

Slate.com

Table of Contents

[Advanced Search](#)

[books](#)

The Vanishing City

[books](#)

Ready, Get Self, Go!

[books](#)

The Party vs. the People

[books](#)

China's Tell-Nothing Ethos

[chatterbox](#)

The Adventures of Jimmyflathead

[chatterbox](#)

When "Skinny" Means "Black"

[corrections](#)

Corrections

[culturebox](#)

Dude, You Stole My Article

[culturebox](#)

"Baboons Are Simply Too Small for Leopard Bait"

[dear prudence](#)

Hubby's My Future Step-Brother

[did you see this?](#)

The Seinfeld Reunion Show, 2027

[dispatches](#)

On the Front Lines of the Global Food Crisis

[dvd extras](#)

Candid Camelot

[explainer](#)

Will Respirators Help Our Olympic Athletes?

[explainer](#)

Why Do Banks Fail on Fridays?

[explainer](#)

Can You Stockpile Gasoline?

[explainer](#)

Can My Shrink Rat Me Out?

[faith-based](#)

Let the God Games Begin

[fighting words](#)

The Man Who Kept On Writing

[five-ring circus](#)

Hot SI Medal Pick: Im Over Park in Men's Archery

[five-ring circus](#)

The 2008 Olympics

[five-ring circus](#)

China Goes for (All of) the Gold

[five-ring circus](#)

The Beijing Olympics: a Visitors' Guide

[five-ring circus](#)

Summer Olympics Disaster Guide: Opening Ceremony Edition

[five-ring circus](#)

Full Speedo Ahead

[food](#)

Beyond Wontons

[foreigners](#)

Death of a Writer

[gabfest](#)

The Risky Man Gabfest

[human nature](#)

The Price of Survival

[human nature](#)

Breast-Feeding Kills

[human nature](#)

Fast-Food Conflation

[map the candidates](#)

Vacation Eve

[moneybox](#)

Harming Farming

[moneybox](#)

Always Dumb Politics. Always Wal-Mart.

[moneybox](#)

America's Smartest Banker

[movies](#)

Eminently Quaffable

[movies](#)

Bud Movie

[other magazines](#)

Watch Out, Michael Moore

podcasts

R. Kelly: the Audio Book

poem

"The Intention of Things"

politics

Lifehacking for Candidates

politics

No Penalty

reading list

Olympic Marathon

recycled

August

shopping

You Are Now Free To Move Your Kid About the Country

slate fare

Introducing the SlateOlympics Twitter Feed

slate v

The Chinese Are Coming!

slate v

Damned Spot: Drilling McCain on Oil

slate v

Bookmark: Pressure Kicker

technology

The Anthrax Truth Movement

technology

Wandering Through the Desert With Windows

television

Gangsta Pap

the audio book club

The Audio Book Club on Brideshead Revisited

the chat room

Broken Windows

the green lantern

Video Stores vs. Online Rentals

today's business press

China Slows Down

today's business press

Chrysler Turning Japanese

today's business press

Stocks Roar Back

today's business press

Beware of Cheap Oil

today's business press

Goodbye Subprime, Hello Prime

today's papers

Prison Break

today's papers

Case Closed?

today's papers

Gonzalez's Eleven

today's papers

A Farewell to Arms

today's papers

Beyond Subprime

today's papers

The Deported

today's papers

Scientific Inquiry

war stories

Annual General Meeting

webhead

The Lazy Man's Guide to Web 2.0

webhead

How To Talk to a Search Engine

Advanced Search

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

books

The Vanishing City

The life and death of Beijing's alleys.

By Rob Gifford

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 6:50 AM ET

Once upon a time Beijing, like China, knew what it was. It was static, it was poor, but in the minds of its mandarins, it was a brilliant civilization, and it was the center of the world. Peasant revolutions, new emperors, nomadic invaders came and went, but the Celestial City remained the same, its order

set in stone, as immovable as the walls of the city itself.

Beijing as we know it today—including its famous *hutong*, or alleyways—was initially built by Kublai Khan, the great Mongol emperor, in the 13th century. Then, between 1405 and 1421, the Yongle emperor of the Ming dynasty supervised the construction of the Forbidden City, where he and successive emperors would reside. This beautifully symmetrical edifice—formidable, impenetrable, ordered—symbolized the harmony of the capital, balancing Heaven and Earth.

But it was in those Mongol-built *hutong* outside the imperial city where real life went on. There were richer *hutong* neighborhoods and poorer ones, but most were made up of courtyard houses, walled and enclosed, the architecture mirroring the inward-looking nature of Chinese civilization. Many of the narrow lanes were arranged in grids, running from east to west, and, though the houses were enclosed, they formed close-knit communities. Children played out in the lanes, and the shouts of vendors selling their wares echoed off the crumbling brick walls along the alley. Life for centuries in Beijing was lived very close to the ground.

Westerners, arriving in large numbers for the first time in the 19th century, were unimpressed. "There is not a more squalid collection of houses in an Arab village or in the old City of Limerick," wrote a Western journalist in 1861. They set about trying to change Beijing, as they set about trying to prize China open to the outside world.

Slowly, reluctantly, the city, like the country, began to change as it searched for a new, modern identity. In the early 20th century, railroads, telegraph lines, tarmac roads, and street lighting began to appear. But the *hutong* remained, largely untouched even through the Japanese occupation of the 1930s. The Communist Party, after its conquest of China in 1949, launched an assault on everything old, as it pushed toward its new utopia—a modern, proletarian identity. It wrenched the Chinese from their obsession with the past, tearing down the ancient city walls, and turning the temples into barracks and workshops. New utilitarian apartment blocks were constructed around Beijing, and old *hutong* courtyards were

divided up among the masses as land and property and housing were nationalized. But the *hutong* themselves remained, saved by the continuing poverty of a country that could not afford to destroy any form of livable housing.

It is only now, in the last 10 years, with Mao long dead and gone, that the Beijing government has set about destroying the city's famous lanes. Their central location has made them prime real estate, and many have been demolished to make way for shiny new office buildings and apartment blocks for the emergent middle classes. The lanes that survived so much else could not survive the assault of the market.

Residents are compensated for their homes, but not enough to buy an apartment in the block that is then constructed on their land. So, most people are forced to relocate to the farthest outskirts of the city. Many have welcomed the upgrade—the offer of an apartment with heating and indoor plumbing—but some have resisted, holding out for more compensation. They hold residents' meetings and attend public forums to discuss how some of the *hutong* can be saved. But the combined power of the Communist Party and the wealthy real-estate developers is always too great for the little people to resist, and everyone is forced out in the end.

There were 7,000 *hutong* in 1949; now there are fewer than 1,300. More than 1 million residents out of a population of some 17 million were evicted between 1990 and 2007, as the old parts of the city were razed. It has all been part of the \$22 billion makeover to change Beijing's identity forever and to make the 2008 Olympic capital a faster, higher, and stronger city.

Michael Meyer records this orgy of destruction and the ongoing struggle for a new identity in his excellent book [*The Last Days of Old Beijing*](#). Like Peter Hessler's *River Town*, it is a haunting portrait of the interaction between change and changelessness in China. Meyer, like Hessler, was a Peace Corps volunteer in southwest China in the mid-1990s, and on arriving in Beijing a few years later, he says it was "love at first sight." Indeed his book reads like a love letter to the *hutongs* and to Old Beijing itself, a snapshot snatched before the scene disappears for ever.

For two years, while he volunteered as a full-time English teacher in a local school, his home was two small rooms without a bathroom in a *hutong* in Dazhalan, one of Beijing's oldest and poorest neighborhoods. This, writes Meyer, is one of the world's densest urban environments, half a square mile made up of hundreds of alleyways housing "57,000 people, including one foreigner."

In *The Last Days of Old Beijing*, you can smell the public latrines. You can taste the dust in the lanes and feel the claustrophobia. You can hear the shouts of the recyclers as they prowl the alleyways, collecting plastic bottles and cardboard. The locals have a name for the bearded American in their midst—Little Plumblossom—and adopt him as one of their own. In return, he details their lives as they deal with the change all around them.

Dazhalan is a world unto itself, partially insulated from the convulsions taking place in the wider city but aware that it lives on borrowed time. Change inevitably penetrates the maze of the *hutong*, but the inhabitants still cling on to their old ways, and the characters Meyer portrays reflect some of this confusion: his students, torn between the modernity they see around them and the traditions of their families; Meyer's fellow teacher, Miss Zhu, who longs to have a baby but wonders whether she will bring it up in the neighborhood where she herself grew up; Soldier Liu, who considers Beijing a paradise compared with his home village in the countryside; Recycler Wang, for whom trash is a future, of sorts; and the ever-present Widow next door, who is constantly, affectionately, upbraiding Meyer for his wasteful ways ("Little Plumblossom, you dolt!").

The main character, however, and Meyer's cleverest device, is a figure who haunts every chapter just as it haunts the *hutongs*, a figure whom Meyer calls the Hand. Everyone fears the Hand, a symbol of the unseen governmental power that still exists and cannot be impeded. The Hand comes in the night and, like some demonic Chinese Zorro, slashes a character in white paint upon the walls of houses to be razed. The character, *chai* (*destroy*), is a silent cloud hanging over the *hutongs* and a silent theme running throughout the book. Every day, the residents wonder if today—tonight—they will be visited by the Hand. "The Hand didn't have to listen to ... residents at council

meetings and public forums. The Hand just erased and drew, erased and drew."

The main characters are also the Dazhalan *hutong* themselves—the living, breathing communities that are disappearing. As the traditional courtyard houses are destroyed, the residents are forced to exchange their close-knit, horizontal existence for the vertical loneliness of a high-rise apartment on the outskirts of the city. Meyer beautifully dissects the tensions between tradition and modernity in the minds of the Chinese people and examines the identity crisis that still persists, for Beijing, and for China. A question lingers throughout the book: How much of your history should you hold onto, and how much should you leave behind?

Perhaps it will all work out. You feel that, in the end, Michael Meyer thinks it will. Perhaps Beijingers will find the balance between the past and the present and the future, and the Chinese people will relax into their new identity, knowing who they are and what they are, as they move on.

But that has not happened yet. As the last of the old *hutong* neighborhoods are destroyed, it seems that more time is needed for the dust to settle in the streets of Beijing, and in the Chinese mind.

books

Ready, Get Self, Go!

China's younger generation discovers the identity crisis.

By Ann Hulbert

Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 7:03 AM ET

"My youth began when I was twenty-one. At least, that's when I decided it began. That was when I started to think that all those shiny things in life—some of them might possibly be for me." These opening sentences of *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, a semiautobiographical novel by one of China's young expatriate stars, 35-year-old filmmaker and writer Xiaolu Guo, have the sound of a generational mantra. Ask pianist Lang Lang, the 26-year-old virtuoso who will be performing at the Olympic opening ceremony on Friday and who has produced a ghost-written memoir (two, actually: [a young-adult version](#) and another [for grown-ups](#)) timed for the occasion. He, too, has lately been making up for a lost childhood. Chief among the youthful indulgences he and Guo's narrator, Fenfang, tardily

seize on is one that an older Chinese generation doesn't begin to grasp: the thrilling pursuit of self-discovery.

It is, of course, one of the West's favorite sports, and Xiaolu Guo and Lang Lang have rightly gauged the Olympic season to be an ideal moment to showcase the struggles of Chinese neophytes in this nationally unfamiliar endeavor. The coming-of-age marathon, you could call it. Life coaches might draw a common lesson from the experiences described in these very different books: The belatedly liberated self, primed by years of precociously mature discipline, just might leave the rest of us in the dust. Westerners, watch out!

"We don't have much the individuality concept in China." So explains Z, the narrator of Guo's previous novel, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), who is learning English as she writes—and who shares Fenfang's predicament: They are both young peasant women determined, in a global era, to escape the grinding confines of communal village life. Their goal in the big city is to explore that disorienting individuality concept. For Z, sent to London to learn English to help her parents' burgeoning shoemaking business back home, the most challenging lesson of all is figuring out what she and the British man she quickly moves in with each mean when they "use the word 'self,' " a novelty for her. In *Twenty Fragments* (which Guo wrote a decade ago in Chinese and recently decided to recast in English), Fenfang has escaped the sweet-potato fields to seek her fortune in Beijing's TV-and-film industry. She veers wildly in her quest to define a more distinctive role for herself than Extra No. 6787, the identity stamped on her form by the employment office.

Lang Lang's situation is a variation—in a very different key—on the same theme. Almost as soon as the 2-year-old boy sat down at the piano his musician parents bought for their apartment in the northeastern outpost of Shenyang, he began hearing a relentless refrain from his father, Lang Guoren: You will be "Number One." Younger than Guo's narrators, who were reared to serve family needs, Lang Lang was a "little emperor" of the one-child-policy era—hovered over by parents ready to sacrifice all to fulfill his illustrious trajectory. But that hardly spelled empowerment. Lang Guoren, his own musical career thwarted by the Cultural Revolution, directed his son's every moment toward a single mission. Where Fenfang flees on her own to "cruel Beijing" to figure out what she might "care for in life," Lang Lang at 9 was dragged there (and away from his beloved mother) by a fanatical paternal taskmaster intent on taking China's grueling competition system by a storm. It was only after a teenage Lang Lang arrived in the United States, armed with a scholarship to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, that the driven son and prize-obsessed performer found the freedom, and the need, to explore the possible meanings of that alien word *self*.

In many ways, of course, Lang Lang's is a classic prodigy story. Yet he also casts it as a timely Chinese tale of blinkered discipline capped by Western-abetted creative self-expression (never mind entrepreneurial ambition: You wouldn't know from his memoir what a spectacular self-promotional enterprise he has lately spearheaded). Guo, too, sees herself and her narrators in an emblematic light. "We're the first generation to leave what we know out of choice, not for economic reasons, but to think about following our dreams," [Guo explained in an interview](#). The new venture can be almost as terrifying, in its way, as the coercive, collective uprooting endured by older generations in China. Z and Fenfang, setting out alone in gray cities, cleave so tightly to men that they must then claw their way free. For Lang Lang, the dream fueled by his father takes a nightmarish turn early on. When Lang Guoren's intensity erupts into an insane attack on his son one day, the traumatized 9-year-old refuses to touch the piano for months and sinks into a depression.

Yet, if a lonely emptiness haunts the dislocated women and the motherless boy, so does a restless ambition and spirit of resilience. Guo's narrators have a striking tenacity, hardly the navel-focused and commitment-averse style typically associated with Western self-seeking. Z gets frustrated with her British boyfriend, 20 years older than she and worn down by a defiant independence that has brought him scant happiness. He retreats from real intimacy and undermines his own talents, merely dabbling in sculpture and driving an old delivery van. For her, as for Fenfang, individualism and self-expression are mysteries that demand mastery, and they're impatient, as Fenfang puts it, "to forge my self-centered individualist life into some kind of healthy activity," whatever it takes. They've been raised to work hard, and, like their author—who has already written four novels and made five films—they don't waste time, buffeted though they feel by urban chaos and private confusion. They're determined to see for themselves, better late than never, whether " 'self' is the original creativity for everything," as Z exclaims in a giddy moment.

And where another boy might have been crushed by such a brutal father, and derailed as an artist by the urge to defy him, Lang Lang emerges a spiky-haired dynamo eager to put his own passionate mark on the music he plays—overeager, in fact, as critics began to say when the early raves for the prodigy faded. The teen version of his memoir (*Playing With Flying Keys*), packaged with a brief introduction by Daniel Barenboim about the deep pleasure that good practicing can bring, gives the odyssey a didactic spin: Lang Lang's convalescence while an injured hand heals also helps cure a fragile and unexamined self. With the help of American friends and mentors, he has discovered a balanced soul within, he says, and has been liberated to explore other dimensions of life as well as the inner depths of music.

The adult version (*Journey of a Thousand Miles*), which is rawer and more direct—more youthful—from the start, betrays more

of Lang Lang's struggle to moderate an obsessive-compulsive dependence on the piano and temper a desperate need to win. Entering his 20s, his injury forces him finally to pause, and he discovers that he "didn't have to practice ten hours a day to stay sane. ... Was I ever really a normal teenager? Maybe not, but I also wasn't crazy. The piano is a beautiful thing, but during that month I learned that it isn't the only beautiful thing." To a Western reader, though, the most amazing feat is his apparent ability to soar above his rage at a man who has heartlessly tyrannized him. Lang Lang discovers his inner child *and* finds he can be his own boss, and his father's, too.

This unshackled young self takes charge with manic gumption, but also with grace. At his Carnegie Hall solo debut at 21 in 2003, he invites his father up on stage for one of his encores. It's a duet for piano and *erhu*, the Chinese fiddle Lang Guoren plays expertly, and Lang Lang makes a point of noting that he has changed the original name of the piece, "Competing Horses" or "Horse Race," to "Two Horses." With that deft gesture, he conveys deference and at the same time claims his independence. Watch this [video](#) of the galloping pair, and it is obvious this son has no doubt now about who is leading the way.

books

The Party vs. the People

What might the new populist protest in China portend?

By Minxin Pei

Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 5:59 AM ET

Making sense of the momentous change taking place in China has never seemed more pressing, or more impossible. Even the most knowledgeable observers of the Middle Kingdom now have a hard time agreeing on where the country is headed or what China's rise portends. If you read the business press, filled with stories about the Chinese economic juggernaut, you would believe that China is rewriting the laws of economics and will continue to grow forever. If you follow the annual Pentagon reports on Chinese military power, China seems to be replacing the former Soviet Union as America's "peer competitor," soon to challenge U.S. supremacy. But if you care to look at the countless books and articles about China's internal transformation since the end of the Cultural Revolution, you would be totally confused.

One school, perhaps the dominant view, contends that China's capitalist revolution has not only created an economic miracle but also launched the country on the road toward gradual—but inevitable—democratization. Extrapolating from the West's own historical experience, believers in the power of capitalism to transform politics are convinced that China is no different: A liberal order is evolving. They cite as evidence the expansion of

personal freedoms, the emergence of nongovernmental organizations, the spread of the Internet, and the increasing sophistication of government policies made by pragmatic technocrats.

The other school questions the assumption that capitalism can foster political liberalism on its own. Skeptics note that instead of opening up the political process to greater public participation or establishing the rule of law, the ruling Communist Party has, since the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, consistently resisted pressures for democratic reforms. By skillfully deploying the economic and repressive resources of the state, the party has stifled internal dissent, co-opted social elites, and solidified its hold on power.

In *Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of a New China*, Philip Pan—a prizewinning reporter for the *Washington Post* who spent nearly eight years in China (2000-07)—bolsters the case for the skeptics. He weaves his portrait of a "new China" out of the dramatic stories of individuals whose real-life experiences he views as a guide to where China is right now and may be headed. They do indeed supply a vivid glimpse of a system in turmoil, and he's right not to find revolutionary heroes in his cast of characters. But Pan may miss stirrings of collective resistance, quieter and less colorful, that could challenge the party's authority and doom its self-perpetuated political monopoly.

One of the decisive struggles for China's future is, ironically, being waged over its history. As Pan deftly shows through his first batch of stories, history in China is resolutely suppressed by the party—and turned upside down. Hu Jie, a documentary filmmaker, gets fired from his government job for daring to portray an obscure college student's opposition to the government, never mind that her defiance and execution occurred a half-century ago. In the juxtaposition of his next three characters, Pan illuminates with rare clarity the ironic reversals at the heart of a political and economic order that increasingly resembles crony-capitalism, maintained for the benefit of precisely those who were the targets of the Communist-led revolution. In today's China, a well-connected few reap a disproportionate share of the rewards of the growth, while the majority of the people—ordinary workers and peasants—see their job security disappear, wages go unpaid, and houses get bulldozed for urban development. If they dare to make a fuss about their unjust treatment, they risk immediate repression.

Pan has found individuals who epitomize this sharp contrast. Chen Lihua, a Beijing mogul and China's 54th-richest person, accumulated a real-estate fortune worth at least \$1 billion, thanks to political connection—*guanxi*—which in the new political order can turn a virtual nobody into a billionaire overnight. Among other murky dealings, she managed to get the most senior members of the Communist Party leadership to intervene on her behalf so that her company could clear an old

neighborhood in downtown Beijing for building commercial real estate. Zhang Xide is a corrupt party boss in an impoverished county who ordered police to beat up villagers who refused to pay taxes; gleefully, he told Pan how he chased a six-months-pregnant mother of two into a river trying to "persuade" her to undergo a forced abortion.

If the new order is kind to Chen and Zhang, it is merciless toward people like Xiao Yunliang, a worker employed in a large state-owned iron alloy factory in Liaoyang. A region run by party bosses with close ties to the mafia, Liaoyang is a part of China's rust belt where most state-owned enterprises were driven into bankruptcy in the late 1990s by both competition and mismanagement. Millions of blue-collar workers like Xiao were left stranded, abandoned by the state and cheated out of their pensions. In early 2000, Xiao and thousands of co-workers staged days of demonstrations to demand that the government honor its promises. Instead, the authorities deployed thousands of police officers, sowed distrust among workers by turning some of them into informers, and arrested protest leaders. Xiao was given a choice: He could either take an all-expense paid vacation to a faraway scenic province or face jail. Xiao chose jail without any hesitation—and served four years.

In such individual acts of defiance and moral courage, Pan resists the journalistic temptation to see the rejuvenation of the collective soul of the "new China." He devotes the remainder of the book to the stories of six ordinary citizens who dared to challenge the new inequities and corruptions of China, but he does not romanticize their accomplishments. Their heroic efforts yielded limited results—and some of them paid a heavy price. A retired army surgeon he writes about, Jiang Yanyong, forced Beijing to admit the truth during the worst moment of the sudden acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) crisis in March 2003. Yet he was abducted and silenced after he demanded a year later that the party admit its mistake in ordering the June 4 crackdown in Beijing in 1989. Cheng Yizhong, an enterprising newspaper editor, turned his *Southern Metropolitan Daily* into a vehicle that championed social justice, but he was arrested on trumped-up bribery charges. Chen Guangcheng, a blind self-taught lawyer Pan writes about, was once hailed by the government as a model citizen for speaking out for the rights of the disabled. He is now serving a four-year term for "disturbing social order" after he challenged the cruel family-planning measures enforced by a local party boss (who, incidentally, received a six-month training in public administration at the University of New Haven and interned in the New Haven mayor's office in 2000).

It is not hard to see why Pan pessimistically concludes that "the Communist Party is winning the battle for the nation's future." Yet perhaps there is as great a risk in seizing on individuals as emblematic failures as in glorifying them as saviors, or demonizing them as villains, of the nation. China is a huge country, and there are signs that resistance in more collective form may be on the rise and become more potent. The party has

done well since 1989, but its policies have become increasingly untenable, especially with rising income inequality and worsening environmental degradation. The legitimacy of outright repression is declining. The party may incarcerate those trying to set up an opposition party, but it cannot deploy brute force against ordinary citizens demanding clean air, drinkable water, and affordable health care.

The Chinese citizenry today is not just more diverse and demanding. It is also becoming sophisticated enough to probe the soft spots (such as corruption, inequality, and incompetence) of the autocratic system and challenge it without taking excessive risks. So last year when residents of Shanghai tried to stop the city government from building a magnetic levitation train that would threaten their health and property values, they organized a collective "street stroll" and "shopping trip" in central Shanghai. They forced the government to suspend the project. Such new populist political tactics—deploying a Chinese version of "civil disobedience"—will be more effective in forcing the party to heed the voices of the people. They're also likely to inspire more innovative collective endeavors to demand better government.

So the battle for China's future is far from over. Pan is right to write off the Communist Party as a democratizing force. But in history, many autocratic regimes that were once thought invulnerable eventually succumbed to "people power." China will be no different.

books

China's Tell-Nothing Ethos

What the man on Mao's right doesn't say.

By Andrew J. Nathan

Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 5:59 AM ET

The title seems to promise a timely exposé in the age of the tell-all memoir, on the eve of the Beijing Olympics and China's bid for global openness: [*The Man on Mao's Right: From Harvard Yard to Tiananmen Square, My Life Inside China's Foreign Ministry*](#). All the ingredients of privileged insight are on display: proximity to power, a hint of American savvy, a grim domestic reference, a promise of foreign intrigue. But open Ji Chaozhu's memoir, and you'll discover a very different kind of document, more of a memo to the grandkids than to history. As witness to a half-century of Chinese turmoil, at home and abroad, he says surprisingly little that is not already known. The revelation here is of how persistent the tell-nothing ethos of a totalitarian era can be. Ji isn't alone in hoping against hope that discretion, rather than dissension, might somehow pave the way to more openness.

Ji Chaozhu, chief English interpreter in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, really was the man on Mao's right. He's there at Mao's shoulder in an endless succession of photos with foreign leaders atop Tiananmen, starting in 1959, and there in a famous picture of Mao and Edgar Snow in 1970. Even more of the time, he interpreted for China's premier, Zhou Enlai. He also interpreted for foreign minister Chen Yi and for Deng Xiaoping during Deng's 1979 visit to the United States. That's Ji next to Deng, both men in cowboy hats, in a widely circulated photo that created enormous U.S.-China goodwill.

Ji truly was a well-connected insider in MOFA, ultimately rising high in the ranks. He served as head of the America desk in the early 1980s, as Chinese ambassador to Britain, and, finally, as deputy secretary general of the United Nations from 1991-96. And well before that, he mingled with China's leaders on a wide variety of crucial occasions. He accompanied Zhou to the Bandung Conference in 1954 and to the Geneva conference on Indochina later that year. He went on Zhou's 14-nation Africa-Asia tour in 1963-64. But you won't find any new details about Zhou's substantive dealings with other countries' leaders. Ji's idea of vividness is to describe the premier's avuncular relations with his staff and deft responses to local protocol challenges.

Ji was the sole other person in the room when Pakistani President Ayub Khan notified Zhou that U.S. President Richard Nixon wanted a rapprochement with China. He interpreted when Zhou met Kissinger and Nixon. However, we already know what happened in these meetings from Kissinger's memoirs and from internal American memoranda that the Freedom of Information Act released to the George Washington University's National Security Archives. The U.S. leaders fawned over Zhou and promised to meet China's bottom-line demand not to support Taiwan independence. Ji's brief accounts of these meetings focus on Zhou's personal warmth and winsome courtesies.

Ji's account of official events and figures hews closely to the views of the PRC's official historians. Ji says that he worshipped Mao, Zhou, and Chen Yi. He describes Mao somewhat spookily as "serene," "regal," and "mentally far away, at peace." The dictator's crimes are dusted over with a liberal use of the passive voice ("people were beaten to death"), vagueness ("fiascoes ... produced a famine"), euphemism ("Mao came up with schemes that were supposed to increase productivity but had the opposite effect"), and wishful thinking ("Mao united all those who could be united, only resorting to armed force when there was no alternative"; the Red Guard movement resulted from "the youthful instinct to rebel"). Ji sticks to the script: Zhou Enlai is heroic, warm, and selfless and "worked hard behind the scenes to protect veteran government officials." Deng Xiaoping set things right. China's diplomacy is unselfish. The United States and China have no reason not to be friends.

Ji is hardly more forthcoming about experiences that involved him personally, not simply as an interpreter-spectator. The

foreign ministry was rife with factional struggles, yet Ji tells frustratingly little of "meddling power plays" that targeted him among others. Even after Mao's death and the fall of the so-called Gang of Four, conflict in the ministry continued "that eventually involved my having to suffer through repeated struggle meetings aimed at expelling me from the Foreign Ministry." What was that about? Ji says no more, and he also speeds over the other deprivations he endured during the Mao years. Like other intellectuals, he went hungry, was frequently separated from his wife, did periods of hard labor on a commune and in a May 7 cadre school, and suffered ritual denunciations and self-criticisms. He is stoic about these occasions, which is admirable but not instructive.

Between the lines, however, Ji's testimony does offer some unwitting insight into just that—the stoic reticence to which he is committed and that hardships only reinforce. His memoir comes to life in its focus on his family, in which "intrigue and discretion were a way of life," and where he, too, learned what he calls "survival diplomacy." His revered father and older brother were secret communists even though working for the pre-PRC Nationalist regime. The family came to New York in 1939, when Ji was 9, to avoid the war in China, and stayed for more than a decade, poised to go home at the right moment. His reminiscences of New York in the 1940s are vivid and charming, full of well-observed period details. Ji attended elementary and high school in the city and then spent a year at Harvard before breaking off to return in 1950 to participate in New China's struggle for survival. There he faced yet one final survival lesson, to "learn to be Chinese."

Ji perfected the useful skills of averting his gaze and staying out of trouble. "I heard the rumors and felt the mood," he says of the mass movements of the early 1950s, "but I was preoccupied." "If I'd known the whole truth, I would have been horrified," he writes about the famine that started in 1959. In a rare act of courage, he went to visit a colleague who was falsely accused, but apparently he did not flaunt this act publicly, because "in the end, no one noticed or complained." On another occasion, he chose not to call on a condemned colleague because "it would have attracted the wrong kind of attention to make too much of my association with him, or my sympathy."

As Ji insightfully says, "Perhaps the biggest reason people suffered in silence through the bad times was to protect their families. ... In this poisonous atmosphere, millions of us kept our doubts to ourselves, even among family and friends." China today is by no means the totalitarian terror state of the Mao years, yet bad things are still happening, and people still normally bury the troubles they personally experience or witness—official corruption, abuse of power—rather than confronting the system. The parents pursuing justice for their children crushed in the Sichuan earthquake have been told officially to shut up, and the rest of society has moved on. The multifingered propaganda authorities promote patriotic

groupthink, often from behind the scenes, on topics like the Olympics, Taiwan independence, relations with Japan, and human rights. Today as in the past, dissident voices are challenged less by police repression than by mass indifference. All this is not new. Without intending to do so, Ji gives us some insight into how it happens and why it persists.

chatterbox

The Adventures of Jimmyflathead

The Internet postings of Bruce Ivins.

By Timothy Noah

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 7:00 PM ET

The [documents](#) released by the Justice Department on Aug. 6 contain no direct proof that Army microbiologist Bruce Ivins, who killed himself last week, was the anthrax killer. But they contain ample evidence that Ivins was a ubiquitous presence on the Web, frequently posting bizarre or angry comments under such aliases as "[jimmyflathead](#)," "[kingbadger7](#)," and "[goldenphoenix111](#)." Herewith, a first pass at compiling them.

Kappa Kappa Gamma. Ivins had a bizarre obsession with [this sorority](#) (or, rather, "women's fraternity"), and investigators deem significant the presence of a Kappa Kappa Gamma chapter near [10 Nassau St.](#) in Princeton, N.J., where the anthrax letters were allegedly [mailed](#). One manifestation of this obsession was that Ivins spent a great deal of time battling with Wikipedia and other Web sites over what they wrote about Kappa Kappa Gamma:

[Dec. 21, 2005:](#)

It's a common misconception that "Kappa Kappa Gamma" stands for "Key to the Kingdom of God." Actually, it stands for "Kalon K'Agathon Gnothi," which is Greek for "Know the Beautiful and the Good." KKG is big on the virtues of Plato: "The Good, The True, and The Beautiful." The organization is one of the oldest women's fraternities in the country, founded in 1870 at Monmouth College. Famous alumnae include Ashley Judd, Jane Pauley and Kate Jackson.
—Jimmy Flathead

[Feb. 9, 2006:](#)

I have reinstated

Historical Miscellaneous Facts—In the late 1800s, the Kappa Call, *Ai Korai Athenes!* (The Maidens of Athena!), was introduced. It is still practiced in some chapters today.

If you remove it again, I will request you to be blocked. Furthermore, I suggest that you sign in with a name. If my additions to this page continue to be removed, then I will begin to add things such as the hazing incident at DePauw, the Kappa chapter being kicked off the University of Maryland campus for drugs, the fact that a member of the Symbionese Liberation Army was a Kappa. I hope that I have made myself clear.—jf

[July 25, 2006:](#)

It is correct to assume that other fraternal organizations have "Other Facts" that they would rather people not know. For example, Symbionese Liberation Army member and confessed murderer Emily Harris was a Chi Omega. Charles "Tex" Watson, mass murderer and member of the Charles Manson "Family," was a Pi Kappa Alpha. Many organizations have been cited for hazing violations. If people want to add such information to other Wiki pages, please do so. If these pages are intended to be honest and provide a look at a bit of the negative (as well as a lot of the positive) information about organizations, then good for honesty. If they're meant solely to be commercials or advertisements, then that should be made clear, so that individuals reading the pages will know that what they read has been carefully crafted to present the organization in a totally favorable light.—jf

[Aug. 4, 2006:](#)

You have removed true and verifiable information from the Kappa Kappa Gamma page. Please do not remove content from Wikipedia. It is considered vandalism. If you would like to experiment, use the sandbox. Thank you.jimmyflathead

[July 8, 2007:](#)

Eelmonkey, I'm not a member of KKG, but at one time I had a copy of the Book Of Ritual. I'm familiar with their secrets and rituals, but I don't think that the organization would want

them revealed. I would respectfully suggest you ask the opinions of some of the Kappas who have posted here. jimmyflathead

Dave Twigg. In May 26, 2006, a man named Dave Twigg got entwined in a [misunderstanding](#) with a law enforcement officer of Virginia's Department of Natural Resources while driving his truck in Tuscarora. The officer drew a gun on Twigg, searched his truck, and issued a citation stating (incorrectly) that Twigg had gotten caught "spotlighting," an illegal form of hunting in which deer are blinded with bright lights. (In fact, Twigg had been looking for the top to his trash can, which had fallen off the truck.) Nothing came of it, but to Ivins it was the Dreyfus case all over again. Although his original postings to the *Frederick News-Post* are no longer available, on Aug. 7 the paper [retrieved and reported on them](#). Here they are:

I've known Dave Twigg for a long time, and he's a great, honest, law-abiding guy. The DNR agent was more than a bit over-reactive and (testosteronal) in what he did to Dave. ... Dave should sue the DNR and the officer involved for what happened.

...

Great ... that's all that night predators need to know: That they can stop anybody, anywhere, for practically any reason and say that they're 'DNR.' Dave Twigg wasn't running from anybody, so the 'attempting to flee' charge is completely bogus—What's next? Arresting kids who have flashlights and are looking in their yard for nightcrawlers?"

...

[Y]ou can go online and purchase 'police car' lights for your vehicle. Scary, huh? Knowing that, how many of us would tell our loved ones to stop at night on deserted roads when unmarked, supposed police cars flashed their lights? As to comment in the previous post about 'salivating lawyers,' I think that the DNR officer's actions would cause many reasonable people to consult an attorney.

The Da Vinci Code. Unlike most film critics, Ivins liked the [Tom Hanks movie](#) and reviewed it in a series of postings on the *Frederick News-Post* site (also not available anymore, but retrieved by the paper in that same Aug. 7 story):

Just as 'Ben Hur' and 'Touched by an Angel' were fictional, so The Da Vinci Code is

fictional. It's not theology or history, it's a fictional suspense thriller. We were taught in gradeschool that Jesus was 'a man like us in all ways but sin.' So Jesus being fictionally given a wife would make him sinful? Please!

...

I just finished watching the first showing of *The Da Vinci Code* at the Westview theaters. It was a good, fast-paced, suspenseful movie. I recommend it, but people should read the book first, so that they can follow it more easily. (It moves VERY fast.) I didn't see any protesters, thank goodness.

...

I saw it also, Erika, and I enjoyed it thoroughly. People forget that the movie and the book are FICTION. The Da Vinci Codes's supposed blasphemy is that Jesus was a Jewish man with a Jewish wife and she bore him a child. Did Jesus sweat? Did he have cavities or get sick? Did he 'go to the bathroom?' We were taught that he was (a) person like us in all ways but sin, so having sexual relations with one's spouse doesn't seem sinful.

Family Origins. The *Washington Post* [found](#) an entry in GreekChat.com from Aug. 2006 in which Ivins ([posting as "Prunetacos"](#)) bemoaned real or imagined "skeletons" in his family closet:

The skeletons are all out, 33girl. I'm having a devil of a time rounding them back up. Let's see...how about mom who was an undiagnosed paranoid schizophrenic, a brother who was a wife-beater, who left her shortly before their baby was born - didn't want to pay child support - and who was fired from several jobs for stealing? Is that bones enough? Oh...by the way...a few years ago he went to an SAE [[Sigma Alpha Epsilon?](#)] house and tried to get into it, saying that he was a member. When they found out he was lying, they kicked his butt to the curb. Just like my brother....

The Mole. This is a reality [TV series](#) on ABC that someone the [same age as Ivins](#) who identified himself as "bruceivi" [commented about](#) on YouTube just one month ago. (The posts were found by [True Crime Report](#).)

Maybe something really dreadful will happen to Kathryn Price. If so, she will richly deserve it! The least someone could do would be to take a sharp ballpoint pin or letter opener and put her eyes out, to complete the task of making her a true mole!

...

With that he should have taken the hatchet and brought it down hard and sharply across her neck, severing her carotid artery and jugular vein. Then when she hits the ground, he completes the task on the other side of the neck, severing her trachea as well. The "Blind" mole is dead and Steve is a hero among heroes! I personally would have paid big money to have done it myself.

...

Steve had a great chance to Kill Kathryn that would go down as the primo moment in reality TV.

After the fake fainting he'd say, "Kathryn, do you know what a mole is? It's a blind useless, animal that humans hate. And do you know what we do to moles? We kill them!"

Sorry if my comments offended people. This occurred several years ago. It was meant as a macabre twist to a pretty lame reality show.

Juggling. This was one of Ivins' hobbies. Five months ago, the poster "brucivi" was [tickled](#) to find an acquaintance named Deb demonstrating her juggling on YouTube. (This, too, was found by [True Crime Report](#).)

Way to go, Deb!!!! You probably don't remember me but I'm your sister Jen's Godfather, Bruce. Where did you learn to do all that great stuff? Did you ever try two in each hand? Start with doing two in one hand, then do two in the other, then you can put them together, either alternating throws or throwing at the same time. I used to juggle as stress relief—it's hard to think of other things when you're tossing stuff in the air and trying to keep gravity from winning!—bruce

As we now know, Bruce Ivins was experiencing quite a lot of stress at that time.

chatterbox

When "Skinny" Means "Black"

The *Journal* stumbles over racial subtext.

By Timothy Noah

Monday, August 4, 2008, at 6:06 PM ET

In the Aug. 1 *Wall Street Journal*, Amy Chozick [asked](#), "[C]ould Sen. Obama's skinniness be a liability?" Most Americans, Chozick points out, *aren't* skinny. Fully 66 percent of all citizens who've reached voting age are overweight, and 32 percent are obese. To be *thin* is to be *different* physically. Not that there's anything *wrong*, mind you, with being a skinny person. But would you want your sister to marry one? Would you want a *whole family* of skinny people to move in next-door? "I won't vote for any beanpole guy," an "unnamed Clinton supporter" wrote on a Yahoo politics message board. My point is that any discussion of Obama's "skinniness" and its impact on the typical American voter can't avoid being interpreted as a coded discussion of race.

Chozick insists that she didn't intend her playful feature about Obama's physique as potential electoral liability to carry any racial subtext. "I can't even respond to that," she told me. "That's ridiculous." Bob Christie, Dow Jones' vice president of communications, phoned me in a flash to reaffirm that message. I believe Chozick and Christie when they say that the *Journal* never *intended* skinniness to serve as a proxy for race. (Full disclosure: I was a reporter in the *Journal's* Washington bureau a dozen years ago. I know neither Chozick nor Christie. Fuller disclosure: I phoned my former *Journal* colleague, Michel Martin, an African-American journalist who is now host of NPR's [Tell Me More](#), which frequently addresses matters of race, to ask whether she was offended. She was not.)

But I firmly disagree that a racial reading of Chozick's story is "ridiculous," and I would counter that any failure on Chozick's part to recognize such is just a wee bit clueless.

Let's review the basics. Barack Obama is the first African-American to win a major-party nomination for president of the United States. African-Americans are distinguishable from other Americans by their skin color. This physical attribute looms large in our nation's history as a source of prejudice.

The promise of Obama's presidency, in many people's minds, is partly that America will move toward becoming a post-racial society. It's pretty clear, though, that we aren't there yet. When white people are invited to think about Obama's physical appearance, the principal attribute they're likely to dwell on is his dark skin. Consequently, any reference to Obama's *other*

physical attributes can't help coming off as a coy walk around the barn. A whole genre of humor turns on this reality. A *Slate* colleague informs me that an episode of the TV sitcom *Happy Days* ("[Fonzie's New Friend](#)") had its 1950s-era characters nervously discussing the fact that a black man in their midst was so ... *skinny*. Was it true that *skinny* people liked fried chicken? That they were good at basketball? And so on.

It might be argued that body weight differs from certain other physical characteristics (apart from skin color) in that it has never been associated with racial caricature. Chozick wasn't asking (and, I feel sure, would never ask) whether Americans might think Obama's hair was too kinky or his nose too broad. But *it doesn't matter*. The sad fact is that *any* discussion of Obama's physical appearance is going to remind white people of the physical characteristic that's most on their minds. Moreover, Martin points out, "The black male body has been commodified in this country from its earliest days. People were *brought here* for their bodies." Better either to leave the whole topic alone, it seems to me, or to address the question of racial prejudice head-on, as Juan Williams [did](#) in an Aug. 4 *Wall Street Journal* column. In the future, the press would be wise to avoid discussing how ordinary Americans will respond to the size of Obama's ears, the thickness of Obama's eyebrows, and so on.

Is that prohibition too inhibiting? I doubt it, unless you happen to be a political cartoonist, and therefore have no choice but to navigate these perilous waters. Indeed, a few paragraphs into her story, Chozick shifts her topic from Obama's appearance to Obama's eating habits—from something Obama *is* to something Obama *does*. The shift was probably necessitated because in reality, people *don't* think much about Obama's skinniness. Chozick could substantiate her hypothesis with only two quotes, one of which—the "beanpole" quote—she solicited on the Web. ("Does anyone out there think Barack Obama is too thin to be president?" Chozick [queried](#). "Anyone having a hard time relating to him and his 'no excess body fat'? Please let me know. Thanks!") In the vastness of cyberspace, you can always find *somebody* who will say whatever you want.

Are Obama's eating habits a political liability? The question may be trivial, but at least it's not offensive. The only real objection you can make there is that Chozick's litany of healthy foodstuffs favored by Obama (he "snacks on MET-Rx chocolate roasted-peanut protein bars and drinks Black Forest Berry Honest Tea, a healthy organic brew") [echoes](#) a similar litany from the day before by John McCain's campaign manager, Rick Davis. ("Only celebrities like Barack Obama ... demand MET-RX chocolate roasted-peanut protein bars and bottles of a hard-to-find organic brew—Black Forest Berry Honest Tea. ...") But that possible misdemeanor lies beyond our purview.

corrections Corrections

Friday, August 8, 2008, at 6:56 AM ET

In the Aug. 1 "[Politics](#)," Jeff Greenfield misspelled the name of the *Christian Science Monitor* writer. His name is Richard Strout, not Richard Stout.

*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.*

culturebox

Dude, You Stole My Article

How I investigated a suspicious alt weekly.

By Jody Rosen

Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 4:00 PM ET

The saga began in the classical manner: with an e-mail about Jimmy Buffett. Several weeks ago, I received a note from a *Slate* reader drawing my attention to an article published in March 2008 in the [Bulletin](#), a free alternative weekly in Montgomery County, Texas, north of Houston. "I believe your ... profile of musician Jimmy Buffett was reproduced wholesale without attribution," the reader wrote. "I thought you should know." I followed a link to "[Spring Fling: Concerts That Make the Holiday a Time to Party](#)"* by Mark Williams, a feature pegged to concert appearances by Buffett and country singer Miranda Lambert. Sure enough, the article included 10 and a half paragraphs copied nearly verbatim from "[A Pirate Looks at 60](#)," my *Slate* essay of Jan. 9, 2007. My words were slightly reworked in places, and further enlivened by eccentric use of em dashes and semicolons—a hallmark, I would learn, of the Williamsian style. But the original text was largely unaltered. For example, my *Slate* piece began this way:

Jimmy Buffett turned 60 this past Dec. 25, a day he undoubtedly spent in a lower latitude, in a meditative frame of mind, in close proximity to a tankard of Captain Morgan. At least that was the case with birthday number 50, which, as recounted in his autobiography A Pirate Looks At Fifty (1998), Buffett celebrated by piloting his private jet from the Cayman Islands to Costa Rica to Colombia and drinking copiously, while contemplating "spirituality" and his goals going forward:

"Learn celestial navigation," "Swim with dolphins," "Start therapy."

Mark Williams kicks off his consideration of Buffett with this passage:

Buffett, who turned 60 on Christmas Day, likely spent the day in a lower latitude, in a meditative frame of mind—and in close proximity to a tankard of Captain Morgan. At least that was the case with birthday number 50; as recounted in his 1998 autobiography 'A Pirate Looks At Fifty,' Buffett celebrated by piloting his private jet from the Cayman Islands to Costa Rica to Colombia—merrily drinking while contemplating "spirituality" and his goals: learning celestial navigation, swimming with dolphins and starting therapy.

I recalled writing the Buffett piece, laboring on deadline into the wee hours, hunched over a laptop at the kitchen table in my Brooklyn home. How could I have known that I was previewing a concert to take place some 15 months later at the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion in Spring, Texas?

I decided to contact the *Bulletin's* editor about the plagiarism of my work. On the *Bulletin's* Web site, I found [data](#) on the newspaper's circulation (20,000) and advertising rates (cost of a one-eighth-page vertical ad measuring 2½ inches by 6¼ inches: \$105 per week). I learned that the *Bulletin* had been in business since 1969 and had received the 1998 "Most Improved Newspaper" Award from the [Texas Community Newspaper Association](#). I searched the *Bulletin's* [archives](#), skimming through music reviews, left-leaning political op-eds, local news features, and previews of Montgomery County community happenings ("A Spooktacular Halloween: Concerts & Parties That Make This Season Frighteningly Fun"). The phrase "send your comments to editor@thebulletin.com" was appended to many pieces, but the ghost editor was never named. The *Bulletin's* site has no masthead, and most articles dating from the past few years are unbylined. The only name that appears consistently is Mark Williams, billed variously as "Music Editor," "Bulletin Music Editor," and "The Bulletin Staff Writer."

Eventually, a Google search turned up the name of the *Bulletin's* publisher, Mike Ladyman, whose surname did little to dispel the feeling that I had been sucked into a Charlie Kaufman screenplay. But Ladyman is entirely real—a resident of Montgomery, Texas, who answered his phone on the first ring and listened patiently as I informed him of Mark Williams' misdeed. Our conversation was cordial and brief. "I'll look into it," Ladyman said. "I'll speak to Mark about it." We hung up, and I dashed off a follow-up e-mail with a mildly harrumphing tone ("I do not think I need to tell you how poorly this unethical

practice reflects on your newspaper," etc.). And then, content that I had put the matter to rest, I let it drop.

Except that I didn't let it drop. I found myself reading and rereading and rereading again, poring over "Spring Fling" like a Talmudist. The article has an odd, jangling tone, a product of its syntax ("their loyalty has a vague spiritual overtones [*sic*]") and the ragged suturing of my writing to Williams'. But was the prose surrounding my own actually Williams' work? I began to wonder. When the borrowings from my *Slate* essay end, four paragraphs from the bottom of the article, Williams makes a jarring genre shift from think-piece to celebrity profile, complete with boilerplate quotes from the singer himself. Did the *Bulletin* really interview Jimmy Buffett? I Googled a phrase from Williams' piece—"leaves the Parrotheads with this head scratcher"—and the search returned two results: "Spring Fling" and a *USA Today* piece from July 8, 2004, "[Buffett takes country out for a boat ride](#)," written by Brian Mansfield.

It was then that I realized, with a pang of regret, that Mark Williams is not my biggest fan—a reader so enraptured by Rosen's prose stylings that he was driven to steal them. "Spring Fling" has at least three sources: my *Slate* essay, Mansfield's *USA Today* piece, and a [Minneapolis Star-Tribune Miranda Lambert profile](#). And this is just the beginning of Williams' collage-art music journalism.

Since 2005, the *Bulletin* has published dozens of stories under Williams' byline that appear to be copied, whole or in part, from other periodicals. Compare the *Bulletin's* Nov. 4, 2005, [Franz Ferdinand piece](#) and this [NME](#) review, published five weeks prior; the *Bulletin's* [Steely Dan piece](#) (July 14, 2006) and this article from the Web site [All About Jazz](#) (July 4, 2006); the *Bulletin's* [Black Rebel Motorcycle Club feature](#) (June 14, 2007) and an earlier [Boston Globe piece](#) (May 25, 2007); the *Bulletin's* [McKay Brothers article](#) (Nov. 11, 2006) and this [Dallas Observer item](#) (Oct. 19, 2006); and the *Bulletin's* "[God and Country: More Popular Artists Are Now Singing a Spiritual Tune](#)" (Sept. 20, 2007) and the [Billie Joe Shaver concert review](#) by *Washington Post* pop critic J. Freedom du Lac (Sept. 13, 2007). The [Eagles piece](#) published in the *Bulletin* on Dec. 13, 2007 is a nearly word-for-word recapitulation of [David Fricke's Rolling Stone review](#) (Nov. 1, 2007). Mark Williams sought inspiration from *USA Today* for his features on Paul Simon ([USA Today version](#); [Bulletin version](#)) and Tom Petty ([USA Today version](#); [Bulletin version](#)). The Evanston, Ill.-based blog *Pop Matters* is the apparent source of articles on Dwight Yoakam ([Pop Matters version](#); [Bulletin version](#)) and Matthew Sweet and Susanna Hoffs ([Pop Matters version](#); [Bulletin version](#)). And then there's "[Crazy About 'Crazy'](#)" (March 2, 2007), Williams' deconstruction of the monster 2006 pop hit by Gnarl Barkley—an article that bears a striking resemblance to "[Crazy for 'Crazy'](#)," published six months earlier in *Slate*.

And so on. Uncovering these sources is a matter of choosing the right phrases to dump into Google, not a difficult feat for anyone moderately attuned to writerly rhythms. Often, the keywords leap right out at you. The [Willie Nelson appreciation](#) currently headlining the *Bulletin's* Web site begins: "Willie Nelson is so impeccably grizzled that he has moved into a realm to which the phrase 'elder statesman' scarcely begins to do justice"—a sentence with a twang more British than Texan, probably because it was [first published in the U.K. *Guardian*](#).

Shortly after realizing I might not have been Williams' only plagiarism victim, I called Mike Ladyman a second time. Ladyman speaks in a soothing singsong tone and has a genial telephone manner. But he seemed eager to cut short our conversation and uninterested in the details of my allegations. I pressed the point: "I think there's a serious pattern of plagiarism here. You should really look into this." Ladyman's reply was vague: "Well, I've already mentioned it to Mark. So that's under way. E-mail me the articles and I'll take a look." And then we hung up.

Whereupon I returned to surfing the *Bulletin* site, digging deeper into the newspaper's archives—and turning up dozens more suspect articles. Like many alt weeklies, the paper's bread-and-butter is politics, and from the spring of 2005 on, its political op-eds comprise an apparently unbroken sequence of pilfered prose. The *Bulletin's* archives reveal a strong preference for the online magazine *Salon*—in particular, the punditry of Joe Conason and Sidney Blumenthal. Compiling a complete annotated list of articles would require the services of a half-dozen unpaid interns, so a few examples will have to suffice. Compare:

- Conason's "[The Only Way Out](#)," *Salon*, Dec. 3, 2005, and the *Bulletin's* "[We Can Work It Out](#)," Dec. 9, 2005
- Conason's "[Alberto Gonzales' Coup D'Etat](#)," *Salon*, Feb. 9, 2007, and the *Bulletin's* "[Let's Just Burn the Constitution](#)," Feb. 16, 2007
- Blumenthal's "[Above the Rule of Law](#)," the *Guardian*, Aug. 5, 2005, and the *Bulletin's* "[Bush's Dirty War](#)," Aug. 12, 2005
- Blumenthal's "[Bush's Betrayal of History](#)," *Salon*, Nov. 17, 2005, and the *Bulletin's* "[Truth Is for Traitors](#)," Nov. 25, 2005
- Walter Shapiro's "[A Decisive Year for 'the Decider'](#)," *Salon*, Dec. 26, 2006, and the *Bulletin's* "[The Good, the Bad and the Ugly](#)," Dec. 29, 2006
- Farhad Manjoo's "[Bush's Sinking Popularity](#)," *Salon*, April 29, 2005, and the *Bulletin's* "[Sinking Ship?](#)," May 6, 2005
- Joan Walsh's "[Bye-Bye, Bullies!](#)," *Salon*, Nov. 13, 2006, and the *Bulletin's* "[Calamity for the Corrupt](#)," Nov. 17, 2006
- Brad DeLong's "[Mike Huckabee Wants To Abolish the IRS](#)," *Salon*, Jan. 7, 2008, and the *Bulletin's* "[Down With the IRS](#)," Jan. 17, 2008

The *Bulletin's* rampant borrowing has not gone totally unnoticed. A [May 2007 post](#) on a now-dormant "*Bulletin* watchdog" blog, Nation of Mice, points out that an article on Rudy Giuliani was "completely plagiarized from Salon.com." "Low and behold, will The *Bulletin* Publisher and Editor Mike Ladyman ever give credit to pre-published articles in his liberal rag," the writer asks, not quite grammatically but not unreasonably.

I have tried in vain to put that question to Ladyman directly. But since June 17—the date when I first contacted the *Bulletin's* publisher and when we had our two phone conversations—I have had no communication with Ladyman or Mark Williams or any other member of the *Bulletin's* staff. I phoned Ladyman repeatedly at four different numbers, but he has not answered my calls. He has failed to respond to my voice-mail messages. I sent Ladyman three e-mails, all on June 17, to which he never replied. But I suspect that he received them: The e-mails detailed plagiarism in three articles bylined to Williams—"Spring Fling," the Eagles review, and the Dwight Yoakam review—and all three pieces have since disappeared from the *Bulletin's* Web archives. No correction or retraction was ever issued.

At times over the last month, I've doubted that the *Bulletin* actually exists. A tiny newspaper from the Houston suburbs, filled week after week with bowdlerized Joe Conason columns and record reviews airlifted from the pages of *Slate*? It seemed preposterous, and the longer I spent squinting into the [mustard-and-magenta glow](#) of the *Bulletin's* Web 0.0-quality Internet site, the more I began to suspect that I was the dupe of a conceptual art prank, a cheeky Borgesian commentary on the slipperiness of language and authorship. Or something.

But I telephoned the offices of Montgomery County's reputable daily, the *Courier*, and reporters there assured me that the *Bulletin* indeed exists. A *Courier* staffer picked up a copy at a shop in Conroe, Texas, and mailed it to me, and as I type these words I am looking at the [front page of the *Bulletin's* latest edition](#), Volume 38, Issue 26, with a color cover photograph of Austin blues-rockers the Band of Heathens beneath the headline "Hot Summer, Hot Texas Music: New Lone Star CD Releases That Make the Summer Sizzle."

It is a tabloid format newspaper of just 16 pages. There are a couple of pages of classifieds, and lots of advertisements for local businesses: restaurants, real-estate brokers, the [Schlitterbahn Waterparks](#). Unlike the *Bulletin's* Web site, the paper-proper has a masthead, which lists five staffers: Ladyman ("Publisher & Editor"), Williams ("Music Editor," "Staff Writer"), an account executive, a listings guy, and a graphic designer. (I tried to reach all of these *Bulletin* employees by phone, to no avail.) The masthead also reveals that the *Bulletin* is part of the [Alternative Weekly Network](#), a nationwide consortium of 110 weekly publications.

As for the articles: more of the same. The cover feature on [those sizzling summer CDs](#) seems cribbed from three sources: an [Allaboutjazz.com piece about Willie Nelson and Wynton Marsalis](#), an [Amazon.com customer review of a Band of Heathens CD](#), and a [Jambase.com review of the band Reckless Kelly](#). A [review of the new Coldplay album](#) looks an awful lot like a review first published in the [Daily Telegraph](#). An op-ed titled "[Environmentally Incorrect: How McCain Can Prove He Won't Be Like Bush](#)" is apparently a [rejiggered Joe Conason column](#). Even the *Bulletin's* [letters to the editor](#) appear not to be letters at all but op-ed pieces written by a couple of professors and published [elsewhere first](#).

In other words, with the exception of the local events listings, every single item in the June 3-July 10 *Bulletin* is suspicious. Indeed, I wonder: In purely statistical terms, do the articles in the Montgomery County *Bulletin* amount to the greatest plagiarism scandal in the annals of American journalism?

But perhaps the *Bulletin* is merely on-trend—or even ahead of its time. The [Drudge Report](#), the [Huffington Post](#), and [Real Clear Politics](#) have made names and money by sifting through RSS feeds; Tina Brown and Barry Diller are [preparing the launch of their own news aggregator](#). Mike Ladyman and company may simply be bringing guerilla-style 21st-century content aggregation to 20th-century print media: publishing the Napster of newspapers.

In any case, there is at least one example of original writing in the current *Bulletin*. At the top of the masthead section is a [note about the paper's distribution](#)—an obvious point of pride for Mike Ladyman. It reads: "*The Bulletin* is available free to readers and distributes 20,000 papers every Thursday at 572 locations." There then follows this sentence:

The Bulletin is distributed at outdoor racks, book stores, barber shops, hair salons, nail salons, cleaners, coffee houses, liquor stores, meat markets, convenience stores, grocery stores, brake shops, tire stores, transmission shops, body shops, insurance agents, banks, libraries, hotels, motels, gyms, drug stores, clinics, hospitals, doctors, dentist [sic], chiropractors, college campuses, restaurants, movie theaters, bars, night clubs, ice houses, etc.

Now, this is a great piece of writing, an epic catalog in the Homeric mode: a poem, a poem, forsooth! Journalists hallow truth, but beauty trumps truth, and when the list of *Bulletin* distribution locales hurtles forward in breakneck rhythm ("transmission shops, body shops, insurance agents"), rising to that ringing final cadence—*ice houses, etc.*—who but the hard-hearted and the tin-eared could deny the beauty of those words? I may have to borrow them sometime.

sidebar

Return to [article](#)

Note to reader: Three of the *Bulletin* articles mentioned in this piece—"Spring Fling," "Remembering Buck," and "Eagles on the Edge of Eden"—were taken down from the paper's site after Jody Rosen contacted the newspaper's publisher about possible plagiarism. *Slate* captured cached versions of the articles, which are linked to in this piece.

culturebox

"Baboons Are Simply Too Small for Leopard Bait"

The 10 oddest travel guides ever published.

By Paul Collins

Monday, August 4, 2008, at 5:51 AM ET

"After five years' travel," veteran guidebook writer Geoff Crowther once recalled, "most of us went feral." So did the books they wrote. Jammed into backpacks, ripped into pieces, guidebooks escape into the wild to get lost or abandoned for the next edition. Here are 10 that are so transfixedly odd that they've remained readable long beyond their original itineraries:

1. *The Truth About Hunting in Today's Africa, and How To Go on Safari for \$690.00*, by George Leonard Herter (1963)

Equal parts Hemingway and Cliff Clavin, mail-order hunting goods retailer George Herter was one of America's great oddball writers. His self-published guide—bound in tiger-print cloth—is a malarial fever of anecdotes, family safari photos, and horrifying advice: "Baboons are simply too small for leopard bait. ... A live dog is one of the best leopard baits." Hunting with a phonograph of distressed goat calls is encouraged; so is the importation of animals: "Leopard farming would be far more profitable than mink farming," he proposes. As the corpses of rhinos, lions, elephants—and one of their guides—pile up for more than 300 pages, Herter never misses a chance to sell his sporting goods with such photo captions as: "A Masai warrior admires a pair of Hudson Bay two point shoes."

2. *A Guide Through the District of the Lakes in the North of England*, by William Wordsworth (5th edition, 1835)

A travel guide by Wordsworth? It's true: Alternating between

practical information and rhapsodic stanzas, the Romantic poet muses upon such sublime sights as the "almost precipitous sides of mountains with an intermixture of colours, like the compound hues of a dove's neck." Try finding *that* in Frommer's. His guide drew so many tourists that Matthew Arnold later recalled, "one of the pilgrims, a clergyman, asked him if he had ever written anything besides the *Guide to the Lakes*." The guide embodied tourism's contradictions. Wordsworth, ambivalent about the gawkers that he succeeded too well in attracting, eventually grumbled about "the railway with its ... swarms of pleasure-seekers, most of them thinking that they do not fly fast enough through the country which they have come to see."

3. *Das Generalgouvernement*, by Karl Baedeker (1943)

The iconic Baedekers of Leipzig, pressured by the Nazi government into producing a vacation guide to occupied Poland, published the most inadvertently creepy guidebook ever, complete with Reichminister General Governor Hans Frank promising visitors the charms of home—"ein stark heimatlich anmutendes Gebilde." Those charms include an Adolf-Hitler-Platz in the foldout Warsaw map and a brief entry for Auschwitz listing it only as a "train station." Although Germans lost no time in producing vacation guides to their newly captured territories—check out this 1940 guide to [non-Blitzkrieg visits to Paris](#)—it's still hard not to be struck by the inner cover's sale listing of prewar Baedekers. They include guides to *Großbritannien* and *Rußland*—destinations most Germans could only view through a bombsight.

4. *Fodor's Indian America*, by Jamake Highwater (1975)

Fodor's one attempt to get down with the 1970s got them more than they bargained for. First, there's the author: Jay Marks, a rock critic who, after claiming Indian ancestry, changed his name to Jamake Mamake Highwater. His book is as much a history and a personal essay as a travel guide. Beginning with a visit by his mother to Central Park ("So they put the trees on reservations too!" she snorts), Highwater dispenses cultural advice ("[B]eating the hand against the mouth and making a wow-wow sound is deeply racist") and modern updates ("Certificate of vaccination against smallpox is no longer required") among his travel facts. The only Fodor's to contain a 20-point position paper and appendix titled "A Note on Cultural Relativism" and "Fifteen Questions About the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie," *Indian America* remains a unique experiment: It never had a second edition.

5. *Bollocks to Alton Towers* by Robin Halstead, et al. (2006)

This lyrical look at British eccentricity covers such oddball attractions as [a leech-operated barometer](#) and the [Cumberland Pencil Museum](#). Whether mourning the military-requisitioned [village of Imber](#) ("The saloon chalk board that would normally advertise Today's Specials is busy with military scribble, all arrowheads and flanking formations") or dryly summarizing

Mad Jack's Sugar Loaf ("The man behind this stupid structure is a fascinating figure"), *Bollocks* captures [British anoraks](#) in ways no conventional guide could. Who else would lovingly redeem the [famously awful likenesses](#) of Louis Tussaud's House of Wax in Great Yarmouth by pointing out its perfect 1970s-vintage games arcade? "The whole experience," they muse, "is a time machine—you are an eight-year old visiting the seaside with your nan."

6. *Travel Guide of Negro Hotels and Guest Houses*, by Afro-American Newspapers (1942)

Like [The Negro Motorist Green-Book](#), the *Travel Guide* captures an era when African-Americans had to be mindful of where they vacationed. Alongside bucolic listings for shoreline getaways, the Manhattan listings are an urban time capsule: Small's Paradise ("presenting Chock Full o' Rhythm Revue, starring Tondelayo and Lopez"), the Savoy Ballroom, \$1 rooms at the Hotel Crescent, and Bowman's Most Ultra Bar and Cocktail Lounge over on 135th Street. The 1942 edition includes an exhortation to wartime travel—"Vacations for Victory. You can do your job better after recreation"—and to modern eyes is striking for what hotels emphasized in the early 1940s. There's no TV, of course, and rarely any AC. So what's the most common amenity promised in the hotel ads? "Hot and Cold Running Water."

7. *Lonely Planet Guide to Micronations*, by John Ryan et al. (2006)

This may be the only Lonely Planet guide in which armchair travel is probably assumed—for the countries themselves are about the size of an armchair. Self-proclaimed "micronations" include a [kingdom of Danish schoolteachers](#), the spherical [Republic of Kugelmugel](#), and the [Copeman Empire](#)—which, the guide helpfully explains, "is actually a small caravan in Sherringham, England." Amid the whimsicality—Whangamomona's combination border control/outhouse, say, or the Royal Wheelbarrow of the Kingdom of Romkerhall—the book's a meditation on just what it is that drives people to want to get away, even if only for a few square meters, from the hassles and history of the land they were born into.

8. *The Night Climbers of Cambridge*, by "Whipplesnaith" (1937)

"A game of roof-climbing remains the same, changing scarcely, if at all, from generation to generation," proclaims *Night Climbers*, a legendary guide by University of Cambridge students so catlike in their reflexes that their identities remain unknown 71 years later. An urban sport guidebook to what might be called rooftop tourism, *Night Climbers* has earned a cult following for decades from its droll narration ("Crying 'boo' at people is not consistent with good climbing") and transfixing photos of campus mountaineers [ascending](#) the O'Hara Tottering Tower, [dodging police](#), [jumping rooftops](#), and climbing, [spring-loaded](#), between the columns of the Fitzwilliam Museum. A

recent reprint ensures a new generation of mad climbers will bedevil the campus porters.

9. *A Tramp Trip: How To See Europe on Fifty Cents a Day*, by Lee Meriwether (1886)

One of the original college-dropout backpackers, Lee Meriwether figured out in 1886 how to travel across Europe on 50 cents a day: namely, by couch surfing (or, sometimes, pile-of-hay surfing). Half-starving worked pretty well, too. Meriwether possessed a brilliant knack for bizarre travel options—like his attempt in Italy to combine sightseeing with free lodging. Instead, he reports, "I was lodged in jail, and the next morning brought before an officer of justice, and charged with the heinous crime of sleeping in the dead city of Pompeii." When he [died in 1966 at the age of 103](#), Meriwether was *still* writing travelogues; he retraced his old routes with a Van Winklesque view of the changes in European peasant life wrought by electricity and the automobile.

10. *Overland to India and Australia*, by the BIT Travel & Help Service (1970)

A century after Lee Meriwether traveled on 50 cents a day, there was the BIT—a communal crash pad/happening on London's Elgin Road that stapled together hundreds of letters from hippie travelers on where to crash cheaply, catch freak buses, and generally boogie across continents on ... well, about 50 cents a day. Fueled by 'shrooms and wine and sometimes sold as a sheaf of papers in a plastic bag, *Overland to India and Australia* became a hippie trail bible. Founding editor Geoff Crowther [later discovered BIT](#) "taken over by a bunch of petty crooks, speed freaks, rip-off artists, winos and cider freaks"—but from its alumni and customers grew much of the colossus that is Lonely Planet. *Overland*, though, is now the scarcest title in this list. Few books have a worse life expectancy than travel guides, particularly ones abandoned in Katmandu hostels or converted page-by-page into rolling papers. Even Crowther himself lacks a copy, and only one library in the world is [known to have preserved](#) this proto-hippie guide. To see it, you'll have to go—where else?—to the University of Amsterdam.

Which, come to think of it, might make for a great trip.

dear prudence Hubby's My Future Step-Brother

My mom is dating my spouse's dad, and I'm miserable!
Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 6:47 AM ET

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

Dear Prudence,

I am a married woman in my late 20s. My parents divorced a few years ago after 35 years of marriage. My husband's mother died around the same time. Recently, my mother and his father have started to see each other. They did not sit down with my husband and me before they started dating to discuss how this would affect us but have since said they would be open to talking about our issues. However, every time we bring something up, my mom gets defensive, my father-in-law gets mad, and they end up convinced that we are trying to sabotage their relationship. One thing is especially trying for me: My mother has started to attend my church with my father-in-law. I made it clear to my mother that her going bothered me. She said that she would continue to go as long as my father-in-law asked her to. I have also told my mom that if they marry, I would like her to keep her name so I can have my married name for myself. She asked if I wanted to bind her to this horrible last name forever. I can't continue to be miserable for the sake of their relationship, so how can I get her to listen to my point of view?

—I Just Want To Be Heard

Dear Just,

Think of the possibilities if your mother and father-in-law get married: You and your husband will be step-siblings, and you each will be the aunt and uncle of your own children! This reminds me of the novelty song "[I'm My Own Grandpa](#)." Sure, it is awkward to contemplate this turn of events, but although each of your parents has said they're open to discussing the complications inherent in this situation, it actually turns out they're not. They're especially not when you come to them with a list of restrictions that includes where they are allowed to worship and what name your mother may use. I don't understand your hostility to your mother attending your church. You may have noticed that often generations of one family sit together in the same pew. As confusing as your family situation may become, keep one thing in mind: They're your parents, not your children, and you don't get to tell them whom they can socialize with. I know of another family in which this exact thing happened. A widowed father and divorced mother met through their married kids and fell in love; the older couple ended up having a much happier marriage than the younger. One way to keep your own marriage happy would be to focus more on it, instead of concentrating on being "miserable" about your mother's relationship. And if your mother does become your mother-in-law, you can smile at the fact that God sometimes works not only in mysterious, but also amusing, ways.

—Prudie

[Dear Prudence Video: No Check, Please](#)

Dear Prudence,

My wife and I have a dispute that has been ongoing for years, ever since my hair started to turn gray. She would like me to dye

it, and I do not want to. Recently she brought it up again, and the discussion grew more heated than usual. She says I would look sexier and not so old. (I am approaching 40.) My hair is dark, so I have a salt-and-pepper look, with about 20 percent salt (like George Clooney—enough said, right?). She would like me to try a new treatment that leaves some gray, so maybe I could just maintain my current level and not get any "worse." I don't object to hair-coloring in general (she has hers dyed), but I have no interest in coloring mine. I have explained to her that I would feel silly, fake, self-conscious, and almost embarrassed. She insists that she wants to know the "real" reason, because for any reason I give, she has a counterargument. I am, in any case, adamant that I won't color my hair. How can we resolve the conflict?

—Going Gray

Dear Going,
How can you resolve this? Maybe you can start leaving literature for your wife about breast lifts, liposuction, Botox, and other tweaks she can make in her appearance so that, as she approaches 40, she can look sexier and not so old. When people complain about the appearance of their spouse, most often it's because the spouse has put on poundage equivalent to a mule deer, not because the spouse resembles one of the best-looking movie stars of the day. I agree with you about men with dyed hair; they always seem a little bit silly. Tell your wife that there are some conflicts for which there is no compromise solution. Say you've heard her out, but this subject is closed, now and forever. You can add that as a sign of appreciation, in the years to come, you will not point out to her the many ways she's aged.

—Prudie

Dear Prudie,

A childhood friend and her husband came to visit me and my boyfriend recently. This was the first time we've seen each other in a number of years. She and her husband talked at great length about their 7-year-old daughter, "Betsy," who is the light of their lives. They began discussing Betsy's behavior, which led to them telling us that Betsy eats markers. They said that they've had to restrict her marker use because she was chewing on them so severely that she was getting ink all over and inside her mouth. They went on to say that Betsy recently had some baby teeth pulled; when we asked why, they said very nonchalantly, "Oh, she likes to eat the wall." Evidently, Betsy gnaws on the drywall to the point that she's eaten the wall to the studs and worn her teeth down. My friend and her husband said nothing about seeking treatment for her, and their attitude was that this is just a normal stage of childhood development. Since they left, I've done some Internet research, and it sounds like Betsy might be suffering from pica, which can lead to a number of difficulties, as well as being an indication of possible developmental disabilities. I'm concerned about the welfare of their little girl—am I morally obligated to share my worries and the information

I've gathered, or should I stay out of it?

—Concerned

Dear Concerned,

It's hard to believe that the doctors and dentists who have treated Betsy haven't taken a thorough history and discussed with her parents how to deal with what's wrong. But there is always a chance that your friends are so unwilling to face that something is awry that they aren't addressing this. And [pica](#), a disorder in which people have compulsions to eat strange substances, certainly seems like a possibility. You are hesitating to say something because it's always touchy to sound as if you are criticizing someone else's childrearing. But if your intervention could prevent damage to a child, then you are obligated to speak up. You can call or e-mail and say you were concerned about their description of Betsy's behavior. Say you know what devoted parents they are, so you're sure she's getting the best medical care. Acknowledge that you're no doctor, but since they didn't mention a diagnosis for Betsy, you wanted to make sure that Betsy's doctor had looked into the possibility of pica. It's worth risking your friend's ire to make sure you've done everything you can for the health of this girl.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence,

My soon-to-be mother-in-law is a compulsive shopper. Her basement is filled with items she has no use for but couldn't resist buying, which drives my fiance crazy. She is a very sweet lady, but her manner of welcoming me is to inundate me with gifts. Some of them are wonderful, but many are items that I can't use or don't like. She means well, but I feel like when her son and I have a house of our own, there won't be room for us after all of the stuff she donates makes it in! How can I politely indicate to her that while I love her dearly, I do not share her love of clutter, and would rather have her company than the constant results of her shopping trips?

—Not a Pack Rat

Dear Not,

Compulsive is the crucial word here. Whatever you say won't make any difference because she's not shopping for you; she's shopping for herself. So accept her gifts graciously, keep the few you like, and ruthlessly return, donate, or toss the ones you don't. When she comes over and asks where is the fabulous fondue fountain or the wonderful *Wall-E* plush toys she got for you, do not get defensive. Simply say you didn't have room for them, then point out the place of honor you have given her ravishing rhinoceros lamp.

—Prudie

did you see this?

The *Seinfeld* Reunion Show, 2027

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 7:05 PM ET

dispatches

On the Front Lines of the Global Food Crisis

Is the damage inflicted on Punjab by the Green Revolution driving India's next big separatist movement?

By Mira Kamdar

Friday, August 8, 2008, at 7:09 AM ET

From: Mira Kamdar

Subject: Things That Go Bump in the Night

Posted Monday, August 4, 2008, at 2:42 PM ET

JAITU, FARIDKOT DISTRICT, India—Wrapped in a musky blanket under a fan that was frantically trying to beat the air free of mosquitoes, exhaustion was finally overtaking me when I vaguely felt something nuzzle my left hand. In theory, I was alone, deadbolted away from the family of six, who were sleeping outside on string cots so I could have the only bed in the only room of their home. At the second nudge, definitely mammalian, adrenaline flooded my body, sending me shrieking into an upright position. A rat scurried away.

I had traveled to this remote part of Punjab to try to understand India's agricultural dilemma. Squeezed between the relentless pressure to increase production and an environment stressed to the breaking point, the agricultural miracle brought to Punjab by the Green Revolution back in the 1960s was failing, the terrible costs of its success tearing at the fabric of Punjabi society. If Punjab couldn't find a way out of the current impasse, I didn't see how India, or the world as a whole, was going to feed a growing population in the face of environmental collapse and growing political instability fueled by scarcity.

The next morning, after tea with milk from the cow tethered out front, my host family's son Jitinder gave me a ride into town on the back of his motorcycle so I could attend a workshop on natural farming organized by Umendra Dutt, an agricultural activist who runs an organization called [Kheti Virasat Mission](#). Kheti Virasat Mission's work focuses on raising awareness about

the damaging effects of chemical pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, and overwatering, as well as the mass dislocation of people away from their land and communities into an urban-oriented economy that can't absorb them.

I braced myself as lightly as I could against Jitinder's body, conscious of being a woman perched behind an unrelated man in a strongly patriarchal culture, as we wove our way out of the dirt lanes of the village and onto a narrow asphalt road that cut through an endless sea of ripening wheat, passing bullock carts piled high with fodder, tractors clanking toward the fields. I hadn't ridden on the back of a motorcycle in a long time. It was exhilarating to feel the air whipping around my face, the throb and bob of the machine gripped between my legs. I could smell the green scent of the plants and hear the morning bustle of the birds. Farmers and laborers were already wading through the waist-high wheat, spraying pesticide by hand from backpack reservoirs.

When the Green Revolution arrived in Punjab, the "land of five rivers," India faced chronic food shortages. A combination of massive irrigation infrastructure mandated by the Indian state, new hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides boosted yields to record levels over the following decades, saving India from the specter of mass famine. With just 1.5 percent of India's land area, Punjab produces 20 percent of the country's wheat and 12 percent of its rice. It provides 60 percent of the government's reserve stocks of wheat and 40 percent of its reserves of rice, the country's buffer against starvation.

Punjab's amazing productivity made it possible for India to feed most of a growing population that tripled from 350 million when the country became independent in 1947 to more than 1.2 billion people today. In 2001, India even began to export grain, though critics claim this impressive achievement was gained at the expense of India's poor.

Only two years later, in 2003, India had to reverse the funnel and import grain, something it had not done in decades. Every year since then, India has imported more and more of its food. Panic-buying by India is credited with helping to raise the price of wheat on global markets by more than 100 percent last year, causing prices to spike around the world, from pasta in Italy to bread in Russia.

In an era of global food scarcity, economic growth does not guarantee India the ability to buy as much food as it needs on the world market. And steps India has taken to liberalize its domestic grain market, a move hailed by some as a necessary corrective to a system riddled with inefficiencies and disincentives to production, may have contributed to the current food crisis by allowing agribusiness giants to siphon off huge quantities of grain.

Meanwhile, the tragic social and environmental costs of the Green Revolution are escalating, threatening a return of the political violence that took the lives of more than 25,000 Punjabis during the 1980s and '90s when a violent secessionist movement—fueled by profound social disruption caused by the Green Revolution, which dislocated small farmers—militated for an independent Punjab, which would be called Khalistan. The movement had religious overtones derived from Punjab's majority religion, Sikhism. The Indian state came down on the movement as hard as it could, culminating in June 1984 with an attack by the Indian army on Sikhism's most sacred site, the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was subsequently assassinated by her Punjabi Sikh bodyguards, after which thousands of Sikhs were massacred in retribution. The government, at the least, looked the other way.

The nasty side effects of the Green Revolution have gotten only worse in the years since. The irrigation canals are drying up. Water tables are sinking. According to a new report from Punjabi University in Patiala, pesticide levels, among the most elevated in the world, are being blamed for actually altering the DNA of Punjabis exposed to them.

Meanwhile, there aren't enough jobs or slots at the better schools and universities. Unemployment is high. The children of farmers, who've grown up with the tantalizing images of the new urban India paraded before them on television, have no desire to farm but no skills to do much else. Drug addiction, fueled by heroin transited from Afghanistan via Pakistan through Indian Punjab on its way to Europe and North America, is rampant, claiming an astonishing 40 percent of the state's youth and 48 percent of its farmers and laborers, according to one recent report.

Before my encounter with the rat, as I sat with my host family around the bed that would become mine for the night, Jitinder's father, Prem Kumar, proudly showed me a photograph of his father, a Communist rebel who eluded Indian government forces for years. "He was never caught," he exulted. "He fought in the tradition of [Bhagat Singh](#)," Prem Kumar added proudly, citing a local boy turned national hero who didn't hesitate to take up arms against the British in the early 20th century.

Prem Kumar explained to me that most of the land around the village was mortgaged to banks or private moneylenders. The water table keeps sinking, and the villagers are having trouble getting enough water to irrigate their fields. Prices for everything have gone up. Many people in the village are sick with cancer.

His 8-year-old granddaughter's playmate came over to visit with her grandmother.

"She lost her mother just two months ago," Prem Kumar explained.

"That's horrible," I replied. "What happened to her?"

"She had brain cancer," he replied. Looking at the girl cradled in her grandmother's lap, he sighed: "Such a beautiful child, like her mother."

It was true, she was a beautiful child. I looked into her big brown eyes and wondered what her future held.

From: Mira Kamdar
Subject: A Real Green Revolution
Updated Friday, August 8, 2008, at 11:03 AM ET

JAITU, FARIDKOT DISTRICT, India—Jitinder's motorcycle pulled up in front of a concrete arch that had been draped with cloth banners printed with messages about pesticide poisoning and cancer.

"Welcome, welcome to our workshop," a beaming Umendra Dutt called out in English as I alighted. The tangled locks of his long hair gave him a bit of a wild-man look. A cell phone was clutched in the hand he waved. Umendra started to read the Hindi messages on the banners and was delighted when I chimed in. It helped that English words such as *cancer* were simply rendered phonetically in Devanagari script.

Under a white tent, a buffet table had been laid, a stage erected, and rows of chairs set out. Boys hurried to and fro at Umendra's orders, their rubber thongs slapping against the grimy marble floor. On the table, grease and curry stains randomly bloomed on a fabric that must once have been an elegant cream color. Flies swarmed everywhere, exploring the stains and the platters of food that began to appear.

Farmers in turbans of every hue, many coordinated with the color of their immaculate shirts, milled around helping themselves to tea and breakfast. They had come from all over the state to learn about natural farming. These were educated men who'd clearly prospered from Punjab's Green Revolution. They also had firsthand experience of its dark side. No one made eye contact with me, the only woman and the only foreigner in the room. When I asked Umendra about the gender exclusivity, he said matter-of-factly: "Farming is mainly men's work." I'd seen too many women out in the fields to believe that, but I supposed that managing a farm, as opposed to spending the day bent over, transplanting seedlings or weeding, was, mainly, men's work.

Umendra pointed with conspiratorial pride to the large poster of [Bhagat Singh](#) that beamed over the stage. Dashing mustached, Bhagat Singh stood boldly behind a half-open door, handgun poised to shoot the first Englishman who got in his way.

"I want the farmers to get the message that what we are doing, what they will be doing when they embrace natural farming, is revolutionary," Umendra explained in a low voice as he restlessly surveyed his public. "This is about taking back our land and our health. It is our new freedom struggle."

I thought about the 2006 hit movie *Rang de Basanthi*, in which a group of feckless college kids get roles acting in a movie about Bhagat Singh and are transformed into rebels by the experience. Clearly, Umendra envisioned similarly inspiring his audience of Punjabi farmers.

Umendra's comrades in arms included Rajender Singh, Rajasthan's "water man," whose organization [Tarun Bharat Sangh](#) has brought water back to villages in that parched state using traditional techniques such as building [check dams](#) and refurbishing village ponds. Dr. G.V. Ramanjaneyulu, quickly nicknamed "Ramuji," from the [Centre for Sustainable Agriculture](#) in Hyderabad, had come to share techniques of natural yet highly effective pest control. Like Umendra, Singh wore the hand-woven cotton khaddar clothing popular with Indian social activists, a tradition that dates from the early days of India's independence movement and the refusal to wear clothing made from cloth spun in English mills. Ramuji wore trousers and a button-down shirt. He had come equipped with a projector and a laptop loaded with PowerPoint presentations, graphs, photos, and short demonstration films. Between the two of them, Rajender and Ramuji covered the most critical nodes of Punjab's agricultural crisis: water scarcity and pesticide poisoning.

The hybrid seeds introduced during the Green Revolution flourished when a grand scheme of irrigation canals brought plenty of water to the fields. Where the canals didn't reach, farmers sank tube wells and pumped water out of the ground. A naturally dry area, Punjab became one of India's top producers of water-loving rice.

For decades, the water flowed through the new canals and out of the wells as if it would last forever. Then the flow began to ebb. Wells had to be dug deeper to reach water tables that now sink as much as 100 feet a year. Those who couldn't afford to dig deeper placed their faith in seasonal rains, a faith that was all too often dashed. The canals, their symmetrical culverts lined with imported eucalyptus, carried less and less water. Where water was applied with too much abandon, naturally occurring soil salts rose to the surface, making the topsoil too saline for plants to grow properly.

The Green Revolution's miraculous yields depended on boosting efficiencies through mono-cropping. Family farms that placed small plots of vegetables next to fields of wheat or other traditional grains, such as local varieties of sorghum and millet, disappeared in favor of an American agribusiness vision of the farm as a vast outdoor factory. Today, Punjab is practically one continuous lawn of wheat and rice.

Tractors allowed farmers to plow larger fields faster. Everyone wanted one. Very poor farmers with only an acre or two borrowed money to park one of these shining symbols of modernity on their land. Brides brought them to their in-laws' farms as dowry gifts. Double-cropping and even triple-cropping were introduced, one harvest succeeding the last during the same calendar year, like shifts on an assembly line. The amount of food produced soared. India's grain stocks groaned under the sheer weight of Punjab's incredible productivity.

Insect pests also thrived under this new regime. An infestation in one field quickly spread to a whole region across an uninterrupted ocean of grain. At first, chemical pesticides were effective, but the pests became resistant. More pesticides were applied. Farmers, unaware of any danger, sprayed their crops without donning protective clothing. Pesticide and chemical fertilizer runoff permeated the state's soil and water, and Punjab became one of the most poisoned regions of India, a country where pesticide use has generally been heavy. Cancer rates rose so alarmingly that the government of Punjab began a cancer-registry program this year to understand how bad the epidemic has become.

The farmers who'd come to Umendra's workshop realized they were caught in a vicious cycle requiring them to buy more fertilizer and more pesticides, to invest more money in getting water while they watched pests become even more voracious and their soil fertility decline. Seeds were also becoming more expensive. The farmers paid dearly for new hybrids that promised ever-greater yields. They paid even more for the new genetically engineered seeds whose very DNA was copyrighted, making it illegal for farmers to do what farmers have done since the dawn of agriculture: save seeds from one year to plant the next.

These farmers were practical men, not eco-warrior ideologues. What they wanted from the workshop was a way out. They shouted out the names of their various insect enemies. With Ramuji's coaxing, they came up with a few traditional means of control. When Ramuji played a video showing low-cost, effective, nonchemical techniques for pest control, such as digging trenches into which hairy caterpillars fell and were trapped or using [neem-based](#) and cow-urine-based sprays, the farmers watched with rapt concentration, scribbling notes in their datebooks.

And when Umendra told them that they were learning how to take back their land, their lives, and their freedom from the agribusiness giants who profited by keeping them hooked on toxic pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and genetically modified seeds, and that they were revolutionaries in the mold of Bhagat Singh, the farmers roared their approval.

From: Mira Kamdar

Subject: In the Test Fields of Academe

Posted Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 7:08 AM ET

LUDHIANA, PUNJAB, India—India has never been able to feed all its people. Even when it has produced plenty of food, an inefficient distribution system that allowed tons of grain to rot in storage barns, coupled with abject poverty, ensured that people went hungry. India shamefully boasts the world's largest population of malnourished children. Still, most people believe that the situation would have been much worse if yields in Punjab had not risen as dramatically as the country's population. If a single institution can take credit for bringing the Green Revolution to Punjab, it is [Punjab Agricultural University](#).

Founded in 1962 on the American land-grant-university model, PAU was inaugurated by Jawaharlal Nehru, the nation's first prime minister, with the mission of finding a way to feed the country's hungry millions. It succeeded spectacularly. Yields increased more than 10-fold, from 2.3 million tons of food grains in 1960-'61 to 25.9 million tons in 2005.

The university maintains close ties to Ohio State and other agricultural universities. It is a research-oriented institution that received a \$2 million government grant this year to decode the wheat genome. PAU intends to be at the forefront of the promise by agribusiness corporations that biotechnology and genetic engineering are the way to food security—not to mention a potentially enormous new area of economic activity.

I gained entrée to the pinnacle of the university's administration through a series of introductions that ultimately led me to Dr. N.S. Malhi, director of the university's extension education program. Dr. Malhi graciously gave me a ride in his chauffeur-driven white Ambassador sedan to the building where the vice chancellor, Dr. Manjit Singh Kang, recently returned after years of teaching at Louisiana State University, had his office. I hadn't ridden in an Ambassador, the car used by government officials all over India, in years. The experience was as different from the back of [Jitinder's motorcycle](#) as PAU was from the revolutionary fervor of Umendra Dutt's would-be natural farmers.

The meeting was highly decorous, with formal introductions all around and sensitivity to hierarchy, great deference being paid to the vice chancellor, and to me, the honored guest from the United States. I resigned myself to hearing an unquestioned advocacy of technological solutions to Punjab's agricultural woes or maybe to being told that there were no problems. I was wrong.

I launched into my concerns: the fact that the Peter G. Peterson Institute for International Economics has [predicted](#) that India will see its current level of agricultural production decline by 38 percent as a result of climate change by the year 2080—the same period in which India's population is expected to grow by 400 million; the soaring cancer rates and the alarming levels of pesticide residues in the nation's water, land, food, and milk, including breast milk; the water crisis, which could only get worse; the use of chemical fertilizers derived from natural gas, which will become more expensive and are causing grave environmental harm; the 80 percent of India's farmers who have such small-scale operations that they have no access to formal credit and can't afford the increased cost of seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, and digging deeper wells, who therefore become indebted to usurious private moneylenders and who, in ever-increasing numbers, commit suicide in despair.

More than 100,000 Indian farmers have killed themselves during the past 10 years, the same decade that has seen India's rapid rise as a global economic power. Thirteen thousand of these suicides were in Punjab, India's most productive agricultural state.

After listening intently, the vice chancellor and the deans voiced their own concerns. Did I know that 25,000 acres of farmland were being gobbled up each year for nonagricultural development, including "green field" industrial parks and posh residential enclaves? Did I know that Punjab had a problem with migration, with 6.7 million migrants from other parts of India moving in to work in the fields, many of them ending up in slums and creating an additional burden on already overtaxed schools and social services? Was I aware of the educational crisis in the state, where only 8 percent of the students at Punjab Agricultural University came from farms and 92 percent came from cities where better schools got them better exam results? That unemployment was a huge problem? That drug addiction was a plague among the state's young people?

They argued passionately that Punjab was caught in a global crisis in which small farmers around the world were being cut off from collective structures that allowed them to leverage economies of scale by sharing big-ticket items like tractors. They complained that governments, including the government of India, had reduced spending on agriculture, gradually abandoning farmers to a private sector that cared only about maximizing production and profits.

"Most of the policies that have come since globalization have not been farmer-friendly," observed one dean.

Incredibly, in a country where 70 percent of the population lives in rural areas and slums are the fastest-expanding part of overloaded cities, India's leaders believe that moving millions of people off the land so that large-scale factory farming can be established with private investment is the way to go. After all, that's what the United States did, and in the process it became a fabulously rich and powerful country, never mind the damage done to its heartland or to the health of a people whose "supersized" diet has afflicted them with epidemic obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.

The Indian government gets a lot of encouragement for this scenario from institutions such as the World Bank that favor export-oriented agriculture; from transnational agribusiness giants clamoring to get into India, a country with the second-largest amount of arable land after the United States; and from India's own big companies eager to get into a new business area some experts predict will eclipse the billions made from outsourcing and information technology. India's minister of finance, Palaniappan Chidambaram, [envisions](#) a future where 85 percent of India's population lives in cities and only 15 percent are engaged in agriculture, an India with a heartland as empty as that of the United States with its few remaining farmers completely beholden to the agribusiness giants who sell them their seeds, their fertilizers, and their pesticides, and then buy their harvests.

This is not the vision I found at PAU. One dean lamented: "We've been told you have to push people off the farm, that that is the solution." Clearly, he disagreed.

Still, the dean and his colleagues are research scientists, not social activists. They are skeptical about organic farming. ("Who can wait three years for certification?" asked one academic.) They have great faith in the capacity of agricultural science to deliver solutions to the threats posed by climate change. On this front, PAU is working with the [Tata Energy Research Institute](#), whose director general, Rajendra K. Pachauri, chaired the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Al Gore, as well as with the [M.S. Swaminathan Institute](#), named after and headed by the father of India's Green Revolution, to create new heat-resistant seeds and engineer new rice varieties that would absorb more carbon from the atmosphere and others that would use less water.

If climate change slams India as hard as it is predicted to do, these efforts could prove life-sustaining.

From: Mira Kamdar
Subject: The Organic Farmer

Posted Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 6:48 AM ET

SIRSA, HARYANA, India—"Sit right here, sweetheart," croons Ricchpal Singh Grewal. A robust man with silver hair and a neatly trimmed beard, Grewal is one of India's pioneering organic farmers. I can't quite place the smoothness and inflection of his voice. His English is flawless but not in the usual Oxbridge-educated way one hears in Delhi.

"Can I get you something?" he offers. "Some tea?" he asks, gesturing to an armchair. The room is immense and rather dusty, with just a sofa and a couple of chairs in one corner. "Relax, baby," Mr. Grewal smiles, "we have all the time in the world."

It doesn't make sense. How can a farmer with some land off the national highway near the Haryana-Punjab border be talking to me in what is, without doubt, a "Hollywood, baby" style?

On the wall are enlarged vintage black-and-white photos of Sikh farmers in a field of wheat. Grewal returns, followed by a young girl carrying a tray with tea things that she shyly places on a table in front of me.

"The sugar is our own," he says. I usually don't take sugar, but the mound of crumbling caramel tempts me. It is delicious in the tea. "Those are amazing photos," I observe.

"That is my grandfather. He bought 500 acres here with the pension he'd earned as an engineer for the British raj. He and my father knew the earth and how to coax life from it like no one else. I came to it too late," he sighed. He explained how as a youth he ran away from farming, hopped a freighter in Bombay and made his way to Mexico, then to Los Angeles.

"Hollywood, that's where I ended up," he beamed. I'd nailed it! "They loved India, but they didn't know anything about it. I was the first to import tie-dye. I became a huge success, with offices in Milan, and my line in *Vogue* magazine. But the drug scene was too much. One day, I told my partner in Milan, 'You want this? It's all yours.' I came back here. I knew I had to farm. I needed the soil, the earth. Everything is born of her," he declared, sounding like a California guru.

In the kitchen, I meet his wife, Amrith, a lovely woman who manages the processing aspect of their operation in addition to running their home, which includes cooking three meals a day for the family and their dozen employees. The food is cooked using biogas derived from cow manure. The hot water heater runs on crop waste and paper scraps. Except for electricity and gasoline, the farm is self-sufficient.

Grewal takes me out into the fields. He shows me how he practices inter-cropping, growing nitrogen-fixing legumes between the cotton plants. When we get to the wheat fields, he notes that a lot of weeds have come up. "Got to get some women out here. They'll weed this in a day. The best are from Rajasthan—very respectful and hard-working." And also inexpensive, I think.

Abundant cheap labor is one of the potential advantages India can bring to expanding organic agriculture. Picking off pests by hand, harvesting inter-cropped fields with a mix of plants ready at different times, eliminating weeds by frequent hoeing between tight rows, preparing soil with organic fertilizers, deploying micro-irrigation lines positioned to release water at the roots of each plant—these are all labor-intensive tasks.

But organic farming in India faces significant disincentives. Most government policies favor industrial agriculture, with heavy subsidies for India's chemical-fertilizer and pesticide industries. The focus, understandable in a developing country, is on maximizing yields and boosting exports. The mindset of the Green Revolution is well-entrenched, despite the widely acknowledged social and environmental damage those practices have wrought and the knowledge that they are simply not sustainable.

"The very rich and the poor eat organic in India," chuckles Grewal. "Seventy percent of the farmers in India are organic farmers. They can't afford to farm any other way. The chemical inputs are too expensive for them. But they don't know they are doing organic farming, and they aren't certified. Unless you're certified, you can't export, you can't get the confidence of the consumer," he explains.

"Another problem is that to export, you need to be able to provide a full shipping container of product. Foreign buyers want scale. They don't want a little from me, a little from the next guy," Grewal complains. His answer is to do his own product processing and packaging. He shows me a sample, a millet grown in the northwest Indian state of Himachal Pradesh where he plans to buy land and expand his operation. The small plastic packet is labeled, "Product of Grewal's Organic Agriculture Farms: Certified Organic." The back of the package is crowded with logos and organic certifications.

India is now the world's biggest exporter of organic cotton, though many people I've talked to claim that by this point most Indian cotton has been contaminated with genetically modified seed. After Monsanto introduced its patented Bollgard cotton, which contains a bacteria toxic to the boll worm, enterprising Indian entrepreneurs concocted a range of legitimate and bootleg genetically modified cotton seeds, which they sold at lower prices. Small fields and the natural tendency of genetically modified material to migrate with the wind have ensured, I'm

told, that no one can guarantee Indian cotton to be "GMO-free," an important criteria for certified organic products.

The domestic market for organic food is slowly increasing among India's health-conscious, affluent urbanites, but procurement, distribution, and retail networks are patchy. Organic farming in India is growing at a year-over-year rate of 40 percent, but it still represents a tiny portion of India's total production. By 2012, there are expected to be more than 5 million acres under organic cultivation out of a total of more than 419 million cultivated acres.

Meanwhile, a host of genetically modified crops are being fast-tracked to market in India. The Indian government is encouraging private companies, including global genetic-engineering giants Monsanto, Syngenta, and Bayer Crop Science, to expand their activities. It sees this as a way to boost growth in the lagging agricultural sector of the economy and to position India as a key site for global research and development of new biotechnologies. The long-term health consequences of eating genetically modified food and the impact on the environment from genetically modified organisms have been dismissed as trivial concerns. Genetically modified eggplants will hit the Indian market this year. They will not be labeled.

The landholdings of small farmers are being aggregated by big players through long-term leasing schemes, with the farmers being hired as contract labor on the new factory farms. In India, as elsewhere in the world, organic and natural farming by small producers is on a collision course with large-scale industrial farming. Whether India can transition to a sustainable agricultural model that can feed its hungry millions while providing a dignified living for the farmers who are the majority of its workforce remains to be seen.

From: Mira Kamdar
Subject: The Seeds of Violence

Posted Friday, August 8, 2008, at 7:09 AM ET

MUKTSAR, PUNJAB, India—On a numberless district road between Muktsar and Jaitu, my driver slows the car down to a crawl, again. It's another police roadblock. Rows of sandbags reduce traffic to a single lane. Tractors, open-backed trucks loaded with people, camel carts, and cars are backed up in both directions. It's slow going, slow enough for the dozens of khaki-uniformed policemen massed on both sides of the road to get a good look at each vehicle. Lee-Enfield rifles slung over their shoulders, most sport manly mustaches and menacing glares. Their superiors slouch in grimy plastic chairs under a nearby

tree. The police seem particularly interested in the trucks loaded with people, but they give our car a penetrating look as well.

It turns out I've chosen to visit Punjab during a period of renewed tension between the Indian state and militant Sikh separatists who want to turn Punjab into an independent nation named Khalistan, a goal unlikely to be realized. The Indian state, which has long struggled against separatist movements in Kashmir and in its northeastern territory, has zero tolerance for any movement that threatens the integrity of its national boundaries. The government crackdown on the Khalistan movement in the 1980s and '90s was brutal and effective. Most of the leadership was eliminated or forced into exile. The appetite to join the cause was dampened when thousands of young Sikh men were tortured and "disappeared," atrocities for which no one in the Indian government has been held accountable. The militants engaged in their share of violence as well. Among their more headline-grabbing deeds: halting buses, separating the Sikh passengers from the Hindus, and gunning down the latter.

It was a lot of violence to stomach, especially in the state that suffered most during the bloody partition of Pakistan from India back in 1947. Partition sundered the historic region of Punjab in two; one part ended up in India and the other in Pakistan. At least 1 million people lost their lives during Partition, the largest and most violent migration in human history. A large part of the mayhem occurred in Punjab.

Sheer weariness with sickening violence was one factor in the Khalistan movement's decline. Since elections in 1997, the state has enjoyed relative peace. The naming of Sikh Manmohan Singh as India's prime minister, after national elections returned the Congress Party to power, was widely seen as the final healing touch to relations between Punjab and the Indian state.

This symbolic gesture is lost on the new generation of Khalistan militants, who are splintered into a plethora of distinct groups. There is the Khalistan Commando Force (known as KPF), the Babbar Khalsa International, the Khalistan Liberation Force, and the Bhindranwale Tigers Force of Khalistan, named after Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who died in 1984 at the hands of the Indian military when it [attacked the Golden Temple in Amritsar](#). In March of 2008, two BKI militants were arrested in Jalandhar, Punjab, on their way, it is alleged, to kill Baba Piara Bhaniarewala, a charismatic religious leader whom they consider to be a heretic as well as a competitor for the hearts and minds of Punjabi Sikhs.

It may well be that the decade of relative peace is about to end. In March, Prime Minister Singh warned the government of Canada, where thousands of Sikhs have emigrated, that it needed to pay closer attention to Khalistan-movement activity there. The Indian government is concerned that members of pro-Khalistan

groups in the Sikh diaspora will get their organizations removed from terrorist watch lists.

A large percentage of the Sikh diaspora in Canada and in the United Kingdom is composed of small farmers who were pushed off their land and propelled out of Punjab in search of a better life by the fallout from the Green Revolution. They have done well. Many retain strong ties to Punjab, with close family members still living at home. Many still hold titles to land from which they could no longer make a living yet that they can't bear to let go. Their sense of rootedness in Punjab often eclipses any sense of India, a more abstract entity, as their homeland. They understand firsthand the damage done to the land and the people of Punjab by Green Revolution agricultural practices, and while the vast majority would never engage in terrorist acts, it is easy to blame the Indian state that reaps a disproportionate share of the Green Revolution's benefits while Punjab's residents live with its negative effects.

India also believes that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency is providing cross-border assistance to Khalistan militants and fanning the drug trade. The drug trade has emerged as potentially the most destabilizing factor in Punjab. One morning, I woke up to find the front-page headline of the local English-language newspaper screaming the sensational news that the head of the youth wing of Punjab's ruling party had been arrested on his way to the Amritsar airport with 22 kilos of heroin in his car. That the drug trade has apparently penetrated to this level is worrying.

The heroin in Punjab originates in Afghanistan, a country that for all intents and purposes has turned into a narco-state. It is then funneled through Pakistan. From Punjab, it is transported to Canada or the United Kingdom, where it is distributed by diaspora drug mafias.

Local demand is growing as well. Legions of poor youths, with no job prospects and no desire and little ability to survive by farming, are susceptible to being recruited to work as couriers. Addiction has reached epic proportions, with one recent report putting the portion of addicted Punjabis between the ages of 15 and 25 at 40 percent.

Such epidemic despair bodes ill for Punjab's future. Perhaps the state will be able to keep producing record-breaking harvests of wheat and rice right up until the moment when the last drop of water is used and the last villager drops dead from cancer. Then what?

Punjab is a microcosm of the success and the failure of industrial agriculture in the developing world. There is no doubt that, with enough water and enough chemicals, privileging production above all else can boost yields dramatically. But the damage to the land and the people that make that production possible is profound. It is a model that is not sustainable, as a [report](#)

published this spring by the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, a joint effort of the World Bank and various U.N. agencies, so strongly argued. Ultimately, it will fail. It is failing now, just as the world is desperate to find a way to feed a growing population in a time of climate uncertainty and resource scarcity.

After my trip to Punjab, I came to believe that [Umendra Dutt](#) is right: Farmers who switch to natural farming techniques are engaging in a truly revolutionary act. Instead of Bhagat Singh's pistol, they are wielding plowshares, with no less profound consequences for the future of India than the shaking off of British imperialism decades ago. India's new nonviolent revolution, against incredible odds, is in agriculture. It bears watching.

dvd extras

Candid Camelot

Robert Drew's documentaries captured the Kennedy mystique—and changed presidential politics forever.

By Elbert Ventura

Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 5:53 AM ET

Is there a less spontaneous creature than the contemporary politician? Surrounded by banks of TV cameras, candidates have been trained to stay on script, follow stage directions, and play it safe, lest YouTube [claim another scalp](#). The race itself may hold surprises, but presidential campaigns stick to the photo-op playbook—glad-handing in the New Hampshire snow, visits to Midwestern diners, stopovers at Rust Belt bars. The campaign has become not so much a breaking story captured by cameras as a choreographed production put on for their benefit.

It was not always thus. In 1960, journalist Robert Drew came up with the idea of following Massachusetts Sen. John F. Kennedy with a movie camera during his run against Minnesota Sen. Hubert Humphrey in the Wisconsin Democratic primary. But it wasn't the story so much as the way Drew got it that made the project memorable. Drew and crew were equipped with newfangled movie cameras that gave them unprecedented mobility. The result, *Primary*, was the first of its kind: a freewheeling, fly-on-the-wall documentary with no interviews, no music, no correspondent, and little exposition.

Stacked up against today's documentaries, which tend toward overweening subjectivity and strident polemics, Drew's movies seem like relics. Here, it seems, was the first gaze—the audience granted an intimate glimpse of their leaders, the subjects not yet trained to play to the cameras. Ironically, Drew's innovations would end up killing the very spontaneity he captured. The

ubiquity of portable cameras, whose development Drew helped speed along, would eventually usher in the era of media-trained politicians.

Considering his role as one of the godfathers of *cinéma vérité*, Robert Drew is a curiously obscure figure. Indeed, some cameramen who worked with him, including [D.A. Pennebaker](#) (*Don't Look Back*, *The War Room*) and [Albert Maysles](#) (*Gimme Shelter*), have achieved greater fame. A [newly released box set](#) of Drew's Kennedy films, *Primary* and *Crisis*, offers a vivid reminder of his enduring influence on both journalism and filmmaking—and a poignant testament to the Kennedy mystique.

Click [here](#) for a video slide show on Robert Drew's Kennedy films.

explainer

Will Respirators Help Our Olympic Athletes?

Only if they put them on correctly.

By Jacob Leibenluft

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 6:55 PM ET

Four members of the U.S. Olympic cycling team sparked outrage Tuesday when they disembarked in Beijing [wearing masks covering their mouths and noses](#). The U.S. Olympic Committee has [issued several hundred respirators](#) to its athletes to use as they prepare to compete at the Games. Will those masks actually help?

Yes—as long as they have activated carbon in them and the athletes put them on correctly. If you're going for gold in [the Madison cycling event](#) at the Olympics, you are probably most anxious about two types of pollution: particulate matter and ozone. (Readings for other hazardous pollutants, like sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, and carbon monoxide, haven't been quite as bad in Beijing.) For competitive reasons, the USOC is [not revealing the secrets](#) behind its masks, but a team physiologist has claimed that they'll keep out "[between 85 percent and 100 percent](#)" of Beijing's pollutants.

How plausible is that claim? The simple act of holding a hankie over your nose and mouth might screen out about 20 percent of dust particles that are 3 microns in diameter. Respirators are designed to protect against the smaller particles that do more damage to your lungs. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health certifies respirators that are effective at filtering out at least 95 percent of all particles as small as 0.3 microns. (See, for example, [this in-depth guide](#).) Some doctors,

however, worry that NIOSH doesn't test for even smaller, "ultrafine" particles. A recent [University of Cincinnati study](#) suggested NIOSH-certified masks weren't reaching the 95 percent-protection level for ultrafine matter, but the best masks did score well enough to suggest the USOC's goals are within reach. (For a 2003 Explainer describing why surgical masks don't catch tiny viruses, click [here](#).)

It's a bit trickier to filter out ozone gas—which has been found to inflame the lungs and restrict air flow. NIOSH [recommends](#) that workers exposed to ozone concentrations higher than 0.1 parts per million—a threshold Beijing has [broken before](#) (PDF)—should use a mask with a chemical filter. Keeping with that advice, the USOC has revealed that its masks include [activated carbon](#), which binds to the ozone and prevents it from passing through. While there is limited evidence about the use of activated carbon in respirators, studies have confirmed that it can be effective at removing ozone in other contexts. Those studies found that quality [varies significantly](#) among different commercial filters, however. And filters meant to block ozone—like those for particulate matter—can become less effective the longer they are in use.

Even the best masks will work only if the athletes are putting them on correctly. A 2004 [study](#) (PDF) estimated that more than one-quarter of people who tried to follow the manufacturers' instructions for donning NIOSH-certified masks failed to wear them in a way that achieved the government-mandated level of protection. (Fitting a mask can be [particularly tough](#) if you have a beard or you wear glasses.) But regardless of whether they can put them on properly, don't expect to see many athletes sporting the masks on TV: Even if they get heavy use in the Olympic Village, U.S. officials say the athletes won't wear them during competition.

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

Explainer thanks Ken Rundell of Marywood University and Tom Pouchot, Jeff Peterson, and Terry Thornton of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

explainer

Why Do Banks Fail on Fridays?

So the government can fix them up over the weekend.

By Nina Shen Rastogi

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 12:35 PM ET

Last week, [First Priority Bank](#) in Bradenton, Fla., became the [eighth American bank to fail this year](#). Every single one of these

institutions went under on a Friday. Why do banks always go bust on Fridays?

So the government has a full weekend to reopen them under new management. If the banking business didn't return to normal at the earliest opportunity, the specter of agitated customers might erode public confidence in the banking system, triggering a wider panic. So regulators close banks at the end of the day on Friday to take advantage of the regularly scheduled days off. In that time, officials from the [Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.](#)—the agency in charge of supervising the actual takeover—can settle a failed bank's accounts and carve out assets to liquidate later, thereby easing [the transition to a new owner](#). And if there is no new owner—i.e., if no healthy bank has stepped up to purchase the failed one—then the FDIC can use the weekend to write checks to customers for the total amount of their [insured deposits](#). (The FDIC can also create a temporary [bridge bank](#), as it did last month with [IndyMac](#), to take over the failed bank's operations.)

Preparations for a bank failure can begin long before that final weekend, however. A troubled institution is usually put on notice months earlier by the agency that chartered it. (In the case of First Priority, that's the Florida Office of Financial Regulation.) If it can't manage to turn itself around in a timely fashion, the chartering agency may decide to close it. Regulators wait until the last minute to make the formal announcement, though, to keep the failed bank's employees and customers as calm as possible for as long as possible. (Sometimes the FDIC doesn't get much advance warning at all, particularly when fraud is involved and the chartering agency must take swift action. When the [First National Bank of Keystone](#) closed in 1999, the FDIC got wind of it only the day before.)

If the FDIC has enough lead time, it can obtain the bank's financial records in advance and start looking for a potential buyer. Regulators select candidates and quietly notify them, in very general terms, that a bank matching their criteria is about to go on sale. Interested parties sign confidentiality agreements and then gain access to a secure FDIC Web site with more specific information. Bids are usually due by noon on the Tuesday prior to a planned Friday closing, and the winning bidder is notified by the end of the day. The acquiring bank must then quickly assemble its own team to help with the weekend merger.

On the Friday of a typical takeover, the FDIC arrives on-site with a large team to manage the transition. (When a large bank fails, this might include upward of 100 people.) The team has two main priorities. First, it must figure out which customers' deposits are insured and which are not. This can be a tangle, since customers can sock away money in a variety of accounts to ensure that their deposits fall under [FDIC-insured limits](#). The second priority is getting the bank ready to open under new ownership by Monday. That involves discarding any material with the old bank's name on it—like posters, cashiers' checks,

and marquee signs—and putting the new bank's paperwork, advertisements, and employees in place. Specialists from other departments, such as facilities, human resources, IT, public relations, and accounting, round out the FDIC's team. Officials once even [hired a hypnotist](#) to help a bank employee remember a vault code.

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

Explainer thanks David Barr and Robert Schoppe of the FDIC.

explainer

Can You Stockpile Gasoline?

How to save up fuel when prices are cheap.

By Jude Stewart

Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 12:14 PM ET

Gas prices dropped to an average [\\$3.871 a gallon](#) on Tuesday after a [two-week stretch of declining prices](#). Is it possible to stockpile cheap gas before the prices go up again?

Yes, but you have to be very, very careful. If you don't do it right, your stash of gasoline might spoil or blow up. For safety reasons, the EPA discourages consumers from storing more than [1 to 5 gallons](#), and the National Fire Protection Association proposes a limit of [25 gallons](#). Local fire codes determine whether your stockpile is legal: In New York City, for example, you can't keep more than 2.5 gallons.

If you're still game, first stake out a location for your fuel cans or storage tanks. Choose a spot downhill and downwind from your home—that way the heavy gasoline vapors will tend to flow away from where you live. Heat accelerates fuel evaporation, so make sure to pick a relatively cool spot. (As volatile elements in gasoline evaporate, your fuel's ability to combust degrades, diminishing engine performance.) Hang a dry chemical or CO₂ fire extinguisher nearby and a huge "No Smoking" sign.

Next, pick your storage container. Portable gas cans are most convenient for storing anything less than 5 gallons; the standard color code for portable cans is blue for kerosene, red for gasoline, and yellow for diesel fuel. Don't mix these up: Putting the wrong fuel in a tank can hurt your engine's performance (best-case scenario) or explode (worst-case). Invest in [brand-new cans](#) to reduce evaporation, fuel spills, and vapor leakage. For large-scale storage, 55-gallon fuel drums are cheap and convenient although they can eventually rust or leak. Consider a commercial-grade tank, ranging in size from 100 to 10,000 gallons in either above-ground or underground varieties.

It's best to fill your tanks at a well-trafficked gas station where you're more likely to get fuel that's fresh from the refinery. Gas that's been sitting around is prey to several chemical processes that degrade the fuel, including evaporation, oxidation, and water contamination. Oxidation occurs when hydrocarbons react with oxygen, producing new compounds that eventually change the fuel's chemical composition and gum up your engine. ([Oxidized gas](#) looks darker than fresh gas and may even smell sour; you can protect your stash by adding a stabilizer like [Sta-Bil](#).) Gasoline's ethanol component tends to draw moisture out of the surrounding air, which makes your engine run rough until all the water is burned out of the system. You should also opt for [higher-octane gasoline](#) as it's more resilient to the effects of evaporation.

The consequences are ugly if you get gas storage wrong. Last spring, a Massachusetts couple started hoarding gas in plastic jugs in a utility closet and [ignited eight apartments in their complex](#). They would have been better off joining a [fuel bank](#): Members lock in a low price by buying gas online when prices dip; then they collect the gas at participating stations later when prices rise.

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

Explainer thanks Matt Lewis of Ohio State University and Emory Warner of Backwoods Home Magazine.

explainer

Can My Shrink Rat Me Out?

Did Bruce Ivins' therapist have to say that her patient was a homicidal sociopath?

By Juliet Lapidos

Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 5:53 PM ET

The psychotherapist who treated Bruce E. Ivins, the deceased suspect in the 2001 anthrax attacks, [told a Maryland court](#) on July 24 that her patient was a "sociopathic, homicidal" maniac who planned to kill his co-workers and that he had "attempted to murder several people" using poison as far back as 2000. Did she have to drop a dime on her patient, or could she have kept quiet?

It's murky. The 1996 Supreme Court case [Jaffee v. Redmond](#) officially recognized psychotherapist-patient privilege in federal courts. That decision, concerning a police officer accused of excessive force who sought to keep his social worker's notes out of a trial, states that "effective psychotherapy ... depends upon an atmosphere of confidence and trust in which the patient is willing to make a frank and complete disclosure of facts."

Patients, in other words, should feel secure that what they reveal in a clinical setting is between them and their psychologists. Although all states recognize some form of this privilege, 27 of them, including Maryland, require therapists to breach confidentiality if the patient poses a serious danger of violence to others. (In some other states, psychologists have explicit permission to warn the cops but aren't obligated to do so.)

The exact nature of this requirement varies slightly from state to state, but the general formulation is that a mental-health professional must warn either the police or the potential victim if a patient makes a specific threat against an identifiable third party. That is, the patient has to be doing more than just blowing off steam ("God, I'm gonna kill my boss!"). He has to have an actual plan ("I'm going to buy a gun") and an actual victim ("and shoot my neighbor") in mind. But it's up to the therapist to decide if the patient truly intends violence and is capable of carrying out the threat. Arguably, Duley could have kept quiet if she thought Ivins' apparent plan to kill his co-workers was really just a fantasy.

The "duty to warn" concept dates back to the 1974 case [*Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California*](#). In *Tarasoff*, a patient told his therapist that he intended to kill a young woman who had spurned him. A couple of months later he did so, and her parents sued the therapist for failing to warn their daughter. The case ended up in the Supreme Court of California, which ruled that therapists have a "duty to warn" not just the police (which the therapist had done) but the potential victim as well. In a 1976 rehearing, the court replaced the phrase "duty to warn" with "duty to protect."

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

Explainer thanks Harold J. Bursztajn, co-director of the Program in Psychiatry and the Law at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center; Michael Lamport Commons of Harvard Medical School; Harvey Dondershine of Stanford University; Thomas Gutheil, co-director of the Program in Psychiatry and Law at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center; and Gary Zalkin.

faith-based

Let the God Games Begin

How missionaries' attempts to evangelize at the Olympics were foiled.

By Adam Minter

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 6:49 AM ET

On April 30, 100 days before the Olympics opening ceremonies, China's Catholic Patriotic Association, a government-chartered

organization with oversight of the country's Catholics, issued an edict requiring all mainland dioceses to celebrate a Mass in support of a successful Olympics. But that was really just a formality: China's churches—government-registered and underground—have been praying for a successful Olympics for years.

Before and after China's bid for the 2008 Summer Games, supporters argued that hosting the Games would force the country to address human rights issues, among which were long-standing concerns about religious freedom on the mainland. Others looked at the Games as a prime opportunity to save souls.

The number of China's Christians (estimates range from 30 million to 100 million) continues to grow, mostly as a result of indigenous efforts but also with the aid of thousands of foreign missionaries who have lived and worked in China as schoolteachers and other professionals. Though foreign missionaries have been illegal in China for decades (they are still strongly associated with colonialism and their midcentury resistance to China's Communist Party), these efforts have often gone undetected or, more often, were considered harmless and not worth the trouble of disrupting. (Under Chinese law, the missionary's offense is tightly defined as proselytizing outside government-sanctioned venues that would never license them in the first place. In the case of Protestants, proselytizing typically takes place in house churches, though it can take place anywhere face-to-face contact can be established.)

As recently as the spring of 2007, evangelical groups were planning an effort meant to include thousands of trained missionaries descending on China. However, in the course of the last year, several developments have damaged the prospects for the planned spiritual harvest.

Between April and June 2007, China expelled more than 100 Christian missionaries, several of whom had been living in China for at least 15 years. China's Foreign Ministry did not comment on the expulsion. But it has been widely assumed that the decision was related to the Olympics and may have been a strike against any potential on-the-ground infrastructure to support the Olympic missionary influx.

Next, unexpectedly tight visa and other Olympic-related security restrictions have rendered many mission efforts impractical or impossible, leaving congregations little choice but to pray from American churches, instead of from the Olympics themselves. (Meanwhile, the Kansas City-based Fellowship of Christian Athletes, unsatisfied with [regulations](#) about religion and the Games that, among other things, allow only chaplains selected by the Chinese government to minister in the Olympic Village, has [asked](#) former Olympians, including retired gold medalist swimmer Josh Davis, to serve as informal chaplains alongside athletes whom it supports in ministering to other athletes.)

Resistance to Olympics-based evangelizing didn't come from just the government. For three generations, American evangelicals have directed prayers to China's persecuted Christians. But many Chinese Christians increasingly object to interference by foreign missions. "We don't need foreign Bibles or prayer leaders anymore," a Shanghai-based clergyman told me recently. "We finally have Chinese ones." But perhaps the most significant blow came from the least expected source. Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, arrived in China in May at the invitation of the Three Self Patriotic Movement, the Chinese government-chartered organization that oversees the country's Protestant churches. Speaking to reporters at the beginning of his mission, he [conceded](#) that he had seen China make real progress with religious freedom in the 20 years that he had been visiting China. In the course of his remarks, he encouraged China's Protestants to resolve disagreements with their government—which many interpreted as an encouragement for the underground Protestants to seek reconciliation with the open church movement. (In the last year, Pope Benedict XVI has made a similar, though [more formal, entreaty to China's divided Catholics](#).) Then, in a bombshell for American evangelicals, Graham added that he was opposed to Olympic evangelization: "I would not support any illegal activity at all."

The response from the evangelical community was swift and fierce, including [withering comments from Bob Fu, of the China Aid foundation](#), a prominent U.S.-based organization supporting China's underground Christians. Graham, however, did not back down, and, in a statement he released after his initial comments, he noted:

I believe we must be sensitive to and respectful of the local church and the impact we as outsiders could have on them. We are guests in China and anything we do or say has a lasting effect on Chinese Christians that will be there long after the Olympics when we are gone.

With his statement, Graham, in effect, acknowledged religious freedom had improved to a point that China no longer needs foreign missionaries to contravene Chinese law in order to spread the Gospel. That message may be unwelcome to many American evangelicals, but it resonates with Chinese Christians who are beginning to take considerable pride in coming out from the shadow of America and Europe—or, at least, their missionaries. For many, missions and smuggled Bibles are an archaic and unnecessary throwback to a time when China wasn't home to overflowing churches (open and underground) and one of the world's largest Bible publishers, the state-owned [Amity Press](#) in Nanjing, which is publishing a multilingual Bible that will be the first to bear an Olympics logo—the ubiquitous Dancing Beijing seal that one China-based blogger [suggests](#) looks like Jesus nailed to a red door.

Still, China's religious freedom situation is far from ideal. Many of the Olympics-related options, though very welcome, benefit visiting foreigners, not Chinese believers. Indeed, in the run-up to the Olympics, many of Beijing's "underground" Protestant house churches were forcefully closed, their leaders scattered, after having been allowed to operate mostly unimpeded for years. Ethnically diverse religious communities in Tibet and Xinjiang province, which have little ethnic loyalty to the Han Chinese state, have been subjected to often brutal persecution and detentions that bear little resemblance to the increasingly mainstream lives of Christians in China's urban centers. And yet, in the case of Tibet and Xinjiang, the more relevant factor is ethnicity, not faith. For underground Christians, the question is their willingness to subject themselves to the licensing requirements of the national and local governments.

By design and circumstance, the public face of religion during Beijing's Olympics will be government-registered and supportive of the Games. Yet despite the implicit and overt suggestions of Beijing's religious-freedom critics, that face expresses real, mainstream religious belief in China's capital. Missionaries who fail to recognize this fact have lost sight of their declining importance in what could likely be the world's largest Christian nation by midcentury.

fighting words

The Man Who Kept On Writing

Alexander Solzhenitsyn lived as if there were such a thing as human dignity.

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, August 4, 2008, at 10:35 AM ET

Every now and then it happens. The state or the system encounters an individual who, bafflingly, maddeningly, absurdly, *cannot be broken*. Should they manage to survive, such heroes have a good chance of outliving the state or the system that so grossly underestimated them. Examples are rather precious and relatively few, and they include Nelson Mandela refusing an offer to be released from jail (unless and until all other political detainees were also freed) and [Alexander Solzhenitsyn](#) having to be deported from his country of birth against his will, even though he had become—and had been before—a prisoner there.

Two words will always be indissolubly connected to the name of Alexander Isayevich: the acronym *GULAG* (for the initials of the Stalinist system of penitentiary camps that dotted the Soviet landscape like a pattern of hellish islands) and the terse, harsh word *Zek*, to describe the starved and overworked inhabitants of this archipelago of the new serfdom. In an especially vivid chapter of his anatomy of that ghastly system, Solzhenitsyn parodied Marxist-Leninist theories of self-determination to argue

that the Zeks were indeed a nation unto themselves. In his electrifying first book, [One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich](#), he did in a way delineate the borders and customs of an undiscovered country with a doomed and unknown citizenry. He became an anthropologist of the totalitarian in a way not understood since David Rousset's [L'Univers Concentrationnaire](#). If you are interested in historical irony, you might care to notice that any one chapter of *Ivan Denisovich*, published in *Novy Mir* during the Khrushchev de-Stalinization, easily surpassed in its impact any number of books and tracts that had taken "Socialist Realism" as their watchword. The whole point about "realism"—*real* realism—is that it needs no identifying prefix. Solzhenitsyn's work demonstrates this for all time.

To have fought his way into Hitler's East Prussia as a proud Red Army soldier in the harshest war on record, to have been arrested and incarcerated for a chance indiscretion, to have served a full sentence of servitude and been released on the very day that Stalin died, and then to have developed cancer and known the whole rigor and misery of a Soviet-era isolation hospital—what could you fear after that? The bullying of Leonid Brezhnev's KGB and the hate campaigns of the hack-ridden Soviet press must have seemed like contemptible fleabites by comparison. But it seems that Solzhenitsyn did have a worry or a dread, not that he himself would be harmed but that none of his work would ever see print. Nonetheless—and this is the point to which I call your attention—he kept on writing. The Communist Party's goons could have torn it up or confiscated or burned it—as they did sometimes—but he continued putting it down on paper and keeping a bottom drawer filled for posterity. This is a kind of fortitude for which we do not have any facile name. The simplest way of phrasing it is to say that Solzhenitsyn lived "as if." Barely deigning to notice the sniggering, pick-nose bullies who followed him and harassed him, he carried on "as if" he were a free citizen, "as if" he had the right to study his own country's history, "as if" there were such a thing as human dignity.

And, once he succeeded in getting [The Gulag Archipelago](#) into print, even in pirate editions overseas, it became obvious that something terminal had happened to the edifice of Soviet power.

Of course, one cannot have everything. Nelson Mandela has been soft on Daniel arap Moi, Fidel Castro, Muammar Qaddafi, and Robert Mugabe, and soft on them even when he doesn't need them anymore as temporary allies in a difficult struggle. When Solzhenitsyn came to the United States, he was turned away from the White House, on Henry Kissinger's advice, by President Gerald Ford. But, rather than denounce this Republican collusion with Brezhnev, he emptied the vials of his wrath over Americans who liked rock music. The ayatollahlike tones of his notorious [Harvard lecture](#) (as I called them at the time) turned out not to be misleading. As time went by, he metamorphosed more and more into a classic Russian Orthodox

chauvinist, whose work became more wordy and propagandistic and—shall we be polite?—idiosyncratic with every passing year.

His most recent book, [Two Hundred Years Together](#), purported to be a candid examination of the fraught condition of Russian-Jewish relations—a theme that he had found it difficult to repress in some of his earlier work. He denied that this inquiry had anything in common with the ancient Russian-nationalist dislike of the cosmopolitan (and sometimes Bolshevik-inclined) Jew, and one must give him the benefit of any doubt here. However, when taken together with his partisanship for Slobodan Milosevic and the holy Serb cause, his exaltation of the reborn (and newly state-sponsored) Russian Orthodox Church, and his late-blooming admiration of the cold-eyed Vladimir Putin, the resulting mixture of attitudes and prejudices puts one in mind more of Dostoyevsky than of Tolstoy. Having denounced "cruel" NATO behavior in the Balkans, without ever saying one word about the behavior of Russian soldiers in Chechnya, Solzhenitsyn spent some of his final days in wasteful diatribes against those Ukrainian nationalists who were, rightly or wrongly, attempting to have their own Soviet-era horrors classified as "genocide."

Dostoyevsky even at his most chauvinistic was worth a hundred [Mikhail Sholokhovs](#) or [Maxim Gorkys](#), and Solzhenitsyn set a new standard for the courage by which a Russian author could confront the permafrost of the Russian system. "A great writer," as he put it in [The First Circle](#), "is, so to speak, a secret government in his country." The echo of Shelley's remark about poets being the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" may or may not be deliberate. But it serves to remind us that writers, however much they may disown the idea, are nonetheless ultimately responsible for the political influence that they *do* choose to exert. Therein lies the germ of tragedy.

five-ring circus

Hot S/ Medal Pick: Im Over Park in Men's Archery

The latest from the [SlateOlympics](#) Twitter feed.
Friday, August 8, 2008, at 7:05 AM ET

For the next two weeks, *Slate's* going to be Twittering like mad about the Olympics and the surrounding hootenanny. Keep coming back to this page to read our 10 latest tweets, which will automatically update below. You can also follow us at <http://twitter.com/SlateOlympics>, and you can read more about our Twitter experiment [here](#). (Note: If you're using Internet Explorer, hitting refresh on this page will make the Twitter module disappear. We're currently working on a fix for the problem. If you're using Firefox, though, feel free to refresh away.)

five-ring circus

The 2008 Olympics

A roundup of *Slate's* coverage of China and the Beijing Games.
Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 6:59 PM ET

The Games

"[Will Respirators Help Our Olympic Athletes?](#): Only if they put them on correctly," by Jacob Leibenluft. Posted Aug. 7, 2008.

"[China Goes for \(All of\) the Gold](#): Economists predict whether the host country will rule the Beijing Olympics," by Daniel Gross. Posted Aug. 7, 2008.

"[Summer Olympics Disaster Guide](#): Opening Ceremony Edition: The Olympics are all set to kick off. What could possibly go wrong?" by Lucy Morrow Caldwell, Kara Hadge, Nayeli Rodriguez, and Derek Thompson. Posted Thursday, Aug. 7, 2008.

Slate V: Can China top the United States in the medal count?

"[Full Speedo Ahead](#): Can Michael Phelps' cutting-edge swimsuit make me a better swimmer?" by Sara Dickerman. Posted Wednesday, Aug. 6, 2008.

"[Olympic Marathon](#): The best books, Web sites, and video to prepare you for the Beijing Games," by Rachael Larimore. Posted Saturday, Aug. 2, 2008.

"[Swifter, Higher, Cuddlier](#): Stop picking on Beijing's Olympic mascots," by Seth Stevenson. Posted Thursday, July 24, 2008.

"[Dara Torres, Demystified](#): Do the swimmer's 'secrets to success' hold up?" by Amanda Schaffer. Posted Wednesday, July 16, 2008.

"[Summer Olympics Disaster Guide](#): What could go wrong in Beijing? Everything," by Lucy Morrow Caldwell, Kara Hadge, Nayeli Rodriguez, and Derek Thompson. Posted Wednesday, July 2, 2008.

"[Passing on the Torch](#): Why are world leaders boycotting the Beijing opening ceremony?" by Jacob Leibenluft. Posted Friday, April 11, 2008.

"[The Carbon Olympics](#): Keeping track of the Olympic torch's carbon footprint—one leg at a time," by Chadwick Matlin. Posted Tuesday, April 11, 2008.

"[Boycott Beijing](#): The Olympics are the perfect place for a protest," by Anne Applebaum. Posted Monday, March 24, 2008.

"[Spielberg Bails on the Beijing Olympics](#): Will Darfur spoil everything for China?" by Kim Masters. Posted Thursday, Feb. 5, 2008.

"[The Olympics Take Beijing](#): The new city comes to my backyard," by Tom Scocca. Posted Monday, Dec. 3, 2007.

The Culture

"[The Beijing Olympics: a Visitors' Guide](#): What should I eat? How much should I tip? Is that kid peeing in the street?" by Tom Scocca. Posted Thursday, Aug. 7, 2008.

"[The Vanishing City](#): The life and death of Beijing's alleys," by Rob Gifford. Posted Thursday, Aug. 7, 2008.

"[Let the God Games Begin](#): How missionaries' attempts to evangelize at the Olympics were foiled," by Adam Minter. Posted Thursday, Aug. 7, 2008.

"[Magnum Photos](#): China's secret plot to look good in photographs," by Zena Koo. Posted Thursday, Aug. 7, 2008.

"[Ready, Get Self, Go!](#): China's younger generation discovers the identity crisis," by Ann Hulbert. Posted Wednesday, Aug. 6, 2008.

"[Beyond Wontons](#): A new cookbook showcases recipes from China's ethnic minorities," by Nicholas Day. Posted Wednesday, Aug. 6, 2008.

"[What's Up With Chinese Menus?](#): The stories behind 'chicken without sexual life' and 'bean curd made by a pockmarked woman,'" by Brian Palmer. Posted Monday, June 23, 2008.

"[China's SAT](#): If the SAT lasted two days, covered everything you'd ever studied, and decided your future," by Manuela Zoninsein. Posted Wednesday, June 4, 2008.

"[Seven Mysteries of China](#): Is porcelain addictive?" by Christopher Benfey. Posted Wednesday, April 2, 2008.

"[A Flipbook on China](#): A Magnum photo essay." Posted Friday, March 7, 2008.

["How the Grinch Stole Chinese New Year:](#) The government has banned many of the traditions associated with Chinese New Year—but the holiday may be staging a comeback," by April Rabkin. Posted Wednesday, Feb. 6, 2008.

["A Political Scientist in China:](#) How China is like a bicycle," by Ian Bremmer. Posted Friday, Oct. 5, 2007.

The Politics

["The Party vs. the People:](#) What might the new populist protest in China portend?" by Minxin Pei. Posted Tuesday, Aug. 5, 2008.

["China's Tell-Nothing Ethos:](#) What the man on Mao's right doesn't say," by Andrew J. Nathan. Posted Tuesday, Aug. 5, 2008.

["The Chinese Earthquake Roundup:](#) Can grieving parents have another child? And other questions about the tragedy," by Jacob Leibenluft. Posted Thursday, May 15, 2008.

["Olympic Flame Out:](#) China learns the price of a few weeks of global attention," by Anne Applebaum. Posted Monday, April 14, 2008.

["China's Great Migration:](#) Why would hundreds of thousands of people risk their lives to move to America and live as illegal aliens?" by Patrick Radden Keefe. Posted Wednesday, April 9, 2008.

["The Last Days of Cheap Chinese:](#) Why American consumers are about to start paying more for clothes, electronics, toys, and just about everything else," by Alexandra Harney. Posted Tuesday, April 8, 2008.

["Why Does China Care About Tibet?:](#) Plus, when are monks allowed to get violent?" by Nina Shen Rastogi. Posted Friday, March 28, 2008.

["Live From Lhasa:](#) Shaky cell-phone videos from Tibet foretell doom for the Chinese empire," by Anne Applebaum. Posted Monday, March 17, 2008.

["Trade-Offs:](#) Is China the key to Africa's development?" by Eliza Barclay. Posted Thursday, March 6, 2008.

five-ring circus

China Goes for (All of) the Gold

Economists predict whether the host country will rule the Beijing Olympics.

By Daniel Gross
Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 6:17 PM ET

The economic story of the past several years has been China's massive growth as it has nabbed market share in important international competition and assumed a higher profile on the global stage. Nothing exemplifies China's rise more than its hosting the 2008 Olympics. Could it put an exclamation point on its upward trajectory by dominating the Games?

Economists seem to think so. Four years ago, [we wrote about](#) models that predicted Olympic medal totals based on factors that have nothing to do with sports and everything to do with what has been going on in economies around the world. The competitors in this medal-count guessing game are [PricewaterhouseCoopers](#) and [Andrew Bernard](#) of Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business. (Descriptions of Bernard's model, developed with [Meghan Busse](#) of the University of California-Berkeley, can be seen [here](#) and [here](#).) Both engage in the classic economists' tactic of forecasting via extrapolation of the recent past. While the models differ, both share the basic assumptions that population (more potential competitors) and income levels (more resources to develop competitors) are crucial determinants of Olympic success. Both also agree that other factors enable countries to punch above their economic weight, including past performance, having been a member of the Soviet/Communist bloc, and/or home-field advantage.

Click on the player below to watch a video from Slate V about China's Olympic team.

This year, each of those factors would seem to weigh heavily in China's favor. Its economy has grown rapidly for many years, making it the world's second-largest when measured by [purchasing power parity](#). It's a former member of the Communist bloc with an enduring and strong state sports bureaucracy bent on bringing home the [maximum number of medals](#). And it's the host. Taking all of that into consideration, PricewaterhouseCoopers [projects](#) that China will better its 2004 medal haul by 40 percent, going from 63 to 88. "The combination of the home country effect and the state support for sport ... is expected to lead to a particularly significant boost to Chinese medal performance," writes PwC economist John Hawksworth.

That would allow China to edge out the United States as the leading medal miner in Beijing. Hawksworth projects the American medal count will fall nearly 20 percent from 2004, from 108 to 87. Other big losers: Russia, Germany, Australia, Japan, and France. In other words, China and some other emerging markets (Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Poland) are expected to grab market share from the industrialized West. Such predictions are perfectly in keeping with the shifting geography of wealth and achievement that has been a byproduct

of globalization. The world may not be flat, but the valleys aren't quite as deep as they were in the past, at least when it comes to Olympic competition. In 1960, the top 10 countries won 78 percent of the medals. In 2004, the top 10 countries won nearly 56 percent. This year, PwC projects the top 10 will win only 52.4 percent.

Bernard reaches a somewhat different result this time around. He sees the rich getting richer and the emerging world taking less of a bite. Bernard's model foresees the United States easily on top with 105 medals, Russia holding steady at 92, and China making only relatively modest gains, with 81 medals. Bernard also sees Germany and Australia holding steady. The net result: The top 10 nations should take home 59 percent of these Games' medals.

But I'm skeptical that either PwC or Bernard will come close to predicting the actual medal count. First, the 2004 projections made by both the PwC and the Bernard models didn't quite pan out. Both overestimated the degree of American decline and the gains by countries whose economies were growing rapidly but lacked a tradition of sports achievement. Both overestimated home-field advantage, and both overestimated the degrees to which established Western powers would lose market share. (Here are Bernard's 2004 [projections](#).) As we noted in our [2004 Olympics post-mortem](#), PwC and Bernard projected that the U.S. medal haul would fall 30 percent and 4 percent from the 2000 total, respectively. Both foresaw that host nation Greece would more than double its 2000 medal count. And PwC boldly forecast that India would massively increase its medal count, from one in 2000 to 10 in 2004.

Oops!

In Athens, the United States actually *increased* its medal total by more than 6 percent, from 97 to 103. Russia, predicted by PwC to lose nearly 30 percent of its 2000 medals (and by Bernard to lose about 6 percent of its medals), increased its take from 88 to 92. Greece won 16 medals in Athens, a 20 percent increase from its 2000 total, but nowhere near the massive gains the models had predicted. And India disappointed PwC by again taking home one measly medal. The excuse: "Indian sport tends to be focused on events that are not included in the Olympics, most importantly cricket," Hawksworth wrote in the introduction to the current projection.

The rampant growth in China, India, and around the globe has surely changed the way we view winners and losers in the global market. But while swift economic changes influence the models' calculations in the short term, it might take decades for money to translate into building a culture of athletic performance. And as seen by the performance of members of the former Soviet bloc, cultures of athletic excellence can endure even when the economic structures that built them have crumbled. In addition, sports are tied up with culture, geography, social mores, and traditions that aren't particularly responsive to economic

changes. An ultra-wealthy country like Saudi Arabia is unlikely to produce many female Olympians.

In addition, predictions about the Olympics are difficult because of the nature of the Games. The differences separating medal-winners from nonmedal-winners are often counted in hundredths of seconds or fractions of inches. And myriad factors on the ground that have nothing to do with economics can impact the outcome of events: a last-minute injury, a runner clipping a single hurdle, or a swimmer turning in a once-in-a-lifetime performance. Finally, as I noted in 2004, I think the models continue to ignore another economic factor that enables some countries to perform above expectations. Ultimately, Olympic success revolves around a nation's ability to attract, retain, and develop human capital to its fullest potential. Historically, no country in the world has managed to do this quite as well as the United States. When the U.S. team enters the Olympic stadium in Beijing on Friday, distance runner [Lopez Lomong](#) will carry the flag. Seven years ago, he was one of the lost boys of Sudan, living in a refugee camp in Kenya. Today, he's a U.S. citizen and a contender for a medal.

five-ring circus

The Beijing Olympics: a Visitors' Guide

What should I eat? How much should I tip? Is that kid peeing in the street?

By Tom Scocca

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 12:11 PM ET

Where can I see the authentic Beijing?

Which one? The one that was artificially suspended in the 1960s by the Cold War? Or the one being artificially accelerated into the 21st century? The authentic Beijing is synthetic—a composite of the edicts and aspirations of centuries' worth of different Chinese rulers. When Marco Polo got here, by his account, Kublai Khan had just relocated the entire population to a new city, built right next to the old one, on the advice of an astrologer.

With that in mind, look for the real Beijing the way you'd look for an authentic Chinese restaurant: Watch where the Chinese people go. It may be disappointing to see crowds flying kites or dancing on some charmless, overscaled plaza outside an office/retail complex—or peddling bicycles through an overrenovated, Disneyfied *hutong*. But that's the city they live in.

If you want to see what things looked like before they got fixed up, have a look at the north bank of the [Tonghui River](#), just outside the Second Ring Road below Jianguomen. There, a strip of charming squalor has somehow missed demolition or

renovation: Low, grubby brick buildings huddle in a row, with stray bricks holding their roof coverings in place. Keep this scene in mind as you see citizens strolling through narrow, lushly planted roadside parks around the rest of the city—the sod and trees mark the graveyards of similar rundown stretches.

What should I eat?

Beijing duck is one of the world's great chauvinistic local delicacies, like pizza in New York or pizza in Naples. After you've eaten duck in Beijing, when you go to a duck house somewhere else and get decent strips of meat wrapped in an OK pancake, all you will taste will be your own tongue, which you will be furiously biting to avoid jabbering on and on about how much, much better the real thing is.

Snub recommendations of the duck at [Quanjudu](#) (overrated, for tourists) and at Made in China (too cute, for oversophisticates). Get it done fancily at one of the two branches of Da Dong, or un-fancily at [Xiangmanlou](#).

Beyond the duck, there are two indigenous branches of cooking: imperial, which can be fussy and bland, and old Beijing, which is pungent and filling. Imperial is served in prettier dining rooms, but all the rest of the advantages belong to old Beijing. Have some *zhajiangmian*—noodles tossed with bean sauce and minced pork—and a side of *ma dofu*, a gray paste of the fermented dregs of tofu-making, fried in lamb fat.

Two warnings for diners accustomed to American Chinese restaurants: Restaurants in China hold back the rice till the very end of the meal, so it doesn't compete for stomach space with the meats and vegetables. And in China, takeout containers are hopelessly flimsy—loosely closing clamshell boxes made of something that combines the water resistance of paper with the structural strength of thin-gauge plastic.

What should I do about money?

Despite [Visa's obligatory pre-Olympic inroads](#), credit-card coverage at Beijing shops and restaurants is spotty. ATMs, however, are plentiful. Withdraw a bunch of 100 RMB notes and start breaking them with coffee-shop or convenience-store purchases as soon as you can. Not only does Beijing run on cash, but at the low end of the spending scale, it runs on small bills. Handing a 100 to a snack vendor (or a cabbie) can get you anything from resentment to outright refusal.

If you get a 50 in your change, hold it up to the light. A watermark of Mao's face should appear in the white space on the left front of the bill, and in a circle next to the white space, you should see a geometric figure, half-ink and half-shadow, neatly aligned. That tip won't save you from all the counterfeits, but it will at least spare you the embarrassment of passing a crudely made one.

Among your small bills will be some that are literally smaller—undersized bills denominated in *jiao*, or tenths of RMB. These went from being an annoyance to a convenience when China outlawed free plastic shopping bags this year, requiring merchants to charge a nominal fee before bagging your goods.

How do the taxis work?

A glowing red sign on the dashboard or up by the windshield indicates an available cab. If the drivers won't stop, you may be standing in a no-pickup zone—search the area for an official cab stand, or try a side street.

The chance of getting a cabbie who can speak fluent English is, optimistically, 1 in 500. (Many drivers, in from the provinces, don't even speak particularly good Mandarin.) In taxis, as elsewhere in the service sector, Beijing's push for [remedial foreign-language instruction](#) has trained people to converse the way automated voice-recognition phone trees do—stray at all from a narrow script, and you're stuck.

The best way to get where you're going is to have someone write out your destination in Chinese beforehand and to carry a cell phone, so you can dial the place you're going and have someone there talk to the driver. The latter is perfectly normal behavior.

Under no circumstances should you try to show the driver a map, even if it's in Chinese. Beijing cabbies navigate by loose geographical associations—"it's outside the Dongzhimen interchange, near the Yuyang Hotel"—and map reading just makes most of them anxious.

How much should I tip?

Nothing. Ever. For all the Audi-driving bosses and Fauchon-dining swells, China is still a country that violently overthrew its aristocracy. People drive you places and serve you food because those are their jobs, for which they are paid a wage. Low as that wage might be, the workers are not expecting the customer to add a lordly bonus to the listed price. It's bad manners.

How can I avoid getting ripped off?

Ignore the laminated rate cards provided by airport taxi touts and tourist-spot pedicab drivers. An absurd price neatly formatted is still an absurd price.

In the markets, knock 75 percent off whatever a vendor quotes you. When haggling ensues, stay at your figure. The only way to tell if you're being unreasonable is if the vendor actually lets you walk away.

All goods and services are denominated in RMB. One shameless scam is for someone—say, a pedicab operator—to say the price is "20," and then afterward claim that was in American dollars. Ignore this and pay in the native currency.

Did that child just pee in the street?

Yes, he did. Beijing's campaigns to improve public manners—and the accompanying fines—have reduced the incidence of public spitting and line-jumping. But the littlest Beijingers still follow tradition, and tradition means open-crotch trousers where Americans would use diapers.

When will this filthy air go away?

Have a look at a flagpole. Beijing sits up against the mountains, at the northwestern end of the industrial coastal plain. The summer weather alternates between sultry, dirty air from the south and east and drier, cleaner air from the inland north and west. Even after Beijing imposed Olympic restrictions on factory operations and the driving of private cars, uncooperative weather meant the smog kept coming in waves. If the flags are pointing away from the mountains, hang on—the pollution is on its way out. If the flags are pointing toward the mountains (or hanging limp), hurry up and finish whatever you were going to do outdoors, before it gets worse.

Is that man in uniform anyone to worry about?

It depends on the uniform (and on what you're worried about). Beijing is thick with elite police and paramilitaries, but it's even thicker with superficially imposing parking attendants and low-level security guards. If you see someone turned out in a sharp outfit resembling the [U.S. Marine Corps dress uniform](#), you're probably looking at a shopping-mall rent-a-cop. Dark blue trousers and a light blue shirt with a big badge number on the left of the chest means a normal city policeman; a light green shirt with dark green trousers and gold or red insignia means the paramilitary People's Armed Police—or the People's Liberation Army, which shares the uniform. Either one might be assigned to block you from where you want to go or to clear you away from where you are. If you're a foreigner, failure to comply probably means nothing more than an invitation to come along to a police station for a few hours—"for tea" or 'to check your identification,' " as one Beijing correspondent puts it. (Repeated demands to talk to your embassy may shorten the delay.)

A gray-green shirt with green-gray trousers and a shoulder patch reading "Beijing Security" is usually some sort of gatehouse guard. A red armband with a white-and-red Yanjing Beer Olympics polo shirt denotes a member, usually elderly, of the neighborhood watch. But the uniform to look for is no uniform at all. In crowds, keep an eye out for placid-looking men between 25 and 45 years old in Chinese dressy casual—dark slacks and golf shirts or dress shirts—with oversized cell phones carried low by their sides. They're looking for signs of unrest, including protests or unauthorized acts of journalism. Inside the arenas, police will be wearing Olympic volunteer uniforms so as not to dampen the atmosphere. Don't forget to notice the ubiquitous electronic auxiliary force of security cameras—armed with face-recognition and crowd-behavior-analysis software. Smile!

five-ring circus

Summer Olympics Disaster Guide: Opening Ceremony Edition

The Olympics are all set to kick off. What could possibly go wrong?

By Lucy Morrow Caldwell, Kara Hadge, Nayeli Rodriguez, and Derek Thompson

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 11:01 AM ET

One month ago, we reported on [every possible thing that could go wrong at the Beijing Games](#): rampant pollution, a television blackout, an uprising by Uighur extremists. Now that the Olympics are set to kick off, we've added updates to all of our crisis scenarios and reordered the list with the biggest potential disasters at the top. On our ranking scale, one torch is no big deal; 10 torches is a potential catastrophe. Print out this handy guide, and be prepared for the worst.

Scenario: The official Web site of the Beijing Olympics says, "[Terrorism, in particular, poses the biggest threat](#)" to this year's Games. More than 500 detailed security plans have supposedly been mapped out, and one Communist Party official announced that Chinese authorities have already raided a "[terrorist gang](#)" with plans for an Olympics takedown. While al-Qaida is a natural suspect for sabotage, keep an eye on Uighur extremists, Muslims in Western China who have become [increasingly active](#) in recent months.

Chance it could happen: 10 percent

Scary quote: The U.S. State Department has [warned](#) Americans that there is a "heightened risk that extremist groups will conduct terrorist acts within China in the near future."

Update, Aug. 7: There have been two major attacks in China in the last month. The Turkistan Islamic Movement took responsibility for [bombs on two buses](#) in the southern city of Kunming that killed two people on July 21. Chinese police, however, say the [bombings aren't the work of terrorists](#). In the province of Xinjiang, homeland of the Uighur separatists, [16 police officers were killed](#) when two grenades were thrown into a police station. China has said that Uighur separatists, possibly linked to al-Qaida, are [responsible for the attack](#).

Scenario: The [world's top marathon runner](#) won't compete in the Olympic marathon because of concerns about Beijing's toxic air. Pollution worries have also led more than 20 countries to [move their pre-Olympic training](#) to Japan. But nobody knows quite what to expect in August. At worst, droves of athletes could make an eleventh-hour exodus on account of not being able to breathe. At the very least, the thick air could make 200 meters feel like a steeplechase. So far, though, reports out of China point to [vastly improving air quality](#). Beijing's radical [anti-pollution measures](#)—shutting down all chemical plants, freezing construction projects, ordering half of the cars off the road—point out what's possible when you have tight state control.

Chance it could happen: 90 percent

Scary quote: "The magnitude of the pollution in Beijing is not something we know how to deal with. It's a foreign environment. It's like feeding an athlete poison," said [a respiratory expert assisting American marathoners](#).

Update, Aug. 7: Millions of Beijing residents have been [forced to stop driving](#) on account of a partial government ban on cars. The ban seems to be working: Pollution levels in the city have [decreased dramatically](#). Mother Nature hasn't been as cooperative, though. Scant rainfall and weak winds have allowed a [fog of pollutants](#) to linger over Beijing. The Australian swimming coach has even [complained about smog](#) that's somehow managed to creep inside the Olympic swimming venue.

Scenario: International concern for Chinese repression in Tibet has already sparked protests in San Francisco, London, and Paris, where the Olympic torch was briefly [extinguished](#). The Chinese government [has cracked down violently](#) on demonstrations in recent months, and numerous world leaders have responded by [boycotting the opening ceremony](#). The worst-case scenario, as seen earlier this year: The Chinese government goes overboard trying to squelch demonstrations and [kills more than 100 pro-Tibetan activists](#).

Chance it could happen: 70 percent

Scary quote: "There are people all over the world who are Tibet supporters, and this is just the first of a cascading waterfall of actions," [said](#) American Shannon Service, who was expelled from China after staging an anti-Olympic protest on Mount Everest.

Update, Aug. 7: Nepali police [arrested and detained more than 300 anti-China Tibetan protesters](#) this week. China has said three public [parks in Beijing may be used for protests](#) as long as the demonstrations don't harm the country's "national interests."

Scenario: More stringent visa policies put in place in the last few months have already [hurt tourism in Beijing](#). The new rules require certain travelers to show [invitation letters, airline tickets, and proof of hotel arrangements](#) before applying for entrance into China. A foreign ministry spokesman has stated that these policies reflect China's concern for security during the Olympics. If high-profile visitors, journalists, or athletes can't get into the country, though, the bad PR might drown out any potential security gains.

Chance it could happen: 90 percent

Scary quote: "Business is so bleak. ... Since May, very few foreigners have checked in. Our occupancy rate has dropped by 40 percent," [one hotel operator told](#) the *New York Times*.

Update, Aug. 7: American speedskater Joey Cheek, a former Winter Olympian, had [his visa revoked this week](#) by the Chinese government. Cheek is the head of [Team Darfur](#), a group of athletes trying to raise awareness about China's role in Sudan. Also, five out of the six mainland cities hosting events for the Olympics have [stopped issuing business visas](#) until after the Games conclude.

Scenario: What if everything goes off without a hitch in Beijing but no one is watching? [Television-rights holders have complained](#) that the Chinese bureaucracy is making it impossible to plan their coverage, with broadcasting equipment reportedly being tied up for security reasons. Even if the cameras do arrive, it's highly unlikely that China will allow live coverage from Tiananmen Square or the Forbidden City. Then again, [NBC paid \\$1.5 billion](#) for broadcast rights to the 2006 and 2008 Olympics—that's a big incentive to make sure that millions don't tune in to see nothing but static.

Chance it could happen: 50 percent

Scary quote: "We are two weeks away from putting equipment on a shipment, and we have no clearance to operate or to enter the country or a frequency allocation," [said](#) Sandy MacIntyre, director of news for AP Television News.

Update, Aug. 7: The Chinese government will [allow live broadcasts from the streets of Beijing](#). Though cameras will be permitted in Tiananmen Square for six hours each day, Chinese officials have banned media organizations from conducting interviews there. In the meantime, Internet censorship has become the latest battleground. The BBC's Chinese language edition and Amnesty International, among other Web sites that had been censored, were [opened to reporters last week](#).

Scenario: The U.S. Olympic team, among other delegations, has raised concerns about the safety of the [food in the Olympic Village](#). In response to [a New York Times report](#) that the U.S. team was bringing its own beef, chicken, and pork to Beijing, a Chinese official said that [outside food would not be allowed](#) in athletes' lodgings. China might come to regret that decision if a sprinter is seen heaving on the starting line.

Chance it could happen: 50 percent

Scary quote: "We had it tested, and it was so full of steroids that we never could have given it to athletes. They all would have tested positive," [said](#) an American caterer, explaining the potential problem with serving the U.S. team Chinese chicken breasts.

Update, Aug. 7: Amid concerns about the safety of the nation's food supply, the Chinese government has placed factories and other food facilities [under video surveillance](#) during the Olympics. Because high temperatures in Hong Kong could lead to food poisoning, the Olympic Village there [will not be serving raw or undercooked foods](#) such as sushi and oysters.

Scenario: The chance of precipitation in Beijing in early August is 50 percent, but China isn't leaving anything to chance. The government plans to stop the rain by firing silver iodide rockets into the sky in the hope of wringing water from the clouds before they soak the opening ceremony. With so much invested—financially and publicity-wise—in [weather-controlling technology](#), a wet opening ceremony would be a major embarrassment, not to mention a major bummer for the fans.

Chance it could happen: 50 percent

Scary quote: "I don't think their chances of preventing rain are very high at all," [said Roelof Bruintjes](#) of the U.S. National Center for Atmospheric Research. "We can't chase away a cloud, and nobody can make a cloud, either."

Update, Aug. 7: Weather.com's [10-day forecast](#) predicts rain throughout the first week of the Olympics. That's a bummer for the International Olympic Committee but a blessing for endurance athletes praying for rain to wash away the Beijing haze.

Scenario: Getting water to Beijing, a landlocked city, is a major undertaking. The Chinese government has begun diverting [more than 39.6 billion gallons](#) to a dried-up lake near the capital city—a public-works project that has displaced an estimated 300,000 citizens. Northern China has been fighting drought for years, so Beijing's added demands have many Chinese fearing that there [won't be enough water](#) to go around. There's also the (slim) possibility of protests by parched attendees of this year's Games.

Chance it could happen: 10 percent

Scary quote: "Sometimes you wonder if they need all the water more than us here," [said](#) Shi Yinzhu, a Chinese sheep herder.

Update, Aug. 7: China says [it has all the water it needs](#) for athletes and visitors.

Scenario: The Yellow Sea, the Olympic sailing venue, is full of ships. Unfortunately, they're not racing vessels; they're gunk removers, dispatched to clean up an enormous [algae outbreak](#) that's choking 5,000 square miles of open water. The Chinese government planned to remove the green stuff by mid-July. Until then, international sailing teams were practicing in what looked [like a putting green](#).

Chance it could happen: 10 percent

Scary quote: "There's no way you can sail through it," [said](#) British windsurfer Bryony Shaw. "If it's still here in August, it could be a real problem."

Update, Aug. 7: Most of the gunk is gone, but Xinhua News Agency reports that "[sporadic algae](#)" still lingers near the sailing venue. The competition will likely go on though an assistant chairman of the sailing committee has said that a large storm could still force Beijing to suspend the competition.

Scenario: If you thought locusts were a problem only in Old Testament times, think again. In 2002, the pests [devoured 3.7 million acres of farmland](#) in northern and central China. The insects are [now eating their way through Inner Mongolia](#) just in time for the start of the Games. The last time locusts [reached the capital](#), locals snagged the protein-filled insects for midsummer snacks. International athletes unaccustomed to the Chinese diet might not be so pleased to find the creatures in their mouths during a competition.

Chance it could happen: 5 percent

Scary quote: "The first-generation locusts this year in the areas have already hatched," [said Gao Wenyuan](#), a Chinese official.

"The harm they do is obvious."

Update, Aug. 7: No word in recent weeks on the locust swarms that had been eating their way south from Mongolia. Perhaps the insects are quietly gathering their strength for the weeks to come.

five-ring circus

Full Speedo Ahead

Can Michael Phelps' cutting-edge swimsuit make me a better swimmer?

By Sara Dickerman

Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 2:39 PM ET

When I first started swimming competitively, in junior high, we took pride in the sheer, tattered swimsuits we'd wear layered one atop another for extra drag in practice. It was, after all, the *Flashdance* era, when droopy layers had no small cachet. But come meet day, we'd do anything to be sleek—shave our legs and squeeze ourselves into too-tight Lycra suits, at the time still a newish technology. The goal was to minimize turbulence and to maximize forward momentum in the water. If the look intimidated a few competitors, so much the better.

That goal hasn't changed, though a new breed of racing suits—most notably Speedo's much-hyped [LZR Racer](#)—has taken sleekness to new limits. To make its latest high-tech, skinlike suit, Speedo enlisted NASA's wind tunnels, a water flume at New Zealand's Otago University, and the once-radical fashion design of Comme des Garçons Rei Kawakubo. Whatever Speedo's doing seems to be working: "When I hit the water [in the LZR Racer], I feel like a rocket," claims Michael Phelps, who's set two world records in LZR suits. Since its introduction in February, swimmers wearing the LZR Racer have claimed close to 50 world records.

Not surprisingly, cries of "[technological doping](#)" have erupted from swimming insiders. Athletes and teams sponsored by other swimwear companies have defected to Speedo for big races, for fear of whiffing on a world record or losing an Olympic slot due to brand loyalty, and the jilted companies have filed lawsuits. Despite the outcry, FINA, the governing body of international swimming, reviewed the supersuits and declared them legal for competition.

How could a swimsuit make such an impact on a swimmer's performance? To find out, I tried one out myself. The suits were designed for the most elite swimmers in the world, but I took a neck-to-ankle bodysuit version of the LZR Racer (retail value

\$550) for a couple of test drives, to see what it could do for a devoted, but by no means extraordinary, swimmer like me. I competed in high school and swam on masters teams for some 10 years after college. Since having babies, I haven't gotten back into serious training—[Dara Torres](#) I'm not—but I still swim pretty quickly. I tried the suit in the water twice—once on vacation in Italy, where I sprinted back and forth in our villa's pool, and once back home in Seattle, when I took it for a milelong swim in Lake Washington to test its qualities over time.

I was expecting the LZR Racer to be as hard to put on as the wetsuits I've worn for open-water racing—a pain-in-the-ass wriggle that makes you confront some of the more problematic parts of your body. But getting into the Speedo suit is much harder, like a lobster trying to molt backward. The LZR feels like paper, not cloth, and it is extraordinarily tight and stretchy. There is a second layer of core-compressing mesh that is particularly hard to get around the fleshier expanses of my hips and thighs. To get the super-flat zipper in the back closed, I tug the suit together while my husband pulls a [Hattie MacDaniel](#) and muscles the zipper closed.

Once vacuum-packed, I am quite a sight. The suit is darkly sheer in many places—all the more so because I am not nearly as lithe as an Olympic swimmer. (I doubt any of them are breast-feeding.) Rubbery expanses of matte black polyurethane keep my private bits concealed, but I can't help feeling like a dumpy Cher wannabe circa "[If I Could Turn Back Time](#)" (sans belly chain and aircraft carrier).

Even before I hit the pool, the first effect of the LZR is evident: It is one hell of a girdle. There is no jiggle to my walk, and previously droopy parts of my body are sucked up and in. Speedo is owned by Warnaco, which also makes underwear, and I cannot help but think that its lingerie divisions might be soon dipping into the body-tightening technology for their support garments. This firming up, of course, will make me more hydrodynamic since there are fewer obtrusive body parts to create turbulence in the water. It also has the effect of holding my body in a longer, leaner line as I swim. When I dive in, I feel propelled forward.

The hydrodynamic bit is enhanced by the polyurethane patches, which shed water as I swim. These PU sections are at the heart of the technical controversy between Speedo and other swimwear manufacturers, who say they thought FINA's rules required swimsuits to be made entirely out of more traditional fabrics. (Since FINA declared the LZRs legal, [Speedo's competitors are scrambling](#) to get their own PU-enhanced suits completed.) Though the suit does not provide buoyancy in the same way that a neoprene wetsuit does, there is a great deal of grousing about whether the large patches of PU alter swimmers' buoyancy. I am not by any means a scientific observer, but I

certainly feel like the Speedo suit improves my body position in the water.

Great swimmers use their technique and force to raise their hips high in the water while pressing their sternums toward the bottom of the pool, creating a long, lean line as they propel themselves forward. Lacking world-class technique and strength, I have always struggled to hold my lower body high in the water. But in the LZR Racer, beyond the reduced drag and the invigorating body massage of the fabric, I have the distinct impression that my hips are higher and my stroke more efficient. Are my hips being pulled up by the elastic fabric or being floated up by displacement where the PU patches were? I can't tell you. Head games count for a lot in competitive sports, of course. Whether my buoyancy is actually improved or whether the sum of the other efficiencies simply makes me feel more buoyant is hard to determine.

I should reiterate that the LZR is designed for the world's fastest swimmers. My taking one out for a spin is as dilettantish as a go-kart dabbler borrowing a Formula One racecar for a test drive. The LZR Racer isn't created for swimmers like me to make minor improvements. It was engineered to propel someone like Natalie Coughlin or Ian Crocker to records and medals. When all that stands between them and a gold medal (or more pessimistically, fourth place) is a hundredth of a second, any small refinement—in their [VO₂ max](#), in their flip turns, or in their super swimsuits—makes a huge difference.

No doubt I'm corrupted by the time we live in, but I don't think such technological innovations are cheating. To the uninitiated, swimming might have the air of a nontechnological sport, as unadulterated as some nearly naked bodies against the water and the watch. To go faster, athletes need to train harder and fix their biomechanics, which after hundreds of thousands of practice strokes have often locked into bad habits. (With every lap, I say to myself "elbows higher," but my arms still splay wide.) But despite that pure vision, swimmers have long been assisted by technological breakthroughs: The designs of pools, lane dividers, and starting blocks have made a difference, as have ever-tighter, more compressive swimsuits. Outsized, drug-inflated muscles weren't the only thing that shocked the world about the East German swimmers in the '70s. As this amazing 1974 [Sports Illustrated story](#) demonstrates, so did their ultra-tight, unlined suits "made of a membranelike rubberized knit called Lycra."

Hopefully all elite swimmers will have the chance to exploit the latest advances. In Beijing, I'll be surprised to see more than a handful of top swimmers who are willing to compete without LZR suits. (If a swimmer is not sponsored by Speedo, he or she can get one at a discount from a coach; all American swimmers will get one thanks to Speedo's team sponsorship.) Frankly, if I were still competing on the masters circuit, I'd be tempted to slap down some money just to see if the suit could help me get my times close to my high-school personal bests. Besides price, my

main hesitation would be looking like a gear-happy jackass on the pool deck at a meet.

But these days I swim more for pleasure and less for speed—on my latest lake swim, I went without the LZR and felt pretty good. Maybe my hips were a little lower, and I wasn't so speedy, but my neck wasn't chafing, and I liked the feel of the water as it trickled over my own skin—and not a synthetic skin developed in a NASA wind tunnel.

food

Beyond Wontons

A new cookbook showcases recipes from China's ethnic minorities.

By Nicholas Day

Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 7:04 AM ET

At first glance, [Beyond the Great Wall: Recipes and Travels in the Other China](#) looks much like every other expensive cookbook: a weighty, glossy tome that's large enough to be a coffee table by itself. But look again: It isn't until the end of the book's lengthy introduction, after a lesson on the geography and peoples of China's periphery, after a centerfold of maps and a page of language family trees, that any mention of food appears. And even if you only skim authors Jeffrey Alford and Naomi Duguid's opening remarks about how "three-fifths of the land area we now call China is historically the home of people who are not ethnically Chinese" and how "non-Han China" is "most frequently on the short end," you'll realize that this cookbook isn't just about perfectly fried Uighur pastries with pea tendrils.

To twist a lit-class truism, all cookbooks are political. And almost every single-country cookbook promotes a homogenizing agenda, if only obliviously, by focusing on the cuisine of the dominant ethnic group. If you don't believe me, just try finding a Kurdish recipe in a Turkish cookbook. *Beyond* takes the opposite tack: It's a Chinese cookbook that ignores what we think of as Chinese food. A preservationist manifesto, the book draws all its recipes from China's ethnic minorities—Tibetans, Mongolians, Uighurs, Hui, Dai, and more than a half-dozen other groups, each of which is briefly profiled. Alford and Duguid, a Canadian couple who met on a Lhasa rooftop and who have published a series of inimitable culinary travelogues, wrote *Beyond* with the sinking feeling that these minority cultures are imperiled. (The book concludes with "A Note on [Sinicization](#).") It's an alarm bell disguised as a set of dumpling directions. As Alford said in [a recent interview](#), "We think there's an overlap between the seed savers who are making sure we save our plant biodiversity, and those of us that are making sure that cultures survive; our way of talking about that is through food."

The theory of cultural preservation through cookery is well and good, but it works only if people like the cookery. And some of the recipes in *Beyond* are a hard sell. Along with a very few other ethnographic cookbook writers like Paula Wolfert or Diana Kennedy, Alford and Duguid are interested in cuisines at their most basic: Asked once at an industry dinner in New York what they were working on, [Alford replied](#), only half-facetiously, "We'd really like to do a book about sorghum and millet." In researching *Beyond*, Alford took a trip to Hom, a remote and impoverished village in China where few other cookbook authors would go. That's because, well, there isn't much food there: "They'd boil bones. They'd hand-pull noodles and put them in the broth and then put it on a platter and put the bones on top. So then I get home, and I'm, like, O.K., bones and noodles?" But I feel far from the cuisine of poverty and hardship in my cozy Connecticut apartment. So, a few weeks ago, when I began cooking widely from *Beyond*, I was expecting blowback: I worried that I'd finish a recipe from some obscure, oppressed minority and then place a to-go order for General Tso's chicken.

First up, I fired up the grill to make the Dai specialty of pressed tofu coated with chilies and lard, a combination so incongruous it almost seems perverse. (When a couple of recent contestants on Bravo's *Top Chef* were told to create a dish that conveyed the word *perplexed*, they marinated [tofu in beef fat](#). And they won.) But it's also marvelous: charred, crisp and then creamy, less lard-tinged than mysteriously savory.

When I turned to the Tibetan section, I cheated, sort of. Most Tibetan dishes are short on vegetables, but I sampled a high-altitude ratatouille, with eggplant and tomato stew, Sichuan pepper, and soy sauce. Enriched with what the authors call Tibetan bone broth—oxtail, ginger, star anise, water, heat—it's tasty, easy, and exotic at the same time. It's also homey, something I'd never associated with the out-there Tibetan cuisine I'd had before. And I tried *tsampa*, the Tibetan Clif Bar: whole barley that's toasted and then ground into flour. The Tibetans stir it into butter tea, but I dipped it into sour yogurt instead, which carries its toasted flavor. It's an oddly appealing cold morning breakfast, like dark-roasted granola that happened to get finely pulverized.

The great surprise of *Beyond* is how many of the dishes, like the faux-ratatouille and the *tsampa*, are both peculiar and familiar. The yogurt-based, covered-pot-baked Kazakh bread smells exactly like good dinner rolls from a Midwestern supper club, but the moist, absorbent texture seems closer to an underwater sea sponge. Ground-lamb *samsa*, the Central Asian version of Hot Pockets, would fit in at a church potluck, although I'd keep quiet about the quarter-cup of lamb fat used for flavoring. But if the recipes are unexpectedly accessible and simple, the tastes vary wildly as Alford and Duguid pinball across China. Raw vegetables rarely make an appearance in Han Chinese cooking, but there's a chapter's worth of recipes for uncooked meals here. I tried fresh Silk Road salads from Xinjiang and Central Asia,

including an onion and pomegranate variation, as well as a half-cooked Dai carrot salad with pickled chilies—my new favorite source of beta carotene. This diversity of flavor matches how Alford and Duguid see China: eclectic, novel, anything but monolithic.

Every page of *Beyond* makes pretty much the same political point: Hey, we're over here in Kashgar! Pay attention to these people before it's too late! But I can excuse this redundancy. It's an important point, and one that's more likely to be heard since it's accompanied by a plate of Uighur pomegranate-juice marinated lamb kebabs. As a next step, Alford and Duguid push readers to travel—to stop settling for the photographs (all taken by Alford and Duguid themselves) and get closer to the people in them. This is the only cookbook I know with a subhead for "border crossings." When you finally arrive in Inner Mongolia, make sure you order the millet with pickled mustard greens for breakfast.

foreigners

Death of a Writer

How Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* changed the world.

By Anne Applebaum

Monday, August 4, 2008, at 7:10 PM ET

Although more than three decades have now passed since the winter of 1974, when unbound, hand-typed, samizdat manuscripts of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's [Gulag Archipelago](#) first began circulating around what used to be the Soviet Union, the emotions they stirred remain today. Usually, readers were given only 24 hours to finish the lengthy manuscript—the first historical account of the Soviet concentration camp system—before it had to be passed on to the next person. That meant spending an entire day and a whole night absorbed in Solzhenitsyn's sometimes eloquent, sometimes angry prose—not an experience anyone was likely to forget.

Members of that first generation of readers remember who gave the book to them, who else knew about it, and to whom they passed it on. They remember the stories that affected them most—the tales of small children in the camps, or of informers, or of camp guards. They remember what the book felt like—the blurry, mimeographed text, the dog-eared paper, the dim glow of the lamp switched on late at night—and with whom they later discussed it.

In part, his Soviet readers responded so strongly because Solzhenitsyn—who [died on Sunday](#) at 89—was simultaneously very famous and strictly taboo. Twelve years earlier, the Soviet regime had serendipitously allowed him to publish, officially,

the first fictional account of Stalin's concentration camps—*A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. It was also the last: Too honest for the Soviet Union's leaders at the time, the book, though a publishing sensation, was quickly banned along with its author, whose later works would be "published" illegally—or abroad.

It didn't matter: Even Solzhenitsyn's expulsion from Russia in 1974 only increased his notoriety as well as the impact of *The Gulag Archipelago*. That book, though based on the "reports, memoirs, and letters by 227 witnesses," was not quite a straight history—obviously, Solzhenitsyn did not have access to then-secret archives—but, rather, an interpretation of history. Partly polemical, partly autobiographical, emotional and judgmental, it aimed to show that, contrary to what many believed, the mass arrests and concentration camps of the Soviet Union were not an incidental phenomenon but an essential part of the Soviet system—and that they had been from the very beginning.

Not all of this story was new: Credible witnesses had begun reporting on the growth of the gulag and the spread of the terror from the time of the Russian revolution. But what Solzhenitsyn produced was simply more thorough, more monumental, and more detailed than anything that had been produced previously. It could not be ignored or dismissed as a single man's experience. As a result, no one who dealt with the Soviet Union, diplomatically or intellectually, could ignore it. So threatening was the book to certain branches of the European left that Jean-Paul Sartre described Solzhenitsyn as a "dangerous element." The book's publication certainly contributed to the recognition of human rights as a legitimate element of international debate and foreign policy.

In later years, Solzhenitsyn lost some of his stature, thanks partly to Soviet propaganda that successfully portrayed him as a crank and an extremist, but thanks also to his own failure to embrace liberal democracy. He never really liked the West, never really took to free markets or pop culture. When the Soviet Union finally collapsed in 1991, he went back to Russia, where he was first welcomed and then forgotten. In a Russia that is no longer interested in examining its history, he came to seem outdated, a spokesman from an irrelevant past. Even his Russian nationalism, now a popular cause, had something crusty and old-fashioned about it. His vision of a more spiritual society, of Russia as an alternative to the consumerist West, doesn't hold much appeal for the supercharged, superwealthy, oil-fueled Russian elite of today. His apparent endorsement of ex-President Vladimir Putin seemed more like an old man's foible than a serious change of heart.

In the week of his death, though, what stands out is not who Solzhenitsyn was, but what he wrote. It is very easy, in a world where news is instant and photographs travel as quickly as they are taken, to forget how powerful, still, written words are. And Solzhenitsyn was, in the end, a writer. A man who gathered

facts, sorted through them, tested them against his own experience, composed them into paragraphs and chapters. It was not his personality, but his written language that forced people to think more deeply about their values, their assumptions, their societies. It was not his TV appearances that affected history—it was his written words.

His manuscripts were read and pondered in silence, and the thought he put into them provoked his readers to think, too. In the end, his books mattered not because he was famous—or notorious—but because millions of Soviet citizens recognized themselves in his work. They read his books because they already knew that they were true.

gabfest

The Risky Man Gabfest

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

By Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz
Friday, August 8, 2008, at 11:02 AM ET

Listen to the Gabfest for Aug. 8 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 is on vacation, so John Dickerson and David Plotz talk politics with Will Saletan. This week, it's the presidential race, the Beijing Olympics, and the end of the anthrax case.

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

The trio discusses the latest on the [death of the government's prime suspect](#) in the anthrax attacks of September and October 2001.

David and John both mention a "[fifth column](#)" in their discussion of the anthrax scare.

This week, Obama and McCain [continue to spar about oil](#) as Republicans [try to use the issue](#) to attack Obama.

The [Beijing Olympics](#) open on Friday amid concern about [politics and pollution](#).

John chatters about his growing role as a [lifhacking coach](#).

Will expresses dismay at California's [regulation of trans fats](#) in restaurants.

David is hooked on [America's Best Dance Crew](#).

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

Posted by Dale Willman on Aug. 8 at 11:15 a.m.

Aug. 1, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for Aug. 1 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, John McCain accuses Barack Obama of playing the race card, Obama's law school exams are under review, and the Justice Department faces charges of illegal hiring.

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

McCain accused Obama of "[playing the race card](#)."

David says McCain can win the presidency only by [scaring people](#) into voting for him.

This week, the *New York Times* put [class materials](#) from Obama's time as a law professor at the University of Chicago Law School on its Web site.

The [inspector general](#) of the [U.S. Justice Department](#) testified on Capitol Hill this week, telling a Senate committee that [Bush administration appointees politicized the hiring process](#) at the DoJ.

John chatters about a new book that explains [all the policy decisions](#) the next president will face.

David talks about [a new study](#) that shows it might one day be possible to take a pill to increase your athletic endurance without exercise.

Emily discusses [LifeStyles Condoms'](#) offer to teenage singing star [Miley Cyrus](#) to [become the company's spokeswoman](#) in return for \$1 million.

David and Emily speculate about how much money it would take for Cyrus to promote condom use, comparing it with the hypothetical posed in the overrated 1993 movie, [Indecent Proposal](#), starring [Woody Harrelson](#), [Demi Moore](#), and [Robert Redford](#).

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

Posted by Dale Willman on Aug. 1 at 12:23 p.m.

July 25, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for July 25 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 Barack to Iraq, the state of the presidential race, and John Edwards vs. the *National Enquirer*.

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

Sen. Barack Obama [completes a trip to the Middle East](#), including Iraq. It was [considered a major success](#). However, he has not done so well in talking about his Senate vote against supporting President Bush's surge strategy. [When asked if he would still vote the same way today](#), he said that he would.

John reminds critics of Obama's trip to Iraq that they should also remember John McCain's visit there in 2007. McCain said Iraq was safe enough that "there are neighborhoods where you and I could walk through those neighborhoods, today." It was later revealed that during his stroll, [McCain wore body armor](#) and was accompanied by U.S. soldiers and that several attack helicopters were flying overhead.

McCain, meanwhile, [continues to criticize Obama's trip](#) as well as his position that the troop surge was not the only reason for recent success in Iraq, saying it is "pretty obvious he [Obama] took this position in order to secure the nomination of his party by taking the far-left position and being dictated to by MoveOn.org and others."

There are conflicting public-opinion polls. [According to a poll from Quinnipiac University](#), McCain is gaining ground in three key states—Colorado, Michigan, and Minnesota—despite the positive coverage of Obama's Middle East swing. Yet [polling by the Gallup organization](#) finds Obama's lead growing in a number of key swing states.

The Gabfest goes nuclear over a story in the *National Enquirer* [alleging that John Edwards recently met with a mistress](#) in a Los Angeles hotel.

John chatters about political columnist Robert Novak, [who struck a pedestrian while driving](#) on a Washington, D.C., street earlier this week. Novak drove on after hitting the 66-year-old man, only to be stopped a short time later by a witness to the accident. Novak said [he was listening to National Public Radio](#) at the time.

Emily talks about a release on Thursday of [three more documents](#) pertaining to the Bush administration and torture. The documents were obtained by the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) under the [Freedom of Information Act](#).

David is frustrated with a series of books he is reading with his daughter. Called *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, they are suspiciously similar to the [Harry Potter](#) series.

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

Posted by Dale Willman on July 25 at 1:25 p.m.

July 18, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for July 18 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 economy takes another hit or two, Barack Obama tries to improve his foreign-policy credentials, and the flip-flop stages a comeback.

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

The economic outlook for the United States is rough. The [fallout surrounding Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac](#) continues as [Congress](#)

[attempts to ride to the rescue](#). Also, a California bank failed this week, and inflation was up for the month of June.

David discusses John McCain's former economic adviser Phil Gramm and [what he had to say](#) about whiny Americans.

Despite all that is happening with the economy, the two presumptive nominees [seem to have relatively little to say](#) about the country's problems.

A new [Washington Post/ABC News poll](#) has some interesting findings.

Obama's [plan to withdraw troops](#) from Iraq continues to evolve.

Is [good news from Iraq](#) better for McCain or Obama?

The trio discusses whether it would help the economy [to lift tariffs on ethanol from Brazil](#).

David asks [whatever happened](#) to the plan for a series of town-hall debates between Obama and McCain.

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

Posted by Dale Willman on July 18 at 11:21 a.m.

human nature

The Price of Survival

How medical progress creates new disease threats.

By William Saletan

Friday, August 8, 2008, at 8:17 AM ET

human nature

Breast-Feeding Kills

The pro-life case against birth control, nursing, and exercise.

By William Saletan

Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 1:27 PM ET

Secretary Michael O. Leavitt
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Leavitt:

I am writing to express my support for the draft proposed regulation, [presently being circulated](#) by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which would protect the right of employees to refuse to facilitate any abortifacient chemical or activity. Under the draft proposal, the federal government will use its grant-making power to compel private employers to respect this right of refusal.

In particular, I commend the language of the draft, which would define abortion as "any of the various procedures—including the prescription, dispensing and administration of any drug or the performance of any procedure or any other action—that results in the termination of the life of a human being in utero between conception and natural birth, whether [before or after implantation](#)." This definition protects the right of employees to withhold oral contraception, which could prevent implantation of an already-conceived embryo.

My concern, Mr. Secretary, is that the proposal does not go far enough.

As you know, the risk that oral contraception will prevent implantation of an embryo is purely theoretical. There is no documented case of such a tragedy, since we have [no way to verify conception](#) inside a woman's body prior to implantation without causing the embryo's death. Even theoretically, the risk is [vanishingly small](#), since the primary effect of oral contraception is to [prevent ovulation](#), and the secondary effect is to [prevent fertilization](#). To classify oral contraception as abortifacient, one would have to [posit a scenario](#) in which the drug fails to block ovulation, then fails to block fertilization, and yet somehow, having proved impotent at every other task, manages to prevent implantation.

It is a tribute to the president's courage that despite this profound implausibility and total absence of documentation, he is protecting the right of employees to refuse to facilitate any such risk, no matter how small.

Based on this generous standard, I hope you will agree that employees deserve protection when they decline to facilitate additional activities that pose an equal or greater risk to the embryo. Specifically, I call to your attention the problem of breast-feeding.

Thousands of people working at hospitals, lactation centers, maternity-product retailers, drug stores, and supermarkets are presently required by their employers to participate in breast-feeding, either by teaching it or by providing products that facilitate it. Those who refuse can be terminated at will. They endure this discrimination despite clear scientific evidence that breast-feeding poses the same abortifacient risk as oral contraception.

Breast-feeding, like oral contraception, alters a woman's hormonal balance, thereby [suppressing](#) ovulation, fertilization, and, theoretically, [implantation](#). These results were documented in a 1992 [research paper](#), "Relative Contributions of Anovulation and Luteal Phase Defect to the Reduced Pregnancy Rate of Breastfeeding Women." The authors concluded: "The abnormal endocrine profile of the first luteal phase offers effective protection to women who ovulate during lactational amenorrhea within the first 6 months after delivery." In other words, breast-feeding prevents pregnancy despite ovulation.

Note that the authors described this effect as "protection" despite the fact that they worked for a [Catholic university](#). This illustrates the urgent need for specific regulatory language with regard to breast-feeding. Technically, the current HHS draft proposal would guarantee the right to withhold breast-feeding products or assistance, since it defines abortion as encompassing "any other action ... that results in the termination of the life of a human being" prior to implantation. Catholic health providers, however, specifically [endorse](#), [promote](#), and [facilitate](#) breast-feeding despite its abortifacient risks. Employees of such providers who cannot in good conscience engage in these activities require specific protection from coercion by Catholic authorities.

In addition, millions of Americans in the food-service industry face the threat of discrimination if they decline to participate in the provision of caffeinated beverages to women of childbearing age. Earlier this year, the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* published a [study](#) showing that "an increasing dose of daily caffeine intake during pregnancy was associated with an increased risk of miscarriage." The evidence suggests that drinking 10 ounces of coffee per day could [double](#) the probability of miscarriage.

It is not sufficient to protect the right of food-service personnel to refuse caffeine to women who are visibly pregnant. Pregnancy is not externally visible until well into gestation. Nor is it sufficient to protect caffeine refusal to pregnant women only. The stated purpose of the draft proposed regulation is to protect human beings prior to implantation—in other words, prior to pregnancy. As mentioned above, there is no way to determine, prior to implantation, whether a woman is carrying a newly conceived human being. Therefore, to avoid the theoretical abortifacient risk, employees must be guaranteed the right to refuse caffeinated beverages to any woman who appears to be of childbearing age.

Furthermore, millions of Americans presently work at gyms, swimming pools, parks, or other recreational facilities where they may be required to encourage or collaborate in exercise by women. Research published last year in a British journal of gynecology [demonstrated](#) that, as with caffeine, "exercise early in pregnancy is associated with an increased risk of miscarriage." Again, to avoid abortifacient risk in women who

are not yet pregnant, the draft regulation must guarantee the right to withhold any collaboration in exercise by women of childbearing age.

Thank you for your steadfast pro-life efforts and for expanding the definition of abortion to include any activity that results in the termination of human life prior to implantation. This expanded definition will save the lives of more and more unborn human beings as we advance from conscience protections to legal restrictions on abortion. As research uncovers additional causes of miscarriage or preimplantation embryo loss, I look forward to further legislation against caffeine consumption, exercise, and other abortifacient activities among premenopausal women.

Sincerely,
William Saletan

human nature

Fast-Food Conflation

More on the Los Angeles fast-food moratorium.

By William Saletan

Monday, August 4, 2008, at 6:43 AM ET

Lots of backtalk to Thursday's piece about the [fast-food moratorium](#) in Los Angeles. The conversation is turning into a progressive-libertarian slugfest. My bad: I laid on the outrage a bit thick. I really am shocked that the L.A. City Council unanimously voted to treat fast food just like alcohol or tobacco. But I don't want the crossing of that line to be obscured by a larger ideological quarrel. So let's back up and focus on exactly what's new here.

Two writers I respect, Ezra Klein and Matt Yglesias, argue that the moratorium isn't really new. Here's [Klein](#):

[T]he city council is doing something incredibly ordinary: Deciding what sort of establishment it will allow to open within its jurisdiction. This is called zoning, and not to scare anyone, but it happens all the time. ... City governments have long used the preferences of residents or the perceived needs of the community to discriminate when licensing businesses for construction. ... [T]he idea that this is some sort of crazy new nanny state innovation just suggests that folks really aren't paying attention to how their local governments work.

And here's [Yglesias](#):

[T]his is hardly unique. Is Saletan for abolishing liquor license regulations? Maybe he is. I don't think that's a crazy position but that would be a radical change in the way we do business. Banning fast food outlets, by contrast, is very much in line with the status quo. And though it might shock Saletan to hear about it, there are lots of upscale towns and neighborhoods all across the country that do the same thing.

Well, almost. When an old practice ventures into new territory, you can always choose to look at it as the same old thing. But in this case, the novelty of the application is what's interesting. Most cities have long zoned liquor stores, and some have zoned chain restaurants for reasons other than health, such as tackiness. What's new in L.A. is the zoning of fast food as a health threat akin to liquor. Health zoning has crossed the line from booze and cigarettes to food. This goes way beyond tackiness. In principle, it justifies banning the targeted restaurants not just here or there but everywhere.

To clarify the novelty, here's the [New York Times](#), two years ago, on a similar plan that was under development in New York:

Leaders in Concord [Mass.] and other communities have acted against fast food because they say the establishments create traffic and pollution problems, contribute to truancy, tarnish the aesthetics of the area or drive mom-and-pop restaurants out of business. [New York City Councilman Joel] Rivera is one of the first elected officials to propose restricting fast-food outlets for purely nutritional reasons.

Health is the explicit rationale for the L.A. ordinance. Marqueece Harris-Dawson, the executive director of Community Coalition, a major force behind the ordinance, reaffirmed this point in a [letter](#) to *Slate* on Friday:

What kind of choice is it if the predominant options we have in our neighborhood are greasy, unhealthy fast food restaurants? What kind of choice do we have when our neighborhoods are filled with liquor stores rather than full service grocery stores? Our choices are not between healthy and unhealthy, but often between bad and worse.

Much of what Harris-Dawson says is dead right. But notice his easy transition from liquor stores to fast-food joints, which he

repeats elsewhere in the letter. Yglesias, in his analysis of zoning, draws the same connection. This comparison has played a central role in the campaign for the moratorium. And it's a crucial comparison, because it justifies and, to some extent, obscures a huge step: telling food merchants that they may not open any new outlets in certain neighborhoods because their kind of food is inherently unhealthy.

So now that we're clear about what's new, let's go to the next question: Is it OK? Are we cool with regulating fast food like liquor?

In general, I detest fast food. I try to keep it out of my house and away from my kids. But here's the thing: It's *food*. If you're starving, cigarettes and whiskey won't keep you alive. But hamburgers will. A Big Mac is hardly ideal. To turn it into a proper meal, you'd need leaner beef, less bun, less sauce, and a lot more vegetables. The thing I love about [Roy Rogers](#) is that you can do exactly this by loading up the burger with [a heap of lettuce and tomatoes](#). But these are all modifications of the noun *food*. And that's the fundamental difference between whiskey and fast food: Food is necessary and, when properly modified, good for you.

The L.A. moratorium defies this difference. It [forbids](#) the opening of "any establishment which dispenses food for consumption on or off the premises, and which has the following characteristics: a limited menu, items prepared in advance or prepared or heated quickly, no table orders and food served in disposable wrapping or containers." As far as I can tell, that language would block Roy Rogers from opening in south L.A. No burgers, no lettuce, no tomatoes.

This is what happens when you treat food like booze or cigarettes. Food is way too complicated for that.

Harris-Dawson and *Slate's* Amaka Maduka argue that people in south L.A. need [better food options](#). They're right. I've made [the same point](#). But that's an argument for facilitating better options, not for prohibiting worse ones—particularly when the prohibited options include a \$3 item that can supply three food groups.

"Fast-food chains often crowd out smaller competitors with healthier fare," Maduka writes. Harris-Dawson agrees, arguing that the moratorium is necessary "to open land and space to provide an opportunity for other healthier types of options to enter the community." But where's the evidence that fast-food joints are making land in south L.A. too scarce for grocery stores or healthy restaurants?

Take a look at the land around Harris-Dawson's Community Coalition headquarters, courtesy of Google Street View. It's easy. Block and copy this address: "8101 s. vermont ave., los angeles, ca." Then go to <http://maps.google.com/maps>, paste the

address into the "Search Maps" bar, and click the button. When the map comes up, click on the photo and use the arrows to pivot the camera around so you can see the whole vista. Then try the same thing from the [Jack-in-the-Box](#) I mentioned, which is six blocks away. The address to plug in there is "805 w. manchester ave., los angeles, ca." Does this look like land scarcity to you? To me, it looks like urban blight. I'd love to put a grocery store near one of those locations. I'm just not persuaded that the Jack-in-the-Box is what's standing in the way.

Absent a scarcity problem, the moratorium boils down to limiting the availability of unhealthy food. And that brings me back to Human Nature's [first law](#): Bad things don't happen because they're bad. They happen because, in the beginning, they're good. Yes, most fast food sucks. Yes, it can be addictive, sort of. Yes, there's an unusually heavy concentration of it in southern L.A. So if you're going to start prohibiting certain kinds of food outlets, fast food is a logical food to target, southern L.A. is a logical place to do it (though I still think segregated food zoning as a solution to ["food apartheid"](#) is [twisted](#)), and one year is a logical introductory period. That's what makes the L.A. ordinance worth debating: It presents the most tempting case for crossing the line to restrict food like cigarettes or whiskey. But you still have to decide whether to cross that line—and where you'll stop once you do.

map the candidates

Vacation Eve

Obama is in Hawaii before a weeklong respite. McCain is in Iowa and Arkansas.

By E.J. Kalafarski and Chadwick Matlin
Friday, August 8, 2008, at 11:15 AM ET

moneybox

Harming Farming

Low food prices used to hurt the world's poor—now high prices do. What gives?

By Liza Featherstone
Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 5:45 PM ET

Last week, the Doha Development Round of global trade negotiations collapsed. Some of the stickiest points involved agricultural trade: Third World governments refused to open their markets further to exports from the European Union and the United States, citing the need to protect small farmers, who make up 75 percent of the world's poor. But just why *are* these Third World farmers suffering? We've been hearing for years that cheap food makes it tough for them to make a profit. But food's not so cheap anymore: Global food prices have increased

26 percent from 2004 to 2007, according to the World Bank, and are expected to remain above 2004 levels at least through 2015. Now that we're all paying higher prices at the grocery store—meaning more visits to food pantries or fewer to Whole Foods, depending on your situation—shouldn't the farmers' fortunes be improving?

Alas, economics is not that simple. It's true that for years, low food prices have hurt farmers in poor countries. The result has been that in most of the world, farming is "simply not affordable," explains Olivier De Schutter, U.N. special rapporteur on the right to food. Still, he emphasizes, "This does *not* mean that small-hold farmers will benefit from the current increase in prices." Because they lack economies of scale and trade policy is not designed in their favor, most small farmers are not well-connected to markets. To benefit from food inflation, farmers would need massive investments to improve their productivity. Most poor farmers can't afford this because their costs—transport, fertilizers, and pesticides—have risen even more dramatically than the price of food.

Most important, says Anuradha Mittal, executive director of the Oakland Institute, a progressive policy think tank, "Farmers are also consumers." Indeed, says De Schutter, small farmers "buy more food than they can sell for cash." So they're suffering as much as other poor people from the rising expense of food. And that suffering is widespread: Early this year, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations announced that because of food inflation, 36 countries would require additional food aid. In Yemen, children have been marching in the street to attract attention to child hunger.

"Farmers have already lost the local markets," says Mittal. "These have been taken over by the multinationals." And big agribusiness certainly seems to be doing well. Cargill's revenues have grown by 17 percent in the last year, Archer Daniels Midland's by more than 20 percent. Meanwhile, Mittal says, "Farmers in Laos have been forced to put their tools down because there is no way they can make a living."

Of course, there are winners and losers for every major change in the global economy, and it stands to reason that some poor farmers will find a way to profit from inflation. Says Columbia University economist Sanjay Reddy, who teaches courses on world poverty and development economics, a few "may have only to walk down the road and sell their produce for a lower price than people are paying." Reddy also notes that there's a difference between landowners and the landless; clearly, the former have a somewhat better chance of eking out some profit. But for most of the rural poor, the odds of cashing in are dismal.

So is there perfect price that wouldn't impoverish either farmers or consumers? Not really, says Reddy: "Price always involves a conflict of interest." That's logical enough: The higher price is in the interest of the seller, and the lower price is in the interest of

the buyer. At times, the policies poor countries have adopted to make food more affordable for consumers—such as government-enforced price depression in sub-Saharan African nations—have created "terrible conditions for agriculture," says Reddy.

Agreeing it's a tricky balance, De Schutter emphasizes the need to protect consumers while also using "the increase in prices as an opportunity to promote investments in agriculture in developing countries." To that end, he points out, it's important not to bring prices down, but to help households cope with higher prices through more programs to help the poor such as school breakfast and lunch programs, cash assistance, and cash-for-work programs. This could be sensible in the U.S. context, too: In a recent hearing on economic woes here, Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., observed that countries with stronger social safety nets are better able to shield their citizens from the effects of inflation, and thus can pursue a more balanced monetary policy, while in the United States, if we don't control inflation, people are left in truly dire straits. In May, Second Harvest, a national network of food pantries, reported that attendance was up 15 percent to 20 percent, with 100 percent of food pantries seeing an increase.

Others feel that governments should provide incentives and subsidies for farmers to grow food for their domestic markets. Reddy says, "National self-sufficiency is a desirable goal for developing countries."

All of these ideas are sharply at odds with recent policy trends. Many developing countries, including India (home to 600 million to 700 million small farmers), used to heavily subsidize agriculture. Some, like Indonesia, used to ensure fixed prices to protect both farmers and consumers. Export bans used to be common.

Most countries have abandoned such strategies, following the dictates of international lending institutions like the International Monetary Fund—sometimes with dire consequences. After Indonesia lifted its price controls in the 1990s, it became the largest recipient of international food aid. In that sense, hunger in the Third World, argues Mittal, is a political choice: "It's not as if these countries just suddenly forgot how to grow food."

But Mittal, a co-founder of Food First and a proponent of the idea that food is a universal human right, is optimistic about the prospects for improving the lives of the rural poor. The trade talks fell apart, she says, because Third World governments "decided that the vulnerability of the poor farmers could not be traded off against commercial interests of the developed countries." The "food crisis," she explains, is "not supernatural, it's caused by man-made policy. Which is hopeful because it can be fixed." In the United States, though, that fix probably awaits a new government interested in helping poor countries adapt to rising prices.

moneybox

Always Dumb Politics. Always Wal-Mart.

The retailer's clumsy, self-defeating attempts to influence Washington.

By Daniel Gross

Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 4:01 PM ET

Last Friday, the *Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) that retailing giant Wal-Mart, concerned about a potential Democratic sweep this fall, has been not-so-subtly indoctrinating managers and department heads about the perils of an Obama presidency. The operating assumption in Bentonville seems to be that a Democratic president and a Democratic Congress would pass laws such as the [Employee Free Choice Act](#), which would make it easier for unions to organize at Wal-Mart, thus hurting the company, its workers, and its shareholders. And while the executives running the meetings were careful not to instruct workers which lever to pull, the upshot was clear. "I am not a stupid person," a Wal-Mart customer-service supervisor told the *Journal*. "They were telling me how to vote."

Wal-Mart denied that it was engaging in partisan politics. But, even so, these meetings are the latest in a series of clumsy political moves. Wal-Mart may be a master of many domains: global supply chains and logistics, local politics and zoning, anti-union warfare and branding. But on the stage of national politics, it has proved to be strikingly inept. Its executives seem to have a cartoonish understanding of the way Washington works, ascribing mythic powers to the nation's continually weakening private sector unions and misunderstanding the linkages between party control in Washington and its impact on the performance of the economy and individual companies.

For starters, Wal-Mart has pursued what would appear to be a self-contradictory political strategy. Clearly, Wal-Mart fears the prospect of unionization more than any other factor. Low wages, low benefits, and a generally supine workforce have been fundamental to its business model for decades. Wal-Mart clearly believes Democrats are more sympathetic to unions than Republicans. So one might think that the company would be doing everything in its power to help Republicans and hurt Democrats. That's certainly what it used to do. In the [2000 campaign cycle](#), its political action committee devoted 85 percent of its donations to candidates for federal office to Republicans; in [2004](#), the split was 78 percent to 22 percent. But with Democrats having resumed control of Congress, Wal-Mart has increasingly deployed corporate resources to help Democrats stay in power. So far in this cycle, [according to the Center for Responsive Politics](#), Wal-Mart has basically split its \$884,700 in donations equally between the two parties (52 percent to 48 percent in favor of the Republicans). The [list of recipients](#) includes long-standing friends of organized labor such as Rep.

Charles Rangel of New York and Sen. Debbie Stabenow of Michigan.

Wal-Mart seems to be trying to help Democrats in retail politics, too. In the fall of 2006, Wal-Mart, seeking to bolster its public image, kicked off a campaign to help its 1.3 million employees—whoops, I mean "associates"—[register to vote](#). The company hasn't published results of this campaign. But given the demographic makeup of Wal-Mart's workforce, any such efforts would seem to help Democrats. As [Wal-Mart's 2006 EEOC data](#) shows, 61 percent of employees are women, including 75 percent of sales workers, while 17.5 percent of workers are African-Americans and 11.4 percent are Hispanic. So it has spent money and effort helping to register voters who are quite likely to vote for Democrats.

As it tries to scare managers and workers about the inevitable triumph of unions should the Democrats sweep this fall, Wal-Mart also seriously misreads recent political history. The company behaves as if private-sector unions are juggernauts gaining strength, enjoying enormous support in Washington, and bending the Democratic Party to their will. In reality, private sector unions are very weak and getting weaker. [Data](#) from the statistical abstract of the United States show that in 2006, just 8.1 percent of private-sector workers (7.4 million) were covered by unions, down from 9.8 percent in 2000 and 15.9 percent in 1985. Given the massive job reductions in the auto industry, the figures are almost certainly lower now. Yes, big unions such as [SEIU](#) and [AFL-CIO](#) spend money on (mostly Democratic) campaigns and help get out the (mostly Democratic) vote. But the long-term trend is against unions and has been so under all partisan combinations in Washington. While Washington Republicans are almost uniformly hostile to organized labor, Washington Democrats aren't exactly the second coming of Samuel Gompers. Remember that NAFTA, a piece of legislation that organized labor vociferously opposed, was passed in 1993, when a Democrat was in the White House and Democrats controlled both houses of Congress. In today's enlarged Democratic tent—with its upscale constituencies on the coasts and newly flipped districts in places like Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas—unions just don't matter as much. (While this shift could explain Wal-Mart's increased willingness to fund Democratic candidates, it strikes me as too subtle a change to register with Wal-Mart's Manichean strategists.)

Finally, consider this. Wal-Mart's brass plainly believes—no, know—that a Republican president would be good for Wal-Mart, while a Democrat would be bad. Despite Clinton's Arkansas roots, most Wal-Mart executives probably opposed Clinton in both his successful campaigns. But during his presidency, Wal-Mart's [stock more than tripled](#). By contrast, Wal-Mart executives polled in 2000 would have been exultant at the prospect of two George W. Bush terms, especially if they were to be coupled with mostly Republican control of the House and Senate. And yet this decade has been a lost one for Wal-

Mart shareholders: In the [Bush years](#), the stock hasn't budged at all.

Yes, politics matters. But in the end, the macroeconomic climate matters a lot more. Wal-Mart's success ultimately depends on whether the lower-income and middle-income customers on whom it depends are doing well or getting eaten up by stagnant incomes and rising costs for health care and gas. Here, again, the last two decades offer a pretty good contrast. In the 1990s, when a Democrat was in the White House, the rising economic tide lifted all boats (though not all boats equally), and Wal-Mart benefited. In this decade, the rising tide lifted only the yachts. The Bush years have been something of an economic disaster for people on the lower rungs of the income ladders. [Census data](#) show that household income in 2006 was below its 1999 peak and that the uninsured rate has steadily risen throughout the decade. Layer on soaring energy prices in the past couple of years, and you've got trouble. It's not all the fault of Bush or congressional Republicans, of course. But it's pretty clear that the dominant fiscal and economic policies of the past eight years—massive tax cuts for the wealthy, economic royalism, hostility to labor, and neglect on health care—haven't made things better for Wal-Mart customers.

Instead of asking whether a particular candidate or political party will be favorable to Wal-Mart's labor-relations policies, the executives in Bentonville, Ark., should be asking whether the candidate or party will be good for Wal-Mart's customers.

moneybox

America's Smartest Banker

The nation's financial industry is cratering, so how come Hudson City Bank is thriving?

By Daniel Gross

Saturday, August 2, 2008, at 6:56 AM ET

"If you look to the right, you can see New York City," says [Ronald Hermance Jr.](#), CEO of [Hudson City Bancorp](#), as he points out the fourth-floor window of the company's boxy headquarters in unglamorous Paramus, N.J. I had to venture through traffic to this distinctly nonimperial corporate redoubt 17 miles west of the George Washington Bridge—it's just past a union building and across the street from a garden supply center—in my quest to find a sensible banker in the New York area. Despite the proximity to Manhattan, Hermance and his [140-year-old bank](#) have never been part of the fast-money Wall Street scene. And thanks to its geographic and cultural distance, this bridge-and-tunnel bank has thrived amid the mortgage debacle.

Hudson City in late July [reported](#) that second-quarter profits were up 52.3 percent. In the 2008 first half, mortgage

originations rose 50 percent from 2007. And yet its balance sheet is pristine. "Only 328 out of 79,929 loans are nonperforming at the end of the second quarter," he said. (But who's counting?) Last Thursday, Hudson City sported a [market capitalization](#) of \$9.46 billion, twice the size of the Blackstone Group.

But Hermance could walk unnoticed through power lunch hotspots like the [Four Seasons](#). "I'll let everybody else go to the Hamptons," he says in the flat accent of an upstate New Yorker. (He's from Batavia.) When I first spoke to Hermance, he was vacationing on a lake near Buffalo.

Hudson City banks the old-fashioned way: It takes deposits and makes mortgages to people who buy homes in which they plan to live. And then it hangs on to them. No subprime, no securitization. Hudson City's bankers are steady daters in a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am era. "We don't have Wall Street bundle up the mortgages and sell them to someone in Norway," Hermance says. "We're going to live with those loans." As a result, Hudson City maintains higher standards.

Throughout the boom, it eschewed computer models and required borrowers to make down payments of at least 20 percent. (The typical mortgage in its portfolio has a 39 percent down payment.) Just as on the singles scene, maintaining high standards in lending means turning down a fair number of dates. But Hudson City builds loyalty by lavishing attention on Realtors and mortgage brokers. "Out of the 44 banks I work with, Hudson City is the one I really and truly love," says Michael Daversa, president of Atlantic National Mortgage in Westport, Conn., which has done \$100 million in business with Hudson City in the past eight months.

Boring? Maybe. But Hudson City, which went public in 1999, hasn't had to beg for money from Mideast oil potentates. Instead, its impressive growth has been fueled by the deposits of prosperous New Jersey burghers. The average Hudson City branch has about \$138 million in deposits, almost twice the average for FDIC-insured banks. Hudson City's idea of swinging has been to venture tentatively beyond New Jersey. In 2005, it moved into Long Island and Staten Island, where the demographics (read: income levels) were similar to those of Northern New Jersey. Now Hudson City is spreading from *Sopranos* territory to John Cheever country—Westchester County in New York and Fairfield County in Connecticut, both of which are thick with affluent households. Hudson City's 123 branches are [concentrated](#) in nine of the nation's 50 wealthiest counties. It just opened one in snooty Darien, Conn.

The strategy, which led Hudson City's stock to bump along during the height of the boom, has proved a genius long-term move. A [one-year chart of Hudson City's stock compared with the KBW Bank Stock Index](#) looks like the mouth of a Nile crocodile about to swallow a warthog. The stellar performance of Hudson City's stock, which is up nearly 50 percent since last

July, has turned the 61-year-old banker—whose first CNBC appearance in 2005 on the B-list 6 a.m. hour was preempted for the Saddam Hussein trial—into a media darling. CNBC's motormouth James Cramer has dubbed Hermance a [modern-day George Bailey](#). And while it has been a wonderful life of late for Hermance (last year he was paid a total of \$8.45 million, and his shares in the bank are worth about \$114 million, according to Hudson City's [2007 proxy](#)), comparisons between the balding, mustachioed banker and Jimmy Stewart only go so far.

Hudson City has avoided crossing the river into Manhattan. "They don't want to get involved in the condominium marketplace," says Melissa Cohn, president of [Manhattan Mortgage](#). And yet Hudson City is very much tethered to the fortunes of Wall Street, the contracting job-engine of the bank's expanding service area. Even though local government officials have warned about impending declines in Wall Street bonuses, Hermance isn't concerned. "The analyst from Bear Stearns who followed us got a new job the week after Bear went down," he says.

So how is it that Hermance kept his head when all the geniuses with higher pay and fancier pedigrees lost theirs? The tri-state metro area's only smart banker shrugs. We all approach life's fundamental choices from a unique angle. "It's like my grandfather used to say," he says. "If everybody thought the same way, they would have married your grandmother."

movies

Eminently Quaffable

Bottle Shock is a sweet little wine movie.

By Dana Stevens

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 1:23 PM ET

With its California wine country setting, gold-burnished traveling shots of rolling vineyards, and half-satiric, half-lyrical rendering of wine-geek lingo ("I detect bacon fat laced with ripe melon"), *Bottle Shock* (Freestyle Releasing) will be universally compared to Alexander Payne's *Sideways*. But really, it's more like an oenophilic remake of *Breaking Away*. The tale of a 1976 wine-tasting contest in which American wines went head-to-head with French ones for the first time (based on a [true story](#)), *Bottle Shock* is at heart a sports movie. Instead of bicycling, the sport is fermentation, and instead of suave Italian cyclists, the heroes' archrivals are old-growth French Bordeaux grapes. But the movies share a genuine ardor for their subjects (bikes and bottles, respectively) and a nonjingoistic respect for the power of American pluck.

Jim Barrett (Bill Pullman) is a lawyer turned amateur vintner whose small Napa property is mortgaged up to its eyeballs. He's also a self-taught visionary on a quest for the perfect handcrafted Chardonnay. His son Bo (Chris Pine), a hippie and sometime-cellar rat, can't commit to either getting an education or joining the trade. Instead, he kicks around the county with his buddy Gustavo Brambila (Freddy Rodriguez), hustling barflies with demonstrations of Gustavo's supposedly infallible ability to identify any wine by its vintage. When a foxy intern, Sam (Rachael Taylor), comes to work at the Barretts' vineyard, Bo and Gustavo enter into a competition for her attentions.

Meanwhile in Paris (every movie should have a "meanwhile in Paris"), British wine merchant Steven Spurrier (Alan Rickman) is also managing a failing business; he knows everything there is to know about French wine except how to sell it. His only customer is an American aficionado, Maurice (Dennis Farina), who tastes wines for free all afternoon while kibitzing with the owner. Maurice persuades Steven to goose his sales with a publicity stunt: a blind tasting competition between French wines and those of the New World (popularly assumed, at the time, to be undrinkable plonk).

So Steven flies to Napa Valley, where, in the movie's best scenes, he drives from one bare-bones vineyard to the next in an incongruous business suit, sipping wines out of jelly jars and trying not to admit they're among the best he's ever tasted. Alan Rickman, marvelous as ever, balances his character's priggishness with curiosity and a barely hidden streak of hedonism. In one dialogue-free scene, a Mexican farmer by the roadside serves Steven some of his wine with a delicious-looking bowl of guacamole. Rickman's multistage encounter with this unfamiliar treat should be nominated for some kind of Oscar for Best Snack.

Caveat emptor: By comparing *Bottle Shock* to *Breaking Away* and *Sideways* above, I didn't mean to imply that this movie is anywhere nearly as good as those. Its story arcs are far more predictable, its humor broader, and since the eventual victory of the California wines is a foregone conclusion, the lead-up to the climactic contest lacks tension. The director and co-writer, Randall Miller, is also not above pandering. The unconvincing love triangle among Gustavo, Bo, and Sam feels artificially wedged into the story to sex things up, and there's a deeply gratuitous wet T-shirt scene as the comely Sam hoses down the grape thresher to the delight of the field hands. So why did I feel such affection for this scruffy, hokey little movie? Maybe it's the same logic that applies to wine-drinking itself: Sure, a great claret would be ideal, but an OK rosé is better than washing down your dinner with water.

Bottle Shock ends with Rickman's character dizzily imagining the possibilities of a globalized wine industry: "We'll have wines from South America, Australia, India!" Thirty years later, that dream has come to pass with a vengeance. As shown in the 2004

documentary *Mondovino*, the wine trade is now a consultant-driven, brand-obsessed international megabusiness that's endangering the artisanal methods of production this movie celebrates. Viewers who, like this movie's heroes, see wine as an expression of regional pride may want to warn the main character to be careful what he wishes for.

movies

Bud Movie

Pineapple Express has its moments, but it's kind of harsh.

By Dana Stevens

Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 11:57 AM ET

Pineapple Express is this summer's precise equivalent to *Superbad*: a Judd Apatow-produced buddy comedy directed by a proxy from the indie world (last time around, it was *The Daytrippers*' Greg Mottola; this time it's *All the Real Girls*' David Gordon Green). Both movies follow three marginally functional man-boys through a day and night of substance-abuse-related mayhem. The two movies were even released in the same part of the season, as a dog-days follow-up to the big Apatow comedy of early summer (in 2007, *Knocked Up*; this year, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*).

Laugh for laugh, *Pineapple Express* is way funnier than *Superbad*. It may be the funniest mainstream comedy released so far this year (not that that means much when you've got *The Love Guru* pulling down your average). But my problem with the movie is the same that I had with its 2007 twin: It's a moral thing. The swath of destruction these boys leave in their wake—and *Pineapple Express*, unlike its predecessor, boasts a significant body count—seems disproportionate to the prevailing mood of dopey fun. Must every boys' night out culminate in exploding vehicles, multiple gunshot wounds, and piles of sadistically dispatched villains? Whatever happened to heading out to White Castle for sliders?

So much stoner humor rests on the simple fact that when you're high, accomplishing the most mundane task feels like a cognitive milestone. Hence the slider quest of the first Harold and Kumar movie, or Anna Faris' bewildering trek across Los Angeles in the unaccountably ignored *Smiley Face*. But Seth Rogen and James Franco, as the permanently zonked heroes of *Pineapple Express*, are saddled with problems that would stress out even the unbaked among us. Rogen plays Dale Denton, a process server in his mid-20s with little ambition beyond toking up and hanging with his barely legal girlfriend. On the way to deliver a subpoena to a drug boss named Ted Jones (Gary Cole), Dale witnesses a murder and flees in a panic to the house of his dimwitted dealer, Saul Silver (Franco). Dale leaves his joint behind at the crime scene, and Ted immediately pegs the weed

as "Pineapple Express," a strain so rare that only he supplies it. Thus are Saul and Dale marked for destruction, along with Saul's middleman Red (Danny McBride).

The shaggy script (by Apatow, Rogen, and Evan Goldberg) careens deliriously from couchbound bull sessions to hyperviolent set pieces. The former are often hysterical, especially an early scene in which the needy Saul ropes Dale into smoking a state-of-the-art "cross-joint" while he holds forth on the work of his "second-favorite civil engineer" and the glories of Pineapple Express ("It smells like God's vagina ... smoking this is sort of like killing a unicorn"). Similar to Brad Pitt, Franco may be a great character actor trapped in a leading man's body. He drooped as a listless hunk in the *Spider-Man* movies, the historical romance *Flyboys*, and that TV biopic of James Dean. But his Saul Silver is a wonder, a pajama-clad philosopher nearly dumb enough to qualify as a holy fool.

Rogen's acerbic and bumbling but ultimately warmhearted Dale isn't exactly a stretch from the character he's been playing ever since *Freaks and Geeks*—himself, I guess—but he reliably delivers the Rogen goods. And Danny McBride as the blustering, cowardly Red (imagine Falstaff in a mullet and a frayed kimono) is a genuine comic discovery. Indeed, McBride ought to have been discovered earlier this summer as a lovelorn tae kwon do instructor in the barely seen indie comedy *The Foot Fist Way*. But between this attention-grabbing role and his appearance next week in Ben Stiller's *Tropic Thunder*, he should be commanding his own goofy franchise in a matter of months.

David Gordon Green and his fine cinematographer Tim Orr, whose previous films have been long on poetic voice-over and contemplative landscape-gazing, have no idea how to direct an action sequence—and why should they? The nearly 20-minute shoot-'em-up that concludes this film, involving car crashes, bombs, Korean ninjas, and light-saber duels with marijuana grow lights, makes no visual sense. But worse, it makes no sense in the movie as a whole. Why, at the end of a movie that's all about the minimalist pleasures of friendship (in one lovely, dialogue-free scene, Dale and Saul play leapfrog in the woods and marvel at a caterpillar), do we need an extended tribute to Tarantino-style "comic" gore? I guess the sight of Seth Rogen holding up a square-inch segment of his own ear cartilage does provide a frisson of queasy hilarity. But the casual bloodthirstiness of the last reel—particularly the dreadful end met by one endearing thug—seems out of keeping with the movie's essential sweetness, a far cry from Saul's trademark sign off: "Peace out."

other magazines

Watch Out, Michael Moore

The *Weekly Standard* on Hollywood's increasingly vocal conservatives.

By Morgan Smith
Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 1:49 PM ET

Weekly Standard, Aug. 11

The [cover story](#) observes the "growing class of Hollywood conservatives" who are launching a "frontal attack on the excesses of the American left. ..." A group of Tinseltown righties, including David Zucker, are reigniting "hope that conservatives will have a battalion in this exceedingly influential battleground of the broader culture war." ... An [article](#) parses Obama's *Hyde Park Herald* op-eds to examine the period referred to as the senator's "lost years"—between his first state Senate run and his first U.S. Senate campaign. Written between 1996 and 2004, the columns show "a Barack Obama sharply at variance with the image of the post-racial, post-ideological, bipartisan, culture-war-shunning politician ... purveyed by [his] campaign." In fact, they portray a "politician ... [who is] profoundly race-conscious, exceedingly liberal, free-spending even in the face of looming state budget deficits, and partisan." ... A [piece](#) derides the "tiresome feminist complaining" of Speaker Nancy Pelosi's recently published memoir.

New York, Aug. 11

The [cover story](#) investigates "the noticeable aesthetic shift ... dovetailing with quantum leaps in plastic surgery and dermatology." Dubbed the "New New Face," it represents the desire of women to avoid the "gaunt face," an unwanted side effect of the "unholy marriage of extreme fitness and calorie restriction" meant to keep the body youthful. Women want to achieve the "round-and-soft-and-also-somehow-perfectly-defined" look of the teenage girl, and doctors have new techniques to make it happen. ... An [article](#) uncovers the story of a Syrian girl living in New York who, after 9/11, was incarcerated for nearly three months in a New Jersey detainment facility with her family, where the "corrections officers ... were ignorant and abusive." After she was finally released, the college student had to explain where she had been to her dean, "who asked if she could provide some documentation to prove what she'd just told him." ... A [piece](#) on memoirist/journalist David Carr reveals he "has always approached truth-telling as an extreme sport."

Portfolio, August 2008

A [piece](#) profiles "one of the biggest beneficiaries of the slumping economy": Joel Osteen, "master marketer and ... damn good chief executive." A cornerstone of the mega-preacher's "gentler" Gospel holds that "God wants everybody to be rich." He also "defers to God" on issues on which his brethren take more hard-nosed stances: He "recus[es] himself from condemning gays ... or women who have had abortions" and takes a moderate view on intelligent design. ... An [article](#) looks at the dealings of concierge Sead Dizdarevic, who has built an empire out of

booking corporate Olympic travel packages. Though the "smooth-talking hospitality pitchman ... first burst upon the Olympic scene in 1983," the Beijing Games may prove to "dwarf anything [he] has done before." His company has "sold more than 70,000 packages for Beijing ... [and] Dizdarevic has plunked down roughly \$130 million on this year's Summer Games"—but he projects revenue of nearly \$200 million.

The New Yorker, Aug. 11-18

A [piece](#) details the exploits of Frédéric Bourdin, a serial child impersonator whose repertoire includes "scores of identities, in more than fifteen countries and five languages." Authorities who investigated the modern-day Peter Pan found "no evidence of sexual deviance or pedophilia ... [or] any financial motive." One prosecutor says, "His profit seems to have been purely emotional." When "pressed about his motivations," Bourdin said all he "wanted was love and family," making him "the rare impostor who elicited sympathy as well as anger from those he had duped" ... An [article](#) considers the looming danger of superbacteria in hospitals. The bugs, which "have developed immunity to a wide number of antibiotics," come not only from the overprescription of antibiotics to humans, but also from widespread preventative dosing of livestock at factory farms. One source says, "antibiotics and antibiotic-resistant bacteria are ... in the air and soil around farms, in surface and ground water, in wild-animal populations, and on retail meat and poultry."

Newsweek, Aug. 11

The [cover story](#) chronicles the old wounds and new despair of the South. To gauge "the tenor of a region that has been critical to every U.S. presidential election since 1932, as a journalist retraces "the deepest scar in the country—the blazing track of total war left by Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman in 1864 and 1865." It concludes that the "white, Christian, middle-class Southerners," who are the "core of Republican strength" are "disconcerted" about the state of the economy and still "leery of Obama's liberalism if not his skin color." ... A [piece](#) reports on the surge of "bloody outbursts" in central Jerusalem, led by residents of the city's eastern, mostly Palestinian neighborhoods. In the past, East Jerusalem has enjoyed "relative stability" because of "close ties with both the Israeli economy and Palestinian culture." But now, it is "quietly becoming radicalized." The ideological shift is in part due to Israel's restructuring of the area, which isolates East Jerusalemites "from the West Bank without integrating them into Israel ... creat[ing] a state of limbo. ..."

Wired, August 2008

The [cover story](#) of the "How To" issue concentrates on frequent Gawker subject Julia Allison's rise to fame. "[N]obody gets people to pay attention quite like" Allison, though it's "hard to describe what she's famous for." She's frequently accused of

narcissism and was named the No. 3 most-hated person on the Internet by *Radar*, but Allison "regularly shows a savvy self-mockery" that can endear her to "even the most hardened Gawker commenter." ... A [piece](#) uncovers the magic of the Clover coffeemaker, which can make a "single cup of custom-made coffee that's Jessica Alba hot, Bill Gates rich, and as unique as a snowflake." The secret to the \$11,000 machine is that it lets "the user program three key variables: dose, water temperature, and brew time." ... A [list](#) advises what not to say in a Facebook status. Among them: "[j]ust came up with a new emoticon for sanguine [:<#>," "[w]atching *The Notebook* again," and "[t]hinking about maybe talking to someone."

podcasts

R. Kelly: the Audio Book

Sparkle, the log cabin, and the *Little Man* defense—all on your iPod.

By Josh Levin

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 11:53 AM ET

Less than two months after a Chicago jury found R. Kelly not guilty on child pornography charges, the R&B star's new album, [12 Play: Fourth Quarter, has leaked online](#). If a new batch of Kelly tunes isn't enough to sate your ears, give a listen to "Dispatches From the R. Kelly Trial," now in audio-book form. You'll now find audio versions alongside each original dispatch: the stories from [the trial's first week](#), Josh Levin's [second round of essays](#), and his [analysis of the not-guilty verdict](#).

If you'd prefer to listen to all eight recordings back-to-back, click on the audio players below:

Parts 1-4

Parts 5-8

You can also download the entire audio book [here](#), and you can subscribe to *Slate*'s daily podcast feed in iTunes by clicking [here](#).

poem

"The Intention of Things"

By David Ferry

Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 5:50 AM ET

Listen to David Ferry read .

The death that lives in the intention of things
To have a meaning of some sort or other,

That means to come to something in the end,
It is the death that lives not finding the meaning

Of this or that object as it moves among them
Uncertainly, moving among the shadows,

The things that are like shadows, shadows of things,
The things the shadows of shadows, all in the effort

To put off the death that we are coming to.
The intention makes its way among its moments,

Choosing this object or that, uncertainly,
Somebody's cock or cunt, or the leaves of a tree

On a summer night in a landscape somewhere else,
Under which something happened that made it different;

It is seeking to find the meaning of what they are.
But it moves uncertainly among them, the shadows,

The things that are like shadows, putting off
The death that is coming, that we are coming to.

It is the death that lives that makes the flower
Be what's it's going to be and makes it die,

And makes the musical phrase complete itself,
Or fail to complete itself, as Goethe said,

Writing a friend whose son had died in the Army:
"So you have had another terrible trial.

It's still, alas, the same old story: to live
Long is to outlive many; and after all,

We don't even know, then, what it was all about.
The answer to part of the riddle is, we each

Have something peculiarly our own, that we
Mean to develop by letting it take its course.

This strange thing cheats us from day to day, and so
We grow old without knowing how it happened or why."

It is the death that lives in the intention of things
To have a meaning of some sort or other;

Implacable, bewildered, it moves among us
Seeking its own completion, still seeking to do so,

But also putting it off, oh putting it off,
The death that is coming, that we are coming to.

politics

Lifehacking for Candidates

The pros give productivity advice to the presidential hopefuls.

By John Dickerson

Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 7:29 PM ET

Presidential candidates try to connect with voters in different ways. They [bowl](#). They attend [motorcycle rallies](#). Sometimes they [drink boilermakers](#). They do not, as a general matter, discuss time-management strategies. In a campaign, as in real life, such talk tends to make people wonder about you.

Yet when Barack Obama and British conservative leader David Cameron [talked recently](#) in London about their hyperscheduled lives, I found myself fascinated—and sympathetic. And then I wondered if I could help. Sen. Obama, Mr. Cameron, and Sen. McCain, allow me to introduce you to a term you may not have heard of: lifehacking.

In London, Obama and Cameron commiserated about their days, which are arranged in 15-minute intervals of crisis. They react, but they never have time to reflect. Cameron said he tried to not let aides "chalk up his schedule" with too many commitments. Obama's solution was to set aside time to let his brain work during his mid-August vacation. "The most important thing you need to do is to have big chunks of time during the day when all you're doing is thinking," he said, repeating advice he'd gotten from a Clinton administration veteran.

What made the conversation so recognizable was not just the description of a busy life but the way the two politicians exchanged lifehacking tips—those elegant tricks and long-term productivity strategies that help you control your time and attention, which the world conspires to take from you.

I have increasingly become drawn to lifehacking and studying personal productivity because my own commitments have stretched me into transparency. I don't think I have read more than 50 pages in a book without interruption since college. I have stacks of legal pads with notions I've dashed off but haven't had time to think through. I know, I'm often my own worst enemy: I take time to answer rude readers who don't deserve it, and, [hey look, I Twitter!](#)

What I'm looking for is the same thing Obama craves—space to think. So I read [Linda Stone](#) and Web sites like [lifehacker.com](#) and [43folders](#), where author Merlin Mann [found inspiration](#) in Obama's conversation. I've adopted Mann's [smart approach to managing the flood of e-mail](#) and turned my life over to David Allen's [Getting Things Done](#) system. (I know it sounds like I should be handing out pamphlets at the airport, and I'm OK with that. Except for those hooded robes, which are limiting.)

Given that I've found some halting success, I wondered whether these ideas could help the presidential candidates. So I asked the professionals.

The experts who spend their time thinking about how [knowledge workers](#) can be most efficient all agree that Obama is taking the right first step. He recognizes the value of making time to take a programmatic look at his world. Presidential candidates have always had time-management issues. When William Jennings Bryan's opponent heard that he'd given 16 speeches in a day, he quipped, "When does he think?" And there are always events the candidate cannot outsource. He has to give speeches, answer reporters, and keep smiling while a big money-raiser explains his unworkable theory for addressing high gas prices. Long plane flights offer little rest: The candidate studies policies, talks to staffers, [answers starlet e-mail](#), and makes decisions about ads, where to campaign next, and just how hard to hit back against an opponent. I asked McCain's top staffer Mark Salter when the candidate has time to himself to think, and he said: "In the shower."

A candidate needs to set aside time to think because campaigns conspire to crush him. We all know what it's like to come to the end of a day of e-mails and interruptions and wonder where the previous 12 hours went. Now imagine that feeling in a day that's six hours longer and you're forced to spend most of it behaving artificially. When you're a candidate, the press, your strategists, and voters determine who you are, and each day you must either fulfill or refute the cartoon, usually by moving through a range of unnatural behaviors—constant repetition of the same talking points, [feigning umbrage](#), or sometimes just by playing dumb.

At the end of the day, a candidate feels not just numb but also displaced. A string of hasty tactical decisions puts him in danger of contradicting his core message. After running on Straight Talk, he's fibbing. After vowing to change the old style of politics, he's practicing the old tricks themselves. "You lose the big picture," as Obama put it to Cameron. "You lose a feel." This not only affects judgment but also threatens success. While candidates are engaged in an enterprise that drives them away from their authentic selves, voters are craving authenticity.

Candidates have long known to create what Linda Stone calls [receptive distractions](#), those little vacations that give them time to think. Bill Clinton used to read mystery novels on the campaign plane. McCain and Obama watch sports to get their

minds off the day. (Obama is reportedly better at this than McCain, whose aides may ban him from watching late-night cable news because it winds him up.)

The time for the thinking prized by Obama and productivity analysts represents a more programmatic approach than merely finding free time. It seems absurd that anyone would need an instruction manual for vacation, but without one, the ambitious candidate might come to the end of his time off without any insight. Imagine you've set aside an afternoon to clean the garage. Where do you begin? You could just dive in, but in an hour you'll find yourself sitting on a canister of Lincoln Logs, going through your high-school yearbooks. "If you write, 'Solve problem of world peace' on the whiteboard," says Mann, "that's a big hoagie."

David Allen, who coaches CEOs all over the world on how to be more productive, says the first question he'd ask a candidate is what has taken hold on their attention. What's eating at them that must be cleared so that they can start doing the big thinking? Attention can be eaten up by specific problems ("We must kick that reporter off the plane!") and existential ones ("Do I believe in free trade?").

This isn't a one-time process. Candidates need to use some of their thinking time to find a system for dealing with issues that are always going to pop up. There are many solutions here. They could carry a Hipster PDA—index cards that track goals and capture ideas and problems that need to be addressed before disappearing. Or they could draw up a [project list](#). The truly committed candidate could embrace the entire [Getting Things Done methodology](#), but he'd have to do it two years before he started running.

The idea is to break down whatever distracts them into addressable nibbles that can be tackled before they accumulate into big problems that require a vacation's worth of thinking. If a candidate plans well, he'll trust his in-the-moment responses (because they're part of a strategy), and he'll reduce the indefinable nagging feeling that unaddressed problems remain.

The point of blocking out periods of undisturbed attention, say the experts, is to apply your best creative thinking to your most important problems. But if that means getting back to your true self, as Obama suggests, how do you do that? This process requires a level of self-awareness that atrophies over a campaign. You're not supposed to be self-aware or ponderous. There's no time for it, and it's unhealthy for lots of reasons. You start to [worry that Maureen Dowd is going to call you an elitist](#), for one thing. Obama and McCain could read the biographies they wrote, I suppose, though they might find unpleasant contradictions with the campaigns they're running.

Both candidates are fortunate, because they know what produces their best thinking. Barack Obama will probably spend some of

his vacation writing. It's clear from his autobiography, and from the [model answers he gave students](#) when he was a law professor, that he processes ideas by working them out on paper. Yes, he writes speeches during the campaign, but as good as they may sometimes be, they are programmatic, formulaic, and targeted. If he's trying to recapture his center, it's going to take a deeper kind of writing.

McCain would design the opposite regimen for his vacation. He's not a writer; he's a talker. In conversation he tries out new ideas and thinks aloud, changing his mind as he engages in back-and-forth with advisers and others. That's why he's so frustrated by his new on-message campaign. The freewheeling conversations on his campaign bus used to sustain him, but now his aides worry that they will interrupt his daily campaign message. (The equivalent would be if Obama were to let the press watch over his shoulder as he writes.) On his vacation, maybe McCain could schedule off-the-record bus tours with reporters, editorial writers, and experts in various fields.

Politicians may have the most acute form of a condition Linda Stone calls "[continuous partial attention](#)." In this state, our minds are constantly scanning *for the best opportunities, activities, and contacts, at any given moment*. The analogy for me is my e-mail inbox: I hate it. It is a Superfund Site. But I keep checking it because there might be a new opportunity I should grab or a response I've been waiting for that will allow me to get back to work on an idea. I don't want to miss anything. I'm Gollum, and I can't take off the ring.

Presidential candidates don't have to worry about e-mail—they've got staffers who can handle that—but they live in a world where speed is rewarded. Candidates who move quickly can define an issue on their terms. Those who don't move quickly let their opponents define them, which can take weeks to undo. The challenge for presidential candidates, as Merlin Mann puts it, is "to know when to stop scanning your campground for bears long enough to make S'mores."

Good luck with your vacation, Sen. Obama. And Sen. McCain, maybe you can find some time on the bus.

politics

No Penalty

Voters don't mind negative ads. Do they care about hypocritical ones?

By John Dickerson

Monday, August 4, 2008, at 5:27 PM ET

Last week the McCain campaign was [roundly criticized](#), even among some of his Republican [allies](#), for [running several](#)

[misleading ads](#) about Barack Obama. Many voters seemed to agree: A CNN [poll showed](#) that four in 10 thought McCain had attacked Obama unfairly.

Yet his aides say it was the best week McCain has had in a while. And their happiness may eventually be justified. It is an accepted piece of campaign conventional wisdom that negative ads work. McCain's latest barrage will test whether hypocrisy still matters.

McCain's aides were pleased because they had controlled a few consecutive news cycles for the first time in ages, and they put their opponent on the defensive. They also think they've finally found a coherent, easy-to-understand way to frame the race: McCain = Country First. Obama = Obama First.

It may be negative, and people say they don't like negative ads—but they listen to them. In the Democratic primaries, exit polls routinely showed that Hillary Clinton won handily among those voters who thought she had attacked Obama unfairly. And if voters will tolerate some negativity, maybe they don't mind a little hypocrisy.

All candidates say they're going to tell the truth and then don't. But McCain has made truth-telling the central theme of his campaigns. His bus is called the Straight Talk Express, and he promises candor at nearly every event. And yet his ads aren't truthful—they're not necessarily mean, just untrue. McCain has also pledged to run a clean campaign. And suggesting Obama was too media crazed to make time to visit wounded troops on his recent overseas trip, [even though he visited wounded soldiers in Iraq, wasn't clean](#).

Now is the time to make the sophisticated point that these kinds of distortions are hardly surprising. This is politics, after all. Sure, but there has to be a hypocrisy tripwire somewhere. Someone has to say it: Railing against headwear while wearing a top hat is insincere, if not dishonest.

If there are any qualms about the new strategy in the McCain campaign, they're hard to find. In a [bad political environment](#), with the press stacked against them, aides appear to be at ease with over-reaching if they believe it counterbalances the forces working against them. They can also take comfort in another fact: Barack Obama didn't pay a hypocrisy penalty for his attacks on Hillary Clinton.

Pundits have compared McCain's tactics to Karl Rove's, but there are more recent parallels in Obama's record during the Democratic primaries. Obama founded his campaign on the promise of a new high-minded brand of politics. But last fall, [Obama supporters were worried](#) that despite his big rallies, Obama wasn't closing the gap with Clinton. So Obama telegraphed in an [interview with the New York Times](#) that he was

going to go after Clinton more aggressively. His target? [Her veracity](#). He didn't make a policy argument. In fact, Obama often pointed out that the two were pretty close to agreement on most policy issues. The issue with Clinton was whether voters could trust her. It was the same kind of values-based argument McCain is making about Obama now as he tries to stoke fears about his opponent's underlying character.

The difference between McCain now and Obama then is that Obama was more subtle, and he escalated his attacks slowly. He ran ads [hinting that Clinton was a political opportunist](#) but didn't say so explicitly. His slogan, "Change You Can Believe In," let voters come to the implied point that Clinton was offering change you *can't* believe in. But after Obama's popular-vote losses in Ohio and Texas, his aides launched a full-out assault on Clinton's honesty that matched [just the tit-for-tat behavior](#) Obama was campaigning against. Democratic [voters didn't penalize Obama](#). Surely McCain's aides took notice. And if voters in the general election are as forgiving to McCain as they were to Obama in the Democratic primaries, then maybe McCain aides have a reason to smile.

reading list

Olympic Marathon

The best books, Web sites, and video to prepare you for the Beijing Games.

By Rachael Larimore

Saturday, August 2, 2008, at 6:55 AM ET

Every four years, Americans turn away briefly from our regular summer sporting obsessions—pennant races, NFL training camps, the PGA Championship, and NASCAR—and become experts on otherwise-ignored sports like gymnastics, swimming, track, and the [modern pentathlon](#). Keeping up with water-cooler conversation requires some advance reading.

The modern games began in 1896 with 245 athletes and 43 events. The [Beijing Olympics](#), which kick off Friday night, will feature more than 10,000 athletes competing in 302 events. Fittingly, the seventh edition of David Wallechinsky's [Complete Book of the Olympics](#)—keep this indispensable reference within reach of your armchair or keyboard—squeezes into its 1,200-plus pages an essay on "gigantism," or whether the Games have grown too large. Wallechinsky tirelessly chronicles the top finishers of every event in every sport since the modern games began. He devotes nearly 400 pages just to track and field, sorting out fact from fiction in the stories of British athlete Harold Abrahams, who inspired the movie [Chariots of Fire](#), and Jesse Owens, who was indeed probably snubbed after his four-gold-medal performance in 1936, but by Franklin Roosevelt, not Adolf Hitler.

All eyes will be on swimmer Michael Phelps as he makes his second attempt to win eight gold medals. It's been 36 years since Mark Spitz pulled off the previously unimaginable feat of winning seven golds at a single Olympics. (Phelps won six golds in Athens; if you want to evaluate his chances this year, watch his dominance as he sets a [world record](#) in the 400 individual medley.) If you're too jaded to read [Amazing Pace: The Story of Olympic Champion Michael Phelps From Sydney to Athens to Beijing](#), a slightly hyperbolic biography of the 23-year-old Phelps (sample line: "Michael Phelps manipulated the water like no man since Moses"), you might be better off with [Mark Spitz: The Extraordinary Life of an Olympic Champion](#) by Richard Foster, which touches not only on his swimming accomplishments, but also his sometimes difficult relationships with his father and coaches and the surreal experience of being a Jewish athlete competing at Munich, the Olympics marked by the massacre of Israeli athletes competing there. Phelps is not the only American looking to make history in the pool in Beijing. At age 41, Dara Torres is competing in her fifth Olympics. Maybe, just maybe, she was inspired by [Off the Deep End](#), W. Hodding Carter's account of his attempt to make the Olympics as a cure for a midlife crisis.

Torres first swam in the Olympics in 1984. Back then, ABC made waves by airing an unprecedented 180 hours of coverage. This time, the network NBC [3,600 hours of coverage](#) on its various properties, including 2,200 hours of *live* streaming video coverage online on [NBCOlympics.com](#). Finally! The online video should stave off a repeat of the Sydney Games of 2000, when fans had to avoid the Internet if they didn't want to learn the results before they had a chance to see the footage. (Fans weary of NBC's pro-American bent or emphasis on treacherous profiles will appreciate *Slate* staffer June Thomas' plans to head to Montreal to watch the Olympics on [CBC](#). Check out her [Bloggingheads.tv Olympic preview](#) with *Slate* sports editor Josh Levin.) All those live results mean you can track medal counts and read in-depth reporting in real time at [ESPN.com](#) and [SI.com](#). Good Olympic blogs include Philip Hersh's [Globetrotting](#) at the *Chicago Tribune*, where he covers Olympic sports and the IOC year-round; [Rings](#), which gets a gold medal in the all-around, by the staff of the *New York Times*; and [Blogging Beijing](#), where Daniel Beekman at the *Seattle Times* provides the perspective of an American living in China.

There's no telling what happens to NBC's carefully arranged schedule if something goes awry. And what could go wrong? Well, [just about everything](#). A longtime concern has been Beijing's air quality, and [smog persists](#) a week before the opening ceremony. Watch ESPN's [Outside the Lines report](#) on how Beijing might control the smog and how U.S. athletes will be prepared.

The IOC's decision to hand the 2008 Olympics to China, a nation with a totalitarian Communist government but a burgeoning economy, was controversial. Unsurprisingly,

activists have used the occasion to protest China's involvement with Sudan, and pro-Tibet demonstrators disrupted the torch relay. [Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China](#) examines the efforts of the Chinese government to cast itself as a world leader amid the cacophony of protests. And [China: Fragile Superpower](#) looks at how China's nationalism is a threat to its tenuous stability. To glimpse life in Beijing leading up to and during the Olympics, check out the *Wall Street Journal's* [China Journal](#), [the Beijinger](#), and [China Digital Times](#). For all the heat that China is taking, though, this revealing article in the *New York Times* explains how Peter Ueberroth, head of the 1984 Olympic organizing committee and currently chairman of the USOC, believes that [China saved the 1984 Olympics](#) by defying the Soviet Union's call for Communist nations to boycott the Games. As the *Times* writes: "Now, no matter what political issues arise—and with China there are many: human rights, Tibet, its relationship with the government of Sudan—large-scale boycotts are no longer part of the discussion."

recycled August

Let's get rid of it.

By David Plotz

Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 7:02 AM ET

August is upon us—a month of nasty weather, thin news, and nonevents in the entertainment industries. In a 2001 "Assessment" reprinted below, David Plotz made the case for August Reform, a plan that would cede some of August's days to July and others to September, leaving a truncated version of "that most useless month."

August is the Mississippi of the calendar. It's beastly hot and muggy. It has a dismal history. Nothing good ever happens in it. And the United States would be better off without it.

August is when the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when Anne Frank was arrested, when the first income tax was collected, when Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe died. Wings and Jefferson Airplane were formed in August. The *Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* debuted in August. (No August, no Sonny and Cher!)

August is the time when thugs and dictators think they can get away with it. World War I started in August 1914. The Nazis and Soviets signed their nonaggression pact in August 1939. Iraq invaded Kuwait Aug. 2, 1990. August is a popular month for coups and violent crime. Why August? Perhaps the villains assume we'll be too distracted by vacations or humidity to notice.

August is the vast sandy wasteland of American culture. Publishers stop releasing books. Movie theaters are clogged with the egregious action movies that studios wouldn't dare release in June. Television is all reruns (or worse—new episodes of *Sex and the City*). The sports pages wither into nothingness. Pre-pennant-race baseball—if that can even be called a sport—is all that remains. We have to feign interest in NFL training camps. Newspapers are thin in August, but not thin enough. They still print ghastly vacation columns: David Broder musing on world peace from his summer home on Lake Michigan? Even Martha Stewart (born Aug. 3) can't think of anything to do in August. Her *Martha Stewart Living* calendar, usually so sprightly, overflows with ennui. Aug. 14: "If it rains, organize basement." Aug. 16: "Reseed bare patches in lawn." Aug. 27: "Change batteries in smoke and heat detectors."

You can't get a day off from August, because it is the only month without a real holiday. Instead, the other months have shunted onto this weak sister all the lame celebrations they didn't want. Air Conditioning Appreciation Week, Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist Week, National Religious Software Week, Carpenter Ant Awareness Week: All these grand American celebrations belong to August. Is it any accident that National Lazy Day, Relaxation Day, Deadwood Day, and Failures Day are commemorated in August?

August is the month of vagueness. October is the 10th month, March is the third month. What's August—bet you can't remember. Does it have 30 days or 31? You have to recite the rhyme to figure that one out. The great writers of history forget August: It rates three mentions in *Bartlett's Quotations*, compared with a dozen for December and two dozen for March.

The people with August birthdays are a sorry bunch. [Sure](#), Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton were born in August, but the other presidential Augustans are Herbert Hoover and Benjamin Harrison. Film is represented by Robert Redford and Robert De Niro—but also by John Holmes and Harry Reems. Third-raters populate August: George Hamilton, Danny Bonaduce, Rick Springfield, and Frank and Kathie Lee Gifford were born then. August gave us Fidel Castro and Yasser Arafat. In art, August offers Leni Riefenstahl, Michael Jackson, and Danielle Steele. (To be sure, not everything that happens in August is so terrible. Raoul Wallenberg, Alfred Hitchcock, Herman Melville, and Mae West were born in August. Richard Nixon resigned in August. MTV launched in August. And Jerry Garcia died in August.)

August can't even master the things it is supposed to do well. Despite its slothful reputation, it is not the top vacation month, July is. Nor is August the hottest month (on the East Coast, at least). That crown, too, is July's. August is when the garden starts to wither, and when the long summer days cruelly vanish.

We should rage, rage against the dying of the light. The United States desperately needs August Reform. Purists will insist that we shouldn't tinker with the months, that August should be left alone because it has done workmanlike service for 2,000 years. That's nonsense. Calendars are always fluxing. August itself was a whimsical invention. In 46 B.C., as part of a broad calendar change, Julius Caesar added two days to Sextilis, an old 29-day month. In the reign of his successor, Augustus Caesar, the Senate voted to change Sextilis' name to "Augustus" (as the Senate under Julius Caesar had renamed the month before, "Quintilis," "Julius").

August was created by politics, and it can be undone by politics. For too long, bureaucrats in Washington have been telling you how you must divide up your calendar. But these are *your* months, and you should be able to do with them what you like. Genuine August Reform will be hard. It will require tough compromises to protect the special interests of September and July. (And who better to sponsor this revolution, incidentally, than Sen. John McCain—birthday Aug. 29?)

Here is a framework for compromise. Cede the first 10 days of August back to July, thus extending holiday revelry for more than a week. September would claim the last 10 days of August, mollifying the folks who can't wait to get back to serious work. Labor Day would come 10 days earlier, the school year would run longer, and the rush of fall activity could get jump-started. August itself will keep 10 days. That is just enough: Every summer we'll be able to toot happily, "Gosh, August went by so quickly this year!"

And as for the 31st day, it will be designated a holiday independent from any month. It will fall after the 10th and last day of August, and it will celebrate the end of that most useless month.

shopping

You Are Now Free To Move Your Kid About the Country

The best (and worst) travel gear for parents.

By Sara Mosle

Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 3:28 PM ET

For the past few years, my family has temporarily divided its time between Texas (where I grew up and have been working on a book) and New York (my home, where I've lived for nearly two decades). As a result, my 4-year-old daughter and I frequently fly between the heartland and the East Coast and to other destinations far-flung.

Traveling with a small child is challenging under the best of circumstances, but especially so with only one set of adult hands. Even the flight attendants of hard-hearted American Airlines have been known to comment, "Honey, you look like you could use some help" as I stagger down the aisle with a car seat and two carry-on suitcases, festooned with laptop and diaper bag, toddler in tow. After one particularly disastrous 12-hour flight—the plane sat on the tarmac for two hours; circled our destination for another two; was diverted to a different airport, where we sat on the tarmac for yet two more hours; etc.—during which my daughter didn't cry once, people literally applauded her fortitude as we deplaned. I, however, was a wreck.

Over time, I've learned a few lessons. First, although infants can ride on a parent's lap up to age 2, you should spring for the extra seat if you can possibly afford it. That's especially true if you're traveling alone and can't trade off holding the baby. Otherwise, expect to emerge from the cabin at trip's end looking as if you were mauled by a feral cat. I know of nothing that prevents this except perhaps large, leather animal-trainer mittens. Second, think of the plane as a potential deserted island. During that 12-hour flight with my daughter, the plane had no food and eventually ran out of water; you need enough provisions to last a day. This includes a bucket-load of baby wipes (whether or not your baby is in diapers) and a change of clothes for your kid. Both help (trust me) with vomiting at 30,000 feet.

Mostly, however, I've relied on technology to cope. I've bought every imaginable toting and labor-saving device—some of them genuinely helpful, many of them not. In my four years as a parent, I've road-tested an enormous amount of travel gear. What follows is the result of this real-life test lab: what to avoid, what to buy, and why.

Not Recommended

Go Go Kidz TravelMate, \$79

While the FAA doesn't require car seats onboard, it does strongly encourage their use until age 4 (or until a child weighs 40 pounds). So do I. Besides offering additional safety, a car seat provides a natural headrest, so your child can sleep during the flight. My daughter was always a thousand times happier when strapped in her own car seat than when left to swim in the relative freedom of the plane's seat belt. The problem is a full-size car seat is about as easy to maneuver around an airport as a small wet hippo.

The TravelMate is a promising, but poorly executed, attempt to address this difficulty. A modified dolly, it holds a car seat upright on wheels. Your child can then sit tight while you push the dolly around the airport like a stroller. Sounds great. But the TravelMate's designers failed to consider the bottleneck at security. In my experience, the dolly won't fit through the X-ray machine unless you detach your car seat first. This slows you

(and every person behind you) down at just the moment your child is already upset about being forcibly separated from Mr. Snuggles. Worse, it's too wide to roll down most airplane aisles. This means you have to unfasten the seat just as you're boarding the plane and then somehow get it, the dolly, your carry-on luggage, and your child all at once down the aisle by yourself. All this attaching and detaching might not be an issue if it were quick and easy to do—but it's not. It requires screwlike pins and is a major headache.

The Sit 'n' Stroll, \$249.95

A mild improvement on the TravelMate (because it fits through the X-ray machine), the Sit 'n' Stroll looks, at first glance, like just another plush car seat. But pull out the telescoping handle on the back, and *voilà*, wheels pop out of a secret compartment in the bottom, and it's a stroller, too. Snap the handle down again, and the wheels retract—all this, at least theoretically, while your child is onboard. Even at \$250, the allure is obvious: As you move from plane to street to automobile, the child can stay put. Three problems with this fairy tale: 1) Like the TravelMate, the contraption is too wide to fit down most airplane aisles. 2) The Sit 'n' Stroll weighs around 16 pounds when empty and is awkward to pick up. 3) You have to lift the Sit 'n' Stroll completely off the ground by several inches to get the wheels to pop out for stroller mode (which is extremely difficult owing to problem No. 2, especially if your child is already strapped in). If you have a partner who pumps serious iron or if you're not embarrassed by asking strangers to help you hoist large, potentially screaming objects, great. Otherwise, save the significant moola for your child's college fund.

Recommended With Reservations

CARES Airplane Safety Restraint, \$72.99

The purpose of a car seat is not, as I thought prior to motherhood, to surround a kid in impact-resistant foam and cushioning. It's for positioning a harness over a child's torso. (A regular belt won't do the trick since it cuts across the child's middle in a way that can cause severe internal injuries in even a minor crash.)

The CARES Airplane Restraint—an elaborate strap that wraps around an airline seat—does just that without the bulk of a car seat, even as it adds an upper-body harness so your child's head won't fly forward in cases of unexpected turbulence. It's easy to pack and installs in seconds, but my daughter hated it. She felt as if she'd been tied up and couldn't sleep in the restraint, as there was nothing to lean her head against. Besides, I object to spending more than \$70 for what is, essentially, a belt.

Trunki, \$39.99

Although it doesn't address the car seat issue, Trunki, a carry-on

for kids, is still a transportation aid, and for sheer fun, it's hard to beat. Made of tough neon-green plastic, it has bright-blue horns, a hot-pink "nose" (really one of the bag's latches), and four wheels for hooves. Because the bag sits horizontally (instead of vertically, like most carry-ons), it can be ridden like a bull. Should you need to carry it, the Trunki comes with a shoulder strap, which can also be used as a rein for your child to hold on to. With its low center of gravity, it maneuvers well around corners and is surprisingly roomy—holding nearly as much as a traditional carry-on because there's no telescoping handle taking up interior space. My daughter, who is tall for her age, just outgrew her Trunki (it's intended for children ages 2 to 4). But she used to love scooting herself along on it. And when she got tired, I'd pull her through the terminal. Once on the plane, I worried that it would be hard to use, as it has no exterior pockets, but because it's smaller than most carry-ons, it's easy to pull out and open. Its only drawback is that it doesn't really serve any pressing purpose. Because airports and airlines let you use strollers up to the airplane door, there's little need for a rideable bag. But it's cute, relatively inexpensive, and exceedingly light. Plus it will make other travelers smile—no small accomplishment in this time of rising air rage.

Highly Recommended

The Pac Back, \$39.95

You won't win any beauty contests with this backpack-style strap that allows you to carry a car seat on your back. Also be careful when making sudden turns; it's easy to broadside innocent bystanders. That said, the strap is elegantly simple. It readily attaches and detaches in seconds and fits, even when holding a car seat, through the X-ray machine and down an airplane aisle—both major pluses over the TravelMate. It folds flat and so is easy to store when not in use. You can even drape it, with the car seat still attached, on the handles of a stroller to avoid the pack-mule look. It's also fairly inexpensive. Until my daughter became too old for a car seat on the plane, this is what I used the most.

RideSafer Travel Vest, \$99.99

Airlines won't allow boosters (thick cushions with large handles) in the cabin because to work they need a shoulder strap, which airplane seats don't have. But many states require them in cars for children up to age 8. So what's a parent to do? The traditional solution involves lugging a booster to the airport, checking it or stuffing it in the overhead compartment, and then retrieving it for the car ride to the hotel or back home. This can be a hassle if you aren't otherwise checking luggage. Also, boosters are heavy and cumbersome to haul around.

Enter the RideSafer Travel Vest, a less bulky alternative to the traditional booster. Like the CARES restraint, it repositions a belt across a child's body—but it's cozier and simpler to use

while still thin enough to fit in a carry-on's side pocket or even a large purse. A car's seat belts slide readily through the vest's tough metal guides, and you can leave it fastened in the back seat, so your child need only slip in and out without a lot of detaching and reattaching. My daughter, who thinks it looks like something an astronaut might wear, loves it. It's such a snap that some families might actually dispense with their booster altogether in favor of the RideSafer Travel Vest, even if they're not frequent flyers. Surely that's the mark of great travel gear: It's suitable for everyday life back home.

slate fare

Introducing the SlateOlympics Twitter Feed

How to follow the Beijing Games 24/7.

By Josh Levin

Friday, August 8, 2008, at 7:04 AM ET

During the next two weeks, NBC is planning to broadcast [3,600 hours of Olympics coverage](#) across its television properties and on the Web. That's all well and good, but the truth is that most of us can watch no more than 100 hours of television per week. That's where *Slate* comes in: We'll be watching the Games all day and all night so you can get some rest. Along with distilling the action with [our usual mix of essays and commentary](#), we're going to try something new. For the next two weeks, *Slate* staffers and contributors will be Twittering like mad about the proceedings in Beijing. If Michael Phelps sets a world record, Bob Costas says something dumb, or the Canadians wear incredibly silly opening-ceremony outfits, you'll hear about it first on the SlateOlympics Twitter feed.

There are lots of ways to follow what we're Twittering. First, we'll be collecting every tweet on [a Slate article page](#). We'll repost the page to our table of contents every morning during the Games, so you'll never have to worry about missing the previous night's musings. You can also get every update by going to [the nifty SlateOlympics page](#) at Twitter.com. Want to follow the SlateOlympics feed on IM or on your phone? The [Twitter FAQ](#) tells you how.

slate v

The Chinese Are Coming!

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 10:36 AM ET

slate v

Damned Spot: Drilling McCain on Oil

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 10:28 AM ET

slate v

Bookmark: Pressure Kicker

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 9:59 AM ET

technology

The Anthrax Truth Movement

The Web searches for holes in the FBI's latest lone-gunman theory.

By Farhad Manjoo

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 4:50 PM ET

On Wednesday, the FBI released [a raft of documents](#) to buttress its case against Bruce Ivins, whom the government says bears "sole responsibility" for the 2001 anthrax attacks. The FBI says Ivins, the late military scientist, is the man who mailed anthrax-laced letters to news organizations and two Senate offices, killing five people and infecting 17 others. The FBI's dossier offers mainly circumstantial evidence, leaning heavily on Ivins' troubled psychological history and on genetic markers that tie the anthrax used in the attacks to a lab in which Ivins worked. The FBI says that in the days before the letters were sent, he grew frustrated with the state of his research, spent late nights in his lab, and sent e-mails [describing his paranoid delusions](#). [Ivins' e-mails](#) (PDF) also warned that Osama Bin Laden had "decreed death to all Jews and all Americans"—language similar to that used in the anthrax letters.

The FBI's cartload of paper is unlikely to settle the case. Like 9/11 and the Kennedy assassination, the anthrax attack bears the hallmarks of a tragedy destined to spawn innumerable alternative theories: It's an event of world-changing consequence with a murky official narrative that can be construed, depending on your view of the government, as either pretty sensible or unbelievably bizarre. The FBI has outlined a classic "lone gunman" case. Ivins, an unstable yet brilliant scientist who feared that his research was endangered, worked late into the night to cook up anthrax in his lab.

I've spoken to many members of the 9/11 "truth" movement, and aside from the supposed evidence they marshal, their argument against the official story inevitably comes around to plain disbelief. Nineteen men were inspired by a tall bearded fellow in a cave to do *that!*? Skeptics of the FBI's anthrax case are putting

forward a similar argument: Can we really believe that one man did all that by himself?

When news of Ivins' suicide broke, [media accounts portrayed](#) the government's case as open-and-shut. The follow-up stories have been much more dubious. Online, disbelief is ascendant. Ivins' friends and colleagues, many with backgrounds in biology and weaponry, are [pushing back against the allegations](#). And unlike doubts about the official story of 9/11—which tend to come from the Bush-hating far left— incredulity about the anthrax attacks has united skeptical partisans on both sides. *Salon* blogger [Glenn Greenwald](#) has been leading the charge on the left; he points out that [the Bush administration](#) and [Republicans](#) long spun the anthrax letters into a case for war in Iraq and argues there's little reason to believe what they're saying now. Meanwhile, no less a conservative authority than the *Wall Street Journal's* op-ed page has [declared Bruce Ivins innocent](#).

There's also a crush of amateur speculation. At least a half-dozen full-time, nonprofessional investigators have set up shop online, plumbing the case's odd turns with [obsessive diligence](#). Some outsiders have even managed to push the official investigation in new—and erroneous—directions. Microbiologist Barbara Hatch Rosenberg [was instrumental](#) in fueling early interest in Steven Hatfill, the weapons expert whom the Justice Department fingered as a "person of interest" in the case. The government later exonerated Hatfill, [settling a lawsuit](#) with him earlier this year for more than \$5 million.

Below, I've compiled the emerging alternative theories about the anthrax case, listed in decreasing order of plausibility. Think of it as a preview: If the response to 9/11 is any sign, the Web is likely to fracture into separate truths on this story. In a few years' time, you'll Google *anthrax* and have a choice—you can go with the FBI's account, or you can choose to believe ...

Theory No. 1: Bruce Ivins is another Steven Hatfill.

On her blog about the ins and outs of anthrax vaccination, Meryl Nass, a researcher who knew Ivins, offers a point-by-point [rebuttal](#) to each of the government's claims against her former colleague. There isn't any physical evidence implicating Ivins, she notes. The government claimed the anthrax came from a vial in Ivins' lab, but as many as 100 people could have worked with that vial, the FBI has admitted. What's more, the government has offered no evidence to place Ivins in Princeton, N.J.—where the anthrax letters were postmarked—at the time of the mailings. (To place Ivins in Princeton, the FBI points to his [strange obsession](#) with the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority, whose chapter house was located near the mailboxes where the letters were dropped off.) *Salon's* Greenwald [adds](#) that the FBI was unable to find any anthrax spores at Ivins' house or on his other belongings.

All of this gets at the biggest problem for the government's case: To believe that the FBI's circumstantial evidence amounts to

proof beyond a reasonable doubt, you've got to trust in the bureau's competence. The FBI got the wrong man once. Couldn't they have done it again?

Those on the left who make this case are particularly suspicious of the government's theory for *why* Ivins would have done it (to boost the market for a vaccine he was working on, the FBI says). Nass offers what she considers more plausible motives for others who may have been involved—for instance, "bioevangelists" who made money when the government moved to fund research into bioterrorism. Neither Nass nor Greenwald venture anywhere near suggesting that the administration carried out the attacks (see below for that). But their arguments have resonated among left-wing bloggers who say that given how officials used the attacks to press for war, we can't believe what they say now. (Greenwald has demanded a [9/11 Commission-style investigation into the case](#).)

Theory No. 2: It was Syria and Iraq.

Richard Spertzel, a former biological weapons inspector in Iraq, wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* this week that the anthrax used in the 2001 attacks was "a product of exceptional quality." The particles were extremely small and prepared in such a way as to be easily inhaled. Their lethality, he concludes, is likely beyond the capabilities of what can be produced by a scientist working alone in the United States.

Spertzel, who [fervently believed](#) that Saddam Hussein harbored weapons of mass destruction before the U.S. invasion, has outlined a classic international conspiracy theory to explain the attacks. "I now suspect that Syria made the anthrax product with Iraqi Intelligence assistance," [he wrote](#) in 2007. Spertzel believes that sometime before the invasion, Iraq sent Syria a "spray dryer" that could have been used to produce the anthrax. Iraq also had access to silica particles, which he says were used to coat the anthrax so they could be more easily dispersed through the air. He says the bacteria themselves could have come from the Pasteur Institute in Paris, which was known to house the strain of anthrax used in the case.

But Spertzel's case has several flaws (even beyond the fact that he has no evidence to support any of it). The FBI's [deeper genetic analysis](#) of the anthrax ruled out most international labs as the source of the bacteria. In addition, there is [a heated debate](#) about the quality of the anthrax used in the attacks, particularly over whether it was treated with additives like silica. Early in the investigation, officials suggested that such additives were used; later, scientists who examined the spores said they [doubted the presence of silica](#). In its presentation this week, the FBI said little about the anthrax itself, leaving open the possibility, for some, that outside powers were involved.

This theory finds support among conservatives who still believe there were WMD in Iraq. The FBI's pursuit of Hatfill long rankled many on the right, who believed that it should have been

[looking beyond American borders](#) for the killer. For the same reason, the FBI's new lone-gunman theory will be hard for Iraq-agitators to swallow.

Theory No. 3: Did the White House know about the attack beforehand?

Just after the 9/11 attacks—and weeks before the anthrax letters were found—the White House [distributed the antibiotic Cipro](#) to staffers, including those traveling with Vice President Dick Cheney. This has drawn the attention of [many](#) on the [conspiracy fringe](#). Why would the White House have handed out an antibiotic used to treat exposure to anthrax—unless, maybe, possibly, our government knew something that we didn't?

That idea reprises the primary argument you see in conspiracy theories about 9/11: Hawks in the White House derived the greatest benefit from the attack (it helped their case for war), so we ought to [suspect them of the crime](#).

The White House has long declined to explain why it handed out the Cipro. In 2002, the conservative group Judicial Watch, which represented postal workers in Washington, sued the White House for documents relating to the case, but the suit went nowhere. Larry Klayman, the founder of Judicial Watch, has been [quoted as saying](#), "We believe that the White House knew or had reason to know that an anthrax attack was imminent or underway." (Klayman is no longer with the group, and a spokesman disavowed his comments.)

Obviously, there's nothing inherently nefarious about the vice president getting Cipro. After 9/11, the White House was a clear target; it didn't take foreknowledge to see that the place could come under biological attack. But what's a modern conspiracy theory if Dick Cheney isn't involved?

technology

Wandering Through the Desert With Windows

Microsoft's strange, passive-aggressive "Mojave Experiment."

By Farhad Manjoo

Monday, August 4, 2008, at 2:18 PM ET

In mid-July, representatives of Microsoft traveled to San Francisco in search of people who hated Windows Vista. The company recruited 140 Mac and PC users who thought Microsoft's latest operating system was slow, that it crashed constantly, that it was incompatible with various devices, and that installing it would be a pain. None of these people had ever used Vista; they'd only heard from others that it sucked. When they were asked to watch a short demonstration of a brand-new

Microsoft operating system called Windows Mojave, the Vista-haters were blown away. The new OS was quick and pretty, it handled photos and videos and music with aplomb, and it never crashed. "Why didn't you guys release this instead of that Vista crap?" many wondered.

But that was the trick. Windows "Mojave" was really Windows Vista. Microsoft filmed the focus-group sessions using hidden cameras, and when the company rep dropped the news to the Vista haters, many were pleasantly surprised. "I had no idea that you could do all this with Windows Vista!" was a typical reaction. The company has since posted [the videos online](#) as part of a new ad campaign dubbed "the Mojave Experiment" (the ads are running here at *Slate*). But the experiment is a strangely passive-aggressive way to sell software. "You were wrong—Vista totally doesn't suck as much as you thought!" is hardly a reason to pick up a new OS.

Microsoft has sold more than [180 million copies](#) of Vista in a year and a half; in surveys, the vast majority of Vista owners say they're satisfied with the software. But there are 1 billion Windows users in the world, and a lot of them seem terrified of adopting Vista. True, evidence for the Vista malaise is [mainly circumstantial](#)—retailers and PC manufacturers say that customers are still [asking for good old Windows XP](#), [big companies](#) are choosing to [wait for Windows 7](#), Mac sales are [skyrocketing](#), and PC makers have been touting the ease with which customers can ["downgrade" from Vista to XP](#). Every other day, the tech press has a new report on people's Vista difficulties. One recent headline: "[Man gets Windows Vista to work with printer](#)."

But here's the only proof you need that folks are absolutely horrified about the prospect of using Vista: Microsoft had to rebrand the software and set up 22 hidden cameras just to persuade people to try it out. This sort of sales tactic might work for [instant coffee](#), a product that everyone understands is a bastardization of something much better. The only way to get people to drink Folgers is to fool them into it. But for an operating system that Microsoft aims to convince us represents the state of the art in personal computing, this sort of trickery seems to convey, at best, a mixed message. Sure, people thought Vista was cool once they were tricked into using it. But if you've got to fool them, haven't you already lost?

That's not to say that Microsoft doesn't have a point. Vista [isn't a terrible operating system](#). Since its release, Microsoft and hardware makers have done much to improve its usability, and in many ways—its strength against viruses and other malware, for instance—Vista is much better than Windows XP. Participants in the Mojave Experiment were selected based on an obviously irrational aversion to Vista. They were silly to have hated Vista without ever trying it. And that's what the experiment proved—that people who blindly believe that Vista is a nightmare are happy to learn that it's not.

But it's also important to point out what Microsoft's test [doesn't prove](#): that you should buy Windows Vista. Participants in the Mojave Experiment handled the software for just a few minutes, and they were helped along by a technician who showed them the ins and outs (a service that Apple offers for new Mac buyers but which you'd be hard-pressed to find for a Windows machine). The test subjects didn't have to suffer through the frustration of installing the OS, setting it up to work with a printer or home network, starting it up, shutting it down, or seeing it drag during a fast-paced game. Nor were participants given a chance to test Vista against other operating systems: Would they have reacted differently had they been shown Mac OS X or Windows XP side by side with Vista? We don't know, but giving people that chance would have made for a more compelling argument.

I asked Microsoft to explain the impetus behind the Mojave campaign. In an e-mail, a spokesman said that while the company has improved the operating system tremendously since its release, it worried that "perceptions have not necessarily kept pace with reality" and that people who harbored "a negative perception hadn't actually seen or used the product." Bill Veghte, Microsoft's Windows unit business chief, [recently told News.com](#) that Vista users "feel guilty" about declaring their love for it because the rest of the world thinks it's a bad OS. The new campaign is aimed at overturning this guilt, at getting everyone to realize that Windows Vista is nothing to be ashamed of.

It's probably not a bad idea for Microsoft to work on Vista's image. But with the Mojave campaign, Microsoft seems to be arguing that all of Vista's problems are matters of perception. The OS is truly wonderful, and we're fools to have mistaken it for a dud. Of course, if that were really the case, the solution for Microsoft would be easy: It could simply relaunch Windows Vista as Windows Mojave.

But there's a reason a simple rebranding won't work, the same reason that we've heard stories about people who switch to Vista and then decide to switch back to Windows XP. For much of Vista's first year, many users had a terrible time with it. Those were real problems, not fantasies. Vista is much better now, but given the software's early months, people aren't fools to be skeptical. And it'll take more than trickery to convince wary customers. Folgers might taste delicious when it's [poured from a golden carafe](#) at a swanky restaurant, but everyone knows that when you make the stuff at home, it's simply vile.

television Gangsta Pap

The often astonishing *From G's to Gents*.

By Troy Patterson
Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 6:59 PM ET

The most dynamic subgenre of reality television is the caste-climbing makeover competition, and its essential text is *Ladette to Lady*, canceled this year after three delightful seasons on the U.K.'s ITV. The program endeavored to instill aristocratic values in its young female contestants who were commoners plucked from a newfound segment of the commonalty. The girls tended to look like a football hooligan's idea of a trollop, and any club-chair sociologist could see that the ladettes had realized the constraints of the local class system and had chosen to opt out of it. Instead, the ladettes established a pseudo-subculture and careered around the kingdom like a roaming gang of slags, taking shelter wherever the sound of Oasis being played very loud was coincident with lager on tap. In the last episode of each season of *Ladette to Lady*—the reliably precious finishing-school graduation scene—the winner made a kind of debut. She was alleged to know both self-respect and how to set a formal dinner, and we were encouraged to believe that both pieces of knowledge mattered to her moral improvement. She entered small-S society.

Matters of class are rather less straightforward on these colonial shores, as evidenced by *American Princess* (WE). That one whisks its contestants away from Sacramento, Calif., and Pittsburgh to drill them on carriage and elocution in Ye Olde Country. The host is the actress Catherine Oxenberg, who descends from the Glücksburg branch of the House of Oldenburg. No less important, Oxenberg played both Amanda Carrington on *Dynasty* and the Spencer girl in *The Royal Romance of Charles and Diana* (1982). She exists at the distant temporal end of the contestants' knowledge of history. Their ideas about nobility and its obligations all come from Disney films, *People* magazine, and beauty pageants. Their class consciousness was but a vague set of insecurities and shopping lists. They entered the show already having won the big prize of getting to hold court on TV; the winner also gets a "title of nobility" of the kind you can usually find on eBay for, maybe, \$300. Then she gets to lord that over her friends back home.

This summer, *From G's to Gents* (MTV, Tuesdays at 10 p.m. ET) has pimp-rolled exuberantly onto the scene, a carnival about hip-hop culture, black masculinity, preppies, and power. What is a G, you ask? A G is a straight gangsta, dawg. One contributor to Urban Dictionary appraises them as "the most ruthless niggaz on the block." A G can be of any race or ethnicity, but he must take it upon himself to embody a black stereotype. I'm kind of thinking of a cross between King Kong and old-school Ice Cube.

The man shaping these outcasts up is Fonzworth Bentley, a Morehouse man who parlayed a job in retail at Polo first into a gig as P. Diddy's valet and then into a secure station in the hip-hop world. Some of his suits are frightfully lovely, though his

daytime handkerchiefs can sometimes be a bit too *natty*, know what I'm saying. The conceit of the show is that Bentley (né Derek Watkins) is the "president and founder" of a "gentleman's club." The club is said to be "prestigious." I would also add that the club is *highly exclusive*, as Bentley seems to be the only person in it. He is helped by Fredrick, a black butler, laconic and sardonic: Jeeves by way of Benson.

Bentley's overall philosophy of a gentleman's responsibilities is quite similar to Millicent Fenwick's as expressed in *Vogue's Book of Etiquette* (1948), with the obvious exception of Mrs. Fenwick's attitude toward empty celebrity: "Publicity for its own sake is not always approved by good usage." No matter. The man is going to find a thug with a heart of gold. Each of the 14 G's is a "pledge" who wears a club jacket with a crestlike insignia seemingly inspired by a label on a bottle of fortified wine. In a weekly twist, they are each given an "ebony sphere" with which to nominate other contestants for elimination, which isn't how we used to do it at bicker but does yield some good noisy beefs and energetic "alliance" story lines.

Of course, it's difficult—what with the completion-bond companies and the parole officers and all—to sign actual criminal sociopaths up for a reality show. Some of the G's are just low-class clowns, and many of these had already been eliminated going into the fourth episode. Consider Pretty Ricky from San Diego, Calif., for instance. It wasn't looking good for him from the moment when, drunk on hard liquor one night at the clubhouse, he took a piss against a wall. Then there was The Truth—a name only a bullshitter would contrive for himself; he was not a G, just a mouthy punk. In contrast, Mikey P. suffered for being a total poser. He lost significant street cred when he said he'd just bought a four-bedroom house in Mercer County, N.J.

No, the G to watch is Creepa, who's a mutant breed of super G, a goon. "You know what a goon is?" he asked the other G's, not quite rhetorically. "A goon's somebody that's hired to terrorize and defeat!" Creepa as much as lists his occupation as "hustla." Creepa calls his sunglasses "hater-blockers," and he leaves them on all the time, owing to all the jealous haters out there. But then, during a one-on-one in the brandy room with Bentley, he shed the shades and lifted his eyes in a decent approximation of sincerity: "In order to be successful, you gotta be ready to broaden your horizons."

Creepa's heart, like his teeth, is made of gold. He brought a lot of energy to both the fashion challenge—where the G's choose outfits to wear to charity events on yachts—and to the cricket lesson as well. Will he be able to make his way through a high-society fantasy without assimilating and selling out his inner G? He is, after all, a lot more comfortable with this kind of cultural passing than, say, J. Boogie. Also recently eliminated, J. Boogie was not a G in the slightest, but a kind of B-boy fashion victim on the slum. (Fruit-colored high-tops, buzzy mohawk.) The

giveaway came when J. Boogie reported being employed as an office assistant and strained to make the job sound tough in the street-corner sense: "I'm axually workin' in a lab'atory." Bentley saw that the young man would be able to advance in life without the assistance of his gentleman's club: "J. Boog, your membership has been denied. Please remove your blazer."

the audio book club

The Audio Book Club on *Brideshead Revisited*

Our critics discuss Evelyn Waugh's most popular novel.

By Meghan O'Rourke, Troy Patterson, and Katie Roiphe
Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 10:08 AM ET

To listen to the Slate Audio Book Club discussion of Evelyn Waugh's Brideshead Revisited, click the arrow on the player below.

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

This month, Meghan O'Rourke, Troy Patterson, and Katie Roiphe discuss *Brideshead Revisited*, by Evelyn Waugh. *Brideshead* is Waugh's most popular—and most filmed—novel, but is it "popular for the wrong reasons," as Patterson suggests? As Martin Amis said, it's a "problem comedy"; it's also a war novel; a meditation on memory, loss, and love; a book about a house; and it's very much a Catholic novel—Waugh himself described it as being "a story about the effects of divine grace on a series of interlocking characters." The discussion—on these and many other topics—lasts around 55 minutes.

For the next book-club selection, we've chosen Curtis Sittenfeld's new novel, *American Wife*. The book is about a former school librarian who is married to the president of the United States, and we think it's a perfect choice for election season.

You can also listen to any of our previous club meetings by clicking on the links below*:

[Netherland](#), by Joseph O'Neill

[Anna Karenina](#), by Leo Tolstoy

[Beautiful Children](#), by Charles Bock

[All the King's Men](#), by Robert Penn Warren

[Eat, Pray, Love](#), by Elizabeth Gilbert

[Tree of Smoke](#), by Denis Johnson

[The Audacity of Hope](#), by Barack Obama

[The Road](#), by Cormac McCarthy

[The House of Mirth](#), by Edith Wharton

[Independence Day](#), by Richard Ford

[The Emperor's Children](#), by Claire Messud

[The Omnivore's Dilemma](#), by Michael Pollan

[Beloved](#), by Toni Morrison

[Everyman](#), by Philip Roth

[Saturday](#), by Ian McEwan

[The Year of Magical Thinking](#), by Joan Didion

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

* To download the MP3 file, right-click (Windows) or hold down the Control key while you click (Mac), and then use the "save" or "download" command to save the audio file to your hard drive.

the chat room

Broken Windows

Farhad Manjoo takes readers' questions about Microsoft's sly new PR campaign for Vista.

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 3:00 PM ET

Slate technology columnist Farhad Manjoo was online at Washingtonpost.com to chat with readers about Microsoft's effort to [burnish the image of Windows Vista through its "Mojave Experiment."](#) An unedited transcript of the chat follows.

Farhad Manjoo: Hi everyone! This is Farhad Manjoo, tech columnist at *Slate*. I'm here to talk about the piece I wrote this week about Microsoft's Mojave Experiment, in which it showed people a wonderful new operating system—and when everyone raved about it, Microsoft broke the news that the OS was actually Windows Vista. I called the experiment "a passive-aggressive experiment." But maybe you guys disagree?

London: Farhad—you complain that the Mojave experiment does not show "the frustration of installing the OS, setting it up to work with a printer or home network, starting it up, shutting it down, or seeing it drag during a fast-paced game"—but this sentence alone suggests that you yourself have no experience doing any of these things and merely serves to perpetuate the "Vista sucks" meme created by Apple.

I upgraded from XP Pro to Vista, and the installation was seamless; networking beats XP in terms of sheer clarity; the boot time is much faster and the process is smoother; and the "fast-paced games" I played on XP, like Oblivion, work pretty much the same on Vista if the FPS counter is anything to go by. In the future, please do not blatantly act as a pawn of corporate

marketing and repeat "circumstantial evidence" as if it were true. Slate used to be better than that.

Farhad Manjoo: OK, let's get the corporate pawn talk out of the way. A lot of Vista users make this claim: They love Vista, and everyone who thinks it sucks must never have used it.

But how do you square that argument with the many, many Vista users who've experienced problems with it? Especially during Vista's first year on the market, people reported trouble installing it, getting it to work with their peripherals, and getting it to enter and exit standby mode. See the Seattle PI's coverage of this [here](#). Also, check out responses to my story in Slate's fray, where many readers report similar troubles.

Of course, not everyone has had a bad time with Vista. And Microsoft has improved the OS recently, and hardware makers have done a lot to make their devices Vista-compatible. You're surely not alone in experiencing few troubles with Vista. But it's not fair to say that folks who don't like it are simply drinking the Apple kool-aid.

Alexandria, Va.: I hate Vista. Ever since we got a new laptop that had it already installed, we can't get our printer to work with it and I can't get it to accept my Dell MP3 player or my Canon digital camera. It drives me absolutely crazy that there really aren't any good alternatives out there. I actually wish I could have afforded to get a Mac, but it was not in the budget. In the meantime, does anyone have any suggestions for my peripheral issues?

Farhad Manjoo: To get your devices to work with Vista, try visiting the Web site of the device's manufacturer—in this case Dell and Canon—and downloading a Vista "device driver" for your product. In most cases, this should work. If it doesn't, alas, you probably have to call tech support, or a tech-geek friend. But don't lose hope; chances are you'll eventually get it to work and won't have to go the Mac way.

Anonymous: Passive-aggressive seems to fit pretty well. The point is that it isn't a disaster—but on the other hand, they don't address the core issue that really the only good way to use it is to have spanking-new powerful hardware. This is not the OS for your puny 30GB Pentium II system that seemed so hot in 2002. I need—seriously need—a new PC. My work provides one, but on the personal side, we're hitting 9 years old and Windows 2000. I was waiting for Vista to be released, then waiting for SP1, and now I'm waiting for the back to school sales to hit big time. Did I mention a serious procrastination problem?

Farhad Manjoo: Right. Microsoft used a new HP laptop with 2 GB of ram. If you use something slower or older, your mileage may vary. Microsoft has always been clear about this; Vista requires more resources than its predecessor. What I think it didn't quite anticipate was that many people wouldn't like that tradeoff.

There's a bigger story tucked in this, I think. Even heavy computer users rarely need to buy PCs as often as we once did, because much of our computing, these days, occurs in the "cloud"—we store our e-mail in Gmail, we collect our photos on Flickr, we manage our lives from Firefox. I used to need to buy new machines to keep up with the disk and processor demands of MS Outlook, which got very sluggish with a huge mailbox. Then I switched to Gmail, and now my needs are much diminished.

Silver Spring, Md.: Farhad, has anybody done a side-by-side, long-term comparison of using Windows XP vs. Vista on a regular basis? Seems like this sort of study would provide some real insight on the issue—to a degree that neither Microsoft nor its detractors may be comfortable with.

Farhad Manjoo: Not that I know of. Perhaps that would be useful—but it is increasingly difficult, these days, to buy Windows XP. So the matter may already be moot.

Hunt Valley, Md.: A historical note to those frustrated with Vista's lack of drivers: XP wasn't all that great when it came out, either. However, back then there weren't really any viable options, and everyone just sucked up and waited. Microsoft can't get away with this again, but this isn't just a Vista thing—it's a "Microsoft launching a new OS thing."

Farhad Manjoo: This is a good reminder. We can expect Vista to get better—indeed, it already is.

Readers also reminded me that when Apple first released Mac OS X, it had problems, too. An OS is a big undertaking. Software, as my friend Scott Rosenberg [has pointed out](#), is hard.

New Orleans: I like Vista overall and think it's an improvement from XP. My complaint has to do with the peripherals as well. My HP 1210 printer works with Vista only on the most elementary level. I can't scan with it, can't adjust print settings, and so on. I place the fault on HP, though, not Microsoft—I feel HP could've updated their drivers if they cared to, but they want

people to buy new printers. Even on the troubleshooting page for this problem, HP recommends an upgrade as the solution.

Farhad Manjoo: You're right. I just went over to the [support page](#) for your printer and I saw this message: "You might find that some of the advanced features are no longer available when using this basic driver. You can upgrade to an HP product that is fully compatible with Windows Vista if the advanced features are necessary."

That's ridiculous! The blame here is HP's, not Microsoft's, but it suggests a word of caution: If you're thinking about buying a new Vista PC, make sure that all your peripherals will work with Vista. (Usually you can Google the device's model number, find its support page, and look up Vista compatibility.) You don't want to buy a new PC and then discover that you need a new printer, too.

New York: Actually, it is incredibly easy to buy fully licensed copies of XP in stores and on eBay. It's just not on new machines anymore.

Farhad Manjoo: Thanks for the tip!

Indianapolis: I dual-boot between Windows XP and Vista SP1. While I agree that Vista is not as horrible as die-hard XP users claim, I would submit that Vista is less stable than its predecessor. This most likely is because of its advanced GUI. This past weekend I experienced the "blue screen of death" in Vista for no apparent reason. I know XP never would have crashed as easily as Vista had. Vista still needs improvements in terms of stability.

Farhad Manjoo: Thanks for your comment. I've got nothing to add, but I wanted to publish your post as proof that users experience problems with Vista.

New York: Does Microsoft still have any relationship with *Slate*? If so, shouldn't you disclose this?

Farhad Manjoo: No, it doesn't. Microsoft [sold Slate](#) to the Washington Post company at the end of 2004.

"It drives me absolutely crazy that there really aren't any good alternatives out there.": Uh ... how about this [Ubuntu](#) or

[Mandriva](#) Linux GUIs? The lack of games and iTunes support are the only reasons left to skip past Linux. Microsoft knows that better than anyone and is scared witless. Witness their [heavy-handed tactics](#) on the Eee PC. Steve Ballmer wakes up in a cold sweat every night at the prospect of an entire generation of kids in developing countries growing up on Open Source. All of the drudgery that Windows users take for granted—robotically checking for security patches, getting nagged by your OS to do this and that, buying ever more expensive computers to keep up with the code bloat, etc.—will be completely foreign to them.

Farhad Manjoo: But wouldn't you agree it takes someone relatively skilled in tech to set these up? I agree they're alternatives, but I'm not sure if they're viable for many computer users. But if you're sick of both Apple and MS, by all means, folks, take the Linux plunge.

Farhad Manjoo: Well, my time's up, folks. Thanks for all the questions. Have fun with whatever OS you're using!

the green lantern

Video Stores vs. Online Rentals

Is your Netflix queue destroying the environment?

By Jacob Leibenluft

Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 5:51 AM ET

My family just got Netflix, and the first DVD we rented was *An Inconvenient Truth* (really). As we watched the film, I started getting pangs of regret: The movie was surely sitting on the shelf at my local video store, and here we were getting it delivered from hundreds of miles away. Is my Netflix queue destroying the environment?

You can rest your conscience: Renting a DVD by mail is probably a greener choice than going to your local video store. To understand why, let's chart the journey a DVD takes before it arrives in your living room.

Up until the last few miles, your disc's trip is pretty similar no matter how you get it. A Netflix DVD is initially delivered to the company's main distribution center in [Sunnyvale, Calif.](#), and then sent by truck with thousands of other discs to one of 53 [regional distribution centers](#) across the country. From there it's sent as part of a daily delivery to a nearby U.S. Postal Service hub, and regular mail carriers take over. Meanwhile, a DVD destined for a brick-and-mortar Blockbuster store first goes to the company's [McKinney, Texas](#), facility, where it's repackaged into a Blockbuster-sanctioned plastic case and trucked to your

local store. (Blockbuster now offers a [rent-by-mail service](#) as well.)

The two methods of renting a DVD are only substantively different at the very end, when the disc travels to your doorstep. The Netflix DVD may be transported back and forth over much greater distances than the one from the local video store. But it's part of a much larger delivery in the back of a mail truck—and that reduces its environmental impact. (By the same reasoning, a shipment of lamb that comes halfway around the world on a massive boat may be [more energy-efficient](#) than a smaller shipment from somewhere nearby.)

The green marketing gurus at Netflix go even further, arguing that the mail is going to be delivered to your house anyway, so the environmental cost of delivering one of their DVDs is effectively zero. (They use this theory to arrive at an [enormous estimate](#) for the number of gallons of gas saved by delivering DVDs through the U.S. Postal Service.) Here, the Green Lantern feels Netflix may be overplaying its hand just a little: Eventually, the addition of new mail into the system adds up, requiring more trucks, greater strain on the mail-sorting system, and so on. Since we can't identify the impact of one extra piece of mail, we're better off averaging the cost of delivering the mail over each item. By that logic, the environmental cost of a Netflix delivery is still extremely small, albeit not quite zero.

Indeed, according to a [study](#) recently published in the *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, even just a two-mile drive to the video store will consume a few hundred times more energy than the Netflix delivery from a distribution center 200 miles away. The authors run through calculations for a consumer in Ann Arbor, Mich., and conclude that renting three DVDs online consumes about 33 percent less energy and emits 40 percent less CO₂ than picking up those same movies at the traditional video store.

Still, it turns out that transportation accounts for only a small amount of the energy it takes to make and deliver a DVD. In fact, if the *Journal of Industrial Ecology* study is right, 30 minutes spent reordering your queue—in a well-lit, climate-controlled room with the computer running—will use far more energy than the actual Netflix delivery and about as much energy as it would take to drive your hybrid to a store a half-mile away.

Packaging accounts for another chunk of the difference between renting online or from the video store. It takes a significant amount of energy to make the lockable polypropylene case that you might get at a video store—by the *Journal of Industrial Ecology* estimate, about as much as you'd need to drive to and from the mall. And compared with a mail-order [Tyvek](#) sleeve, a video-store case takes up more space when it's shipped from the main distribution center.

A warning, though: Just because renting by mail wins here doesn't mean that e-commerce is always a greener option. A [2002 study](#) co-authored by a group of U.S. and Japanese researchers concluded that buying a book from an online retailer often required more energy than getting one in person. That's partly because many book shipments are made by air and partly because sending books by UPS and FedEx can require extra stops by couriers. (Bookstores lose much of their advantage if they don't manage their inventories well—traditionally, retailers return a sizable chunk of their stock to the publisher when it doesn't get sold.) So remember: It's not just how far something travels that matters. It's the route it takes to get there.

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.

today's business press

China Slows Down

By Matthew Yeomans

Friday, August 8, 2008, at 6:13 AM ET

Even as China celebrates the start of the Beijing Olympics—and by extension its role as a rising colossus on the world stage—there are signs that [its economy is slowing](#), says *Business Week*, which writes: "In a worrisome sign that China's growth streak is losing more steam, the latest official statistics on manufacturing show the output of Chinese factories may have actually contracted in July." The reality of being not just a driver of the global economy when it goes well but also a passenger when it applies the brakes is apparent in new Chinese government figures showing growth has [slowed to 10.2 percent this year](#)—down from 11.9 percent in 2007—"on the back of sagging global demand and government measures to rein in excessive credit," adds the BBC.

The *Economist*, never a publication that could be accused of being backward-looking, skips past China to consider [London's challenge of upstaging the Beijing Games](#), given that the [United Kingdom is facing recession](#), as the *New York Times* also discusses today. The *Economist* notes that financing for the 2012 Olympic village has been hampered by the credit crunch and that the economic conditions "could mar plans for what was to have been a glorious Olympic legacy" of former Prime Minister Tony Blair.

What a bunch of killjoys. At least the corporate sponsors in Beijing should be happy, right? Perhaps not; NPR reports that the top 12 official Olympic sponsors have spent \$866 million in direct advertising and support but that "most [Chinese] [consumers have no idea who the actual official sponsors are](#)," in

the words of Shaun Rein, head of the China Market Research Group. Take Coke, which spent \$70 million to be one of the top 12. "We found 40 percent of consumers thought Coke was the sponsor, versus 60 percent for Pepsi," Rein says. Gulp.

Most bartenders will attest to Wall Street traders' love of a buyback. However, the news that both [Merrill Lynch and Citigroup have agreed to buy back](#) \$17 billion in auction-rate securities from individual investors must be pretty hard for those bankers to swallow. As the *Wall Street Journal* explains, the banks' largesse is "aimed at defusing a regulatory and legal showdown [with New York State and the SEC] about their sales practices for securities that were touted as safe but then couldn't easily be sold" when they lost value.

Seeing that the likes of Goldman Sachs, Lehman Brothers, JPMorgan Chase, Morgan Stanley, UBS, and the Wachovia Corp. are also being investigated for similar practices, yesterday's moves by Citi and Merrill "[are likely to pave the way for other banks and brokerage firms to take similar actions](#)," notes the *NYT*. Reimbursing 100 percent of the investment points to the potential exposure felt by Citi and Merrill, says CNN Money. Some "40,000 Citi customers, whose holdings are worth more than \$7 billion, are expected to benefit," it [notes](#).

The U.N., World Bank, and European Union all have warned about the effect that biofuel production is having on global food prices and the world's poor, but the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency yesterday rejected a call to [reduce the Bush administration's ethanol quota](#) for gasoline, arguing that the "national goal of reducing oil use trumps any effect on food prices from making fuel from corn," reports the *NYT*.

For now maybe, but the combination of high oil prices, an expanding global middle class, and ramped-up biofuel production continues to influence the price of grains. That affects [costs throughout the agricultural food chain](#), and "consumers are likely to bear the brunt in the form of rising food prices," writes the *WSJ*.

High oil prices have sent [commuters flocking back to the railroads](#), says another *WSJ* report. Unfortunately Amtrak can't cope, as many of its trains are "overcrowded, and a backlog of infrastructure problems stands in the way of expanded service," it writes. No doubt this is true, but the story feels very reminiscent of [this NYT piece](#) from June.

No room to read a paper but have all that commuting time to kill? Sounds like the perfect environment for Twitter. *Fortune* serves up this [profile of the microblogging Web 2.0 ingenue](#) that hopes to emulate the success of Facebook and YouTube. And just as with the media-changing social network and video-sharing site, *Fortune* (and everyone else) continues to wonder how Twitter "will evolve from hip technology to moneymaker." If any of you has the answer, tweet us.

today's business press

Chrysler Turning Japanese

Matthew Yeomans

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 6:13 AM ET

Is Chrysler about to outsource production of a [new midsize fleet to Nissan](#)? That's the scuttlebutt out of Detroit this morning as the *Wall Street Journal* reports the flagging baby of the Big Three is about to enter "a partnership that would move the U.S. auto maker toward a radical new business model."

Consumer flight away from SUVs and light trucks has hit Chrysler hard. It has just one compact car in its 30-model range, a precarious condition for a company with no overseas market to fall back on. Sales have plummeted about 25 percent this year, prompting the credit markets to question how long privately owned [Chrysler can stay in business](#), says CNN Money. One troubling sign: the company's "finance arm was recently able to raise only \$24 billion of the \$30 billion it sought." This Nissan partnership makes Chrysler a "marketer and seller of cars made by others," a risky strategy when trying to convince discerning car buyers, says the *Journal*. But in an auto economy where even Toyota is feeling the pinch, it might be Chrysler's only play.

[Freddie Mac set a trend of performance woe](#) that stretched throughout yesterday into this morning with news that [Barclays' profits fell by one-third](#) to \$5.5 billion, weighed down by subprime impairment charges. Joining a chorus of gloomy chief-exec pronouncements, Barclays CEO John Varley warned it would be wrong "to suggest that the market conditions over the foreseeable future will be anything other than tough," writes the *Financial Times*.

Squeezed between the Freddie and Barclays reports came news that second-quarter profits for German insurer [Allianz fell 36 percent](#), while U.S. rival and global market leader [AIG recorded a \\$5 billion loss](#) in the same period. With private-equity giants Blackstone and GLG also posting losses and seeing [big dents in performance fees](#), it is perhaps not surprising to hear that "many of the world's biggest banks are [proposing reforms](#) that would limit the size and scope of their businesses," as the *FT* reports. Based on a study by Goldman Sachs managing director Gerald Corrigan, these new proposals would restrict "the number of investors who can buy complex financial products, bring large swathes of the derivatives markets into regulators' sights and call on banks to spend more on technology and risk management."

Here's an admission you don't hear that often. The *New York Times* reports that Sprint "[lost nearly a million customers](#) in the second quarter. But the company says it lost some of them on purpose." The nation's third-largest wireless carrier says it

jettisoned less valuable customers as it tightened credit standards. "We are interested in quality, not quantity," said CEO Daniel Hesse, who took heart that Sprint beat admittedly modest earnings targets. But with the company still "churning" hundreds of thousands of customers to rivals AT&T and Verizon, and needing to raise \$3 billion to cover its debts, losing any more customers might be considered careless, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde. As Fortune.com put it, Hesse "[has his work cut out for him](#)."

Ultimately, companies do need to pay attention to customers' demands. Monsanto has discovered this after failing to foist on the U.S. drinking public [milk produced from cows treated with artificial growth hormone](#). Not that the food giant is admitting as much. It insists that despite putting its Posilac bovine growth hormone business up for sale, demand for the brand remains high. But as the *NYT* writes, Monsanto's "decision comes as more retailers, saying they are responding to consumer demand, are selling dairy products from cows not treated with the artificial hormone."

Finally, what's an activist investor got to do to get some fair and accurate reporting in today's world of business journalism? If you're Carl Icahn, you go [hire your own mainstream media reporter](#) to contribute to your blog. Former Thompson Reuters reporter Dane Hamilton should get up to speed on the [Icahn Report](#) pretty quickly. After all, he used to cover his new employer.

today's business press Stocks Roar Back

By Matthew Yeomans

Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 7:18 AM ET

A combination yesterday of falling commodity prices and the Federal Reserve holding its nerve helped alleviate the fear of inflation and [sent Wall Street soaring](#), with the Dow Jones Industrial index jumping 330 points, its biggest one-day gain in more than four months. Traders came not to praise commodities but to bury them and, with oil wounded by the dagger of decreasing global demand (crude futures have lost 5 percent in value in the last two days, [closing at \\$119.17 a barrel](#)) and the [Fed holding interest rates at 2 percent](#), the markets dreamed once more of cheaper gas and easing inflation, as the *Wall Street Journal* reports.

Yet the *New York Times* sounds a [cautionary note](#), writing: "During this year's financial travails, stock market enthusiasm has several times been ignited only to be dashed by fresh disclosures of problems at banks or renewed signs that the housing market has still not found its bottom." Indeed, the Fed

itself seems unsure as to whether the economic glass is half full or empty. "Although downside risks to growth remain, the upside risks to inflation are also of significant concern," it said when explaining the decision to leave rates unchanged. Today's one-two punch announcement of Freddie Mac's quarterly results and the government's weekly energy inventory could test Wall Street's seemingly sunny disposition.

Anglo-Swiss mining giant Xstrata isn't too worried about a blip in the commodities market. This morning it launched a [\\$9.78 billion takeover](#) of the world's third-largest platinum producer, Lonmin. Xstrata has expanded rapidly through a series of global acquisitions and, according to the *Financial Times*, it "appears to be taking the [recent fall in the \[Lonmin's\] shares](#)—down 26 percent over the past year—[due to infrastructure problems in South Africa] as a chance to make a move." Lonmin immediately [rejected the overture](#), calling it "[opportunistic and entirely unwelcome](#)."

Four years ago, those hulking dinosaurs of the recording and publishing industrial age, Sony and BMG, sought to protect their dwindling businesses in a grand alliance. Yesterday, [Sony bought back](#) Bertelsmann AG's half of the Sony BMG Music Entertainment [joint venture for \\$900 million](#), the *Wall Street Journal* and *FT* report. Sony says that having full ownership of its entertainment media business will allow it to bring more value to its PlayStation Network and its 50-50 mobile phone joint venture with Sony Ericsson. But given that Sony BMG's sales today equal what the two companies' music units used to generate separately, [this assessment](#) from the *WSJ*'s "Heard on the Street" column seems more succinct: "There is one thing worse than owning a music company in today's brutal market: owning half of one."

Staying with the world of media, News Corporation's full-year earnings ending June 30 [rose 58 percent to \\$5.38 billion](#). CEO Rupert Murdoch's empire was bolstered by its Italian satellite TV network, its U.S. cable channels (despite launching Fox Business Network) and the [20th Century Fox film studio](#), writes the *Guardian*. Even the newspaper and book divisions brought in more money, helped in part by the acquisition of Dow Jones and the success of James Frey's *Bright Shiny Morning*. Now the bad news: The Fox broadcast network and local affiliates saw operating income [drop 28 percent to \\$279 million due to reduced advertising](#). And even though the company made good noises about MySpace, the social network's parent unit, Fox Interactive, saw revenues decrease. All of which suggests a testing next few quarters. "As we look ahead, we anticipate an increasingly difficult economic environment," said Murdoch.

Finally, this morning the *NYT* reports that the "[largest hacking and identity theft ring ever exposed](#)"—a multinational organized crime ring spreading from Belarus to Miami—stole more than 41 million credit- and debit-card numbers from retailers like Barnes & Noble and Sports Authority. It also tells us that a

[Russian cybergang has infected thousands of PCs](#) in corporate and government networks with "programs that steal passwords and other information." Who knew Smersh was getting into e-commerce?

today's business press Beware of Cheap Oil

Matthew Yeomans

Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 5:16 AM ET

Oil plummets and America rejoices! Right? Well, not quite. Certainly crude prices seem to be headed south, closing around \$120 on Monday and raising the prospect of pump prices dropping below \$4 a gallon. But as [Fortune.com makes clear](#), "[F]alling oil prices also suggest that the recession the U.S. has so far avoided is well on its way."

There's plenty of Texas tea-leaf reading taking place to divine all the reasons for oil's current fall, be it a boost in Saudi production, relief that Tropical Storm Edouard is no hurricane, or, intriguingly, the *Financial Times'* suggestion that Beijing may have been [stockpiling oil ahead of the Olympics](#). The *New York Times* points to less-fickle Chinese behavior—a [very real economic slowdown](#) (some say 2 percent) in the world's premier economic driver.

A Chinese economic contraction has ramifications throughout the commodities world. Manufacturing in China, the world's biggest metals buyer, "[contracted in July](#) for the first time since at least 2005," writes Bloomberg, just one of the factors that has brought on a global commodities bear market.

But before you fire up the F-150 that's been sitting neglected in the driveway, remember that what goes down could always go back up. Even as some economists foresee a return to double-digit crude prices, one analyst cautions Fortune.com that, "[b]y the end of the third quarter, there's a good chance oil could be below \$100 a barrel, and a good chance it could be above \$150." Guess we'll have to see what the futures hold.

Fresh from creating ulcers for Yahoo CEO Jerry Yang, Carl Icahn has shifted his attentions to a company he already controls. As chairman of the ImClone board, he and his board [moved to reject](#) Bristol-Myers Squibb's unsolicited \$4.5 billion offer for the high-flying biotech company, suggesting "the target company might be worth more to shareholders if it were split in two," writes the *Wall Street Journal*. Observers suggest this riposte was just part of the bargaining process as the two former collaborating companies came to a deal, but that didn't stop Icahn from expressing his "concern" that "Bristol-Myers may have had access to confidential information about ImClone

before offering to acquire the 83% of shares it doesn't already own."

He might also have some concern over a *WSJ* report that shareholder opposition to Jerry Yang [could have been greater](#) than was recorded at last week's Yahoo shareholder meeting. Yang won 85.4 percent of the shares to stay on as a director, with 14.6 percent withheld. Now one major shareholder that opposed Yang, Capital Research Global Investors, has asked for a review of the vote, though the *Journal* notes that even if a mistake was made, "the impact on the total vote would have been relatively minor."

Did the [CEO of Freddie Mac ignore warnings](#) that "the firm was financing questionable loans that threatened its financial health"? That's the charge in the *NYT* this morning, backed up by "more than two dozen current and former high-ranking executives at Freddie Mac, analysts, shareholders and regulators." At issue is a 2004 memo sent to CEO Richard F. Syron by former chief risk officer David A. Andrukonis, in which he warned that buying bad loans "would likely pose an enormous financial and reputational risk to the company and the country." Syron admits some mistakes were made but replies with a candor that must make shareholders weep: "Frankly, if I had perfect foresight, I would never have taken this job in the first place," he says.

Cloud computing may be common parlance among the digerati, but it also has gained mainstream business resonance in recent days with the announcement of new remote computer networking and storage services by successive tech companies including Amazon, Google, and IBM. [AT&T is the latest to join the cloud computing craze](#), and yesterday it described how the U.S. Olympic Committee, which runs teamusa.org and other Olympics Web sites, will rely on AT&T's server power to manage the spike in traffic it will receive during the Beijing Games. Yet even as the trend in cloud computing grows (even Microsoft is said to be planning its [own post-software vision](#)), Dell Inc. is looking to [trademark the term](#), according to *Computer World*. Apparently, "Internet based development and use of computer technology" (thanks, [Wikipedia](#)) just doesn't have the same ring to it.

Finally, for all you morning java fixers, Starbucks has got a new way to lure you back in the afternoon. Starting nationwide today the caffeinated chain will offer morning customers "any iced grande beverage for \$2 after 2 p.m.," *CNN Money reports*. That's one way to give the economy a jolt.

today's business press Goodbye Subprime, Hello Prime

By Matthew Yeomans
Monday, August 4, 2008, at 6:35 AM ET

Anyone looking for a bold move by U.S. and European central banks this coming week is likely to be disappointed. Amid slowing global growth and continued high inflation, "the outlook confronting policymakers [remains grim](#)," writes the *Financial Times*.

While most private banks have likely taken all the write-downs necessary to account for their subprime folly (HSBC today reported a [whopping 28 percent fall in profits](#) for the first half of 2008, and RBS looks set to declare [the biggest loss in U.K. banking history](#) later this week), the sucker punch of a global economic slowdown combined with high inflation suggests neither the Federal Reserve nor Europe's equivalents have the appetite to juggle interest rates. That, says CNN Money, is an [admission by the Fed](#) that it is "pretty powerless to do much about either problem right now." With the Fed criticized in some quarters for fueling inflation through successive rate cuts and yet fearful of stifling growth by raising rates from the current 2 percent, its options are limited. "The Fed is not really part of the equation any more because of the corner they've painted themselves into," one analyst tells CNN Money.

There is one silver lining for the U.S. economy, notes the *Wall Street Journal*, and that is [productivity, currently growing at 2.5 percent](#). While Fed chairman Ben Bernanke takes encouragement from this, saying it demonstrates how strong the U.S. economy is, others point out that the desperately weak dollar is to be thanked; it has fueled the export market.

Now that the subprime tsunami has passed, get ready for a prime disaster. That's the warning from the *New York Times* this morning in a story that suggests that growing numbers of "homeowners with good credit are [falling behind on their payments](#) [and] defaults are likely to accelerate because many homeowners' monthly payments are rising rapidly." Prime loans account for the majority of the \$12 trillion U.S. mortgage market, so it's sobering to hear the chief exec of JPMorgan Chase describe the prime loan outlook as "terrible" and suggest losses on prime loans at his bank could triple in the coming months.

Has Time Warner finally found a way to get rid of AOL? The *WSJ* reports the company on Wednesday will announce the [formal split of AOL's dial-up and advertising and content businesses](#), leading to a probable sale of both concerns. The dial-up market, the source of AOL's meteoric 1990s growth, has long been a drag on the company. By isolating it, Time Warner can explore sale options for the more promising content and advertising division ... and that could see either Microsoft or (more likely) Yahoo enter the equation. "[Prior] Yahoo discussions have valued AOL at around \$10 billion, excluding the dial-up business," notes the *WSJ*.

Continued fear over high oil prices is putting the brakes on globalization. As crude futures once more rise on concerns about [Iran's nuclear program](#), the *NYT* [considers how global supply chains](#)—"Brazilian iron ore turned into Chinese steel used to make washing machines shipped to Long Beach, Calif., and then trucked to appliance stores in Chicago"—may no longer make economic sense. High oil prices combined with rising costs associated with maturing labor forces and tougher trade and environmental regulations around the world could yet mean manufacturing jobs returning to the United States. Now that's an energy concept almost as bizarre as [T. Boone Pickens, Al Gore, and Ted Turner](#) seeing eye-to-eye.

Finally to the Amazon, and news from the BBC that Brazil has launched a landmark [international fund to protect its rainforest](#) from illegal logging and agricultural development. This so-called avoided deforestation fund—the latest in a series of tropical forest initiatives recommended by the U.N. as a frontline measure to fight climate change, since 20 percent of global carbon emissions come from deforestation—seeks to raise \$21 billion by 2021 through foreign investment. [Norway is the fund's first donor](#), with a pledge of \$100 million, but Brazil's government has warned donors that signing a check doesn't mean they have a say in the country's internal affairs. "We are not going to trade sovereignty for money," one minister said.

today's papers

Prison Break

By Daniel Politi
Friday, August 8, 2008, at 6:21 AM ET

The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal's* world-wide newsbox lead with a military jury in Guantanamo Bay sentencing Osama Bin Laden's former driver to [five and a half years in prison](#). The *WSJ* is the most direct and [calls it](#) "an embarrassing blow to the Bush administration's first war-crimes prosecution." After the jury convicted Salim Hamdan of supporting al-Qaida but not of the more serious conspiracy charge, prosecutors argued he should be sentenced to [at least 30 years](#). Considering that the judge had already said he will credit him with at least five years and one month of the time he has already served, Hamdan could be released in five months. But no one knows what will actually happen, as the Bush administration has made it clear that it holds the right to keep enemy combatants [imprisoned indefinitely](#).

USA Today leads with a look at how the Transportation Security Administration is currently debating whether it will allow airports to [ban firearms in unsecured areas](#). Of course, passengers aren't allowed to bring weapons to airport checkpoints, but many states permit firearms in parking lots,

terminals, and other areas. The issue is being debated because of a request from Atlanta's international airport, but the TSA's decision could affect all airports. Ultimately, the courts might have to decide whether an airport can override state law.

Once again, supporters of the military commission system seized on the jury's decision to argue that the tribunals [are fair and should continue](#). Although the *WSJ* says the "surprisingly light sentence could be a bad omen for the government," the *WP* highlights that even the judge called Hamdan "[a small player](#)" and future commissions will deal with men who have a much closer connection to terrorist activity. Now all attention will turn to whether Hamdan will be a free man next year. There will undoubtedly be lots of pressure on the administration to release Hamdan when he's done serving his time. "We believe that the notion of fundamental fairness would be deeply offended" if he's kept as a detainee beyond his sentence, [one of his lawyers said](#).

The *WSJ* and *WP* both point out the interesting fact (the *WSJ* calls it [ironic](#)) that those who have been convicted in civilian courts of supporting terrorists received far tougher sentences. The *WP* notes that a spiritual leader in Virginia received a [life sentence](#) "largely for inciting followers to train for jihad against the United States." The *WSJ* contrasts the military commission's sentence of Australian David Hicks (time served plus nine months) and John Walker Lindh, who was also captured with Taliban forces but [received a 20-year sentence](#).

The *NYT* off-loads word that Defense Secretary Robert Gates intends to endorse a plan to nearly double the size of the Afghan National Army that will cost \$20 billion [over five years](#). In what the paper calls "a closely related decision," Gates will also restructure NATO and American forces to give the army officer who heads the multinational force command over most of the American troops as well. The two decisions are seen as "acknowledgement of shortcomings" in the Afghanistan operations as well as an attempt to deal with an increasingly violent insurgency. Officials say Gates would seek contributions from other countries to help pay the \$20 billion.

The papers have more information about Bruce Ivins, the scientist that the FBI says was the sole perpetrator of the anthrax attacks. The *WP* goes inside with a piece that has a bit of new, potentially incriminating, information followed by lots of doubts. The paper gets word that Ivins was away from work [for several hours](#) on the day when the first round of letters were dropped in a mailbox. For some reason, the Justice Department didn't include that information in the documents that were released yesterday. Experts analyzing the data say the Justice Department would have had a hard time proving its case in court. They point to the fact that investigators were unable to uncover tollbooth footage or credit card information to link Ivins to the mailings. The government also insists there was a DNA link between the anthrax in the letters and what Ivins kept in his lab, but bioweapons experts say it's still not clear how exactly

the FBI was able to discard everyone else who had access to the same strain of anthrax.

The *NYT*'s Page One piece takes a close look at how Ivins talked about the attacks, repeatedly offered to assist investigators, and sometimes even [misled them](#). Ivins was part of the team that tested suspected anthrax during the hectic days after the attacks and was quick to offer up names of colleagues that he said could be suspects. He also wasn't shy about talking of the attacks. One woman says Ivins talked about the attacks at a party and he "was just astonished" at the perpetrator's skills for being able to get the anthrax to be so finely ground.

The *WP* fronts, and the *NYT* goes inside with, a look at the continuing negotiations between Barack Obama's campaign and Hillary Clinton's aides about what will take place [at the convention](#). One issue seems to be settled, as both the *NYT* and *LAT* say that Bill Clinton will be [speaking on Wednesday](#), the night before Obama is scheduled to formally accept the nomination. But it's still not known what the formal nominating process will look like. Clinton told supporters last week that her delegates need a "catharsis," which some saw as a suggestion that she would support a symbolic roll-call vote so her backers can express their preference before officially joining Obama. Although Obama's aides might be tempted to simply ignore Clinton, the *NYT* points out that "[she does have leverage](#)" as polls reveal she is still as popular as Obama among Democrats.

The *LAT* notes inside that John McCain's support for the deal that sold Airborne Express to the German company that owns DHL just might cost him the [crucial state of Ohio in November](#). The corporate deal didn't go exactly as expected, and thousands of people could be out of a job in nine Ohio counties if DHL closes its facilities. McCain already knew that the sensitive issue would give him some trouble, but the situation only got worse this week as the [Cleveland Plain Dealer](#) reported that his campaign manager was a lobbyist for the German group and helped push the deal through Congress.

The Beijing Olympics begin today and *USAT* gets into the China vs. United States prediction game. The paper forecasts that China will [win the most gold medals](#) with 51, while the United States will get 43. If accurate, it would mark the first time in 72 years that a country besides the United States or the Soviet Union wins the most gold medals at a Summer Olympics. Overall, *USAT* predicts that the United States will still be able to edge its way to the No. 1 spot in the overall medal count with 104 to China's 97.

The *LAT* reports that Apple has removed an application called I Am Rich that iPhone users could have bought [for a mere \\$999.99](#). So what did 1,000 bucks buy? "Once activated, the user is treated to a large, glowing gem," says the *LAT*. "That's about it." A total of six people purchased it. "I am sure a lot more people would like to buy it—but currently can't do so," the

product's developer said. "The App is a work of Art and included a 'secret mantra'—that's all."

today's papers Case Closed?

By Daniel Politi

Thursday, August 7, 2008, at 6:12 AM ET

The [Washington Post](#), [Los Angeles Times](#), and the [Wall Street Journal's](#) world-wide newsbox lead with, and the rest of the papers front, federal investigators detailing the information collected during a seven-year investigation that has led the FBI to conclude that Bruce Ivins was the [sole perpetrator of the 2001 anthrax attacks](#). There was no smoking gun, and everyone is sure to highlight that much of the evidence is [circumstantial](#). Ivins' lawyer, along with scientists and legal experts, said the Justice Department hasn't managed to prove that Ivins was responsible or that he [acted alone](#). "It was an explanation of why Bruce Ivins was a suspect," said a lawyer who represented the scientist for more than a year [before he committed suicide](#). "But there's a total absence of proof that he committed this crime." Justice Department officials insisted yesterday that the sheer quantity of evidence against Ivins would have allowed them to prove his guilt to a jury.

The [New York Times](#) and [USA Today](#) lead with the military commission in Guantanamo Bay convicting Osama Bin Laden's former driver of [supporting terrorism](#). But the six-member military jury acquitted Salim Hamdan on a charge of conspiring to [commit terrorist acts](#), which the [NYT](#) says was "arguably the more serious of the two charges he faced." Supporters of the military tribunal system were quick to say that this acquittal proves that the military justice system is fair. But, of course, the detainees could still be held indefinitely regardless of any acquittals. Hamdan's sentence could be announced as early as today.

There was lots of information contained in the hundreds of pages released by the Justice Department yesterday tying Ivins to the anthrax attacks, and it's difficult to keep track of everything. But if there's one thing that's clear, it's that Ivins was a deeply troubled man who, even before 2001, was well-aware that he sometimes lost his grip on reality. The [NYT](#) dedicates a separate Page One story to [e-mails written by Ivins](#) that date back to 2000. "I wish I could control the thoughts in my mind," he wrote to a colleague in August 2000. He wrote poems about how he had a double personality and discussed his obsession with a sorority that he said had declared a "fatwah" against him. The [WP](#) also fronts a separate story that takes a look at the e-mails and says that, along with recollections from some who knew him, they paint "[a dark portrait of Ivins](#)" that conflicts "markedly

with the depiction of him by many friends and colleagues." The paper talks to a counselor who says Ivins once described a very specific plan to kill a young woman.

The [WSJ](#) succinctly separates the more compelling evidence and the [downright questionable](#), while the [LAT](#) does the best job of digesting the evidence against Ivins and presents it in an [easily readable format](#). In a piece inside that helpfully summarizes the case against Ivins, the [WP](#) makes it clear that although [the evidence was](#) "circumstantial on its face together they made what Justice Department officials called a compelling case."

The main piece of evidence against Ivins is that he was the "[sole custodian](#)" of the anthrax strain used in the attacks (the [NYT](#) and [WSJ](#) highlight that "more than 100 people had access" to that [specific anthrax](#)) and that the scientist started working late hours in the lab in the days before the mailings in 2001. Significantly, Ivins couldn't really explain his late hours, and the FBI found no evidence of [work he performed during that time](#). Shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks, Ivins also sent e-mails that used similar language to the notes that were sent with the anthrax. The envelopes themselves also provided some clues because of a "[tiny printing defect](#)" that narrowed down where they could have been purchased.

[USAT](#) notes [legal analysts emphasized](#) that "beyond matching the spores used in the attacks to ... Ivins at the U.S. lab at Fort Detrick in Frederick, Md., the documents cited no physical evidence—no hair or handwriting match, for example." Also, the [WSJ](#) notes that his motive "remains one of the biggest unresolved mysteries." The closest thing to a motive is, as has been mentioned before, Ivins' frustration that government regulators had stopped production of an [anthrax vaccine](#). At the very least, his e-mails seem to suggest that his anxiety grew as problems began arising with the vaccine. Skeptics also say federal officials have no physical evidence tying Ivins to the mailbox where the [letters were mailed](#).

[USAT](#) says that the split decision in the Hamdan trial "[could be a troubling sign for military prosecutors](#)," particularly of the difficulty in proving a conspiracy charge. But some say that prosecutors learned a lot from this first trial and it will now be easier for them to present cases effectively. The [WP](#) highlights that one of the reasons why Hamdan, who was described by the military judge as "[a small player](#)," was tried first was so the system could be tested on him before it moves on to bigger fish. Still, the [WSJ](#) talks to a government official who says that prosecutors will face [problems in future trials](#) because "the evidence in Hamdan's case is about as good as it gets." A military panel will now review the case, and defense lawyers can also appeal to a civilian federal appeals court, and perhaps even to the Supreme Court.

The [NYT's](#) editorial board is decidedly unimpressed: "[Now that was a real nail-biter](#)." Although it makes logical sense that

Osama Bin Laden's driver would be guilty of supporting terrorism, it was "an odd prosecution" because "drivers of even the most heinous people are generally not charged with war crimes." As it's designed and operated, the "military commission system ... is a stain on the United States."

The *NYT* notes in a front-page piece that the war in Afghanistan has reached a grim milestone as [more than 500 American service members](#) have now died in that conflict. The paper takes an extensive look at how the conflict has changed over the years and points out that in the first three years of the war, "about two-thirds of all American casualties came under so-called nonhostile conditions." By 2005, that pattern completely changed, and since then about 70 percent of the casualties were the result of "hostile conditions." So far this year, 91 Americans have died in Afghanistan.

The *WSJ* reports on an [employment-bias complaint](#) filed by a former executive of Huron Consulting Group that provides "a rare glimpse behind the curtain of big-money corporate fund raising." The 65-year-old executive says he lost his job after he raised complaints about his boss's repeated requests to contribute to Mitt Romney's campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. He provided the *WSJ* with the e-mails that often mentioned how the donations would help Huron's business. In one e-mail, the chief executive thanked all those who donated: "You can't realize how much leverage this gives Huron going forward to ask various people for business." The company insists the e-mails were merely a "personal request" and that these types of appeals "are common in companies and organizations across America." In the end, Huron executives gave Romney at least \$92,000.

The *WP* notes many Democratic strategists are worried that Barack Obama hasn't done enough to [hit back at John McCain's negative ads](#). The presumptive Democratic nominee released a new ad yesterday that tied McCain to Bush and questioned the Republican's reputation as a "maverick." The *WP* says the ad "may be his toughest yet," but several strategists contend it doesn't go far enough. While Obama has done a good job of dismissing McCain's attacks as the same old politics, that's not enough. "At the same time you do that, you have to counterattack," said one. "You don't want to look like a whiner. You want to look tough." Obama's spokesman does TP's job for him: "This is a classic Washington story, anonymous quotes from armchair quarterbacks with no sense of our strategy, data or plan," he said.

Quote of the day: In the *LAT*'s op-ed page, [Heather Havrilevsky](#) writes: "That good old Olympic spirit, set against the backdrop of the deeply depressing realities of life in China, makes this summer's festivities feel about as uplifting and cheerful as an accidental shooting at a wedding reception."

today's papers

Gonzalez's Eleven

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 6:45 AM ET

The *Los Angeles Times* leads with, and the *Wall Street Journal* fronts, news that federal prosecutors have charged 11 men in five countries with stealing more than 40 million [credit and debit card numbers from U.S. retailers](#). The Justice Department said it is the largest identity-theft prosecution in history and was the result of a three-year investigation that tied together what were previously thought to be separate attacks that had been reported by retailers in recent years. The *New York Times* leads with a new report by the Government Accountability Office that details how the Iraqi government is making a handsome profit out of the rising oil prices but continues to spend only a tiny percentage of that on [reconstruction projects](#). By the end of the year, Iraq could have a budget surplus of as much as \$79 billion, but much of it is likely to end up sitting in banks while the United States has appropriated approximately \$48 billion for reconstruction projects since the invasion.

The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez issuing a number of decrees to [consolidate his power](#). Significantly, many of the new laws were part of the package of constitutional changes that voters rejected in a December referendum. Among other things, the decrees formalize the creation of a popular militia, increase Chávez's influence over regional political leaders, and tighten the government's power over private companies. *USA Today* leads with a look at how 25 states don't require the [preservation of DNA evidence](#) despite the fact that many prisoners across the country have used the biological material to prove their innocence. Preserving DNA evidence doesn't just help prisoners, as prosecutors can also use new technology to find the perpetrators of unsolved crimes. The *Washington Post* leads with news that the teenager who was arrested last week after police found a stockpile of weapons and more than 50 pounds of bomb-making materials also had a map of Camp David marked with a [presidential motorcade route](#).

The Justice Department said the international identity-theft ring carried out a sophisticated scheme that involved spotting vulnerabilities in the [wireless networks of retailers](#). Some of the cases that were described yesterday were from [as early as 2003](#), and new information shed light on what may have been a reason why investigators took so long to identify the perpetrators. Turns out the man who is accused of being the ringleader, Albert Gonzalez, was a confidential informant for the Secret Service and had tipped off his co-conspirators when investigators were hot on their trail. In what may be the understatement of the day the U.S. attorney in Boston said, "Obviously, we weren't happy

that the person we had working for us as an informant ... was double-dealing." The *LAT* describes the criminal ring as a "[mini-United Nations](#)" that was composed of men from the United States, Ukraine, Belarus, Estonia, and China.

The new data that reveal just how much Iraqi money is sitting in banks predictably brought complaints from lawmakers who say U.S. taxpayers shouldn't have to continue paying for [reconstruction projects](#). Between 2005 and 2007, the Iraqi government devoted a mere 1 percent of its expenditures to maintain U.S. and Iraqi-funded investments. That low maintenance figure has raised concerns that the infrastructure projects will be [allowed to deteriorate](#). And in what the *NYT* calls "an odd financial twist" some of the money that could be used in these projects is sitting far away. The Iraqi government has around \$10 billion in the Federal Reserve Bank of New York that has earned almost half a billion dollars in interest payments through the end of last year.

The *WP* fronts a look at how one big-time bundler for John McCain has collected money from [seemingly unlikely sources](#). Harry Sargeant III, who raised money for Rudy Giuliani and Sen. Hillary Clinton before he became a key fundraiser for McCain in Florida, has collected thousands of dollars from people who live in modest homes in California and have never expressed an interest in politics. Some aren't even registered to vote. The *Post* tried to talk to some of these donors but didn't get very far. Still, their descriptions are telling. One man who is listed in public records as a Rite Aid manager donated the maximum amount to both Clinton and Giuliani, although neither he nor his wife is registered to vote.

On the other side of the aisle, the *NYT* fronts a piece that follows a recent trend in stories that highlight how Barack Obama's campaign [isn't just relying on small donations](#) to fund his war chest. Out of the \$340 million Obama has collected so far, half has come from donations of \$200 or less and one-third was raised from people who have given \$1,000 or more. That means Obama has collected more than McCain in large contributions. To achieve this, Obama has hundreds of bundlers, many of whom work in industries that have "critical interests in Washington." And (hold on, this is shocking) these bundlers didn't materialize out of thin air. Rather, Obama has been working for years "to build a network of big-dollar supporters" and he "courted them with the savvy of a veteran politician." TP has no idea whether people still find these types of stories shocking (the presidential candidate for a major party has more than just a scrappy Internet operation!), and, while these new fundraising numbers are interesting, isn't it about time journalists stop treating as news the fact that Obama is an effective politician?

In the *LAT*'s op-ed page, Thomas Schwartz writes that we should stop looking at the vice presidential nomination "[as the anointment of an electoral successor](#)." Despite what many might

think, this is actually a relatively new trend that began with President Eisenhower. But the truth is that no one knows who will be the best candidate eight years from now and, regardless, the vice presidency doesn't prepare someone to be commander in chief as much as being governor, a lawmaker, or a cabinet member. "A better running mate is a distinguished elder statesman eminently qualified to assume the presidency but too old to run in eight years."

today's papers

A Farewell to Arms

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, August 5, 2008, at 5:18 AM ET

The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with word that Iraqi cleric Muqtada Sadr plans to order members of his Mahdi Army militia to drop their weapons so it can be transformed into a [civic and political organization](#). If the move is successful, it would mean that what was once one of the main groups fighting against American forces in Iraq and was seen as an instigator for civil war would effectively disappear. The *New York Times* leads with word that Freddie Mac's chief executive was warned repeatedly over the last few years that steps had to be taken to protect the [mortgage giant's financial health](#). Of course, the warnings were ignored. The company's former chief risk officer tells the *NYT* that he wrote a memo to CEO Richard Syron in 2004, in which he warned that the company was buying too many risky loans that could quickly turn into huge losses.

The *Washington Post* leads an Air Force One interview with President Bush, who defended his decision to attend the Olympic Games and emphasized that it is "[important to engage the Chinese](#)." Bush said that it is "really hard to tell" whether the human rights situation in China has improved during his administration. And while he praised China's participation in discussions with North Korea and Iran, Bush also said President Hu Jintao's administration needs to do more to pressure repressive governments in Burma and Sudan to change their ways. *USA Today* leads with a look at how the Pentagon will spend [\\$300 million this summer](#) to fund research on post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury, which marks a record for a one-year expenditure on military medical research. While the program is certainly designed to help veterans, the research could also benefit the more than 1 million Americans who suffer traumatic brain injury each year. The *Los Angeles Times* leads locally but goes high with a federal task force recommending that doctors stop screening men who are 75 and older for [prostate cancer](#). Most already argue against treating the majority of men in that age group for a disease that usually progresses very slowly, but some experts questioned the recommendation and said it could lead to insurance companies

refusing to pay for the test. One described it as "a form of ageism."

The *WSJ* suggests that Sadr's move to [transform the Mahdi Army](#) has more to do with his desire to remain politically relevant than a feeling that his Shiite militia is no longer needed. Sadr was once an extremely popular figure but now that violence has declined many Iraqis who once supported the Mahdi Army are turning their backs on the militia that has often been acting more like a criminal gang than a modern-day band of Robin Hoods. A brochure highlights how Sadr wants the Mahdi Army to focus on "education, religion and social justice," says the *WSJ*. But just because Sadr wants militia members to put down their weapons doesn't mean that they will, and there's no reason to think that extremists who have refused to abide by the cleric's cease-fire order will listen to him now. The question is whether moderate Mahdi Army members will be willing to risk their lives to support the transformation. If he's successful, transforming the Mahdi Army would almost certainly increase Sadr's influence in Iraqi politics.

It's clear that even if Richard Syron would have listened to all the internal warnings, Freddie Mac [would have still faced financial difficulties](#) during the current housing crisis. But the warnings make it clear that people inside the company were aware of potential problems that could befall the company, yet calls for caution were quickly ignored. And frequently Syron decided to do the opposite of what the cautionary voices advised. He was told the company needed to raise more capital, so he allowed it to drop further, and when he was told that Freddie Mac needed to buy fewer mortgages, he bought more. The moves helped Syron financially, but some now say it came at the company's expense. Although some executives defend themselves by saying they were constantly under pressure from the government to buy more mortgages, others respond by saying that dealing with demanding lawmakers is simply part of the job.

The *WP*'s lead takes a look back at the Bush administration's relationship with China and notes that the president's [emphasis on engagement](#) shows how much things have changed since 2001, when many in the White House viewed the Communist government with suspicion. But even as some say that Bush "has emerged as an unexpected diplomat with China," many human rights activists contend the strategy has done little to promote democracy. "In terms of effectiveness, the so-called quiet, behind-the-scenes diplomacy so far is a failure," the founder of the China Aid Association said.

The *WP* fronts word that all foreign officials who visited their citizens being held at Guantanamo Bay had to agree to a set of rules that informed them that their interrogations with the detainees [would be recorded](#). It's not clear whether the video and audio recordings were always made, but if they were it would mean that the U.S. government could be sitting on "hundreds or

thousands of hours" of recordings that could shed light on some detainees' claims that they were abused and threatened during these sessions. Attorneys for the detainees have long been requesting such records, but so far the administration hasn't released anything or acknowledged their existence. Meanwhile, the *Post* talked to some officials from governments who visited detainees, and they all said that they thought the interrogations were being recorded.

Everyone notes that Barack Obama shifted positions yesterday and said he would favor tapping the strategic petroleum reserve to [lower gasoline prices](#). The *WP* is the most harsh on Obama by stating in its lead sentence that it amounted to "the second time in less than a week that he has modified a position on energy issues." Obama had said last week that he would support expanding offshore drilling as part of a compromise package with Republicans. Yesterday, Obama's campaign tried to argue the announcement [didn't really amount to a reversal](#) because he would replace the light crude currently in the reserves with less expensive heavy crude, which would be more appropriate to the country's energy needs anyway. Regardless, everyone notes that the shifts in policy illustrate how both candidates are under a lot of pressure to come up with specific proposals to lower energy costs quickly even if "there are few ways to dramatically reduce gas prices," as the *Post* helpfully summarizes.

Ain't that the truth ... When the *NYT* questioned Freddie Mac's chief executive about his failure to listen to internal warnings, the man who has collected more than \$38 million in compensation since 2003 answered with a bit of [refreshing candor](#). "If I had better foresight, maybe I could have improved things a little bit," Richard Syron said. "But frankly, if I had perfect foresight, I would never have taken this job in the first place."

today's papers

Beyond Subprime

By Daniel Politi

Monday, August 4, 2008, at 5:28 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with a look at how troubles in subprime mortgages could be just the beginning of a [much wider crisis](#). Even as there are signs that the increase in defaults among those with weak credit is slowing down, there are hints that homeowners with good credit are now increasingly in trouble. The *Washington Post* leads with a look at how insurance companies are beginning to use electronic data that contain details on the prescription drug records of millions of Americans to build a "[health 'credit report'](#)." The use of these databases is only expected to increase as the country begins its transition toward electronic medical records.

The [Los Angeles Times](#), [USA Today](#), and the *Wall Street Journal's* world-wide newsbox lead with news that the FBI used [new genetic tests](#) to link Bruce Ivins with the anthrax strain that was sent to [victims of the 2001 mailings](#). *USAT* focuses on how the complete answers about the evidence against Ivins won't be known until the Justice Department [unseals its records](#). Yesterday, former Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle, whose office was targeted in the attacks, said Ivins' suicide "doesn't bring anything to a closure."

In the mortgage market, analysts are now particularly concerned [about so-called alternative-A loans](#), which were often given to those with a good credit score but without requiring as much documentary proof of income or assets as prime loans. The number of "alt-A" mortgage-holders that are behind on their payments quadrupled in April from a year earlier, while the number doubled among prime loans. Analysts were once concerned about what would happen when the rates on adjustable mortgages would reset to higher values, but that has turned out to be less of a problem because of low interest rates. Now the big concern is concentrated on those who have grown used to paying only the interest for several years. Those with mortgages at levels above subprime were usually allowed to continue paying only the interest for longer, which is why some expect delinquencies in those loans will only keep increasing in the near future. "Subprime was the tip of the iceberg," one expert said. "Prime will be far bigger in its impact."

Those in the insurance industry say that using prescription drug records allows them to get a picture of a person's health much more quickly and cheaply than the traditional method of collecting [records from physicians' offices](#). But privacy and consumer advocates say it amounts to an intrusion that the regular public isn't even aware of. The companies that favor the use of these data contend that consumers have to give permission for the data to be released. But some say consumers are left with little choice since they have to sign the consent forms if they hope to get health or life insurance. There are also those who are concerned that insurance companies may make rash decisions based on the records without having all the facts about why someone was taking a particular medication.

The *LAT* talks to one person familiar with the evidence against Ivins who says the scientist "provided what became a signature" by his mixture of spores from [different institutions](#). But the *NYT* talks to one "person who has been briefed on the investigation" who says the evidence against Ivins is [largely circumstantial](#) and that at least 10 people had access to the anthrax mix that was used in the letters. The *NYT's* source admits there might be evidence he's unfamiliar with, but also said there's no proof that Ivins was in New Jersey on the dates when the letters were sent from a mailbox in Princeton. The *WP* notes that some are wondering how Ivins could have kept his [security clearance](#) even after the FBI had focused on him as the prime suspect. Ivins was

barred from Fort Detrick only on July 10, after a counselor expressed concern about his mental health.

The *WP* fronts a poll of [low-wage workers](#) that shows Barack Obama has a wide advantage over John McCain among members of that group. Although part of this edge is certainly due to overwhelming support for Obama from African Americans and Hispanics, the Democrat also holds a 47-37 percent lead among white low-wage workers. Although the lead goes against the impression built in the primaries that Obama can't win over white working-class voters, one in six white voters remains uncommitted. In addition, a majority of all low-wage workers say the election results are unlikely to affect them personally. Unfortunately, the *Post* doesn't specify whether this attitude is normal among these workers, so it's far from clear whether the ambivalence should be seen as significant. Many expressed no opinion when asked which candidate would do more to improve the economy or health care, which means McCain's support could grow, but the *Post* notes that Obama "has the clear edge among those who picked a favorite on these core issues."

Nobody fronts the death of almost 150 Hindu pilgrims in India after rumors of a landslide set off a stampede at a remote temple. The *NYT* notes that as more people in India begin to have more disposable income [domestic travel has increased](#), and overcrowding during religious festivals has become more common. Many of India's temples can only be reached through narrow paths and don't have the necessary infrastructure to support such large numbers of visitors.

Most of the papers front the death of [Alexander Solzhenitsyn](#), the Russian writer who gained worldwide acclaim by chronicling how the Soviet Communist government repressed its own people. He wrote more than two dozen books but will probably be most remembered for *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Gulag Archipelago*, which is often described as his masterpiece for the way in which he described the network of brutal labor camps that were set up in [Stalin's Soviet Union](#). Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1970, which he wasn't allowed to formally receive until he was exiled in 1974. He returned to Russia in 1994 but quickly declared he was disappointed to find a country that was ["tortured, stunned, altered beyond recognition"](#). Still, he stayed and settled down at a rural estate outside Moscow, where he spent his final years in relative obscurity. He was 89.

today's papers

The Deported

By David Sessions

Sunday, August 3, 2008, at 5:03 AM ET

The [New York Times](#) leads with American hospitals engaging in their [own form of deportation](#)—sending injured illegal immigrants back to their homelands because no American health care provider will accept uninsured aliens. The [Washington Post](#) leads with [doubts about Bruce Ivins](#), the scientist who killed himself this week before being indicted by the FBI in an investigation of the 2001 anthrax attacks. Friends and colleagues describe Ivins as a content man without the means or motive to carry out deadly chemical attacks. Online, the [Los Angeles Times](#) leads with another installment of its 2008 Summer Olympics countdown, a [personal essay](#) by an *LAT* correspondent who was born in Beijing.

The "apparently widespread" practice of hospitals repatriating seriously injured or ill immigrants represents "the collision of two deeply flawed American systems, immigration and health care," the *NYT*'s 6,000-word lead story reports. The deportations are entirely private, as "American immigration authorities play no role," and are often the conclusion to a string of events that has cost a hospital millions of dollars. Most of the lengthy piece narrates the tragic story of a Guatemalan immigrant who, after being maimed in a collision with a drunk driver, was eventually returned to the remote village where only his elderly mother now cares for him.

The FBI anthrax probe could be shuttered as early as tomorrow, the *WP* reports, which would "amount to a strong signal that the FBI and Justice Department think they got their man—and that he is dead, foreclosing the possibility of a prosecution." Colleagues and former acquaintances are sharply divided on that question: One argues that Ivins worked with anthrax daily and could have easily removed it from his lab without detection; another does not think anyone at USAMRIID would have "the foggiest idea" how to make powdered anthrax. Ivins' former therapist, a Frederick, Md., social worker, petitioned for court protection because of her suspicions that Ivins was a revenge killer who had previously attempted murder. The *NYT* takes the analytical road, [wondering](#) if the military's increase in biological counterterrorism has given more people access to deadly chemical weapons.

The *LAT* and *NYT* front news that federal officials have underestimated the number of HIV infections in the United States by 40 percent for almost a decade. New technologies have provided more accurate readings, leading the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to up the annual number of infections from 40,000 to around 53,000. The epidemic is not growing, as that figure has been constant for the entire last decade that numbers have been underestimated. The *LAT* notes that the higher estimates are "a jarring reminder that the United States, while castigating prevention efforts in much of the world, has not been able to get a firm grip on its own problems."

The *LAT* has this week's Sunday-paper must-read, an autobiographical [essay](#) by *Times* reporter Ching-Chang Ni that

begins, "I was born in a Beijing that has vanished." Ni returned to her homeland in 2000, after 20 years in the United States, and found it unrecognizable: "While I was gone, China had morphed from a closed communist society with few material comforts into a market-driven economy in which anything seems possible, and purchasable." At the 2008 Summer Olympics, the globe will look primarily upon the sheen of that recent progress—"the world will see the country in all its glory, with as much of the dark side tucked away as possible." As Ni leaves China, this time with her husband and two small children, she can't assure their country will be the same when they return. All she will promise, Ni writes, is that they *will* return: "The only thing I can tell them for sure is that we are not leaving Daddy behind and we will not be gone forever."

The *NYT* fronts a report on the [rapid multiplication of jellyfish](#) in coastal waters around the world, a phenomenon some scientists attribute to climate change, overfishing, and pollution. Designed to thrive in "damaged" environments, jellyfish often survive pollution and breed rapidly in the warmer waters. The problem has mostly been noticed on the shore as a result of closed beaches and clogged nets, but could be the symptom of deeper issues in the world's oceans.

A [front-page piece](#) in the *WP* follows Bill Clinton's "return to ambassador role," as the headline reads, after the end of Hillary's presidential campaign. There's remarkably little to take away from his "first extended interview since his wife exited the campaign in defeat"—Clinton refuses to discuss his own blunders on the campaign trail and does not have any unusual advice for the Obama campaign. Much more entertaining is a [visual comparison](#) in the *Post*'s Style section of word clouds generated by Barack Obama's and John McCain's campaign blogs.

Compiling the complaints of annoyed New Yorkers, the *NYT* Arts & Leisure section constructs a piece on the city's [summer European invasion](#), which makes many Manhattanites feel like members of an endangered species. Europeans, lured by New York's concentration of chic and the weakness of the U.S. dollar, are crowding the city's upscale boutiques and trendy restaurants to spend with reckless abandon—as if New York were "the Wal-Mart of hip."

today's papers Scientific Inquiry

By Jesse Stanchak

Saturday, August 2, 2008, at 6:35 AM ET

Everyone leads with follow-up stories on the suicide of Bruce Ivins, a government researcher who was about to be charged with

mailing anthrax to government and media figures back in 2001. Ivins died from an overdose of codeine and Tylenol last Tuesday, just hours before his attorneys were scheduled to have a plea-bargain meeting with investigators.

The *Los Angeles Times*, which [broke](#) the story yesterday, is now [saying](#) that Ivins was one of the researchers credited with developing an anthrax vaccine and would have received royalty payments on the drug, giving him a financial motive for starting a panic. The paper says, however, that the sum he stood to gain was only in the tens of thousands of dollars range, and ultimately no payments were made because the federal contract for the drug was canceled. The paper says Ivins may also have been trying to scare the government into providing more funding for bioterrorism research in the panic-filled months after the Sept. 11 attacks. The *New York Times* [says](#) the FBI focused its investigation on anthrax researchers instead of terrorist groups because it appeared the attacks weren't actually meant to be deadly, even though they would eventually kill five people. The *Wall Street Journal* [reports](#) that Ivins first came to the attention of the FBI in 2002 when he didn't report an anthrax contamination incident at his lab.

But the case against Ivins wasn't exactly open and shut. The *Washington Post* [cites](#) anonymous sources who claim the evidence linking Ivins to the attacks was largely circumstantial. The sources say that the FBI could prove Ivins had access to the strain of the bacteria used in the attack, but he was not the only researcher with that access. The *NYT* says a specialist who aided the FBI's investigation doesn't think Ivins had the capability to convert the disease into an inhalable power. Questions about the strength of the case are especially pertinent, since the FBI had initially suspected another scientist at the same government facility, only to later pay him a roughly \$5 million out-of-court settlement. It's unknown whether the FBI will continue to examine other suspects or if Ivins' death brings an end to the investigation.

Regardless of his involvement in the attacks, the papers can all agree that Ivins was a [deeply troubled man](#). The *WP* devotes a separate front-page story to the violent behavior Ivins exhibited in the months leading up to his death. He had been admitted to a psychiatric clinic after threatening his co-workers. His therapist eventually petitioned a judge for protection from him. It may be impossible to know now if Ivins' increasingly strange behavior was the product of a murderous mind or if he was a nervous wreck being hounded by federal investigators.

Anthrax is scary stuff—no less so now than it was in 2001. So, why aren't we all still buying duct tape en masse and opening our mail with gas masks on? The *WP* [goes inside](#) with a look at the way we get rid of old fears in order to make room for fresh phobias.

The *NYT* and the *WSJ* [each report](#) on the fading fortunes of Detroit automakers, after General Motors reported a stunning \$15.5 billion loss in its quarterly report on Friday. G.M., along with Ford, saw the sales of trucks and SUVs collapse due to rising gas prices. For years, those sectors were their top sellers in America, so the companies are just now deciding to bring more energy-efficient vehicles to market. The question the paper poses is: Can American automakers retool their product lines successfully before burning through their cash reserves? Given that the paper puts G.M.'s cash pool at \$21 billion and it's reportedly using up more than \$1 billion a month, we might not have to wait all that long for an answer.

Automakers aren't alone, however: The *WP* tells us there's [plenty of bad news](#) to go around as joblessness rates hit a four-year high. What's really worrisome isn't the 51,000 jobs newly lost but the way the job cuts are spreading from long-troubled industries like construction and manufacturing to other fields like trucking and telecommunications.

Under the fold, the *WP* reports that the Chinese government is [cracking down](#) on dissidents in the weeks leading up to the Olympic Games. The paper says the crackdown is pretty much the opposite of what China promised to do when it was bidding for the Games. The irony here is that the government is trying to avoid embarrassing coverage of protests in foreign media.

But hold on there, [says](#) the *NYT*. Human rights violations are still a big problem in China, but the paper argues that, on the whole, things have gotten better over the last 20 years. Political action is still suppressed, but certain economic realities have forced the government to make de facto concessions on things like private poverty and the ability of citizens to move to other parts of the country for work. The changes are subtle things—more the government accepting new policies than instituting them—but they provide a little context for the fresh outrages of the *WP*'s coverage.

Meanwhile, the *LAT* reports on online Olympic [tickets scams](#).

According to the *NYT*, archaeologists are worried that energy development projects in Western states could [destroy archeological artifacts](#) belonging to a range of ancient Native American groups.

The *LAT* reports that Sen. Barack Obama is [hoping](#) to help his image with rural and blue-collar voters across the nation by trying to showcase inroads made with voters in southern Illinois. The paper acknowledges, however, that such appeals can be fraught with landmines, including racial tension. And race, the *NYT* explains, is a subject Obama is in no hurry to [bring up again](#).

[High-fructose corn syrup](#) sweetens practically everything—is that a problem? The *LAT* examines the ins and outs of the issue—and the huge pile of money that's at stake.

You know that whole "six-degrees-of-separation" theory about the links between any two people? Turns out it's for real, or mostly real, at least online. The *WP* has the [story](#).

The *NYT* is a little [late to the party](#) on this one, but it gives a front-page slot to piece on a service called Slydial that can send your calls [directly to someone's voicemail](#), allowing you the option of forgoing unpleasant small talk when delivering bad news.

war stories

Annual General Meeting

Finally, the Army is promoting the right officers.

By Fred Kaplan

Monday, August 4, 2008, at 4:44 PM ET

Last November, when Gen. David Petraeus was named to chair the promotion board that picks the Army's new one-star generals, the move was seen as, potentially, [the first rumble](#) of a seismic shift in the core of the military establishment.

The [selections](#) were announced in July, and they have more than fulfilled the promise. They mark the beginnings, perhaps, of the cultural change that many Army reformers have been awaiting for years.

Promotion systems, in any large organization, are designed to perpetuate the dominant culture. The officers in charge tend to promote underlings whose styles and career paths resemble their own.

Most of today's Army generals rose through the ranks during the Cold War as armor, infantry, or artillery officers who were trained to fight large-scale, head-to-head battles against enemies of comparable strength—for instance, the Soviet army as its tanks plowed across the East-West German border.

The problem, as many junior officers have been writing over the last few years, is that this sort of training has little relevance for the wars of today and, likely, tomorrow—the "asymmetric wars" and counterinsurgency campaigns that the U.S. military has actually been fighting for the last 20 years in Bosnia, Panama, Haiti, and Somalia, as well as in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 2006 and again in 2007, the Army's promotion board passed over Col. H.R. McMaster, widely regarded as one of the most

creative strategists of this "new" (though actually quite ancient) style of warfare. In Iraq, he was commander of the unit that brought order to Tal Afar, using the classic counterinsurgency methods—"clear, hold, and build"—that Petraeus later adopted as policy. When I was reporting [a story last summer](#) about growing tensions between the Army's junior and senior officer corps, more than a dozen lieutenants and captains complained bitterly (with no prompting from me) about McMaster's rejection, seeing it as a sign that the top brass had no interest in rewarding excellent performance. The more creative captains took it as a cue to contemplate leaving the Army.

This was why many Army officers were excited when Petraeus was appointed to chair this year's promotion board. Rarely, if ever, had a combat commander been called back from an ongoing war to assume that role. It almost certainly meant that McMaster would get his due. (Some referred to the panel as "the McMaster promotion board.")

McMaster did get his star—but so did many others of his ilk. That's what makes this list an eyebrow-raiser. Among the 40 newly named one-star generals are Sean MacFarland, commander of the unit that brought order to Ramadi; Steve Townsend, who cleared and held Baqubah; Michael Garrett, who commanded the infantry brigade that helped turn around the "Triangle of Death" south of Baghdad; Stephen Fogarty, the intelligence officer in Afghanistan; Colleen McGuire, an officer in the military police (a branch of the service that almost never makes generals). At least eight special-operations officers are on the list (though not all of them are identified as such), as well as the unit commanders of various "light" forces—in Stryker light-armor brigades or the 10th Mountain Division—that have tended to be ignored by the Army's "heavy"-leaning armor and artillery chiefs.

Almost all these new generals have had multiple tours of duty leading soldiers in battle. In other words, they have a depth of knowledge about asymmetric warfare that the generals at the start of the Iraq war did not. And many of them were promoted straight from their combat commands. That is, they didn't have to scurry through the usual bureaucratic maze.

For instance, just [last year](#), nine of the 38 new one-stars had been executive officers to a commanding general—and, in most cases, not a combat commander—at the time they were promoted. This year, only four of the 40 were serving in that role, and all of them under commanders who had something to do with combat.

How this change happened is another intriguing tale. Usually, the promotion board consists of the upper echelon of the Army's bureaucracy—the vice chief of staff or one of his deputies and the generals in charge of various commands. In 2007, [the promotion board included only one general who reported in from Iraq](#).

This year, Petraeus [wasn't the only unusual general](#) on the board. Another panelist was Lt. Gen. Peter Chiarelli, Defense Secretary Robert Gates' senior military assistant, who was also a corps commander in Iraq and the author of several articles in military journals calling for an overhaul of the Army's personnel policies. Others included Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of the Joint Special Operations Command, who, like Petraeus, was called back from Iraq to serve on the board; Maj. Gen. John Mulholland, commander of special operations for U.S. Central Command (which covers Iraq and Afghanistan); and Lt. Gen. Ann Dunwoody, commander of Materiel Command and a former parachutist in the 82nd Airborne Division, who, as the Army's top-ranking female officer, is well disposed to the idea of opening doors.

Any officer looking at the names on this panel—and the ones I've listed aren't the only ones—would very clearly get the message: The Cold War is over, and so, finally, is the Cold War Army.

In October 2007, a month before Petraeus was appointed to chair the promotion board, Secretary Gates gave a [speech](#) to the Association of the United States Army—usually a forum for back-patting boilerplate, but Gates sounded the trumpet for what many in the audience must have heard as revolution. Speaking of the officers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, "who have been tested in battle like none other in decades" and "have seen the complex, grueling face of war in the 21st century up close," Gates said:

These men and women need to be retained, and the best and brightest advanced to the point that they can use their experience to shape the institution to which they have given so much. And this may mean reexamining assignments *and promotion policies* that in many cases are unchanged since the Cold War.

That change seems to be starting now.

webhead

The Lazy Man's Guide to Web 2.0

FriendFeed crawls Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube so you don't have to.

By Paul Boutin

Wednesday, August 6, 2008, at 7:12 AM ET

No, I don't want to use Twitter. I'm way too busy—and, let's be honest, too uninterested (and uninteresting)—to spend all day thumb-typing status updates from my cell phone. That's the problem with Web 2.0 services like Twitter, Flickr, YouTube,

Digg, and the rest: They expect me to eagerly upload, type, click, and [tweet](#) my life onto the Internet so these tidbits can be served to others. What I really want is to be able to reap the advantages of these sites without having to lift a finger—to see what my friends are up to without having to write anything myself.

The problem is my friends are spread across dozens of different sites—Picasa, Pownce, Plurk, Pandora, Polyvore—and that's just the Ps. Most of them publish to two or three sites at minimum. Figuring out how to navigate each site is more work than I have time for. My fellow tech pundit Robert Scoble posts movies, photos, and text [to more than a dozen sites](#). Can't I just get one page that lists everything Scoble did today?

I can! A bunch of former Google employees—techies who worked on Gmail and Google Maps—quit their jobs to start [FriendFeed](#), a site that rolls up the output of [43 Web 2.0 services](#) onto one auto-generated page. FriendFeed is basically a custom-tailored home page for people who are obsessed with the Internet. They can create their own FriendFeed page, or you can make one for them. Then, on a single page, you can see what videos they're watching, whom they're chatting with, and what pictures they've uploaded. If they add a DVD to their Amazon wish list, you'll be notified. The beauty of FriendFeed is that it's fully automated and requires no prior knowledge of any of the sites it crawls. You give it a name, and it'll take care of the rest. I typed "Robert Scoble" into FriendFeed's search box. Among the results was a thumbnail photo of Always-On Bobby, plus 15 icons representing different sites he'd incorporated into his FriendFeed account. All I needed to do was click the subscribe button once—done!

Now every time I log in to FriendFeed, I get a page that shows what Scoble—and, to my surprise, some of his friends—are doing online. It looks like one long blog page or a supersized version of the Facebook News Feed. There are news stories shared from Google Reader, strips of photo thumbnails from Flickr, Twitter messages, music from iLike, reviews from Yelp, and videos from something called [Seesmic](#)—I don't even know what that is. Nevertheless, it automatically shows up for me.

Facebook and FriendFeed are parallel universes that connect. Facebook is mostly a private estate where you need to log in and can see only content posted by friends who've accepted you. FriendFeed scours the unprotected part of the Internet, letting you grab anything that isn't locked away. I prefer FriendFeed's Spartan single-column format to Facebook's busier layout, which is full of ads and other come-ons. But if you've taken the plunge into Facebook, you can simply read your FriendFeed updates as part of your Facebook News Feed—everything in one place.

One tip: Don't try to read every single entry. Relax. Exhale. Then scroll down the page skimming for anything that grabs your attention. And when a friend asks over e-mail or AIM, "Did

you see my post about Steve Jobs today?," just pop over to FriendFeed and search for Jobs' name in the spew. "Yeah, I did. You really nailed it," I type back 12 seconds later.

Because it collates everything in reverse chronological order, FriendFeed is also a great way to keep up with the anti-Scobles—friends who post something once a month. When they do, you'll see it minutes later, near the top of your page.

There's another huge unplanned market for FriendFeed: parents. Setting up a single page of all your kids' Internet accounts is a snap. Even if they haven't signed up at FriendFeed, you can do it for them. Click the button to create an "imaginary friend." Then, click on a service—say, Flickr—and type in your offspring's Flickr user name. FriendFeed goes to Flickr, gets their photo stream, and inserts the pics into your page. Whenever they add a new picture, it'll appear in front of you automatically. Being childless, I used the "imaginary" feature to make photographer Brian Solis and conservative pundit Rachel Marsden my imaginary friends. I can at least pretend to keep great company.

There are two things that separate FriendFeed from the rest of the Web 2.0 pack. First, it doesn't presume I've come to the Internet to get attention rather than pay attention. The site doesn't barrage me with requests to subscribe, upload, or share my own content. Second, it's geared toward one-way relationships rather than the two-way electronic "friendships" you're stuck with on Facebook or MySpace.

I feel the same way about FriendFeed that I did about RSS four years ago, when I gushed about it as a way to [speed-read the Net](#). FriendFeed is largely built on RSS—that's how it grabs your friends' content from most sites. But it goes a step further by collating all your feeds into one stream of text, photos, and videos and laying everything out in a consistent, browser-friendly format. You don't need to manually find and add each one. You don't have to pore through each one separately to see all of this morning's updates. You don't have to learn to visually parse each site separately—FriendFeed makes them all look pretty much the same. It's the closest thing yet to an Internet Panopticon.

Moreover, if you're the playful type who likes to e-mail your friends URLs, pictures, and videos all day, you should take the extra step of setting up a feed with your name and photo on it, as Scoble did. Then, instead of cursing your every appearance in their inboxes, your inundated colleagues can use FriendFeed to stay on top of your world—but only when they feel like it.

webhead

How To Talk to a Search Engine

Three queries to help decide if Google or Cuil or Ask is right for you.

By Chris Wilson

Monday, August 4, 2008, at 7:03 PM ET

Last Monday morning, the search engine Cuil launched with great fanfare. By Monday afternoon, it had [completely tanked](#). Users who test-drove the would-be Google rival were quick to complain about [mismatched articles and thumbnail photos](#); the poor breadth of results; obvious queries that turned up blank; and even, in a moment of true existential crisis, [the site's inability to locate itself](#).

It's unfair, of course, to judge a new site on its opening-day performance. Still, it's not clear how we *should* evaluate a new search engine. In the same way that [Kurt Vonnegut once proposed](#) that the definitions for *ain't* and *like* could identify whether a dictionary was prescriptive or descriptive, it's high time for a quick and dirty litmus test for the Googles (and Cuils) of the world. Last week, I asked readers to come up with some [standard queries that we should use to measure our search engines](#). I also wanted an explanation of how those questions could be used to reveal each site's philosophy.

For an extremely thorough evaluation of how major search engines measure up against one another, Rand Fishkin at SEOmoz has oodles of [tables and charts](#). But if you prefer a quick and dirty version—a Vonnegut test for the digital age—here are the three searches that I propose. (Beneath each search term are links to the results given by five major search engines. I'm ignoring sponsored links in all cases.)

George W. Bush

[Google](#), [Yahoo](#), [Live](#), [Ask](#), [Cuil](#)

"I tried George W. Bush and got a great view at the different search engines," writes reader [Jeff Alhadeff](#). "Google responds with news, Wikipedia, the White House, his library, and then some links demonstrating his lack of popularity. ... Yahoo natural search nearly the same, but lighter on the anti-Bush links. ... Cuil responded with 'We didn't find any results for George W. Bush.' I am still laughing. (I had to run the search without the period after the W.)"

A query for our current president points to an interesting philosophical question for any search engine: Which should be higher in this search, [whitehouse.gov](#) or Wikipedia? The former is the president's official site, the latter is the pre-eminent reference site on the Web and considerably more objective. This is an important question of orthodoxy vs. popularity—and one on which not all search engines agree. Of the five search engines considered here, only Google and Yahoo put Wikipedia first. (And for the record, Cuil has resolved its [disagreement with punctuation marks](#).)

2. Viagra

[Google](#), [Yahoo](#), [Live](#), [Ask](#), [Cuil](#)

"Another important factor is checking to see if the engine is resistant to spam," writes **John King**. "Can spammers get into your index for Viagra keywords?"

How well does a search engine sniff out spam—and when, if ever, are sites that sell ED pills over the Internet legitimate? Of the five engines I tested, only Cuil gives high rankings to results that are clearly spam. Yahoo's first page of results was the most informational, with links to health sites, clinics, and the FDA. Live Search, by contrast, has five first-page links to online pharmacies and other sites hawking the drug.

It's not obvious which approach is correct, though I'm thinking that Live might be on to something. What are people who search for the word *Viagra* more likely to be after, a site that discreetly sells the drug or a [HowStuffWorks article](#) on the mechanics of the [corpora cavernosa](#)? Perhaps search engines are putting propriety in front of the results that users really want.

3. Your Own Name

More than half of everyone who wrote in made the case for a vanity search as the ultimate litmus test, arguing that these are the results with which the average obsessive self-searcher is most familiar. "I am intimately familiar with where my name appears online (everybody's guilty of googling themselves from time to time, or all the time)," writes reader **Caren Beilin**. "I figured typing in my own name would be the quickest way to test out Cuil, since I already had a comprehensive knowledge about my name on the web. As for now, I'd rather google myself than cuil myself."

While this test is obviously subjective, it does offer clear insights into the balance between two important priorities for any search engine: relevance and freshness. Are the results that come up for oneself more recent, or are they ones that are more vital to your digital legacy?

The vanity search test breaks down for those of us blessed with highly generic names, so I gave it a run on my editor, Josh Levin (putting his name in quote marks for exact matches). Josh [fares the best on Cuil](#), which, unlike all the other search engines, is not squeamish about listing lots of results from the same source; 10 of the 11 front-page results are from *Slate*. Both [Google](#) and [Ask](#) give top billing to *Slate* articles, while [Yahoo](#) and [Live Search](#) give the No. 1 spot to sites devoted to people of the same name—[josh-levin.us](#) and [joshlevin.com](#), respectively.

The differences here demonstrate that a search engine has to choose between foregrounding a close match or going with a site with lots of authority. By putting a *Slate* article as its top result, Google and Ask reveal a bias for authority over closeness. By linking to sites with the keywords in the URLs, Yahoo and Live show a preference for closeness over authority.

Search engines ultimately aspire to produce results that are both intuitive and correct. In the end, your decision about what search engine is right for you may come down to a matter of opinion: Who spews more disinformation, Wikipedia or the White House?

Copyright 2008 Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive Co. LLC