright line between nuclear mass slaughter and non-nuclear mass slaughter so bright? Was it the radiation, in its invisible insidiousness and—more importantly—in the longevity of its deadliness?

Why are the civilian wartime deaths in Hiroshima different from all other civilian wartime deaths—if they are? How does one compare them with the deaths in the firebombing of Tokyo, where just as many or more died immediately. To Dresden? To Auschwitz, too? Has it numbed us to civilian casualties in places like Vietnam and Iraq? Was Hiroshima a logical outcome of wartime exigency or a war crime? It's the ground zero of ground zeroes for such questions. It's a site of mourning that has lessons for subsequent sites of mourning.

Consider 9/11 in that light. Seven and a half years and two wars ago and *nothing!* Not a single memorial, because the obscene vanity of celebrity architects and developers and the obscene self-promotion of credit-seeking politicians has combined with the conflicting demands of "survivor groups" to utterly paralyze the process of agreeing on anything. (I've long argued that the best memorial would be the raw gaping hole in the earth at Ground Zero—no need for words!)

At Hiroshima, they have the opposite problem. Over the years, Hiroshima Memorial Peace Park seems unable to say no to any memorial tchotchke someone wants to implant on its acres of rolling grass. The map I picked up at the Peace Memorial Park Museum lists no fewer than 74 individual monuments, memorials, cairns, and crypts in the park.

The first thing you notice when you glance over the list of memorials are the number that use the word *peace*. Like an incantation. One can find the "Peace Clock Tower," the "Peace Bell" (one of two Peace bells—I rang them both), the "Stone Lantern of Peace," the "Figure of the Merciful Goddess of Peace," the "Peace Cairn," the "Children's Peace Monument," the "Flame of Peace," (which "won't be extinguished until all the nuclear weapons are abolished from the earth"—good luck with that). Then there's the Pond of Peace, the Fountain of Peace, the Hiroshima National Peace Memorial Hall, the Peace Tower, the Peace Memorial Post, the Statue of Peace, the Camphor Tree planted to Commemorate the First Peace Festival, the Prayer Monument for Peace, the Prayer Haiku Monument for Peace.

Of course, this doesn't include the 60 or so other monuments whose purpose is peace without using the word *peace*, such as the Monument of the Hiroshima Gas Company.

Needless to say, every monument or pond or flame or stone is an admirably earnest and understandable response to a horrible tragedy of war—and a strain of responsibility to the dead, that their death be a sacrifice, or sacralized. In one of the two peace museums (I forget which), you see them characterized as "the sacred dead." They died so we could see the result of our sins, our Faustian bargain with the unstable interior of the atom—an analog, perhaps, of the unstable interior of the human soul.

No one monument can say that, but yet one has to admire the civic culture of Japan for managing to get permits for so many

memorials. Still, at some point a critical mass (not the best phrase) of peace tchotchkes turns Peace Park into a kind of frenzied Peace Clutter, complete with a souvenir stand selling T-shirts and those sticky-sweet Japanese snacks in their radiation-hued pastel packages.

The Peace Clutter also speaks to a recognition the 9/11 planners can't seem to get through their head: There's no single design, no matter how famous the architect, that's going to do justice to the sorrow it commemorates. What it says to the 9/11 clutter of memorial groups is: Be more like Hiroshima, get something up there, give everyone a shot at it, get 74 smaller things built rather than waiting for the perfect world-peace-ensuring design to show up to make One Big Statement About It All.

But the complexities, the politics of memorializing, pale beside the passion over the precise history—actually, the precise historical context of the bombing. Hiroshima is not just a city but a "site of contestation," as they say. And when one enters the Peace Museum and reads the words on the wall and in the guide, troubling questions of that nature arise. While the museum tries to avoid any overt politicizing, there are moments of understatement—or rather *un-statement*—that nag at you.

In discussing the run-up to the world war, for instance, one wall text merely states, "Japan took the path of war." Somber and sad, dignified, not exculpatory in an obvious way. But the spiritualized tone of the word *path* elides the fact that Japan didn't make a dignified choice: In the '30s, Japan made war, used chemical and biological weapons against armies in China, and slaughtered hundreds of thousands of civilians on the way to starting the Pacific War that ended with Hiroshima.

As Herbert P. Bix, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning biography *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, described the role of the deified Japanese emperor throughout this period: "Hirohito's actions [in the '30s] fit a pattern of exterminating people while enveloping oneself in moral humanitarian rhetoric that was just as much Western as Japanese." "Exterminating" is strong language, and I don't think Bix means it in the Hitlerian sense of exterminating an entire people. But it makes you wonder, where is the "Peace Park" commemorating these deaths?

What makes one death worthy of Peace Park star treatment while so many others languish in obscurity? Radiation alone? No, I think I know why. It has something to do with the potential extinction of the human species.

And before the visitor knows it, the museum throws him into a different controversy. Was it necessary to drop the bomb at all? This is a perennial argument that was reignited in 1995 with the publication of Gar Alperovitz's book *The Decision To Use the Atomic Bomb*. It created a [controversy](#) by arguing that Japan was trying to surrender in the days before the bomb was dropped,

and the bomb was dropped despite the surrender talks in order for the United States to demonstrate military superiority, terrifying nuclear supremacy, in the embryonic Cold War rivalry with the USSR.

The Peace Memorial version gives two reasons (and only two) why the bomb was dropped when Japan was effectively defeated and on the brink of surrendering—though how close to the brink is at the heart of the debate. One reason is economic. The museum poster says that the United States spent more than \$2 billion "in gold" to manufacture the bomb, so there was great pressure to use it to get our money's worth. (In other words, the Soulless Mercenary Rationale.)

And secondly—and here's where the memorial echoes Alperovitz's work—the United States knew that the Japanese were secretly discussing peace terms with the Soviets, because the United States had broken the Japanese "Purple" code. Thus, the United States raced to use the bomb before the Japanese could surrender, with the goal of intimidating the Soviets. (The anti-Communist-crusade rationale.)

No mention is made that there were those who sincerely believed that using the bomb would save more lives than it took by obviating the need for a U.S. invasion of the Japanese home islands and the horrible cost in lives that would result—on the order of Hiroshima's hundreds of thousands or several times more. Some attribute this as a sincere motive of Harry Truman, whose ultimate decision it was. Others argue a more Machiavellian power-politics agenda behind Truman's public rationale.

Here, Hirohito biographer Bix disagrees with Alperovitz on how to interpret the Japanese secret contacts with the Soviets, and he almost seems to reply directly to the Alperovitz-inspired language on the Peace Memorial Museum wall. He writes that "neither the emperor nor the Suzuki government ever devised a concrete plan on the basis of which the Soviets could mediate an end to the hostilities, assuming the Soviets were ever interested in doing so, which they were not. ... [N]egotiations with the Soviets to guarantee the emperor's political position and the future of the monarchy was always accorded more importance than the search for peace to end the killing and suffering."

Bix adds that "American intelligence analysts, meanwhile, watched" Japanese preparations for an invasion of the home islands. "They saw how the Japanese had fought and died on Okinawa—thousands almost daily for eighty-two days—and how the whole nation had become enveloped in the imagery of national salvation through mass suicide." Which, Bix argues, gave Washington decision-makers reason to believe the United States faced mass deaths in any invasion attempt—and thus predisposed them to use the bomb. And there's the question of why a mainly civilian target was chosen. These are not dead

issues. Just last week, [a blogger dug up](#) Obama pastor Jeremiah Wright's contrarian view of Hiroshima.

I don't know if these controversies will ever be resolved, but they all raise the same question: Why are these deaths different? It's something you are forced to contemplate as you get farther into the Peace Park Museum and you see the blown-up pictures of the burned bodies of the wounded and dead. Is it because you know that you may well be looking not just at the past but at the future as well? Did crossing the bright line make it, however tragic the sacrifice, less likely the line would be crossed again? Or more likely?

There doesn't seem to be a rationally airtight reason to believe that the deaths at Hiroshima deserve unique consideration or bear a message beyond that borne by all civilian deaths in wartime. Why are these dead different? They are different in which the dead of the death camps were different. Another bright line was crossed there.

But I found myself thinking of a question I'd asked of Robert Conquest, the great historian of Stalin, toward the close of my book *Explaining Hitler*. I'd asked Conquest, who brought to light the genocidal scale of Stalin's murders, whether he considered Stalin or Hitler the more evil. He said there was really no way of measuring evil quantitatively, rationally, at that level. At a certain point, you had to rely on feeling. He said Hitler's evil seemed to him to surpass Stalin's although he had no rational reason for saying so. "It just *feels* that way."

I think something like that obtains with the dead of Hiroshima. We have always had wars. We have never had nuclear war. The ghosts of the first nuclear ground zero *feel* like they have something more to tell us.

The irony is that Hiroshima has been rebuilt so successfully, mourned and memorialized so dutifully, that the raw horror Hersey captured has been museumized. The streets have been franchised. The Hiroshima Starbucks' latte tastes the same as it does anywhere.

But walking back through the predawn streets from the all-night Hiroshima Kinko's, you can hear the whisper of hundreds of thousands of ghosts.

today's blogs

Dupes of Baghdad

By Michael Weiss

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 6:16 PM ET

Bloggers are tut-tutting about the revelation that Saddam likely financed a prewar trip to Iraq by three anti-war U.S. congressmen, and they're wondering if Michael Bloomberg will endorse Barack Obama.

Dupes of Baghdad: A man named Muthanna Al-Hanooti was indicted Wednesday for setting up propaganda tours of Saddam-era Iraq for prominent anti-war Democrats in Congress, and profiting from them with oil-for-food contracts. [According](#) to the Associated Press, though they are unnamed in the indictment, the likely beneficiaries of Al-Hanooti's travel scheme were Reps. Jim McDermott of Washington state, David Bonior of Michigan, and Mike Thompson of California, all of whom claim they had absolutely no idea who bankrolled their junket.

Stephen Hayes at the *Weekly Standard's* **Blog asks**: "If these Democrats were traveling with at least one person known to have worked on behalf of the Iraqi regime, shouldn't they have known that it was possible the Iraq regime was behind their trip? Did these Democrats even ask those questions? And if not, why not?"

Conservative radio-show host and blogger **Debbie Schlus** has been [writing](#) about Muthanna Al-Hanooti for six years: "I've also asked why LIFE for Relief and Development, Al-Hanooti's employer and the organization through which he took the three Congressmen to Iraq, has continued to be allowed to remain open for business and to raise money, even though it was well known to FBI agents--and to me--that LIFE was Saddam Hussein's American advertising agency, as well as a financier of Sunni Islamic terrorism against our soldiers and contractors in Iraq and elsewhere where Al-Qaeda, HAMAS, and their satellites operate." Abe Greenwald at *Commentary's* **Contentions writes**: "It goes to show just how adept the Iraqi dictator had become at working American officials (and other world leaders) like puppets. But still: three anti-war U.S. Reps were flown to Iraq on Saddam's dime in order to defend his kleptocratic regime. And the anti-war crowd dares to call those of us who supported the invasion naïve?"

Patrick O'Callahan at the *Tacoma News Tribune's* **Inside the Editorial Page says**: "McDermott wanted to stop a war that – give him credit – later turned into a disaster. But on the same trip, he was also trying to undo the international sanctions that were keeping Saddam from getting unhindered access to the revenues from Iraq's oil wealth."

The conservative **Autonomist argues**: "Totalitarian despots know that when it comes to American politicians, they can usually count on leftwing anti-US-war Democrats for sympathy and support. Is it any wonder why some of the world's worst despots, including Osama Bin Laden, express hope that Democrats get elected over Republicans?"

Conservative Washington state blogger **Celebrity** is slightly more [generous](#): "I'll give McDermott the benefit of the doubt on this one, but it still doesn't make it right after the fact. I'm thinking this could be some good news for McDermott's challenger and ex-anti-war activist, Steve Beren, although personally, I don't think Beren even needs this kind of fodder against McDermott to win."

[Read](#) more about the Saddam travel agency.

Obama likes Mike: Barack Obama gave a speech on his economic policy Thursday at Cooper Union in New York, and Mayor Michael Bloomberg [introduced](#) him. The pair had had a "mystery breakfast" four months ago, and their latest meeting fueled speculation about a Bloomberg endorsement, if not a VP slot.

At **Comments From Left Field**, Kyle E. Moore [thinks](#): "While no endorsement has stood out as being a game breaker, and it would be naive at best to assume that Bloomberg would be the endorsement to change the rules, plucking a high profile figure from Clinton's backyard is hardly anything to sneeze at."

Conservative Ed Morrissey at **Hot Air** [wonders](#) if this means the mayor's a VP possibility: "Obama will need a dynamic, experienced executive as his running mate to convince general-election voters of his substance and ability. Bloomberg has made no secret of his ambitions, and having put aside the presidency, may see a VP run as an entree to something bigger down the road. He could wind up being the economics guru of an Obama administration — and he could potentially keep Hillary voters from defecting to McCain." **Marc Ambinder** [is](#) thinking along the same lines: "[T]he best way to look at an Obama-Bloomberg ticket is by noticing their complimentary traits. Obama isn't much of an administrator or a details guy by his own admission, while Bloomberg is so concerned about Your Health and Welfare that he studies intently the ins and outs of congestion pricing and trans-fats. He's a prime minister-type -- although he brings an outsider's sense of efficiency to the bureaucracy. Let Obama be the vision guy; Bloomberg could be the brass-tacks administrator."

The **Jed Report** doesn't [buy](#) it: "I'd bet pretty heavily against an Obama-Bloomberg pairing. For starters, the main thing that Bloomberg would bring to the table is the same thing that Obama already has: appeal to upper-income Democrats and independents. Geographically, Bloomberg has nothing to offer, and there's no indication that he'd be a great campaigner."

[Read](#) more about Obama and Bloomberg.

today's blogs

What Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy?

By Alex Joseph

Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 5:48 PM ET

Bloggers are taking Hillary Clinton to task over her meeting with Richard Mellon Scaife and debating John McCain's speech on Iraq.

What vast right-wing conspiracy? On the heels of having to apologize for [overstating the danger](#) she faced on a visit to Bosnia, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton is fighting off another scandal: She has met with arch-conservative Richard Mellon Scaife—who gave [\\$2.3 million to a conservative magazine](#) to dig up dirt on Bill Clinton in the 1990s—and gave an interview to his paper, the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*. Bloggers quickly jumped on the hypocrisy in Clinton's latest move.

Byron York at the *National Review's* **Corner** has the [photographic evidence](#): "We've heard reports of a rapprochement between Scaife and the Clintons of late, and the Pennsylvania primary is fast approaching, but this is still a pretty striking picture." **Talking Points Memo's** Josh Marshall [points out](#) the irony of such a meeting: "This alone has to amount to some sort cosmic encounter like something out of a Wagner opera. Remember, this is the guy who spent millions of dollars puffing up wingnut fantasies about Hillary's having Vince Foster whacked and lots of other curdled and ugly nonsense. Scaife was the nerve center of the Vast Right Wing Conspiracy."

Michael J. Stickings at the **Reaction** [believes](#) it shows that Clinton is willing to sink to any level to win the nomination: "I understand that she needs to win Pennsylvania, and I understand that things are looking bleak, but sitting down with Scaife and engaging in a mutual assault on Obama—she was using him, he was using her, all for the common purpose of tearing down Obama—was simply disgusting." Liberal John Aravosis at **AMERICAblog** [reiterates](#) just how low the Clintons have stooped: "You've heard of Paula Jones, Vince Foster's 'murder' (as the far-right calls it), Troopergate, and Whitewater? Mellon Scaife is responsible for it all. And now Hillary is getting all cozy with him over an editorial board meeting at his wacky far-right paper (but it's okay to fire what's-his-name at MSNBC, he was mean to Chelsea). Anything to destroy Obama."

Blogger **David Corn** [agrees](#): "Clinton might be willing to put aside her grudge against the *American Spectator* and Scaife because doing so helps her politically. But in the 1990s this band of Clinton-haters were out to ruin not merely her and her hubby but the entire progressive agenda. (They always believed the Clintons to be far more left than Bill and Hillary actually were.) But now, for Hillary Clinton, they're good enough to use against Obama."

At **Unfogged**, the [significance](#) of the meeting is that it represents a collaboration between two entrenched political elites: "It confirms the impression that for a lot of the 'elite' class in Washington, they're playing what is to them merely a game of power and status, the real costs of which are borne by the people they're playing it 'for,' the audience, which is us."

[Read](#) more about Hillary's meeting with Scaife.

Man of his word: After returning from a weeklong overseas trip, Sen. John McCain delivered a speech Wednesday on his strategy for Iraq. In it, he aimed to accomplish something that President Bush has been unable to: assure the American people that their leaders have a clear plan for victory in the Middle East.

RedState's "Haystack" [sees](#) prescience in McCain's stance: "[W]e're 60 years running with a presence in Japan and Germany ... 50 in Korea ... how is Iraq (long-term) different? Oh, that's right—there are still bad guys in Iraq with guns and explosives. We need to get the heck outta Dodge until there are no more bad guys. Why on *earth* would we have Soldiers doing the work of Soldiers where there is currently a need for ... Soldiers?"

Ankle Biting Pundits' Patrick Hynes, a GOP consultant, [believes](#) that McCain's clarity could win over skeptics: "Which brings us to the real reason why most Americans are comfortable with Sen. McCain as commander-in-chief, even if they disagree with his position on Iraq: His position is clear and coherent. The Democrats', especially Sen. Obama's, isn't. Americans will abide a competent leader with whom they disagree. They will not abide a politician whose position on a transcendent issue is a confused jumble at best."

While McCain's morning speech hasn't lit up the blogs with the same passion that Obama's race speech did, most are calling it a stirring and insightful look into the Arizona senator's position on the war. Andrew Romano at *Newsweek's* **Stumper** [offers](#) this candid recap: "The most striking thing about the speech was the personal tone that McCain used when speaking about conflict—perhaps a nod toward critics who say the senator, if elected, will merely continue the same path as the Bush administration when it comes to waging war. He talked of the sacrifice he and his own family had made on behalf of the country—noting when his father went to war after Pearl Harbor that he barely saw him for four years."

[Read](#) more about McCain's speech.

today's blogs

Hillary, Lies, and Videotape

By Michael Weiss
Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 7:22 PM ET

Hillary Clinton gets caught lying about her trip to Bosnia, French president Nicolas Sarkozy flirts with boycotting the Beijing Olympics, and David Paterson fesses up, again.

Lies and videotape: Hillary Clinton [apologized](#) Tuesday for having repeatedly describing a trip to war-torn Bosnia thusly: "I remember landing under sniper fire. There was supposed to be some kind of a greeting ceremony at the airport, but instead we just ran with our heads down to get into the vehicles to get to our base." The destination in question was Tuzla, Bosnia, and the year in question was 1996. [Here's](#) how Clinton really touched down, with nary a marksman in sight but a nice little greeting ceremony, after all.

Anchoress [asks](#): "Does Hillary not realize that a thing called the internet has come along? Does she not realize that if she stands at a podium and tells a dramatic tale of 'flying in under evasive action' someone is going to look for the news stories about it?" Ed Morrissey at **Hot Air** [writes](#): "Now, if she really felt like she was in danger, why would she leave her daughter out in the open on the tarmac, let alone that little girl? That's the question Wolfson can't answer, and why he's probably buying Roloids by the case this week."

John Aravosis at liberal **AMERICAblog** cites Clinton's mea culpa—"last week, you know, for the first time in 12 or so years I misspoke"—and [thwacks](#) her for it: "Last week? That's simply a lie, and at this point Hillary knows it. She said it four times over four months. She sent out scores of aides to defend the comments—comments she said FOUR TIMES. And now expects us to believe that she only said it once a week ago, so it was a slip of the tongue (mind you, it was a minute long slip of the tongue)?"

CNBC's **Lawrence Kudlow** [thinks](#): "This whole faux-military, faux-commander-in-chief Hillary charade reminds me of Sen. McCain's GOP-debate zinger earlier in the campaign. When asked about Hillary's ridiculous earmark for the Woodstock museum, McCain replied that he didn't know much about it. He said he was 'tied up at the time.' Voters remember stuff like that. They will remember Hillary's Bosnian delusion. They will remember Obama's Reverend Wright controversy, too."

And **Jules Crittenden** [writes](#): "I hate to get particular about this kind of thing. It's one thing when John Kerry makes much of the wartime command he bailed on. Reasonable people can debate whether three-scratches-and-a-sayonara commends someone for the position of commander in chief or not. It's another thing altogether to lie about war experiences when you've never heard a shot fired in anger."

[Read](#) more about Hillary's Bosnian adventure.

Sarko the strong: Meanwhile, French president Nicolas Sarkozy is getting praise for [saying](#) that he's not averse to boycotting the Summer Games in Beijing because of China's awful human rights abuses.

Philip Hersh at the *Chicago Tribune's* **Globetrotting** is [pleased](#): "Political protests do not taint the Olympic torch or the relay, which, ironically, was an idea conceived by a German for the 1936 Nazi Olympics. They show the torch as a powerful symbol of moral authority that is tarnished by being linked to China. Sarkozy, a conservative, publicly suggested Tuesday that he might boycott the Beijing opening ceremony. That is the kind of statement democratic leaders need to make, especially when the IOC leadership stands mute."

Mad Minerva 2.0 [spots](#) some dodgy media coverage: "Now observe more carefully the words in the BBC headline: 'Sarkozy threat to Olympic opening.' Hmmmm. SARKO is the threat? Apparently the democratically elected leader of a free European nation is the 'threat' when he wants to voice his opinion about a situation that has attracted the condemnation of numerous world leaders. Oh, the threat can't possibly be an autocratic dictatorship using bloody force in a location it has seized and deliberately subjected to cultural mutilation."

However, Joshua Keating at **FP Passport** is skeptical that Sarkozy is engaged in more than mere "window dressing." He cites French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner's comments that "There are a lot of good ideas that can't be put into practice," and [replies](#): "Sounds like somebody got a talking to. This isn't the first time that Kouchner's idealism has taken a back seat to his boss's more pragmatic priorities."

[Read](#) more about France's possible Olympic boycott.

Oh, and one more thing: Finally, New York Gov. David Paterson, who fessed up to extramarital affairs on his first days in office, has now [copped](#) to doing blow in his youth.

Robbie Cooper, a conservative military vet from Austin at **Urban Grounds**, [says](#): "If this guy came out next week and admitted to engaging in child sex trafficking in Thailand back when he was younger, I wouldn't bat an eye." And at **Blackline**, Nonso Christian Ugboke [snarks](#): "It is understandable that the governor is laying all his cards on the table, however one does wonder how many cards he's got to go. I just wanted to save the governor some more time by coming forward myself before some reporter discovered our love. However I am ready with a nice tweed Chanel suit, just in case the governor needs me to stand by him at a press conference revealing our past times."

While liberal Jeralyn Merritt at **TalkLeft** [calls](#) the admission "refreshing" and says, "I'll take more like Paterson please."

[Read](#) more about Paterson's cocaine use.

today's blogs

The Newest McCarthyism

By Chris Wilson

Monday, March 24, 2008, at 5:49 PM ET

The newest McCarthyism: In the [latest name-calling volleys](#) between Democratic campaigns, Bill Clinton sparked angry reactions from Barack Obama's camp when he said Friday that he hoped for a general election between "two people who loved this country and were devoted to the interests of this country." Construing the statement as suggesting that Obama is unpatriotic, retired Air Force Gen. Merrill "Tony" McPeak, an Obama adviser, compared the sentiments akin to McCarthyism.

Not everyone agrees that the former president meant to disparage Obama's patriotism, as the **Huffington Post's** Sam Stein [notes](#): "Recently on the campaign, the former president has made remarks that have been a bit unpredictable. Days ago, he complimented McCain as bipartisan, a war hero, and a tough general election foe. No 'but's' included. Days before that, he was touting a Sen. Hillary Clinton-Obama pairing as an electoral 'dream ticket,' even though his wife's own campaign was making the case that Obama was not ready to serve as commander-in-chief."

For the most part, though, bloggers appear to be fed up with the name calling. *New York* magazine's **Daily Intel** [declares](#) that the primary race is "sapping the Democrats as never before," also citing strategist James Carville's remarks comparing New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson's endorsement of Obama to Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Ari Savitzky at **Providence Daily Dose** [foresees](#) damage control from the Obama campaign: "No doubt Obama will distance himself from the McCarthy reference a bit. That said, Bill's comment on its face seems pretty reprehensible in its implications, namely that Obama doesn't love his country. So, ya know, if the shoe fits."

Ernie at **Transformed Consciousness** [sees](#) evidence that Bill Clinton is weighing down Hillary Clinton's campaign. "When the dust settles on this primary election cycle I think pundits and historians will mostly all agree that Bill Clinton was Hillary's undoing. His game worked when it was him attacking them, when it was Bill versus the right wing conspiracy; however, when it is Bill versus 'other Democrats' it is an abject failure." Over at the **Swamp**, the Tribune Co.'s Washington bureau blog, Don Frederick [suggests](#) advisers take the lead from their

respective candidates: "Credit Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton with having the good sense to each take an Easter respite from a grueling, enervating struggle for the Democratic presidential nomination. Now, someone needs to advise a couple of their most ardent backers to chill."

Kel at the left-wing **Osterley Times** [is just disgusted](#). "It is simply unthinkable that a Democrat could be attacking another Democrat as lacking in patriotism, but that does appear to be the gist of what Bill is saying, it's certainly the inference that is being read into this by the Obama camp," Kel writes.

Meanwhile, rightie Mary at **Freedom Eden** [sounds hopeless](#) in her assessment of the campaign tenor: "The presidential election of 2008 seems to be an endless series of explanations and clarifications and apologies, unrelated to the issues. One of the campaigns always seems to be in the midst of some sort of lame controversy, requiring some sort of lame explanation, and sometimes a lame apology. In short, Election 2008 is lame."

[Read](#) more about Clinton's comments.

John McCain, D-Ariz.? The *New York Times* recalls two moments in the last eight years when Sen. John McCain allegedly [flirted with the idea of switching parties](#).

Many bloggers were unimpressed with the *Times*. Nate at **You Decide 2008** [didn't find much new](#) in the piece. "The intent here can clearly be one of two things. Either the *Times* is hoping to prevent McCain from winning over conservatives, or they're trying to say he's lying about his account of these events since he denies much of what is alleged in this article," he writes. "Unfortunately this is a he said/they said situation, so who knows the real truth?" CubbyChaser at Comedy Central's **Indecision 2008** is [equally unimpressed](#) with the article: "The *New York Times* has some breaking news concerning things that they (and everybody else) reported on years and years ago." **Beltway Snark** [piles on](#): "Not really much point in discussing this again, he already has the GOP nomination, and the Dems can't really use it against him. Maybe it's a slow news day over at the *NYT*."

Others saw it as further evidence that McCain is ill-suited to lead the Republicans. Steven Benen at the **Carpetbagger Report** [says](#) he's more inclined to believe the Democrats. "I'm pretty skeptical about the McCain camp's version of events, in large part because the Dems involved in the events have no reason to lie," he writes. **No More Mister Nice Blog** sees McCain's motive as [opportunism](#): "So swing voters who think a McCain presidency would be an eclectic mix of conservatism and moderation need to take note: The moderation came when he was ticked off at Bush and other Republicans. Right now, by contrast, there's no powerful right-wing force in the party thwarting him. He's the GOP Alpha Dog. So what reason is there to believe he's going to deviate from his usual right-wing orthodoxy in the future?"

Rightwingsparkle, meanwhile, [doubts](#) that news of possible defections will make a tremendous difference. "What does this matter? McCain is our nominee. This will only remind moderates that McCain is well, more moderate. Let's be honest. The more we know about Obama, the more Republicans who have been angry with McCain will rush to vote for him anyway. Nice try though to the *NYT*."

[Read](#) more about the *NYT* article.

today's papers

Swimming With the Sharks

By Daniel Politi

Friday, March 28, 2008, at 6:00 AM ET

The *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal's* world-wide newsbox lead with the latest from Iraq, where [tens of thousands](#) took to the streets in Baghdad to protest against the crackdown on Shiite militias that is being overseen by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. At least 125 people have been killed, but the Iraqi security forces seem no closer to getting rid of the militias in Basra [than when the offensive began on Tuesday](#). The Green Zone was once again pounded by rocket and mortar attacks, which yesterday killed another American contract worker. The government imposed a curfew in Baghdad after explosions rocked the capital throughout the day and violence continued to rage in several cities. The *WSJ* highlights that a bomb was placed under an oil pipeline near Basra, which officials said could affect shipments and increase prices. In a Page One story, the *WSJ* highlights that the increasing violence once again threatens efforts to [lure big oil companies to Iraq](#).

The *Washington Post* devotes most of its above-the-fold space to the role of U.S. forces in the Iraqi crackdown but leads with a look at how the actions taken by the Federal Reserve in the last couple of weeks could mark a vast expansion in the role of the [central bank in the future](#). The Fed was just trying to deal with the current crisis, but many are now starting to recognize the actions will have long-lasting consequences. "Whether we like it or not, they've recreated the financial universe," a finance professor declared. *USA Today* leads with the [hundreds of flight cancellations](#) that passengers have had to deal with this week and warns there could be more to come as the Federal Aviation Administration continues cracking down on airplane safety. After problems were discovered in Southwest planes, the agency ordered all airlines to check for problems. American Airlines and Delta Air Lines canceled flights this week, and some suspect others will follow suit as the FAA continues its inquiry.

President Bush declared yesterday that Iraq is returning to "normalcy" and praised the latest operation in Basra as a sign

that the Iraqi government is [taking security matters seriously](#). "This offensive builds on the security gains of the surge and demonstrates to the Iraqi people that their government is committed to protecting them," [Bush said](#).

The *WP* [off-leads its Iraq story](#) and says there are hints that U.S. troops are more involved in the fighting than military officials let on. One of the paper's correspondents saw U.S. troops in armored vehicles directly fighting Mahdi Army forces in Sadr City while Iraqi units largely stuck "to the outskirts of the area." Throughout the day, "the din of American weapons" could be heard, and the *WP* pointedly declares that U.S. troops "took the lead in the fighting." So U.S. forces are getting more involved in the conflict even as one American official admitted that "we can't quite decipher" the situation and figure out why the government decided to act now. But there's a growing consensus that Maliki is firing "the first salvo in the upcoming elections," says the official, who then gives us the understatement of the day: "It's not a pretty picture." U.S. military officials insist American troops are merely playing backup to Iraqi security forces, but commanders with the Mahdi Army say they've been fighting U.S. troops for the past three days.

The *LAT* points out that U.S. officials are now in a strange situation where they have to [consistently talk about](#) how the crackdown is aimed at Shiite militias in general and insist that it's rogue elements of Muqtada Sadr's army that are to blame and not the cleric. Of course, they're worried that Sadr will officially call off his cease-fire. But as the *WP* [makes clear](#), that cease-fire seems to exist in name only, since Sadr's "fighters and Iraqi and U.S. forces are waging full-scale war in places." The *NYT* once again notes that there's "[little evidence](#)" that Iraqi security forces in Basra are targeting anyone besides Mahdi Army fighters. *Slate*'s [Fred Kaplan](#) plainly declares that the fighting in Basra "is not a clash between good and evil or between a legitimate government and an outlaw insurgency. ... It's just another crevice in the widening earthquake called Iraq."

The *WP* talks to [administration officials](#) who say Maliki launched the offensive without consulting the United States. But the move couldn't have been that much of a surprise seeing as the *NYT* [reported on March 13](#) that the Iraqi army was planning an offensive to take control of Basra's port.

The *Post* says that when the leaders of the Fed decided to open up what is "[essentially a bottomless pit of cash](#)," which was previously available only to traditional banks, to large investment houses, they knew it was a big deal. The plan calls for that money to be available for at least the next six months, but even if it expires, the perception of how the Fed will act in a crisis has been forever changed. Experts now say that investment banks and their clients may be less worried about risky investments in the future since they will assume that the Fed will come to the rescue if there's a crisis. The question now is

whether the Fed will formally take on a more heavy-handed approach to regulating Wall Street.

The *LAT* and *NYT* front, while everyone else goes inside with, the proposals put forward by the presidential contenders to deal with [problems in the economy](#). Sen. Barack Obama emphasized there should be more federal regulation of the financial markets, while Sen. Hillary Clinton proposed a plan to [retrain laid-off workers](#). Obama put forward a \$30 billion economic-stimulus package, and Clinton's aides took the opportunity to highlight that she had proposed to spend \$30 billion to help prevent foreclosures (the country needs "leadership, not followership," [they said](#)). Both the Democratic contenders [sharply criticized](#) Sen. John McCain, who said the federal role should be limited because "it is not the duty of government to bail out and reward those who act irresponsibly, whether they are big banks or small borrowers."

The *NYT* highlights that, despite the rhetoric, both parties have agreed that the government [should be involved](#), but "the ideological clashes are ... more about whom it should try to rescue." In the end though, their results could be similar, since it's probably impossible to separate the individuals from the markets, because each would suffer if the other is doing badly.

The *NYT*'s [Paul Krugman](#) analyzes their proposals and says that, just as with health care, each candidate's policy tells "a tale that is seriously at odds with the way they're often portrayed." McCain, who is often referred to as an independent maverick, "offers neither straight talk nor originality" as he offers traditional right-wing views. Obama is seen as "a transformational figure," but his proposals "tend to be cautious and relatively orthodox." For her part, Clinton, who "we're assured by sources right and left, tortures puppies and eats babies," offers proposals that "continue to be surprisingly bold and progressive."

The *Post* takes a look at Obama's huge success in [raising funds through the Internet](#) and says that in the past two months the senator has "rewritten the rules of raising campaign cash." The key to his "elaborate marketing effort," which involves spending heavily on Internet ads, seems to be that his campaign doesn't ask for money at every possible turn and instead has pursued a "strategy of slow-walking its way into supporters' wallets."

The *WSJ* reports that as foreclosures continue to increase, banks and mortgage companies are increasingly finding that homeowners [are taking revenge](#) by trashing their homes before handing over the keys. As a result, many are offering homeowners hundreds, or thousands, of dollars "to put their anger in escrow and leave quietly."

today's papers Lord of War

By Daniel Politi

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 7:33 AM ET

The [New York Times](#) leads with an investigation into a weapons contractor that has been providing Afghan security forces with lots of [old and useless ammunition](#). The company, AEY Inc., is led by a 22-year-old who has no discernible experience in military procurement and has had problems with the law. After the paper began making inquiries, the Army decided to suspend AEY from any further contracts, but it seems clear the problems with the munitions were fairly obvious to anyone who was bothering to pay attention. [USA Today](#) leads with a look at how Shiite cleric Muqtada Sadr has the power to paralyze [vital sections of the Iraqi government](#). Sadr loyalists control several ministries and services, and they've heeded the cleric's call for a nationwide strike, which is raising fears that basic services throughout the country could come to a standstill. The [Wall Street Journal](#) leads its world-wide newsbox with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki warning Shiite fighters that they have [three days](#) to drop their weapons. The clashes, which continued to rage in Baghdad and southern Iraq, have killed around 140 people.

The [Washington Post](#) and [Los Angeles Times](#) lead with Sen. John McCain's first major foreign-policy speech since clinching the Republican presidential nomination, where he carefully distanced himself from the Bush administration while also [emphasizing his support for the Iraq war](#). McCain called himself a "realistic idealist" and said it's important for the United States to vigorously pursue diplomacy to attract "others to our cause." He said, "I detest war," that fighting terrorism shouldn't be seen as a primarily military endeavor, and that the United States should use aid, diplomacy, and trade to gain favor in the Muslim world. The [LAT notes the speech](#) "showed McCain in a political pivot" as he moves from the Republican primaries to the general-election campaign, where he knows he has to broaden his base of support by appealing to independents and Democrats.

The [NYT's lead story](#), which clocks in at more than 4,000 words and involves reporting by seven reporters in as many countries, has several key pieces of damning information, and each could have made up a story by itself, but added together they paint a shocking picture of the underworld of the arms trade, not to mention the inefficiencies in the federal procurement process. Here's a highlight: Some of the ammunition provided by AEY is more than 40 years old; much of it came from former Communist countries and involves obsolete stockpiles that the State Department has paid to destroy; to maximize profits, the materiel was often sent in inappropriate packages that quickly disintegrated; AEY appears to have done business with people whom the federal government suspects of illegal arms trafficking; and millions of pieces of ammunition were manufactured in China, which could mean the company broke

U.S. law. Not enough for you? To top it all off, a conversation between the company's president and an Albanian businessman, which was secretly recorded, suggest the 22-year-old executive was well-aware that his purchases involved lots of kickbacks and corruption.

Despite all the information, the story raises almost as many troubling questions as answers. Primarily, how did AEY get away with this for so long? And how on earth did a previously unknown company manage to get such high-value contracts? Perhaps more important, though, how many companies like AEY are there out there? As the [NYT](#) points out, AEY is only one of many small contractors that seemed to rise out of nowhere when federal dollars started flowing for the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. Needless to say, [the whole piece](#) is well-worth a read.

As fighting continues to rage in Baghdad and southern Iraq, the Health Ministry, which is controlled by Sadr loyalists, was deserted yesterday. If the strike continues, it could have tragic consequences for Iraq's hospitals. And Sadr's influence goes far beyond the health sector. The cleric's followers have the power to "stop all the daily affairs of government," a professor at Baghdad University [tells USAT](#). "They can stop services, schools, and bring the economy to a standstill."

Yesterday, TP wondered whether the Iraqi security forces in Basra are really targeting all Shiite militias or whether, as Sadr contends, they're focusing simply on the Mahdi Army. Today, the [NYT](#) seems to have somewhat of an answer and reports that most of the operations [seemed to focus on neighborhoods controlled by Sadr's Mahdi Army](#). "In fact, some witnesses said, neighborhoods controlled by rival political groups seemed to be giving government forces safe passage, as if they were helping them to strike at the Mahdi Army," reports the [NYT](#). So far, it doesn't seem like Iraq's security forces are gaining much ground, and they appear beset by operational problems. If you're confused about the different Shiite groups vying for control of Basra, you can at least take comfort in the fact that you're not alone. "The landscape is one of enormous complexity," explains the [NYT](#), because there are a number of armed groups that have taken control over key parts of the city's economy. But it's important to remember that the groups from which Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki derives much of his political power have been clashing with the Mahdi Army lately.

Meanwhile, U.S. officials are characterizing the offensive as a good example of how Maliki is taking security matters into his own hands. But the [WP](#) talks to [a Kurdish legislator](#) who says he doesn't understand why Maliki chose to carry out the offensive now when there are so many other pressing problems and insists the prime minister didn't discuss the operations with parliament.

The [WSJ](#) reminds readers that the recent violence [isn't the only pressing concern](#) for U.S. officials and points out that there's a

real risk many Sunni fighters who have joined local security forces will go back to acting as insurgents. Add to that the possibility that Sadr will officially call off his cease-fire and that most of the additional U.S. "surge" troops are getting ready to go back home, and it all adds up to an easily combustible situation. "All three of the factors holding down the violence are unwinding at the same time, which is a pretty big deal," a U.S. professor tells the *WSJ*.

The *WP* fronts word that the United States has been [increasing the number of attacks](#) against al-Qaida targets in Pakistan's tribal areas because officials know the window of opportunity for carrying them out may be closing. Predators have struck at least three al-Qaida sites over the past two months, killing around 45 fighters. Some have warned that airstrikes can't be all that effective without more special forces on the ground, but officials realize the new parliament is likely to curtail these types of attacks in the near future, so they're trying to get as many in as they can in the meantime.

The *LAT* fronts apologies from [the writer and editor](#) responsible for a story published last week about a 1994 attack against rapper Tupac Shakur. *LAT* reporter Chuck Philips partly based his story on what he said were FBI documents that tie Sean "Diddy" Combs to the shooting of Shakur that sparked a West Coast vs. East Coast rap war. Yesterday, the Smoking Gun said the paper was fooled by a con artist who forged the documents. "In relying on documents that I now believe were fake, I failed to do my job," Philips said in a statement Wednesday. "I'm sorry." *LAT*'s editor, Russ Stanton, said the paper will conduct an internal review but said that "the bottom line is that the documents we relied on should not have been used."

Back to the past: Yesterday, in a column that surveyed the way people get political information from the Internet, the *WSJ*'s [Lee Gomes](#) went mid-'90s on his readers to talk (of all things) e-mail technology. The paper noted that e-mail is "an easy and effective way for people to share ideas with friends about what might be going on with the candidates." TP thought it couldn't get much worse than that, but then today's Page One (!) [NYT story comes along](#), where Brian Stelter reveals that (brace yourselves here) people, and more specifically "younger voters," are "not just consumers of news ... but conduits as well." That means these young people send out stories and videos to their friends, who often share stuff as well so they all keep each other informed. "In one sense, this social filter is simply a technological version of the oldest tool in politics: word of mouth." Exactly.

today's papers Basra Calling

By Daniel Politi
Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 6:14 AM ET

The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*'s world-wide newsbox all lead with the [outbreak of violence](#) in Iraq as Shiite militias loyal to cleric Muqtada Sadr clashed with Iraqi security forces in Basra, Baghdad, [and other cities](#). The most serious fighting took place in the southern city of Basra, where American and British troops provided aerial support for the huge offensive launched by Iraqi forces against militias that have been [battling for control of the area](#). There were also serious clashes in the southern cities of Kut and Hilla, and Sadr's Mahdi Army battled against U.S. and Iraqi forces in Baghdad. And, as if that weren't enough, a barrage of rockets [pounded the Green Zone](#) in Baghdad for the second time in three days. Yesterday, the U.S. Embassy confirmed that an American civilian who was wounded in Sunday's attacks against the Green Zone died on Monday.

USA Today leads with an analysis of federal data that shows midsize airports located outside big cities are experiencing a [huge growth spurt](#). The numbers of passengers and flights at these airports, which are close to cities such as New York and Boston, have increased by up to 400 percent in the past 10 years. Much of this growth is due to the fact that popular discount airlines have been lured by the cheaper prices at these "secondary airports." This growth has helped spur economic development in suburban areas while also decreasing congestion at the country's major airports.

Everyone says the biggest risk of the latest outbreak of violence in Iraq is that Sadr will once and for all declare officially an [end to the cease-fire](#) that has been a key part of the recent improvements in security across the country. Sadr has always said his followers have a right to defend themselves, although it seems clear that the latest events take the meaning of self-defense to a whole new level. But U.S. military officials say many of the attacks, particularly in Baghdad, are being carried out by "[rogue elements](#)" of the Mahdi Army that do not necessarily follow Sadr's wishes.

The *NYT* says almost 30,000 Iraqi security forces are [involved in the](#) Basra operation, which is seen as a key test of whether the Iraqi forces are ready to operate (largely) on their own. To highlight the importance of the operation, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki flew to Basra to direct the fighting. As the *NYT* and *WSJ* highlight, whatever happens over the next few days could have a direct impact on further withdrawal of American troops. The *LAT* reports that some of Sadr's supporters are threatening to set fire to the Basra [oil wells if the crackdown continues](#).

While U.S. troops may not be on the ground in Basra, the *NYT* points out that they do appear to be helping Iraqi troops seal off Sadr City, a stronghold for the Mahdi Army. Throughout Baghdad, tensions were high yesterday as many residents chose

to stay behind closed doors while heavily armed members of the Mahdi Army [walked the streets](#). There were reports that the Mahdi Army took control of checkpoints in Sadr City, and the *NYT* appears to have confirmation of this from [one of its photographers](#).

Sadr called for nationwide protests in response to what his followers say is the way that the central government is targeting his supporters. An analyst tells the *LAT* that [the violence](#) "looks like a preview of what will happen as we approach provincial elections in the fall." Indeed, many of Sadr's followers believe the crackdown in Basra is the government's way of weakening their political movement before the elections. But the government insists the [crackdown is aimed](#) at Shiite militias as a whole, and the *NYT* reminds readers that a key part of the operation supposedly involves freeing the extremely lucrative Basra port from the control of a militia run by the [Fadhila political party](#). It's obviously understandable that information from the ground is sketchy at best, so it'll probably be a few days before we know whether the Iraqi security forces are really targeting all the Shiite militias.

Early morning [wire stories](#) reveal that the Green Zone was once again pummeled by rockets and mortars today, and the U.S. Embassy says three Americans were seriously injured. Maliki has said that any militia members who don't put down their weapons in three days will be targeted for arrest. The latest death toll now stands at 40 killed in Basra and 15 in Sadr City, while approximately 300 people were wounded.

The *Post* fronts the revelation by Pentagon officials that the U.S. military sent Taiwan [four secret nuclear missile fuses](#) when it was meant to send helicopter batteries. Most worrying of all is the fact that the mistake wasn't discovered until a year and a half after the shipment was sent out. The fuses contained no nuclear material, but the mistake raised more questions about the [safety of the country's nuclear material](#), particularly since it comes a few months after six nuclear warheads were mistakenly flown from North Dakota to Louisiana.

The *NYT* fronts word that a [cigarette company funded the study](#), which made big news when it was published in 2006, that declared that more than three-quarters of lung cancer deaths could be prevented through widespread use of CT scans. The *NYT* appears to have made the discovery and shocked cancer research experts when it told them of the findings. Of course, those responsible for the study say they never tried to hide their funding source and insist the cigarette company had no effect on the study's outcome. Although many were already skeptical of the study, some are now seeing the cigarette company's fingerprints on the results, since it would be in the company's interests to suggest lung cancer can be successfully treated if it's caught early enough.

In an interesting Page One story, [the WSJ reports](#) that as the murder rate of African-Americans increases, black funeral parlors are being forced to invest more in security and change the way they do business due to a marked increase in violence during services.

The *WSJ* says that recent problems in the markets suggest that we might be in the midst of a "[lost decade](#)." The stock market is at the same level it was nine years ago, and many think the period of decline is far from over. Stocks are often referred to as the best long-term investment, but the truth is that over the last nine years, investors would have gotten a bigger return out of Treasury bonds.

If you've been itching to write the next great book about the economy, [now is the time](#), says the *LAT*. Publishers are desperate to seize on the growing interest in the economy to publish books that will explain the issue to readers and help them deal with the mess. Some believe "the key to publishing a successful business book in tough times is to avoid relentless pessimism." But best hurry, because there's a short window of opportunity here. "I haven't seen an avalanche of submissions yet," Grand Central publisher Rick Wolff said. "But it's early. It's only 1 p.m. I might see six of them this afternoon, and the floodgates could open."

today's papers

Pass It On

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 6:17 AM ET

The [New York Times leads](#), and the [Washington Post off-leads](#), word that in a videoconference with the top commander in Iraq and the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, President Bush was presented a plan that would put a stop to any further [troop withdrawals after July](#). The news is hardly a surprise, but the *NYT* highlights that this would mean the number of troops in Iraq "would remain nearly the same through 2008 as at any time during five years of war." The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with Bush declaring that the outcome of the Iraq war "will merit the sacrifices" as the American military death toll reached 4,000. The [Los Angeles Times](#) leads with news that the World Food Program sent out an [emergency appeal](#) for more money to deal with soaring food prices. The U.N. agency warned it would have to scale back its programs if it's not able to close a constantly growing funding gap of at least \$500 million. The WFP says food prices have increased 55 percent since June and warned that if the ascent continues it's likely that more people will need help, which means its funding problems would increase.

The *WP* leads with Pakistan's new prime minister ordering the [immediate release](#) of the judges who had been detained by President Pervez Musharraf. Yousaf Raza Gillani of the Pakistan Peoples Party made the announcement, which is seen as a clear challenge to Musharraf, soon after he was overwhelmingly endorsed by parliament. Gillani also said he would seek a formal U.N. investigation into the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. *USA Today* leads with new data that shows [sales of existing homes](#) increased 2.9 percent in February from a month earlier. The unexpected jump is largely seen as a sign that home prices are dropping enough to encourage buyers to come off the sidelines. In February, the median price for homes dropped 8.2 percent from a year earlier to \$195,900.

In the videoconference with Bush, Gen. David Petraeus said that any decision on further troop cuts beyond the extra ones that were part of the surge should be put off for one or two months while the situation is evaluated. The *WP* talks to a military official who says this evaluation is likely to last [at least six weeks](#). The *NYT* reports that the situation would then be evaluated approximately [once a month](#) to see whether there should be any further withdrawals. But moving troops around takes time, which is why it's highly likely that Bush will leave office with the same number of troops in Iraq as before last year's escalation.

It's also important to remember that although the number of troops on the ground is supposed to reach pre-surge levels after July, the truth is that the numbers don't quite add up because there were 132,000 troops before the escalation and [approximately 140,000](#) will be left after the summer withdrawals. But the surprising (at least to TP) truth seems to be that no one really has a handle on the numbers. The *WP* talks to a military official who explains that "figuring out boots on the ground is difficult" and military officials are currently trying to work out the math so exact numbers can be presented to Congress when [Petraeus testifies in April](#). The *NYT* also smartly points out that it seems unlikely there will be any big withdrawals before the provincial elections in Iraq, which are supposed to take place in October.

Although Bush didn't announce a decision about troop levels yesterday, there seems to be little question that he will accept Petraeus' recommendation for a "pause" in troop withdrawals. But hold on one second, apparently the word *pause* has fallen out of favor. In a somewhat amusing trip through the Washington lexicon, the *NYT* notes that Petraeus [specifically avoided](#) using the term *pause*, apparently because the word has become too politically charged, and is now referring to it as a period of "consolidation and evaluation."

The *WSJ* notes residents of Shiite neighborhoods in Baghdad say armed militias have taken over rooms in schools and [filled them with rockets](#), which could be a sign that they're preparing to carry out more attacks against the government. Yesterday, U.S.

officials said the rockets fired into the Green Zone on Sunday were made in Iran and all but accused Shiite militias of carrying out the attacks. Increasing tensions were obvious in Baghdad as followers of Shiite cleric Muqtada Sadr launched a protest and ordered some shops to close in a show of strength. The *Post* says they are planning demonstrations for the next three days to protest what they say is the targeting of Sadr's followers in southern Iraq by [security forces](#). Some fear Sadr will call an end to the cease-fire, which is widely seen as one of the main reasons why violence in Iraq has dropped.

The Iraqi government has launched a new security offensive in the southern city of Basra, and early morning wire stories report that [heavy fighting has broken out in the area](#). Clashes between Shiite groups have become common in Iraq's southern cities, and this violence appears "to have put Sadr-aligned forces on alert in Baghdad," says the *WSJ*. The *LAT* notes some in the Iraqi government think the attacks on the Green Zone were meant [as a reminder](#) that Sadr's Mahdi Army still has the power to inflict damage. It's easy to see how the protests in Baghdad coupled with the new offensive in Basra could quickly spiral out of control and bring back the attacks that were once all too common.

The *NYT*'s Andrew Ross Sorkin says that by increasing its bid for Bear Stearns to \$10 a share, JPMorgan made clear that "the Fed is officially in the deal-making business." The Fed denies it [set the price for the deal](#), "but the notion that it didn't press JPMorgan to pay as close to zero as possible doesn't square with reality." The fact that the Fed seemed to oppose the higher price at first, and then approved several measures in the deal that "either stretch the rules or disregard years of precedent" makes it clear that the central bank was a key player. "Even at \$10 per share, the JPM buyout stinks to high heaven because of the conflicted role played by the Fed," a financial analyst tells the paper.

Shut up and drive: The *LAT* points out that although some states are eagerly passing laws to force drivers to use [hands-free devices](#) when talking on cell phones, the move may not make roads any safer. Research done on the issue suggests that simply talking on the phone is dangerous, regardless of whether a driver has both hands on the wheel. Some scientists even worry that these types of laws could give drivers a false sense of security and may end up making roads even more dangerous. But an expert at the conference of state legislatures says that banning all types of talking while driving is "just not something that's politically feasible."

today's papers The Price Is Wrong

By Daniel Politi
Monday, March 24, 2008, at 6:30 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with word that JPMorgan may end up paying [five times more](#) than originally planned for Bear Stearns. In order to avoid problems with the many shareholders who have complained that the initial offer of \$2 a share was ridiculously low, JPMorgan is currently considering offering \$10 a share. But the Federal Reserve, which would have to approve a new deal, doesn't seem eager to accept a higher price because it would raise more questions about whether the federal government is rescuing Bear shareholders. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with a look at how the Bush administration has failed in its efforts to [cut off financing](#) to al-Qaida and other terrorist groups.

The *Washington Post* leads with news that it took the National Institutes of Health almost a month to notify patients that a laptop containing [sensitive medical data was stolen](#). The information about the 2,500 patients enrolled in a clinical trial was not encrypted, which is a violation of government policy. Although the theft appears to have been random, the *Post* says it amounts to the latest example of how government employees have often failed to properly safeguard personal information. *USA Today* leads with police agencies across the country reporting that witnesses of violent crimes are often refusing to cooperate with investigations, which is [decreasing the number of solved murders](#). An FBI spokesman says criminals have been successful in creating "a climate of fear" that leads witnesses to prefer silence in order to prevent retaliation. The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with the latest from China, where heavily armed police are patrolling the city of Chengdu, the main travelers' gateway to Tibet. The move shows how nervous the Chinese government is about the possibility that the protests in Tibet will spread and further embarrass the country in the run-up to the Summer Olympics. In a Page One story, the *NYT* says this fear of [creating a public relations disaster](#) may have been the reason why Chinese police seemed unwilling to act when violence first broke out in Tibet.

Bear Stearns employees, who own more than one-third of the company's stock, didn't hide their anger at the low price of \$2 a share offered by JPMorgan, and there has been much talk of the possibility that shareholders would [file a lawsuit to block the deal](#). In offering to pay a higher price, JPMorgan doesn't only seek to pacify these shareholders but also to assure investors that Bear won't close its doors anytime soon. The Fed is not eager to accept the new proposal because government officials have been quick to point to the low price whenever there were complaints that the deal amounted to a bailout. But if the Fed stands in the way of an agreement, shareholders from both firms are likely to complain that the government is preventing them from closing a fair deal. Meanwhile, the *NYT* also reports that Bear's board is attempting to speed majority shareholder approval by trying to authorize the sale of 39.5 percent of the company to JPMorgan

since Delaware allows companies to sell up to 40 percent without approval from shareholders.

Part of the reason why it's been so difficult to [cut off funding](#) to al-Qaida and other extremists has to do with the fact that these terrorist networks have largely moved away from the formal banking system and are using a variety of techniques to move money around that are practically impossible to track. Officials also say the effort has been hampered by a lack of cooperation between different agencies, and some have suggested there should be a czar or agency to coordinate the different efforts. But officials are mostly eager to point the finger at other countries for the overall failure, saying there has been a lack of international cooperation as many lack resources and some key allies, including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, have refused to implement the necessary mechanisms to target terrorist financing.

The *LAT* goes above the fold with a large picture that reefer a package of stories inside the paper marking the grim milestone that was reached in Iraq yesterday when a roadside bomb pushed the American death toll in the five-year-old war to [at least 4,000](#). Four U.S. soldiers died in that attack on a deadly day when more than 60 Iraqis were killed and the highly guarded Green Zone in Baghdad came under heavy attack. The *NYT*, which also [fronts the story](#), says that the "intensity of the violence added to the sense that insurgent and sectarian attacks had been on the rise in recent weeks," while the *WP* is [more direct](#) and says yesterday's events "marked an escalation of violence."

In election news, the *WP* fronts a story that won't make either Democratic contender happy as it states that both Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. Hillary Clinton are guilty of [overstating their roles in key legislation](#). Obama has claimed he was an important player in Senate negotiations over a comprehensive immigration bill, a contention that appears to be a clear exaggeration. And last week, he claimed credit for putting forward a proposal to address the housing crisis, but Sen. Chris Dodd, an Obama supporter, said that wasn't exactly accurate. Meanwhile, Clinton has claimed she was behind the State Children's Health Insurance Program, but lawmakers don't exactly remember it that way. "If she was involved, I didn't know about it," said Sen. Orrin Hatch, the lead Republican negotiator of the bill.

The *NYT* goes inside with a look at two events in Sen. John McCain's past that he [rarely talks about in public](#). In 2001, when McCain was still angry over rumors that were spread about him during the 2000 primaries, he discussed the possibility of leaving the Republican Party with some key Democratic leaders. Three years later, he discussed the possibility of being Sen. John Kerry's running mate. But the devil is in the details, and that's where the two sides disagree. Democrats say it was McCain who made the approach in both instances and began the discussions. For his part, McCain insists he was merely being courted by Democrats and he never took the proposals seriously.

Real-estate values may be plunging across the country, but those hoping to hobnob with the rich and famous this summer will still need to put down lots of cash [for a prime location](#). The *LAT* reports that a \$150,000-a-month price tag for a four-bedroom house in Malibu, Calif., marks a local record high but hardly seems out of place in an area where "even mundane beachfront houses are renting for as much as \$70,000." And just because it's expensive doesn't mean those hoping for great locations can afford to wait. "By May all the good listings may very well be gone," a Malibu agent said. "Recession? What recession?"

today's papers

Regulation Size Racket

By Jesse Stanchak

Sunday, March 23, 2008, at 6:47 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with Congress and the White House [debating](#) whether or not to tighten regulation of the financial services market. The *Washington Post* leads with Bhutan preparing to [conduct its first elections](#) on Monday, despite resistance from some citizens who are wary of the tumult of electoral politics. The *Los Angeles Times* leads locally, with its top national story saying that Sen. John McCain is [staking his White House bid](#) on the war in Iraq.

The *NYT* compares the debate surrounding the current financial crisis to the reaction following the Sept. 11 attacks. Just as the attacks highlighted problems with coordinating intelligence and law enforcement agencies, the paper says the current crisis points out the lack of coordination between financial regulators. The paper finds the White House and Congress sparring over how best to correct a flawed system of financial regulations that Wall Street has learned to exploit. The Bush administration favors streamlining regulations and possibly creating an umbrella agency to handle duties currently split between different regulatory bodies. Congressional Democrats, however, want to tighten the rules by applying banking regulations to investment firms. Both sides claim their solution will benefit the free market the most. The White House says that investment capital would wither if the industry were overly regulated. Democrats, however, say that unless the industry becomes better regulated, investor confidence will shrivel and take the market with it.

The *WP* covers the ways in which the upcoming parliamentary elections in Bhutan will subvert expectations. Here, the paper says, is a country where a monarch is imposing elections on a hesitant public, rather than the other way around. Some voters tell the paper they're only supporting the election because their beloved king tells them it is necessary. Why would a monarch demand his people accept democracy? The *WP* posits that the

king may be trying to raise his tiny country's profile and secure aide and allies to help Bhutan develop.

The *LAT* says Sen. McCain is hoping his support for the "surge" strategy will help him win the White House in the fall. But the war could be a double-edged sword for McCain, who might still have to answer for a string of bad calls leading up to the war in Iraq, including the assumption that U.S. troops would be greeted as liberators by the Iraqi people.

The *NYT* off-leads with analysis of [McCain's trip abroad](#), calling it "an audition on the world stage," as McCain looks to prove he can bolster America's standing with the rest of the world. The paper concludes that while a change of tone from the Oval Office would be welcome abroad, many countries will still regard Iraq as the yardstick for how America deals with the rest of the world.

The *WP* off-leads with [reports](#) that the Bush administration is using a combination of regulatory shuffles and selective scientific findings to keep new species from being classified as endangered. The twist here is that the administration doesn't deny that they've been slow to give species legal protection; they just claim it's because of a backlog of environmental lawsuits that are tying up agency resources. The paper finds that environmental groups have been using the courts to get species classified as endangered with regular success.

The *WP* goes under the fold with a [discussion of race and politics](#) in Pennsylvania, focused on two Harrisburg-area American Legion posts, one predominantly white, one predominantly black. The story, based entirely on anecdotal evidence, concludes that blue-color white Pennsylvanians are still resistant to the idea of voting for Sen. Barack Obama.

Sen. Obama [called](#) for a national dialogue on race last week, asking all Americans to try to understand the problems facing other races. The *LAT* says that's all well and good- but what would that conversation look like? The paper [tries to start one](#), and the answers it gets are at once refreshingly frank and painfully awkward. The authors do a good job of shying away from generalizations and pat conclusions until the very end, when they quote a subject saying that the morally complex issue of race isn't all "black and white." Maybe the writers felt like ending on a pun would cut the tension a little, but to TP's ear, it just falls flat.

The *WP* fronts the [outrageous story](#) of Saman Kareem Ahmad, a man who was denied a green card after 4 years of serving as a translator in Iraq, because he once belonged to a group that tried to overthrow Saddam Hussein.

You know things are bad in Haiti when people [start to miss](#) François Duvalier- but that's what's happening, says the *NYT*.

The paper says Haitians increasingly pine for the relative stability of life under Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude. While Jean-Claude is currently living in exile, the piece says he's been mulling a return due to the recent waves of nostalgia.

Under the fold, the *NYT* reports that [haggling is making a comeback](#) at big box retail stores. The paper says that tough economic times have convinced retailers that employees sometimes need a little leverage to make a sale, especially on big ticket items.

Cocaine production is back on the [upswing](#) in Peru, reports the *LAT*. This time it may be much harder to combat, says the paper, as drug ring leadership becomes increasingly decentralized.

Movie theaters are [diversifying their offerings](#), according to the *NYT*, showing sporting events and concerts to supplement ticket sales of feature films.

It's Easter Sunday, so all the papers include stories on different facets of the holiday. The *NYT* says some preachers will be taking a cue from Sen. Obama and are working [thoughts on race relations](#) into their Easter sermons. The *LAT* covers a Japanese-American church where traditional Taiko drums are being used to [shake up](#) Easter services. The *WP* looks at a local couple whose spiritual lives were [reborn](#) after a terrible car accident.

And the *WP* treats readers to a second installment of what will hopefully become an Easter tradition: the [marshmallow peeps diorama contest](#).

today's papers

Houses Without Homes

By Morgan Smith

Saturday, March 22, 2008, at 5:14 AM ET

The *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* all front stories about the worsening housing slump. The *LAT* leads with an article on record foreclosure rates, reporting that at the end of 2007, they were at "the highest level since the [Mortgage Bankers Assn.] began keeping records in the 1970s." The states hit the hardest by foreclosures and delinquent mortgages were California, Florida, Nevada, and Arizona, and in those regions the housing crisis may last longer than it will nationally. The weekend edition of the *WSJ* leads with a [prediction that the stagnant condo market](#) will deteriorate further. Even though there's already an excess of unfilled units, developers will still complete more building projects because they "usually put up their own money for a project first, then spend borrowed funds," so once a project's moved through its initial phase, they have a "strong incentive to keep building to

finish," and hope the market will turn in the meantime. And with its contribution to coverage of the troubled economy, the *WP* off-leads locally with a [profile of a Virginia woman who lost her home](#) when she defaulted on a subprime loan, pushed through for her by predatory lenders.

The *New York Times* leads with a [report that Pakistan will begin talks with militant leaders](#), after an increased number of suicide bombings in urban areas. This marks a departure under new coalition leaders from Washington's recommendation against negotiations, which it has opposed in the past because "short-term peace deals between the militants and the Pakistani military were a sign of weakness and resulted in the militants' winning time to fortify themselves." After more than \$10 billion in U.S. military aid granted to President Musharraf, leaders of Pakistan's new coalition government say "the war against the insurgents has to be redefined ... as 'Pakistan's war' " instead of a item on "an American agenda." The country's tribal areas near its border with Afghanistan* spawn much of the violence; the Bush administration believes that the region serves as "a sanctuary for Taliban forces" as well as al-Qaida. But Pakistanis, according to the piece, view it as "a once peaceful region where a group of militants have turned their wrath on the rest of the country as punishment for the American alliance."

The *WP* leads with [news of Condoleezza Rice's apology](#) for State Department employees' nosing into the passport files of the presidential candidates. Workers looked into the files without authorization, but the article notes, unless they gave the information to an outside source, "they probably did not violate any law." Below-the-fold, the *NYT* [remarks](#) the "breaches are particularly mortifying for the State Department because officials there discovered them as far back as last summer ... but did not inform any of the candidates until Thursday." The *WSJ* tops its world-wide news box with a [warning](#) that the passport-snooping reveals problems in government agencies' ability to monitor how well they protect the data collected on citizens.

The *NYT*, the only paper to front Bill Richardson's endorsement of Barack Obama, [concentrates](#) above-the-fold on the New Mexico governor's perceived snub of Hillary Clinton. The nod is "a stinging rejection of her candidacy" coming from a man who "served in two senior positions in President Bill Clinton's administration." In his speech, Richardson also neared doing "what Mrs. Clinton's advisers have increasingly feared some big-name Democrat would do as the battle for the nomination drags on: Urge Mrs. Clinton to step aside in the interest of party unity." The *WSJ* [adds](#) that the nod could attract Hispanic voters away from Clinton and push more superdelegates in Obama's direction. An article in the *WP* interestingly [pulls](#) bits of Richardson's rhetoric along the campaign trail to see how he moved from "trumpeting the importance of his own extensive experience to lauding Obama as a 'once-in-a-lifetime leader.' "

The *LAT*, *WP*, and the *NYT* continue to cover violence in Tibet. The *LAT* [fronts](#) eye-witness descriptions of the brutality on both sides. Chinese forces have target Tibetan rioters, who have "bludgeoned [a Chinese motorcyclist] in the head with paving stones" and killed 19 other native Chinese. According to the Dalai Lama, 99 Tibetans have died, including one 16-year-old-girl who was shot by Chinese police. The *WP* [reports](#) human rights groups have increased criticism of corporate Olympic backers like Coca-Cola, Visa, and General Electric, after China's squashing of Tibetan protesters. The piece notes, "Corporate sponsors are walking a fine line, trying to appear sensitive while arguing that the Games not be politicized." In its international section, the *NYT* [observes](#) that on Thursday, the Chinese government "acknowledged for the first time that civilians had been struck by police gunfire," but "insisted that the police opened fire only in self-defense."

Elsewhere in the Himalayas: On the eve of the nation's first democratic elections, the *WSJ* [rounds out](#) its front page with an investigation on how Bhutan's unique Gross National Happiness model is holding up as a governing principle and [examines](#) the Bhutanese government's three-year-old prohibition on the sale of tobacco products. The *WP* [considers](#) Nepal's upcoming elections, in which nearly 6,000 candidates are running for 601 spots in an assembly that will write the country's new constitution.

**Correction, March 24, 2008: This piece originally referred to "The country's tribal areas near its border with Pakistan." It should have read "border with Afghanistan," as Pakistan is the country in question. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)*

video

Wars: Middle East

A Magnum photo essay.

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 11:09 AM ET

war stories

Warlord vs. Warlord

What are they fighting about in Basra?

By Fred Kaplan

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 6:40 PM ET

The wars in Iraq (the plural is no typo) are about to expand and possibly explode, so it might be useful to have some notion of what we're in for.

Here is [President George W. Bush](#), speaking this morning in Dayton, Ohio, and revealing once again that he has no notion:

[A]s we speak, Iraqi security forces are waging a tough battle against militia fighters and criminals in Basra—many of whom have received arms and training and funding from Iran. ... This offensive builds on the security gains of the surge and demonstrates to the Iraqi people that their government is committed to protecting them. ... [T]he enemy will try to fill the TV screens with violence. But the ultimate result will be this: Terrorists and extremists in Iraq will know they have no place in a free and democratic society.

The reality, alas, is less stark. The fighting in Basra, which has spread to parts of Baghdad, is not a clash between good and evil or between a legitimate government and an outlaw insurgency. Rather, as [Anthony Cordesman](#), military analyst for the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, writes, it is "a power struggle" between rival "Shiite party mafias" for control of the oil-rich south and other Shiite sections of the country.

Both sides in this struggle are essentially militias. Both sides have ties to Iran. And as for protecting "the Iraqi people," the side backed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (and by U.S. air power) has, ironically, less support—at least in many Shiite areas, including Basra—than the side that he (and we) are attacking.

In other words, as with most things about Iraq, it's a more complex case than Bush makes it out to be.

The two Shiite parties—the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and Muqtada Sadr's Mahdi army—have been bitter rivals since the early days of post-Saddam Iraq. And Maliki, from the beginning of his rule, has had delicate relations with both.

Sadr, who may be Iraq's most popular Shiite militant and who controls several seats in parliament, gave Maliki the crucial backing he needed to become prime minister. However, largely under U.S. pressure, Maliki has since backed away from Sadr, who has always fiercely opposed the occupation and whose militiamen have killed many American soldiers (until last year, when he declared a cease-fire).

Maliki has since struck a close alliance with ISCI, which has its own militia, the Badr Organization, and whose members also hold much sway within Iraq's official security forces (though more with the police than with the national army). This alliance has the blessing of U.S. officials, even though ISCI—which was originally called the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq—has much deeper ties with Iran than Sadr does. (ISCI's leaders went into exile in Iran during the decades of Saddam's reign, while Sadr and his family stayed in Iraq—one reason for

his popular support. As [Ray Takeyh](#) of the Council on Foreign Relations has noted, SICRI was created by Iran, and the Badr brigades were trained and supplied by Iran's Revolutionary Guard.)

Sadr's Mahdi army and ISCI's Badr Organization came to blows last August in the holy city of [Karbala](#). This fighting—and his growing inability to control criminal elements within the Mahdi army—spurred Sadr to order a six-month moratorium on violence, which he renewed last month, against the wishes of some of his followers. (This moratorium is a major reason for the decline in casualties in Iraq, perhaps as significant as the U.S. troop surge and the Sunni Awakening.)

The fighting this week in Basra may be a prelude to the moratorium's collapse and, with it, the resumption of wide-scale sectarian violence—Shiite vs. Sunni and Shiite vs. Shiite.

Many Shiites believe—not unreasonably—that Maliki ordered the offensive in Basra now in order to destroy Sadr's base of support and thus keep his party from beating ISCI in the [upcoming provincial elections](#).

Late last month, Iraq's three-man presidential council [vetoed](#) a bill calling for provincial elections, in large part because ISCI's leaders feared that Sadr's party would win in Basra. The Bush administration, which has (correctly) regarded provincial elections as key to Iraqi reconciliation, pressured Maliki to reverse his stance and let the bill go through. He did—at which point (was this just a coincidence?) planning began for the offensive that's raging now.

Maliki's official reason for the offensive, simply to bring order, has some plausibility, because Basra—Iraq's second-largest city, a major port, and a huge supplier of oil—is teetering on the edge of anarchy. At the start of the occupation, British forces were put in charge of Basra, but they viewed their operation as passive peacekeeping, not counterinsurgency, so militias moved in and gradually took the place over. By the time the British withdrew to the outskirts, the city was already taken over by fractious warlords.

The current fighting in Basra is a struggle for power and resources between those warlords. It's hard to say which faction is more alluring or less likely to fall under Iranian sway. Neither seems the sort of ally in freedom and democracy that our president conjures in his daydreams. (The lively blogger who calls himself [Abu Muqawama](#) speculates that Bush officials have embraced ISCI because, unlike Sadr, its leaders speak English.)

It's not a case of good vs. evil. It's just another crevice in the widening earthquake called Iraq.

war stories

What Does Bush Mean by "Victory in Iraq"?

His grandiose definition makes defeat almost inevitable.

By Fred Kaplan

Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 6:10 PM ET

As the toll of Americans killed in Iraq topped 4,000 this week, President Bush [publicly vowed](#) "to make sure that those lives were not lost in vain"—that the war's outcome "will merit the sacrifice" and that "our strategy going forward" will be to "achieve victory."

We all wish that this were so. But what does he mean by "victory"?

The definition has evolved, or devolved, in the five years that this war has been raging. Originally, victory was conceived in grandiose terms. The defeat of Saddam Hussein's army and the toppling of his regime would spawn a new democratic Iraq, the example of which would ignite the flames of freedom across the Middle East.

Bush scaled back the standard in a November 2005 [speech](#) at the U.S. Naval Academy titled "A Strategy for Victory." This victory will come, he said, "when the terrorists and Saddamists can no longer threaten Iraq's democracy, when the Iraqi security forces can provide for the safety of their own citizens, and when Iraq is not a safe-haven for terrorists to plot new attacks on our nation."

In January 2007, the National Security Council formalized the concept in a document titled "[The Iraq Strategy Review](#)," which stated that the "strategic goal" was "a unified democratic federal Iraq that can govern itself, defend itself, and sustain itself, and is an ally in the War on Terror."

Bush and others have heralded much progress in the past year, as the troop surge went into effect and as Gen. David Petraeus devised new tactics based on counterinsurgency principles. Casualties have gone down, in some areas dramatically. The Iraqi army and police have grown in size.

However, by the Bush administration's own standards of success, laid out in the president's speech and the NSC's strategy review, we are no closer to victory now than we were when those documents were drafted. Iraq is not unified, it is only superficially democratic, it cannot govern itself, its security forces cannot provide for the safety of its citizens, and it remains

more of a haven for terrorists than an ally in the war against them.

Gen. Petraeus has said many times that there is no strictly *military* victory to be had in Iraq. The goal of the surge—and, at this point, of the U.S. military presence generally—is to provide enough security, especially in Baghdad, to let the Iraqi factions settle their sectarian disputes and form a unified government. If this political goal isn't achieved, then the surge will have been for naught. And lately, Petraeus has expressed disappointment that the Iraqis have made so little progress on that path.

The instances of progress, especially the reduced casualties (among American soldiers *and* Iraqi civilians), are valuable for their own sake. But body counts have never proved much. When Americans killed more guerrillas in Vietnam, it didn't mean that we were closer to winning that war. And when insurgents are killing fewer Americans in Iraq today, it doesn't mean that we're closer to winning this war, either. (If you think that it does, you would have to conclude that we're closer to losing the war this month than we were last month because casualties have gone back up.)

The troop surge has been one of several factors that have made life a little less treacherous in Iraq this past year. Another is the "Sunni Awakening," the alliances of convenience between U.S. forces and Sunni insurgents against the common enemy of al-Qaida in Iraq—alliances that were initiated by the Sunnis before the surge began. Still another is the moratorium on violence called by the leading Shiite militia leader, Muqtada Sadr.

But look at what is happening. First, the surge is ending this July, not because it has been successful (as Bush has sometimes claimed) but because of simple math. The five extra combat brigades, which were deployed to Iraq with the surge, each have 15-month tours of duty; the 15 months will be up in July; the final brigade will go home; and the U.S. Army and Marines have *no* combat brigades ready to replace them. To the extent that the surge *has* improved life in Baghdad, the end of the surge (the timing of which is inexorable) may make life worse.

Second, the Sunni Awakening is showing its frays. Some of these militias haven't been paid for months, and they're going on strike, refusing to man their checkpoints and battle stations. They are also frustrated by the Shiite-led government's refusal, despite earlier promises, to let them join the Iraqi national army and police force. This is another consequence of the sectarian leaders' failure to settle their disputes and form a unified government.

Finally, the [Shiite militias](#) have resumed attacks in southern Iraq, a sign either that Sadr is losing control over his men or that he himself is backing away from the moratorium. In either case, it's unlikely that many Sunni militias—especially given the training

and reinforcements they've received from U.S. armed forces—will stand by as the Shiite militias start fighting again.

By the administration's own measures, then, victory in Iraq is not in sight, nor is there much evidence that the road we are treading will lead us toward that destiny.

And yet our president still seems to have little comprehension of what the war that he has spawned is all about.

A White House "[fact sheet](#)" titled "Five Years Later: New Strategy Improving Security in Iraq," posted on the occasion of the invasion's fifth anniversary, states:

Defeating the enemy in Iraq will make it less likely we will face this enemy here at home. The terrorists who murder the innocent in the streets of Baghdad also want to murder the innocent in the streets of American cities.

And so, once again, President Bush tries to link the war in Iraq to the attacks of Sept. 11. Once again, he pretends (or does he somehow believe?) that al-Qaida is "*the* enemy in Iraq." Would that things there were so clear-cut. One big difficulty about fighting in Iraq is that there *is* no single enemy. The overarching problems are disorder, sectarian strife, a weak central authority, and the absence of legitimate politics in the provinces. AQI is a menacing force, but it is also a small one. If it were destroyed tomorrow, Iraq would be only slightly less messy. (In one way, it might be more messy, at least in the short-run, as the Sunni insurgents who are now our allies would be expected to resume their fight against us after our common enemy is vanquished.)

Just as Bush mistakenly treats Iraq's myriad insurgencies as if they were one—thus making them appear (and perhaps making their warriors feel) mightier than they really are—so he also elevates the stakes of the war, and the requirements of victory, above and beyond any prospect that's feasible.

In his speech at the State Department on Monday, where he restated his goal of achieving "victory," he also said of the fallen soldiers in Iraq that "one day people will look back at this moment in history and say, 'Thank God there were courageous people willing to serve because they laid the foundations for peace for generations to come.' "

A wartime president who has no real allies and whose own military is too small to achieve such lofty goals should begin to scale back his rhetoric so that it has at least a patina of plausibility. By defining victory in Iraq as an outcome that lays "the foundations for peace for generations to come," George W. Bush ensures that defeat is nearly inevitable.

well-traveled

The Mecca of the Mouse

Celebration, Disney's backward-looking city of the future.

By Seth Stevenson

Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 7:44 AM ET

From: Seth Stevenson

Subject: The Wide World of Disney World

Posted Monday, March 24, 2008, at 7:17 AM ET

Soon after checking in to my hotel room, I discover a mouse in the bathroom. Three mice, in fact. One is imprinted on the bar of soap. One peers out from the shampoo label. And a third, on closer inspection, is a washcloth—ingeniously folded by hotel staff to create two protruding, terrycloth ears.

I'm growing used to these rodentophilic touches. Earlier today, as I drove into the enormous Walt Disney nation-state here in Florida, I noticed a tall electrical stanchion topped with a pair of Mickey ears. Soon after, I spotted a water tower with the ears painted in black. When it comes to branding, Disney's aim is total immersion.

Which is good, because that's my aim, too. I'm here to envelop myself in the Disney World experience. I've obtained lodging deep within the compound, at a Disney-owned resort. I've bought a \$280 multiday pass, granting access to more Disney attractions than any person could reasonably endure. For the next five days, I plan not to stray beyond the borders of the Disney empire. (Don't worry, that still leaves me 47 square miles, an area roughly twice the size of Manhattan, in which to roam.)

Why on earth would I, a childless adult, visit Disney World by myself? Basically, to figure out what the hell's going on in this place. Because America has clearly decided it's hallowed ground.

More than 100,000 people visit Disney World every day. I went when I was a kid. Nearly all my friends went. A few went more than once. Heck, I know Jews who weren't bar mitzvahed but did go to Epcot.

Somehow, this cluster of amusement parks has grown into a rite of American childhood. Kids are born with homing beacons set for Orlando. Meanwhile, parents—despite the hefty costs—often seem just as eager or more so to make the pilgrimage.

My question is: What exactly are we worshipping at this mecca?

Day 1: Epcot

I drive the three minutes from my hotel and ditch my rental car in the lot. After swiping my pass-card and getting my fingerprint scanned (a new security measure), I enter through Epcot's gates. Once inside, I'm immediately jaw-dropped by the looming mass of Spaceship Earth.

It's tough to ignore—being a 16-million-pound, 180-foot-high disco ball. One of Walt Disney's personal rules for theme-park design involved a concept he curiously termed the *wienie*. A wienie is a show-stopping structure that anchors the park. It is meant to be iconic and captivating, so that it lodges in your visual memory forever.

Spaceship Earth is perhaps the wieniest of all wienies. And it announces right off the bat that Epcot will not be your standard kiddie fun park. Over at the Magic Kingdom, the wienie is the fairy-tale Cinderella Castle. Here, it's a geodesic sphere inspired by the theories of R. Buckminster Fuller.

When I enter Spaceship Earth, I board a ride tracing the history of communication—from the first written symbols to the advent of the personal computer. It's low season now, so there's a mercifully short wait for the ride. That's the good news. The bad news is that once the ride is under way, I discover that it's a vague, aimless snooze. Toward the end of it, we pass what I believe to be an animatronic Steve Jobs. He's pneumatically gesturing inside a replica of a 1970s California garage.

When the ride is over, we spill into an area called "Innoventions." It's sponsored by a company called Underwriters Laboratories, which specializes in product-safety compliance. Among the fun activities here for kids: Try to make a vacuum overheat! Also: See if you can fray the cord of an iron! (I'm not kidding about this. There are 9-year-old boys with furrowed brows attempting to cause product failures.)

Several other exhibit halls surround Spaceship Earth. According to my guidebook, they feature "subjects such as agriculture, automotive safety, and geography." Well gosh, that's what being a kid is all about!

Inside a pavilion labeled "The Land," I find myself being lectured on sustainable development. The lecture is delivered by the animated warthog from *The Lion King*. I can overhear the nice mom behind me trying to distract her whimpering toddler. "Look honey," she says, reading from her Epcot brochure, "the next ride is a 'voyage through amazing greenhouses and a fish farm!' " The kid cries louder.

Though I was only 8, I still remember the day Epcot opened in 1982. The TV networks treated the event as news, airing live coverage. Every kid in my third-grade class was desperate to see this wondrous new place.

Once the fanfare faded, though, we began to sense that Epcot was a slightly odd duck. Disney had purposefully designed it to appeal more to young adults than to their offspring. It was bound to disappoint all but the nerdiest of children. It had been the largest private construction project in all of American history—requiring three years and \$1 billion to complete—and in the end, it was essentially a tarted-up trade expo.

A perusal of Disney history suggests that Epcot was in some ways the brainchild of the man himself. What Walt envisioned was an Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow—a real town, serving as a laboratory for cutting-edge ideas about urban planning. But after Walt died in 1966, his dream was gradually perverted into the theme park we see today.

Sponsors were called in to defray the huge costs, and in return, Epcot's "Future World" exhibits became an ode to giant corporations. The automotive safety ride is brought to you by General Motors. The agricultural science ride is compliments of Nestlé. In his tome *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* (the title refers to the fake leaves on a Disney "tree"), mildly paranoid anthropologist Stephen M. Fjellman writes that Epcot's attractions are meant to "convince us to put our lives—and our descendants' lives—into the hands of transnational corporate planners and the technological systems they wish to control."

When I leave the Future World area, I walk around the Epcot lagoon to the other half of the park. Here I enter the "World Showcase." It consists of 11 separate pavilions, each dedicated to a different nation.

I like the idea of the World Showcase. And some of the architecture—the faux Paris street scene, for example—displays an astounding talent for mimicry. But if you've ever actually been outside America, this nod to the rest of the world is mostly just insulting.

Half the pavilions have no cultural content at all. The Morocco complex is just souvenir stores selling carpets and fezzes. The ride meant to encapsulate Mexico is a collection of slapstick Donald Duck skits. (Donald loses his bathing suit while parasailing in Acapulco, Donald flirts with some *caliente* señoritas, etc.) I guess none of this should surprise me. Lots of tourists view travel abroad as basically a chance to shop for regionally themed trinkets.

By the early evening, it's getting dark, and both kids and adults are getting crankier. A lot of strollers get wheeled into corners as

moms whisper-shout, "Settle down, Hunter" and "You stop that right now, Madison." I'm also noticing a lot more people buying the \$8.50 margaritas available next to the Mexico pavilion.

I take this as my cue and head back to the parking lot. Tomorrow's another day—and another theme park.

From: Seth Stevenson
Subject: Disney's Hollywood Studios
Posted Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 7:36 AM ET

The keynote attraction of Disney's Hollywood Studios, listed first on the park brochure, is something they call the Great Movie Ride. This ride purports to trace the history of American cinema. "Travel through classic film scenes and Hollywood moments," the pamphlet promises.

Eager to see what sort of curatorial stamp the Disney imagineers might put on this topic, I line up, wait my turn, and hop aboard a conveyor pod. Soon, I'm rolling along past various iconic movie stuff. There's Jimmy Cagney cracking wise. There's Humphrey Bogart wooing Ingrid Bergman. And oh, look, it's Sigourney Weaver battling an alien. (To my great disappointment, we at no point pass Debbie doing Dallas.)

There are two big problems with this ride (besides there being no Debbie). First, as best I can tell, the kids sitting all around me have no idea who any of these actors are. Never seen any of these movies. They perk up solely at references to films that were released after 2005.

Second, these aren't video clips we're watching: Those famous scenes are being performed by animatronic robots. They have waxy faces and whirring pneumatic limbs. Frankly, they're weird. And they, too, leave the kids completely cold.

I'm sure "audio-animatronic" creatures were nifty when Disney pioneered them in the 1960s. They became possible after [Wernher von Braun](#) lent his pal Walt Disney some magnetic computer tape—the same kind that was used by NASA to synchronize its launches. (Pause to contemplate: Wernher von freaking Braun! He gave the world not only the V-2 rocket and the Saturn V superbooster, but also the means to create an android Sigourney Weaver. Perhaps the greatest innovation of all!)

In 1964, an animatronic Abe Lincoln wowed the crowds at the New York World's Fair. People were convinced he was a live

actor. Impressive achievement. Four decades later, though, who's impressed when a mannequin blinks and raises its eyebrows?

Sadly for Disney, many well-known rides throughout all the parks—even the famed Pirates of the Caribbean—still rely on animatronics as a central selling point. I'm guessing that within a decade all these robot performers will get phased out. Robot Humphrey and Robot Sigourney will get powered down one final time, then tossed on a pile in some dark, archival closet. A few classics—maybe android Abe—will be left out on display to appease the nostalgists.

However dated, it's still very Disney—this notion that the ultimate entertainment is to watch a machine impersonate a human. It hints at Disney's core philosophy. If I had to choose a single word to describe the Disney theme parks, that word would be *inorganic*. Or, as a cultural studies post-doc might put it: "Blah blah simulacra blah blah Baudrillard." As has been noted in many a dissertation, we visit Disney World to savor the meticulous construction—physical, mythical, and emotional—of a universe that's completely fake and soulless.

But oh, how beautifully soulless it is. Upon leaving the Great Movie Ride, I walk down a facsimile of Sunset Boulevard. Here, I notice the asphalt under my feet has rubbed away in spots, revealing the old streetcar tracks beneath. Of course, there never was a streetcar. And its tracks were never paved over to make way for the automobile age. And that pavement was never subsequently eaten away by the ravages of time. In fact, this entire fake history came into being all at once, fully formed, plopped on top of some Florida scrub land. As famed Baudrillard scholar Michael Eisner announced at the opening of the park in 1989: "Welcome to the Hollywood that never was and always will be."

I think it's these interstitial moments—the seamless and the attention to detail—that really stun Disney visitors and stay with them long after they've left. The rides are great, sure, but every amusement park has rides. Disney creates fully realized narratives.

Consider the Tower of Terror, located at the end of Sunset Boulevard. It's just a classic [drop tower](#), where the goal is to send your stomach up into your sinuses. A regular amusement park would put you in a windowed gondola, crank it up high, and drop it. But here the complicated back story is that we're visiting a haunted, 1930s-era Hollywood hotel. The hotel lobby contains accurate period furnishings—battered velvet chairs, musty lampshades.

As I wait in line, shuffling forward, I eavesdrop on the couple behind me. The woman (I've gathered she's from a show-business background) is marveling at Disney's set design. "Look at the distressing on all the surfaces," she says with real admiration. "That's not easy to do. You can't just let the set hang

around and age for 50 years." She's right: The place is yellowed, stained, and cobwebbed to a perfect patina. You'd never guess the whole thing was built in 1994.

After passing through the lobby, we're shown an expensively produced film about the hotel's haunted past. Then "bellhops" in [Barton Fink](#)-ish costumes lead us to our seats. And then, at last, the actual ride happens. It's about 45 seconds of screaming our tonsils out as we plummet down an elevator shaft. All that effort and ingenuity wrapped around such a simple thrill. But this is precisely what draws folks all the way to Disney World instead of to their local Six Flags.

When the ride's done, I go back outside and watch people strolling down Hollywood Boulevard. It turns out that the most far-fetched fantasy in Disney World isn't the magic spells, the haunted buildings, or the talking animals. It's the fact that there aren't any cars.

For the mostly suburban Americans visiting here, this whole pedestrianism concept is at once liberating and bewildering. People don't seem ready for it. On the one hand, they adore walking with their children in a totally safe environment (one that's outside and is not explicitly a shopping mall). On the other hand, they're getting extremely winded.

It's pretty far to walk the whole park. "Slow down! Stop walking so fast," I hear over and over—sometimes from fat adults, other times from their chubby children. They sweat through oversize T-shirts. They breathe heavily with every step. Their plump calves go pink in the sunshine, contrasting with their bright white sneakers and socks. Self-propulsion appears to be a wholly unfamiliar challenge.

Still, the rewards for their efforts are many. Around any given corner there might lurk Power Rangers, mugging for photographs. Sometimes a troupe of fresh-faced teens will suddenly materialize and perform dance numbers from *High School Musical*. Later, you can buy a multipack of *High School Musical* socks at one of the sidewalk souvenir stores. (OK, I actually bought some of these socks. They were for my 26-year-old sister. We share a refined sense of humor.)

As the afternoon wanes, and I grow tired of the masses, I duck into the least-attended attraction I can find. It's called "Walt Disney: One Man's Dream." Inside, there's a small museum dedicated to Walt's life and a theater screening a short biographical film. There are about 12 people in the auditorium when the film begins. One family leaves halfway through because their toddler is cranky.

Poor Walt, I think to myself. One day you're chilling with Wernher von Braun, inventing lifelike robots. The next day you're just some dude who drew a mouse.

(Hey, let this be a lesson to you, *High School Musical* brats. There will come a time when no one will be buying your licensed hosiery anymore. Who will sing and dance with you then? Allow me to answer: You will sing and dance alone.)

From: Seth Stevenson

Subject: Disney's Animal Kingdom

Posted Wednesday, March 26, 2008, at 8:05 AM ET

The Imagineering Field Guide to Disney's Animal Kingdom reveals that the imagineers deliberately left the parking lots out in front of this Disney-style zoo as bleak and barren as they could. A wasteland, with no strips of grass to interrupt the endless asphalt slab. They wanted to heighten the contrast we feel when entering into the lush, wooded Animal Kingdom park. The scheme "ensures that the immersion into nature ... will be very impactful."

My first thought upon reading this was: Screw you, imagineers! Parking lots suck enough as it is. You're saying you made yours even more depressing than necessary, just so you could showcase some cutesy landscaping idea? Go imaginuck yourselves!

Once I'd gotten this indignation out of my system, my second thought was: Gosh, they sure do put a lot of thought into this stuff. Leafing through these behind-the-scenes books (I also have *The Imagineering Field Guide to Epcot*) brings to light, yet again, the insane attention to detail you find at every Disney property.

For instance, once you've made that transition from the parking lot, through the gates into the Animal Kingdom entrance area, the imagineers' next goal is to carefully orchestrate your first glimpse of the massive Tree of Life. (It's one of this park's two [wienies](#)—the other being a replica Mount Everest.) Various inclines, berms, and hollows have been arranged so that you're forced to ascend a small rise before suddenly stumbling onto a gorgeous, unimpeded view of the tree. (The tree itself is an impressive feat of engineering. And is, of course, totally fake.)

I've been curious to see how this obsessive nano-focus would be reconciled with the challenges of a zoo. Live animals seem decidedly un-Disney, as they can't be compelled to perform a repeated, synchronized sequence. (Unlike an animatronic robot. Or a low-wage employee.) With the animals' free will involved, it's impossible to ensure that every guest will receive the same, focus-group-approved experience. This sort of thing makes the imagineers extremely uncomfortable.

Their response was to make the animals into a sideshow. In many cases, you don't even get to watch the animals from a static viewing point, as you would at a regular zoo. Instead, there's a "ride" with a silly narrative structure (about, for instance, chasing poachers), during which you get quick, oblique glimpses of the animals as you speed by. The true stars of Animal Kingdom aren't the lions, apes, and elephants. The stars are the precision-crafted environments you walk through.

Here, come with me as we visit the delightful little village of Harambe. Harambe is the perfect East African port town of your mind's eye. When you first come upon it, it's hard not to feel you've been teleported to Kenya.

All the signs are in the right typeface. The buildings are lovingly dilapidated. The paint-color choices are perfect. (The imagineers say they took paint chip samples on research trips and did surface rubbings to get the building textures right.)

Having traveled to Africa myself, I can tell you that Harambe gets only two minor details wrong. The first is that Africa has many more flies than this. And the second is that Africa has black people.

Given the otherwise remarkable accuracy of Harambe's set design, I'm sort of surprised that Disney didn't manufacture 15,000 animatronic Africans. OK, so they did import a few actual, nonrobot Africans to work the snack stands. *Jambo!* But perhaps the bigger issue is: Where are the black tourists visiting the park? I've seen maybe two black families all day. As in the rest of Disney World, there are literally more French people here than African-Americans.

Another population dynamic I've noticed: the dearth of children at this supposed family destination. I've seen lots of adult couples with no kids in tow. Even when there's a token toddler present, there are often six or seven grown-ups attached to it. I'm beginning to suspect it's the adults who really want to be here, while the kids are just serving as fig leaves.

This theory is bolstered by a scene I witness while waiting in line for food. An elderly, gray-bearded gent is in front of me, trying to buy a soda, when all of a sudden he's interrupted by his twentysomething daughter, who is scurrying toward us. "Daaaaaad! She's not tall enough to go on the ride!" whines the woman, gesturing with a pout at the tiny girl clinging to her thigh. "So now I can't go! And you wandered off!" The man says nothing. "Take her hand," the woman demands. The poor old fellow is mortified by this behavior (and is in the middle of his beverage transaction, to boot). But he silently takes his granddaughter's hand so his horrid daughter can go enjoy her fricking roller coaster.

Admittedly, Disney has some pretty great roller coasters. Toward the end of the day, I walk over to Anandapur (a fake Himalayan village, complete with Tibetan-style prayer flags) and board the Expedition Everest ride. I'm seated in a rickety rail car, which creaks up to the top of the 200-foot mountain before swooping, banking, and dropping at insane speeds. Everyone screams together. It's a group outpouring of white-knuckle terror. When the ride's over and I disembark, I find I've broken out in a light sweat. My dazed fellow riders look at each other in total awe: Can you believe what we just went through?

The same thing happens on the nearby Kali River Rapids ride. There are seven other people on my raft, and as we float down the rushing river, I can feel us starting to gel into a team. We shout warnings to each other when the white water rages ahead. ("Look out, here it comes!") We catch each others' eyes and can't help but smile. The little girl sitting next to me cackles every time we get hit with a splash. She's shouting, "I'm soaked!" with a big, adorable grin.

If I've found one redeeming feature of the Disney World experience, it's the community spirit that's fostered when strangers all join together for a primal shriek of fear—or joy.

From: Seth Stevenson

Subject: Celebration and Downtown Disney

Posted Thursday, March 27, 2008, at 7:44 AM ET

I've spent three straight days inside the Disney World fortress. The incessant magicalness is starting to wear on me. I'm feeling a need to escape Big Rodent's clutchy claws. At the same time, I don't want to risk too much corruption from outside influences. I'd rather not stray too far—geographically or spiritually. The perfect compromise: a visit to Celebration.

This insta-town was conceived by Disney, built on Disney-owned land, and initially managed by Disney executives (though the company has shed much of its involvement over time). And it's only a few miles from my hotel. I make the short drive, park my car downtown, and hop out for a look.

I've long been a fan of planned communities. I once lobbied my editor at *Newsweek* to let me write a story about Co-op City—those ugly brick apartment towers in the Bronx, N.Y., next to I-95. My resulting (very short) article included a quote terming Co-op City's architecture "a disgrace to humanity." The piece also noted that Co-op City had been constructed on the rubble of an abandoned theme park. The park was called Freedomland, and it was the creation of a former Walt Disney associate.

Celebration, though it wasn't built until the 1990s, was in some ways the creation of Walt himself. Walt's original plan for his Florida swampland was to create a brand-new living town—the true [Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow](#). Celebration is the belated (and mangled) realization of that dream.

Walt had envisioned a high-tech, sci-fi city, in appearance not unlike Epcot's Future World area (monorails whizzing by and whatnot). That's not how things turned out. Celebration is instead *backward* looking, with neotraditional, faux-prewar houses. Its old-timey, Norman Rockwell vibe is less Future World and more [Main Street U.S.A.](#)

Celebration's planners were proponents of New Urbanism (in itself a somewhat nostalgic credo, what with its emphasis on marginalizing the automobile). The town's layout is pedestrian-friendly, the retail and restaurant district is a short stroll from many houses, and all the car garages are hidden in rear alleys not visible from the street. Sure enough, within moments of my arrival, I find myself smack in the middle of a New Urbanist/Rockwellian moment: children walking home from school together as a friendly crossing guard holds up his stop sign.

The thing is, I can't help but wonder if these kids might be animatronic. Everything looks waaaaay too perfect. The town famously has a strict rulebook legislating things such as yard upkeep, what color your curtains can be, and what kind of furniture (if any) you can put on your porch. This results in a place so scrubbed of individuality that the houses seem to resent their human residents.

All the streets here have the same power-washed gleam as the streets in the Disney theme parks. The neighborhoods have the same built-all-at-once aesthetic. I actually like some of the downtown buildings designed by shnazzy architects. (Favorites include the [toylike post office](#) by Michael Graves and the [retro cinema](#) by Cesar Pelli—though I feel Philip Johnson's [town hall with its forest of pillars](#) is a facile, unfunny joke.) But having spent the last few days surrounded by maddeningly perfect Disney habitats, I'm now getting the sinking sense that I haven't escaped the Mouse at all.

Celebration forces upon you the same seamless, manufactured experience you get when you walk through the "villages" of [Harambe and Anandapur](#). The inhabitants of Celebration are essentially *living* inside a theme park. (We might call it Suburb Land.) Each night when the park shuts down, they're still inside the gates.

In the evening, I decide to check out downtown Disney, back inside the fortress. It's basically a very high-end strip mall—with a Planet Hollywood instead of an Applebee's, and a Virgin Megastore instead of a [Hot Topic](#). I grab dinner at Bongos

Cuban Café (celebrity owner: Gloria Estefan) and then stroll over to Pleasure Island as it gets dark.

Pleasure Island is where adults on vacation at Disney go at night to escape their children. Also here: businesspeople stuck in Orlando for conferences and locals who treat this as their regular hangout. (Pleasure Island doesn't require a Disney Pass.) There's a club for every taste, from the disco lounge (8-Trax) to the hip-hop spot (BET Soundstage) to the mainstream, top-40 dancehall (Motion).

A single cover charge gets you in to all the clubs, all night. So people bounce back and forth among the venues. This creates the sort of nightlife melting pot that you rarely, if ever, find in the real world. Because it's Disney, and we all feel safe and emboldened, no one's afraid to venture into what might be perceived as alien territory.

Nerdy white people stride confidently into the "black" club. Older couples wade onto dance floors packed with whippersnappers. Gay dudes sashay through the redneck-y rock club. (When I say that, I'm not trying to play on a stereotype. I literally watched three gay men prance about and do ballet jumps while the house band played Lynyrd Skynyrd. These guys were egging each other on, trying to get a rise out of the crowd, but none of the lumpy heteros seemed to pay any mind.)

I find the whole scene oddly hopeful—at first. If people can all get along together here, maybe we can bring that tolerance back home with us. As the night wears on, though, different groups begin to self-segregate.

Early in the evening, for instance, I had a drink at a club called Mannequins. It had a mixed crowd: moms and dads in dorky khakis, some college-age kids getting blitzed, and one pair of gay guys dancing up a storm under the disco ball. I was heartened by the diversity. But it didn't last.

When I popped back a few hours later, I ordered a drink and scanned the room again. It appeared the demographics had undergone a radical shift. Now there were 150 men positively swarming the rotating dance floor. They were accompanied by about three women. And I couldn't help but notice that these men, as a group, seemed extraordinarily handsome, trim, and well-dressed.

Ohhhhhhhhhh. I suppose that name should have been a clue, now that I think about it.

Anyway, it's all good in the Disney 'hood. When we envision a "magic kingdom," we, each of us, have our own ideas.