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Shots All Around!

Advanced Search

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

architecture

For Sale: 200,000-Square-Foot Box

What happens to the store when Wal-Mart leaves town?

By Julia Christensen

Wednesday, November 19, 2008, at 7:06 AM ET

Big-box buildings are the large, free-standing, warehouselike structures that have become dominant in the American landscape, constructed by one-stop-shopping retailers, grocers,

and category-killers. Hundreds of new big-box buildings are built each year—and hundreds are vacated. In a healthy economy, retailers often leave behind one store to build an even bigger one nearby. In tough times, weaker chains are forced to close stores. Circuit City [recently announced](#) it will close 155 stores before the holiday season. What happens to big-box buildings when a retailer abandons them?

The big-box aesthetic does not immediately lend itself to any other use. The buildings are often upward of 150,000 square feet. There simply aren't many enterprises that need that much space, and because the buildings are built for a single-use purpose, it's not so easy to break them up into smaller units. Yet all over the country, resourceful communities are finding ways to reuse these buildings, turning them into flea markets, museums, schools—even churches.

[Click here](#) to read a slide-show essay on how to recycle a big-box store.

books

How To Read the Quran

A new translation captures the confusion.

By Reza Aslan

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 3:03 PM ET

Reading the Quran can be a baffling experience. Unlike the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), the Quran is not a collection of books recounting the mythical history of a community of faith. It is not, like the Gospels, a pseudo-biographical sketch of a particular prophet in a particular time. It does not narrate the life of Mohammed, nor does it chronicle the rise of Islam (indeed, Mohammed is barely mentioned in it). Though the Quran is divided into 114 chapters (called suras), these are arranged neither thematically nor chronologically but rather from longest to shortest, the lone exception being the first and most important chapter, al-Fatiha, or "The Opening." The chapters are given evocative titles like "The Cow" or "The Feast," but these have almost nothing to do with the content that follows. The Quran itself states that its verses have multiple meanings, some of which are unfathomable to human beings and known only to God. And yet, in both style and content, the Quran is unique among scriptures.

The words of the Quran are thought to be infused with divine power. Muslims believe it to be the actual speech of God handed down through Mohammed between 610 and 632 CE. The physical book—its cover and pages—is considered sacred and is to be handled only in a state of purity. Its verses are inscribed on buildings and tombs in order to sanctify them. They are placed in locket and worn as amulets to ward off evil. They are etched

into cups so that when one drinks from them one consumes God's divine power. The mere act of writing out the words of the Quran—the art of Islamic calligraphy—has been elevated into the supreme artistic expression in the Muslim world.

The inherent sacredness of the Quran has historically created an unusual problem for many Muslims. Since the end of the seventh century CE, when its verses were collected into a single, authoritative canon, the Quran has remained fixed in Arabic, the language in which it was originally revealed. It was believed that translating the Quran into any other language would violate the divine nature of the text. Translations were done, of course. But to this day, non-Arabic versions of the Quran are considered *interpretations* of the Quran. Unless the original Arabic verses are embedded on the page, it cannot technically be called a Quran.

The consequences of this belief are obvious. For much of the last 14 centuries, some 90 percent of the world's Muslims for whom Arabic is not a primary language had to depend on Islam's clergy—all of them men, as women are not allowed to enter the clergy—to define the meaning and message of the Quran for them, much as pre-Reformation Christians had to rely on priests to read them the Bible, which at the time was available only in Latin. That is now changing. Over the last century, the Quran has been translated into more languages than in the previous 14 centuries combined. A great many of these translations have been done not by Muslim clergy but by scholars and academics, by Muslim laity and non-Muslims, and, perhaps most significantly, by women. (The first English translation of the Quran by an American woman, Laleh Bakhtiar, was published in 2007.)

Arabic is a language whose words can have multiple, sometimes contradictory, meanings, so how one chooses to render a particular word from Arabic to English has a lot to do with one's biases or prejudice. Take the following example from Sura 4:34, which has long been interpreted as allowing husbands to beat their wives: "As for those women who might rebel against you, admonish them, abandon them in their beds, and strike them (*adribuhunna*)." The problem, as a number of female Quranic scholars have noted, is that *adribuhunna* can also mean "turn away from them." It can even mean "have sexual intercourse with them." Obviously, which definition the translator chooses will be colored by whatever his or her preconceived notions are about a husband's authority. The new crop of Quran translators are brushing aside centuries of traditionalist, male-dominated, and often misogynistic clerical interpretations in favor of a more contemporary, more individualized, and often more gender-friendly approach to the Quran. In the process, they are not only reshaping the way Islam's holy book is read; they are reinterpreting the way Islam itself is being understood in the modern world.

The latest entry into this cornucopia of Quran translations comes from eminent professor of Islamic history Tarif Khalidi, who is currently at the American University of Beirut. Written in what Khalidi calls "measured modern English," his is an eloquent and eminently readable translation, but one that does not stray too far from other conventional English versions of the Quran. (Khalidi, like the majority of his male predecessors, renders the word *adribuhunna* as "beat them.") However, Khalidi's Quran is unique in that it is divided not into individual verses, as is the case with all other Qurans, no matter their language, but rather into clusters of three, four, or five verses at a time. In other words, he bundles the individual verses into lengthy paragraphs that are rendered in both prose and poetry. This may perturb those trying to pinpoint a particular verse (Khalidi does provide occasional verse markers on the margins of each page to let readers know where they are in the text), but the overall effect is that Khalidi's Quran probably reads much closer to the way the first Muslims originally experienced the Quran.

The Quran literally means *the recitation*, an indication that this was a text meant to be heard, not read. That may explain why the Quran was never written down in Mohammed's lifetime. Instead, the revelations were diligently memorized by a class of religious scholars called the *Qurra* (or "Quran readers"), who then disseminated God's words to the rest of the Muslim community in short, easy-to-remember bursts of prophecy. A few of the most important revelations—those dealing with legal or economic matters—were preserved on bits of bone or scraps of leather. But the bulk of the Quran was not collected into a single volume until about 50 years after Mohammed's death. Only then was the revelation divided into individual verses.

This made it extremely difficult to place the Quran's verses, which had been revealed to Mohammed over a 22-year span, into historical context, much less chronological order. And so the compilers of the Quran did not bother doing either. Instead, they gathered up all of the revelations and recorded them in what can be described only as random order. This was a deliberate choice on their part. Muslims perceive the Quran as God's dramatic monologue, recorded without a human filter. (According to traditional Islamic theology, the Prophet Mohammed was merely a passive conduit through which the words of God flowed.) For the compilers of the Quran to have provided any explanation or commentary to the text, for them to have organized the verses in any deliberate way—whether chronologically or thematically—would have, in their minds, interfered with the direct revelation of God. As a consequence, those who are unfamiliar with the early history of Islam, or who may not recognize the historical allusions or contextual references that assist scholars in their exegesis, can feel rudderless trying to navigate through this challenging book.

In the introduction to his Quran, Khalidi admits that "the very allusiveness of the text, its impersonality, its meta-historical tone, seem almost deliberately to de-emphasize context." But he

also seems to imply that it is natural to be confused by what we read. It is through the attempt to make sense of our confusions, to work through them with reason and with faith, that the Quran's dramatic monologue transforms into an eternal dialogue between humanity and God. Indeed, of all the sacred texts of the world, Khalidi argues that the Quran is perhaps the one that most self-consciously invites the reader to engage with it, to challenge it, to ponder and to debate it. After all, as the Quran itself states, only God knows what it truly means.

books

The Dark Matter of Our Cherished Document

What you see in the Constitution isn't what you get.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 2:25 PM ET

When the sun rose on Nov. 5, 2008, it looked like the end of conservative America. Basic conservative principles—free markets, deregulation, small government—had taken a beating in the weeks before. But with the rout of GOP candidates on Election Day, it looked as if liberalism was the last man standing. That is, of course, unless you were standing in the courtroom of the Supreme Court on Nov. 5, 2008, when yet another day of oral argument revealed that all of the power, momentum, and energy at the high court is still held by its conservative wing.

It's not just about numbers, although it's indisputable that with the appointments in 2005 of Chief Justice John Roberts and Associate Justice Samuel Alito, the number of strongly ideological judicial conservatives at the high court rose to four. And it's not just about demographics, although the average age of the court's conservatives is markedly younger than the average age of its liberals. It's about something almost undefinable that has changed on the bench in the past two years: a sense that Alito and Roberts and Justice Antonin Scalia have formed a most enthusiastic, [collegial](#) constitutional beach volleyball team that revels in setting one another up, spiking as hard as they can, and clapping one another on the back after each point. The court's liberal wing, in contrast, often appears to spend oral argument engaging in four sedate, side-by-side games of computer solitaire.

But at the most granular level, the momentum shift at the high court has less to do with the current lineup of justices than with constitutional theory. Last spring's *Heller* decision, for instance, overturning the District of Columbia's gun ban on Second Amendment grounds, revealed the absolute dominance of conservative interpretive theories at the high court. The liberals

and conservatives took turns trying to outdo one another as "textualists" and "originalists" and "strict constructionists," leading [more than one commentator](#) to enthuse that regardless of the outcome, after *Heller*, "we are all originalists now."

Well, maybe. Certainly, while the sun may have set on some conservative political theory, it's been decades since the sun of conservative constitutional theory shone so brightly at the Supreme Court. Liberals today mostly only whisper the words "living Constitution," for fear of being taunted by their Federalist Society friends for advocating the "sweet mystery of life" and "penumbras" and other feel-good '60s notions about a Constitution so vast and unchecked and benevolent that it might just as well be called "Mom."

Enter Harvard Law School's Laurence Tribe, one of the undisputed lions of liberal academia. A few years ago, Tribe stunned legal academia when he announced that he would [not be updating](#) his legendary constitutional-law treatise because, as he said at the time, "conflict over basic constitutional premises is today at a fever pitch." In his view, "no treatise, in my sense of that term, can be true to this moment in our constitutional history." Everybody waited for him to change his mind. He didn't.

Instead, this fall saw the publication of [The Invisible Constitution](#), Tribe's effort to explain to ordinary Americans that when it comes to this cherished founding document, what we see is much less than what we get. This book is a kick in the shin to "textualism" and "originalism," in that Tribe begins from the principle that the written, or "visible," Constitution so revered by conservative jurists is, in fact, only a small part of what Americans think of as the Constitution. He notes that the text of the Constitution contains words that are not even constitutional—original language that has been amended but that still appears in the document. He points out that some of our most cherished constitutional convictions, such as "one person, one vote," appear nowhere in the text. In other words, by fetishizing the words alone, we lose sight of the enormity of what the document does.

Tribe's argument is not so much an argument for a living Constitution that morphs and adapts to meet the needs of a changing society. He's more interested in the shadow Constitution—what he calls the "dark matter" that represents the "ocean of ideas, propositions, recovered memories, and imagined experiences" of which the visible Constitution is only a small part. You cannot spend five minutes listening to oral arguments without realizing that most discussion of what is "constitutional" transcends the mere words in the document. And that is the ground he seeks to excavate. One of his examples, the proposition that no state may secede from the Union, he describes as a part of the Constitution that is written "not in ink but in blood."

Tribe wants, as he says, to "shift the discussion from whether various constitutional claims are properly rooted within the Constitution's written text to whether claims made in its name rightly describe the content, both written and unwritten, of our fundamental law." His movement away from close-reading the text of the Constitution comes just as some progressive scholars have come to embrace it. But like those progressive scholars, Tribe seeks to distance himself from what conservatives decry as the flabby, results-based decision-making that is parodied by justices like Antonin Scalia as empty lyricism. Scalia's brutal attack on what he dubbed "the sweet mystery of life" passage found in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* reveals what happens when constitutional courts wax Shakespearian. That opinion features the famous phrase: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." It's legal language that has launched a thousand snorts.

Tribe, with his background in math and science, is determinedly more earthbound. This is a book about "excavation" and "dark energy" and "double helixes." Tribe is focused not on penumbras in the air, but on the invisible physical matter that connects the words of the Constitution to the constitutional world, the stuff that binds "life" to "liberty" to "property."

Here is an example of how it works: The 14th Amendment provides that no state shall "deprive any person of life, liberty or property, without due process of law." Looking only at the text, says Tribe, one might suppose that the state could punish someone for constitutionally protected free speech so long as it afforded her with the "due process" of a full and fair trial in which to defend herself. This defies common sense, however. And that is why the courts have read due process to include substantive freedom and not just procedural protections. And the substance of what is being protected comprises a part of the "Constitution's invisible dark matter."

In its most whimsical section, the book includes Tribe's hand-drawn renderings of what he describes as six "modes of construction" of the invisible Constitution, including the "geodesic," the "gravitational," and the "gyroscopic." Each of the six models represents either an effort to connect the dots between the visible elements of the Constitution or to explain how the Constitution would collapse upon itself if the invisible portions were not there. Whether this act of pressing the hard sciences into service as models for imagining the Constitution's "dark matter" strikes you as clarifying or obfuscating, what Tribe is attempting here is to impose muscularity, rationality, and structure on progressive constitutional thought. A term like "due process of law" needs to be both unpacked and constrained at the same time, and this is Tribe's project.

Tribe turned his attention away from his landmark treatise in part because while constitutional law is changing at lightning speed, the Constitution is not so much changing as slowly taking

form. Indeed, he concludes with an observation nicked from a friend's fortune cookie: "Everything that we see is a shadow cast by that which we do not see." Tribe believes that the modern view of the Constitution, with its protections of personal dignity and equality, are the shadows cast by a much richer, more nuanced document than the text itself would suggest. There are problems with this notion, to be sure, not the least of them being the question of who *sees* an invisible Constitution, and how justices ready to kill one another over the visible text will ever reach agreement about an unseen one.

In the coming months or years, President-elect Barack Obama will probably name a prominent liberal thinker or two to fill a seat at the Supreme Court. That nominee will be confirmed in an intellectual climate that currently begins and ends in the rigid constraints of textualism and originalism. With *The Invisible Constitution*, Laurence Tribe asks his readers to dream bigger than that. Not in the interest of promoting any one ideological agenda, although Tribe's progressive preferences are hardly hidden. Instead, he offers a blueprint for reimagining the national constitutional conversation with fuller information about its complexities and internal tensions. He asks us to take the time to figure out what the founding document does rather than nitpicking about what it says. And if ever there were a moment in which liberal thinkers might allow themselves to dream big, this should be it.

corrections

Corrections

Friday, November 21, 2008, at 7:05 AM ET

In the Nov. 20 "[Jurisprudence](#)," Dafna Linzer mistakenly stated that Ted Stevens has served in the Senate for 50 years. He has served for 40 years. The article also misspelled Ted Olson's name.

In the Nov. 18 "[DVD Extras](#)," Gary Giddins spelled Marion Mack's name incorrectly.

In a Nov. 18 "[Politics](#)," Josh Levin incorrectly stated that Florida State missed the BCS title game in 2000-01 despite beating Miami. It was Miami that missed the title game despite beating Florida State.

*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.*

culture gabfest

The Culture Gabfest, Identity Crisis Edition

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

By Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner
Wednesday, November 19, 2008, at 11:35 AM ET

Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 21 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

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

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss the Malcolm Gladwell phenomenon, Michelle Obama's role as first lady and mom-in-chief, and the post-Obama buzz kill of Prop 8.

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

Malcolm Gladwell's latest book, [Outliers: The Story of Success](#). Jason Zengerle's article on Malcolm Gladwell in [New York magazine](#).

A *Slate* "[Book Club](#)" about *Outliers*.

Rebecca Traister's article on the "momification" of Michelle Obama in [Salon](#).

Slate's [article](#) on the Obama marriage.

Slate's "XX Factor" [blog post](#) on Michelle, Hillary Clinton, and Sarah Palin.

The Michelle Obama [biography](#) that played at the DNC.

A *Slate* [article](#) comparing the fight over gay marriage with the civil rights movement.

[Background info](#) on Prop 8.

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: David Garland's [Evening Music](#) show on WNYC.

Julia's pick: Beyoncé's latest songs, "[Single Ladies](#)" and "[If I Were a Boy](#)."

Stephen's pick: Charles Mingus' [Mingus Plays Piano](#).

You can reach the Culture Gabfest at culturefest@slate.com.

Posted on Nov. 19 by Amanda Aronczyk at 11:45 a.m.

Nov. 6, 2008

Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 20 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

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

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss Obama, Obama, and Obama. What happened with the election, how the media covered it, and what lies ahead for culture under future President Barack Obama.

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

President-elect Barack Obama's [election-night speech](#) in Chicago.
Kevin Phillips on the "Southern strategy" in his book, [The Emerging Republican Majority](#).
How CNN's [holograms](#) work.
CNN's [bio](#) for John King.
Troy Patterson's *Slate* piece on [the television coverage of election night](#).
The New York Times' [interactive election results](#).
The FiveThirtyEight [Web site](#).
Walt Whitman's [preface](#) to *Leaves of Grass*.
David Simon's HBO [series](#) *The Wire*.
The Bernie Mac [film](#) *Soul Men*.

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: The Giorgio Morandi [survey](#) at the Met. If you don't live in New York, check out *Slate*'s [slide-show essay](#) on the exhibition.
Julia's pick: Timothy Crouse's book, [The Boys on the Bus](#).
Stephen's picks: The Donovan song "[Catch the Wind](#)" and Paul Berman's book [A Tale of Two Utopias](#).

You can reach the Culture Gabfest at culturefest@slate.com.

Posted by Amanda Aronczyk on Nov. 6, 2008 at 12:14 p.m.

Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 19 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

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

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss the unexpected catharsis they felt watching Oliver Stone's *W*. Then, in a special lightning round, they revisit past Gabfest topics, including the ongoing Fey/Palin tragicomedy, Rachel Maddow, and the future of the current environmental movement.

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

The official [Web site](#) for Oliver Stone's film *W*.
Dana's *Slate* [review](#) of *W*.
Slate's [conversation](#) about *W*. with Oliver Stone, Ron Suskind, and Jacob Weisberg, and Bob Woodward.
Curtis Sittenfeld's [American Wife: A Novel](#) about Laura Bush.
Slate's [Audio Book Club](#) on *American Wife*.
Jacob Weisberg's book [The Bush Tragedy](#).
Sarah Palin's latest appearance on [Saturday Night Live](#).
Slate's "XX Factor" blog's [discussion](#) of Palin's *SNL* stint.
Michael Pollan's recent [article](#) in the *New York Times Magazine*.
Cormac McCarthy's novel [The Road](#).
Stephen Metcalf's tomato.

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: James Wolcott's *Vanity Fair* [blog](#).
Julia's pick: [oatmeal](#), brought to you by Starbucks.
Stephen's pick: Claudia Roth Pierpont's collection of essays, [Passionate Minds: Women Rewriting the World](#).

You can reach the Culture Gabfest at culturefest@slate.com.

Posted by Amanda Aronczyk on Oct. 22, 2008 at 11:08 a.m.

culturebox

I Want To Upend Your Expectations

Why movie vampires always break all the vampire rules.

By Christopher Beam

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 6:57 PM ET

There's a scene midway through *Twilight*, the new 'tween vampire flick, in which the heroine, Bella, arrives at the vampire Edward's house—a bright, spare, Modernist home that seems stocked with Calphalon pans and furniture from Design Within Reach. She looks around wonderingly. "What did you expect?" he says. "Coffins and dungeons and moats?" It's a familiar scene to anyone who knows vampire movies: the part where the vampire (or vampire expert) turns myth-buster and explains what vampires are *really* like.

A perfect example is this exchange from HBO's [True Blood](#). "I thought you were supposed to be invisible in a mirror," marvels Anna Paquin's Sookie, [reclining in a bathtub](#). Sorry, says her vampiric love interest, Bill. "What about Holy water?" she asks. "It's just water." "Crucifixes?" "Geometry." "Garlic?" "It's irritating, but that's pretty much it." Irritating, indeed.

Vampire myth-busters are a cocky lot. Take this scene from [Blade](#), when vampire hunter Wesley Snipes explains "vampire anatomy 101" to his new protégée. "Crosses and holy water don't do dick, so forget what you've seen in the movies," he says. "You use a stake, silver, or sunlight. You know how to use one of these?" He shows her a gun. "Silver hollow point filled with garlic. Aim for head or the heart. Anything else is your ass."

Or consider this exchange from the *Twilight* books: "How can you come out during the daytime?" asks Bella. "Myth," says Edward, her fanged paramour. "Burned by the sun?" "Myth." "Sleeping in coffins?" "Myth." Being smug jerks? True!

The list goes on. In [Interview With the Vampire](#), the bloodsucker Louis corrects his interviewer on the rumor about vampires being afraid of crosses. "That is, how would you say today ... bullshit?" (Same goes for stakes through the heart.) In [I Am Legend](#), the vampire book on which the Will Smith movie was based, the narrator dismisses *Dracula* as "a hodgepodge of superstitions and soap-opera clichés." For example, vampires *are* vulnerable to garlic and sunlight, but the mirror stuff is bunk. In the [Last Vampire](#) book series by Christopher Pike, sunlight doesn't kill the undead protagonist—it just makes her age at a normal rate.

What's with all the rule-rewriting? And why are vampires always crowing about it?

Vampire mythology has never been set in stone—nor has any mythology, for that matter. The folklore that eventually became modern vampire fiction varied even more wildly in past centuries than in current-day stories. Ancient Greek mythology [features](#) women who seduce men and drink their blood; in southern Africa, there is the [impundulu](#), a giant blood-sucking bird that controls the weather; Latin American folklore has the fanged [chupacabra](#), a scaled reptile-kangaroo monster that drains the blood from goats. It wasn't until the 19th century, with the publication of stories like Polidori's [The Vampyre](#), Le Fanu's [Carmilla](#), and Bram Stoker's [Dracula](#), that *vampire* became synonymous with "fanged, Euro, coffin-dwelling Goth." But even in these books, the attributes vary—Polidori's Lord Ruthven can go out during the daytime, but sunlight weakens Count Dracula.

The modern reworkings of the genre are traceable to a few different factors. For one thing, rewriting the rules is just good storytelling. Upending conventions lets you surprise the audience. You thought garlic was going to ward off the boss

vampire? Sorry. You planned to kill him with that little piece of sharpened wood? Good luck. These days, you'll see vampires slapping crosses out of the way more often than shrinking in fear. Variations on the vampire rules also make for some clever plot twists. For example (spoiler alert!), in *30 Days of Night*, Josh Hartnett notices that once bitten, victims become vampires right away—but they don't become *evil* vampires for a few hours. He therefore injects vampire blood into his veins so he can fight them off and save his wife. *True Blood* also has a smart twist on the myth-busting trope: The vampires started the myths themselves. "If the humans thought they couldn't see us in a mirror," explains vampire Bill, "it was another way for us to prove we weren't vampires." Plus, tweaking the rules is part of the appeal of genre fiction—authors have a template to play with, so every minor variation they make becomes loaded with meaning.

These expository scenes are also common because vampires are so darn chatty. All monster myths vary, after all. Sometimes [zombies are fast](#), sometimes they're slow, and it always seems to take a different tactic to kill them. But zombies can't talk, so they can't haughtily explain to you why they're not like all the other zombies. They just chomp your face. Vampires, on the other hand, are the biggest self-promoters around: They can't stop talking about themselves.

Another factor is changing censorship rules. Believe it or not, vampires were not always sexy (although sexuality was [part of the mix](#) as early as *Carmilla*). The original *Dracula* film came out in 1931, a year after the [Hays Code](#) was put in place. So they shot two versions—one chaste English version for American audiences and one Spanish-language version for distribution in Mexico. The women in the foreign version wear lower-cut dresses. Hot vampires really broke out in the 1950s in the British [Hammer](#) horror films and finally made it to the United States once the Hays Code was dropped in the late 1960s, clearing the way for Andy Warhol's [take](#) on vampire sex.

Technology also plays a role in vampire transformations. Vampire films got gorier once color film made it clear they were drinking blood, not oil. Shoddy makeup on high-quality film stock sometimes made fangs unconvincing. One director, Mario Bava, decided to scrap them entirely—the vampires in the 1960 flick [Black Sunday](#) are, like the Hays Code at that time, toothless. Technology *within* the films plays a role, too. In recent vampire stories, science is the new magic. In *I Am Legend*, it's the "*vampiris* germ" that causes vampirism. ("You see, the bacillus is a facultative saprophyte," we're told, which is supposed to explain why a stake causes a vampire to dissolve into dust.) In [Underworld](#), it's a [genetic mutation](#). And as technology evolves, so do vampire-slaying methods. *Blade*'s garlic-filled bullets are nothing compared with the bullets from *Underworld* that are filled with—kid you not—daylight.

Other variations are introduced because, well, they're totally sweet. The vampires in *30 Days of Night* are more feral than human, with their own creepy language and two rows of shark teeth. Needless to say, they don't leave two dainty dimples in the neck. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, meanwhile, features an elaborate universe of humans, vampires, demons, werewolves, slayers, and "watchers." (Sometimes, they [sing](#).) *Underworld* creates a deep mythology about a war between werewolves and vampires. In Guillermo Del Toro's *Cronos*, the vampire isn't human at all—it's a [tiny mechanical beetle](#).

But the biggest reason for all the myth-busting has to do with creating a believable world. It may seem odd to explode the myth about crosses in one scene while positing that [vampire blood is a sex drug](#) in the next—neither myth is believable, taken alone. But stomping on old myths *heightens* the realism. It's a way of acknowledging the silliness of most vampire stories while distancing yours from the rest. *We know vampire tales are childish*, it says. *This one is not*. That's why you'll always have a character saying he doesn't believe in vampires—the filmmakers know that's what you're thinking, too. The myth-busting scene is therefore a necessary ritual. By rewriting the rules every time, you ask viewers to invest themselves in *this* story, not in the last vampire movie they saw.

All genres evolve, and in this respect vampire films are nothing special. But vampires seem to relish deviating from their conventions more than most. At the very least, it keeps the genre fresh for *Lesbian Kung-Fu Robot Vampire Killers From Space*.

culturebox

The J. Crew Catalog Destroyed My Spirit

Why mailmen give up.

By Paul Collins

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 6:59 AM ET

It's a discovery worthy of a murder mystery: In a parking lot in the mountains outside Santa Cruz, Calif., a truck is found abandoned, the keys still hanging in the door. Inside the police find ... a note? A body?

Not quite. Try [13,000 pieces of undelivered mail](#).

The recent discovery in Bonny Doon, Calif., of a former mail carrier's old stash was not exactly unprecedented. There's also the recent [arrest of a Detroit postal carrier](#) who squirreled away 9,000 pieces of mail into a storage locker, a work dodge worthy of [a Seinfeld plot](#). A week earlier, a postman was nailed for [hoarding 27,000 letters in Leeds, England](#); the week before that revealed a postal hoarder with [20,000 letters in Frankfurt](#),

[Germany](#). ("[He] didn't deliver mail addressed to himself either," a police statement dryly noted.) And all of them were dwarfed by the North Carolina postman who admitted in August to filling his garage and burying in his backyard [nearly a tractor trailer's worth of undelivered junk mail](#).

But the hoarding and abandonment of mail is a phenomenon that extends at least back to 1874, when Providence, R.I., postman Benjamin Salisbury was caught throwing mail into the ocean "[to avoid the trouble of delivery](#)." Some things don't change much; a Long Island postman used the same MO in 1954, when he blamed a bum leg from the war for forcing him to dump his mail off a local pier. The scheme kind of worked ... until the tide came in.

In 2006, the last year the U.S. Postal Service [released figures](#), there were 515 arrests and 466 convictions for "internal theft." That figure includes abandonment and hoarding cases, where the motive has remained constant since the days of penny postage: A worker gets overwhelmed or simply disinclined to finish his route. "It's not a huge issue," Agapi Doulaveris of the U.S. Office of the Inspector General told me. "We work on referrals."

And there's the rub: For a referral to happen, first someone has to notice.

The deliveries affected are often what the U.S. Postal Service now terms "standard mail"—and what the rest of us call "junk." With the railroad-driven growth in catalogs, postal abandonment stories were already common by the 1880s. The *New York Times* complained of mailmen burning their bundles and in 1883 ran the immortal headline "[To Deliver His Letters Some Time](#)" after the discovery of a mailman's old stash in the basement of an Upper East Side saloon.

For a mail-sack slacker, there's a dark allure to hoarding junk. Think about it: If someone's first-class mail with paychecks or credit card bills doesn't show up, they're liable to complain. But if the umpteenth Eddie Bauer catalog doesn't arrive, well ... who's gonna notice?

So, who does notice? The discovery of hoards follows some common narratives: They've been caught by meter readers, by housesitters feeding a rabbit for a vacationing postman, and by state troopers making traffic stops. A number of "dead-letter cars"—old clunkers filled up like a junk-mail piñatas—have been discovered by mechanics and used-car dealers. And a number of cases are broken after the stashed mail catches fire: In 1974, back-to-back cases a week apart yielded 1,200 sacks of mail in a Louisville, Ky., attic and another tractor-trailer load in a burning attic in suburban Connecticut.

Discovery becomes more likely in cases where a rogue carrier indiscriminately tosses both first-class mail and junk. In 1978,

the postmaster of Roxbury, Conn., was retired after postal inspectors in a late-night raid found letters in the central office's trash cans. Among the locals, both [Arthur Miller and William Styron were missing mail](#). "I have had over the years a large amount of mail for a well-known writer—I guess that's the term," Styron mused afterwards to the *New York Times*. "And in the last year and a half I've been saying to myself, 'Well, is my stock declining?'"

All these cases, however, bow before the [Chicago mail scandals](#) of 1994. Ranked dead last among cities in postal customer satisfaction, that year Chicago found itself on the receiving end of hoard stories seemingly every week. Letters burning under a railway viaduct, letters rotting under a porch, letters stuffed into a dumpster: The stuff was even found hiding at the post office itself. The post office, indeed, was as much a problem as the individual carriers: "Complaint lines might ring as often as 85 times without being answered. ..." noted reporter Charles Nicodemus. "Mammoth mounds of undelivered mail were found at several stations—including [one pile 800 feet long](#), nearly the length of three football fields."

It seemed an almost inevitable coda when, five years later, a final Chicago stash caught fire in a home and took down its mailman with it.

To be fair, the problem is not peculiar to the United States. Postal hoards turn up everywhere from [Norway](#) to [Malaysia](#), where a postal worker caught hoarding 21,255 letters complained, "Why should I deliver the letters when I am being paid less than 500 Ringgit?" He might have taken a lesson from Italy, which gamed the practice to squeeze some money out of it: In 1974, the Poste Italiane was caught selling new mail to paper-pulp plants for \$14 a ton. "Most of the mail has now been turned into cheap cardboard suitcases," the *Times* of London reported. Shamed by the resulting outcry, the postal service then resorted to stuffing letters into unofficial "ghost trains" that circled the country without any destination.

True to form, though, the most spectacularly eccentric cases come from Britain, where in 2004 one Staffordshire carrier achieved a [monumental stash of 130,000 pieces](#) of mail. Far from simply being too tired to carry their mail, British carriers have given excuses ranging from low blood sugar to the post-traumatic stress of having served in Northern Ireland. Most memorably, last year a cross-dressing carrier in Leeds [took revenge on local jobs](#) by tossing their mail after they made fun of her newly acquired lipstick and heels.

But when one hears of a Yorkshire postman who [filled every room of his house](#) with 35,000 undelivered letters, it's hard not to find a more universal parable of the overwhelming reach of modern communication and consumerism. The carrier, Rodger Parkinson, seemed almost relieved that his mail stash was discovered.

"I'm glad in a way," he told his judge. "It needs sorting."

dear prudence The Devil, They Say

My family thinks an exorcism will cure my mental illness. How can I spend Thanksgiving with them?

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 6:58 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,

Genetic predisposition and a traumatic childhood have led me to develop debilitating mental disorders that I have spent years working to manage. I'm now at a functional place. My parents are divorced, and my mother's family has always been very supportive. My father's family, by contrast, sees mental illness as a stigma and has always disagreed with my approach to treatment. Recently, they invited me to my grandmother's birthday party. When I arrived, everyone was sitting solemnly around the living room, and the local pastor was there. He calmly explained to me that I was not actually mentally ill but possessed by agents of Satan and in need of an exorcism. I choked back tears as I explained to them that I did not need any demons driven out, and the evening ended awkwardly. Now they've invited me for Thanksgiving, and I don't know what to do. I don't want to alienate them, but my symptoms are part of a real disorder and can be treated by medication. How do I explain to them that while I do want to spend time with them, it's not the Middle Ages, and I don't want or need an exorcism?

—It's the Schizophrenia, Stupid

Dear It's the Schizophrenia,

For Thanksgiving, please exorcise these people from your life. Spend the holiday somewhere else, preferably with those who love and accept you. Perhaps your mother's family is an option. If not, maybe you can make your own gathering with friends, or friends will extend an invitation to you after realizing you'll be on your own. And if you're too uncomfortable searching for a place to go, every city has shelters or nursing homes that welcome volunteers willing to serve Thanksgiving dinner. What your father's family did to you was appalling. You're very generous not to want to alienate people who believe you are possessed by Satan; I would have been tempted to threaten them with my pitchfork. I suppose at some time less loaded than a big holiday, you can get together with them to try to explain that you have a medical condition that is being successfully treated. But as you point out, this is the 21st century, and an unwillingness to accept that mental illness is just that—an illness—seems an act of willful bigotry not amenable to reason. Be proud of how

you've worked your way to a satisfying life, and don't let people, just because they're relatives, do anything to undermine that.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence Video: Pack Rat on Steroids

Dear Prudence,

I'm 27 years old, and I've always wanted to be a mother. It's my special dream to have a daughter someday. I'm crazy about the man that I've been with for the past two years, and we have plans for marriage and kids in the future. A few months ago I found out that I was pregnant, even though I've been on birth control. I'm in a very difficult three-year program at school. My boyfriend is seven years younger than I am and is decidedly not ready for kids. (He said having a baby now would ruin his life.) So we made the difficult (at least for me) decision to end the pregnancy. The problem is this: My cousin and his wife are expecting their first child shortly. It's a girl, and the name they've chosen happens to be the name that I have long wanted to give to my own daughter. Even though I'm not especially close to my family, it's expected that I see the baby when she's born and attend Thanksgiving and Christmas with them as well. I'm happy for them, but I don't think that I'll be able to do any of that. I've cried a number of times about this and have decided to try to avoid them at all costs for the time being. However, my family will probably be very upset with me and demand to know why I'm not around. I can't tell them that I had an abortion because they believe that abortion is a sin. Would it be wrong for me to tell them that I had a miscarriage and hope they understand why I can't be around at the moment?

—Sad and Anxious

Dear Sad,

Yes, you are going through a painful time; and, no, nobody can force you to attend a family event. But you need to accept the choice you made and get back to living a normal life. That means attending the holidays and welcoming a new member of the family. It also means letting go of the fantasy that your cousin has usurped the name for her child that you thought you had somehow reserved for the child you didn't have. Lying about a miscarriage seems exactly the wrong way to go. First, because it is a lie; and, second, because it will only mean you have to fight off a barrage of questions about your future marital and procreative plans. If you feel so stuck that you plan to avoid any event at which you will see your cousin and his baby, then you should seek short-term therapy or join a support group to come to grips with your decision. It's hard that you can't share your sadness with your family, but leaving them baffled and worried about your absence will surely only make you feel more isolated. You also need to examine where your relationship is headed. You say you want children, but given your age difference, you need to face whether your boyfriend will be ready for fatherhood in time for you to be able to be a mother.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence,

In the weeks following the presidential election, my e-mail inbox has turned toxic with virulently nasty e-mails about our new president-elect. The messages are harshly worded, patently untrue rants. I read and delete. The problem is, I work as a small-time entertainer, hosting events all over the country. My politics, which I keep to myself, are very liberal. I do not host political events of any kind because my business depends on as many bookings as I can manage, especially in these hard times. I don't want to shut off potential customers because of perceived leanings. Lots of customers and their friends have my e-mail, and because they have taken my political silence to mean I must support their extreme views, I'm getting these truly distasteful diatribes. What should I do? This is making me ill again about my country.

—For Obama

Dear For,

Don't feel ill about your country—*your guy won!* It may be distasteful and ridiculous that you're still getting invective-filled rants and lies about Barack Obama, but you can chuckle to yourself as you hit delete, because they lost and *your guy won!* Aside from the e-mails, you say that when you get together with these correspondents, you are providing entertainment for social occasions, so it should be easy to put their political views out of your mind. If politics does come up, make some noncommittal sounds and happily think to yourself: *My guy won!* And, surely, given the economic statistics, you will ultimately be doing more for the fortunes of President-elect Obama to be a quiet, employed supporter than a vocal, unemployed one.

—Prudie

Dear Prudie,

I have a friend whom I've seen through the best and worst of times. She suffers from depression, and I've always tried to be a good friend to her no matter what. When she is depressed, it can be a real emotional workout to spend quality time with her, but I do it because her friendship is important to me. About two years ago, she started intense therapy and has made some real changes in her life. She looks better than ever and is doing very well, however she has become critical of me lately. I wear the wrong clothes. I'm too heavy. I should work out every day. I should wear different makeup. My husband told me that when I return from my weekly outing with my friend, I'm very hard on myself. It's true I don't feel good about myself, and occasionally I give away clothing that she's insulted me about so that I don't have to be reminded how bad I look. I've never been particularly confrontational, so I tend to suffer her comments with a smile. I do enjoy her 90 percent of the time. It's just her lingering hurtful comments that leave me off balance. What do I do to save myself without hurting her in the process?

—Stung

Dear Stung,

How thoughtful of your friend, now that she's feeling better, to want you to understand what she was going through when she felt worthless by making you feel that way yourself. I actually doubt she feels as good as she says. What she's doing to you sounds like a lot of projection—she's just off-loading the running critical voice in her head onto you. Loyalty to a friend, particularly a troubled one, is admirable. But your friend sounds like a trial no matter what her emotional state, and loyalty has its limits. Perhaps you should reconsider subjecting yourself to weekly doses of this friendship. When you do get together, if she starts in with her commentary on you, tell her that while you know there are many things about you that could use improvement, you don't want to focus on them during a pleasant evening out, and say she needs to please drop the critique.

—Prudie

drink

What To Drink on Thanksgiving

Zinfandels that won't overwhelm your turkey.

By Mike Steinberger

Friday, November 21, 2008, at 11:47 AM ET

Produced on these shores for nearly two centuries, zinfandel has long been considered the all-American wine and the ideal choice for those looking to drink domestically on Thanksgiving. Some oenophiles even assumed that the zinfandel grape was indigenous to the United States. Seven years ago, researchers proved that it is actually Croatian in origin; what we (mercifully) renamed *zinfandel* is an old varietal native to the Dalmatian coast called *criljenak kastelanski*. However, this discovery has done nothing to erode the link between zinfandel and the most gluttonous of American holidays. But not all zinfandels are up to the task of washing down the turkey. While zinfandels are by nature rich, spicy, and mouth-filling, the market is flooded these days with monster-truck zins—dense, high-alcohol wines that, whatever virtues they may possess, tend to crush any food that gets in their way. Happily, there are still some producers who believe that table manners matter and who make zinfandels in a more genteel style—wines that will flatter the bird next Thursday rather than flatten it.

Zinfandel arrived in the United States in the 1820s and was first cultivated along the East Coast. It was brought to California in the 1850s and by the late 19th century was the state's most widely

planted grape. It was very popular with home winemakers during Prohibition, but its reputation declined in the years following repeal. Wineries like Soverain and Louis M. Martini turned out good zinfandels, but the grape was generally relegated to workhorse status. That began to change in the mid-to-late 1960s, when vintners like Joseph Swan and Bob Trinchero started crafting ambitious, age-worthy zinfandels. But it is Ridge Vineyards, founded in 1962, that gets most of the credit for putting a serious face on the grape. Ridge's single-vineyard zinfandels, usually blended with small amounts of petite sirah and carignane, were complex, elegant wines that could last for years and improve with cellaring. They were often described as "Bordeaux-like," which was a testament to their path-breaking quality.

Despite the sensational wines produced by Ridge and a few other estates, zinfandel's fortunes continued to ebb and flow. Since the early 1990s, however, zinfandel has soared in popularity, to the point that there was even an effort a few years ago to designate it California's official grape. (Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed the measure—maybe the Austrian native prefers grüner veltliner?) But the last two decades have also seen the ascendancy of a particular style of zin—brawny, Schwarzenegger-like wines that are very heavy on the alcohol. Nowadays, zinfandels in excess of 15 percent alcohol (an amount that can leave even seasoned drinkers in need of Tylenol in the morning) are commonplace.

In fact, zinfandel has become so synonymous with "high-octane" that it is now Exhibit A for a growing chorus of writers, sommeliers, retailers, and vintners concerned about increased potency in wines. With zinfandel, however, the alcohol issue is more complicated than is often acknowledged. The zinfandel grape is a thin-skinned one that tends to ripen easily if somewhat unevenly; riper grapes contain more sugar, which makes for more alcohol in the final product (the fermentation process converts sugar to alcohol). According to Ridge's Paul Draper, who is considered by many people (including yours truly) to be the greatest vintner this country has produced, zinfandel grapes usually can't reach full physiological maturity at less than 14 percent potential alcohol; Draper says that only if the grapevines are truly old—at least 60 years of age—can maturity be achieved below that threshold. The challenge with zinfandel, he explains, is that it doesn't take much to push the alcohol into the eyebrow-singeing range; a few hot days just before or during the harvest can send the sugar levels soaring. Draper says it is possible for a zinfandel to tip the scale at 15 percent alcohol and still be balanced, but he thinks that the ripeness of the fruit can overwhelm the influence of the vineyard, which is why he prefers his wines to be under that number.

For other producers, however, maximum ripeness is the aim; they want their zinfandels to come in above 15 or even 16 percent alcohol. It is a stylistic preference for many of them, but there are also commercial considerations: Heady zinfandels are

the ones that seem to score best with critics, and the wine-buying public appears to really like them, too. A study released last year by Zinfandel Advocates & Producers, an organization that represents some 300 wineries, found that just 10 percent of consumers surveyed felt that zins were too ripe and alcoholic. The fact that demand for zinfandel remains strong clearly suggests that elevated alcohol levels are not an impediment to sales and may even be part of the attraction.

But at the risk of sounding like the persnickety, Eurocentric oenophile that I am, the problem with these steroidal zins is that they are tough to pair with any dish this side of woolly mammoth. There just aren't many foods that marry well with jammy, low-acid wines (and it doesn't help that many such zins are also so excessively oaky that they can leave your tongue feeling like a lathe). Fortunately, there are still zinfandels being made with an eye to dinner, Thanksgiving or otherwise.

I long ago owned up to my fondness for [Ridge](#), and the trio of wines that I tasted this week did nothing to dull my enthusiasm. The excellent **2006 Ridge Vineyards Sonoma County Three Valleys** (\$22) is an impeccably proportioned wine redolent of raspberries, leather, and licorice, and it is a good value, too. The **2006 Ridge Vineyards Geyserville** (\$35) sports a terrific bouquet of crushed berries, flowers, cedar, and chocolate. It is a full-bodied, energetic, but also very suave wine with enough structure to carry it well into the next decade. The **2006 Ridge Vineyards Lytton Springs** (\$35) is delicious; aromas of black currants and roasted herbs float up from the glass, leading to a wine of almost Zen-like poise that exudes completeness.

Mike Dashe worked as Paul Draper's assistant before starting his own eponymous winery in 1996, and the Draper influence is unmistakable in the restrained opulence of his zinfandels. The **2007 Dashe Cellars Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel** (\$24) is a beautifully balanced wine, its lavish fruit parried by good acidity and ripe, perfectly integrated tannins. The **2006 Dashe Cellars Todd Brothers Ranch Zinfandel** (\$32) is big and lusty but with just enough acidity to avoid sliding into flamboyance. I was more impressed by the **2006 Dashe Cellars Louvau Vineyard Zinfandel** (\$32); a bouquet brimming with blackberries, cherries, tobacco, cedar, and leather gives way to a graceful wine that showcases zinfandel in all its palate-staining glory.

Like Ridge, [Chateau Montelena](#) is an iconic California winery; unlike Ridge, Montelena's zinfandel has always been overshadowed by its cabernet and chardonnay. But the **2005 Chateau Montelena—The Montelena Estate Zinfandel** (\$30) is an outstanding wine, with succulent but nicely harnessed fruit, fine structure and minerality, and a long, satisfying finish. Green & Red Vineyard is a Napa winery that has long been recognized for the quality of its zinfandels. The **2005 Green & Red Vineyard Tip Top Vineyard Zinfandel** (\$28) is a superb, mineral-inflected effort (with a great menthol note, too) that seems to have a foot in both the New World and the Old,

combining California brightness with continental restraint. The **2006 Green & Red Vineyard Chiles Mill Vineyard Zinfandel** (\$25) is equally winning, although it moves at a slightly different tempo. It is a peppery, creamy, richly flavored wine with strapping tannins, but it flows harmoniously.

Celebrity wines are popping up everywhere; the **2005 Rubicon Estate Edizione Pennino Zinfandel** (\$40) is one that is actually worth drinking. Francis Ford Coppola owns Rubicon and consistently turns out classically robust, peppery zinfandels. The '05 is packed with lush, briary fruit, but there is ample acidity to keep the wine from becoming pudgy, and it finishes with big, ripe tannins and a nice lick of chocolate. Sonoma's Nalle Winery, by contrast, has no claim to celebrityhood; it hardly even gets mentioned in the wine press these days. Nalle makes what have become truly anomalous zinfandels, ones that trade on subtlety and finesse rather than power. The **2006 Nalle Winery Zinfandel** (\$32) has the light complexion of a red Burgundy and a gentle, inviting nose of cherries, flowers, cloves, and black pepper. The first sip will not impress; the wine will seem lean and lacking (especially next to other zinfandels). But wash it around your mouth a bit—this is a charming zinfandel, with plenty of concentration and flavor. It is a wine of hidden depths and a timely reminder that not all zinfandels need to smack you across the head to make an impression. The 2005 version, which goes for the same price, is equally lovely.

dvd extras

Buster Keaton's *The General*

Yeah, it's silent. So what? You'll barely notice. It's that good.

By Gary Giddins

Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 9:04 AM ET

Those of us who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, when television was awash in classic movies (*Million-Dollar Movie*, *Shock Theater*, *The Late Show*, and *Silents Please* were among the first schools in cinema—just ask Scorsese, Spielberg, or Coppola), are aghast to find that our children are often reluctant to watch black-and-white films, let alone silent ones. Especially those deemed to be among the greatest ever made. The imprimatur of the experts turns pleasure into obligation, and suddenly the notion of sitting through a comedy that had for decades convulsed audiences takes on all the promise of reading *The Merry Wives of Windsor*—the most annoying and witless of Shakespeare's plays, yet once upon a time thought to be a riot.

Still, for anyone who has never seen a silent picture or, worse, seen only speeded-up pie-throwing excerpts, Kino International has an offer you can't refuse: a spotless new transfer of Buster Keaton's 1926 epic, *The General*. Kino initially released a DVD of *The General* in 1999, which looks like every other version

I've seen in theaters or at home—the focus is soft, and the tinted film stock is faded, scratched, and jumpy. The new edition, part of a two-disc set (most of the extras concern the historical basis for the story), is pristine, sharply focused, stable, and gorgeous.

Gorgeous is important, because *The General* is a peephole into history and by any definition an uncannily beautiful film. Indeed, for a first-time viewer, I would emphasize the beauty over the comedy. Many people are disappointed when they first see *The General* because they have heard that it is one of the funniest movies ever made. It isn't. Keaton made many films that are tours de force of hilarity, including *Sherlock Jr.*, *The Navigator*, and *Seven Chances* (all available from Kino). *The General* is something else, a historical parody set during the Civil War.

The comedy is rich but deliberate and insinuating. It aims not to split your sides but rather to elicit and sustain—for 78 minutes—a smile and sense of wonder, interrupted by several perfectly timed guffaws. *The General* belongs to at least three movie genres: comedy, historical, and chase. Most of it is constructed around a pursuit as relentless as any Bourne blowout, involving a Confederate locomotive, called the General, hijacked by Union spies.

The General's engineer, Johnny Grey (Keaton), spends the first half racing after it—on foot, handcar, bicycle, and another train—and, once he has stolen it back, the second half in flight from the Texas, a train manned by Union troops. If the film begins as a contest between man and machine, it ultimately depicts a triumphant collusion between the two. [Keaton, one of the](#) greatest natural athletes and stuntmen in film, loves his train as much as he does his inamorata, Annabelle Lee (played by the wonderfully oblivious Marion Mack*). He leaps and crawls over every inch of it, from the pilot, or cowcatcher, riding low on the tracks to the tender carrying the fuel.

In Keaton's hands, the train is nothing more than a gigantic prop, an incessant inspiration to his inventive genius. Many passages are so suspenseful and minutely worked out that the gag, when it comes, is like the release of the General's steam. It gives you a chance to breathe again.

It's worth remembering that *The General*, made 82 years ago, re-creates an incident that occurred only 64 years before it was shot. In 1862, a civilian Union spy, James Andrews, led a small attachment of soldiers 200 miles into enemy territory to steal an engine of the Western & Atlantic Railroad at Big Shanty, Ga. The General's engineer, William Fuller (the basis for Keaton's character), led the chase that ended with their capture. Some were hanged, while others escaped and became the first-ever recipients of the Medal of Honor. Among the latter was William Pittinger, who published a memoir, *Daring and Suffering: A History of the Great Railroad Adventure*, which can be [freely downloaded](#) as part of the Gutenberg Project.

When word got out that Keaton was making a comedy of Pittinger's story, he was refused permission to use the General, which had survived and would later—partly because of Keaton's film—be spruced up for a Georgia museum. The town of Marietta, where the story began, wanted nothing to do with him. So he re-created Georgia in the Northwest, shooting the picture entirely on location. Much of our visual sense of the Civil War derives from photographs by Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner. For all its humor, *The General* conveys the illusion of those photographs come alive.

Keaton's best films function as a loving record of American town life, with its shops and picket fences and leisure pursuits, set against a splendor of mountains, gulches, rivers, and fields. Using Cottage Grove, Ore., as his main location, Keaton preserved two eras: the Civil War, re-created with daunting attention to detail, and 1926, as passers-by in Cottage Grove would have seen it—the costumes were of the 19th century, but the buildings and natural surroundings were little changed. Other Civil War films, not least *The Great Locomotive Race*, Walt Disney's dramatic 1956 telling of the same story (from the perspective of the Union raiders), invariably look like Hollywood pageants. Keaton's authenticity and comedic understatement make *The General* a surprisingly modern experience. The storytelling and the gags are free of sentimentality and knockabout clichés. The four-minute battle scene is simply one of the most gripping, and occasionally hilarious, ever filmed.

Silent movies suffer as home video. They were meant to be seen in theaters, where the audience morphs into a comedy meter, responding en masse to each gag. I've seen it in theaters enough times to know that a few moments always elicit gales of laughter, some of them fleeting by so quickly that you will be grateful for instant replay, like Keaton's running mount onto a wooden bicycle or the scene in which he straddles the pilot and averts disaster by using one log to get rid of another.

A classic minute in the history of movie romance (55:30 to 56:32) occurs when Annabelle tries to help him fuel the train, throwing wood into the furnace. She rejects one log because it has a hole in it and tosses in a small stick. Keaton, watching this, hands her a splinter. She conscientiously throws it in the fire, at which point exasperated playfulness gets the better of him, and he briefly strangles and then kisses her—all done so quickly that she remains entirely unfazed. A standard joke in Keaton's comedies (and Charlie Chaplin's, too) is that the world of silent movies is truly silent when a character's back is turned. As Keaton chops wood, facing forward, he doesn't hear the Union army passing behind his back.

Most Keaton films have astonishing scenes that transcend comedy. In *The General*, there is an overhead tracking shot of Keaton and his train entering a smoke-filled tunnel. The most unforgettable shot, said to be the costliest filmed during the

silent era, is one in which Keaton sets fire to a bridge, causing the Union train to crash into a ravine—prefiguring by 30 years the climax of David Lean's *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.

Kino offers three soundtracks for *The General*, though the only one worth bothering with is the default musical score composed by Carl Davis in 1987. It keeps a straight face throughout, heightening without intruding on a magical film that is too brisk to bore and so absorbing that you may find yourself forgetting that it is silent.

Correction, Nov. 19, 2008: In this article, Marion Mack's name was originally spelled incorrectly. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

explainer

Explainer's Wildfire Roundup

Your questions about the disaster in Southern California, with answers from our archives.

By Brad Flora and Sophie Gilbert

Friday, November 21, 2008, at 7:07 AM ET

Three wildfires have been moving through Southern California in the past week, burning though 17,000 hectares of land, causing "[the worst loss of homes due to fire](#)" ever in the city of Los Angeles, and adding considerably to the [state's financial woes](#).

Among the [fires](#) burning in Southern California were the Montecito Tea Fire, the Sayre Fire, and the Triangle Complex Fire. Who picks these names?

In general, naming rights go to the group that makes the "initial attack" on a fire, whether it's a squadron of local firefighters or a team from the U.S. Forest Service. (In contrast, every tropical storm in the Atlantic gets its [name](#) from a single organization.) The commander on the scene often uses a nearby geographical feature to describe the fire, but he's not bound by any official rules. (For more on how a wildfire gets its name, read [this Explainer](#) from 2005.)

Officials have 100 percent "[contained](#)" two out of the three fires. What does it mean to contain a fire, and how is the percentage calculated?

To prevent a blaze from spreading, firefighters dig a "fire line" around its circumference. If three miles of fire line have been built around a fire that is 10 miles in circumference, then 30 percent of the fire is contained. Once a fire is fully contained, firefighters work on "controlling" it by battling it inside the containment line. A controlled fire is one that has no risk of

expanding beyond the fire line. (For more on how wildfires are rated, read [this Explainer](#) from 2001.)

According to newspaper reports, [1,500 California prison inmates](#) are helping to put out the blaze. Why are prisoners fighting wildfires?

In California, some prisoners get transferred to a system of "conservation camps," where more than 4,000 inmates are housed and trained to fight forest fires. According to the Department of Corrections, "assignment to a conservation camp is a hard-won privilege" and provides the opportunity for prisoners to live without gun towers or security fences and to reduce the duration of their sentences by as much as two-thirds. Spots at the camps are reserved for physically fit offenders with no history of escape attempts, violent crimes, or—naturally—arson. (For more on prisoners and disaster relief, read [this Explainer](#) from 2005.)

Gov. Schwarzenegger's finance spokesman says [wildfire property damage](#) will top \$305 million. What about the environmental damage from all the carbon being spewed into the atmosphere? Do wildfires have a significant impact on global warming?

A lot depends on what the fire destroys, as there is tremendous variation among tree species in terms of carbon storage. If you see a fire sweeping through an expanse of mighty evergreens, the carbon emissions will be much higher than if the conflagration were consuming wispiest trees. You've also got to factor in the composition of the ravaged soil. The fires that swept across Indonesia in 1997 burned relatively thin tropical trees. But the devastated forests were also covered in carbon-rich [peat](#). As a result, the Indonesian fires were estimated to have released between 13 percent and 40 percent of the world's annual emissions at the time. (For more on the environmental impact of wildfires, read [this article](#) from 2007.)

Santa Barbara, Calif., Sheriff Bill Brown says one of the fires was caused by [a bonfire built by students](#), but the other two are still under investigation. How do you examine a wildfire for signs of arson?

First, figure out where it got started. The place where firefighters first engaged with the blaze is a good place to begin, as are spots where eyewitnesses say they first saw flames or charred ground. Once there, investigators can lay down something like [an archaeological grid](#) and start sifting through the debris. This evidence might include the "puddle" burn patterns caused by an accelerant—or the remains of a cigarette. Investigators also look for footprints or tire marks, and they sometimes use magnets to find stray bits of metal that might have been part of a time-delayed incendiary device. (For more on how investigators look for signs of arson, read [this Explainer](#) from 2006.)

Just this week, a homeless man in California was [sentenced to four years in prison and ordered to pay costs of \\$101 million for setting fires that burned down 160,000 acres of national forest. How's a guy who sleeps in a tent supposed to pay \\$101 million?](#)

He isn't. Instead, he's expected to pay a tiny bit every month until he dies. The man, Steven Emory Butcher, currently receives \$1,000 a month in Supplemental Security Income, which is basically welfare for the elderly, disabled, or blind. The federal court ordered Butcher to pay \$25 to Los Padres National Forest four times a year while in prison, then \$50 a month once he's released. No one expects him to deliver the entire \$101 million—even a spokesman for the prosecutor acknowledged that the odds of Butcher paying it off were "extremely slim"—but they do expect him to pay what he can. If Butcher gets a job when he's out of prison, the probation officer can modify the amount of monthly payments—the criminal equivalent of refinancing your mortgage. (For more on why a homeless man is given such an unrealistic fine, read [this Explainer](#) from 2008.)

Witnesses have described "[thick clouds of gray-black smoke](#)" blotting out the sun. Others have seen "[orange-white plumes](#)." What determines the color of smoke?

The type of fuel and how hot it's burning. A wildfire can produce both colors of smoke. First, the hot, flaming combustion of dry underbrush releases little particles of black soot into the atmosphere. But the blaze also produces smoldering combustion—think of the glowing logs at the bottom of a campfire—which don't burn quite as hot. Big branches or tree trunks that have a lot of moisture are more likely to smolder and release white smoke. (For more on what determines smoke color, read [this Explainer](#) from 2006.)

Reports have described wildfire flames as high as 100 feet in some places. How high can a fire hose shoot?

Between 75 feet and 100 feet straight up, depending on water pressure. In practice, though, firefighters on the ground rarely attempt to reach higher than 40 feet with hoses. (For more on how firefighters attack tall flames, read [this Explainer](#) from 2004.)

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

explainer

The Globavore's Dilemma

Your questions about food contamination, with answers from the archives.

By Noreen Malone

Friday, November 21, 2008, at 7:07 AM ET

The Food and Drug Administration [opened a new branch](#) in Beijing on Wednesday in response to a spate of recent high-profile contamination scares. Meanwhile, the embarrassed Chinese government has [promised](#) to tighten inspection standards in the wake of the ongoing poisoned baby formula scandal. And last week, the United States [implemented](#) an "import alert" for any food products made in China to be sure they're both dairy- and melamine-free. Here's an Explainer roundup of all the ways your food can make you sick.

So is China the world capital of contaminated food?

Britain seems to be giving it quite a run for its money. In recent years, the country's cattle has fallen victim to mad cow disease, bluetongue disease, and foot-and-mouth disease. In part, the outbreaks are just bad luck. They also have something to do with the country's status as a global hub: Heathrow Airport has the [most international traffic in the world](#), and airline-food waste is sometimes processed into the food that's fed to cattle, posing a massive risk for disease. (For more on Britain's meat problem, see this [Explainer](#) from 2007.)

In 2007, workers at a U.S. pork processing plant all [reported](#) troubling symptoms, including weakness and dizziness. All were working in the area where the pig's brains were being liquefied. Foodies everywhere wondered: Is it safe to eat pork brains?

Yes. There's no evidence that the digestion of pork brains will do you any harm, but the inhalation of them seems to be a different story. Breathing in the brain tissue triggers an immune response that leads to the sort of symptoms experienced by the factory workers. Like all meat, pork brains can be contaminated in various ways, but there's no evidence that the substance itself is bad for humans. (For more on the innards-and-outs, see [this Explainer](#) from 2008.)

To be on the safe side, I'll avoid dairy, meat, and other animal products, but nothing's safer than a PB-and-J sandwich. Right?

Nope. In 2007, ConAgra-made peanut butter, including Peter Pan, caused an [outbreak](#) of salmonella, infecting hundreds of people. Animal products are the most likely foods to harbor salmonella bacteria. But vegetables and fruits can have it, too, if they're not washed properly and infected manure makes it onto the crop through water runoff or leaky [waste lagoons](#)—remember 2008's salmonella-infected tomato [scare](#)? Peanut butter isn't usually a high-risk food for salmonella outbreak, since the peanuts are roasted at super-high temperatures, but the germs can creep back in at the jarring stage of post-processing. ([This Explainer](#) from 2007 and [this one](#) from 2008 have more details on salmonella contamination.)

Will washing my fruits and veggies help cut down on diseases?

Yes, probably. A "[thorough rinsing](#)" can cut down on microbacteria by as much as 90 percent—the remaining decile of disease is lodged in grooves on the produce's surface or attached to it by [electrostatic charges](#). The longer the bacteria stay on, the more attached they get. Washing is more helpful in getting rid of "spoilage bacteria"—giving something a rinse before putting it in the fridge might help make it last longer. (For more detail, read [this Explainer](#) from 2006.)

The United States isn't the only place in the world to snobbishly ban food imports. In fact, Europe [won't let American chickens across the pond](#). Are they unsafe?

No, they just taste funny to the European palate. American birds are bathed in chlorine (or another bacteria killer), a stringent regulation that was put in place after E. coli scares and salmonella scares in the 1990s. That doesn't mean that they're redolent of a swimming pool, though—tests have found that chlorinated chicken doesn't begin to taste significantly worse than its nonchlorinated counterpart until it's been reheated several times. (For more on bad-tasting birds, see [this Explainer](#) from 2008.)

Poisoned babies have been grabbing the headlines lately, but [last year](#) the victims of contaminated Chinese imports were American cats and dogs. It turned out that we were putting bad wheat gluten from overseas into our pet food. Wait, imported wheat products? Isn't America the breadbasket of the world?

Yes, but other countries make cheaper gluten. Although we're the world's largest consumer of wheat gluten, just a handful of American companies produce it, and 80 percent of our supply comes from abroad. Europe has a lot of extra gluten since they use wheat starch (what's left over when you separate out the gluten) to make sweeteners. They've also got wheat subsidies in place, which lower the price still further. China has a smaller, but growing, share of the market. (For more on wheat gluten, check out [this 2007 Explainer](#).)

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

explainer Explainer's Same-Sex-Marriage Roundup

Your questions related to California's Proposition 8 with answers from our archives.

By Sophie Gilbert
Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 6:38 PM ET

On Nov. 4, voters in California approved Proposition 8 to adopt a constitutional amendment [banning same-sex marriage](#). This week saw the California Supreme Court jump back into the debate with the news that it will [review the legality](#) of the ballot measure.

Fervent campaigning by members of the Mormon church may have pushed support for Prop 8 [over the top](#). What, exactly, do Mormons think about homosexuality?

That orientation is distinct from practice. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has issued [several position statements](#) about homosexuality—or "same-gender attraction," as the church calls it. One of its most recent publications, a 2007 pamphlet titled "[God Loveth His Children](#)," states: "If you avoid immoral thoughts and actions, you have not transgressed even if you feel such an attraction." Being a practicing homosexual can be grounds for excommunication, but gay Mormons who remain celibate can continue to be members in good standing, allowed to worship in the temple and assume positions of leadership. However, gay and lesbian Mormons who publicly acknowledge their orientations—even if they don't act on them—may face [informal disciplinary measures](#) from their congregation [bishops](#). (To read more on Mormon attitudes toward homosexuality, read [this Explainer](#) from 2008.)

Help! There are so many things I don't understand about this issue. What's the legal difference between a marriage and a civil union?

It depends where you live. Vermont's [statute](#) provides a very comprehensive set of legal rights to same-sex couples: "[T]he same benefits, protections and responsibilities under law, whether they derive from statute, administrative or court rule, policy, common law or any other source of civil law, as are granted to spouses in a marriage." Thus *civil unions*, as the term has come to be understood in the light of Vermont's law, have all of the same attending legal consequences as marriages; the only difference is their name. (For more answers to your FAQs on gay marriage, read [this Explainer](#) from 2004.)

The California Supreme Court has implemented a [short-term freeze on gay marriage](#) while it considers the constitutionality of Prop 8. If I get married in Canada, is it legal here in the United States?

Probably not, at least until the newlyweds pursue the matter through the courts. The United States recognizes most foreign marriages because of "comity," the legal version of the golden rule. The principle holds that lawful conduct in one jurisdiction should be respected in another, lest travelers worry about their

marriages being invalidated as they cross borders. But comity is more a custom than an obligation, and neither the states nor the federal government are compelled to extend the courtesy to every couple wed abroad. They can decline if the marriage in question violates a jurisdiction's definition of an acceptable union—say, if the bride is below the age of consent or if the couple are close blood relations. Or, in the case of same-sex marriages, if a local law explicitly defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman. (To read more on the legality of Canadian same-sex marriages, read [this Explainer](#) from 2003.)

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

explainer

The Evergold State

Are prospectors crazy to be dredging in Washington's rivers and streams?
By Jacob Leibenluft

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 6:36 PM ET

Gold prospectors in the state of Washington are [up in arms](#) about new restrictions on when they can search for gold. The [rules](#), issued last week, are intended to limit digging and dredging in streams, which may put fish eggs at risk. Just how much gold is in those Pacific Northwest streams?

It's hard to know for sure, but don't expect a Washington gold rush anytime soon. According to [the most recent estimates](#) (PDF) by geologists with the U.S. Geological Survey, the Evergreen State had about 519 metric tons of known gold resources within its borders during the late 1990s; another [study](#) guessed that there might be 2,100 tons worth of undiscovered gold deposits throughout the Pacific Coast region. Washington ranks among the top 10 states in its existing gold deposits, but it is well outpaced by Nevada's 6,100 metric tons of gold deposits, by far the largest in the nation.

With [gold prices](#) at about \$747 an ounce on Thursday, 519 tons is a significant haul. (It's \$13.7 billion, to be exact.) But while no one keeps exact figures, it's hard to imagine much of that gold will show up in the pans of prospectors. Most gold that appears in streams is placer gold, which refers to gold found in the sand and gravel deposits of stream beds or beaches. (The word *placer* comes from the Spanish for "sand bank"; by contrast, gold that is still in solid rock is called "lode gold.") The USGS [estimates](#) (PDF) that about 20 percent of U.S. gold deposits are placer gold. But in most places—Alaska is a rare exception—placer gold is not very economical to mine, so it accounts for a much smaller percentage of gold produced nationwide. Indeed, even for a small-scale prospector, mining in a stream can get rather expensive: The [suction dredges](#) at issue in the new rules—

machines that pull up material at the bottom of streams and then filter it—will set you back a few thousand dollars apiece.

The best indicator of the amount of gold in Washington's streams is probably the fact that according to the state's geology department, there isn't a single commercial placer gold operation in the state—the prospectors are [all part-timers](#). Geologists don't offer much encouragement about the prospects of striking rich through prospecting, either. A [USGS guide to prospecting](#) notes that "[t]he grizzled prospector with a burro is no longer a significant participant in the search for mineral deposits, and the small producer accounts for only a minor share of the total production of metals including gold." Another [primer from the California Geological Survey](#) (PDF) estimates that one in every 1,000 prospectors "will ever make a strike." And in Washington—where an estimated 2,000 to 2,300 people might call themselves prospectors—the miners say that half an ounce of gold (or about \$373 worth) is a pretty typical haul for a season, and that many prospectors are lucky if they find enough gold to cover their expenses.

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

Explainer thanks Micheal George of the U.S. Geological Survey, Dave Norman of the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, and Bill Thomas of the Washington Prospectors Mining Association.

explainer

Explainer's Pirate Roundup

Your questions about pirates with answers from our archives.
By Noreen Malone

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 4:16 PM ET

Somali pirates [seized a Saudi oil tanker](#) worth \$100 million on Saturday, and attacks on Thai and Indian vessels followed on Tuesday. So far, more than 95 ships have been attacked by pirates near Somalia this year. It's been a while since the last [golden age of piracy](#), so the Explainer is here to get you up to speed on all the most crucial information about these high-seas renegades.

What's their motivation?

Booty, naturally. Pirates haven't changed *that* much. In the middle of the 20th century, pirates tended to be merely thieves at sea, climbing aboard commercial ships and making off with whatever valuables they could grab. Some pirates are still operating on this small scale, but they tend to pack more heat—guns or even grenades. A typical yield for this sort of attack,

which often involves breaking into commercial safes onboard, can range from \$1,000 to \$20,000. The really big bucks in pirating come from ransom, though. For instance, the Saudi oil tanker is [being held captive](#) for \$25 million; a more typical ransom for a captured ship is \$1 million. (The United Nations estimates that \$25 million to \$30 million has been paid out in ransom to pirates this year.) Human captives are sometimes taken for a less dramatic ransom, yielding tens of thousands each. (For more detail on what modern pirates want from us and how they get it, check out [this Explainer](#) from 2005.)

After the news broke of Saturday's oil tanker seizure, [world oil futures spiked briefly](#), with investors worried about the impact such unpredictable factors could have on supply. If you're in the commercial shipping business, what steps can you take to pirate-proof your haul?

You should definitely invest in K&R insurance—that's "kidnapping and ransom." Premium costs have increased as much as tenfold over the past year, but if you're shipping through the [Gulf of Aden](#), it's worth it. You should also consider hired muscle: [Blackwater](#), of Iraq war fame, is offering a protection package that includes an attack helicopter and escort ships. (For more on how to cover your booty, see [this article](#) from *Slate's* sister site *The Big Money*.)

Since August, anti-piracy patrols have had a [few victories](#). Earlier this week, the Indian navy sunk one pirate ship and forced the crew to flee another, while last week a British ship stopped a boat full of pirates and arrested eight people. How exactly do you make an arrest at sea?

First, try to contact the outlaw ship via radio or P.A. system. Then board the vessel from helicopters or smaller ships, and make a thorough search for lawbreakers and weapons. Prisoners should be handcuffed and the seized ship steered to the nearest port. If the pirates try to flee, you might try to shoot out the ship's engine or "foul its propeller" with a netlike device deployed in the water ahead of the ship. (For more detail on maritime arrests, see [this Explainer](#) from 2005.)

So, do these modern-day pirates still say "Arrr"?

No, and the old-fashioned ones probably didn't, either. Hollywood brought the phrase onto the scene in 1934, and it stuck. *Arrr*, pronounced with the trademark burred accent, became fixed in the popular consciousness when an actor from Southwestern England used it to great effect playing Long John Silver throughout the 1950s. Today's Somali pirates might be likely to say something more along the lines of "*is dhiib*" ("Surrender"), "*istaag ama waan ku tooganayaa*" ("Stop or I will shoot"), or perhaps one of [these other useful Somali phrases](#). (For more on high-seas etymology, see [this Explainer](#) from 2007.)

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

explainer

Measuring the National Carbon Footprint

How do you total up the greenhouse-gas emissions for an entire country?

By Brian Palmer

Wednesday, November 19, 2008, at 6:57 PM ET

The United Nations reported this week that Kyoto Protocol signatories have [reduced greenhouse-gas emissions](#) to 5 percent below 1990 levels, four years ahead of the treaty schedule. Is it really possible for a country to measure how much carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, perfluorocarbons, sulfur hexafluoride, and other [greenhouse gases](#) it's putting out?

Not exactly. For a country to get a direct readout of its national emissions, it would have to put a greenhouse-gas meter on every tailpipe, landfill, and cow. Since that's impractical, government officials track the inputs rather than the outputs. In other words, they count up the number of gallons of fossil fuels consumed, cattle raised, and pounds of waste produced. From there, it's just a matter of doing the right calculations.

Carbon dioxide is the easiest gas to measure in this way. When a unit of fossil fuel is combusted, it emits a predictable amount of carbon dioxide. While different combustion devices may produce differing levels of certain pollutants, such as [sulfur dioxide](#) or [particulate matter](#), the poundage of carbon dioxide emitted depends in large part on the composition of the fuel. For example, combusting one gallon of gasoline reliably produces about [19 pounds of carbon dioxide](#). One ton of coal can be counted on to give off approximately 5,700 pounds. A cubic foot of natural gas produces 0.12 pounds of carbon dioxide. ([Sequestration](#) technology could in theory lower these numbers, but [so far](#) has had little impact on national emissions.) That means you can tally the amount of each type of fuel consumed in a year—via surveys of energy importers, producers, and suppliers—then multiply the totals separately.

Computing methane emissions is more complicated, because the ratio of inputs to outputs can change from one situation to the next. In the United States, about 24 percent of human-caused methane emissions comes from the decomposition of organic matter in landfills, but the amount that comes out of any one landfill depends on what kind of garbage the landfill contains and at what temperature. A further 21 percent of our emissions are spewed out by livestock—but a cow will be more or less gassy depending on the details of its [diet](#) and the bacteria in its gut.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recommends a method for calculating methane emissions from livestock. The mathematical model looks at a national livestock population's average age, weight, diet, and other factors to generate an "emission factor," representing the average methane emission per head of cattle per day for that population. The emission factor can then be multiplied by the number of cattle, which is calculated via government surveys of ranchers and dairy farmers. There is a similar model for methane emissions from landfills, incorporating the weight of municipal waste, the fraction of waste deposited in landfills, the age of the waste, and climatic conditions.

Nitrous oxide estimates are even less reliable. The gas is released when microbes in the soil metabolize nitrogen-rich fertilizer—but the details of this reaction are very difficult to model due to variations in the native microflora and oxygen availability. The best we can do is use temperature data, soil conditions, fertilizer type, and crop type to make an imprecise guess about the overall rate of emission.

The difficulties in measuring certain gases means there's likely to be some degree of error in the calculations. That problem is mitigated by the relative ease with which we can estimate carbon dioxide emissions. While methane, nitrous oxide, and [other gases](#) are more potent climate change agents, carbon dioxide remains the largest contributor to the problem [by a sizable margin](#).

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

Explainer thanks Paul McArdle of the Energy Information Administration and Roxanne Smith of the Environmental Protection Agency.

explainer

Behold the Power of Michelle

Why are there so many powerful Michelles in Washington?

By Abby Callard

Wednesday, November 19, 2008, at 5:58 PM ET

When Michelle Obama moves into the White House next year, she will immediately become the most famous member of one of Washington's most powerful and exclusive clubs: the Michelles. Here's a short list:

- [Michele Bachmann](#) represents Minnesota's 6th Congressional District in Congress.
- [Michelle Bernard](#) is the president and CEO of the Independent Women's Forum and an MSNBC political analyst.

- [Michelle Fenty](#) is a lawyer married to D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty.
- [Michelle Malkin](#) is a conservative commentator.
- [Michel Martin](#) is a correspondent for ABC News and NPR.
- [Michele Norris](#) hosts NPR's All Things Considered.
- [Michelle Rhee](#) is chancellor of the D.C. public school system.
- [Michele Woodward](#) is a well-known life coach and former White House Advance Office staffer under Reagan.

Why so many Michelles?

That's easy. It was an insanely popular name in the '60s and '70s, and [it peaked in popularity in 1968](#). (The members of the D.C. gang were born between 1956 and 1970.) We can also blame the Beatles—their 1966 Grammy Award-winning song, "[Michelle](#)," came out at about the same time the name broke into the top 10 baby names in the United States. (For what it's worth, at least two Michelles—Martin and Woodward—despise the song.)

Harder to explain than popularity is power. Part of it, of course, could just be sheer volume—there are also a lot of powerful Amys and Marys around, two other popular names of the era. Name expert Pam Satran, co-founder of [Nameberry](#), theorizes that because the name was so popular for so long, it effectively escapes stereotyping and allows Michelles more freedom to be themselves. It's much easier to be a Michelle, she says, than to be a Hillary or Condoleezza, to choose two names at random. A Hillary—again, speaking purely hypothetically—might have had to prove she was more serious than her name gave her credit for.

Unsurprisingly, the Michelles have theories of their own. When meeting another Michelle, Bernard always asks whether it's two L's or one. Over the years, she has noticed that Michelles tend to be taller, like herself and Obama, while Micheles tend to be shorter. (Whether height equals power is [another question entirely](#).)

Enough with the theory. What do Washington's Michelles plan to do with all their power? Not even unnamed sources would say. (That's a joke.) Although the group doesn't regularly hold secret meetings, Woodward threw a "Michelle" party six years ago after realizing how many friends she had with the same name, and Norris attended. Woodward doesn't currently plan to have another get-together, she said, but if she did, she'd invite everyone on *Slate's* list—including Obama.

Which brings up a sensitive topic: How will the new Michelle fit in? To a Michelle, members of the current group say they are proud to have a namesake in the White House. (Norris even [danced with Obama](#) at a community center in South Carolina.)

But that doesn't mean that the transition won't have its bumps. It's impossible to compete with a "hotness" like Obama's, says Martin. And Norris points out that the first lady probably won't be called Michelle, at least while she's in Washington. "That's what happens when you move into 1600 Pennsylvania," she says. "She'll remain Michelle in print, but that's about it. We'll keep the name alive on her behalf."

They may also want to keep a lookout for any rising stars (and rivals) with popular names from the 1980s. If none of these Michelles is able to finally break that glass ceiling, maybe Jessica, Ashley, Jennifer, or Amanda will.

explainer

The Millionaire Arsonist

Is a homeless felon really expected to pay \$101 million?

By Christopher Beam

Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 5:50 PM ET

A homeless man in California was [sentenced](#) Monday to four years in prison and ordered to pay \$101 million for setting fires that burned down 160,000 acres of national forest. How's a guy who sleeps in a tent supposed to pay \$101 million?

He isn't. Instead, he's expected to pay a tiny bit every month until he dies. The man, Steven Emory Butcher, currently receives \$1,000 a month in Supplemental Security Income, which is basically welfare for the elderly, disabled, or blind. The federal court ordered that Butcher would pay \$25 to Los Padres National Forest four times a year while in prison, and then \$50 a month once he's released. No one expects him to deliver the entire \$101 million—even a spokesman for the prosecutor acknowledged that the odds of Butcher paying it off were "extremely slim"—but they do expect him to pay what he can. If Butcher gets a job when he gets out of prison, the probation officer can modify the amount of monthly payments—the criminal equivalent of refinancing your mortgage.

So why fine him so much? It's the law. A federal judge is [required by statute](#) to make a defendant pay restitution when there's property damage incurred, even if he doesn't have the money. The amount of the restitution depends not on how much the criminal can afford to pay, but how much property the victim lost, as determined by the [Federal Sentencing Guidelines](#). For example, the 2006 fire set by Butcher cost Los Padres National Forest more than \$59 million in damages, plus fire suppression costs, according to an assessment by the U.S. Forest Service. Ultimately, the court settled on a \$101 million price tag. Monetary loss can also be a factor in calculations of jail time—a practice that has proven controversial over the years. Loss-based

sentencing is [one reason](#) Jeffrey Skilling and others convicted in financial fraud cases were sentenced to decades in prison.

There's a difference, though, between restitution fees and federal fines. Restitution goes to the victim of a crime—in this case, Los Padres National Forest. A fine goes to the state. If Butcher had deeper pockets, he might be ordered to pay the state up to \$250,000 in fines as well. But the federal sentencing guidelines say that an individual defendant is off the hook if he "establishes that he is unable to pay and is not likely to become able to pay any fine."

Some foreign governments adjust punishments according to what criminals can pay. European countries including Finland and Germany have a system of "[day-fines](#)," in which judges take your income into account when assigning penalties. Instead of a flat rate, you're fined a certain portion of your daily disposable income. (In Finland it's usually about half, with a minimum fine of 6 euros.)

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

Explainer thanks Marc Mauer of the Sentencing Project, Robert Weisberg of Stanford University, and attorney Mark Windsor.

explainer

Can You Be a Gay Mormon?

Yes, but only if you don't have sex.

By Nina Shen Rastogi

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 6:20 PM ET

Since the passage of California's Proposition 8, which repealed the rights of gays and lesbians to marry, the Mormon Church has been dealing with [widespread protests](#) of its support for the measure. What is the official Mormon policy on homosexuality?

That orientation is distinct from practice. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has issued [several position statements](#) about homosexuality—or "same-gender attraction," as the church calls it. One of its most recent publications, a 2007 pamphlet titled "[God Loveth His Children](#)," states: "If you avoid immoral thoughts and actions, you have not transgressed even if you feel such an attraction." Being a practicing homosexual can be grounds for excommunication, but gay Mormons who remain celibate can continue to be members in good standing, allowed to worship in the temple and assume positions of leadership. (However, gay and lesbian Mormons who publicly acknowledge their orientations—even if they don't act on them—may face [informal disciplinary measures](#) from their congregation [bishops](#).)

On the nature-vs.-nurture issue, the church has [declined to speculate](#). But though Mormons believe that gender is a fixed, eternal construct that's set [before you're born](#) and continues after death, homosexuality is seen as something that only exists during a person's mortal lifetime. Mormons believe that after you die, [your soul moves on to a spirit world](#), taking with it the knowledge and memories it gained on Earth. According to "God Loveth His Children," Mormons who cannot overcome their same-gender attractions in this life will have their "feelings and desires ... perfected in the next life."

The Church of Latter-day Saints places great doctrinal emphasis on family and sexuality, which makes homosexuality a particularly complex issue for Mormons. Mormons subscribe to the concept of [eternal or celestial marriage](#)—the notion that marriage covenants performed and "sealed" within the temple are binding in the afterlife. [Section 132](#) of the church's *Doctrines and Covenants* records God's revelation to the prophet Joseph Smith that those who enter into the celestial marriage will, after they die, "be gods," with the "angels ... subject unto them." (This same scripture also says that these Mormons will experience a "continuation of the seeds forever and ever," suggesting that these couples will procreate in the afterlife as well.)

Marriage is intimately bound up with the church's concept of salvation: Heaven is organized into a series of families, and only those Mormons who are sealed in a temple ceremony are eligible to enter the highest of its three levels, the [Celestial Kingdom](#). Yet homosexuals—like single, heterosexual Mormons who don't find partners in this lifetime—will have the opportunity to be sealed to a husband or wife in the afterlife, provided they live chastely and righteously in this one.

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

Explainer thanks Donald L. Boisvert of Concordia University, Michael Falco of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, Terryl Givens of the University of Richmond, Jay Johnson of Pacific School of Religion, and David Melson of Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons.

fighting words

Fidel Gets Religion

Why on earth did Castro build a Russian Orthodox cathedral in Havana?

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 11:56 AM ET

In January of 2009—on New Year's Day, to be precise—it will have been half a century since the brave and bearded ones

entered Havana and chased [Fulgencio Batista](#) and his cronies (carrying much of the Cuban treasury with them) off the island. Now the chief of the bearded ones is a doddering and trembling figure, who one assumes can only be hanging on in order to be physically present for the 50th birthday of his "revolution." It's of some interest to notice that one of the ways in which he whiles away the time is the self-indulgence of religion, most especially the improbable religion of Russian Orthodoxy.

Ever since the upheaval in his own intestines that eventually [forced him to cede power](#) to his not-much-younger brother, Raúl, Fidel Castro has been seeking (and easily enough finding) an audience for his views in the Cuban press. Indeed, now that he can no longer mount the podium and deliver an off-the-cuff and uninterrupted six-hour speech, there are two state-run newspapers that don't have to compete for the right to carry his regular column. Pick up a copy of the Communist Party's daily *Granma* (once described by radical Argentine journalist Jacobo Timerman as "a degradation of the act of reading") or of the Communist youth paper *Juventud Rebelde* (*Rebel Youth*), and in either organ you can read the moribund musings of the maximum leader.

These pieces normally consist of standard diatribes about this and that, but occasionally something is said that sparks interest among a resigned readership. Such an instance occurred on my visit to the island last month. Castro decided to publish a paean to Russian Orthodoxy, to devote a state subsidy to it, and to receive one of its envoys. I quote from the column, headed "Reflections by Comrade Fidel" and titled "The Russian Orthodox Church," which was "syndicated," if that's the word, on Oct. 21. This church, wrote Castro:

[i]s a spiritual force. It played a major role at critical times in the history of Russia. At the onset of the Great Russian War, after the treacherous Nazi attack, Stalin turned to her for support to the workers and peasants that the October Revolution had changed into the owners of factories and the land.

These sentences contain some points of real interest. It is certainly true, for example, that the Orthodox Church "played a major role at critical times in the history of Russia." It provided the clerical guarantee of serfdom and czarism, for example, and its demented anti-Semitism gave rise to the fabrication of the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which had a ghastly effect well beyond the frontiers of Russia itself. That's partly why the Bolsheviks sought to break the church's power and why the church replied in kind by supporting the bloodthirsty White Russian counterrevolution. But Castro openly prefers Stalin to Lenin, which may be why he refers to the Nazi assault on the USSR as "treacherous." He is quite right to do so, of course, but it does involve the awkward admission that Stalin and Hitler were linked by a formal military alliance against democracy

until 1941 and that Stalin was more loyal to the pact than the "treacherous" Hitler was. And, yes, of course the Orthodox Church backed Stalin, just as he always subsidized the Orthodox Church. But these are chapters of shame in the history of Russia and even in the history of communism and Christianity. Why would Castro single out the darkest moments for his praise?

It gets worse. As Castro writes in the same column, concerning the visit of a Russian Orthodox archbishop named Vladimir Gundjaev to Cuba, "I suggested building a Cathedral of the Russian Orthodox Church in the capital of Cuba as a monument to Cuban-Russian friendship. ... During the construction, earth was brought from the place where the remains were laid to rest of the Soviet soldiers who perished in our country during the tens of years they rendered services here." How extraordinary! He writes as if the Soviet (or, interchangeably, Russian) soldiers had fallen in combat in Cuba, and as if the Soviet Communist regime had sanctified their deaths—of old age or venereal disease or suicide, since there never was any war—as a sort of Christian martyrdom.

I have been in Cuba many times in the past decades, but this was the first visit where I heard party members say openly that they couldn't even guess what the old buzzard was thinking. At one lunch involving figures from the ministry of culture, I heard a woman say: "What kind of way is this to waste money? We build a cathedral for a religion to which no Cuban belongs?" As if to prove that she was not being sectarian, she added without looking over her shoulder: "A friend of mine asked me this morning: 'What next? A subsidy for the Amish?'"

All these are good questions, but I believe they have an easy answer. Fidel Castro has devoted the last 50 years to two causes: first, his own enshrinement as an immortal icon, and second, the unbending allegiance of Cuba to the Moscow line. Now, black-cowled Orthodox "metropolitans" line up to shake his hand, and the Putin-Medvedev regime brandishes its missile threats against the young Obama as Nikita Khrushchev once did against the young Kennedy. The ideology of Moscow doesn't much matter as long as it is anti-American, and the Russian Orthodox Church has been Putin's most devoted and reliable ally in his re-creation of an old-style Russian imperialism. If you want to see how far things have gone, take a look at the photograph of President Dmitry Medvedev's inauguration, as he kisses the holy icon held by the clerical chief. Putin and Medvedev have made it clear that they want to reinstate Cuba's role in the hemisphere, if only as a bore and nuisance for as long as its military dictatorship can be made to last. Castro's apparent deathbed conversion to a religion with no Cuban adherents is the seal on this gruesome pact. How very appropriate.

foreigners

Still Waiting for Chinese Democracy

How long can Beijing resist political liberalization?

By Damien Ma

Friday, November 21, 2008, at 1:31 PM ET

Axl Rose understands, perhaps as well as the Chinese Communist Party, that creating *Chinese Democracy* requires patience. As *Chinese Democracy* [hits stores](#) in the United States, democracy is far from rocking China. But Rose may be consoled by the knowledge that in the [17 years](#) it took the album to take shape, rock 'n' roll has made a ripple in China—indeed, "November Rain" can be found on the playlist of countless karaoke bars. Guns N' Roses surely owes its rising popularity with a new generation of Chinese to economic liberalization, even as its latest album's title track bemoans the state of the political system. As Rose wails that time's running out for the Chinese government, evidence suggests that, in fact, time is very much on Beijing's side.

Some in the United States were undoubtedly dejected when Deng Xiaoping, who in 1978 inaugurated sweeping market reforms of the Chinese economy, ultimately failed to deliver on promises of political liberalization. Hopes for a democratic China were violently quashed in Tiananmen Square in 1989, only to be reignited when the Soviet Union disintegrated two years later, leaving China the lone major power led by a wobbly authoritarian government. Yet as Communist regimes toppled around the world in short order, China proved immune to the democratization wave washing from Moscow to Berlin. Expectations for Chinese democratization dimmed as time wore on, and 30 years after Deng opened up the Chinese economy, China's political system remains insular. The CCP has defied predictions of its imminent collapse, and Western-style democracy has not come to China. What gives?

It's clear that China is not lurching toward democracy. Understanding why this is so requires poking some holes in underlying Western assumptions. One of the dominant assumptions is that economic liberalization will inevitably lead to political freedoms, yet China has grown ferociously for 30 years without sweating such inevitability. Another assumption, related to the first, is that China's 100 million strong and growing middle class will demand political reforms once its material wealth has been satisfied. But few signs point to concerted political activism among Starbucks-drinking, BMW-driving, Guns N' Roses-listening Chinese yuppies. A more recent assumption is that the Internet will act as a powerful tool to circumvent China's ubiquitous censorship and organize massive grass-roots movements against the status quo. Aside from Internet-organized anti-Japanese demonstrations, the Web has yet to prove its utility for fomenting serious political opposition in China.

CNN's Jack Cafferty famously called the Chinese leadership the same bunch of "[goons and thugs](#)" during the Tibet protests in spring 2008, highlighting the static image of China in the West. True, heavy-handed suppression of perceived threats to the political regime is still in Beijing's arsenal of knee-jerk, reactive policies and should not be condoned. But it is a mistake to view the Chinese leadership as simply a ruthless dictatorial regime. Mao Zedong would probably not recognize today's CCP, save several of its more anachronistic elements. It has undergone thoughtful introspection about its own legitimacy and potential demise, recently prompting Vice President Xi Jinping, the front-runner to assume the presidency in 2013, to state that the CCP's survival is not inevitable. What's more, Premier Wen Jiabao, in an unprecedented interview with Fareed Zakaria earlier this fall, unflinchingly claimed that a democratic China will be the endgame.

But the Chinese concept of "democracy" should not be conflated with the Western idea of direct elections and using the rule of law to constrain power. The utterance of the term *democracy* among the Chinese elite has so far meant promoting government transparency and accountability, village-level elections, rule by consensus and consultation, expanding the public sphere, co-opting entrepreneurs and intellectuals into the party—anything but conceding ultimate power to the people.

In short, the CCP has nimbly adapted, is populated largely by elites, and is essentially ruled by a nine-member oligarchy in the Politburo, the fount of power in Chinese politics. Gone are the days of a single strong man. More voices now participate in the policymaking process, creating competing factions within the party that vie for influence.

The party's subtle transformation is significant because its retooling efforts have left it standing and turned previous assumptions on their heads.

First, China's decision to attract foreign investment meant that it had little choice but to create a legal environment that Western businesses could tolerate. Its entry into the World Trade Organization expedited the creation of a sound legal regime. This has led top leaders to promote the rule of law (applicable to everyone except the party itself, of course). As a result, lawyers are proliferating and rising in rank in China, and citizens have increasingly turned to legal channels to protect their rights. Second, the Chinese middle class has benefited most from the state's economic policies. It has few incentives to dismantle the status quo. Third, far from being a liberator of thought, the Internet has in many ways been manipulated by the party to reinforce and shape its message. The Chinese state's reach at every level of society has always been overestimated, and the Internet has become a useful tool to gauge public opinion for the purpose of better governance. On the one hand, the central government has increasingly involved the public in the policymaking process by inviting online comments on major

policy proposals. On the other, the CCP has cultivated a crop of young, tech-savvy cadres in universities across the country—known as the "50-cent gang"—to infiltrate online forums and bulletin boards to counter criticisms of the government with pro-CCP propaganda. Incremental tweaks and improvements in governance and public participation have apparently blunted the urgency for full-fledged democracy.

So, Western democracy will not come to China anytime soon, and, in fact, Beijing has increasingly spurned the Western model of governance. Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a shell-shocked Beijing mustered enough reason to commission a systematic study of the causes for the Soviet implosion, followed by an assessment of the "color revolutions" in former Soviet states and an examination of Western democracies. Ultimately, it concluded that the U.S. style of democracy is unsuitable for China and that political reforms must not be rapid. Instead, Beijing appears determined to draw from various political systems, adapting when warranted, conforming where demanded, and rejecting when necessary.

For all the CCP's efforts at reinvention, it is still rarely confident in its "mandate from heaven." It is a party plagued by endemic corruption at all levels, unable to provide sufficient basic social services, terrified of collective protests, and prone to suppression rather than accommodation. Some China experts have argued that CCP rule in its current form is not sustainable and that the end is near. Another scenario, just as likely, is that piecemeal, gradual political reforms could mean that democracy arrives in China with a whimper instead of a bang. A third scenario is a CCP whose inchoate and improbable experiments with governance eventually settle upon a unique formula that satisfactorily addresses the monumental issues that China faces. The party then accrues enough political capital and overwhelming public confidence that it calls for a general election, certain of victory. It would demonstrate its embrace of democracy without actually abandoning single-party monopoly.

While it's impossible to predict with any accuracy the ultimate fate of the Chinese polity, 30 years of evidence seems to indicate that Beijing is willing to change only on its own terms. For instance, the impressive [stimulus package](#) Beijing unveiled recently was more an indication of the leaders' resolve to tackle domestic anxieties than a sign of answering the global call for stronger Chinese leadership. The stimulus is motivated as much by gloomy economic forecasts as by politics. Emphasis on rural development in the stimulus plan signals a recognition that the CCP cannot simply be a party of elites and must "spread the wealth" to the poor—the majority of China. Indeed, this has been the focus of the current Hu Jintao administration.

Domestic dynamics consistently trump outside pressure, so any potential for democracy will likely result from internal, rather than external, factors. Democracy promotion may have long lost its effectiveness on China, particularly since the nation is ruled

by leaders who have virtually discredited Western democracy as a necessary, or even appropriate, end. Washington, the world, and aging '80s rock bands may have to deal with an evolving, but lasting, authoritarian government for quite some time.

foreigners

War of Words

The West must not be distracted by Russian—or Georgian—propaganda.

By Anne Applebaum

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 7:07 AM ET

The *New York Times* has now [done it](#); so, recently, have [European cease-fire monitors](#), the [BBC](#), and [NPR](#). These organizations, along with a whole host of other investigators, have looked once again into the events surrounding Georgia's Aug. 7 incursion into South Ossetia, the event that led, in turn, to the massive Russian invasion of Georgia on Aug. 8.

Their most important conclusion? Georgia started it and killed civilians in the process. My conclusion? We knew that already. We also knew, and indeed have known for some time, that the Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, is susceptible to extreme bouts of criminal foolhardiness. A year ago this month, he [attacked demonstrators](#) in Tbilisi with riot police, arrested opposition leaders, and even smashed up a Rupert Murdoch-owned television station—possibly not, [I wrote at the time](#), the best way to attract positive international media coverage. I'm told Saakashvili—who did indeed overthrow the corrupt Soviet *nomenklatura* that ran his country—has many virtues. But caution, cool-headedness, and respect for civilian lives and democratic norms are not among them.

We knew that about him—and so did the Russians. That was why they spent much of the previous year taunting and teasing the Georgians, shooting down their planes, firing on their policemen, and attacking their villages, all in an attempt to create a *casus belli*, either in South Ossetia or in [Abkhazia](#), another Russian-dominated, semi-autonomous enclave inside the Georgian border. And when Saakashvili did what they'd been hoping he'd do, they were ready. As one Russian analyst [pointed out](#), the Russian response was not an improvised reaction to an unexpected Georgian offensive: "The swiftness with which large Russian contingents were moved into Georgia, the rapid deployment of a Black Sea naval task force, the fact that large contingents of troops were sent to Abkhazia where there was no Georgian attack all seem to indicate a rigidly prepared battle plan." There was, it seems, one minor miscalculation. As a very senior Russian official recently told a very senior European official, "We expected the Georgians to invade on Aug. 8, not Aug. 7."

No matter. Once the well-planned invasion had been launched, the Russians rampaged across the countryside, systematically destroyed Georgia's sea ports and factories, killed civilians, and rolled their tanks into the middle of the country, as if preparing to cut off Tbilisi. Though they didn't invade the capital in the end, I have no doubt that their intention was to prove to the Georgians that they could have done so if they had wanted to—and that next time, they will. The operation succeeded: They went home, declared themselves the defenders of human rights in South Ossetia, [exaggerated](#) the number of Osetian civilian casualties by a factor of 20, and [denounced](#) Saakashvili as a "Soros paid, CIA/MI6 controlled puppet."

This is all old news, of course, but I'm repeating it because it is important to focus, not just once but again and again, on the nuances, complications, and layers of this story, since it is one whose retelling has recently become an important propaganda tool in an ongoing trans-Atlantic war of words. It is very satisfying to describe Georgia as a tiny, brave, and innocent democracy, proudly standing up to the evil Russian bear, and, indeed, some did so at the time: "We are all Georgians," said John McCain. It is also very satisfying, I have no doubt, to describe Georgia as a tin-pot dictatorship, an evil American-neocon lackey, and the personal fiefdom of a major war criminal—and some are [doing so right now](#). Indeed, for those longing to go back to "business as usual" with Russia, I'm sure it is extremely satisfying to discover, suddenly, that it was all Georgia's fault in the first place.

Unfortunately, neither cartoon version of events is accurate, and no new "investigations" or "revelations" about the August war will make them so. Saakashvili's attack on South Ossetia was a disaster, made worse by the bizarrely [boastful celebrations](#) he conducted afterward. The outrageous Russian response was also horrific, both for the Georgians and for Russia, whose neighbors (and investors) now know exactly what to expect from the Medvedev-Putin regime.

The conclusions to be drawn from this unsatisfying, cloudy picture are not simple, either—but then, they never were. In the short term, the Georgians must ensure Saakashvili is not murdered or ousted in a Russian-backed coup. In the long term, the Georgians need to choose a leader who can promote true political and economic stability. Until then, Western leaders should support Georgian democracy—not particular Georgian democrats—and prepare a unified response to the Russian military escapades to come. And while the propaganda battle rages, they must stay on the sidelines.

gabfest

The Quaker Meeting Gabfest

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

By Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz
Friday, November 14, 2008, at 10:28 AM ET

Listen to the Gabfest for Nov. 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 talk politics. This week, the Obama administration begins to take shape, politicians jockey for position, and the Big Three automakers come to Washington.

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

Among the people mentioned as potential Cabinet members are [Sen. Hillary Clinton](#) and Arizona Gov. [Janet Napolitano](#). Media reports indicate that former Senate Majority Leader [Tom Daschle](#) has been selected to become the next [Health and Human Services](#) secretary.

The group discusses what it calls the [endless speculation](#) over Obama's Cabinet.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the possible nomination of [Eric Holder](#) as attorney general. One potential pitfall for such a nomination is [Holder's involvement](#) in Bill Clinton's pardon of [Marc Rich](#).

John mentions the so-called "[Team of Rivals](#)" approach to forming a Cabinet.

John talks about how [President Bush's approval ratings](#) continue to be low, even after the election. He says this is not helping the "[Republican brand](#)."

Alaska Sen. [Ted Stevens is out](#), losing a squeaker to Anchorage Mayor Mark Begich. His loss [came the same week](#) as his 85th birthday.

California Democratic [Rep. Henry A. Waxman](#) has been voted [the incoming chairman of the House energy and commerce committee](#), ousting [Rep. John Dingell](#) of Michigan.

Former Republican primary candidate Mitt Romney made headlines this week with his *New York Times* op-ed, "[Let Detroit Go Bankrupt](#)."

Emily chatters about a federal court ruling involving five Algerian detainees at Guantanamo Bay. The judge, an appointee of [President George H.W. Bush](#), ruled that [the five men have been held unlawfully](#) and should be released.

David discusses the [real estate frenzy in Washington, D.C.](#), brought on by the inauguration. Many D.C.-area residents are [renting out their homes and apartments for huge amounts](#) to people hoping to visit the capital for the festivities. By some estimates, [as many as 4 million people](#) are expected to descend on Washington.

John talks about the resurrection of photographs from *Life* magazine. The [photos are now being made available](#) through [Google](#). Among them are shots of [former NBC correspondent Nancy Dickerson](#), John's mother.

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 on Nov. 21 by Dale Willman at 11:27 a.m.

Listen to the Gabfest for Nov. 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 talk politics. This week, the election, how Barack Obama will fare as president, and the future of Sarah Palin.

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

President-elect Barack Obama has the [highest approval rating](#) going into office of any president over the past 25 years. Outgoing President George W Bush, meanwhile, has the [lowest approval rating](#) of any president since the beginning of such polls.

It appears that the cautious tone of [Obama's Nov. 4 acceptance speech](#) was an attempt to tamp down expectations.

A major question for Obama will be whether he should [behave like former President Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#) and work fast to capitalize on his current popularity or whether he should move more cautiously. John says he favors a [bold approach](#), similar to what Obama promised in the campaign. But he says [Obama's bold rhetoric](#) does not match the more [mainstream](#)

[policies](#) he is championing. John says Obama will be able to make some early choices that will be popular, including reversing current policies on the [State Children's Health Insurance Program](#) and [stem cells](#).

The group discusses how to [talk to children](#) about the Obama victory and its place in the racial history of the United States.

Since the election, Sarah Palin has been [talking a great deal about the campaign](#) and her role in it, perhaps in an attempt to [rehabilitate her public image](#). Emily says the visibility campaign may be an effort to become the national spokeswoman of the conservative wing of the Republican Party.

David says *Slate* has received many inquiries following last week's request for a Gabfest sponsor. He also chatters about a *New York Times* story that says more and more women are [opting to give birth at home](#).

Emily talks about a Supreme Court argument on whether forensic scientists working for police labs [can be required to testify](#) in court about their findings in criminal cases.

John chatters about a [2004 interview](#) in which Obama discussed his views on religion. John says the interview occurred at a time when Obama did not yet have all the filters in place that now prevent him from speaking candidly.

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 on Nov. 14 by Dale Willman at 10:30 a.m.

Nov. 7, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for Nov. 7 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](#).

John Dickerson, David Plotz, and Emily Bazelon talk politics. This week, what happened, what's next, and what will become of Sarah Palin?

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

This election is significant for many reasons, among them that the [voter turnout was the largest](#) in 44 years.

[Exit polls](#) turned out to be pretty accurate predictors of the final results.

[Voter turnout](#) in the District of Columbia was huge but caused few voting glitches.

John discusses Barack Obama's [final campaign rally](#) in Manassas, Va., which drew as many as 100,000 people. At the end of that speech, Obama told the story of how, months earlier, during a visit to South Carolina, [one woman helped motivate him](#) by shouting out, "[Fired up, ready to go!](#)" That moment, he says, shows how one person can make a difference. The phrase itself became a rallying cry for the Obama campaign.

John also talks about Rahm Emanuel's [appointment as Obama's chief of staff](#). He says it shows Obama quickly moving from election mode into governing mode. The group also discusses the baggage Emanuel could bring to the Obama White House. [He is known for being ruthless](#) and is often described as having "sharp elbows."

One major question lingering after the election concerns the fate of Sarah Palin. Some Palin supporters say she is now being blamed for McCain's loss. *Newsweek* reported that [McCain-campaign insiders are complaining](#) that Palin spent thousands of dollars more than previously disclosed buying clothes for herself and her husband.

David chatters about Curtis Sittenfeld's novel [American Wife](#), which is inspired by the life of first lady Laura Bush.

Emily talks about the passage of [Proposition 8](#) in California, a constitutional amendment that bans same-sex marriage in the state. A number of [lawsuits have already been filed](#) in an effort to overturn the measure.

John chatters about the [holograms](#) CNN used during its election-night coverage.

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 on Nov. 7 by Dale Willman at 12:30 p.m.

Oct. 31, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for Oct. 31 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 talk politics. This week, it's all about the last week of the presidential campaign—with a shout-out to the Philadelphia Phillies.

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

John writes this week about [a sense of hopefulness](#) that has come over many of the people working for the McCain campaign.

Emily attempts to correct John's [pronunciation](#) of the word *dour*.

Emily suggests that John McCain is getting some traction with his campaign's latest effort, which is to [cast Barak Obama as a socialist](#) who wants to redistribute wealth in the country.

John talks about the size of the crowds at [campaign rallies for Obama](#) compared with [those for McCain](#).

The gang also discusses whether attacks on Obama's character will appeal to undecided voters. John points out that [undecided voters typically vote for the challenger](#) in a presidential race, which should mean Obama, since the Republicans currently hold the White House. One factor in McCain's favor is that during the primaries, the [undecided voters favored Hillary Clinton](#) over Obama.

John says [10,000 Elvis fans](#) can't be wrong.

John says the optimism in the McCain camp is likely misguided, because there are too many data points favoring Obama—[so many red states seem to be leaning toward the Democrat](#) or are considered likely wins for Obama. He says Obama's early strategy of challenging McCain across the country, rather than focusing on primarily Democratic states, is now paying off.

David praises [Howard Dean](#), chairman of the [Democratic Party](#), who [designed the so-called 50-state strategy](#) after the Democratic defeat in the 2004 presidential election.

Emily breaks the discussion of politics with her cocktail chatter, in which she brags about her hometown [Philadelphia Phillies winning the World Series](#).

John chatters about the early vote in this election. [As many as one-third of all voters will have voted by Election Day](#), so it is possible that the election will effectively be over by then, though no one will know for sure.

David talks about *Slate's* effort to [have staffers publicly state who they will vote for](#) next Tuesday. Of those who took part, the count was 55 for Obama and just one for McCain. David claims that almost all major news organizations would find similar results.

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 on Oct. 31 by Dale Willman at 10:41 a.m.

gaming **Wii Will Rock You!**

Sleater-Kinney's guitarist tries out Wii Music.

By Carrie Brownstein

Wednesday, November 19, 2008, at 7:04 AM ET

One summer, when I was elementary-school age, my neighbors and I built guitars and keyboards out of scrap wood, painted them in bright colors, and formed the cover band Lil' "D" Duran Duran. We didn't make our own noise or even pretend to play our fake instruments. We merely had props to stand in for the real thing; it gave us something to do with our arms. We made no effort to look like the members of Duran Duran or to emulate their glamorous pop-star world. Instead, with mutts and thumb-sucking siblings as our audience, we jumped and pranced around to their songs as they emanated from a boombox in the backyard.

That's what I thought of the first time I played Nintendo's new game [Wii Music](#). Unlike [Rock Band](#) and [Guitar Hero](#), where the fun is derived from living inside of and paying tribute to a world you already know, Wii Music is about invention, deconstruction, and imagination—which is to say it is more childlike, and I don't mean that in a bad way. Wii Music barely borrows from the codified and iconic images associated with music. For one thing, your Mii (the avatar you create to represent yourself in the game) has mallets instead of hands, a pair of harmless, fingerless spheres. This roundness is your first clue at how gentle Wii Music is. Not surprisingly for a game [designed by Shigeru Miyamoto](#)—the creator of Super Mario Bros.—the figures are diminutive and huggable and about as threatening as a cotton ball.

In Rock Band and Guitar Hero, you learn to master fake versions of real instruments—a plastic, guitar-shaped controller stands in for an electric guitar. In Wii Music, the regular game controllers are re-imagined as [66 different instruments](#): piano, drums, guitar, trumpet, xylophone, cowbell, harp, marimba, and so on. To play

the guitar, you simply hold the [Wii Nunchuk](#) as if it were the neck and strum with the [Wiimote](#) in your other hand. To [play the trumpet](#), you hold the controller up to your mouth and press the buttons to change notes; moving it up and down increases the volume. The broader strokes, like guitar strumming, are instinctive. The flourishes—tremolo, muting, pitch bending—take a bit more memorization and coordination.

Initially, I did miss the weight of even a pretend instrument. Wii Music aims more for essence than verisimilitude, which takes some mental adjustment with a video game. There is no toy guitar to sling over your back, no four-piece drum kit replete with a kick pedal to sit behind (though the Wii does have a drum pad, sold separately). Much of Wii Music, then, involves learning—or relearning—how to play air versions of everything from the clarinet to vibes. (You'll have a leg up on the air horns if you're a fan of Kenny G. or Gerry "Baker Street" Rafferty.) Yet after a while, I stopped worrying about what my arms—flailing around, sans instrument—might look like to my neighbors or to my pets. I mean, if I'm only playing virtual cello anyhow, do I really need to be holding something that looks like one?

Another difference between Wii Music and other games of its ilk is that the most interesting stuff happens *on-screen*. Look down, and you don't appear to be playing the banjo—all you're doing is waving your hand back and forth a few inches from your stomach. Look at the screen, though, and you're changing notes, and they all seem to be the right ones. The tactile experience gives way to the virtual—with Wii Music, watching might even be more fun than doing.

If you're playing the game by yourself, as I was for the most part, you'll spend a lot of time with the Tutes. These guys (and gal) are your backup band, or you are theirs. They each have their musical specialty—percussion, bass, keys, etc.—and are well-versed in all the genres. (Wii Music lets you play in a multitude of different styles, from rock to pop to march to Latin to electronic to Japanese.) When the Tutes finish a song, they throw back their heads in convulsive glee no matter how expertly or poorly you played. Like watching Kristen Wiig's "[Target Lady](#)" on *Saturday Night Live*, you're filled with a vague dread despite being in the presence of happiness.

If you can get past the Tutes, the game's biggest limitation is the lack of song choices. You're pretty much stuck with "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" until you complete a few lessons and make a couple of videos, thus unlocking more options. (The game lets you play along with around [30 songs total](#), including public-domain tracks like "Yankee Doodle," Nintendo songs like the Super Mario Bros. theme, and licensed music like the Monkees' "Daydream Believer.") Then again, you haven't truly experienced "Twinkle, Twinkle ..." until you hear it in the style of reggae. Some of my early Wii performances warranted an apology to an entire genre. Dear classical music, I have failed

you. Dear reggae, forgive me; I don't even deserve my Augustus Pablo albums anymore.

After you complete a song, the game's narrator and teacher, Maestro, asks whether you'd like to save the performance as a video; you do, but only because it's a requirement if you want to reveal more sections of the game. The process of making these videos is complicated by the fact that you have to rate your own performance. I was flummoxed by this proposition. I went to a liberal arts college wherein grading was qualitative and we had to write our own evaluations. I'm over it. Give me a grade, Nintendo! Yes, I understand that the game is implying that *my* feelings about my own performance are what's most important. But if I know I'm not being scored, why try? Oh, right—for the fun of it. In the gaming world, I *want* to be scored—or at least to be held back until I've earned the right to proceed; it gives me an incentive to try again (and again). Plus, Maestro always responds to your self-evaluation—no matter whether it's one or 100—with the same words: the ambiguous and slightly passive-aggressive "I see." All in all, this existential crisis is a lot to inflict when all you really want to do is unlock more songs.

Far more pleasant is the Lessons mode, in which you break each song into parts—percussion, rhythm, chords, melody, etc. While practicing, I discovered what I knew already: I am a horrible bass player. Each time the instrument came up in the arrangement section, I was forced to practice the sequence over and over with my bass instructor—who looks like [Josh Homme](#) from Queens of the Stone Age—telling me to relax and let go. I finally did, after being berated for about 10 minutes.

After my torturous practice session, I was allowed to play the whole song. As I progressed from one instrument to another, the Wii saved my performances and inserted them into the jam. I didn't realize this at first and kept wondering why my Tutes backup band was getting worse with each pass of the song. But I soon realized that all of the musicians looked like my Mii. It became nearly impossible to lay down a guitar part when my previous drummer-self kept dropping the beat and making the tempo go from emo to hard-core in a single measure. I did, however, excel at the galactic horn, mostly because it provided the song's melody and thus allowed me to improvise. When I watched my video later, I was a little jealous of the "Carrie" band member who got to play the galactic horn. And I thought everyone else in the band sucked.

(As a side note, I began to realize that my performances on each instrument were executed as if in character. My bassist, for instance, always wanted more airtime and would inevitably—and accidentally—play a few extra notes or, shall I say, a solo at the end of each jam session. My guitar player preferred jumping to hitting the right chords. My tambourine player lacked subtlety and was the loudest thing on stage.)

I found the Jam mode most rewarding, particularly the section known as Jam Mastery. (I couldn't help wishing that this had something to do with the Grateful Dead. It doesn't.) You start by choosing a genre—say, electronic—and the game breaks down the style into an arrangement, and from there into the instruments that make up the arrangement. In this case: turntable, hand claps, galactic bass, galactic piano, and galactic guitar. (In the realm of Wii Music, *galactic* is a more benign, kid-friendly word for *trippy*.) You can customize the jams by removing specific instruments—making the songs minimal or flush, depending on your taste or mood. My Tutes and I played the Police's "Every Breath You Take" on only piano, bass, tambourine, and harmonica (my instrument of choice for this tune). I removed the drums and guitar, which is what Sting would have done, too.

Once you unlock the advanced stages and get deeper into the game, there is plenty of experimentation and frivolity to be had. Picking a dog suit as my "instrument" and making my character emit a high-pitched bark while a guy played bass and another drums was the closest I've ever come to being a performance artist. Other highlights included playing "Frère Jacques" in an electronic arrangement while speeding down the highway on the back of a flatbed truck (the game allows you to play on "stages" ranging from atop a birthday cake to floating in outer space); "Do-Re-Mi" re-imagined as a rock song; Wham's "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go"—my first and last foray into jazz drumming; and Madonna's "Material Girl"—yep, that's me again on galactic horn, and I'm available for gigs. And I did discover a way to make your Mii gain the use of its hands. Select hand claps as an instrument, and two oversize, multifingered appendages appear and look like they're about to make you [Hamburger Helper](#). Oh, "the Rapper" instrument also has hands, which are covered in gold rings.

At its best, Wii Music draws you into the conventions of music while simultaneously allowing, even daring you to break them. Putting a cheerleader, a black-belt karate master, and a cat in the "instrument" section goes a long way toward helping you find music and melody in the commonplace and where it's least expected. But the game doesn't go far enough; despite exalting creativity, you still feel more like an audience member than a band member—on the sidelines, watching yourself on-screen, where it seems like you're having more fun. The game shows you a fantastical sonic world but falls short of letting you invent your own. Instead, one's enjoyment of Wii Music must exist in the mock creation, in the augmenting of your own imagination. Wii Music elevates the scope of music video games by moving beyond commentary on what music *is*—as Rock Band and Guitar Hero do—to suggesting what it could be. Yet I'm still left wondering: Couldn't it be more?

hey, wait a minute Only in America?

The wrongheaded American belief that Barack Obama could only happen here.

By David Berreby

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 4:23 PM ET

People are still amazed he won. In a country where more than a few white folks would still say outright that one of "them" shouldn't be in charge, here was a politician who didn't downplay his ethnicity, his foreign-sounding name, or his father who wasn't even a Christian. And he wasn't just ethnically atypical. He'd made himself a member of the country's meritocratic elite. He wrote real books that really sold. That blend of outsider detachment and obvious ambition drove his earnest enemies crazy.

So they attacked him as doubly strange, both "not like us" and elite. They claimed you could not trust this man, that he was unknowable, unreliable, a snob, and a toff. They ridiculed the seal he'd contrived for himself, with its Latin motto meaning, roughly, "yes, we can." These same rhetorical ploys did not keep Benjamin Disraeli (motto: "*forti nihil difficile*"; literally "nothing is difficult to the brave") from twice becoming prime minister of Great Britain during the reign of his good friend Queen Victoria. So could we Americans stop patting ourselves on the back about the supposed uniqueness of our electing Barack Obama president?

Last week, the [New York Times](#) told us Europe would not soon—indeed might never—see a political triumph like Obama's. It described British politics as though Disraeli had never existed and painted a similar picture of mono-ethnic France.

Désolé, chers collègues, but one year after the far-off, sunny isle of Corsica was acquired by France in 1768, there was born there one Napoleon Bonaparte, whose heavy Italian accent made him seem even more exotic to *la France profonde* than his strange name. At least our president-elect, born on the far-off, sunny isle of Oahu two years after it became a U.S. state, pronounces English without the marked accent of, oh, the governor of California. And speaking of German accents, the *Times* thumb-sucker also foresaw that there would be no German Obama any time soon. Bad timing for them: Three days later, Germany's Greens elected Cem Ozdemir, an ethnic Turk, as their new leader.

Americans, indulging this month in our national pastime of unparalleled exceptionalism, need to rejoin the reality-based community. Pride is one thing. But telling ourselves that the Obama story could only happen in our country, in our time? That's hokey.

The truth is that Obama-style chiefs of state—people who came out of stigmatized ethnic minorities or "foreign" enclaves to lead their governments—are an uncommon but regularly recurring part of history. Alberto Fujimori, who held both Peruvian and Japanese citizenship, was elected president of Peru in 1990. Sonia Gandhi, born Edvige Antonia Albina Maino in northern Italy, led her Congress Party to a resounding victory in India's 2004 elections. Daniel arap Moi is from the Kalenjin people, not the Luo or Kikuyu who are the nation's largest ethnic groups and its centers of political gravity. But this did not bar him being president of Kenya from 1978 to 2002.

Of course, opponents of such candidates try the usual xenophobic rhetoric, only to find that this time, it falls flat. In India, when the opposition BJP screeched about Sonia Gandhi's European ethnicity and Christian faith, it ultimately provoked more hostility to the BJP than to her. She ended up declining the premiership, but it was clear the job was hers if she wanted it. Moreover, ethno-discordant leadership is not confined to nations that hold elections. Stalin, of course, wasn't Russian. It's a matter of some debate whether Alexander the Great was ethnically Greek. Quite a few rulers of the Roman Empire came from underprivileged, barbarian families in North Africa, Syria, and the Balkans. The *Times'* portrait of ethnically blinkered European politics would have surprised not only Disraeli and Napoleon, but also, *inter alios*, such second- and third-century Roman emperors as Philippus (known as Philip the Arab for his ethnicity), Septimius Severus (father Roman, mother North African), and Diocletian (humble stock from Dalmatia, present-day Croatia).

Instead of expecting, against the evidence, that people only want a leader who is ethnically, religiously, or culturally "like us," Americans ought to be examining how and why people decide that "like us" can be based on criteria other than race or religion. If we stop congratulating ourselves for inventing what is, in fact, an ancient political phenomenon, we'd have a better idea of what we've just done. For all the obvious differences of time and place, there do seem to be some commonalities among such leaders.

For one thing, self-made, boundary-crossing leaders generally arise in times of upheaval, when it's clear familiar ways aren't working. Were it not for the French Revolution, after all, Napoleon's "supernatural energies might [have died] away without creating their miracles," as Disraeli himself observed. Disraeli's own career took place in a rapidly industrializing England. Fujimori's slogan, in a time of economic chaos, was "*Cambio*" or "change." As for the Berber, Arab, and Balkan Roman emperors, they were Latin-speaking Colin Powells—outsiders who had entered politics' elite circles via military service.

About their atypical and unprivileged status, boundary-breaking leaders have, like Obama, usually been open, not shy—a second

trait they often share. They make a loud, clear show of the fact that they aren't hiding or trimming their origins. Fujimori was happy to be called "*El Chino*." Napoleon took his emperor's crown from the pope and ostentatiously placed it on his head himself. Disraeli, though a Christian from age 13 on, never tried to hide his Jewish identity. "Yes, I am a Jew," he famously told a boorish opponent in parliamentary debate, "and when the ancestors of the right honorable gentleman were brutal savages in an unknown island, mine were priests in the temple of Solomon."

At the same time, of course, Disraeli could not and would not be pigeonholed as the representative of a minority. Instead, he made an asset of his supposed liability in two ways, as Adam Kirsch lucidly explains in his [recent book](#) about Disraeli and Jewish identity. First, Disraeli argued, in word and in deed, that there was no need to choose between Jewishness and Britishness—he could have both. Second, he hinted that his complexities and ambiguities of identity, his supposedly troubling "foreignness," would be of service to the nation. His exotic traits added up to a feature, not a bug. He could be both a British gentleman and a conjuror with skills beyond the ken of mere gentlemen.

Of course, opponents could and did denounce these plenipotentiaries as blank, being all things to all people. Disraeli acknowledged this, writing, "I am new enough on the national political screen that I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripe project their own views." Oh, wait. My bad. That was Barack Obama in *The Audacity of Hope*. Disraeli's line, according to Kirsch, was, "I am the blank page between the Old Testament and the New."

When charges of subterfuge fail to stick to a minority candidate, it is often because the target has made them ridiculous by showing a strong, sincere strain of don't-rock-the-boat conservatism. That surprising appeal to tradition is a third theme that repeats in their stories. Many such leaders have a reverence for, as Larissa MacFarquhar wrote of Obama, "the constriction of tradition, the weight of history, the provincial smallness of community, settling for your whole life in one place with one group of people." Napoleon, who once said "there is no good morality without religion," reconciled France with the Catholic Church and restored monarchy. Disraeli, of course, spent three decades as a Tory defending England's status quo against any and all newfangled assaults. Even as he wrought political changes beyond the imagining even of his Liberal adversaries, he spoke of preserving the good old ways of yore. A politician who offers this kind of outlook can make exotic facts paradoxically reassuring. It's as if the jolt of their minority identity is a kind of promise that the surprises have been covered, that the rest of the show will be safe.

The lesson to be gleaned, then, from the hardly new success of "outsider" leaders is that, in troubled times, people want leaderly reassurance. But it's not necessarily ethnic/religious/one-of-us

reassurance. Rather, they want something new and brave to address their fears, without effacing what they love most about their country. In other words, they want society to be new *and* old, changed *and* restored, familiar *and* unfamiliar. Anyone can say the right things about those contradictory desires, but it's much more convincing to elect a person who by birth embodies them.

Barack Obama addressed that need and so accomplished a great and surprising political feat. It takes nothing away from his achievement to recall that he wasn't the first national leader to do so. After all, it means he also won't be the last.

hot document

CBS's Dream Team

Guess who CBS considered to conduct its Dan Rather investigation?

By Bonnie Goldstein

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 12:40 PM ET

From: Bonnie Goldstein

Posted Monday, November 17, 2008, at 12:40 PM ET

In 2004, CBS News [commissioned](#) an external, two-person review panel to investigate the reporting methods employed by Dan Rather and producer Mary Mapes in their *60 Minutes* segment revealing details about President George W. Bush's famously sketchy Vietnam-era [service](#) in the Texas Air National Guard. The report had stirred controversy because it was based, in part, on documents whose authenticity couldn't be verified. The review panel [concluded](#) that, though the story was [flawed](#), it bore [no evidence](#) of political bias.

Internal notes from CBS brass (see below and the following four pages)—[recently provided to Rather](#) as evidence in his ongoing \$70 million [breach-of-contract lawsuit](#)—suggest the same may not be said about the method by which CBS's top executives selected the panel members.

The notes indicate that in choosing the so-called "independent" investigators, CBS sought input from the Republican Party. The network's lawyers [argue](#) that CBS [chose](#) a GOP attorney (former Attorney General Dick Thornburgh; the other panelist was Louis D. Boccardi, former CEO of the Associated Press) "to open itself up to its harshest conservative critics and to ensure that the panel's findings would be found credible." But a list of potential candidates compiled by [Linda Mason](#), CBS's senior vice president for standards (below and the following four pages), suggests the effort was intended at least initially to quiet attacks from the political right. Mason compiled her list in consultation

with CBS Washington lobbyists [Carol Melton](#) and [Gail McKinnon](#).

A "GOP political operative" with whom Mason discussed possibly hiring retired [Sen. Warren Rudman](#), a political moderate, "said he would be great" and added that Rudman was "known as his own man" (Page 3). But [Dick Wiley](#), an attorney for CBS, was "not so sure" and worried "the right" would "criticize the selection." Thornburgh, who had been a politically combative attorney general under President George H.W. Bush, received "high marks from GOP" (below).

CBS also considered for the panel such unbiased voices as [Ann Coulter](#), [Pat Buchanan](#), [Rush Limbaugh](#), and Matt Drudge (Pages 4 and 5). Roger Ailes, president of rival network Fox News, was also considered (Page 5).

Please send ideas for Hot Document to documents@slate.com.

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human nature

Children of the Clones

When you get pregnant from your twin's ovary, who's the mom?

By William Saletan

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 6:39 PM ET

What's the next best thing to having your own baby? Having your identical twin's baby.

A woman in England just did it. Her ovaries didn't work, but her sister's did. So doctors transplanted an ovary from the fertile sister to the infertile one. The result, announced [a few days ago](#), is the first baby verifiably born from a whole-ovary transplant. The story raises a bunch of messy questions, starting with this one: Who's the mom?

If you get pregnant with a donor egg, you're the gestational but not the genetic mother. But what if the donor is your twin? It's easier to think about this in the context of organ transplants we're already familiar with. Suppose you get a kidney transplant from your identical twin sister. Genetically, your new kidney is (almost) the same as your old one. The new kidney wasn't born in you, but you and it [developed from the same embryo](#). Not just the same womb, but same embryo. In that sense, it really is yours.

Eggs and ovaries are more complicated. Your twin sister's ovary, like her kidney, came from the same embryo that produced you. Because of [reproductive cell division](#), any one of her eggs would differ genetically from any one of yours (though even that point is [quite complicated](#)). But over time, her ovary and yours will yield almost the same set of eggs, if not in the same order. It's as though each of you rolled the same pair of dice a million times. So when she gives you an ovary instead of an egg, the result will be as though you were getting back your original ovary.

And that's the point. Doctors are choosing twins for these pioneering ovary transplants not because it's cool or weird, but because what's cool and weird about your twin—that she's genetically identical to you and yet is a different person—is also medically crucial. One reason it's crucial is organ rejection.

Ovaries, unlike kidneys, aren't necessary for survival. If you got an ovary transplant from a random woman, you'd need serious drugs to stop your body from rejecting it as foreign. The rejection or the drugs could harm or even kill you. But if the ovary comes from your identical twin, it's not foreign. Your body accepts it. This is much safer.

The second reason is that your twin, while genetically identical to you, is physically distinct. This is important because the primary purpose of twin ovary transplants isn't to help twins (there aren't that many) or to advance toward ovary transplants between strangers. The primary purpose is to perfect the best kind of transplant: the kind you get from yourself.

At first glance, this sounds nuts. If your ovary works, why take it out in the first place? There are two answers. One is that tens of thousands of still-fertile women have to get [chemotherapy or radiation](#) for cancer. They'd rather not nuke their eggs as part of the deal. By removing an ovary, freezing it during cancer treatment, and later restoring it, they stand a decent chance of beating the cancer and still having kids.

The other answer is that millions of women would like the freedom to delay motherhood beyond the years nature intended. That's the ultimate market for ovary transplants, according to Sherman Silber, the doctor who did the procedure in England. "Women have opportunities they didn't have before, they do not want to commit to a relationship until they are sure it is the right one, they want to get the degree, save a little money and buy the nice flat," he told the *Telegraph*. Today, these women risk losing their fertility. IVF is expensive and uncertain. Donor eggs are hard to get, and the child isn't genetically yours. A self-ovary transplant, Silver points out, is "so much nicer and more convenient."

In fact, self-transplants of partial ovarian tissue have already [been done](#). The problem is that when the woman subsequently gives birth, doctors can't be sure whether the egg came from the reimplanted tissue or from tissue left behind. The only way to be sure is to take out the whole ovary or, better yet, to get the ovary from somebody else. Somebody else who matches you genetically. Your twin. That's why doctors working on self-ovary transplantation are so excited about the progress in twins. It's a [testing ground](#), says one, to see whether "the entire organ can be successfully retransplanted."

Down the road, this research raises big questions. What's going to happen to us as we detach motherhood from what were known, back in the 20th century, as the fertile years? What happens when we can put those years in a freezer and shoot them into the future? It's great that women can have careers, take their time finding the right person, and just be themselves before starting a family. But if we think we've stopped the biological clock, we're kidding ourselves. It's more like that time-travel scenario where you send the astronaut into space at nearly the

speed of light and he comes back a year later to find that everyone else has aged a decade. The clock in your frozen ovary slows, but the clock in your body keeps on ticking. The ovary comes back to an older, weaker host. Maybe you can still have a baby. But can you raise it?

For now, we're still working on twins. By last year, Silber had done ovarian tissue transplants between [seven pairs](#) of twins. More whole-ovary twin transplants will follow this one. Three years ago, the former procedure produced its [first baby](#); now, the latter procedure has done the same. Who exactly are the biological parents of these children? "I haven't really spent any time thinking about the idea that [I am the genetic mother](#)," says the twin who donated the ovary for the child just born in England. Is she the genetic mother? Or is it her sister, who carried the child and came from the donor's embryo? Or is it both?

We've heard of scenarios like this before, but in a different context. Seven years ago, in his maiden speech on stem-cell research, President Bush [warned](#) that human cloners might "grow another you, to be available in case you need another heart or lung or liver." Critics called this science fiction. But such clones already exist. They're called identical twins. They've given each other kidneys, liver tissue, even hearts. Now they're giving each other babies. In this miracle of love and science, an embryo that split in the previous generation reunites in the next. "I always say she is the other half of me," the donor in the English case [says](#) of her sister. And so she is.

human nature

Drone Ask, Drone Tell

How Pakistan learned to stop worrying and love the killing machines.

By William Saletan

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 7:57 AM ET

Good news from Pakistan: The drones are winning.

If you're a regular Human Nature reader, you know the story line we've been following [here](#) and on the [blog](#): Pakistan has become the world's first [mechanical proxy war](#), with unmanned aerial vehicles hunting and killing bad guys so U.S. troops don't have to. It's a strategic showdown between the ruthless and the bloodless. The drones have taken away the usual insurgent advantage of luring, bogging down, and picking off an invading army. The insurgents have responded by killing Pakistani civilians, hoping to bully Pakistan into pressuring the United States to call off the drones.

In recent weeks, as Pakistani officials urged the U.S. to [stop](#) the drone attacks, I wondered whether these appeals were sincere or [fake](#). They sure [sounded](#) fake. Now we have confirmation. In Sunday's [Washington Post](#), Karen DeYoung and Joby Warrick report what they've learned from interviews with U.S. and Pakistani officials. Here are the highlights:

1. The drones are succeeding tactically. They found and killed three al-Qaida leaders in the first nine months of this year. In October, after drone operations intensified, they killed three more.

2. Pakistan tacitly accepts the drones. The U.S. and Pakistan "reached tacit agreement in September on a don't-ask-don't-tell policy that allows unmanned Predator aircraft to attack suspected terrorist targets in rugged western Pakistan, according to senior officials in both countries." Terms: "the U.S. government refuses to publicly acknowledge the attacks while Pakistan's government continues to complain noisily about the politically sensitive strikes."

3. Terrorism in Pakistan has made the government more acquiescent to drones, not less. According to U.S. officials, "Pakistan's new acquiescence coincided with the new government there and a sharp increase in domestic terrorist attacks." The attacks have persuaded Pakistan that the terrorists along its border are a grave threat to Pakistan as well as to Afghanistan and the U.S. The new acquiescence can be measured in hits: "From December to August, when Musharraf stepped down, there were six U.S. Predator attacks in Pakistan. Since then, there have been at least 19."

Let's think through what we've just read. Terrorists use civilian deaths and the prospect of more civilian deaths to blackmail governments. This is a political game, not just a military one. It's what they did, for example, to [Spain](#) four years ago. In Pakistan, they've tried the same thing, but this time with a new twist: The enemy they're trying to neutralize is mechanical. The terrorists can't bog down or kill the drones because drones don't bleed and they don't have to land. So the terrorists tried to blackmail the nearest civilian target, Pakistan, to gain leverage over the drones.

If the *Post* story is correct, this strategy failed. In fact, it backfired. The terrorists are losing not just the military fight but the political one.

Now let's move on to two related points.

4. The drones are becoming more precise thanks to ground intelligence, technology, and practice. The *Post* reports:

Current and former U.S. counterterrorism officials said improved intelligence has been an important factor in the increased tempo and

precision of the Predator strikes. Over the past year, they said, the United States has been able to improve its network of informants in the border region while also fielding new hardware that allows close tracking of the movements of suspected militants. ... [T]he drones are only part of a diverse network of machines and software used by the agency to spot terrorism suspects and follow their movements, the officials said. The equipment ... includes an array of powerful sensors mounted on satellites, airplanes, blimps and drones.

Another factor, DeYoung and Warrick point out, is that "in recent years—and especially in the past 12 months—spy agencies have honed their skills at tracking and killing single individuals using aerial vehicles."

5. Improved precision means fewer civilian casualties. The *Post* quotes James Clapper Jr., the U.S. military's chief intelligence officer: "It's having the ability, once you know who you're after, to study and watch very steadily and consistently—persistently. And then, at the appropriate juncture, with due regard for reducing collateral casualties or damage, going after that individual."

Let's digest these two points and connect them to the previous discussion. Human sources on the ground are handy. The downside is that unlike drones, the humans can bleed and be intimidated. That's why the bad guys have been trying to find, kill, and intimidate them. To the extent that we have a persistent or growing network of informants, the bad guys are failing. That's the good news. The better news is that much of our success may be due to improved air-mounted sensors. (I've [guessed](#) at what these sensors might be doing, but I really [don't know](#).) Good luck killing and intimidating the sensors. If we can not only kill you from the air but also find you from the air, you're screwed.

Still better news: the practice factor. In addition to informants on the ground and drones in the sky, remote hunting relies on a third player: the faraway "pilots" who operate the drones. This isn't a normal way of fighting, unless you're a [video gamer](#). It takes time for a pilot's brain to map a faraway fleet and adopt it, in essence, as his body. (At the recommendation of many of you in the Fray, I just listened to the audio edition of [Ender's Game](#), a sci-fi novel that illustrates how this can happen.) But it's crucial, because you need human judgment to check and complement the drones' calculations. Sensors can give you plenty of information, but you have to learn how to interpret it—and how to direct the sensors to get what you need. Apparently, we're learning.

And now for the best news: the payoff. I'm not talking about the kills: We've already proved we can kill lots of people the old-fashioned way. I'm talking about the people we *don't* kill: civilians. We've talked before about [hover time](#): the drones' superior ability to stay in the air, without fatigue or risk of death, allowing them to watch the ground and identify and track targets. If that level of persistence and precision improves our ability to distinguish the bad guys from everybody else, then the bottom line isn't just kills. It is, in Clapper's words, fewer "collateral casualties." If you look back at reports from the ground, that's exactly what stands out about the [recent drone attacks](#): We've been hitting an impressively high ratio of bad guys, especially senior bad guys, to innocents. Yes, some innocents have died. But no counterinsurgent air war has ever been this precise.

And that precision, in turn, feeds back into the political equation. Pakistan tolerates the drones not just because it fears the terrorists but because the drones are earning its confidence. They're not inflicting the sort of [massacres](#) that trigger domestic unrest and destabilize allies. In fact, the drones are doing such a good job that Pakistan now wants drones of its own. "Give them to us," Pakistan's president tells the *Post*. "We are your allies."

Some day, Pakistan will have its drones. So will [India](#), [China](#), and [Iran](#). The proliferation of drones is well underway. Maybe it will solve the problem of terrorist insurgency. Maybe it will create something worse.

jurisprudence

I Beg Your Pardon

The top prospects for a last act of Bush clemency.

By Dafna Linzer, [ProPublica](#)

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 7:00 AM ET

Attention, convicts: Time is running out to get applications to the pardon attorney at the Justice Department if you're hoping President Bush will be your decider. Few of you should get your hopes up—Bush has rejected a record number of requests for pardons and commutations. In the last eight years, he has pardoned 157 people—a miserly sum compared with his predecessors. But you don't have to give up entirely: More are expected in the coming months, most notably for Vice President Cheney's former chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby.

Before President Clinton went on a [pardon spree](#) for wealthy friends and campaign contributors at the end of his presidency, pardons and commutations were traditionally bestowed on average citizens who had successfully reformed their lives and given back to their communities after completing lengthy sentences. Pardon experts believe that of the Bush prospects, the

1980s junk-bond king Michael Milken best fits the rich-and-famous description.

Most of the other top prospects for pardon listed below have, like Milken, been convicted and served prison time. But not all. People who are merely charged could be eligible for pardons, as Bush's father demonstrated when he pardoned former Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger. And Washington is [abuzz with the prospect](#) that Bush might issue pre-emptive pardons for government employees who could face trouble in the future stemming from their roles in his "war on terror."

We've rated potential pardonees' chances from zero to four "Get of Jail Free" cards.

SPORTS

Marion Jones: unlikely. This disgraced Olympic gold medalist returned five awards after she was sentenced to six months in jail in January for lying to federal agents about using steroids. She was released on Sept. 5. Jones' offense is considered mild, and her sentence was brief, but the president may not want to reward someone who *cost* the United States Olympic gold.

Michael Vick: no chance. The Atlanta Falcons' suspended quarterback is serving a 23-month sentence in Leavenworth, Kan., for criminal conspiracy relating to dog fighting. Yuck. There just isn't much of a pro-dog fighting lobby to pull for Vick.

Barry Bonds: unlikely. The former San Francisco Giants superstar who holds the MLB all-time record for home runs was indicted in November 2007 for lying about his involvement in a steroids scandal. Bonds became a free agent last year but has been unable to find a team willing to sign him while under indictment. As a former baseball team owner, Bush may be sympathetic to Bonds. But let's be honest—who in baseball likes Barry?

TEXAS

Florita Bell Griffin: possible. As governor, Bush appointed Griffin to the oversight board of the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs. In 2000, [she was convicted](#) of bribery, theft, and money laundering. In 2003, a federal appeals court overturned a separate conviction for mail fraud. Griffin has two things going for her: Bush and Texas. Bush has pardoned more of his fellow Texans than residents of any other state.

Texas Border Patrol guards: good chance. Ignacio Ramos and Jose Compean are serving sentences of 11 and 12 years, respectively, for the nonfatal shooting in the back of an unarmed Mexican drug runner in February 2005. A jury found that the two border patrolmen then tried to cover up the shooting. Their requests for pardons have won support from numerous Republican congressmen, including Rep. Duncan Hunter of California, who introduced the Congressional Pardon for Border Patrol Agents Ramos and Compean Act. Bush left open the possibility of pardons for both men during [an interview](#) with a Texas TV station.

TEAM BUSH

Scooter Libby: You betcha! Cheney's former chief of staff, who also served as assistant to the president, was convicted of [perjury and of obstructing](#) the FBI's investigation of the leak of former CIA officer Valerie Plame's identity. In June 2007, he was sentenced to 30 months in federal prison and ordered to pay a hefty fine. Bush [commuted](#) the prison time, but only a pardon will allow Libby to practice law again.

James Tobin: good chance. Tobin was Bush's 2004 New

England campaign chairman and raised more than \$200,000 for the president's re-election bid. He was indicted in October for making false statements to the FBI in connection with the bureau's investigation of the plot to jam Democratic Party phones in New Hampshire in 2002. Tobin was convicted in 2005 for his actual role in that scheme, but that conviction was overturned on appeal in 2007. His fundraising prowess and the overturning of his earlier conviction—in connection with the same case—make him a good pardon candidate.

Tom Noe: unlikely. Noe was a prominent Ohio Republican fundraiser for Bush-Cheney '04. He was sentenced to 27 months in a federal prison for illegally funneling money to the campaign. Two months later, he was also found guilty of [theft, money laundering, forgery, and corrupt activity](#) related to Ohio's rare-coin investment scandal. Noe might have a shot if his only offense were connected to campaign funding. But his Ohio crime was one of a number of nasty Republican scandals that badly damaged the party's standing in the 2006 midterm election.

CONGRESS

Sen. Ted Stevens: possible. [Now](#) that the 85-year-old Alaska Republican, who was found guilty last month of corruption, has lost re-election, members of his party might push for a pardon for him—after all, he spent the last 40* years in the Senate. Stevens seemed to dismiss the need for a pardon while the votes were being counted; late Tuesday, he was tight-lipped about the whether he would ask Bush for clemency.

Bob Ney: no chance. The former Republican congressman from Ohio was sentenced to two and a half years in prison after he acknowledged taking bribes from convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Ney was on the Abramoff-sponsored [golfing trip](#) to Scotland at the heart of the case against David Safavian, the former White House procurement officer who was also caught up in the scandal. A pardon of Ney could refocus public attention on cushy relationships between Republicans and lobbyists over the last eight years—relationships that a humbled

GOP would rather forget.

Randy Cunningham: no chance. The former Republican congressman from California pleaded guilty in 2005 to federal conspiracy charges to [commit bribery, mail fraud, wire fraud, and tax evasion](#). He was sentenced to eight years and four months in prison and ordered to pay \$1.8 million in restitution for all the fancy gifts he racked up from lobbyists. "[The Duke](#)" has a pardon attorney, and a number of people have written to the Justice Department in support of clemency. But Cunningham's naked abuse of power tainted Republican rule and contributed to steep party losses in 2006.

Others convicted in the Cunningham scandal:

Brent Wilkes: possible. Wilkes, a defense contractor, was sentenced to 12 years in prison in February for furnishing Cunningham with yachts, vacations, and other luxury items in exchange for lucrative contracts. Wilkes cooperated with federal investigators in the Cunningham case, and that could help him win a pardon.

Kyle "Dusty" Foggo: possible. Foggo was Wilkes' childhood friend before he rose to become executive director of the CIA, the No. 3 position in the U.S. spy agency. He was indicted in 2007 on several counts of fraud, [conspiracy](#), and [money laundering](#) in connection with Wilkes and admitted to steering a lucrative CIA contract to his pal. Foggo remains under investigation by the CIA and other federal agencies. But his cooperation with investigators and years of service in the clandestine agency [once run by Bush's father](#) could make him a good candidate for clemency.

TEAM ABRAMOFF

Jack Abramoff: no chance. The former Hollywood producer-turned-Republican lobbyist was at the center of the largest lobbying scandal in Washington, which erupted in 2005. Abramoff was convicted of [fraud, tax evasion, and conspiracy to bribe public officials](#). The sentence was reduced in September to four years in recognition of Abramoff's cooperation with investigators. That's all the break he'll get. Abramoff was such a disaster for Bush and the GOP that the White House refused to release any photos in which the president and Abramoff appeared in the same room at the same time.

J. Steven Griles: possible. Griles served as deputy secretary of the Interior during Bush's first term. In March 2007, he pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice charges in connection with his 2005 Senate testimony regarding the Abramoff scandal. Griles was sentenced to 10 months in prison and fined \$30,000. He was released this year. Griles' time served, combined with his senior position in the administration, make him a good candidate for a pardon.

David Safavian: unlikely. The senior White House procurement officer in the Office of Management and Budget was convicted in 2006 for concealment, making false statements, and obstructing justice in the Abramoff investigation. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison, but the conviction was overturned in June. A retrial is set for December.

WHITE COLLAR

Michael Milken: excellent chance. The junk-bond king became the symbol of the '80s greed on Wall Street that led to insider-trading scandals and a stock-market crash. Milken was sentenced to eight years for conspiracy and fraud charges and ordered to pay \$200 million in fines. But he was released in January 1993, after less than two years in prison. Milken, who was diagnosed with prostate cancer that year, has since devoted significant resources to philanthropy and has created several foundations to support cancer research. Milken, who is believed

to be worth more than \$1 billion, tried unsuccessfully to secure a pardon from President Clinton. [He](#) is currently represented by Washington powerhouse attorney Ted Olson,* Bush's longtime friend and first-term solicitor general. Olson also represented Armand Hammer, who received a pardon from former President George H.W. Bush.

The Smartest Guys in the Room: possible. Former Enron executives Jeffrey Skilling and Andrew Fastow were convicted of [multiple federal felonies](#) in 2006 in connection with Enron's downfall. Skilling, who was Enron's CEO, is serving a 24-year prison sentence at a federal penitentiary in Minnesota. Fastow, the corporate CFO, is nearing the end of his six-year sentence. Bush was friends with the now-deceased chairman, Kenneth Lay of Enron, which, of course, was based in Texas. But the president managed to distance himself from the company's extraordinary collapse. A point against pardons for these guys: Considering the current financial crisis, rewarding Enron's failed leadership might not be smart.

Martha Stewart: Why not? Millions of glue-gun aficionados would love to see a pardon for the domestic doyenne who was convicted in 2004 of lying to investigators about a stock sale and who served five months in a women's correctional facility. Thousands of people have even signed a [petition](#) seeking a pardon for Martha. It's hard to see what would be in it for Bush. But Martha's spectacular book sales and daytime-TV ratings are testament to millions of other Americans' ability to forgive. Why not the president, too? (The question, of course, that all pardon applicants ask.)

***Correction, Nov. 20, 2008:** The original sentence mistakenly stated that Ted Stevens has served in the Senate for 50 years. In fact, he has served for 40 years. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)*

***Correction, Nov. 21, 2008:** The article originally misspelled Ted Olson's name. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)*

low concept

Dear President Obama

There are a couple of embarrassing e-mails from my past that I think you should know about.

By Justin Peters

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 2:16 PM ET

Question No. 13 on Barack Obama's [extensive questionnaire](#) for potential members of his administration: "If you have ever sent an electronic communication, including but not limited to an e-mail, text message or instant message, that could suggest a conflict of interest or be a possible source of embarrassment to you, your family, or the President-Elect if it were made public, please describe."

From: Justin Peters

Date: 05/22/1996

Subject: Whoops!

hey all ... my first week on e-mail and I'm already screwing it up. yesterday afternoon, I accidentally hit "reply all" and sent everyone in my address book an e-mail that I only meant to send to brad. although this was meant to be humorous, i understand that many of you found it incredibly hurtful. for the record, i don't really think that all the sophomore girls are "aspiring whores," and i certainly don't think that beth jervey is a fat and stupid hooker who never takes a shower. i also was kidding when i said those things about mrs. wenzel, beth jervey's father, and people of irish heritage. finally, i did not mean to attach that photograph of my balls. please delete that photograph asap.

From: Justin Peters

Date: 10/12/1998, 11:36 PM

Subject: "Hurt"

julie, ever since you dumped me, like trent reznor said, "i don't know what i am i don't know where i've been, just hurt and so much skin." its so true. when I see you in the halls and you just walk right by me, it hurts so much because "my blood wants to say hello to you, my feelings want to get inside of you." when I go out with mark and brad i pretend to have a good time but really its "the plastic face forced to portray, all the insides left cold and gray." i cant live without you!!! I can't think of anything else, because "you are the perfect drug, the perfect drug, the perfect drug."

--

"Work like you don't need the money, love like you've never been hurt, and dance like nobody's watching."—Robert F. Kennedy

From: Justin Peters

Date: 12/31/1999, 2:14 PM

Subject: Last chance

Hey all, I'm sorry if these recent emails have been annoying, but I love you all and don't want to see you hurt. PLEASE DESTROY YOUR COMPUTERS before midnight tonight. As I have told you multiple times, at 12:01 AM on 01/01/00, the Y2K virus will spread throughout all the world's computers. This is not a joke, science has confirmed that THIS WILL HAPPEN. I will be ringing in the New Year in a pup tent I've pitched in the alkali flats. I IMPLORE YOU TO JOIN ME BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.

--

"Work like you don't need the money, love like you've never been hurt, and dance like nobody's watching."—Robert F. Kennedy

From: Justin Peters

Date: 05/04/2001

Subject: miss my punkin pie

Hey punkin pie, how is Arizona??? I really miss you punkin pie, and I hope you're having fun at your conference because I've cried myself to sleep every night this week because I can't sleep without my punkin. I've been saving my tears in an eyedropper, and I'm going to put it on a pendant and give it to you when you get back so that you'll always know how much I love you. I don't know if your phone is dead or what, because you haven't been answering, but I will call you again at 5:00 AM because I have to hear your voice or I think I might die.

--

"Work like you don't need the money, love like you've never been hurt, and dance like nobody's watching."—Robert F. Kennedy

From: Justin Peters

Date: 07/13/2001

Subject: Re: NSA w4m - 25

I don't normally answer these Craigslist casual encounters ads, but your promise that those who met you would be "lonelyhearts no longer" intrigued and aroused me. I am a sentimental type, recently single after a hard breakup, who lives by Robert F. Kennedy's maxim that you should "work like you don't need the money, love like you've never been hurt, and dance like nobody's watching." I am attaching a photo, and you have also probably seen this photo of my balls that's been floating around cyberspace for like five years. Write me back!

--

"Work like you don't need the money, love like you've never been hurt, and dance like nobody's watching."—Robert F. Kennedy

From: Justin Peters
To: letters@washingtonpost.com
Date: 08/30/2001
Subject: IDOITS!!!

DEAR IDIOTS AT THE WASHINGTON POST, WHY DID YOU DECEIVE ME INTO THINKING THAT ROBERT F KENNEDY WAS THE AUTHOR OF THE "LOVE LIKE YOU'VE NEVER BEEN HURT" QUOTE? NOW I LOOK LIKE AN IDIOT TO ALL MY FRIENDS, AND I BLAME YOU AND YOUR SO-CALLED COLUMNIST "GENE WEINGARTEN." FURTHERMORE, WHY DID YOU CANCEL ZIGGY? WHICH WAS THE ONLY THING WORTH READING IN YOUR LIEBERAL PAGES! I GUESS YOU'VE GOT PLENTY OF ROOM FOR YOUR LIEBERAL BIASES, BUT NO ROOM FOR THE ADVENTURES OF A SQUIGGLY MAN WITHOUT PANTS AND THE ANIMALS WHO LOVE HIM.

From: Justin Peters
Date: 05/02/2003, 4:17 AM
Subject: really really miss my punkin pie

Hey punkin, it's been awhile...don't hate me for writing, I just miss you. I know I freaked you out with that costume thing I kept doing, and I know you said I was "clingy," but I swear im over that now. Im having a birthday party and I really want you to come. I promise I wont touch you if you don't want.

From: Justin Peters
Date: 04/13/2004, 10:14 AM
Subject: Re: raise

Listen, Todd, don't ask for a raise, just do what I do... take office supplies and sell them on eBay. Remember when we all thought that the night cleaning people took those Aeron chairs from the conference room and they got fired? I bought a Segway with the cash I made from those. Those old computers in the storage room are ripe for the picking... you'd better get to them before I do! :)

From: Justin Peters
Date: 08/13/2008, 09:50 AM
Subject: Adult diapers

Dear makers of Depend Undergarments. I am a freelance writer currently researching [an article in which I will test various adult diapers](#) to ascertain which brands can hold the most urine. I will

produce my own urine as part of this test. Can you please send me some free samples? I am attaching some articles I have written in the past, and a photograph of my balls, which you have probably seen before.

From: Justin Peters
Date: 05/05/2008, 07:16 PM
Subject: A movie that you will LOVE

Hey guys, economy's been bad so I swallowed my pride and took a job in PR. But don't worry, even if I hadn't, I'd totally be emailing you to tell you about *Lucky Break*, the new Freddie Prinze Jr. movie. Freddie plays a firefighter who breaks his leg and falls in love with his doctor. If I were you, I'd see the movie, and tell your friends and family and anybody you know who likes to laugh, and have their heart warmed, and such. It's absolutely a scream! And, for all of you who still have jobs in journalism, if you want to do a phoner with Freddie (really nice guy, I hear), just let me know and I'll set it up. Boy, this job really turned out to be a *Lucky Break* for me!

moneybox

Harvard's Investment Errors

That's where America's greatest university is investing its endowment?
By Daniel Gross
Monday, November 17, 2008, at 7:03 PM ET

The recent market turmoil portends hard times for even the wealthiest universities. Last week, Harvard President Drew Gilpin Faust [told](#) stakeholders that, with the research service Moody's projecting "a 30 percent decline in the value of college and university endowments in the current fiscal year," Harvard needs "to be prepared to absorb unprecedented endowment losses and plan for a period of greater financial constraint."

If any investor could have avoided the credit catastrophe, it should have been Harvard. Harvard, the ultimate long-term investor (it's been compounding assets for more than 350 years), sports the nation's leading business school and counts a host of financial geniuses among its many distinguished alumni. But judging by one snapshot of a portion of Harvard's gigantic endowment, Harvard's recent financial performance is less than impressive.

The [Harvard Management Company](#) has the enviable but challenging task of managing Harvard's mammoth endowment. As of June 30, 2008, HMC managed more than \$45 billion, the vast majority of it endowment assets. (Here's HMC's [annual report](#) and data on its [impressive recent performance](#).) HMC parcels out big chunks of the endowment to outside managers—

hedge funds, private-equity firms, asset managers of all stripes—and its staff manages a large chunk itself.

Much of the granular data on who manages what and how much Harvard has invested in which assets aren't publicly available. But every quarter, HMC files a 13-F form with the Securities and Exchange Commission, indicating a portion of its holdings in publicly traded securities—stocks, bonds, exchange-traded funds. The 13-F is a snapshot and is not fully representative of Harvard's overall holdings. But the chunk of the portfolio revealed in the most recent [13-F](#) looks like it was chosen by someone who watched a few episodes of CNBC's *Squawk Box* and heard that the hot new investments were emerging markets, commodities, and private equity.

The 13-F shows Harvard with some 231 positions worth nearly \$2.9 billion, highly concentrated in popped macroeconomic bubble plays. The top 10 holdings, which Bloomberg helpfully breaks out, account for 70 percent of the value of the disclosed holdings. Virtually all of them performed rather poorly in the third quarter, and virtually all of them have slid in the weeks since Sept. 30.

The biggest position disclosed—all amounts and dollar values are as of Sept. 30—was \$463 million in the iShares MSCI Emerging Market fund. As the [six-month chart](#) shows, that fund's off nearly 60 percent from this summer and down by about one-third from the end of September. Third-largest was a \$233 million position in Weyerhaeuser, the wood-products giant that has fallen about 40 percent since the end of September. The top 10 included \$232 million in the iShares MSCI Brazil Index Fund, off about 40 percent since the end of September; about \$51 million in the iPATH MSCI India Index, off about one-third since the end of September; and \$158 million in the iShares FTSE/Xinhua China Index, off about 30 percent since the end of September. For good measure, top 10 holdings also included index funds that were plays on South Africa's commodity-based economy and on the perennially emerging market of Mexico. Would it surprise you to learn that both of those investments, after fairing poorly in the third quarter, have fallen further in the fourth quarter?

Now, this emerging-market-heavy filing is clearly not representative of Harvard's overall asset-management strategy. As HMC's [asset-allocation data show](#), the endowment allocated about 11 percent of its total to emerging market stocks. (By contrast, nearly half of the portfolio described in HMC's 13-F was in emerging market stocks.) But it does show that even the best, most experienced, and highly regarded long-term investors can get suckered into new-era thinking and make investments that turn out to be highly risky bets. The 13-F shows that the managers running this Harvard portfolio were huge believers in the decoupling theory—i.e., that emerging markets would continue to thrive even as the United States stalled—and in the notion that commodities would keep booming.

Why did this belief persist for so long? The answer would make a great Harvard Business School case study.

moneybox

The Subprime Good Guys

These mortgage lenders loan to poor people, strengthen communities, and are still making a profit. How do they do it?

By Daniel Gross

Saturday, November 15, 2008, at 7:42 AM ET

In recent months, conservative economists and editorialists have tried to [pin the blame for the international financial mess](#) on subprime lending and subprime borrowers. If bureaucrats and social activists hadn't pressured firms to lend to the working poor, the story goes, we'd still be partying like it was 2005 and Bear Stearns would be a going concern. The *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page has repeatedly heaped blame on the Community Reinvestment Act, the 1977 law aimed at preventing redlining in minority neighborhoods. Fox Business Network anchor Neil Cavuto in September proclaimed that "[loaning to minorities and risky folks is a disaster](#)."

This line of reasoning is absurd for several reasons. Many of the biggest subprime lenders weren't banks and thus weren't covered by the CRA. Nobody forced Bear Stearns to borrow \$33 for every \$1 of assets it had, and Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac didn't coerce highly compensated CEOs into rolling out no-money-down, exploding adjustable-rate mortgages. Banks will lose just as much money lending to really rich white guys like former Lehman Bros. CEO Richard Fuld as they will lending to poor people of color in the South Bronx.

But the best refutation may come from Douglas Bystry, president and CEO of [Clearinghouse CDFI](#) (community-development financial institution). Since 2003, this for-profit firm based in Orange County—home to busted subprime behemoths such as [Ameriquest](#)—has issued \$220 million worth of mortgages in the Golden State's subprime killing fields. More than 90 percent of its home loans have gone to first-time buyers, about half of whom are minorities. Out of 770 single-family loans it has made, how many foreclosures have there been? "As far as we know," says Bystry, "seven." Last year Clearinghouse reported a \$1.4 million pretax profit.

Community-development banks, credit unions, and other CDFIs—a mixture of faith-based and secular, for-profit and not-for-profit organizations—constitute what might be called the "ethical subprime lending" industry. Even amid the worst housing crisis since the 1930s, many of these institutions sport healthy payback rates. They haven't bankrupted their customers or their shareholders. Nor have they rushed to Washington

begging for bailouts. Their numbers include tiny startups and veterans such as [Chicago's ShoreBank](#), founded in 1973, which now has \$2.3 billion in assets, 418 employees, and branches in Detroit and Cleveland. Cliff Rosenthal, CEO of the National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions, notes that for his organization's 200 members, which serve predominantly low-income communities, "delinquent loans are about 3.1 percent of assets." In the second quarter, by contrast, the national delinquency rate on subprime loans was 18.7 percent.

Participants in this "opportunity finance" field, as it is called, aren't squishy social workers. In order to keep their doors open, they have to charge appropriate rates—slightly higher than those on prime, conforming loans—and manage risk properly. They judge their results on financial performance and on the impact they have on the communities they serve. "We have to be profitable, just not profit-maximizing," says Mark Pinsky, president and CEO of the [Opportunity Finance Network](#), an umbrella group for CDFIs that in 2007 collectively lent \$2.1 billion with charge-offs of less than 0.75 percent.

What sets the "good" subprime lenders apart is that they never bought into all the perverse incentives and "innovations" of the bad subprime lending system—the fees paid to mortgage brokers, the fancy offices, and the reliance on securitization. Like a bunch of present-day George Baileys, ethical subprime lenders evaluate applications carefully, don't pay brokers big fees to rope customers into high-interest loans, and mostly hold onto the loans they make rather than reselling them. They focus less on quantity than on quality. Clearinghouse's borrowers must qualify for the fixed-rate mortgages they take out. "If one of our employees pushed someone into a house they couldn't afford, they would be fired," says CEO Douglas Bystry.

These lenders put into practice the types of bromides that financial-services companies like to use in their advertising. "We're in business to improve people's lives and do asset building," says Linda Levy, CEO of the [Lower East Side People's Federal Credit Union](#). The 7,500-member nonprofit, based on New York's still-scruffy Avenue B, doesn't serve the gentrified part of Manhattan's Lower East Side, with its precious boutiques and million-dollar lofts. The average balance in its savings accounts is \$1,400. The typical member? "A Hispanic woman from either Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic in her late 40s or early 50s, on government assistance, with a bunch of kids," Levy says. Sure sounds like subprime. But the delinquency rate on its portfolio of mortgage and consumer loans is 2.3 percent, and it's never had a foreclosure.

Ethical subprime lenders have to look beyond credit scores and algorithms when making lending judgments. Homewise, based in Santa Fe, N.M., which lends to first-time, working-class home buyers, makes credit decisions based in part on whether borrowers have scraped together a 2 percent down payment. "If

customers build a savings habit to save that money on a modest income, it says a lot about them and their financial discipline," says executive director Mike Loftin. Of the 500 loans on Homewise's books in September, only 0.6 percent were 90 days late. That compares with 2.35 percent of all prime mortgages nationwide.

Since ethical subprime lenders know they're going to live with the loans they make—rather than simply sell them—they invest in initiatives that will make it more likely the loans will be paid back. Faith Community United Credit Union, which got started in the basement of a Baptist church in Cleveland in 1952 with members saving quarters on Sundays, now has \$10 million in assets. In addition to making loans, "we teach people how to manage their finances and accounts," says CEO Rita Haynes. ShoreBank, as part of its energy-conservation loan program, offers free energy audits and a free Energy Star refrigerator when upgrades are completed. The theory, reducing energy bills makes it more likely people will stay current with their mortgages. Today, only \$4.83 million of ShoreBank's \$1.5 billion loans are in foreclosure, or just 0.32 percent.

Ethical subprime lenders are now expanding beyond mortgages. Ed Jacob, manager and CEO of Chicago's North Side Community Federal Credit Union, was alarmed to learn that many of his 2,700 members, most of whom have less than \$100 in their accounts, were relying on the "second-tier financial-service marketplace": check-cashing outlets and payday lenders, which charge exorbitant fees. So he rolled out a Payday Alternative Loan, \$500 for six months at 16.5 percent. The delinquency rate on the more than 5,000 PALs extended thus far is 2.5 percent. "For payday lenders, it's a success if customers keep taking out loans. To me, it's a success if they don't have to anymore," Jacob says. He believes such loans can build a credit history and help "move people to better products for them and us—auto loans and, eventually, mortgage loans."

Lending small amounts of money carefully and responsibly to working-class people isn't a recipe for riches or grand executive living. At the headquarters of ShoreBank, which occupies a former movie theater built in 1923, the window in one founder's office looks out onto a brick wall. Bystry, the CEO of Clearinghouse CDFI, earns a salary of \$190,000—a pittance compared with the compensation of larger lenders. (Angelo Mozilo, former CEO of Countrywide Financial, was paid \$22.1 million in 2007.) For all the growth, this remains very much a niche industry.

Still, the mortgage crisis has provided an opportunity for ethical subprime lenders to expand. ShoreBank has added staffers and in August 2007 rolled out a Rescue Loan program, which aims to move borrowers out of expensive adjustable-rate mortgages into fixed-rate loans. "We really believe we can help people caught in these bad mortgages," says Jean Pogge, executive vice president of consumer and community banking at ShoreBank.

And with plenty of lenders having failed or pulled back from markets, new customers are flocking to their doors. "We're getting demand for regular co-op loans for the first time," says Levy of the Lower East Side Credit Union. In California, the news on housing may be unrelentingly grim, but through the third quarter, Clearinghouse CDFI made 161 loans for \$48.4 million, up about 50 percent from the total in the first three quarters of 2007. Doug Bystry says, "This may be a record year for us."

A version of this article also appears in this week's Newsweek. Andrew Murr in Los Angeles and Hilary Shenfeld in Chicago assisted in the reporting.

movies

Twilight

Cute vegetarian vampires in the Pacific Northwest.

By Dana Stevens

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 12:20 PM ET

The paperback cover of *Twilight*, the first of four best-selling teen-vampire fantasy novels by Stephenie Meyer, shows a pair of pale female hands in close-up, proffering the reader an obscurely menacing apple. I haven't been able to make it through that book's 500-plus pages of turgid vampire-ogling. ("He lay perfectly still in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest, his scintillating arms bare. His glistening, pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn't sleep.") But after seeing director Catherine Hardwicke's flawed yet transfixing adaptation of the book, I can understand the appeal of that poisoned apple, and I think I might want another bite.

The feminist critique of the [Twilight phenomenon](#) (see this [astute reading](#) by Laura Miller in *Salon*) points, quite rightly, to all that's reprehensible about the *Twilight* universe: the heroine's passivity and masochism, her utter lack of grrl-power spunk. Bella Swan (Kristen Stewart) is the anti-Buffy; she's a mortal high-school girl committed not to slaying vampires but to being slain by them. Make that one particular vampire: Bella's highest ambition is to be snacked upon by the lavender-lidded, incandescent-chested Edward Cullen (Robert Pattinson) and thus to join him forever in the realm of the permanently teenage dead.

As the movie begins, Bella has just relocated from Phoenix to the remote, rain-soaked town of Forks, Wash., where she's moved in with her father (Billy Burke), the small town's taciturn chief of police. Her new lab partner, Edward, spends his days glaring at her with [Morrissey](#)-like intensity, then suddenly saves her from an impending car crash with what seems like inhuman strength and speed, then returns to insulting and ignoring her.

What's going on with Edward and his four impossibly attractive foster siblings? They never seem to eat or sleep, and they fraternize only with one another, floating through the school day in a pale, silent pack. Oh, and in an apparently unrelated development, Bella's dad is investigating some mysterious deaths outside of town—it's almost as if people were being eaten by some strange bloodthirsty animal. ...

This early part of the movie, in which we wait for Bella to discover what any consumer of pop horror already knows, is static and at times unintentionally funny. Pattinson, a British actor chosen for his sculpted face and gazellelike physique, doesn't seem to have been given much direction beyond "melt the camera with your eyes." But despite his studied gaze, the lens remains stubbornly at room temperature, and this opening act could have been cut by half an hour. What finally convinces Bella isn't the weeks of glaring but a few minutes of Googling: The Cullens, she realizes, are a family of "vegetarian" vampires, forcing themselves to subsist on animal blood as they chastely coexist with delicious, delicious humans. Bella's blood is especially tempting to Edward, for some reason—who can explain the vicissitudes of young love?—and he's been keeping his distance all this time for her safety. But when Edward confides his secret and starts spiring Bella to the tops of giant pines for moony dream dates, the movie takes on a pulp immediacy that somehow draws you in, even if century-old guys with ice-cold, glittering skin are totally not your type.

The director, Hardwicke, began her career as a production designer, and that shows in the convincing texture and detail of the world she's created. The Pacific Northwest locations (with Oregon standing in for Washington) are eerily lovely, and the understated costume design by Wendy Chuck manages to make weatherproof parkas look Goth. Bella's schoolmates—the nonvampiric ones—are convincingly sketched characters, vulnerable and goofy, like real high-school kids rather than readymade archetypes.

Hardwicke, whose first film was the harrowing mother-daughter melodrama *Thirteen* (2003), has a keen sense memory for female adolescence—not just the social insecurity of that time but the grandiosity that can make self-destructive decisions feel somehow divinely fated. Unwholesome, sure, but arguably no more so than [Wuthering Heights](#) or [Jane Eyre](#), two better-written Gothic romances about young women in thrall to a remote, charismatic, often cruel hero. And while Pattinson's Edward is a bit of a vain prig, no one you'd want to risk your immortal soul for, his worthiness doesn't really matter. *Twilight* is a story about pining for the one person you can, and should, never have, and who among us hasn't at least once experienced that vampiric craving? As a life lesson for teenage girls, *Twilight* (excuse the pun) sucks. As a parable for the dark side of female desire, it's weirdly powerful.

music box

Welcome to the Jumble

Axl Rose and the epically messy *Chinese Democracy*.

By Jody Rosen

Friday, November 21, 2008, at 11:38 AM ET

The news lede is simply: *OMG. It's actually here.* After 17 years, a reported \$13 million, and countless rock critic invocations of Howard Hughes, white whales, and Fitzcarraldo, a new Guns N' Roses record will be released on Sunday.

Chinese Democracy's album credits reflect the epic slog that brought it into existence, listing 14 recording studios, five guitarists, and multiple "digital editors." (British record producer Youth is cited for the "initial arrangement suggestion" on the song "Madagascar.") But the telling liner note detail is the absence of all but one of Guns N' Roses' founding members. There is no Slash, no Izzy Stradlin, no Duff McKagan. The last time a collection of original Guns N' Roses songs was released, it was 1991. Barack Obama was graduating magna cum laude from Harvard Law; GNR was the biggest rock band on earth. In the years since, Axl Rose has dithered, tinkered, and obsessed; feuded with [Kurt Cobain](#) and [Tommy Hilfiger](#); [appropriated Christina Aguilera's cornrow extensions](#); and watched the zeitgeist, and his band mates, leave him behind.

So make no mistake: *Chinese Democracy* is an Axl Rose solo record. The surprise, given Rose's reputation for volatility, is how buttoned up it is. From the first moments of the title track—an eerie swirl of siren peals and chattering voices that gives way to brutish power chords—*Chinese Democracy* is slick and airtight, with production values that are up-to-the-minute. The sound is heavily compressed in the contemporary style, and the music's frayed edges have been smoothed away; every kick-drum thump and keyboard tinkle gives off the glint of a thousand mouse clicks. Those digital editors earned their paychecks.

It's ultra-professional, yes—but oh my, is it busy. Guns N' Roses always mixed up its hard rock with other stuff: pop-metal, boogie-blues, Queen-inspired glam, schmaltzy piano pop in the Elton John mode. But *Chinese Democracy* ups the fussiness factor a hundredfold—call it hard rococo. By the sound of it, Rose simply dumped every musical idea he'd ever had, every genre he'd ever heard, into his Pro Tools. And stirred.

The result is songs like "If the World," which starts with Flamenco guitar noodling and segues into a desultory '70s funk groove, before piling on strings, wailing guitars, and a variety of showy digital effects. "Madagascar" has more orchestral strings, and brass fanfares, and drum loops, and ripping guitar solos, and drifting cloudbanks of industrial rock noise. Did I mention the samples from *Cool Hand Luke*? And the snippets of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech?

What Rose is trying to express with this excess is unclear. It is tempting to read a song like "Catcher in the Rye" as a statement about Rose's own Salinger-like artistic stagnation and reputation as a recluse. ("If I thought that I was crazy/ Well, I guess I'd have more fun," Rose sings.) But several songs suggest that *Chinese Democracy* is first and foremost a record about the torment of making *Chinese Democracy*. In "This I Love," a chiming ballad that boasts the album's most shapely melody, Rose pleads: "It seemed like forever and a day/ If my intentions are misunderstood/ Please be kind, I've done all I should." "Sorry" is more defiant: "You thought they'd make me behave and submit/ What were you thinking .../ You don't know why/ I won't give in/ To hell with the pressure/ I'm not caving in."

That's an Axl that Guns N' Roses fans know well: [paranoid and spitting mad](#). But another Axl has gone missing on *Chinese Democracy*. In his heyday, Rose was a classic sex-symbol frontman, dreaming of a utopian [Paradise City](#) populated by babes, commanding "[feel my-my-my-my serpentine](#)," stalking arena stages in serpentine-strangling [spandex biker shorts](#). The members of Guns N' Roses were not just archetypal rock Dionysians, they were the last great rock Dionysians—the end of a dynastic line stretching down from the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and Aerosmith.

Of course, cock rock is not unproblematic, and its problems—musical, political, and, God knows, sartorial—are epitomized by the skeezy silliness of the '80s [hair metal](#) scene that produced GNR. But listening to *Chinese Democracy*, and to the earlier Guns N' Roses records, one is reminded how much pure fun was sucked out of rock circa 1992, when the last [poodlehead](#) packed away his phallus and shuffled off of the Sunset Strip, surrendering the limelight to a succession of sad sacks: grunge rockers, post-grunge rockers, and the current crop of Radiohead- and Coldplay-influenced bands, whose whimpering falsetto vocals rather pointedly dramatize the music's reduced, um, virility.

Rose is 46 years old now, so diminished libido may be par for the course. On *Chinese Democracy*, his voice is still an amazing, bludgeoning instrument, rising from demonic low rumble to piercing banshee wail. But listen to the words he is singing: "Sometimes I feel like the world is on top of me/ Breaking me down with an endless monotony." "Don't ever try to tell me how much you care for me/ Don't ever try to tell me how you were there for me." "I've been brought down in this storm/ And left so far out from the storm/ That I can't find my way back/ My way anymore." The priapic rock god has become just another bummed-out white guy, bellowing his angst over noisy guitars.

Of course, in rock, the sexiness starts with sound, and spreads. There's no gainsaying the skill of the L.A. studio musicians whom Rose has been touring with in recent years. (*Chinese Democracy* is full of virtuoso shredding sure to please the *Guitar Player* magazine subscribers.) But the songs lack the rugged,

sexy swing of the original GN'R. It was a band par excellence: Lead guitarist Slash was Rose's sidekick and foil; rhythm guitarist Stradlin was the hook-savvy secret songwriting weapon; bassist McKagan gave the music its fearsome thrust. I can't help wondering what, pardon the expression, a real Guns N' Roses record would sound like in 2008.

For those of us who will accept no substitutes, there is hope. Rumors have flown for years about the original GN'R lineup reforming; Stradlin and McKagan have mentioned the possibility in recent interviews. Given the money involved, it may eventually prove too tempting to pass up. At the very least, a shotgun reunion is certain to take place at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony in 2012, Guns N' Roses' first year of rock-hall eligibility. That's just three years away, a blink of the eye in Axl time. As a philosopher once said—way back when, in the heady days of the first Bush administration—[all we need is just a little patience](#).

other magazines

America's Checkup

Time on how to fix the health care system.

By Sonia Smith

Friday, November 21, 2008, at 12:38 PM ET

Time, Dec. 1

The [cover story](#) performs a "collective physical" of the American public and finds many in need of a salad. "By too many measures, America is a lot less healthy than a developed nation has any business being." The health care system needs to be retooled to focus on prevention, the author argues. ... When Barack Obama takes office, the time will finally be right for health care reform, an article [argues](#). Fifteen years after Hillary Clinton's failed effort to overhaul the system, the issue is no longer "politically toxic." ... As rumors swirl about Obama picking Hillary Clinton as secretary of state, some are [calling](#) the move shrewd, while others grumble about the new administration being filled with too many Clintonites. "Would this move, if it happens, be just the first manifestation of that new kind of politics that Obama was promising in his presidential campaign? Or proof that he understands the oldest kind all too well?"

Economist, Nov. 22

An [editorial](#) argues the world must deal with Somali pirates, who are currently holding about a dozen ships for ransom, by addressing the anarchy that has been strangling Somalia since 2006. "This includes establishing stability inside Somalia itself, depriving the pirates of a sanctuary, and preventing the jihad-tinted anarchy there from spilling over Somalia's borders." ...

Where it had been the fashion for companies to keep as little cash on hand as possible, in the wake of the financial crisis, companies are scrambling for it, an [editorial](#) finds. "What was once seen as evidence of corporate fitness for the moment looks like anorexia." ... Local governments across America are taking steps to tamp down the predatory cash advances of [payday lenders](#) by capping interest rates and establishing zoning ordinances against them. Consumer advocates find the practices of payday lenders akin to "financially knee-capping their customers without providing a crutch."

New York Times Magazine, Nov. 23

In a special "Screens" issue, A.O. Scott ponders how movies have fared in a world where everyone's a multitasker. Where movies once were a full-immersion experience, today people watch them on laptops and iPods, pausing periodically to check an e-mail or text message. Scott concludes that movies will prevail, as they did against the rise of television and home video. "While both of those developments appeared to threaten the uniqueness of film, they also extended the power and pervasiveness of the movies, which never surrendered their position as the highest common denominator of the popular culture." ... Clive Thompson looks into the "*Napoleon Dynamite* problem" of Netflix's "recommendation engine." Len Bertoni, one of the computer scientists competing to write a better algorithm, is frustrated by the different ratings people give to the film; the public can't figure out whether it's a "masterpiece or an annoying bit of hipster self-indulgence."

Portfolio, December

In the [cover story](#) of what might be called *Portfolio's* "doom-and-gloom issue," Michael Lewis examines a Wall Street cluttered with fallen investment banks and tries to figure out how the collapse happened. He profiles Steve Eisman, a hedge-fund portfolio manager and one of the few people who understood how the "doomsday machine" of subprime mortgages turned into collateralized debt obligations. ... An [article](#) chronicles the woes of the Blackstone Group, which has seen its stock hit bottom after it acquired Hilton's 4,000-hotel empire for a pretty \$26 billion in October 2007. "Blackstone-Hilton was the last big deal of this noisy bonanza, the collision point of leveraged-buyout fever and the hyperinflated real estate market." ... Mayor Michael Bloomberg's [eponymous company](#) is facing a class-action lawsuit claiming the company's managers discriminate against pregnant women. More than 70 women have signed up, claiming their salaries and responsibilities were slashed once they became pregnant.

Texas Monthly, December

A [tale](#) of a family torn apart during the fed's April raid on a meat-processing plant in Mount Pleasant, Texas, confronts the human costs of immigration policy. One woman, disheartened

by the prospect of raising six kids alone on her \$30,000 salary, may return to Mexico to rejoin her deported husband. "But just to think about it, my stomach hurts," she says. "My kids, they don't speak the Spanish they're supposed to speak in Mexico." ... Someone in a University of Texas cap lobbed a [Molotov cocktail](#) at the 152-year-old Texas governor's mansion when it was under renovation this summer, torching it. The arsonist has yet to be found, but authorities suspect he could be one of the anarchists from Austin arrested during the RNC.

Must Read

[Michael Lewis](#) provides critical insight into the irresponsible Wall Street wheeling and dealing that brought about the current crisis.

Must Skip

A *Newsweek* [piece](#) comparing Obama with Lincoln is meandering and unfulfilling.

Best Politics Piece

Elizabeth Kolbert's [comment](#) in *The New Yorker* is a bleak look at the federal regulations President Bush could push through in his last 60 days in office.

Best Culture Piece

The [review](#) of "Prospect 1," the first New Orleans Biennial, tempts you down to the 9th Ward to see it for yourself.

Late to the Party

A few weeks after other magazines did the same, *Time* comes out with [prescriptions](#) for the Republican Party to regroup in the wake of its Nov. 4 defeat.

other magazines

The Redprint

Newsweek's Karl Rove prescribes a Republican comeback plan.

By Sonia Smith

Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 5:18 PM ET

Newsweek, Nov. 24

Karl Rove [offers](#) a 10-point plan for the Republican Party, stressing the importance of adapting the GOP's core values for the new era. "The party should embrace both tradition and reform; grass-roots Republicans want to apply timeless conservative principles to the new circumstances facing America." The party must make inroads among young people by promoting a "green" agenda and should focus on retaking Congress in 2010. ... The cover story [likens](#) Barack Obama to Abraham Lincoln, which the 44th president himself did in the [pages](#) of *Time* in 2005. Both men are known for their humility,

strong rhetoric, and taking the helm during a pivotal historical moment. ... The lame-duck Bush administration is being flooded with [pardon requests](#), but those hoping for one are likely to be disappointed as Bush has granted fewer pardons than any modern president.

Weekly Standard, Nov. 24

The [cover story](#) examines the Chinese government's alleged practice of harvesting the organs of imprisoned dissidents to sell on the black market. Because the initial claims were made by members of the Falun Gong, they have gone unheard for years. "For various reasons, some valid, some shameful, the credibility of persecuted refugees has often been doubted in the West." ... Fred Barnes [thinks](#) President Obama will breathe new life into the GOP simply by enacting his liberal policy agenda. "Starting now, the person with the biggest role in shaping what Republicans and conservatives say and do is President Barack Obama." ... An article [drops in](#) on the Republican Governor's Association convention in Miami, picking the brains of the party's rising stars about Bush's legacy. Only Gov. Jon Huntsman of Utah confronts Bush's job performance, saying he was not a fan.

New Republic, Dec. 3

With the selection of Rahm Emanuel as Obama's chief of staff, Noam Scheiber [wonders](#) whether Obama is truly committed to his mantra of "No drama." Scheiber also ponders what Washington, where "rumor-mongering and backbiting are semi-official sports," will do to the morale of Obama's faithful campaign workers, when forced to mix with "every ambitious law-school grad along the Amtrak corridor." ... An [article](#) on Detroit's ailing auto industry imagines what would happen if the big three—GM, Ford, and Chrysler—were allowed to fail. At least 3 million people would immediately lose their jobs, but from there the crisis would "reach into every community with a parts supplier or factory—and, to a lesser extent, into every town and city with a dealership. In short, virtually every community in the country would be touched."

New York, Nov. 24

As the infamous Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital—"the nuthouse, the punch line, the must-avoid vacation spot"—enters redevelopment as a hotel and conference center, a story [reminisces](#) about the prominent place the "Chelsea Hotel of the mad" has enjoyed in popular culture over the last 78 years. Norman Mailer was sent there in 1960 after he stabbed his wife with a penknife. Mark David Chapman, who shot John Lennon, paid a visit in 1980. ... The gulf emirate of Dubai has [emerged](#) as a sandy safe haven for those fleeing the financial meltdown in the United States. The expatriate community seems to consist largely of blond Texans like 24-year-old Brooke Butler, who found a sales job there a month after starting her search.

However, Butler and her peers do not seem to be digging in for the long term. "People don't stay in Dubai for long. Everyone is passing through. But for now they are here, waiting out the storm."

***The New Yorker*, Nov. 24**

The magazine's food issue features Calvin Trillin's piece on the meat-seeking [quest](#) he took to Snow's Barbeque, which *Texas Monthly* just dubbed the best barbecue in the Lone Star state. The restaurant's hours—it's only open on Saturdays starting at 8 a.m.—required the author to make the early-morning trek to partake in pounds of smoked brisket, sausage, and pork. ... To prepare Malia and Sasha for life in the White House, an article offers [anecdotes](#) from former first kids on domestic life at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. "The generations of girls who have inhabited the White House compose a sort of underground society, initiating one another into the place's charms—'Have a helluva good time,' Alice Roosevelt Longworth wrote to Susan Ford." One is left to wonder what sort of advice the Bush twins will give the Obama sisters.

poem

"Omaha Beach"

By Piotr Florczyk

Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 8:43 AM ET

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

Returning here, it hasn't been easy
for them to find their place in the black sand—
always too much sun or rain,
strangers driving umbrellas yet deeper

into their land. The young radio host said so,
speaking of the vets. When the sea had come,
some curled up inside the shells;
others flexed and clicked their knuckles

on the trigger of each wave, forgetting
to come up for breath. Then as now, there was
no such a thing as fin-clapping fish,
quipped the host—his voice no more than

an umlaut going off the air. But he didn't
give us a name at the start or the end.
Nor did he explain how to rebury a pair of
big toes jutting out from the mud

at the water's edge. In the end, it's a fluke.
A beach ball gets lost. And a search
party leads us under the pier, into the frothy sea
impaling empty bottles on the rocks.

politics

Dingell Buried

Henry Waxman's victory is the biggest gift Obama could have asked for.

By Christopher Beam

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 7:08 PM ET

Out: Rep. John Dingell of Michigan, the tough, cantankerous *eminence grise* of the House Democratic caucus (he's 82), who was so deferential to Detroit as chairman of the House energy and commerce committee that Lee Iacocca [once said](#) he "stood up for the auto industry beyond the call of duty." In: Rep. Henry Waxman of California, the tough, mustachioed *eminence slightly less grise* of House Democrats (he's 69) known for his relentless investigations and aggressive proposals for combating climate change. Waxman's mustache—[it even has a nickname](#)—haunts Rick Wagoner's dreams.

Barack Obama's own transition team could not have hoped for a better outcome. In fact, there are signs it did more than just hope.

Dingell's ouster came after the Democrats' Policy and Steering Committee voted 25-22 in favor of Waxman's candidacy. In charge of the steering committee is Waxman's fellow California Democrat, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. And ousting the leader of the House's most powerful panel—environmental issues, health care, and consumer protection all fall under commerce's purview—is generally not done without permission from the top.

Of course, Waxman and Dingell did their part. As early as the 1980s, Waxman was fighting the attempts of then-Chairman Dingell, working with the Reagan administration, to weaken auto-emissions standards. Dingell, meanwhile, quashed Waxman's acid-rain legislation. More recently, Dingell's 2007 pro-coal, anti-regulatory energy independence legislation prompted Waxman to circulate a letter signed by 11 fellow committee members: "We have serious concerns about the direction the Committee is heading."

At the same time, Dingell could have been helpful to Obama as chairman on some issues. He's been a stalwart liberal almost across the board. He helped to pass Medicare in 1965 and has for years supported a national health insurance system. He and Waxman teamed up to produce the 1990 Clean Air Act. Other accomplishments he [touts](#) are the Endangered Species Act and the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

But on climate legislation, Dingell would not have been a help. Obama has pledged to make addressing climate change a priority—a commitment he [reiterated](#) in a video address this week. And some Senate Democratic leaders, normally moderate checks on their wild-eyed House counterparts, appear [eager](#) to take on clean energy and fuel efficiency.

Dingell isn't opposed to all energy regulation. In his proposed fuel efficiency legislation in 2007, he supported "incentives" for auto manufacturers but opposed forcing them to adapt. He supports cap-and-trade, but [his version](#) is more industry-friendly than Waxman's, which would actually [put the Environmental Protection Agency in charge](#). The difference between Dingell and Waxman is best captured by the fear struck in the hearts of energy sector sympathizers: Dingell's plan would "dramatically raise energy prices," [according to the Competitive Enterprise Institute](#), while Waxman's "would send us back to the Stone Age."

Stylistically, Waxman is a better fit for an Obama-led Democratic charge. He's crazy, but unlike Dingell, he's happy-crazy. Dingell's craziness is darker. He was known for strong-headed, Lyndon Johnson-style political arm-twisting. He leaked dirt about his enemies and fed the news cycle to keep favorable coverage alive. He sometimes went overboard, as with his hearings alleging scientific fraud against Nobel Prize-winner David Baltimore, who was later exonerated, and AIDS researcher Robert Gallo, whose allegations were also dropped. Waxman is tough, too, but in a matter-of-fact, bury-you-with-evidence kind of way. He's a famed tightwad with a righteous streak, but he's not a drama queen. As head of the House oversight committee, he earned the moniker the "Mustache of Justice."

Waxman's rise has broader implications, too. He's just the latest combative Democrat to rise in the Obamaverse. Like incoming Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, Waxman is a partisan. He also represents coastal creep in the legislative branch—the influence of the West and East over industrial Middle America. (Between Pelosi, Harry Reid, Barney Frank, and now Waxman, the power of pro-regulation liberals over hands-off Blue Dog Democrats is rising. And no, Chicago is not Middle America, although Obama's deference to coal could be a problem for the bicoastal mafia.) Lastly, Waxman's victory coincides with the [failure](#) (so far) of Detroit's Big Three to win a federal bailout. Dingell may have been the industry's last best hope to stave off profit-narrowing regulation. (His wife, Debbie Dingell, is an executive at General Motors.)

This doesn't mean Waxman can snap his fingers and make cars more efficient or carbon emissions more costly. As always, the question looms: Will he change the committee, or will the committee change him? He will have to twist arms and make compromises to win votes, and Dingell is not vanishing into the

ether (he's now "chairman emeritus"). Meanwhile, congressional Republicans won't easily forget Waxman's grillings.

But signs suggest House Democrats are ready to be led; more than half of them voted for him. And unlike Dingell in the 1980s, Waxman will have the backing of an ambitious administration. So maybe it won't be just his fingers doing the snapping.

politics

Obama's White House, Clinton's Team

Who's (loyal to) who in the Obama administration: an interactive chart.

By Chris Wilson

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 1:25 PM ET

As President-elect Obama forms his administration, he's including a lot of familiar faces. Many of Obama's picks—for his transition team, his staff, and his Cabinet—are people who worked in the Clinton administration. Where else is a Democratic president going to find people with executive branch experience?

The following chart displays Obama's choices for his team according to their Clinton or Obama bona fides (the horizontal axis) and their tenure in Washington (the vertical axis). An appointee's position along the horizontal axis is determined by the individual's service to the Clintons before or during their time in the White House, endorsements in the Democratic primaries, ties to Chicago and Obama's early political career, and anything else that hints at their loyalties. Some, like John Podesta or Valerie Jarrett, are clearly tied to one camp. Others, like Gregory Craig, are trickier; Craig is a longtime friend of the Clintons but endorsed Obama in the primaries. Mouse over any image to get details. The vertical axis defines "Washington experience" broadly, including time in the private or nonprofit sector in addition to government service.

This chart will be updated each time Obama announces a high-profile pick for his White House. Got a suggestion? [E-mail me](#).

Update, Nov. 20, 1:15 p.m.: Added [senior adviser](#) David Axelrod and secretary of Homeland Security [pick](#) Janet Napolitano.

politics

Spread the Wealth Around

How to profit from Barack Obama's inauguration.

By Christopher Beam
Wednesday, November 19, 2008, at 6:44 PM ET

Everything about Barack Obama's inauguration will be historic: his speech, the turnout, the oath itself. And if residents of Washington, D.C., are smart, there will be historic levels of opportunistic profiteering.

You've probably heard about D.C. locals [renting their homes](#) on Craigslist. Rooms are going for as much as \$1,000 a night. And not just in the District. One house in Alexandria, Va., is being rented for a reported \$50,000 for the entire week. Pennsylvania Sen. Bob Casey is [urging](#) inauguration-goers to spend the night "a short drive or train ride away" from the capital—in his home state.

What other moneymaking opportunities does the inauguration present?

Rent your parking space. Parking near the National Mall is [extremely limited](#), and most existing spaces are available for only two hours at a time. So, if you've got a private spot, sell it. Or, if you know about any unzoned parking, you can share that information [for a small fee](#). Another option: Hold and "rent" spots in conveniently located public parking lots, like the one on [Hains Point](#) near the Jefferson Memorial. Legal? Doubtful. Profitable? Certainly.

Rent your car. Traffic will be hell, but Californians are used to that. Just make sure to offer better rates than rental companies—which shouldn't be hard. Another option: Reserve a bunch of Zipcars now (you can reserve [up to a year in advance](#)) and sublet them during inauguration week.

Run shuttles to the city. Public transportation will be a mess, too. Plane tickets are [almost gone](#), and coach buses are [disappearing fast](#). Even if there are tickets left in January, prices will be stratospheric. So borrow your mom's van or your dad's SUV and offer rides from nearby cities to D.C. The drive to and from Philly shouldn't cost more than \$100 in gas. From Pittsburgh, a little more. Charge \$60 a seat, and you're flush. If that's too much work, drive people back and forth from Dulles airport.

Rent office space. Think of all the wasted space in vacated offices across the city. Spread out a few cots and turn your office into a dormitory. Many inauguration-goers will be coming in big delegations—it would be a lot easier for them to crash together than separately. Your best bet for finding takers is [Craigslist](#).

Get a pedicab. Washington, D.C., does not have the [vibrant pedicab culture](#) of, say, New York City. But it could. Take advantage of all those bike lanes and ferry people around town.

You can splurge on a [full-blown pedicab](#) or [hook a trailer](#) up to your bike. You can even create your own [zone system](#)!

Get a lobbyist to pay for your party. Obama has shunned lobbyists from his campaign and his transition team. If he keeps them away from his inaugural, lobbyists will be looking for other ways to rub shoulders with D.C. influentials. So, if you know a congressman or two—or have a lot of low-level staffer friends—see if you can get a lobbyist to foot the bill for your party. Not sure how to find a sponsor? OpenSecrets.org has a searchable [Lobbying Database](#).

Name drinks after Obama. In Denver during the DNC, every bar had an Obama-themed beverage, even if it was secretly Bud Light. Advertise outside your establishment that you're serving Irish Car Obamas, Change-tinis, and Barack and Cokes, and brace yourself for business. Ice cream shops, go with "[Yes, Pecan](#)."

Become an escort. Seriously. You know what inaugural balls mean: old dudes without dates. Chances are that, like the airlines, the D.C. escort services are booked (or [shut down](#)). Here's your chance to get into the best parties in town *and* make a buck. Just be careful [which section](#) of Craigslist you advertise in. (Or don't.)

Sell food. Hot chocolate on a January morning in D.C. will be like water in the desert. And with few coffee shops within walking distance of the Mall, you can charge Starbucks-level prices. You'll need a street-vending license, though. Special inauguration permit applications will be posted [here](#) Dec. 1. In the meantime, you can find info on the regular permit [here](#). Expect to pay a few hundred bucks for the privilege.

Sell memorabilia. Nothing opens wallets like a stirring inauguration speech. So if you've got stacks of leftover campaign buttons, stickers, and T-shirts, here's your chance. Artists, throw together some authentic-looking portraits of Obama. Seamstresses, get started on those Obama snow pants. Anything people can brandish to prove that *they were there*. Again, special permits will be posted [here](#) Dec. 1. Find info on the regular permit [here](#).

Sell warm clothes. This is not the time to hawk baby-doll tees. Try gloves, hats, scarves, and those [thermal foot warmers](#) that snowboarders use. [Buy them](#) in [bulk](#). If there's a chance of rain, make it [umbrellas](#).

Sell binoculars. Yes, there will be giant screens showing Obama's speech. But people could watch that at home. Give them a chance to see the real thing—albeit from half a mile away. You can get [\\$10 pairs on Amazon](#).

Sell your tickets. Just [don't get caught](#).

politics

Tackling the Tough Issues

Why is Barack Obama obsessed with reforming college football?

By Josh Levin

Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 3:41 PM ET

Barack Obama has revealed his first major policy initiative: college football reform. In Obama's [first televised interview](#) since winning the presidency, he explained what's wrong with the current system, in which computers help determine the two teams that play for the national championship. "I think any sensible person would say that if you've got a bunch of teams who play throughout the season, and many of them have one loss or two losses—there's no clear decisive winner—that we should be creating a playoff system," Obama said. "I don't know any serious fan of college football who has disagreed with me on this. So, I'm gonna throw my weight around a little bit. I think it's the right thing to do."

In simplest terms, this was a [Nixonian strategy](#)—an attempt by Obama to bathe himself in college football's populist glow. But railing against the [Bowl Championship Series](#) is particularly astute. It's the equivalent of calling for rock bands in the cafeteria in a student council election: Your constituents will love you for it, even if they understand it's highly unlikely you'll be able to deliver. But even so, Obama's play-calling carries some risks.

The BCS is entrenched and buttressed by big-money interests—the nation's football powerhouses—and they have the pull to keep things the way they are. On Sunday, Big Ten Commissioner Jim Delany seemed to equate Obama with a sports-radio crank, [saying](#) it was "that time of year" for malcontents to start complaining. And given that [ESPN just signed a new deal](#) to televise BCS games through 2014, Obama may have to wait till his second term to change the system. Perhaps he'd be better served by focusing on a less thorny issue, like passing universal health care.

Delany was right about one thing: The call to abolish college football's bowl system is an annual rite of autumn, akin to Washington's perennial denunciations of lobbying. If Social Security is the [third rail of American politics](#), then lobbying reform is the chenille throw—the squeezably soft issue that every politician wants to get his hands on. Ever since [Standard Oil was accused of buying U.S. senators](#) in the 19th century, and probably before, Washington pols have [orated about the evils of corporate largesse](#). Whenever a bill imprinted with the words *transparency* and *accountability* and *honest leadership* comes up for a vote in Congress, it [passes by an overwhelming margin](#). And yet, despite all of this transparency and accountability and

honest leadership, corporate interests remain embedded in Washington. (It's no accident that I just channeled Ralph Nader. The enemy of corporate America also—surprise, surprise—[hates the BCS](#), arguing that "bowl games are private businesses that should have no right ... to prevent college football from a fair method of determining a national champion.")

In lobbying and college football, the forces of the status quo have been adept at pushing through tough-sounding new rules that don't fundamentally change the system. After the Jack Abramoff fiasco, [Congress banned sit-down dinners](#) between lobbyists and legislators. The easy workaround: [fancy receptions where only hors d'oeuvres are served](#). Similarly, each year's [BCS controversy](#) generates a set of new provisions that supposedly fix everything. In 1998-99, Kansas State got left out of the BCS bowls despite ranking third in the standings; college football poobahs added a rule that the third-ranking team gets an automatic berth. [In 2000-01](#), one-loss Miami missed the title game even though it beat one-loss Florida State, one of the teams selected; the next season, the BCS added a "quality win bonus" to give more weight to big victories.*

It's worth remembering that the BCS itself wasn't created as an equitable way to determine college football's national champion. Rather, it was designed as a candy coating to make the same old scheme—with its massive payouts to the major football conferences—go down easier. In the old system, certain conferences were affiliated with certain bowl games (the Big Ten and Pac-10 with the Rose Bowl, the SEC with the Sugar Bowl), making a No. 1 vs. No. 2 matchup difficult to broker. The new system pulls the nation's top two teams out of this bowl-conference coupling, ensuring that a national championship game can take place, but leaves the sport's basic structure intact—the bowl games all still exist, and the Rose Bowl, for one, still gets the Big Ten and Pac-10 champs unless they're pulled away for the BCS title game.

College football's new paint job didn't fool everyone. In 2003, Tulane President Scott Cowen got scores of smaller football schools, as well as [Sen. Orrin Hatch](#), to [back his plan to abolish the BCS](#), arguing that it was stacked unfairly against the sport's lower-tier teams. Far too smart to allow the cash cow to get butchered, the lords of college football bought the little guys off, guaranteeing that non-major-conference schools with high-enough rankings would get automatic passage to a BCS game. In 2006-07, the BCS added a fifth game, further placating the small schools while guaranteeing yet more revenues.

If Obama is serious about his playoff proposal, he needs to start working over America's leading football institutions: the athletic conferences and the presidents of universities with powerhouse football programs. This will prove about as easy as getting the U.N. Security Council to authorize an invasion. For the university presidents, the best argument in favor of the BCS is that everybody's already getting rich—why mess with a good

thing? The presidents of the Big Ten and Pac-10 are particularly obstinate, unwilling to do anything that would threaten the conferences' traditional tie-in with the Rose Bowl. (A proposal for a "plus one" game after the bowl season was [scuttled on this account](#).)

But Obama will not be without powerful allies. Surrogates like [USC coach Pete Carroll](#) ("I think it stinks"), the [University of Florida's Urban Meyer](#) ("You've got to blow it up"), and [University of Georgia President Michael Adams](#) ("The current system has lost public confidence and simply does not work") would be happy to stump for the president-elect, giving needed political cover to a guy who attended Occidental, Columbia, and Harvard.

While success on the football field might burnish Obama's reputation as a problem-solver, he should be careful what he wishes for. A presidentially brokered playoff scheme is sure to have unintended consequences. No matter the particulars of Obama's plan (his *60 Minutes* proposal: "Eight teams. That would be three rounds, to determine a national champion"), it is guaranteed to generate aggrieved parties. There will always be a ninth team, and a 10th.

So maybe it makes better political sense for Obama to leave college football alone and find some other way to launch his New Deal for sports. How about moving up the starting times of playoff baseball games so that kids can stay up and watch? That's another proposal that everybody in the country can get behind—well, except for those 50 million or so people in the Pacific Time Zone. Does Obama really want to be responsible for losing California for the Democrats for a generation?

***Correction, Nov. 18, 2008:** This article originally and incorrectly stated that Florida State missed the BCS title game in 2000-01 despite beating Miami. It was Miami that missed the title game despite beating Florida State. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)*

politics

Dishwasher in Chief

Barack Obama can wash dishes for exactly 64 more days.

By John Dickerson

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 7:39 PM ET

In Barack Obama's [first interview since winning the election](#), he made an odd but revealing confession: He found it soothing, he said, to do the dishes. I knew exactly what he was talking about (though for me it's light carpentry). He is experiencing the bends associated with the post-campaign re-entry into daily life. This

afflicts not only candidates but the reporters who travel with them.

Of course, Obama (unlike me) doesn't need to wash dishes anymore. He's won. He doesn't even need to pretend. No need to [drink beer at a bar](#) or [go bowling](#), either, or to otherwise offer demonstrations that he's a regular guy. Soon he will be the most powerful man in the world. So why, out of the blue, was he telling *60 Minutes* viewers about the soothing power of dishwashing? His wife, Michelle, was surprised, too: "Since when was it ever soothing for you to wash the dishes?" She asked so quickly and demonstrated such a refined B.S. meter, I wanted to offer her a seat in the press gallery. (Glimmers of authenticity between a first couple will be another White House first we can welcome.)

A symptom of the campaign bends is the temporary view that even the life's most mundane tasks are magical. Why? Because they are discrete, yield results, and require manual labor: characteristics not associated with most campaign duties. Obama, who has been out of his house for two years and faces a future in which his life will never be the same again, may have perhaps the most acute case of this condition in history.

Any professional who has been on the road for a long period of time can identify with the drift away from a normal life. Your cooking skills are replaced by room-service-ordering skills. Gradually, you forget which floor your office is on or whether you take a left or a right turn from home to get to church. A presidential candidate experiences this bubble-wrapped life completely. He lives in a world where his meals, movements, and laundry are all taken care of for him. This is necessary so that he can focus on NAFTA and Afghanistan. If he makes a wrong turn, there is a hand to direct him gently down the correct hallway.

This highly artificial life makes a body starve for the reality it used to know. It was clear that Obama was sensitive to the simple pleasures of returning to his home environment when he described hearing his wife move around the house when she wakes up before him. He'd been away from it so long, it probably rang like thunder.

Sure, the new president has a brutal agenda ahead of him, but in this twilight moment of pause he can luxuriate in being free of the thousands of immediate details of campaign life. And unlike any incoming president in modern memory, Obama has returned from the prison of campaign life to a *relatively* normal life. Yes, he has the constant Secret Service protection, and he can't drive his own car. But within the four walls of his home, it feels normal. Most incoming presidents return from the campaign trail to their already servant-filled lives in governors' mansions or the vice-presidential residence.

Even though Obama may have once hated doing the dishes, after two years of being stretched across the campaign trail, those old chores become deeply meaningful. Under this post-campaign buzz, I once fixed a kitchen cabinet, and it was so rewarding that I took on the middle-distance stare of those people who do tai chi in the park. "I'd make it into a *soothing* thing," said Obama about his Palmolive meditations.

If I'm right, Obama should probably be kept away from culture. He once described listening to Miles Davis as [a near-religious experience](#), which suggests that if he's left alone, he might break out of his trademark equilibrium. My wife and I went to the Art Institute of Chicago the day after the election, and I could barely make it past the front hall, I was so engrossed with everything I saw (*That's the museum map, dear*). New presidents get a big book filled with all the art they can use to decorate their White House. Best to keep the president-elect away from this.

For the next 60 days, Barack Obama is on furlough to his real life before an even more restrictive life begins—and he knows this. In Sunday's interview, he lamented that he can't take a walk and can't visit his old barber. It'll be hard to drop a towel in his new house without someone rushing to pick it up. And it's not just his movements that will get pinched. His forms of expression are going to get clipped. He is likely to lose his BlackBerry, and if he still keeps a journal to work out his thoughts, his lawyers will probably tell him to stop writing in that, too.

Just five years ago, Barack Obama was a state senator in the Midwest. Now he's about to become the most powerful person on the planet. This fast climb will take some considerable adjustment once he gets to Washington, and the opportunities for solace will be scarce. Like his predecessors, he will probably dart out of the White House for dinner at a friend's house to reconnect with regular life. If he's got the bends really bad, afterward he'll probably offer to do the dishes.

politics

Green Old Party

What would a conservative environmentalist agenda look like?

By Christopher Beam

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 7:14 PM ET

If the Republican Party wants to recover from the Great Drubbing of 2008, it shouldn't waste too much time worrying about how to turn blue states red. It should be thinking about how to turn itself green.

There are signs the party knows this. Reports of actual substance from the Obama/McCain meeting on Monday were scarce, but

[aides speculated](#) that they discussed climate change. Karl Rove [suggests](#) in this week's *Newsweek* that in order to win over young people, Republicans need a "market-oriented 'green' agenda that's true to our principles." And Republican commentator David Frum has made a [similar case](#), arguing that the GOP "has the ability to reach these people in a common sense, non-fanatical way."

Still, the Democrats get all the publicity on the climate-change issue—the Dalai Lama of green, Al Gore, is one of them. What must be doubly frustrating to Republicans is that their policies can be pretty green, too. There's actually plenty of overlap between the interests of conservatives and environmentally conscious Americans. What follows is a list of a few policies the GOP might emphasize in order to maximize its climate-change cred:

Save money—and the planet. This one is easy. Fiscal responsibility is a time-honored GOP ideal (emphasis on ideal, as opposed to reality). And there are ancillary benefits: National-security hawks want to ease our dependence on foreign oil from Saudi Arabia. Less demand for oil will also make the price of gasoline fall, cheering commuters. Environmentalists know that less consumption means less emission. John McCain was the first Republican presidential candidate to tie these threads together, arguing that when it comes to energy consumption, less is more. But the GOP can take it a step further: Encourage Americans to consume energy more efficiently—drive fuel-efficient cars, turn off lights, and, yes, inflate their tires. It's not wimpy liberal hokey; it's patriotic.

Don't cap, don't trade—tax. No joke. John McCain advocated a cap-and-trade system on the campaign trail—even if he [didn't fully understand it](#). But most Republican aren't likely to embrace it any time soon. Instead, Frum proposes taxing energy and using all the revenue to eliminate other taxes. Republicans might retch at the idea of a gas tax, but not if it means killing the corporate and capital gains taxes. Plus, once Republicans see the horror show that is cap and trade under Obama, says Frum, they'll come around. Another enviro-friendly Frum proposal: Build more toll roads. That way, there's less incentive to drive and more money to stimulate business.

Don't feed food. Agricultural subsidies are repulsive to free-market conservatives because they distort the price of food and represent excessive government intervention. They are anathema to environmentalists, too, because they drive up the use of harmful fertilizer. Subsidies allow domestic producers to sell their goods cheaply, but those goods are often produced on low-quality land, which requires more fertilizer, which turns into runoff and pollutes rivers.

Kill energy subsidies. Most environmentalists don't care about the economic inefficiencies caused by subsidies for wind energy. To them, it's worth the trade-off. But they might oppose

subsidies for other, less environmentally friendly energy sources. Ethanol has proven to be [less benign](#) than originally thought. Nuclear energy still concerns many Americans, even though many politicians tout its safety. And many environmentalists think clean coal is a myth. Economic conservatives and greenies can agree that the government shouldn't be spending this money—either because it costs taxpayers money or because it costs them their health. Sure, opposing ethanol subsidies is politically risky. But so is alienating everyone who dislikes pandering.

Go fish, with caution. Nothing sets GOP blood a-boil like the unregulated exploitation of coastal fisheries! But, seriously, there is overlap between libertarian Republicans who support imposing property rights rules on the fishing industry and environmentalists who want to limit the number of fish you can haul in a day—a sort of cap and trade for seafood. Right now, the industry suffers from a tragedy of the commons; no one owns the oceans, so no one has incentive to preserve their fisheries. Both conservatives and environmentalists want to change that.

Hike the hikers. Republicans can make the case that because of the low entry fees, national parks suffer from overuse. If we raised the fees—or, in more GOP-appropriate language, *stop subsidizing granola-munching backpackers*—it would reduce the erosion and impact on the supposedly preserved areas. Some environmentalists might argue that hurts the park-going American public. But, say conservatives, what about the non-park-going public that is paying for the park-going public to destroy wildlife? Discuss.

There's a hitch to all this. Environmentalists and most conservatives still disagree that global warming is real and man-made. But as Rove acknowledges, sentiment is shifting as more young people enter the electorate. Maybe the GOP can shelve the debate about causes and focus on the effects of climate change. Then it may stand a better chance of stealing some of the Democrats' green-tinted spotlight.

Thanks to Ben Lieberman of the Heritage Foundation and Jerry Taylor of the Cato Institute.

press box

Rupert Murdoch and the Reverse Ferret

Explaining the mogul's flattering treatment of Barack Obama in the *New York Post*.

By Jack Shafer

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 2:49 PM ET

The *New York Times* [asks today](#) (Nov. 17) if all the soft Barack Obama coverage published in the *New York Post* this month indicates that Rupert Murdoch has "gone soft on liberals" or is reacting "pragmatically" to the president-elect's victory. The *Post*'s ultra-positive Obama coverage includes a bunch of flattering photos of him on Page One paired with such headlines as "Brink of History," "Bamelot," "Dashing," and "Obama's Historic Victory." The paper also ran a 12-page, post-election special section about Obama.

The *Times* reports that while *Post* editorials and its columnists "leaned to the right this year" and the paper endorsed John McCain, "its everyday coverage of the general election campaign was more evenhanded." But then, "starting the day before the voting, the paper's coverage of Mr. Obama turned positive, even admiring, sprinkled with gauzy bits about his family life, even urging him at one point to adopt a particular puppy for his daughters."

Murdoch-watchers tell the *Times* that the News Corp. chief "is a less predictable, less doctrinaire character than his critics imagine," citing his support of Tony Blair and his 2006 Senate fundraiser for Hillary Clinton. Well, yes, it's true that the [genocidal tyrant's](#) ideological flexibility knows no bounds. But what seems to be going on at the *Post* is the tabloid maneuver practiced at Murdoch's London *Sun* whenever circumstances demand a quickie editorial turnabout. It's called the "reverse ferret."

Peter Chippindale and Chris Horrie attribute the phrase to legendary tabloid editor Kelvin McKenzie in their 1999 book, [Stick It Up Your Punter! The Uncut Story of the Sun Newspaper](#). McKenzie would "roar around the office shouting 'Ferret up your trouser!' " whenever he wanted to alter made-up pages at top speed. "Then he might shout, 'Reverse ferret!' and all the pages would have to be changed all over again."

Reverse ferret proved such a useful phrase that it acquired a second McKenziean meaning. Neil Chenoweth, author of 2001's [Rupert Murdoch: The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Media Wizard](#), writes that while running the *Sun*, McKenzie would

stalk the newsroom urging his reporters generally to annoy the powers that be, to "put a ferret up their trousers." He would do this until the moment it became clear that in the course of making up stories, inventing quotes, invading people's privacy, and stepping on toes, the *Sun* had committed some truly hideous solecism—like running the wrong lottery numbers—when he would rush back to the newsroom shouting, "reverse ferret!" This is the survival moment, when a tabloid

changes course in a blink without any reduction in speed, volume, or moral outrage.

The *Post's* current round of Obama love reeks of the reverse ferret. As a broadcaster, Murdoch has good reason to butter up the incoming president, who will be appointing new commissioners to the airwave-regulating Federal Communications Commission. But as the *Times* notes, Murdoch loves politics and political power, and, whenever he can, he attempts to negotiate intimate proximity to it.

Murdoch's reverse ferret portends, of course, a reverse-reverse ferret when Obama-bashing starts to benefit him more than Obama-stroking. In Chenoweth's view, it is "Murdoch's genius" that his whole business philosophy has come to resemble a reverse ferret. If a Murdoch venture falters, if he comes to regret a strategy, if a partnership or friendship no longer serves his interests, he merely "sets off with undiminished speed in a new direction" without pausing to acknowledge his change.

Tabloids depend on the reverse ferret, writes Chenoweth, because they can never afford to admit they're wrong. Send examples of the reverse ferret 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.)

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

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

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

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

recycled

How Wildfires Get Their Names

The story of Burnt Bread and Dirty Face.

By Daniel Engber

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 4:19 PM ET

In a [report on the wildfires](#) spreading through Southern California, the Los Angeles Times refers to the blazes by name—for example, the "Sayre," "Freeway Complex," and "Tea" fires. Back in 2005, Daniel Engber explained how wildfires get their names. The article is reprinted below.

Firefighters in the Pacific Northwest [continued to battle](#) the 49,000-acre "School" fire over the weekend. They've also been busy [trying to contain](#) the "Burnt Bread" fire in north-central Washington and the "Dirty Face" fire to the southeast. How do wildfires get their names?

[From](#) local landmarks, mostly. [The](#) School fire started around School Canyon in Washington, the [Burnt Bread fire](#) got its name from the nearby Sourdough Drainage, and Dirty Face burned on the south slope of Dirty Face Mountain near Washington's Lake Wenatchee*. In general, naming rights go to the group that makes the "initial attack" on a fire, whether it's a squadron of local firefighters or a team from the U.S. Forest Service. (In contrast, every tropical storm in the Atlantic gets its [name](#) from a single organization.) The commander on the scene often uses a nearby geographical feature to describe the fire, but he's not bound by any official rules. He first suggests a name to the interagency [fire dispatcher](#), who passes it along in fire reports, dispatches, and so on.

Three years ago, firefighters named a Pacific Northwest blaze the Sour Biscuit fire because it was near Sourdough Gulch and Biscuit Creek. It later became part of the much larger Florence fire, which started near the Florence Creek. But authorities backtracked when the mayor of Florence—an unrelated town 100 miles away—complained about the bad publicity. The Florence fire became the Biscuit fire.

Dispatchers can stop the spread of an unfortunate name at the outset. They might tell a commander if the title he's chosen sounds too similar to another that's already in use. The Tree fire would be OK on its own, but not if there's a Green fire burning nearby. In places where there are few landmarks to choose from, dispatchers sign off on sequels; one fire might be called Clear Creek and another Clear Creek 2. Multiple fires burning in the same general area are often referred to as a "complex." The whole set is typically referred to by a single name, like the Blossom Complex fire in Oregon or the Long Black Complex fire in Idaho.

There have been more than 42,000 unplanned wildfires in 2005, of which only the smallest remain anonymous. Not every one of the huge number of labels assigned each year has to do with geographical location. A firefighter told the Explainer that he once named a little fire "Samantha," in honor of his daughter.

Each fire also gets an alphanumeric code used by both local and national firefighting agencies. These typically consist of a two-letter state abbreviation, followed by a three-letter locality and a three-digit fire number. The School fire, for example, is also known as WA-UMF-130. That's the 130th fire (130) to occur at the Umatilla National Forest (UMF) in Washington State (WA).

Explainer thanks Rose Davis of the National Interagency Fire Center, Eric Helpenstell of Pacific Wildfire, and Jeree Mills of the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center.

Correction, Aug. 16, 2005: Due to an editing error, this piece originally and incorrectly stated that Dirty Face Mountain was located in Umatilla National Forest in southeast Washington. It's on the north side of Lake Wenatchee, closer to the center of the state. [Return](#) to the corrected sentence.

Science

Bullies Like Bullying

How did a nonstory based on an iffy study end up in a *New York Times* blog?

By Daniel Engber

Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 6:21 PM ET

A year ago this month, the *New York Times* published one of the most notorious pieces of [neuromarketing propaganda](#) ever to show up in a major daily. Two Novembers ago, the *Times* science pages hawked a [witless brain-imaging study](#) of speaking in tongues. (In that case, converging evidence from scientists and journalists revealed a useful fact: If you think you're babbling incoherently, then you probably are.)

And now here we are, just a week shy of Thanksgiving. How's the venerable paper going to celebrate Bad Neuroscience Journalism Awareness Month this time around?

Thank goodness for [Tara Parker-Pope](#), the *Times*' personal-health blogger. Last Wednesday, she posted about a team of neuroscientists from the University of Chicago who had shoved a handful of bullying teenagers into an fMRI scanner to see what was going on inside their heads. "In a chilling finding," she wrote, "the researchers found aggressive youths appear to enjoy inflicting pain on others."

Bullies like bullying? I just felt a shiver run up my spine. Next we'll find out that [alcoholics like alcohol](#). Or that [overeaters like to overeat](#). Hey, I've got an idea for a brain-imaging study of [child-molesters](#) that'll just make your skin crawl!

Let's pretend there were some good reason to wonder how much fulfillment a bully finds in his daily wedgies. The University of Chicago research wouldn't help, even if we cared to know.

First, to call these kids *bullies*—as did Parker-Pope and just about [every other science journalist](#) on the scene—is a bit of an understatement. According to the authors of the study, the eight teenagers selected for the experimental group each displayed up to 18 "aggression symptoms," including a propensity for "physical cruelty to people," "cruelty to animals," and "forced sex." Grand-theft lunch money is the least of these kids' crimes. They're more than bullies; *sociopaths* might be a better descriptor. Or *rapists*.

Second, the "aggressive youths" never inflicted any pain (real or [imagined](#)) on other people during the experiment. Whatever enjoyment or dismay they felt came from viewing a set of photographs depicting, for example, someone stepping on somebody else's toe. So the brain-imaging data may tell us what it's like to watch a bully but not necessarily what it's like to be a bully.

Third, the brain scans themselves are open to interpretation. Compared with the controls, the bad kids showed activity in a pair of brain structures called the amygdala and the ventral striatum. The study's lead author takes that to mean they were getting off on toe-stomping. But neuropunditry watchers may remember that increased blood flow to the amygdala can be tricky to interpret, as it's been associated with a wide range of emotions. In practice, an fMRI signal in that [nutty brain area](#) is more often taken as a sign of anxiety than enjoyment.

The astute blogger [Neurocritic](#) points out that the teenagers in the study showed other responses that don't quite fit with the theory that [bullies like bullying](#). A look at the original research paper reveals the "bullies" also showed activity in areas related to the sensation of pain, like the anterior insula and

somatosensory cortex. So if the aggressive youths appeared to be experiencing more pleasure than the control group, they may have been feeling more empathy, too.

OK, OK: Why am I wasting time on a study so lame that it got a [write-up](#) in the *Onion*? Hasn't this whole [fMRI backlash](#) routine gotten [a bit passé](#)?

In this case, I'm less interested in the science than the lamebrained science journalism. The *New York Times* did something worse than covering a nonstory—it shamelessly promoted it. Take another look at Parker-Pope's [write-up](#), and now read the University of Chicago [press release](#) that went out the week before. Three entire paragraphs (including an extended quote) make it from the release into the six-paragraph *Times* post, virtually unchanged. The rest is paraphrase.

It's no wonder she missed some potential flaws in the bullying study. A quick look through the archives suggests that Parker-Pope makes a regular practice of touching up university-wire stories without any discernable reporting of her own. On Oct. 29, she [posted](#) on a study of stress and decision-making in seniors. The material was reworded slightly, but all of it—including the quotes—had previously appeared in a [USC press release](#). In [this piece](#) from Nov. 4 on a study showing that children are safest under their grandparents' care, she acknowledges pulling a quote from a [Johns Hopkins release](#) but never acknowledges that the rest of the information she cites also appears in that release. Same goes for a Nov. 10 [post](#) on how drivers respond to speed limits, which consists entirely of information that appeared in a release from the [Purdue University news service](#).

I don't mean to suggest it's a crime to take material from a press release. But it's certainly lazy, and there's every reason to believe that Parker-Pope knows better. In her short tenure at Well (and in her previous gigs), she's shown a knack for smart and skeptical science coverage: Posting on a study of how television affects teen pregnancy rates, she goes out of her way to [complicate](#) the sexed-up angle from the [press release](#). Indeed, two years ago, she informed the *Columbia Journalism Review* that, "as reporters, we should never take anything at face value. I think a mistake that a lot of people might make is to read the press release. [I almost never read the press release.](#)"

Back in 2006, Parker-Pope was speaking as a columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, not as the *New York Times* blogger she is today. Reached by phone, she appeared to temper her previous statements: "The blog is providing information from a variety of sources, and sometimes those include press releases. ... I try to make that clear and also to provide links to the original [journal] articles so the readers have all the information." She professes a deep commitment to transparency, both online and in print: "I really believe that if we're quoting from a press release, we have to tell readers that." She does acknowledge that the "bully" post, at least, was an oversight: "This one, I'm kicking myself."

(After our conversation, Parker-Pope adjusted the posts on bullies and decision-making in seniors by adding the phrase "in a press release" to the paragraphs in which the study authors are quoted. She doesn't attribute any of the other material in the posts, nor does she flag her changes for readers.)

The *Times* has no official policy on using press releases, but spokeswoman Catherine Mathis says in an e-mail that it "would not meet our standard" to base an entire article on one without attribution to a company or organization. A draft set of guidelines for the newspaper's blogs includes the following dictum: "In the integrated newsroom, standards online and print are the same. What's different in a blog is voice and tone." That said, someone who attended a *Times* staff meeting in May of 2007 did tell Gawker that executive editor Bill Keller had [warned](#), "We can't let our reverence for quality become a straitjacket in new media."

I can certainly appreciate the time pressures faced by Web journalists, and I'm OK with the idea that standards might be a smidge lower online. (You may have heard that *Slate* doesn't do as much [fact-checking](#) as *The New Yorker*.) But at the risk of sounding like one of those straitjacketed print-media types, that extra leeway shouldn't preclude a reporter from performing her most basic responsibilities. Like calling your own sources. Or writing your own copy.

There are better ways for a newspaper to peddle canned content. On Nov. 7, Washingtonpost.com ran an unbylined [version](#) of the bullying story straight off the PR wire; there, at least, the source was disclosed clearly at the bottom of the page. (Which reminds me: The Washington Post Co. pays my salary.) That's better than a passing attribution of a single quote. Better still would be a clearly marked link to the original press release. If staff cuts on the science desks have made this kind of journalism into a [necessary evil](#), readers should be kept informed.

I'd venture to say that if we slid Tara Parker-Pope into a scanner, we'd discover she has some sympathy for my point of view. ("In a chilling finding, the researchers found reporters appear to enjoy reporting ...") Here's another of her aphorisms from the *CJR* interview: "Just because we have 15 seconds," she says, "or 800 words or whatever the amount of time we have to tell our story, we still have to get it right." So true.

slate v

Musical Numbers: Bonds

A daily video from *Slate V*

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 11:38 AM ET

slate v

Grand Unified Weekly

A new science series from *Slate V*.

By Andy Bowers

Wednesday, November 19, 2008, at 12:53 PM ET

With all the time we now spend watching online video, who's got a few spare minutes to keep up with science news? Now you don't have to choose. Introducing "Grand Unified Weekly," *Slate V*'s new series that harvests the wheat grass of news from the lab and distills it into a power-boost shot directly to your desktop.

Here's our [premiere episode](#), covering the Obama approach to science (hint: he actually *believes* in it), the eternal sunshine of the mouse mind, and what science journals and *People* magazine have in common:

As the name of the series suggests, hosts Christie Nicholson and John Pavlus, along with our producing partners at [Small Mammal Productions](#), will bring you a new episode each week. You can watch them at *Slate V* or on the slick new video player you'll now find on most *Slate* pages.

We'd love your feedback on the show. Send your thoughts to slatev@slate.com.

slate v

Cubez: Google

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 11:06 AM ET

slate v

Dear Prudence: Pack Rat on Steroids

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 11:19 AM ET

sports nut

Change You Can't Believe In

Why hiring a new coach won't solve your favorite NBA team's problems. (Unless the old coach was Isiah Thomas.)

By Ryan McCarthy

Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 9:02 AM ET

For almost one-quarter of the NBA's 30 teams, 2008 is a year of change. Whether it's Mike D'Antoni's fast-paced offense in New York or Larry Brown getting the lowly Charlotte Bobcats to "play the right way," fans in seven cities have new head coaches and great expectations. They shouldn't get their hopes up. Despite years of careful analysis, nobody has determined what it is that NBA coaches actually do.

In all sports, the coach's supposed mission is to impart wisdom to his callow charges. In the NBA, though, the students sometimes have just as much coaching experience as the teacher. Along with vets like D'Antoni and Brown, this year's new class includes Vinny Del Negro of the Bulls, who has never coached anyone on any level. Michael Curry, who replaced veteran NBA coach Flip Saunders in Detroit, has served just [one year as an assistant](#). In a couple of years, both could very well be out of work. A back-of-the-envelope calculation shows that the average tenure of [today's NBA coaches](#)—the amount of time each coach has spent in his current job—is just more than three years, about a year shorter than the current figure for the NFL and MLB. (The figure is even smaller if you account for Jerry Sloan's tenure in Utah, which dates back to the Reagan administration.)

Del Negro and Curry are, of course, ex-NBA players—a reliable back door into the [NBA coaching cabal](#). Hiring a contemporary pro, we're told, is a smart move—nobody can relate to today's player like a recently retired jock. But despite this hiring strategy, the NBA is the only league in which coaches regularly get "[tuned out](#)"—that being the condition in which players stop paying attention to everything that comes out of their boss's mouth. Just two years ago, Avery Johnson led the Dallas Mavericks to the NBA Finals. This summer, Mavs owner Mark Cuban reported that Johnson had alienated his players to the extent that [they demanded trades](#) unless he was fired. The players weren't traded. Instead, the Mavericks dumped Johnson and replaced him with Rick Carlisle, who had previously been [tuned out by the Indiana Pacers](#).

If you think that being an NBA coach sounds a lot like having a position in human resources, you might be right. According to a new study co-authored by David Berri, an economist who runs the sports blog [Wages of Wins](#), most NBA coaches are similar to company managers. In the study, Berri and his colleagues sought to investigate whether Adam Smith's theory that workers make up the value of an organization—and that managers are nothing more than "[principal clerks](#)"—applies to the NBA. The economists looked at a group of 19 longtime NBA coaches that had helmed multiple teams, using a Bill Jamesian statistic called Win Score to evaluate how players performed under their tutelage. Only eight of the 19 coaches had any statistically discernible effect on team performance. Seven had a positive impact, with Phil Jackson topping the chart. Next on the list: Rick Adelman, Rudy Tomjanovich, Rick Carlisle, Don Nelson, Flip Saunders, and Gregg Popovich. The only coach who had a

demonstrably negative impact on his players: the [historically inept Tim Floyd](#). (For what it's worth, Berri didn't study Isaiah Thomas. The NBA coaches study hasn't been published yet; a version of it will be included in the 2009 book *Stumbling on Wins*, by Berri and Martin Schmidt.)

More interesting than the names on Berri's list is his finding that the influence of even the best coaches was statistically very small and was distinguishable only from the worst-rated coaches, like Floyd. Even title-winning, Hall of Fame coaches like Pat Riley and Larry Brown were shown to have almost no impact on their teams. Players leaving Riley-led teams actually got better (except, it seems, for Antoine Walker).

Before we jump to the conclusion that most NBA coaches are just clerks with clipboards, we must acknowledge the inherent problems with measuring a coach's impact. First, coaching is collaborative, and accounting for the effects of trainers and assistant coaches (think of Tex "[Triangle Offense](#)" Winter and defensive guru Tom Thibodeau) is pretty much impossible. Second, at the risk of sounding like a motivational speaker, can leadership even be measured? Could you come up with a statistic to evaluate [Doc Rivers' use of Ubuntu](#)?

It's also worth mentioning that not every basketball stats guy agrees with Berri. Dean Oliver, the director of quantitative analysis for the Denver Nuggets, examined NBA coaching in his 2004 book *Basketball on Paper*. Oliver's research was based on using various methods of establishing an expected number of wins, things like comparing a team's field goal percentage to its opponents'. Oliver then compared these expectations with a coach's actual record. His findings: Coaches like Phil Jackson can be worth up to an additional 12 wins per year. Oliver admits his methods have their limits, and even if a coach is exceeding expectations, it's hard to know exactly why. "I don't want to say seat of the pants, but many of the coaching decisions in the NBA are made so very quickly," Oliver says. "I'm not even sure that they could break down exactly what they were thinking at any given point in the game."

So, how do you know if your coach is doing anything worthwhile? To paraphrase Bill James, there's no consensus on what statistics should be on the back of a coach's trading card—in any sport. In basketball, where decisions are made on the fly, it's hard to break a game down into a set of discrete choices. Roland Beech, the statistical mastermind behind [82games.com](#), gave it his best shot, though. At the behest of ESPN columnist Bill Simmons, Beech created the [Bad Coaching Index](#) as a way to measure the efficacy of Doc Rivers' decisions. Beech compiled statistics on blown leads and offensive and defensive crunch time performance. The index, while mostly a goof, suggested that Rivers may not have been as bad as Simmons thought. Beech found that in 2004-05, Doc Rivers' Celtics came back to win 40 percent of the games in which they trailed in the fourth quarter, the fourth-best percentage in the NBA.

In the NFL and MLB, stat geeks and economists have made more serious attempts to measure the impact of similar situational decisions—that crucial call to the bullpen, the choice to [go for it on fourth down](#). But even in the coach-as-deity world of the NFL, a place in which a writer can earnestly pen a tome called *The Genius: How Bill Walsh Reinvented Football and Created an NFL Dynasty*, there's still no magic data on coaching effectiveness. The same goes for baseball. In his 1997 book *The Bill James Guide to Baseball Managers*, the baseball writer came up with a [makeshift ranking](#) of the greatest field generals of all time but also insisted that there's no such thing as a good or bad manager. Instead, he argued, managers are specialists: Tony La Russa likes the hit-and-run, Bobby Cox loves to platoon, and Sparky Anderson is the king of the intentional walk.

Berri's study shouldn't be interpreted to mean that NBA coaches don't have strengths and weaknesses. Mike D'Antoni and Don Nelson are known as offensive gurus; former Rockets coach Jeff Van Gundy, who tutored Celtics assistant Tom Thibodeau, is more defensive-minded. It's also probably not fair to assume that Berri's work supports the classic complaint that the NBA is dominated by the whims of self-serving millionaire athletes. NBA coaches seem to have their biggest impact when their tendencies blend with their players' quirks. (The New York Knicks' castoff group of shoot-first players seems to be doing fine in D'Antoni's run-and-gun offense.)

Still, in the NFL and MLB, the path to a head-coaching job is usually paved with years of toil as an assistant. Why is it that, in the NBA, inexperienced coaches can step in and succeed right away? (First-time coach Avery Johnson was named the NBA's coach of the year in his second season on the job; newbie Doc Rivers won it after his first.) Berri's contention is that an NBA coach's record is determined almost entirely by the quality of his players. The claim makes sense: In comparison with football and baseball, [NBA statistics vary little from year to year](#). The job of an NBA coach, then, may be less about coaxing better performances out of athletes than about getting their skills and personalities to fit together. By the time a player has moved through the basketball machine to the NBA, he's a relatively finished product. Despite Mike D'Antoni's best efforts, the plodding center Eddy Curry is doomed to be himself. "Think about it," says Berri. "What is a coach going to say that will get Eddy Curry to rebound?"

technology

Second Bite at the Apple

What the Google phone stole from the iPhone.

By Farhad Manjoo

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 4:41 PM ET

There is a story that Steve Jobs likes to tell about fonts. In 1972, Jobs enrolled at Reed College in Portland, Ore.; after a semester, seeing little value in college, he dropped out. But Jobs hung around Portland—he crashed in friends' dorm rooms, recycled Coke bottles to buy food, and sat in on several courses that he found interesting. One of these was a calligraphy class; it was there that Jobs first realized the simple, underappreciated beauty of the written language on a page. Calligraphy, he recalled in a 2005 [commencement speech](#) at Stanford, was "beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can't capture, and I found it fascinating."

For many years, Jobs' interest in typography played no part in his work. In 1976, Jobs and his hacker friend Steve Wozniak started Apple, and their first great machine, the Apple II, featured the same bland, [monospaced](#) typefaces found on other computers. But in the 1980s, when Jobs and his team were developing the Mac, he realized that he could squeeze all that he'd learned in his calligraphy course into the new computer. The Mac was the first consumer machine to offer multiple fonts and the first to use "[proportionally spaced](#)" typefaces, meaning that unlike on a typewriter, some characters could be wider or narrower than others. (The letter I needs less space than the letter W.) Jobs' revolution in typography didn't go unnoticed; Microsoft wisely copied his proportional fonts when it developed Windows. In other words, there's a direct connection between a choice Steve Jobs made in college and that unfortunate PowerPoint you just made in [comic sans](#): As Jobs told the Stanford grads, "If I had never dropped out, I would have never dropped in on this calligraphy class, and personal computers might not have the wonderful typography that they do."

I got to thinking about this anecdote as I spent time over the past few weeks with the [T-Mobile G1](#), the first phone to run Google's new [Android](#) mobile operating system. Among Android's many visually arresting features are its fonts. Google commissioned Ascender, a font house in Illinois, to create a [custom Android font](#) to render most of the phone's text; the font, [Droid](#), is both stylish and highly readable, calling to mind Apple's minimalist aesthetic. That's not the only thing reminiscent of Apple in Google's phone. The G1 and the Android operating system are not copies of the iPhone and its software—they're not Windows Vista to Apple's Mac OS X. But in a deeper sense, everything about the Google phone seems inspired and indebted to the iPhone.

That's because, like the iPhone, the Google phone's best feature is its attractive, well-designed interface. The most important thing about the G1 is not what it does but how it does it. This sounds obvious: Doesn't every mobile phone company set out to create a usable interface? Spend a minute trying to navigate deep lists of drop-down menus on a Windows Mobile or [BlackBerry](#) device and you'll have your answer. Before the iPhone, phones

were pretty to look at but a pain to use; the last blockbuster mobile phone, Motorola's RAZR, induced aneurysms when you tried to do anything but make a phone call. The iPhone changed all that: In the same way that the Mac proved that people want computers that can display calligraphy, the iPhone proved that people want phones that don't require a manual. If Android succeeds—even if it one day manages to beat out the iPhone in market share, which seems plausible given Google's ambitions—it will be because Steve Jobs paved the way.

None of this is meant to denigrate the G1. It is a fine phone—if it had been released a year before the iPhone, rather than a year after, we might have called it revolutionary. You turn it on to see a bright, uncluttered main menu that features a handful of icons for frequently used apps (maps, search, the Web, etc.). To load one up, simply tap the screen with your finger—yup, just like you've seen people do on those iPhone commercials. I found Android's apps speedy and intuitive. Its e-mail program, which integrates with a Gmail account, is [superior to the iPhone's](#), allowing you to see messages in conversation threads and to search through your inbox. (If you don't use Gmail, you've got to use another, less well-designed e-mail app.) The G1 will also appeal to people who find the iPhone's touch-screen keyboard difficult to use. You can use both your thumbs to type on the G1's slide-out physical keyboard, making for far speedier text entry than on the iPhone.

In several ways, though, the G1's interface still lags behind that of Apple's phone. Though it has a touch screen, Android lacks Apple's language of finger gestures. To zoom in on text in Android's Web browser, you click an on-screen magnifying glass icon; on the iPhone, you simply double-tap on the area you want to expand. The iPhone lists all of your apps on its main menu; you don't need to navigate any deeper menus to get to them. But the G1 hides its many preloaded apps behind another on-screen interface—a slider that you've got to pull out every time you want to run that program. (There is a way to add a favorite application to the phone's home screen, but you'll have to click around to figure out how.)

Google's best Android idea is filched directly from Apple: [Android Market](#), a store for third-party developers to sell apps for Google's phones, is a worthy imitation of Apple's iPhone [App Store](#). Google promises to be more inclusive in its app-selection process than Apple, which has [arbitrarily banned](#) a number of programs from the App Store. But Google also recognizes that Apple has hit on the best way to distribute programs for a mobile device: put all the apps in one place.

The G1 is just the first of many new phones that will feature the Android OS; in the face of consumer demand for more iPhone-like devices, handset manufacturers across the globe are clamoring to bring out their Android devices. (Google's OS is open-source, so handset manufacturers can include it on their devices for free.) Motorola, which saw such enormous success

with the RAZR, [reportedly plans to ditch](#) many of its own OSes in favor of Android.

In a similar vein, Verizon will begin to sell the BlackBerry Storm on Friday. It's the first BlackBerry without a physical keyboard—like the iPhone, it uses a touch screen. Anticipation is running high; Apple recently [surpassed BlackBerry's manufacturer](#), Research in Motion, in smartphone sales, and RIM is itching for a blockbuster. Its strategy is much like Google's: pay close attention to Apple. The BlackBerry Storm's interface uses gestures similar to those found on Apple's phone—tap to load an app, flick to scroll down a menu, hit on-screen keys to enter text. (See a Web-based demo of the Storm's interface [here](#).) RIM is also building an Apple-like app store, the [BlackBerry Application Storefront](#).

Steve Jobs eschews focus groups. He [likes to say](#) that he doesn't believe in asking customers what they want; he prefers to build stuff in order to show customers what they want. That's what happened with the Mac: He showed us we wanted a graphical computer, and then we all went out and bought one (even if we didn't buy one from Apple). The same thing is happening in the phone market, too. Jobs showed us that we all want a phone with a touch screen and an app store. Google and RIM are happy to oblige.

television

18 Million People Watch *NCIS*

Should you?

By Troy Patterson

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 6:59 AM ET

By some thermometers, *NCIS* (CBS, Tuesdays at 8 p.m. ET) is the hot show of the moment. Last week's installment played to a record-high 18.8 million viewers—"more than any other show on television for the week," the *New York Times* reported on Monday, further noting that it's also been a smash in Friday-night repeats and cable-network reruns. The *Los Angeles Times* cocked an eyebrow at those numbers the same day, likewise observing that the six-year-old series has achieved its success in the absence of any industry accolades, critical praise, or rousing racket of buzz: "The media try very hard to ignore the show." On that last point, I demand a correction. Until this week, ignoring the show hasn't required the slightest effort.

Now, having taken a breather from not even bothering to snub the program, I can report that *NCIS*—amiable, unpredictable, and no more outlandish than any other prime-time fantasy about battling evil—gives you a lot for your 44 minutes. Mingling elements of a hardy cop show with those of a svelte espionage

drama, segueing from macabre moments at the autopsy table to small giggles of office comedy, it's lively with variety. Last week, the heroes, solving a murder, nabbed a gang of jewel thieves; this week, in spy mode, they apprehended a mole threatening national security. The formula is so elastic that it doesn't resemble a formula.

The show follows a team of federal agents employed by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, and *team* is the operative concept. Many a TV crime-fighting unit offers the audience an idealized vision for its daily life between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., transforming the pressure and drudgery and compensating camaraderie of the workplace into a spectacle of valor, and this one does, too. But something here indicates that the NCIS agents are further bound together like a squad of athletes. Maybe it's their solidarity in the face of frequent turf wars with a haughty FBI. Maybe it's the jockish jocularly they show when huddling in surveillance vans or shooting the breeze by the office snack machine. Perhaps it's all in their frequent donning of ball caps and windbreakers bearing the horsy initialism of the show's title. In any event, on last night's episode, the character Tony DiNozzo—one of those perennial frat boys with a mouth for bold flirting and a head full of pop culture—rhapsodized about the NBA great Bill Russell, encouraging fans in the belief that this group is analogous to the Boston Celtics of yore.

Their Red Auerbach would be Leroy Jethro Gibbs—not, as his name might suggest, an early-modern agriculturalist or some session musician who once played slide guitar with Skynyrd—but a special agent from the school of crisp, taciturn, stoic-but-sensitive bosses. There has been an effort to make the actor in the role, Mark Harmon, look awful, and it has succeeded. The choppy haircut, the noxiously patterned sport coats, the perpetual wedge of white undershirt under his floppy open collar—these all communicate that the man's lack of polish is proof of his trustworthiness.

Gibbs commands the loyalty of subordinates whose determined quiriness never quite undermines their integrity as characters. The forensic specialist, a perky woman in dour garb, is a Goth girl whose pallid neck will forever be ringed by some velvet choker or studded dog collar. In turn, the fussy British medical examiner will never be seen without a bow tie. The babe on the unit is a former Mossad agent; in keeping with a recent tradition of chick investigators on conservative-leaning shows, she often wears low-slung trousers.

DiNozzo recently explained to a new recruit that "bad guys would rather confess than be interrogated by" Gibbs. He was joking but not really kidding, it seems, as the producers' every choice endorses the sentiment. Where Jack Bauer and the boys on *24* fairly revel in resorting to torture, Gibbs can make a suspected terrorist come clean simply by slapping his palm against the interrogation-room table and shooting rays of resolution from his pale blue eyes. Though a man's man, he

never threatens to overdose on his own testosterone—a disposition in keeping with the show's gender-balanced sensibilities. Its warmth keeps its gung-ho instincts in check, as on a rerun that aired last Monday on USA. There, a female Navy pilot faced the wrath of al-Qaida assassins—and also, it turned out, a soccer-mom neighbor with designs on her husband. At some point, in between images of exploding minivans, the pilot shared her troubles as a working mother (and her qualified remorse about having bombed civilians in Afghanistan) with the female agent protecting her. They both stood around a handsome living room holding their coffee cups with two hands, as if this were a commercial advertising human sympathy, the war on terror, and instant cappuccino to boot. The moment suggested that *NCIS* has thrived by crafting its own genre: action melodrama.

television

In Search of Lost Crime

The quotidian beauty of *Law & Order*.

By Troy Patterson

Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 3:52 PM ET

Law & Order (NBC)—not to be confused with the grislier, kinkier *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, or the flashier, friskier *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, but the durable old *L&O*—lugged itself back to the airwaves this month for a 19th season. Series creator Dick Wolf long ago made plain his ambition to see the show through a 20th, at which point scholars of pop and keepers of trivia will be obliged to place it next to *Gunslinger* as TV's longest-running prime-time drama. It may get there yet: Though its recent ratings are, by any normal standard, mediocre, mediocrity goes a long way these days at subnormal NBC. And despite the show's excesses, its signs of deterioration and ossification, its laughable mannerisms, *Law & Order* still displays a singular feeling for pace. It's snappier than a procedural of its advanced age has any right to be.

Your friends on the force these days are Cyrus Lupo (Jeremy Sisto) and Kevin Bernard (Anthony Anderson). Lupo's beard splits the difference between bohemian nonchalance and working-stiff burliness; Bernard is cuddly, roly-poly, an overweight Eagle Scout; and they make for a team somewhat more sensitive than the wry and grizzled detectives of yore. Compared with the dogged and hound-doggish Lenny Briscoe, they're positively emo. Not yet jaded, they go easy on the wisecracks.

Last week, moving spryly on their flat feet, they met a male corpse at a park in upper Manhattan. Had he been cruising for sex? Jonesing for crack? Neither; don't be silly. While pursuing false leads is integral to every cop show, *L&O* has transformed

the convention into a kind of institution. As the detectives fish for red herrings throughout New York City, the show brightens with local color, imagining Gotham as the land of prep-school boys in blue blazers, floozies with yellow hair, pink-cheeked yuppies, gray-faced burghers, purple-tongued aesthetes. The tensions of caste and hierarchy in the imperial city—the frequent throwaway bits about downtrodden assistants and dissipated heirs—are diverting, and the humble details of place are essential to the texture. Last week's best bit of stage business saw Bernard shove a park-based dope dealer onto a metal hobbyhorse mounted near a jungle gym. "Siddown," he said, and the horsy creaked.

Perhaps the series was showing its age as that episode's plot drifted in inertial circles instead of spiraling and twisting on its choice elements. The clues kept pointing to and from a group home for mentally challenged adults. The story relied on an actor giving us—as Robert Downey Jr.'s character so delicately puts it in *Tropic Thunder*—the "full retard." Subtlety in supporting performances is not a prized commodity in these precincts, nor should it be. What you want is the squawk of pulp fiction, and sometimes that means steeling yourself for moderate embarrassment—enduring, in this instance, an offensively brassy depiction of autism.

Law & Order is its truest self when its murder investigation creeps into the grotty and Gothic corners of family life, where a hot-button topic gets a tabloid-biblical treatment. Such was this case. The mystery untangled as a morality tale featuring a quartet of brothers—an abandoned special-need child; the warm-hearted sibling who had tracked him down decades later; the greedy goofus who recognized that the reconciliation would put a strain on his own finances; and, merely to give the plot extra filigree, a blameless fourth. Justice was done, with the "order" end of business pursued by Michael Cutter (the latest in a line of flinty-eyed ADAs with vague chips on their overworked shoulders) and Connie Rubirosa (the latest in a string of lady lawyers memorable only for their elegant necks and breathtaking [zygomatic bones](#)).

But at this point in the show's history, perhaps the moments that matter most involve familiar characters dropping in just to bless the show with a reassuring presence. Thus does Sam Waterston's Jack McCoy, now the DA, pop up to dispense 10 seconds of hard-won wisdom. (Sample sound bite: "You're screwed." Where he once burned with righteousness, he now dryly smolders, emitting decorative wisps of cynicism.) Thus does S. Epatha Merkerson's Lt. Anita Van Buren stop in a hallway, coffee mug in hand, just to hear a little exposition from her detectives. She's been sipping from that mug since the fourth season, always with a small sigh that's a minor triumph over weariness, and the gesture feels as vital as whatever sensation of the week *Law & Order* can manage to rip from the headlines—a toast to our need for sagas of crime and punishment.

the big idea

The Genius Cabinet

Why the president-elect should surround himself with brilliant—albeit prickly, semi-autistic, and egomaniacal—thinkers.

By Jacob Weisberg

Saturday, November 15, 2008, at 7:43 AM ET

Here's a radical suggestion: Barack Obama should pick the smartest people he can find for his Cabinet.

Brilliance has sometimes been a criterion in presidential appointments, of course, but seldom the major one. It usually takes a back seat to [rewarding friends](#) and backers, playing congressional politics, seeking [diversity](#), and appeasing [industry](#) and [interest groups](#). Presidents also feel obliged to avoid too many retreads and place a high premium on [personal loyalty](#).

Obama can't avoid such considerations, of course. He needs to cultivate his congressional relationships, avoid alienating allies where possible, and rely on people he trusts. President No Drama doesn't want a Cabinet full of undisciplined prima donnas. But it makes sense for Obama to give greater weight to intellectual acumen and subject-specific knowledge than his recent predecessors have, both because of the depth of the problems he faces and because of his own style as a thinker and a decision-maker. Bush, whose ego was threatened by any outburst of excellence in his vicinity, politicized all policymaking and centralized it in the White House. Obama, happily, has the opposite tendencies. He is intellectually confident, enjoys engaging with ideas, and inclines to pragmatism rather than partisanship. He can handle a Lincolnesque "[Team of Rivals](#)" or a FDR-style [brain trust](#). And he's going to need one.

The issue starts at the Treasury Department, where the best choice would be former Clinton Treasury Secretary [Lawrence Summers](#). Summers is the outstanding international economist of his generation, someone whose brilliance is immediately evident in any conversation. I happened to run into him at a dinner in New York a couple of days after Lehman Bros. was allowed to collapse. Summers analyzed the situation, which he said had suddenly become far more dangerous, with a clarity I haven't heard from anyone else since. He explained that it was simultaneously a crisis of liquidity, solvency, and confidence and that the government would ultimately have to inject capital into financial institutions and not just buy up distressed assets. It took Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson another three weeks, a defeat in Congress, and a jump-start from Gordon Brown to find his way to a similar conclusion.

Summers can also be arrogant and [politically incorrect](#). He sometimes does a poor job hiding his contempt for lesser intellects and loves to play the [intellectual provocateur](#). Socially, he can be a bit autistic. But these are the defects of a superior mind, and they are a small price to pay for getting the person most likely to maximize our chances of avoiding a full-scale global depression. To say that Summers is the best person for the job of treasury secretary is no knock on others frequently mentioned, including New York Federal Reserve President Timothy Geithner and New Jersey Gov. Jon Corzine, both of whom are highly qualified. But if chosen, the first thing either of them would do is call Summers for advice.

It's a similar story at the State Department, where the Great Mentioner has dropped a number of plausible names, including those of Hillary Clinton and John Kerry. Either would be a good choice, if it didn't mean passing over the person they both get their best foreign policy advice from, Richard Holbrooke. Holbrooke dominates the field like no one else on the Democratic side. He has a quick and supple mind, understands all the issues, knows the leaders, and has a proven record as a diplomat and peacemaker. At Dayton, Holbrooke single-handedly ended the war in Bosnia by sheer force of personality.

Holbrooke has some [personal defects](#), too. He is legendary for his relentless ambition and self-promotion. To say he rubs some people the wrong way puts the proposition mildly—he's a handful. He also backed Hillary Clinton in the primaries. But as with Summers, Holbrooke's flaws hardly rate in the context of the urgent need to rebuild relationships, manage complex security threats, and develop a tough-minded liberal vision of American's role in the world. The president-elect should pick Holbrooke simply because he's the best available player at a hinge moment in history.

The genius principle should also be applied to the lesser agencies, where many of the names being trotted out have a dreary, box-checking quality. Obama says transitioning to renewable sources of energy is his second-highest priority after saving the economy. So why not talk the brilliant, socially awkward Al Gore into taking the job of Energy Secretary? Following the anonymous [Samuel W. Bodman](#) might seem like demotion for the former vice president and Nobel Prize winner, but it would give Gore a chance to accomplish his [life's mission](#) by addressing climate change (and make up for his neglect of the issue when he was vice president). If the president wants a first-class legal thinker to help him clean up the Justice Department, he can't go wrong with his old Harvard Law professor [Laurence Tribe](#), his University of Chicago colleague [Cass Sunstein](#), or Stanford law professor [Kathleen Sullivan](#). For Education, he might choose Joel Klein, the chancellor of the New York City school system. Klein has [not gone through life making friends](#), but he has shown himself an unusually shrewd and committed thinker about educational management and reform. Better yet, what about getting [Bill Gates](#) to tackle the problem?

Among the intangible tasks Obama faces is vanquishing the anti-intellectualism of the past eight years, the prejudice that serious policy discussion is too effete for the Cabinet Room or the Oval Office. If he really wants to bring change to Washington, the new president should start by putting a sign in his window: No hacks.

the chat room iPhoning It In

Farhad Manjoo and Chris Thompson take your questions about the mobile devices of Apple, Google, and BlackBerry.

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 5:24 PM ET

Slate columnist [Farhad Manjoo](#) and *The Big Money* blogger [Chris Thompson](#) were online at [Washingtonpost.com](#) to chat with readers about the [iPhone features](#) borrowed by Google's *Android*, and BlackBerry's *Storm*. An unedited transcript of the chat follows.

Farhad Manjoo: Hi everyone. Chris Thompson and I are ready to answer your questions about Google, Apple and BlackBerry and their smartphones. Let's begin!

New York, N.Y.: Not a question about the Google phone, but the new Blackberry Storm. It seems to be relatively close to the iPhone and as someone who needs a new phone and wants an iPhone but doesn't want to leave Verizon, would you recommend this as an alternative?

Farhad Manjoo: That's the big question. It does look pretty good, and paired with Verizon's excellent network, it may indeed be a viable alternative. I haven't had a chance to review it yet, though, and I haven't seen many reviews. I'd suggest waiting a few weeks or even a couple months for the verdict to come in. Also, for prices to drop over the holidays!

Arlington, Va.: What are you hearing about the G2? Is it worth it to wait until next summer to buy the updated model? Are any other cell providers coming out with their version of the Google phone soon? I really want one but I don't want a superior product to come out two months later.

Chris Thompson: Motorola is scheduled to have an Android phone on the market sometime next year, built around social networking sites. No one yet knows how it will do with users.

Idaho Falls, Idaho: Will these new phones have the ability to copy and paste, so one could forward a text message, edit a Word Document, modify an Excel spreadsheet, etc.?

Farhad Manjoo: Both the G1 and the BlackBerry Storm have copy and paste functions. The iPhone, notoriously and annoyingly, does not—though everyone suspects that at some point, Apple will add that (and when it does, the update will be through software, meaning that older current phones will also get those capabilities).

New York, N.Y.: How many municipalities does the Google phone have in comparison to the iPhone? How is T-Mobile's service rating these days against AT&T's? (Personally, I'm quite unhappy with AT&T but I've never used T-Mobile.) Thanks.

Chris Thompson: As I understand it, T-Mobile's 3G service is fairly limited and very much a work in progress; the company just got 3G coverage for the Washington D.C. area a little over a week ago.

Adamstown, Md.: Let's start with the best feature the Google Phone has that the iPhone does not. (along with what they "borrowed")

Farhad Manjoo: There's one main feature: A physical keyboard. There are some people—or perhaps many people—who can't stand Apple's on-screen keyboard; for these folks, the G1 will always be superior.

Other smaller features that the G1 has but the iPhone lacks include copy and paste and MMS (short messages that can include multimedia, like pictures).

But there are also features that the iPhone has that the G1 lacks. The most annoying, for me: The G1 does not have a headphone jack—it comes with a special earbud set that plugs into its USB port.

N.Y.: So, what's going to win out? How viable is Android?

Chris Thompson: In theory, Android is as viable as the developers make it, although Farhad's pointed out plenty of advantages to the iPhone's closed app model. Maybe in the end, China Mobile will win out; it's the largest cell phone service provider in the world with 436 million subscribers, it's planning to roll out its own version of the Android phone, and it just

announced plans to open its own mobile applications store. With hundreds of millions of potential Android users, that kind of market power could set the tone for future mobile applications.

Silver Spring, Md.: Hello, I am a Verizon customer and I like the idea of the BBstorm but I'm wondering why Verizon chose not to include a WI-FI service on the phone? Do you think future generations of the BB will have WI-FI, or any Verizon phone for that matter? Also, I heard about the new applications that they BB would be able to download, would that be for free or at additional cost? Thanks a bunch!

Farhad Manjoo: Nobody quite knows why the Storm doesn't include Wi-Fi (both the iPhone and the G1 do), but according to [at least one report](#), it's Verizon's doing: That is, the phone is technically capable of handling Wi-Fi, but Verizon crippled it for business reasons (presumably because when you're using Wi-Fi, you're not using Verizon's network).

Research in Motion, BlackBerry's manufacturer, plans to launch an app store for the phone next year. Like on the iPhone's App Store, third-party developers will be able to set their own prices for their apps.

Falls Church, Va.: Please help me avoid hours of internet research! My phone contract is up and I want to upgrade from my current phone to either a Blackberry Pearl (for the small size) or an iPhone. My main goals are to be able to check email, get directions, look up movie times ... and of course make calls and text message. Which one would you recommend? I think the monthly plan costs are similar, but which one is more user friendly and reliable? Thanks!

Farhad Manjoo: Alas, you really should do your own Web search! Both phones have received high marks and can handle what you're looking to do, but your choice will likely depend on a number of personal factors—how much you use your phone (and thus which service plans are better), which networks are strongest in your area, and whether you're switching over to a new plan or staying with your current provider.

Here's one thing I will say: If you plan to use the Web a lot, go with the iPhone.

Baltimore, Md.: Does the Storm have auto-text correction that is anything like the iPhone? If so, does it work as well, and as unobtrusively, as the iPhone? BTW, iPhone's come with key-clicks, as in the Storm's TV ad. It was one of the first things I

turned off on mine. Annoying! I'd much rather have the visual feedback of the key getting bigger.

Farhad Manjoo: The Storm does include a predictive text-entry system, and early reviews have called it pretty good.

The Storm also features an innovative "tactile feedback" mechanism that's meant to make typing on its screen something like typing on a physical keyboard. When you press down on the glass, its surface depresses a bit, as if you're pressing a real button. But reviews of this feature have been mixed. PC Mag [says](#) the system "ends up feeling like a lot of work in a way that typing on a hardware keyboard (or on the iPhone's software keyboard, for that matter) never did."

Washington, D.C.: Chris, this question is for you. In your blog you talk about Yahoo's 20 percent loss. What do you think their next move will be? Can we expect other corporations to fall during these depressing times?

Chris Thompson: Once they find themselves a new CEO, Yahoo will get down to the pleasant task of wondering just what they'll do next. There's been some talk that Yahoo will rebrand itself as a email and news platform, the default starting point for users logging in to check their mail and scan the news each morning. Yahoo is also thinking about setting up an open-source network, allowing developers to write apps to customize the site and make it more interesting. But the company's got a long way to go before it figures out its next move; outgoing CEO Jerry Yang put the company through a lot of turmoil by playing hard to get with Microsoft and then rolling the dice with the Google-Yahoo search deal that Justice just killed.

Whether Yahoo is a harbinger for the rest of the tech sector is an interesting question. In a way, the real question is: just how badly will Google do in the downturn? For years, Google has suggested that it's impervious to recessions, precisely because its text search ads are cheaper than display ads. During a downturn, as companies scale back their advertising budgets, we can expect Yahoo's display ads to take a hit. But in theory, Google will clean up, because everyone will flock to its relatively cheaper ads. On the other hand, Google's stock is less than half what it was a year ago, so investors are clearly feeling a little jumpy.

Norfolk, Va.: It may not have phone capabilities but the Kindle does have some music and Internet capabilities. Have you heard anything about a 2.0 of the Kindle? New features? Release date?

Farhad Manjoo: There have been many rumors about this, but the only news that Amazon has [confirmed](#) is that it's working on

new versions, one of which will be targeted to the student textbook market (which would presumably have a bigger screen than the current version).

I'd say it's a stretch to expect a Kindle cell phone.

Nashville, Tenn.: I realize this is a little outside the topic, but how does the LG Dare stack up to the other phones?

Farhad Manjoo: I haven't used the Dare, but here's [CNET's review](#). They liked that it was packed with features, but thought it wasn't great for browsing the Web.

Farhad Manjoo: Well, thanks everyone! Chris and I are hanging up. Happy phone calls with whatever devices you choose.

the green lantern

An Order of Lo Mein With a Side of Guilt

Is getting takeout that much worse for the planet than cooking at home?

By Jacob Leibenluft

Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 10:24 AM ET

Is it better for the environment to eat takeout or cook at home? The downsides of takeout containers are obvious, but I live alone—and it seems pretty inefficient to cook for just one person. Can I justify ordering to-go on environmental grounds?

The Lantern worries he is repeating himself, but he'll start with a necessary point: What you eat almost always matters more, environmentally speaking, than how you eat it. When you consider everything together, a restaurant-made salad will certainly be a much greener option than a home-cooked steak.

But let's limit the discussion to a pair of similar meals—maybe you have a craving for [lo mein](#), but you aren't sure whether to dial takeout or make it in your own wok. In the process of making your dinner plans, you are forced to choose between two competing ideas when it comes to greening your consumption. The first is that—all things being equal—bulk is good. In other words, it's better to buy one 5-pound can of tomato paste than five 1-pound cans, better to cook one meal for 10 people than to have 10 people cook on their own, and better to do all your shopping at once than to make several different trips. At the

same time, controlling what you eat, how your food is made, and the circumstances under which it is prepared allows you a greater ability to manage your own environmental footprint.

In the case of your lo mein, start by tallying the impact of preparing and cooking the meal. Given how much restaurants must spend on running all their appliances, they have a much bigger incentive to [invest in machines that are energy-efficient](#). While you may be satisfied with an aging fridge and an inefficient stove, a restaurant will see a big dent in its bottom line if it maintains a kitchen that dates from the Clinton era. Even more importantly, a restaurant—depending on how much traffic it sees, of course—is likely to use the same appliances to cook more meals at once. The only danger is that those large fryers and ovens are kept running even when business is slow.

Takeout has obvious disadvantages when it comes to getting that food home: Unless you bike or walk, you'll have to drive to pick up your lo mein, and then there's the (typically) unrecyclable container it comes in. But restaurants can cut down on transportation and packaging by purchasing in bulk. Unlike the ingredients in your pantry, many of the ingredients are delivered directly to a restaurant's kitchen by truckers who have a personal stake in planning out an efficient route. Large deliveries also cut down on the amount of cardboard and plastic packaging—that's fewer bags needed to carry noodles and fewer bottles needed to ship soy sauce.

Staying in has clear benefits when it comes to wasted food. When you cook for yourself, you have a better idea of exactly how much you want to eat. As the Lantern has noted before, wasting food has two downsides: First, something has to be done with all those food scraps; second, all the resources that went into producing, cooking, and transporting your uneaten dinner go for naught. [Studies](#) of restaurants, schools, and cafeterias have found that anywhere between 10 percent and 25 percent of commercially prepared food gets wasted. Use a little bit of foresight, and you can probably do better than that in your own kitchen.

In the end, research comparing prepared foods with home cooking doesn't provide a strong answer either way. A [2005 paper](#) about Swedish meatballs, for example, found that buying a ready-made meal in the supermarket had about the same environmental impact as cooking at home. But as a general principle, the Lantern favors home cooking—even for one—rather than eating out or ordering to go. (That's strictly on environmental grounds; anyone who has tasted the Lantern's cooking recognizes there are other reasons to eat at a restaurant.) Here's why: Figures from the [Food Service Technology Center](#) (PDF) estimate that only about 35 percent of energy used by the average full-service restaurant actually goes toward preparing the food. The balance comes from refrigeration, heating, cooling, lighting, and just about everything else it takes to keep customers coming back. On the whole, restaurants are very

energy-intensive, requiring about five times as much energy per square foot as offices or retail businesses. So when you buy your meal from a restaurant, your impact isn't just felt in the kitchen. Your dinner bill subsidizes the entire dining operation.

If you still want takeout, some restaurants are far greener than others. (Good ones follow practices like [these](#) from the Green Restaurant Association—and probably aren't shy about advertising it.) But there is an alternative for those who are concerned about the impact of cooking for one: invite your neighbors over for dinner.

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

the has-been Famous Patoots

In Idaho's 1st District, they don't make right-wing nuts like they used to.

By Bruce Reed

Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 1:02 PM ET

After a glorious, nearly uninterrupted three-decade run, Idaho's 1st Congressional District has lost its claim as the [nuttiest House seat in the country](#). The state just elected a new congressman so normal, the nation won't have Idaho to kick around anymore.

This election was already certain to boost the state's reputation simply because Larry Craig was no longer on the ballot. Idaho also got a short-lived boost from voters in Alaska, where convicted incumbent Ted Stevens came close to taking Craig's place as chairman of the Senate appeals caucus. After all, Idaho hasn't nearly re-elected a convicted felon since prison-bound Rep. George Hansen fell 200 votes short in 1984.

But for a state wholly unaccustomed to good election-year news, Idaho's real breakthrough was the defeat of first-term congressman [Bill Sali](#), who through sheer force of unpleasant personality persuaded a staunchly conservative district to swear off extremism. With a disastrous campaign, Sali finally lived up to his billing as the Republican whom Idaho Republicans most love to hate.

As a state legislator, Sali once irked then-Speaker Mike Simpson (who now represents Idaho's other district in Congress) so much that Simpson threatened to throw him out a third-floor window in the state capitol. Two years ago, to the horror of the Idaho Republican establishment, Sali won a bruising six-way primary for an open House seat.

In Washington, however, Sali never quite fulfilled his hothead potential. His Republican colleagues elected him chairman of the freshman class. He was reliably right-wing, with perfect marks from the National Rifle Association and the American Conservative Union. But compared with predecessors like [the late Helen Chenoweth](#) (who spent her congressional career warning Idahoans about an invasion by federal black helicopters), his behavior in office was disappointingly unexceptional.

Fortunately, on the campaign trail, the old Sali returned. In mid-October, Sali made headlines when he tried to distract his opponent's campaign director during a Boise television interview by standing behind the camera making faces and holding up bunny ears. Under fire, a Sali campaign spokesman insisted that his boss's gesture had been [horns, not bunny ears](#). The spokesman tried to dismiss the incident with what might as well have been Idaho's mantra in the Craig-Sali era: "[If we can't laugh at ourselves, then what have we become?](#)"

Sali was also hurt when a Republican family [disclosed](#) that he had written \$15,000 in bad checks for farmland and equipment he leased before going into politics. The woman who revealed the bad debts said she was tired of hearing Sali boast about helping farm families when he had stiffed hers. "I wanted to put a sign on our property, but I don't think there are any signs out there that have Sali with a circle and a cross through it," she said.

Sali's opponent, by contrast, was a mild-mannered, grandfatherly businessman named Walt Minnick. Minnick grew up in a Republican household, served in the Army, worked at the Office of Management and Budget in the Nixon White House, and spent 16 years as CEO of a major forestry corporation in Idaho. He seems genetically incapable of having an extremist thought. Nobody's going to throw a guy out the window for saying people "[are just darned fed up](#)."

With a demeanor like that, Minnick proved to be a lot more Idaho than Sali. The Associated Press noted that the Democrat even [owned more guns](#). Buoyed by independents and moderate Republicans in the district's largest counties, Minnick got 50.6 percent of the vote and became [just the second Democrat to win the seat in the last 40 years](#).

What's most remarkable about Sali's defeat is that, unlike their bloodied brethren around the country this year, Idaho Republicans didn't lose anything else. Republicans actually gained a seat in the state Legislature, which they already controlled by more than 3-1. Lt. Gov. Jim Risch won comfortably, keeping Craig's Senate seat in Republican hands. Obama did well to hold McCain and Idaho native Sarah Palin to 62 percent, down from Bush's 68 percent in 2004. But GOP state party chairman Norm Semanko brushed off Sali's defeat and crowed that, in Idaho, 2008 was a banner Republican year.

In short, while the rest of the country voted to throw the bums out, Idahoans concentrated on tossing just one bum: Bill Sali. Dan Popkey, the *Idaho Statesman* political reporter who helped break the Craig scandal, wrote that some Idaho Republicans were celebrating not just over the races they won, but especially over the Sali race they lost. "I don't think Republicans wanted to see Bill Sali in Congress for life," an anonymous GOP source told Popkey. "[Now was the time to take him out.](#)" Sali promptly went on talk radio to call Popkey "[a horse's patoot.](#)"

Etymologists say [the word patoot derives from potato](#). Over the years, Idaho has produced plenty of both. But without Larry Craig and Bill Sali to kick around, Famous Patoots will no longer be the state motto.

the undercover economist

Only the Good Buy Young

Why 20-year-olds should invest way *more* in the stock market, and 50-year-olds, way *less*.

By Tim Harford

Saturday, November 15, 2008, at 7:41 AM ET

Here are the chief investment lessons of the financial crisis for today's young people: They should be buying more stocks and running up debts to do so. I'm not saying that the market is undervalued—how would I know? I am merely suggesting a way of reducing risks.

If that seems strange, reflect for a moment. We know that stocks can be very volatile. We also know that some generations have been luckier than others when it comes to the performance of the stock market. The baby boomer who started regular purchases of U.S. stocks in 1970 and sold in 2000 would have felt pretty sick after the awful bear market of 1974, but in retrospect, his timing would have been perfect, filling his pockets with bargain late-1970s and early-1980s shares and selling out right at the top. His daughter, entering the stock market in 1995 and aiming to retire in 2025, would have spent the past 13 years buying shares at prices that now seem to range from high to extortionate. We could call this "generational risk."

Now think about the current prevailing wisdom on investing in shares, which reflects the fact that shares tend to produce high but risky returns. It is to start by putting most of one's savings into the stock market and as retirement approaches, increasingly shift one's portfolio to bonds and other less volatile investments. That seems to make sense. In fact, it is nonsense.

For one thing, there is nothing particularly safe about holding stocks for the long term. Whether you plan to sell a portfolio of

stocks next week or hold them for another 40 years, a 20 percent fall in the stock market this week reduces the eventual value of that portfolio by 20 percent, relative to where they would have been had you sold them the day before the crash and reinvested afterward.

Further, a long-term investor following the consensus advice is exposed to stock-market risk in a very strange way. When young, he has almost no exposure. Although his tiny pot of savings is largely invested in stocks, that tiny pot contains almost none of the shares he eventually plans to own. That's too conservative. In middle age, he is overexposed in a desperate attempt to enjoy the high returns on stocks. Then as he approaches retirement, he becomes too conservative again, as he pours his portfolio back into safe assets. It is this bizarre pattern that produces generational risk.

The logical way to fight generational risk is to borrow money to make large, regular investments in stocks while young, then use a proportion of later savings to pay back the loan rather than to pile into the stock market in middle age. That sounds risky, but it is, in fact, exactly what people do in the housing market. Knowing that they will need a place to live all their lives, they tend to buy a small house and gradually trade up to a bigger one, paying off their mortgages only late in life.

Most of us need a retirement fund as well as a place to live; there is nothing intrinsically risky about regular borrowing to get that fund off to an early start.

Not only does the concept—"mortgage your retirement"—make sense; it has paid off in the past. The Yale academics who proposed it, [Ian Ayres and Barry Nalebuff](#), have looked at historical stock market data covering 94 cohorts who retired between 1913 and 2004. For every single cohort, the early-leverage strategy beat the conventional wisdom; it also almost always beat the gambler's strategy of investing every penny in stocks until the moment of retirement. Only the blessed cohorts who retired in 1998 and 1999 did better. Such gambles rarely pay off, so if you're 20 years old and want to spread your risks, mortgage your retirement today.

today's business press

Markets Deflate

By Bernhard Warner and Matthew Yeomans

Friday, November 21, 2008, at 7:04 AM ET

today's papers

Economy Crashes, Washington

Watches

By Daniel Politi

Friday, November 21, 2008, at 6:20 AM ET

The [New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#), [Los Angeles Times](#), and [Wall Street Journal](#) lead with yet another horrible day for stocks that sent one clear message: Investors are freaked out. Another grim milestone was reached yesterday as the broad Standard & Poor's 500-stock index plunged 6.7 percent and reached its [lowest level since 1997](#). The [NYT puts it in context](#) and reminds readers that 1997 was "before the dot-com boom, the Nasdaq market bust and the ensuing bull market that drove stocks to record heights." The [WP highlights](#) that this latest downward spiral comes after a few weeks when it looked like things could get better, but now there are fears that the recession will be longer and deeper "than even many pessimists had expected." The [LAT points out](#) that those who followed the all-too-common advice of not selling when the market is down have continued to lose money at a terrifying rate, and now many are throwing up their hands and giving up before they lose more.

[USA Today](#) leads with a look at how states are being forced to impose higher taxes on employers and reduce benefits as the number of people filing for unemployment has [reached a 16-year high](#). Funds to pay for these benefits were down in 32 states compared with last year. Yesterday, Congress passed an extension of unemployment benefits after it became clear the White House would support such a measure.

The S&P 500 is down 52 percent from its high reached a little more than a year ago, which marks the "sharpest decline since the Great Depression," [notes the LAT](#). The [WSJ](#) points out that if the index were to finish the year with yesterday's numbers, [it would mark](#) "the worst annual percentage drop in its 80-year history." The Dow Jones industrial average is a bit more insulated from financial stocks, so it didn't plunge as far, but it still fell 5.56 percent to close at its lowest level since March 2003. The credit markets continued to suffer a thrashing as investors ran as far away as possible from [corporate and mortgage bonds](#). Investors continued to seek safety in the warm embrace of ultra-safe U.S. government securities. Demand for short-term Treasury bonds was so high that investors were, once again, essentially paying the government to hold onto their money, and the [LAT](#) notes that the yield on two-year Treasury notes fell below 1 percent [for the first time](#). Commodity prices responded in kind, and crude oil closed below \$50 a barrel for the first time since 2005.

There was some fresh grim economic data yesterday, including news that weekly unemployment claims reached a 16-year high. But as the [WP highlights](#), "[T]he misery on the financial markets had no single cause." Investors are quite simply in full panic mode because they don't know when the pain is going to stop, and many have decided it's better to just watch from the sidelines rather than see their entire wealth disappear. "We'll have a whole

generation of people whose retirement plans have been wiped out," one expert [tells the LAT](#), which points out economists are worried that the market losses have been so great that it virtually assures a long and painful recession is ahead. As people see their nest eggs disappear, they're likely to cut back on spending and fuel the vicious cycle.

Investors are also panicking because of the uncertainty of how much the government can do to solve the problem. The [WSJ](#) points out that since the government decided to pump money into nine major financial companies, their stocks plunged [an average of 46 percent](#). There's no better example than banking giant Citigroup, which received \$25 billion from the government last month but saw its stocks plunge 26 percent yesterday, its [worst one-day percentage decline ever](#). Citigroup shares have lost half their value this week, and its board of directors will have a meeting today to discuss the company's condition. Executives are apparently considering auctioning off pieces of its business or perhaps even just selling the whole company, [notes the WSJ](#) in a separate front-page piece.

Most important of all, though, investors are wondering: Who's in charge here? As markets plummet, unemployment increases, and those close to retirement wonder how they'll make ends meet during their golden years, lawmakers in Washington spent the day [bidding farewell](#) to the longest-serving Republican senator, and Democrats devoted time to an intraparty leadership scuffle. At the same time, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson [basically implied](#) a few days ago that further action would have to wait until President-elect Barack Obama's inauguration. Yes, it's transition time, but apparently no one got the memo that a financial crisis can't be put on hold until all the pieces of the new administration and Congress are in place.

Things are developing much more rapidly than anyone thought possible. As a separate front-page piece by the [NYT's Floyd Norris](#) points out, in late October the Federal Reserve thought the unemployment rate could rise to as high as 6.5 percent this year, and a few days later it turned out that rate had already been reached. And think about everything that has happened since Lehman Bros. collapsed. Now, investors are looking to Washington for answers, and all they get back is a message to wait. The [NYT's Norris](#) says that "Obama may have missed an opportunity to exert leadership" when he resigned from the Senate so soon after winning the presidency.

The [NYT's Paul Krugman](#) takes up this issue and points out that "the emergence of a power vacuum at the height of the crisis" is one disturbing way in which 2008 is starting to look like 1932. Although the deterioration of the economy appears to be picking up speed, "economic policy, rather than responding to the threat, seems to have gone on vacation."

That's not to say everything that has been going on in Congress has been insignificant. The [LAT](#) and [NYT](#) front news that House

Democrats [ousted](#) Michigan Rep. John Dingell from the chairmanship of the House energy and commerce committee and installed Rep. Henry Waxman of California. Dingell is the longest-serving member in the House, and removing him from his favored post after an intense two-week campaign by Waxman was highly unusual for a place that usually [values seniority above all](#). The news was a clear blow to Detroit's Big Three, as Dingell was a reliable ally who has long been criticized for blocking regulatory efforts. Having Waxman at the head of such a critical committee will in all likelihood make it easier for Obama to get his energy agenda through Congress.

Speaking of seniority, one of the reasons that Sen. Hillary Clinton is allegedly interested in leading the State Department under Obama is frustration at her relatively junior status in the Senate. But Democratic leaders may be trying to work around that, [notes the NYT](#). Senate leaders are apparently ready to give the former first lady some sort of leadership role in the Senate, which is part of the reason why she hasn't decided whether she will, in fact, join the Cabinet. An Obama adviser said that Clinton's nomination is "on track" and that the announcement is expected after Thanksgiving. Still, the Senate majority leader is apparently looking for a leadership position that Clinton could take on in the Senate that would have enough stature to appeal to the former first lady.

The *NYT* is alone in fronting news that for the first time a federal judge ordered the release of a [group of prisoners from Guantanamo](#). U.S. District Judge Richard Leon said five Algerian detainees have been held illegally for seven years because the government's evidence in the case was extremely weak. The judge did rule that one other Algerian prisoner shouldn't be released because the government presented enough evidence that he [worked for al-Qaida](#). Leon urged the men be released "forthwith" and also said the government should "end this process" and not appeal the decision. "Seven years of waiting for our legal system to give them an answer to a question so important is, in my judgment, more than plenty," he said.

Nobody fronts the results of an internal CIA inquiry that revealed the agency purposefully misled Congress and investigators during inquiries relating to the 2001 shooting of an airplane carrying [American missionaries in Peru](#). One of the missionaries and her 7-month-old daughter were killed. While at the time the CIA insisted it was one mistake in an otherwise successful anti-narcotics program, the new report reveals that the agency repeatedly failed to make sure that sufficient care was taken to identify and warn the planes before calling on Peruvian fighter pilots to shoot down the target.

Remember that *WP* story from earlier this month about Eugene Allen, the African-American butler who worked at the White House for 34 years? Sony Pictures plans to [turn it into a movie](#).

In a Page One piece, the *NYT* looks into how superstar [Angelina Jolie](#) has been able to shape her public image like few other celebrities. She has been able to successfully change from one of Hollywood's wildest figures into someone who focuses on charity work and her family, all through a cunning ability to control her image and demand certain concessions from the media that can't get enough of her. Jolie now "expertly walks a line between known entity and complete mystery," notes the *NYT*. And most impressively of all, she doesn't do it through huge teams of publicists that are so common in Hollywood. Although Jolie does rely on a longtime manager, not to mention her partner, Brad Pitt, the "keys to her public image belong to her alone."

today's papers

Panic Grips Wall Street

By Daniel Politi

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 7:09 AM ET

The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* lead with yet another terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day at the [stock market](#). The Dow Jones industrial average plunged 5.1 percent and closed below the 8,000 mark for the first time since March 2003. The market is now down 43.5 percent from a high point hit a little [more than a year ago](#). *USAT* [notes](#) that the market has "wiped out nearly \$10 trillion in wealth since the October 2007 peak," and the *WSJ* [highlights](#) that the recent plunges have nearly wiped out "all the gains from the last bull market, which lasted from October 2002 to October 2007." Optimists who had hoped the market had nowhere to go but up after the lows of last month were hit with a cold dose of reality by a string of grim economic news that made it clear the pain is far from over.

The *Los Angeles Times* gives big play to the stock market woes but leads with news that the California Supreme Court has agreed to review [legal challenges to Proposition 8](#), the voter initiative that banned same-sex couples from getting married in the state. The court's move suggests that it wants to resolve all issues relating to marriage between two people of the same sex in one ruling. The court refused to allow the marriages to continue until a decision has been made, but legal experts warn this shouldn't be read as a sign that the court is ready to uphold the ban.

Investors looking for reasons to be anxious about the economy's future didn't have to look far. The leaders of Detroit's Big Three were grilled for a second day by skeptical lawmakers who made it pretty clear the U.S. auto industry shouldn't be expecting a bailout. The Federal Reserve's leaders warned that they expect the economy to be in a recession through the middle of next

year, [if not longer](#); new data showed that builders started fewer homes last month, marking the fourth straight month of declines to reach the lowest level in at least the 49 years since the government has kept track. And those weren't the only data to reach a record. Perhaps most worrying of all, the Consumer Price Index fell 1 percent in October, its biggest one-month drop in the index's 61-year history.

While the average consumer is likely to welcome a decrease in prices, the decrease can be disastrous for an economy and has brought back the much-talked-about fears of deflation, a prolonged period of falling prices. The *NYT* focuses on [deflation](#)—"an economists' nightmare"—in its lead story, while the *WSJ* devotes a [separate front-page story to the issue](#). Deflation was "a hallmark of the Depression and Japan's so-called lost decade," notes the *NYT*. Everyone still thinks the chances of deflation are extremely slim but the fact that it's even a concern ramps up the pressure on President-elect Barack Obama and lawmakers to pass a new fiscal stimulus package. "Whatever I thought that risk was four or five months ago, I think it's bigger now, even if it is still small," Fed Vice Chairman Donald Kohn said. Even talking about deflation now marks an amazing turn of events considering that this summer the big concern was inflation and many economists openly worried about the prospects of stagflation, the simultaneous increase of inflation and unemployment.

The only reason people aren't more freaked out at the record-breaking price decline is that it was mainly due to falling energy prices, which is good for consumers and is generally seen as a bad indicator of long-term trends. Excluding energy and food, prices fell 0.1 percent in October, which is far more modest but hardly insignificant since, as the *WSJ* notes, it marked the first decline since 1982. The *WP* points out that broadly speaking, [economists worry](#) that "businesses are losing any ability to set prices because demand for their goods has dried up." Due to all the depressing economic news, more consumers are choosing to play it safe and save what they have. Or as one economist succinctly [puts it](#): "People are scared to death." The *LAT* points out that this decline in spending suggests that the only way the economy will get a boost is through increased [government spending](#). Indeed, the *NYT* points to a number of statistics that make it seem "clear that the nation is entering a more frugal era after several years of conspicuous consumption."

The nervousness over the economy's future could clearly be seen in the markets, where, as the *WSJ* points out, investors seem once again to be willing to accept nearly no returns in order to sink their money into the safe haven of short-term Treasury bills. The pain wasn't isolated in stocks. The *WSJ* highlights that by some measures, "bonds were hit harder than stocks." The *WP* points out that this anxiety in the bond markets makes it difficult for companies to [raise money](#).

In the *WSJ*'s op-ed page, [Andy Kessler](#) says that while investors are taught that they should listen to the stock market, right now you should "stick wax in your ears and don't listen to the market until February." When it's working properly, the market can be a good indicator of the economy as a whole, but due to the credit crisis, Kessler is "convinced the stock market is at its least efficient today," and investors shouldn't read too much into the declines that are sure to come in the next two months.

While investors have lost trillions in the stock market over the past year, many top officials at companies that are at the heart of the current crisis managed to make a pretty penny over the past five years, [reveals a WSJ analysis](#). Fifteen leaders of large home-building and financial firms made more than \$100 million in that time period, for example. Among the 15 are the heads of Lehman Bros. and Bear Stearns. This is hardly a new phenomenon as periods of economic booms usually translate into astronomical paychecks for those who participated in the bubble. During the technology bubble of the late 1990s, more than 50 people made more than \$100 million right before the crash.

The *LAT* and *NYT* front, and everyone mentions, the latest news from the presidential transition. President-elect Obama has decided to nominate [Tom Daschle](#), the former Senate Democratic leader, as secretary of Health and Human Services. Everyone sees the nomination as a sign that Obama plans to aggressively tackle health care since Daschle is an experienced legislator who wrote a book about the issue. Apparently, Daschle made it clear he would only accept the Cabinet position if Obama also named him the administration's point man to develop a health care plan. "Being a Cabinet secretary is a car and driver and you get to go to the head of the line at the airport, unless you're Defense or State," a Daschle associate [tells the WP](#). "This was key for Tom to have that White House connection." In other transition news, Gov. Janet Napolitano of Arizona appears to be Obama's choice to become [homeland security secretary](#).

Daschle's selection not only provides another example of how Obama is filling his administration with Washington veterans, but also promises to test his strict ethics rules. Daschle's wife is a registered lobbyist whose list of clients might provide conflicts of interest for her husband, but her focus is in the aerospace and military industries. And, as the *NYT* details in a piece inside, Daschle himself is also [open to examination](#). Since leaving the Senate, Daschle has been a board member of the Mayo Clinic as well as an adviser to a law and lobbying firm. Although this might not prevent his appointment, Daschle might have to recuse himself from issues that relate to his former employers, "a potentially broad swatch of the health secretary's portfolio," says the *NYT*, which notes the lobbying firm has dozens of health care industry clients, including pharmaceutical companies and health care providers.

The *LAT* fronts an interesting interview with a senior officer, "Zimbabwe's version of the KGB: the Central Intelligence Organization." The meeting [between journalist and spy](#), which was carried out in the utmost secrecy, reveals how a group of people who could once be counted on to be the most loyal to the president have become disenchanted. The senior officer estimates that 60 percent to 70 percent of CIO officers no longer back President Robert Mugabe. "That the dark heart of Mugabe's web of fear is abandoning him underscores how tenuous his grip on power has become," writes the *LAT*'s Robyn Dixon.

In the *WP*'s op-ed page, *Slate* founder [Michael Kinsley](#) writes that Americans may have just elected a president who is part of the one group that suffers from socially sanctioned discrimination in the United States: smokers. Although Obama claims to have quit smoking, "the evidence is ambiguous." Regardless, if he hasn't quit, "we should forgive him" because his "good habits outweigh his single bad one." And perhaps his failure to quit is part of the reason why he's been able to maintain his now-famous calm demeanor. "If he needs an occasional cigarette to preserve it," writes Kinsley, "let's hand him an ashtray, offer him a light and look the other way."

today's papers

Come on and Save Me

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, November 19, 2008, at 6:51 AM ET

The *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* lead with the chief executives of Detroit's Big Three begging lawmakers for taxpayer-funded aid to [prevent a possible collapse](#). But senators were less than receptive to their plight, and it looks increasingly unlikely that the automakers will get a bailout from Washington [any time soon](#). Even senators who are generally supportive of the industry weren't shy about criticizing the companies. "Their discomfort in coming to the Congress with hat in hand is only exceeded by the fact that they are seeking treatment for wounds that are to a large extent self-inflicted," Sen. Christopher Dodd said. "No one can say they didn't see this coming."

The *New York Times* leads with news that Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens [lost his re-election bid](#) to Anchorage Mayor Mark Begich. It was certainly close, but Begich leads with more than 3,700 votes with approximately 2,500 still outstanding, which is beyond the margin of victory that would allow Stevens to call for a state-funded recount. The victory gives Democrats 58 seats in the Senate, with two races still undecided. The *Wall Street Journal* leads with the lashing that Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, and, to a lesser extent, Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke, received at a hearing [before the House Financial Services Committee](#). Paulson said he wants to keep the rest of the bailout

money for emergencies and allow the Obama administration to decide how best to use the funds. But lawmakers criticized Paulson for his unwillingness to devote some of the bailout money to aid homeowners at risk of foreclosure. *USA Today* leads with AAA's annual [Thanksgiving survey](#) that found that while many Americans are changing their holiday travel plans, they're still, for the most part, making the trips. The total number of people who plan to travel for Thanksgiving is a bit less than last year's record, which marks the first drop since 2002.

The leaders of General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler blamed the current downturn in the global economy for much of their woes and warned lawmakers that if one of the companies were to collapse, it would have [catastrophic consequences for the country](#). The leaders of GM and Chrysler both said that they're at risk of running out of money soon without more federal assistance. While senators, for the most part, said they recognize the industry's importance, they were also quick to emphasize that they're not convinced giving the companies another \$25 billion would be enough to keep the companies out of trouble for very long. When the executives were asked whether they'd be willing to cut their own salaries to \$1 a year, they all said yes. Still, that was hardly enough to satisfy skeptical lawmakers who heaped criticism on the Big Three.

In the *WP*'s op-ed page, [George Will](#) says it's ludicrous to think that the automakers' problems are tied to the current financial crisis. GM has already failed; "the question is what to do about that," and the answer is to do "nothing that will delay bankrupt companies from filing for bankruptcy protection." The problem is, as the *NYT* notes in its business pages, [bankruptcy protection](#) isn't what it used to be. Whereas bankruptcy protection "always offered a glimmer of hope" that a company could reorganize and continue operating, that is increasingly unrealistic in the current climate. Companies are now avoiding bankruptcy protection like the plague because they know that bankruptcy equals liquidation if they can't get credit, and, needless to say, loans are pretty hard to come by these days. One possible compromise would be for the government to offer loans to a bankrupt company, which would benefit taxpayers since they would be the first to be repaid.

That is precisely the solution that [Mitt Romney](#) advocates in an op-ed piece in the *NYT*. Romney says that while the "American auto industry is vital to our national interest," bailing out the Big Three would "virtually guarantee" their demise. Instead, a "managed bankruptcy may be the only path to the fundamental restructuring the industry needs." The government should guarantee financing for the bankrupt companies and make sure that consumers know their warranties aren't at risk. When Republican Sen. Bob Corker brought up the [idea of bankruptcy](#) with government backing, GM's chairman dismissed it as "pure fantasy," noting that such an action "would ripple across this economy like a tsunami we haven't seen. It seems to me like a huge roll of the dice."

Begich's victory not only effectively ends the career of the longest-serving Republican senator but also brings Democrats one step closer to reaching the 60 seats necessary to obtain a filibuster-proof [majority](#). Yesterday, Democratic lawmakers kept the dream of reaching that magic number alive by overwhelmingly voting to allow Sen. Joseph Lieberman to keep his committee chairmanship. "This was done in a spirit of reconciliation," [Lieberman said](#).

The *NYT*, *LAT*, and *WP* all front word that Eric Holder currently appears to be the top choice to become the next U.S. attorney general, although [no final decision has been made](#). Obama's advisers continue the vetting process but plan to officially offer him the job if he gets enough [support from Republican lawmakers](#). Holder, a senior official at the Justice Department under President Clinton, would be the first African-American attorney general. The biggest sticking point in his nomination is that Republicans are certain to bring up that as deputy attorney general he failed to oppose Clinton's pardon of fugitive financier Marc Rich. But few think that will prevent his confirmation.

The *WSJ* fronts word that former President Bill Clinton is prepared to make concessions on his activities in order to help his wife get the position of [secretary of state in Obama's administration](#). Not only would he stop being involved in his foundation's daily activities, the former president has also said he would be willing to disclose the names of all new donors and seek clearance from both White House counsel and the State Department's ethics chief before accepting any money or paid speaking engagements. In addition, he has agreed to publicly disclose "major" past contributors, although no one has been able to define what "major" means.

Despite all these concessions, it's still not clear that the former first lady [even wants the job](#), note the *WSJ* and *NYT*. Although she was apparently enthusiastic about the prospect when Obama first brought it up, she's now wondering whether she wouldn't rather stay in the Senate. She's apparently reluctant to give up the independence that comes with being a senator in order to become a subordinate to a former rival. Of course, this could all be part of a bargaining tactic. But the *NYT* also notes that if she becomes secretary of state, it would be much more difficult for her to get rid of the [\\$7.6 million debt](#) that she has left over from her presidential campaign.

Whether she wants it or not, there are plenty of opinions on whether she should get the job. The *NYT*'s [Thomas Friedman](#) says that too much attention has been paid to the former president's role and activities when the really important question is what kind of relationship Clinton would have with Obama. Having the full backing of the president "is *the* most important requirement for a secretary of state to be effective," notes Friedman, who admits that he's not sure whether Obama and Clinton can have that kind of relationship with everything that went on between them during the primaries. For his part, the

WP's [David Broder](#) is certainly more direct and says that appointing Clinton "would be a mistake." Although she's qualified, the position wouldn't be "the best use of her talents" and isn't what Obama needs. Plus, carrying her husband's baggage would make the job that much more difficult. "If Clinton can be of service to Obama in Foggy Bottom, she can be of even greater value as an ally on Capitol Hill," writes Broder. Meanwhile, the *NYT*'s [Maureen Dowd](#), for some reason, finds it relevant to ask David Geffen what he thinks. Yes, Geffen made a bit of a splash when he badmouthed the Clintons in the heat of the primary battle, and no one doubts his fundraising prowess, but does anyone care what he thinks? In case you do, Geffen likes the idea of the former first lady running the State Department. Clinton and Obama must be breathing a huge sigh of relief.

today's papers Exit Quietly

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 6:48 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with word that the Iraqi government has been firing inspectors general who are supposed to keep an [eye out for corruption](#). These oversight officials were put in place in every Cabinet-level ministry at the behest of American officials in order to bring some level of transparency to the Iraqi government. But as claims of corruption in the Iraqi government increase, it seems Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government would rather get rid of the watchdogs than deal with the growing problem. *USA Today* leads with a new report by the special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction that reports the Pentagon spent about \$600 million in more than [1,200 Iraq reconstruction contracts](#) that were canceled. Almost half of these contracts were canceled because problems with the contractor, including failure to deliver and poor performance.

The *Washington Post* leads with a look at how a number of [political appointees](#) have been transferring over to civil service posts in preparation for the end of the Bush administration. Between March and November, about 20 political appointees in a variety of departments have become career civil servants. The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with, and the *Los Angeles Times* fronts, the hijacking of a [huge oil tanker](#) by suspected Somali pirates more than 450 nautical miles from the Kenyan coast. The hijacking of the Saudi-owned *Sirius Star* supertanker carrying more than \$100 million worth of crude came as a shock because pirates usually operate much closer to shore and don't go after [such huge targets](#). The *LAT* leads locally with news that the California State University system is proposing a plan to [cut enrollment](#) at its 23 campuses by 10,000 students because of the state's budget woes.

The dismissals of the Iraqi oversight officials were done so quietly that no one knows exactly how many [people were actually involved](#). Out of a total of 30 Cabinet-level ministries that have one inspector general each, some say as many as 17 were fired. Other estimates are much lower and Stuart Bowen, the special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction, said he knew of six dismissals. Interestingly, the Washington-based Bowen says much of the blame for this turn of events lies with the United States because it created the powerful positions but provided little training and support for what was an alien concept in Iraqi politics, known for its secrecy and back-scratching during Saddam Hussein's reign. Of course, the suspicion is that Maliki will either seek to leave the jobs vacant or fill them with supporters.

It is difficult for managers to get rid of employees with [civil service status](#), which means the Bush appointees who have changed their status are for all practical purposes guaranteed a job in the Obama administration, at least for a while. These types of transfers are hardly new: The Clinton administration approved 47 such changes in the former president's last 12 months in office. This time around, the most stark example of this practice is in the Interior Department, where six political appointees were given senior civil service positions. Career Interior officials naturally see this as an attempt by the Bush administration to prevent the Democratic White House from putting its mark on the department.

The *WSJ* notes that the hijacking of the Saudi-owned oil tanker "sharply increases the stakes" in the efforts to [protect energy supplies](#). Although hijackings by pirates off the Somalia coast have been on the rise, these attacks are usually closer to shore and none of the affected vessels came close to having the dimensions of the *Sirius Star* supertanker. "What this represents is a fundamental ability of pirates to be able to operate off the coast to an extent we have not seen before," U.S. Navy Lt. Nathan Christensen [tells the LAT](#). "It's the largest ship we've seen attacked." Although there have recently been stepped-up efforts to monitor the Somali coast to try to push back against the pirates, the threatened area is huge and amounts to "four times the size of Texas," notes the *WSJ*. Many fear that this hijacking means that pirates are becoming more daring and sophisticated in their attacks. They certainly have a financial incentive to carry out these risks as ransoms continue to increase. The *NYT* points out the [pirates' profits](#) are expected to reach \$50 million this year.

The *LAT* fronts an interesting look at how the bad economic situation coupled with increasing deficits may be just what the doctor ordered for President-elect Obama to finally be able to overhaul the [nation's health care system](#). Some have been suggesting that Obama should put health care on the backburner since there's so much else to deal with, but others say the new administration will have a rare opportunity to take dramatic action. Not only are doctors and physicians worried about the

newly unemployed joining the millions of Americans who are uninsured, but businesses also see it as an urgent issue since medical benefits eat up so much of their budgets at a time when profits are shrinking.

The *NYT* points out an eleventh-hour plan by the Bush administration to issue a rule that would prohibit health care providers from discriminating against health care workers who oppose abortion or sterilization procedures because of their ["religious beliefs or moral convictions"](#). This means it would be illegal for a health care center to require staff members to perform or assist in these procedures. Three officials from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission are speaking up against the plan, saying that it would put in doubt 40 years of civil rights law that already prohibits job discrimination based on religion.

The *WP* goes above-the-fold with a long profile of Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson that details how the former head of Goldman Sachs has changed quite a bit [during his 30-month tenure](#). Although he was skeptical, to say the least, of government involvement in the economy when he first arrived in Washington, he was forced to change his mind when faced with such a disastrous economic picture. "My thinking has evolved a lot to the point where I've seen regulation up close and personal," Paulson said. "I've realized how flawed it is and how imperfect, but how necessary it is," he added. Paulson said that sometime in the next few weeks he'll unveil a set of plans to update the country's regulatory structure so the government can properly oversee a bigger chunk of the market. He'll also urge the new administration to give the government the power to take over any failing financial institution, not just banks.

"There is no playbook for responding to turmoil we have never faced," writes Paulson in [an op-ed piece in the NYT](#). "We adjusted our strategy to reflect the facts of a severe market crisis, always keeping focused on our goal: to stabilize a financial system that is integral to the everyday lives of all Americans." Paulson insists that as Obama's administration will take over and try to figure out how to best deal with the slump, it will benefit from a more stable banking system as well as having the authority and resources to tackle the problem.

Indeed, in an interview with the *WSJ*, Paulson said he's unlikely to tap into what is left of the \$700 billion bailout package because he'd rather keep it on hold for an emergency and not make decisions that will tie Obama's hands. "I'm not going to be looking to start up new things unless they're necessary or it's just clear that they need to be done," [Paulson said](#). This suggests that the Bush administration doesn't plan to use any of the bailout money to prevent more home foreclosures, a course of action that many have been pressing for. One of the strongest proponents for action in the foreclosure front has been Sheila Bair, chairwoman of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp, whom the *LAT* [profiles today on Page One](#), noting that she's one of the

few officials "whose reputation has actually improved during the financial crisis." Bair's focus on the issue, on top of her willingness to criticize the Bush administration, may earn her a spot in Obama's administration, particularly since the incoming president has always highlighted his plans to include Republicans in his government.

In an op-ed piece in the *LAT*, historian [Matthew Pinsker](#) says that *Team of Rivals*, the book on the Lincoln presidency that everyone seems to be citing these days as Obama puts together his Cabinet, doesn't tell the whole story. While it's true that Lincoln gathered former rivals in his Cabinet, that approach didn't work as well for him as many assume. Not only did Lincoln anger friends, but he also ended up having to rule with an iron fist over his advisers after his former rivals almost destroyed his presidency. "Lincoln was a political genius," writes Pinsker, "but his model for Cabinet-building should stand more as a cautionary tale than as a leadership manual."

today's papers

First Step

By Daniel Politi

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 6:46 AM ET

The *New York Times* and *USA Today* lead with, while the *Los Angeles Times* fronts, the Iraqi cabinet approving the much-debated security agreement that calls for U.S. troops to withdraw [by the end of 2011](#). After nearly a year of negotiations with the United States, 27 of the 28 cabinet ministers who were present at yesterday's meeting voted [in favor of the agreement](#). The Status of Forces Agreement, which would replace the United Nations mandate that expires at the end of the year, now goes to the Iraqi parliament, where a contentious debate is expected to unfold. The *Wall Street Journal's* worldwide newsbox leads with the meeting between President-elect Barack Obama and Sen. John McCain that will [take place in Chicago today](#). The meeting could be mutually beneficial, as Obama will need Republican cooperation in Congress and it gives McCain the opportunity to reclaim his "maverick, bipartisan mantle" after a heated campaign.

The *Washington Post* leads with a look at how, before the election, Barack Obama wrote letters to employees at [seven federal agencies](#) that included descriptions of how his administration would run specific government programs. The American Federation of Government Employees distributed the letters, which were written at the request of the union's president. In the letters, Obama described how he wants to cut back on private contractors, remove existing roadblocks on scientific research, and promote tougher regulations to protect workers and the environment. Many of the promises made by Obama would

require additional spending, which the president-elect has recognized would be difficult to obtain given the current economic conditions. The *LAT* leads with a rare bit of good news for Southern California—[calming winds](#) brought about "the first major break in days" in the fight against the wildfires that broke out on Thursday. As of late last night, the fires were 80 percent contained.

It's unclear how big a fight opponents of the security agreement will put up in parliament this week. The *WP* says that the [overwhelming](#) "cabinet vote indicated that most major Iraqi parties supported it," but opponents continue to insist that the pact would need to be approved by a two-thirds majority. "If we need to get two-thirds, then there will be difficulties," a Kurdish lawmaker [tells USAT](#). Even if it crosses the parliamentary hurdle, the agreement would then have to be ratified by Iraq's three-member presidential council. The Sunni representative on the council, Vice President Tariq Hashimi, has called for a referendum on the pact and could veto any agreement, [notes the LAT](#). But the *WSJ* points out that "his opposition may be thawing," and some Sunni lawmakers have already expressed [support for the agreement](#).

The *WSJ* says that the "substantive points of the deal haven't changed" much since the more than 100 amendments requested by the Iraqi cabinet were mostly [seen as cosmetic](#). The Iraqi government emphasized that the clause that stated that U.S. troops could be asked to stay longer has been removed. "This withdrawal date is firm and holy and will not be changed according to conditions on the ground," government spokesman [Ali al-Dabbagh said](#). In practice, though, the Iraqi government can still ask U.S. troops to stay.

Besides setting the withdrawal date of Dec. 31, 2011, the agreement also calls for U.S. troops to leave Iraqi cities [by the end of June](#). In addition, a joint U.S.-Iraqi committee would decide whether an American service member who commits a serious crime outside a U.S. base while off duty should face an Iraqi court. Does this mean we'll see U.S. troops standing trial in Iraq anytime soon? It's very unlikely, [notes USAT](#) in a helpful Q and A, because it's simply "almost unheard of for a U.S. troop to be off duty and off base in Iraq."

As Congress gets ready to debate whether to bail out Detroit's Big Three automakers, the *LAT* fronts a look at how a [failure in the industry](#) wouldn't just affect the employees at General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. About 70 percent of the parts in most automobiles are made by outside suppliers that employ hundreds of thousands of workers. This is a point that will probably be emphasized this week when lawmakers hear testimony from industry leaders. But in a front-page piece, the *NYT* says that many industry experts say that people often underestimate how quickly [foreign-owned automakers](#) could step in and pick up the slack if one of the Big Three were suddenly to vanish. That's not to say the change wouldn't be

painful, especially considering that foreign-owned automakers use more parts from overseas.

The *NYT* fronts word that Obama's advisers are looking into former President Bill Clinton's fundraising and activities in order to determine whether there's anything that should prevent his wife from [becoming secretary of state](#). This is seen as a sign of just how serious Obama is about making Sen. Hillary Clinton a member of his Cabinet. In fact, Democratic sources tell the paper that as long as they can figure out the former president's role, it's likely that Obama would ask her to take the job. As others have said, it's highly unlikely that Obama would have risked causing another rift in the party unless he was serious about the appointment. While it's easy to imagine that a Clinton confirmation hearing could be heated, a few Republicans gave their support yesterday. "It seems to me she's got the experience. She's got the temperament for it," Sen. John Kyl, the No. 2 Republican in the Senate, said. "So my own initial reaction is it would be a very good selection."

The *NYT* says many pointed to the news that Gregory Craig was named [White House counsel](#) as a sign that Clinton is on the real shortlist for the State Department job. Some had expected the man who represented Bill Clinton during impeachment proceedings to become national security adviser or deputy secretary of state. But Craig was a strong supporter of Obama from the beginning of the campaign and strongly criticized Clinton's claims of foreign-policy experience.

The *WP* fronts a look at how giving the position to Clinton could provide many "benefits and pitfalls" to the [Obama administration](#). Since leaving the White House, Bill Clinton has tried to position himself as "something akin to the world's philanthropist in chief" and as secretary of state, his wife would oversee many of the country's foreign aid efforts, which could turn the "couple into an overwhelming force in global aid." Former presidents are usually kept at arms length, but that might prove difficult with such a high-profile figure who will have a direct line into the administration. If his wife becomes secretary of state, the former president would definitely face increased scrutiny about his fundraising and lobbying activities, particularly since he has refused to publicly disclose the names of those who have donated to his philanthropic activities and his presidential library.

In the famously detailed vetting document that Obama is asking those who want to work in his administration to fill out, one question asks applicants whether there are "any categories of personal financial records ... that you (or your spouse) will not release publicly if necessary. If so, please identify these records and state the reasons for withholding them." The *WP* [points out](#) that "in the margins of a copy of the application leaked from the transition team, the word 'Clinton' is written next to that paragraph."

today's papers

Money Makes the World Go 'Round

By Kara Hadge

Sunday, November 16, 2008, at 5:44 AM ET

The [New York Times](#) and the [Washington Post](#) both lead with [stories](#) about this weekend's meeting of the Group of 20 in Washington to discuss the global financial crisis, while the [Los Angeles Times](#) [stuffs](#) the news. World leaders from 20 countries [drew up plans](#) to begin the process of regulating financial activity conducted across national borders, but they postponed many of the more difficult decisions until their next meeting, scheduled for April 2009. The [LAT leads](#) with the latest on the wildfires sweeping across Southern California. More than 30,000 people have fled and hundreds of homes have been burned.

At the economic summit in Washington, members of the Group of 20, plus Spain, the Netherlands, the United Nations, and other international organizations, gave a greater role in the planning process to developing nations such as China, India, and Brazil. Europeans walked away happy, according to gloating French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and President George W. Bush adopted a far less stringent defense of free markets than he held when he announced [the summit in October](#). Some of the measures to which the group agreed include the establishment of a "college of supervisors" to oversee the activity of financial institutions that operate internationally, closer scrutiny of hedge funds, and more frequent and diligent reviews of countries' financial systems by the International Monetary Fund.

The *NYT* [downplays](#) the summit's conclusions with a quote from an MIT economist who claims that these were "plain-vanilla" measures that could have been accomplished without a summit, and the only significance of the event was that it was attended by the developing nations included in the G-20 instead of just the larger powers of the Group of 8 nations. President-elect Barack Obama, who both papers agree will face more difficult decisions at the spring summit, was not present this weekend but did send two senior advisers in his place. The *LAT* goes inside with a [story](#) on Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, who took the opportunity at the summit to say that he hopes for improved relations between his country and the United States under the Obama administration.

In California, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proclaimed a state of emergency yesterday in Los Angeles and Orange counties, adding to his earlier proclamation for Santa Barbara County. Fires yesterday tore through a mobile home park in Sylmar, where 500 homes were destroyed, in a blaze that a local fire chief described as the worst he'd seen in the city in three decades

on the job. Flames struck downtown L.A., as well, where the temperature reached a record hot and dry 93 degrees. Several highways in the area have been shut down, throwing a wrench in the evacuation plans of many.

Calls for reform abound in another [front-page story](#) in the *LAT* that laments the present failure of 401(k) plans to guarantee financial security for Americans' retirement years. Committee meetings in the House of Representatives and other research groups have entertained suggestions from experts that include returning to a system that guarantees a pensioner's benefits instead of just the employer's contribution, as well as a proposal to offer government-backed retirement savings accounts that would yield a fixed return, provided for by the elimination of tax breaks that participants in 401(k) plans currently receive. To date this year, the average employee's 401(k) balance has dropped by 21 to 27 percent.

A front-page *NYT* [story](#) kicks off a series examining the role natural resources play in inciting conflict in Africa. Over an expanse of column inches not often granted to such topics, the article considers the value of the tin ore that the Congolese unearth through the exploitation of the poor. Inside the *A* section, the *LAT* includes [news](#) that the United Nations has sent in an official to facilitate talks between Congo's president and the rebel leader responsible for clashes with soldiers in the eastern part of the country.

On a more trivial note, the *NYT* also fronts a [story](#) that wonders if Obama will be the first e-mailing president. While the president-elect hopes to be the first to have a laptop in the Oval Office, he may have to surrender his BlackBerry and give up e-mail, as President Bush did, because of security risks and laws that allow presidential correspondence to become public information.

The *WP* [reports](#) that Iraq's prime minister and its top Shiite cleric will support an agreement to keep U.S. forces in Iraq through 2011, when the measure goes before the Iraqi parliament. The article predicts that this will greatly aid in the agreement's passing. The *NYT*, however, takes a less sanguine view of the pact's chances for success, [pointing out](#) that the most prominent Shiite bloc did not attend yesterday's meeting with top Iraqi politicians, held to gauge support for the plan.

The *WP* goes inside with a [feature](#) that draws parallels between the Great Depression and today's economic climate. Maryland residents who grew up in the 1930s share their tales of scrimping, saving, and going without luxuries. The interviewees wag their fingers at grandchildren who are too quick to pull out the credit card, but also remind the younger generations that even the Great Depression came to an end.

Also in the *WP*, Chris Cillizza breaks down [five post-election myths](#). Mostly, Cillizza takes a contrarian's perspective, claiming

this election did not signal the death knell for the Republican party and choosing Sarah Palin was not necessarily a mistake. However, he also points to pre-election predictions that fell flat (namely, black voters and the young were not the crucial factor in Obama's victory).

In the *WP Magazine*, though, faux-news takes top prize in a feature on *The Onion*. The [piece](#) goes inside the production of the satirical weekly newspaper, where stories are invented to fit the headlines.

A [story](#) in the *NYT* Style Section buzzes about possible schools the Obama daughters might attend in Washington, a topic about which D.C. parents have been speculating since Nov. 5, as [Hanna Rosin noted](#) in "XX Factor." Will they choose a place like Sidwell Friends, the elite private school attended by Chelsea Clinton? Or could the Obamas shock the region's parents by enrolling their daughters in public school, as former President Jimmy Carter did with his daughter? Washington's "power parents" are holding their breath in anticipation.

today's papers National Securities

By Jesse Stanchak

Saturday, November 15, 2008, at 6:33 AM ET

The *Washington Post* leads with [fears](#) that the global economic crisis might [create](#) new national security risks. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with a [local wildfire](#) but devotes its top national story to [progress](#) on a security agreement between the United States and Iraq. The *New York Times* [leads](#) with the economic downturn finally hitting Silicon Valley. The *Wall Street Journal* tops its worldwide newsbox with ongoing wrangling between Congress and President Bush over the possibility of providing financial aid to ailing U.S. automakers.

Hard times around the world may endanger our security at home, the *WP* reports. Global economic woes can aid terrorist recruitment efforts and destabilize friendly governments, even as the United States struggles to maintain funding levels for security programs. Nations that are already troubled (like Pakistan) or rely on oil revenues (like Yemen) are seen as especially susceptible to a rise in terrorist activity.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki privately agreed to support a proposed security agreement with the United States, a move the *LAT* says is a major step toward getting the pact ratified. The agreement would have U.S. troops out of Iraqi cities by next summer and out of the country by the end of 2011. The agreement also covers military conduct in Iraq, including limiting the ability of troops to search Iraqi homes. Maliki hasn't

publicly said he'll support the deal, however, and his comments on the pact seem to be damning it with faint praise. But even if he endorsed it enthusiastically, the paper says the deal could still go south, especially if it's put to a referendum and certain factions oppose it. Maliki's cabinet is expected to meet Sunday to decide whether to endorse the deal or not. The *WP* [goes inside](#) with radical Iraqi Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr saying his followers will resume their attacks on U.S. troops unless they leave Iraq soon and do so without signing a security agreement or establishing bases.

The *NYT* focuses on the recession's impact on the tech sector, an area of the economy once believed to be disconnected from the credit crunch hitting Wall Street. But as businesses and consumers alike are cutting their tech spending, Silicon Valley is beginning to show signs of weakness the likes of which haven't been seen since the dot-com crash of 2000.

Congress will reconvene next week to consider moving some type of economic relief legislation. At one point, Democrats hoped to pass a more expansive bill, but it now appears that any sweeping legislation will have to wait until after Barack Obama is sworn into office. A short-term extension of unemployment benefits seems likely, but the future of a package of loans to the auto industry is up in the air. The *WP* goes above the fold with the Democrats' [revised agenda](#) for the rest of 2008, while the *WSJ* [fronts](#) a look into General Motors Corp.'s push for aid in the face of bankruptcy.

The *WP* off-leads with a [look](#) at how the global economic crisis has empowered developing nations like India, China, and Brazil, whose economies remain relatively robust. That point is underscored by this week's summit, at which 20 of the world's largest economic powers will debate how best to tackle the problem, a role usually filled by the more developed "G-8" nations. Meanwhile, the *WSJ* [declares](#) that Europe is officially in a recession.

Everyone fronts Sen. Hillary Clinton emerging as a top candidate for secretary of state in the Obama administration. After meeting with Obama in Chicago on Thursday, Clinton joins Sen. John Kerry and Gov. Bill Richardson on the short list for the post. The *NYT* [adds](#) that while no specific job offers were made, secretary of state isn't the only position the two former rivals discussed. Naturally, none of the papers has any named sources on this info, and the *LAT* even [goes so far](#) as to ponder aloud why staffers might have decided to leak this to the press. Is Clinton trying to create a tide of public support to bolster her chances? Maybe Obama is just testing public reaction to her possible nomination?

The *WP* [notes](#) that Clinton's simple refusal to comment on the story marks a real departure from her earlier claims that she'd prefer to remain in the Senate. The *NYT* says a Cabinet post may be appealing to Clinton because she's finding her influence in the Senate limited by her relatively junior standing. The *LAT* argues

Clinton could face a contentious confirmation hearing if she's offered the job, due largely to her husband's ties to foreign donors, but the *WP* suggests Clinton would be buoyed through by her good relations with her fellow senators.

The *NYT* [frets](#) about the influence of lobbyists on the Obama transition team.

The *WP* [goes inside](#) with a look at the constraints the next secretary of state will have to work against while trying to shore up the department.

The *NYT* [fronts](#) an interesting look at the role the Mormon Church played in outlawing gay marriage in California. The paper finds the church gave as much as \$20 million to an organization working to build support for a gay marriage ban. The *NYT*'s story might focus on the Mormons initially, but the story broadens to include a range of religious organizations that worked together to support the ban. But what's fascinating here isn't the groups that helped the measure succeed, it's the arguments they used to get undecided voters on their side. The piece is a fascinating postmortem, and it's a welcome change from the parade of distressingly one-dimensional stories about black voters putting the ban over the top.

Inside, the *WP* [covers](#) the backlash against supporters of the gay marriage ban, including actions against businesses and religious organizations. The reprisals have taken the usual forms of protests and boycotts, but also vandalism and possibly even the mailing of white powder to the headquarters of the Mormon Church.

Tough, complicated "clamshell" packages are meant to deter shoplifting and protect the product inside, but the *NYT* says the packaging might just be [hurting the consumer](#). The paper says that each year 6,000 Americans wind up in the emergency room after hurting themselves wrestling with an overpackaged product. The paper says some companies are finally listening to consumer complaints and opting for packaging that can be opened "without a saw."

The *WP* [fronts](#) a piece on poor Congolese who fled violence and returned home to find looters had stolen the small luxuries they worked for years to afford.

The best-selling book series *Twilight* is set in the real-life small town of Forks, Wash. The *LAT* [examines](#) the effect the series' popularity is having on the 3,100-person town, which drew 7,000 tourists so far this year.

war stories Serious People

A guide to Obama's national-security transition team.

By Fred Kaplan

Friday, November 21, 2008, at 10:28 AM ET

Looking over the list of top players on President-elect Barack Obama's transition team, one gets the sense that serious people are coming back to power. [On the national-security team](#) in particular, they're professional, thoughtful, cognizant of the world's complexities, engaged with cutting-edge ideas but not dogmatic about them. This may not sound exciting, but those who think it doesn't constitute "change" haven't paid enough attention to these last eight years of [Jacobin](#) zeal and blundering.

Let's look at a few of these players:

Sarah Sewall, director of Harvard University's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy and deputy assistant secretary of defense for peacekeeping during the Clinton administration, was a member of the panel that Gen. David Petraeus assembled a few years ago to write the U.S. Army's [field manual on counterinsurgency](#). She also wrote an insightful foreword to the [book version](#) of the manual (published by the University of Chicago Press), in which she grasped the truly radical nature of the strategy, the overhaul in tactics, training, and weapons procurement that its full adoption would require, yet also the risks that it entails—the danger of becoming enmeshed in endless, unnecessary wars—and the still greater demands that it places on informed civilian control.

Michèle Flournoy, another former deputy assistant secretary of defense during the Clinton administration, is president of the Center for a New American Security, a Washington think tank that in its mere two years of existence has emerged as a magnet for innovative strategic thinkers. When John Nagl and Nathaniel Fick, two of the military's most creative officers, quit the Army and the Marines, respectively, they came to CNAS—not Brookings, as might have been the case a decade ago—or, more to the point, CNAS reached out to them. Richard Danzig, a member of the center's board, is said to be a strong candidate for Obama's secretary of defense (or deputy secretary if Robert Gates is asked to stay on for a while). Flournoy's papers on the Iraq war call for gradual troop withdrawals and a policy of ["conditional engagement,"](#) in which the United States agrees to maintain any troop presence only if the Iraqis hammer out their political differences. This may seem tepid in light of the current debate over the Status of Forces Agreement—which will almost certainly demand a total U.S. pullout by 2011—but at least her views are grounded in an understanding of war as a political instrument with, in Iraq's case, a goal of stability, not some utopian dream.

Wendy Sherman, a former assistant secretary of state, played a big role in negotiating the nuclear accord with North Korea toward the end of the Clinton years. The accord had its imperfections (it was called an "Agreed Framework," which is to

say, it was meant to have a sequel, which Clinton lacked the time to complete and George W. Bush lacked the slightest interest in so much as beginning). But it did keep the Yongbyon nuclear reactor's fuel rods locked up and thus kept Kim Jong-il from building an A-bomb. (Bush's moralistic refusal to hold talks left Kim an opening to do just that.)

Rand Beers, a counterterrorism specialist in the National Security Council under Presidents Clinton and George H.W. Bush, [resigned in protest](#) during George W. Bush's administration, stating that the latter's policies—particularly the war in Iraq—strengthened al-Qaida and exacerbated the threat to America.

Clark Kent Ervin used to be inspector general in the Department of Homeland Security, until he was canned by George W. Bush after complaining about incompetence in the department's intelligence-gathering divisions.

Judith "Jami" Miscik was a longtime analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency—rising, in 2002, to be the agency's deputy director for intelligence—who resigned in 2005, along with many career veterans, during the short-lived, scapegoat-hunting tenure of Porter Goss. In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, Miscik came under sustained pressure from the White House—especially from aides to Vice President Dick Cheney—to find links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida. According to Ron Suskind's book [The One Percent Doctrine](#), Miscik came back from one such meeting "shaking with rage" and telling then-Director George Tenet that she would not put up with any more pressure. (Tenet backed her up, at least for a while.)

In other words, the appointments of Beers, Ervin, and Miscik in particular send a signal that Obama may be more willing to hear, and possibly heed, uncomfortable dissents from men and women of principle. This alone is comforting news.

war stories

Can We Really Negotiate With the Taliban?

We must reach out to willing factions. But first they must believe we can win.

By Fred Kaplan

Monday, November 17, 2008, at 5:29 PM ET

What's up with [Hamid Karzai](#)? The Afghan president told reporters on Sunday that he would welcome peace negotiations with Mullah Mohammed Omar, the former leader of the country's Taliban regime, and would guarantee his security if he came back to Kabul for the talks.

Several top U.S. officials—Gen. David Petraeus, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, and even President-elect Barack Obama—have recently expressed interest in reaching out to "reconcilable" Taliban fighters, but I somehow doubt they had Mullah Omar in mind.

Omar, recall, was the one-eyed "commander of the faithful" during the Taliban's totalitarian reign. He harbored al-Qaida and allied himself closely with Osama Bin Laden. He has probably been hiding out in western Pakistan since the Taliban was ousted in 2001, but he's still considered a major threat; the Bush administration put a \$10 million bounty on his head, thus far to no avail.

In short, if there are any reconcilable Taliban, Mullah Omar is not among them. And if he does set foot in Afghanistan again, Karzai should pledge to shoot him on sight, not give him safe passage; that's certainly what Omar would do to Karzai, should the tables ever turn.

It is doubtful that Karzai was serious about the offer. Here's what he said about Omar in full: "If I hear from him that he is prepared to come to Afghanistan or negotiate for peace, I, as president of Afghanistan, will go to any length providing protection. If I say I want protection for Mullah Omar, the international community has two choices: remove me, or leave if they disagree."

Two inferences can be made from this remark. First, Karzai is not really proposing anything; Omar has no interest in negotiating for peace, and Karzai certainly knows this. Second, he made the remarks in Kabul after returning from a meeting in London, so he may have meant them for domestic consumption—as a demonstration that he's not a puppet of the West.

Still, Karzai's remark does raise a substantive issue: *Are* there reconcilable Taliban? It's fatuous to consider talks with Mullah Omar, but who might be a useful negotiating partner, under what circumstances, and to what end?

The idea of a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan first gained currency last month, when [Gen. Petraeus](#) said, during a talk at the conservative Heritage Foundation, that some sort of deal with the Taliban would ultimately have to be made. "This is how you end these kinds of conflicts," he said. There is "no alternative to reconciliation."

Petraeus has had experience at talking with provisional enemies. As commander of the 101st Airborne Division, he pacified Mosul in the early days of the occupation in Iraq by paying off tribal leaders, assimilating them into positions of authority, and subsidizing development projects. Later, as commander of multinational forces in Iraq, he crafted the "Anbar Awakening,"

in which Sunni insurgents in Anbar province (and gradually elsewhere) formed alliances with U.S. forces to defeat the common enemy of al-Qaida in Iraq.

So, when Petraeus took up his new post as head of U.S. Central Command (which encompasses all South Asia, including Iraq and Afghanistan), his first instinct was to explore how to co-opt tribal leaders and less extremist Taliban fighters.

[David Kilcullen](#), an Australian counterinsurgency specialist who advises the U.S. and British governments, [said](#) on Fareed Zakaria's CNN talk show Sunday that 90 percent of those who call themselves Taliban "are actually tribal fighters who are motivated by local interests, or by desire for monetary gain, or by a desire for revenge because of something that we've done, rather than because they support the political agenda of the Taliban." In other words, they are susceptible to co-optation.

But among the many differences between Iraq and Afghanistan, two are particularly worth noting in this context. Petraeus ran his co-optation campaign in Mosul just after U.S. forces had overtaken Baghdad and forced Saddam Hussein to flee. The alliance in Anbar was struck at the initiative of the local Sunnis, who saw AQI as a bigger threat than the American occupiers.

In other words, in Mosul, Petraeus was dealing from a position of strength; in Anbar, he had something the insurgents desperately wanted.

So, if this sort of approach has a chance of succeeding in Afghanistan, Petraeus and his NATO counterparts have to muster the same preconditions. They have to deal from a position of strength, meaning they have to win some key battles to show the Taliban that cooperating with NATO would mean joining the winning side. And they have to give the Afghan people—the tribes that are siding with the Taliban opportunistically—something they want, which in this case means a basic sense of security.

The Taliban have gained a foothold in Afghanistan because the central government is dysfunctional. For instance, the police are thoroughly corrupt, so the Taliban come in and impose their own brand of order and justice (which most people prefer to no order or justice at all). The essence of counterinsurgency is to protect the population—to dry up the support for the insurgents, lure the population to the government's side. This is more vital than merely chasing insurgents all over the countryside.

When Petraeus, Gates, Kilcullen, and others—including, I hope, President-elect Obama—advocate "negotiating with the Taliban," what they really mean is negotiating with those who currently support or call themselves Taliban for opportunistic reasons.

Karzai's notion of holding peace talks with Mullah Omar, or any other hard-core Taliban, is senseless. But talking with softer-core factions would be equally fruitless unless they were first persuaded that the United States and NATO can win—i.e., that they (assisting the Afghan National Army) can protect the population slice by slice, village by village. Otherwise, the "reconcilable" Taliban will also view an offer to negotiate as a sign of weakness and a prelude to the hard-core fighters' victory.

well-traveled Life Classes

Changing society through culture and literature, philosophy and conversation.

By Peter Terzian

Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 6:56 AM ET

From: Peter Terzian

Subject: Learning To Take Photographs the Martin Parr Way

Posted Tuesday, November 18, 2008, at 9:00 AM ET

[Martin Parr](#) is taking a picture of my breakfast.

With an impish smile, he glides behind our chairs, leaning over our shoulders to neatly frame pale yellow eggs, fat sausages, grilled tomatoes, and racks of thin, evenly toasted slices of bread. The 12 photographers gathered in the dining room of the [Northbank Hotel](#)—eight men, four women; some professionals, some enthusiasts—study him eagerly. We are on the Isle of Wight, a roughly diamond-shaped piece of land in the English Channel, for an educational weekend with Britain's pre-eminent documentary photographer. Occasionally Parr discusses technique and technology with individual members of the group, but mostly we learn by watching him. The lesson is simple: Photograph what you love.

In Parr's case, this means traditional breakfasts, seaside resort towns, dazed tourists, English people caught being their unguarded English selves. Parr's photos are suffused with nostalgia for the postwar country that he grew up in, a make-do, working-class world of garish entertainments, greasy meals, and unapologetically frumpy homes that he captures in brilliant, saturated color. (Often, he adds a blast of flash in broad daylight, making his subjects paler than usual.) At times, his pictures veer toward the grotesque, and he has been accused of misanthropy. His career is bigger in continental Europe than in his home country; with Brits, he says, "I can confirm all their worst nightmares." In a recent monograph, a critic writes that Parr's work betrays "amused disappointment" and calls his subject "the human effects of globalized corporate culture"; his depictions of

English food are "close to hatefulness." But on the Isle of Wight, I detect more amusement than disappointment—he seems to be perpetually smiling—and he tucks into a glistening rasher of bacon, cooked on the Northbank's Aga stove, with gusto.

Our weekend with Martin Parr is one of the inaugural events of London's new [School of Life](#), the brainchild of Sophie Howarth, formerly a curator of public programs at the [Tate Modern](#). Howarth's mentor and collaborator is writer Alain de Botton, whose books, such as *How Proust Can Change Your Life* and *The Art of Travel*, invented their own genre: literary self-help. The school's courses—on such broad-stroke subjects as "Love," "Work," and "Family"—encourage enrollees to seek self-improvement in the writings of Plato and Rousseau rather than the pages of *Real Simple*. But the organization's brightest idea might be its "holidays," which pair marquee-name writers, artists, and scholars with weekend destinations that complement their chosen trades. Howarth asked Parr to lead the school's first holiday to the location of his choice. The quintessentially English Isle of Wight, with its taffy-colored towns and seasonal vacationers, was a natural fit. Parr and his wife, Susie, take a yearly trip here—"usually on a bank holiday," he says.

The Northbank Hotel is located in Seaview, a small village on the northern coast of the island. "Remember," Parr tells us on Friday evening as we gather in the nautically themed hotel bar, "we're back 20 years. You think it's 2008, but it's 1988." A short distance away—out the sliding doors, over a canted green lawn with a flapping Union Jack and tables shaded by umbrellas marked with the [Pimm's](#) logo, across a thin stretch of shingle—is the Solent, the branch of the English Channel that separates the island from the mainland. (A 20-minute ferry ride connects Portsmouth and Ryde, the nearest large town to Seaview.) Day and night, ocean liners and shipping vessels glide past the hotel.

Most of the clocks in the Northbank Hotel have stopped. In the lobby, a framed portrait of Winston Churchill sits atop a table next to a rotary telephone and a particularly large marrow, a type of gourd that seems to be the island's signature crop. On the side lawn of the hotel, inexplicably, is a weather-warped piano. Everyone remarks on the sunshine—after a cold, wet summer, England is experiencing an unusually warm September—but the inside of the hotel has the legendary briskness of English hotels. We wear our jackets. Before going to bed, I turn on the heater in my room, an electric grate with glowing-red coils and fake coals that light up. In the morning, I stand before the tap with my little pink stick of Pears soap, waiting for the water to run lukewarm.

Parts of the Isle of Wight haven't escaped modernization—on a bus ride inland, I spot a Staples, a Tesco supermarket, and a few other chains. But Seaview is seemingly untouched by time. Walking up the high street, past a tea shop and a small store that sells "provisions," I think of Marianne Moore's poem "The Steeple-Jack":

Dürer would have seen a reason for living
in a town like this ...
... with the sweet sea air coming into your
house
on a fine day, from water etched
with waves as formal as the scales
on a fish.

On the ferry from the mainland, a video plays commercials for some of the island's attractions. There is a castle in Carisbrook where Charles I was imprisoned. Osborne House, Queen Victoria's magisterial summer residence in East Cowes, is open to the public. But Parr stresses at the beginning of the weekend that we won't be going anywhere near these tourist sites. I ask him if we're going to see the Needles, three mountainous rocks that jut into the ocean and are the island's primary postcard fodder. Nope—too obvious, too overdone.

Instead, our group spends the weekend crisscrossing Wight in a minivan, in search of what Parr calls "Britain at its absolute best." The [Brighstone Holiday Centre](#), for example, is pure Parr-World, a self-catering campsite on the southwest coast of the island (otherwise known as "the back of the Wight"). When we arrive, a silent culture clash takes place. The photographers, bulky cameras swinging from their necks, fan out to take pictures of the camp's rows of miniature chalets with their Mondrian-esque, primary-colored doors. The campers, resting in folding chairs on a perfectly green blanket of lawn, watch the photographers skeptically. Two chickens dart around the site, ducking under mobile homes—or "caravans," as they're called over here—to escape the pursuing camera lenses.

A little while later, Parr directs us to the Haylands Horticultural Show, an annual event held at a church in Ryde. Local farmers have displayed their largest and most shapely products, which are judged by such criteria as condition and uniformity. (To taste them would mar their appearance.) Potatoes, apples, raspberries, shallots, cranberry beans, cabbages the size of human heads, and marrow—marrow is everywhere—are embossed with prize pins and displayed on paper plates on tables that run the length of the church hall. Cameras at the ready, Parr and his acolytes dart up and down the aisles, snapping both the carefully arranged vegetables and the crowd, who stand in clusters and contemplate the harvest. One might wonder, judging from the median age of the horticulturists—a man in his '90s, a regular contestant since 1978, won prizes this year for 20 of his 24 entries—if this is an English tradition on the verge of extinction. But I'm betting that the Haylands Horticultural Show will live on for years to come. The Isle of Wight seems quite un-self-conscious of its eccentricities and fageyisms. It's quite happy being its changeless self.

From: Peter Terzian
Subject: Welcome to Parr-World
Posted Wednesday, November 19, 2008, at 7:04 AM ET

In Sandown, a working-class resort on the Isle of Wight with a wide, golden beach, the members of [Martin Parr's photography class](#) shoot a miniature golf course, a rinky-dink amusement park, and a cricket field. I notice that my vision has taken on a Parr-like cast. Looking over the railing of the elevated main street, I get an aerial view of a beachside cafe, where a family, their ample flesh roasted red, savors slick plates of sausage and beans. Meanwhile, Parr spies a "car boot sale"—a flea market where vendors sell goods from their car trunks and hatchbacks—and we follow him there. The merchandise forms a capsule history of 20th-century British culture: [Rupert Bear](#) books, [Cliff Richard](#) DVDs, the self-published first and second editions of *The History of the Sandown Conservative Clubs*.

As we gather back at the van, seven air force jets blaze down the strand in formation, leaving red, white, and blue smoke trails that form a cloud like a melted Bomb Pop. The moseying pedestrians come to a standstill. It's the [Red Arrows](#), someone says—the RAF's aerobatic team, which performs displays of synchronized flying around the United Kingdom. Children, grannies, young couples with spiky gelled hair, all look up at the sky, shading their eyes from the sun, oblivious to the photographers capturing their open-mouthed poses. The planes swan and pirouette, break apart and reshuffle themselves like a deck of cards. Parr looks as pleased as if he had organized the air show for our pleasure.

Parr has invited a friend, [Jem Southam](#), whom he calls "Britain's greatest landscape photographer," to be a co-instructor for the weekend. Southam is gentle and earnest where Parr is puckish. His dense, painterly images of English forests, ponds, fields, and rock falls offer a different kind of sublime than Parr's witty documentation of English society. Often, Southam photographs the same location over months or years, illustrating the effects of time and fate on the countryside.

Southam directs our minivan to Whale Chine, a breathtakingly steep ridge of coastal cliffs that he has been photographing since the 1990s. Dressed in cargo shorts, hiking boots, and a corduroy blazer with a map sticking out of the pocket, he looks like a traditional British explorer-gentleman. He handily balances a large-plate camera—the kind that 19th-century photographers used—as he leads us to the edge of a cliff and onto a wooden staircase that plunges into a deep ravine. The staircase halts abruptly midway down; after that, we shin along a rope and hop over dirt paths and stone ledges to the beach, 140 feet below the cliff top. The photographers scatter along the shore, taking pictures of the sea, the piles of garbage that have accumulated at the foot of the cliffs, the silver and rust horizontal lines that

rivulets of water have painted down the rock face. Southam sets up his camera on a tall tripod and aims the lens at a rock fall—rain regularly chips away at the cliffs. These rocks weren't here a month ago, he tells us, and at the current rate of erosion, the Isle of Wight will disappear in 8,000 years. We watch Southam climb up a stepladder to the viewfinder and duck in and out from under a large black cloth. After much preparation, he takes precisely one exposure. "This is going to cost me 15 quid," he explains, "so you don't exactly go bang-bang-bang."

At the beginning of the weekend, Parr sets out two challenges for the group. Prizes—signed Martin Parr books—will go to whoever takes the most interesting photograph of the hotel and whoever finds the best postcard of the Isle of Wight. He doesn't define what he means by "best," but an evening slide presentation makes clear that his own taste leans toward kitsch. In addition to postcards of shopping malls, holiday camps, highways, postwar German housing projects, and other mundanities, he hoards—"perversely"—Margaret Thatcher plates, Spice Girls chocolate bars, Lawrence Welk trays, and other junk-culture souvenirs. ("If I didn't collect Saddam Hussein watches," he says, "no one would.") Parr's massive collections will one day be inherited by the Victoria and Albert Museum.

We find the most fruitful postcard shopping in [Ventnor](#), another quaint seaside town, with Victorian-era residences skirting a steep hill. It's Sunday, and the antique shops on the high street are closed; there is a foot race today, and a scant few half-marathoners run their final miles through the quiet city. The photographers scout the souvenir shops along the beachfront street. Martin and Susie Parr rest outside a Victorian bathing hut on rented deck chairs made from brightly colored, mismatched fabrics.

Back at the Northbank Hotel, over a cream tea, the group gathers for a collective vote. (Parr refrains from casting a ballot in either contest.) A young art school student wins the postcard contest for a weird, blurry card of a collie running along the shore. Each photographer displays his or her pictures of the hotel—some chintz drapes, the moldering piano, the telephone table marrow—before we elect one of the Union Jack framed by a hotel window and surreally reflected in a wardrobe mirror. It's appropriately Parr-ish.

From: Peter Terzian

Subject: The Importance of Being Earnest

Posted Thursday, November 20, 2008, at 6:56 AM ET

The School of Life is housed in a sleek storefront on Marchmont Street in London's Bloomsbury neighborhood. The ground-floor shop, painted in cool gray with bright yellow signage, reflects the school's tongue-in-cheek approach to its own mission. Aphorisms are typeset on large sheets of paper and suspended in the street-facing window; a quotation from Emerson was on rotation the week that I visited. ("All my best thoughts were stolen by the ancients.") Clusters of cedar trunks rise from floor to ceiling. A carefully curated selection of books is shelved by the reader's immediate need rather than by subject: books for those in love or for those worried about death. If you stand looking out through the window at the street, you can watch the faces of the passers-by as they try to puzzle out what kind of establishment the School of Life is. A jar of free candy bars on a front counter is popular with local children.

The school's single classroom is downstairs in the basement—and when I use the word *basement*, I don't mean to imply a dark, cement-walled room. Around the School of Life's cellar walls runs an illustrated mural by artist [Charlotte Mann](#) that depicts the sort of cheerful cultural clutter you might find in the world's best rec room: bookshelves crammed with art books, great novels, and DVDs of classic films; paintings by Picasso and Breugel; a guitar and a copy of Bowie's *Aladdin Sane*; a soccer game on the television—all drawn in a loose, squiggly freehand. There's no sign of the chalk-dusted desks and humming fluorescent lights typically found in a continuing-education classroom. Instead, chairs are arranged in semicircular rows. The room is softly lit; during classes, a table is set with hummus and pretzels, and the wine flows freely, symposium-style.

On a Monday evening in September, the school launched its "Work" course.

[Roman Krznaric](#), a self-described "writer and teacher on creative thinking about the art of living and social change," gives us colored pens and large sheets of paper and asks us each to draw a "career map." Make yourself comfortable, he tells us, feel free to sprawl out on the carpet. The members of the class—who seem to be in their late 20s and 30s and who range from a barrister to a cheese monger—giggle nervously. Yet there we are, our pens swirling and dipping across our papers as we excitedly cast our employment histories into geographical form.

Taped onto the basement walls are quotations about work, from Thomas Carlyle and Mark Twain down the cultural high-low scale to Rosanne Barr; we break off into clusters in front of our favorites and discuss them. We watch a slide presentation on the history of work from Egyptian slavery to the rise of women in the paid economy. We sketch out our family trees, with an emphasis on the roles that choice and fate have played in our forebears' work lives and ours, and we pair up to chat about our work histories. Krznaric—an Australian with thick, curly hair and an appealingly open, stubbly face—explains that over six

weeks, we will be "trying to discover a way of working that's more interesting, more creative, more adventurous." In future sessions, students will take to the Bloomsbury streets to interview passers-by on their work lives; have the option of participating in a job swap with fellow classmates; and query diversely employed visitors to the course, including a hedge-fund manager and a druidic bard. The first evening's session runs well over its two and a half hour time slot, but the students are so energized, no one seems to notice.

In one corner of the room is a plush Victorian divan, scrolled at one end, of the type that Freud used. I lie upon it the next day while Susan Elderkin leads me through a one-on-one "bibliotherapy" session. Elderkin asks me about my reading history and habits (where do I read? what books figured largely in my childhood?) and delves into personal issues that might affect my choice of reading material (what do you feel is missing from your life?) before coming up with a list of suggested titles. Elderkin, who has published two novels, was awarded a place on *Granta* magazine's best of young British novelists list in 2003, and her therapeutic prescriptions lean heavily toward fiction. I admit that I'm a tough nut to crack—I'm an ardent fiction reader who once worked for the book review section of a New York newspaper. Nevertheless, she suggests some titles that I've heard of but haven't read, and afterward, I head down to [Foyles](#) on Charing Cross Road to seek out Shirley Hazzard's *Transit of Venus* and Helen Garner's *The Spare Room*.

The list of School of Life events and programs goes on. Group meals, where perfect strangers gather to share food and practice the art of conversation at Bloomsbury's [Konstam](#) restaurant, are scheduled for January and February. (Two meals held around Valentine's Day have a matchmaking theme; one is for straight singles and the other is for single gay men.) A Sunday morning lecture series of "sermons," as the school cheekily calls them, features well-known writers and artists on what Sophie Howarth, the founder and director of the School of Life, describes as "rather ungroovy virtues." Writer [Alain de Botton](#) will speak on pessimism, popular scientist [Robert Winston](#) will extol curiosity, and Sam Roddick, founder of "erotic emporium" [Coco de Mer](#) and daughter of Body Shop entrepreneur Anita Roddick, will discuss seduction. Future holidays include a "Sky Holiday" in an observatory, led by cloud expert [Gavin Pretor-Pinney](#), and an "Austerity Holiday," featuring Krznic and Sara Maitland, a writer at work on a book about silence, in Northumberland, near St. Cuthbert's home on [Lindisfarne Island](#). Not all of the programs are of the so-crazy-it-just-might-work variety: Good old-fashioned psychotherapy with licensed psychotherapists is available for individuals, couples, and families.

Howarth is a London native with a shock of straight hair and the energy of a Superball. For seven years, she developed educational programs at the [Tate Modern](#)—"the most dreamy job," she says—before hatching a plan to create a space where people could meet for culture and conversation. She flirted with

various concepts, including a philosophical cooking school, before settling upon "a kind of ideas store." ("Every little girl wants to have a shop," she says.) Friends ribbed her that she wanted to develop a "university of life." She protested before realizing that that was indeed what she wanted to do. "And what would they teach at the University of Life?" she asks. "They'd teach how to die well, how to raise children, how to enjoy your job. Through a lot of conversations with different people, I began to think it would be better if we just had a very few subjects, and they were big subjects, and they were totally enduring. And we didn't change them a lot, because then we could really do the research."

The School of Life's course programs were developed over a year and a half with the help of various experts, many of whom are now on the school's faculty. Actors and performers were called in to help choreograph classes; picture researchers created audio-visual programs. Along the way, de Botton served as a tutelary spirit, helping to set the intellectual agenda and structure curriculum. Indeed, the school might be seen as a natural extension of de Botton's books, which address contemporary issues using the teachings of Greek philosophers or Enlightenment thinkers. "I'm interested in how culture can inform our lives and be of assistance to us by echoing and enhancing our own dilemmas and life challenges," de Botton says. "We feel less alone—we feel that we have thousands of years of reflection and responses to things."

From the beginning, seducing a potentially doubtful public with good design was an important consideration. Everything about the School of Life, from the shop layout to the Web site to the stationery letterhead, is art-directed to the teeth. "I don't see why education should always have such bad design," says Howarth. "If it's about communication, which it is, then communication means good fonts, inspiring graphics, strong pictures—obviously." Howarth and de Botton were careful to build in a healthy dose of humor. "We've had to pedal extra hard to embed within our offering certain things to reduce British anxiety," he says. "We are dead earnest, but in order to be earnest in this culture, you have to joke along. You have to work extra hard against an audience that can very easily think it's pretentious or American—an insult."

One of Howarth's inspirations is indeed American: Dave Eggers' [826 National](#), a quirky, nonprofit chain of tutoring and writing centers that fosters literacy among young people. Each branch is fronted by a kid-friendly shop. One sells pirate supplies; another, robots; another, Sasquatch paraphernalia. The School of Life, says Howarth, "takes a bit of the openness of America, a bit of the intellectual and philosophical culture of France, and perhaps some of our British reticence as well." She hopes to eventually open up more schools, perhaps even in the United States. "Because we're concerned with the big ideas and enduring themes," she says, "they're pretty culturally exportable. They're the same things people worry about all over the world."

It's easy to get sniffy about Howarth and de Botton's ambitious project. And yet their meticulous organization and rigorous quality control have turned what might have been pie in the sky into a very inspiring reality. I visited the School of Life at a time when personal circumstances had laid me low. I came back to America with a wholly different attitude. The School's Isle of Wight holiday had expanded my horizons by taking me to a place of great natural beauty where I might never have gone on my own. It forced me to mingle with total strangers from other fields and walks of life. I began to take pictures again and to think about photography in new ways. I only had the chance to attend one session of the school's "Work" course, but it encouraged me to think about my career path in relation to my parents' and grandparents' and to better appreciate the freedoms and opportunities they had given me.

Howarth and de Botton's idea—to change society, one life at a time, through culture, literature, philosophy, and conversation—is quixotic. The thing about quixotic ideas is that, every so often, they work.

what's up, doc? Shots All Around!

The case for immunizing everyone against the flu.

By Sydney Spiesel

Wednesday, November 19, 2008, at 7:05 AM ET

Problem: Influenza is a common viral disease. Because it's so common (in any one year, somewhere between 5 percent and 20 percent of Americans will get the flu) and because people tend to call any illness with fever, sore throat, vomiting, or diarrhea a "flu," it is often taken casually—more a fact of life than a cause for anxiety. Many of these misnamed infections are pretty minor, but true influenza is often quite a serious disease, leading to more than 200,000 annual hospitalizations in the United States and about 36,000 deaths every year. Unfortunately, catching the flu doesn't guarantee immunity—the virus's unstable genetic makeup changes frequently, and the immunity stimulated by an infection or a shot probably won't be helpful in the next year if even a minor change occurs and a new strain emerges. And sometimes those new strains are exceptionally dangerous. The "Spanish flu," the worst of these varieties, appeared in 1918 and is thought to have killed somewhere between 50 million and 100 million people worldwide—between 2.5 percent and 5 percent of the world's population—during a two-year period.

The vaccine: In most years, the circulating influenza virus is particularly bad for infants and the elderly. People with chronic illnesses like asthma, heart disease, or diabetes are also at higher risk for severe illness and death. So, the first flu-immunization campaigns focused on the elderly and on patients with

significant chronic diseases. (The vaccine is not approved for use in children younger than 6 months.) The recommendations broadened as it became clear that children in the 6-months to 2-year age range were also at high risk for complications of flu and hospitalization, expanding first to include children up to age 3, then age 6, and, this year, 18.

There are several advantages to broadening the range of people to be given flu [shots](#). Because influenza carries substantial risk of requiring hospitalization, giving more people shots will certainly decrease the annual U.S. hospitalization rate and death rate, even though the vaccine isn't perfect—about 25 percent of the time, it fails partly or completely. There is also a secondary benefit: People who have been immunized are much less likely to pass the disease on to others who are unprotected or incompletely protected, a phenomenon called "herd immunity." That's the main reason for the push to immunize all children through age 18—those hacking and spewing youngsters are influenza's version of Typhoid Mary.

New study: If we're going to give annual flu shots to children from 6 months to 19 years old, the parents of babies, pregnant women, people 50 years and older, and everyone else with a chronic disease, maybe everybody should just get it. Starting in 2000, the Canadian province of Ontario offered free flu shots to everyone older than 6 months. Fortunately for science, though perhaps not for public health, the other Canadian provinces continued to offer the flu vaccine just as we do in the United States—targeted to specific populations, like the very old, the young, and people with chronic disease. This "experiment in nature" gave Canadian public-health researchers [a unique opportunity to compare the benefits of universal influenza immunization with targeted policies](#).

Results: It's slightly dicey business to compare data from Ontario with those of the provinces that didn't enact a universal-immunization policy. Researchers can't be sure that the differences in the rate of immunization actually caused the differences in influenza diagnoses, hospitalization rates, or excess deaths. In fact, during the seven-year period under study, there was improvement in flu-vaccination rates in all the provinces. As a result, influenza statistics everywhere in Canada improved—but they improved a lot more in Ontario than in the rest of Canada. Influenza-associated deaths dropped by 57 percent in the rest of Canada, but they fell by 74 percent in Ontario. Every other statistic about influenza in Canada—flu-related cases seen in emergency rooms, doctors' offices, or hospital admissions—showed exactly the same pattern: Things are significantly better in Ontario. We do need to be a bit skeptical—that difference might, indeed, be due to some other environmental, economic, or educational difference between Ontario and the rest of Canada. But this evidence is the best we have today, and it's probably good enough to serve as a basis for changes in public-health policy. The only Ontario patients who didn't get significant benefit from flu shots were the elderly. As

other studies have also shown, it seems as if it's simply harder to give the elderly good protection against flu using our standard methods of immunization, and there is active ongoing research to develop new, more potent vaccines. Meanwhile, we keep giving older people the present vaccine, hoping that at least some will benefit.

Conclusion: The next question is, Can it be done? Judging by the results in Ontario, the answer seems to be "yes" but only by providing newer sites for immunization, more easily available to the public—for instance, schools, stores, airports, train stations, even election polling sites. Should we do it? People afraid of needles are going to hate me for saying this, but yes, I think so. Extrapolating from the Canadian results, I think it is very likely that a policy of universal influenza immunization will lower hospitalization and death rates and even be economically advantageous. But, of course, it's easy for me to say: As a health care provider, I've already gotten my shot this year.

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Calling it a "shot" is not quite accurate these days, since an exceptionally good vaccine that can be administered as a nasal spray is now available for many patients. I have been using this vaccine more and more in my office, and believe me, the kids in my practice appreciate it.

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