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Bloette Girl

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**ad report card**

**In a World Where You Can Smoke Weed  
in a Movie Trailer ...**

The rise of the R-rated preview.

By Josh Levin

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 3:07 PM ET

As you'd expect, the trailer for Kevin Smith's *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* explains the movie's premise: Zack (Seth Rogen) and Miri (Elizabeth Banks) become adult-movie stars when they can't pay the rent. What you might not anticipate is the trailer's extreme lewdness: Justin Long name-checking a gay porn film called *Glen and Garry Suck Ross' Meaty C---* or Rogen's declaring that he'd be happy to watch "a tape of Rosie O'Donnell getting f----- stupid." Vivid descriptions of male genitalia and Rosie O'Donnell *in flagrante delicto*—these are the glories of the red-band trailer.

Just a few years ago, the coming attractions were a safe haven for cinematic prudes. But this year, R-rated trailers—known as "red bands" on account of the [red](#). "[Restricted Audiences Only](#)" [warning](#) that precedes them—have become omnipresent.

According to the Motion Picture Association of America, nearly 30 restricted-audience trailers have been approved so far in 2008, already matching the number accepted between 2000 and 2006. (All-audiences movie trailers, always prefaced by a [green band](#), still run before the vast majority of cinematic fare.) In surveying the recent crop of restricted trailers, it's apparent that the studios are still adjusting to the red-band universe: The aesthetics of the R-rated trailer remain up for debate. Which naughty bits should be thrown on the screen as an enticement, and which should be held in reserve for paying customers?

As an advertising medium, the restricted-audience trailer serves a handful of valuable functions. Similar to slapping an "[unrated version](#)" tag line on a DVD, putting a red band in a front of a trailer promotes the idea that the content within is highly titillating. (And as with unrated DVDs, that advertising can be misleading; Paramount produced [an R-rated trailer](#) for the PG-13 *Beowulf*.) A red-band trailer, with its greater allowance for blood, can also do a better job than an all-audiences version of showing that a movie like *Mirrors* is [slice-your-neck-open gory](#) rather than just [boogeyman-around-the-corner creepy](#). It's also handy when the MPAA has deemed a movie's entire reason for being inappropriate for impressionable youths. The [red-band Pineapple Express preview](#) kicks off with the line, "Goddamn, that's good weed." The bowdlerized green-band trailer starts with ... coughing.

The MPAA places more restrictions on what you can and can't see in trailers than it does on the content of feature films. Restricted trailers may not show "excessive sex or violence," "dismemberment or excessive gore," or "genitalia/pubic hair," among other things. All-audiences trailers are governed by an even more draconian code, leading to such [salami-hiding](#) absurdities as a weed-movie advertisement that doesn't mention weed. Along with the ban on drug references, green bands can't include "ménage à trois, group sex or nudity of any kind ... scenes containing blood or open wounds ... [or] offensive language, gestures or lyrics."

Nevertheless, before the recent red-band renaissance, open-wound-and-group-sex-free green-band trailers were pretty much the only show in town. That's because the big theater chains voluntarily stopped showing red bands in 2000, after a [Federal Trade Commission report](#), "Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children," highlighted such child endangerments as an *I Know What You Did Last Summer* trailer that made "verbal references to mutilations."

Red-band trailers weren't particularly common before 2000. Just as an NC-17 rating branded a feature as outré, restricted trailers in those days were mostly reserved for scandalous material like *Showgirls* and Madonna's *Truth or Dare*. Universal's [R-rated preview for 1999's American Pie](#), for example, highlighted the film's man-on-crust sex scene, making it clear to audiences that this was a different kind of teen comedy.

The decision to ban R-rated trailers in the wake of the 2000 FTC report had more to do with public relations than with protecting kiddies. According to MPAA rules, red bands can be screened only before R or NC-17 movies; the feds were kvetching about tawdriness in all-audiences trailers that screened before PG movies. (The FTC tut-tutted, for example, the placement of green-band adverts for *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* before the PG-rated *Star Wars: Episode I*.)

Whatever the rationale for the theaters' red-band kibosh, studios mostly stopped making them once it went into effect; the R-rated trailers that did get made were seen by so few eyeballs that they might as well not have existed. Maria Pekurovskaya, senior vice president of creative advertising for Universal Pictures, says that marketing films in green has its frustrations. [The green-band trailer](#) for *Road Trip*, for example, left Pekurovskaya worried that they "weren't able to truly represent the film."

Universal is now back in the game, making red-band trailers for movies like *Wanted* and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*. That's partly because a major exhibitor—Regal Entertainment Group, which operates the most movie screens of any company in the United States—decided in March to [allow restricted trailers](#) on its screens. But Regal's decision is more a symptom than a cause of the red-band renaissance. While it's still rare to see a red-band trailer in a brick-and-mortar theater, you can fire up a couple of dozen on the Web any time you want. The MPAA mandates that online red bands must be restricted to sites that cater to an adult audience or be kept behind some kind of age-verification wall. Even so, most red-band adverts are easy to find on YouTube—at least until the Federal Trade Commission decides it's time to issue another 116-page report. (The MPAA has created an in-between trailer category, the [yellow band](#), that's designed for "age-appropriate Internet users." It hasn't really caught on yet—only six or so have been made in the last 18 months—and probably won't, considering how easy it is to find the more salacious red bands.)

Given the popularity of movie trailers on the Web, the potential audience for a red-band preview has gone from minuscule in the *Showgirls* era to virtually limitless in the time of *Pineapple Express* and *Zack and Miri*. Compared with an R-rated trailer that's screened in theaters, a Web-based red band is more likely to get talked up and to reach a target audience of (possibly under-17) fan boys who'll line up for a screening on opening weekend.

Along with doing heavy lifting as a viral marketing tool, red bands can also give potential viewers a better sense of what's in the movie. Pekurovskaya, who has done publicity for Judd Apatow in recent years, says the red band is the perfect medium to display the auteur's unique style. "On the Judd films, they are the juxtaposition of the really raunchy with the very sweet," she says, "and when you can only show half of that equation, you're

actually misrepresenting his films. ... You're doing a bit of a disservice to the audience."

The studios are still learning to deal with the relative lassitude of the restricted-trailer art form. Considering the red band's restrictions on "excessive sex or violence," trailer-makers have the most room to play with language. The [red-band trailer for the Coen Brothers' \*Burn After Reading\*](#), for example, does little more than restore a few s---- and a c----- that were cut from the [all-audiences version](#).

Despite those minimal alterations, that *Burn After Reading* trailer really works, showcasing the film's distinctive patter without using the trailer as an innuendo-enlarging funhouse mirror.

While a few extra s---- never hurt anyone, there might be some value in holding stuff back. It's a long-held complaint that movie trailers give away too much—that marketers dump all the best lines into the preview, enticing people to spend \$10.50 to sit through a movie that's already been strip-mined for its richest material. R-rated trailers exacerbate that problem by revealing swaths of the movie that were previously untrailerable.

Compare the red-band trailer for *Superbad* with the [green-band one](#). The R-rated version includes the lines "I am truly jealous you got to suck on those t--- when you were a baby," "the funny thing about my back is, is that it's located on my c---," and "I arrested a man-lady who was legally named F---." The all-audiences trailer has none of that material, relying on well-placed cleavage and quick, pre-swear-word cutting to suggest the movie's saltier material. The red-band trailer is probably more likely to get teenagers to buy a ticket for opening weekend; it's also a better indication of what *Superbad* is all about. But perhaps the movie would be more enjoyable if you'd seen less of it beforehand.

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## Advanced Search

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

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### books

## Country for Old Men

David Lodge's touch wavers when the topic is aging.

By Peter D. Kramer

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 12:04 PM ET

I have long considered David Lodge's novels a guilty pleasure. They are comedies of manners that, despite Lodge's literary

aspirations, succeed mostly as what Graham Greene called entertainments.

Lodge chooses themes that are serious enough. *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965) and *Souls and Bodies* (1980) explore the difficulties of practicing Catholicism in an age when abortion seems necessary and adultery appealing. *Changing Places* (1975) and its sequel, *Small World* (1984), capture the vanities of academic life. *Therapy* (1995) contrasts medical and religious views of what ails us; *Thinks ...* (2001) extends the discussion to embrace the cognitive sciences. And Lodge, who began his career as a professor of modern literature in Britain, embeds his novels in the canon of great books. *The British Museum* is pastiche, with chapters that mimic Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and others. Jane Austen scholarship permeates *Changing Places*. *Therapy* becomes a meditation on Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism.

But Lodge's erudition can feel gossamer-light, more fascinating than edifying. For instance, *Therapy* contains a half-page riff on how Kierkegaard's name on the page looks to the English eye, and then another half page on how it should be said: "Apparently the *o* is pronounced like *eu* in the French *deux*, the *Kierk* is pronounced as *Kirg* with a hard *g*, the *aa* sounds like *awe* in English, and the *d* is mute. ... I think I'll stick with the English pronunciation." It's hard not to love this snippet of knowledge, but we're not exactly wrestling with existential dread. Moreover, the resolution—why stretch ourselves?—has a reassuring, even pandering quality. Often, Lodge's writing is overly comfortable in this way, relying on the complicit assumption that writer and reader share the same middlebrow views. The coziness extends beyond Danish pronunciation to those big issues Lodge raises. We don't *really* take much stock in psychotherapy (or neuroscience, abortion, literary exegesis, or Modernism); we value traditional faith and common sense.

As a result, the setup of Lodge's novels is the reverse of what one might imagine. The plot complications and sexual high jinks don't seduce readers into confronting uncomfortable questions. The movement is in the opposite direction. The specialized knowledge supplies assurance that we're in the world of intellect and thus not wasting our time—so that the business of plot and character can proceed. On this level, Lodge is a master: In *Souls and Bodies*, set in the transition from the '50s to the sexual revolution, he manages to braid the fates of 10—yes, 10—main characters and in the process to expose the range of mores of young British Catholics.

In his new novel, *Deaf Sentence*, Lodge would seem to be on familiar ground. The setting is a redbrick college in the north of England. The protagonist and narrator, Desmond Bates, is a retired professor of linguistics who suffers from hearing loss. When we meet Des, he is looking down the blouse of a comely young graduate student, Alex, as he tries to make out what she is proposing. Inadvertently, Des agrees to a private meeting that,

we understand, will not amuse his dauntingly competent wife, Winifred, or "Fred." Beware of women with manly names! Alex, we learn, is American, which is to say ambitious, unstable, and provocative. Des seems about to take the sort of misstep that sets comedy in motion.

The problem is, he doesn't. Lodge never places Des in jeopardy. Instead, our hero is allowed to expatiate on concerns that, as the acknowledgments section indicates, Lodge has shared in his own life: hearing loss and the death of a father. So closely is Lodge identified with his protagonist that the book often devolves into a personal meditation on decline.

It's not that the elements of a typical Lodge novel are missing. As in *Therapy* and *Thinks ...*, Lodge showcases a mind-and-brain discipline—in this case, a branch of linguistics with psychological overtones. In his quest for guidance about mortality, Des turns to the poetry of Thomas Hardy and Philip Larkin. Switching between first person stream-of-consciousness and a diary Des keeps in the third person, Lodge creates variations in narrative voice. But these efforts are desultory, more a reference to the material of academic satire than the thing itself.

Meanwhile, the plotline that is meant to draw readers in surfaces only sporadically. Alex disappears for 50 pages at a time. When she re-emerges, her efforts to stir up some action seem desperate, as, finally, do Lodge's. Des deduces that Alex has defaced a library book, so she writes offering penitence. She invites Des to visit her apartment at a designated hour. A red bulb will light the living room. "You'll see me bent over the table, with my head on a cushion. I'll be naked from the waist down. Come up behind me and position yourself to spank my butt." Des is to hit hard and not stop if Alex cries out. And so on, in an enactment of a Viagra-induced fantasy.

Lodge the entertainer wants to hold our interest through titillation. But Lodge the realist knows that a young woman who makes this proposal might be mentally unstable. Alex is undertaking a stylistic analysis of suicide notes; the self-destructive thoughts include her own. And it seems she's conducted an affair with the university English chair whom she's now shaking down for a fellowship. How convenient—Alex is naughty, but not with Des. The plotline climaxes with a self-diagnosis and a threat, which I won't be a spoiler and spell out—though, given her dissertation topic, it's probably obvious. Both Des and the department head are relieved, although, to be fair, they assume that the siren has merely popped off to the States.

What is meant to get everyone off the hook—us as voyeurs, Des as a dirty old man—is the revelation that Alex is not so much depressed as manipulative. Alex's shortcomings allow for a tidy resolution: The chair may yet face his comeuppance, Des can put himself in Fred's good graces—and because Alex was crafty, no real harm's been done to her. But this plotline never sits right. I

don't think it's merely my training as a psychiatrist that leads me to imagine that Alex could have used some help from her elders. Altogether, it never seems comfortable that a suicidal young woman should bear the comedic burden in a novel that is so sympathetic with old men's ruminations on death and disability.

Des's thoughts are crammed with the homey specifics that, in other Lodge novels, serve to provide verisimilitude: "I got my first hearing aid from the National Health Service, a rather clumsy device in two pieces, one about the size of a tangerine segment that fitted behind the ear, containing the microphone, amplifier, battery and controls, with a little transparent plastic tube attached which conveyed the sound to the other bit, a custom-made transparent mould seated in the ear." Des goes on to describe problems with batteries, volume controls, and earpieces that act like earplugs. But here, Lodge is not amassing details so that we'll enter the fictional trance and buy the outlandish sexual intrigue. He merely wants to talk about aging—seemingly, his own.

This tendency is familiar in the novels of fine writers' later years. In *Ravelstein*, Saul Bellow included an unnecessary account of his recovery from food poisoning. In *Exit Ghost*, Philip Roth conveys his response to George Plimpton's memorial service. Fiction becomes a portmanteau for discursive memoir about mortality.

Like Bellow, like Roth, if never at their level, Lodge is a raconteur. Devoted fans won't mind spending time with him, even when the subject is hearing aids. And certain set pieces work well: a cafeteria meal shared by elderly father and son and, later, a failed family Christmas dinner. But the warm-hearted incontinence and impotence humor, the dry comments about women and plastic surgery, the children saying the darndest things ("Mummy bought it at Marks and Spensive")—it could all come from an opinion column in a small-town newspaper.

Lodge might have moved in the opposite direction—dropped the memoirish passages and stepped back from Des, letting him fall prey to an old man's delusions and desires, endangering his marriage and his integrity as an academic. It's not that Lodge is ever terribly deep—as I say, his novels are a guilty pleasure. But when he's at the top of his game, Lodge avoids lecturing readers on particular social issues like contraception, artificial intelligence, or, as here, the aging of the pre-Boomer middle class. Instead, he puts the local material to work in a greater cause. Using the structure of farce, Lodge elaborates absurd entanglements that expose our foibles as humans and then, once the price of humiliation has been paid, allow a modest opening for forgiveness and, perhaps, wisdom.

## books

### Philip Roth's Nightmare

And you thought Jewish repression was bad ...

By Jonathan Rosen

Monday, September 15, 2008, at 7:20 AM ET

Indignation has been good for Philip Roth. The cry of impotent rage and strangled rebellion that ends *Portnoy's Complaint*, though it all but kills Portnoy, has fueled one of the great careers in American letters over the past four decades. The hero of Roth's latest novel, *Indignation*, is not so lucky. He is destroyed almost before he has exited puberty. And so this is one of Roth's counter-life books, where the author seems to be confronting what might have happened had things gone just a little differently for him. Like the hero of Henry James' "The Jolly Corner," who visits the house he once lived in and encounters the wounded specter of the man he might have been had he not left Washington Square and become a novelist, Roth imagines a young man from Newark, N.J., without a writer's aspirations, wit, or imagination—and with extremely bad luck. Though the Korean War lurks in the background waiting to swallow young men, this novel, despite dust-jacket claims, is not really about history and its vicissitudes. It is another in a series of self-portraits in a convex mirror.

From the outset, *Indignation* has the quality of ghost story, which it technically is, since we are told—this is a very mild spoiler; the news comes on Page 54—that the narrator, Marcus Messner, is dead. How Marcus comes to be dead is partly the story he has to tell. His death is the result of a series of unfortunate events that unfold with a sort of nightmare logic and add to the book's ghostly quality by making tiny moments pregnant with surreal portent.

Marcus, aka Markie, is a nice Jewish boy. He is called nice by everyone, including himself. He works hard; he is a fine student; he is polite; he is a good athlete and the devoted helper of his father, who runs a kosher butcher shop in Newark. These scenes in the butcher shop are rich with the persuasive evocation of Jewish working-class life that is one of the great pleasures of many Roth novels. "Flick two chickens, Markie, will ya, for Mrs. So-and-So?" Roth captures masterfully the strain, intimacy, and familial intensity of urban Jewish postwar striving, with a special place reserved for fathers, who exhibit a particular sort of first-generation manliness, small men with thick forearms damping down emotions and private longings and maybe even terminal illness so that they can lay down the bedrock on which their beloved sons are expected to build bright white-collar American lives.

But when Markie is in the first year of a local Newark college, still living at home and laboring alongside his father in the butcher shop, his father is suddenly overtaken by paranoia and dread for his son, a sense that everything is fragile and that his

son is not to be trusted with his own future. A terror that death is lurking everywhere. Oppressed by his father's mania, Marcus transfers to Winesberg College in Ohio.

If Marcus were an aspiring writer, he might have known that *Winesburg, Ohio* was the name of a famous novel describing stunted, smothered, Midwestern lives. The leafy goyish institution, which from afar seemed like a picture postcard of an American WASP haven, turns out to be a private hell for Marcus, who, for starters, is roomed with three other Jews, one of whom—a theatrical, gay, anarchic student named Flusser—taunts Marcus mercilessly for being dutiful and hardworking. Markus flees to a different dorm and to ever-greater isolation. But when he finally dates Olivia, a beautiful undergraduate with red hair, a history of alcoholism, and an ominous scar on her wrist, everything changes.

A remarkable amount of the plot, both psychologically and narratively, revolves around an unexpected blowjob Marcus receives from Olivia. Though this is not in fact narrated as a comic episode, I kept thinking of a short movie W.C. Fields made in the 1930s called "The Fatal Glass of Beer"—a parody of temperance sermons, among other things. Fields sings a hilarious song about a dutiful boy who leaves home, is tempted by college students into having a single glass of beer, and is comically destroyed. This being a Roth novel, alcohol plays no part—it is the fatal fellatio that ruins the hapless hero. There is no going back to his earlier, dutiful grade-getting, self-abnegating focus.

And so, as in a Kafka story, all the father's irrational fears, from which Markie justifiably fled, are indeed born out. If Marcus could just go with the flow, accept Olivia for who she is, join the Jewish fraternity that keeps wooing him, attend mandatory chapel, and pay whatever lip service is required of him, he would of course be fine. But Marcus will not bow. Always it is Marcus' mounting sense of outrage, his inability to conform (though his entire childhood has been one of conforming, and so it may be his fear of his own propensity for it driving him on), and his need for confrontation that facilitate one blunder after another, as he is pursued by the moralizing dean of students and we realize he is racing inevitably toward expulsion and death.

The novel is not really on Marcus' side, taking an almost sadistic glee in destroying him. The world of the novel operates on the principles of a horror movie—illicit sexual gratification is punished by ghastly death. This is not to say that Roth is on the side of the forces of repression, but he has always been a deeply divided writer, sentimentally enamored of the Newark childhood against which he is endlessly in rebellion. Or perhaps Roth is striving for a sort of mythic structure: Marcus is like Sleeping Beauty—nothing his father does can keep him from the fatal prick, though whether he is awakened or put to sleep or both is ambiguous.

To some extent, Marcus' situation is generalized: Toward the end of the novel there is a "panty raid," in which frustrated frat boys attack the women's dorms, masturbate into the panties of the terrified young women, and, in general, rebel against all the strictures of the school. The enraged college president, though ultimately a lampoonable martinet for Roth, delivers a speech that gives voice to a recurrent Rothian theme: "Beyond your dormitories, a world is on fire and you are kindled by underwear." This might be any number of Jewish parents in any number of his novels speaking of the 6 million to chasten the carnal needs of a maturing adolescent.

*Indignation* makes plain just how much of Roth's fiction, however clothed in history or politics, is a sort of elaboration of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Repression is bad and the release of repression is bad. The narrator sounds like a medieval chronicler writing about bubonic plague as he describes the widespread effects on campus of sexual frustration, which "set strapping young men to hobbling about like cripples until the searing, stabbing, cramping pain of the widespread testicular torture known as blue balls would slowly diminish and pass away." But release is not relief, as Roth makes clear; the panty raid is hardly a noble revolt.

What intensifies the nightmare quality of Roth's recent fiction is that Jewish repression has been transferred into the hands of the Christian America into which Roth's hapless heroes flee for refuge. The Marcus family deals in kosher meat, that living symbol of the Law. ("Renunciation is all, cries the koshered and bloodless piece of steak" on the Portnoy dinner table.) But it is Christian Olivia, crushed by an oppressive WASP world, who attempts suicide by draining out her blood: "Had she succeeded," Marcus tells us, "she would have rendered herself kosher in accordance with rabbinical law."

In other words, Christian America turns out to be a kosher world writ large.

This is a private hell for Marcus Messner, but I suspect that the misrepresentation of kosher law, linked preposterously to self-slaughter, is not just a symptom of Marcus' bitter, death-induced derangement. I can't help feeling that Roth is having a Judeo-Christian nightmare, possibly intensified by the rise of evangelical Christianity in America, which turns precious Rothian fluids into human stains. Or that he has discovered that since American culture has Jewish genes, there is for him no escape from the yoke of the Law.

But I'm not sure. There are, I find, several difficulties in attempting to read Roth accurately, though aesthetically he is certainly easy enough to read, so assured is his narrative voice. Some of the confusion is the fruitful ambiguity of a master of ambivalence, a writer who has been for much of his career a sort of puritanical libertine, full of hunger and self-recrimination. But

it isn't always easy to know what is irony, what is postmodern sleight of hand, and what is literary failing.

His characters, physically evoked with such mimetic ease, are often more symbol than body—the suddenly paranoid father or beautiful, afflicted Olivia—rendering them strangely diaphanous. One might say the burden of creating the veil of appearance in order to rip it aside is wearisome, or that this is a postmodern novel, or that many characters in Roth's novels are like the imaginary friend in the film *A Beautiful Mind*: We accept the verbally incarnated character until later, when we suddenly realize—of course—it was a figment, not, in fact, believably drawn but simply useful in illuminating a single troubled consciousness.

The built-in protection against our ever wholly passing judgment is that the narrator is often a writer himself who may be deceiving us with art. Marcus isn't a writer, and yet by dint of being dead he becomes one: A condition of death, we are informed, at least for Marcus, is endlessly revisiting the elements of one's earlier life. Whether this offers a chance for a sort of verbal redemption or is, in fact, a form of damnation is perhaps the darkest of Roth's ambiguous jokes at his own—and the reader's—expense.

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## chatterbox

### Game-Changer Fatigue

What is "certain" to dominate headlines between now and Election Day?

By Timothy Noah

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 6:51 PM ET

Today I predicted in a radio interview that the financial crisis would put Barack Obama in the White House. This story is so big, I said, that it will dominate headlines for the next seven weeks. Obama [may not be getting a boost today](#), but within a few days President Bush's dismal economic record is sure to increase the Democratic presidential nominee's standing in the polls.

I still think that last part is true. But mere minutes after concluding the interview I regretted the finality with which I'd declared that economic turmoil would remain the Big Story between now and Nov. 4. What brought about this regret? The realization, after some Googling, that during the previous six weeks no fewer than *three* successive Big Stories seemed "certain" to dominate headlines through Election Day.

**Story No. 1: A resurgent Cold War?** [Russia invaded Georgia](#).

In *Newsweek*, Evan Thomas [termed it](#) "a 3 a.m. moment," an allusion to Hillary Clinton's [TV spot](#) during the primaries alleging that Obama lacked sufficient experience to handle a

foreign-policy crisis. Obama was "measured but perhaps reticent" in his response. John McCain was "confident and aggressive—but maybe too much so?" In the *Nation*, Robert Scheer [called](#) the invasion an "October surprise"—even though it was early August—and maintained that the timing was arranged by McCain's senior foreign-policy adviser, Randy Scheunemann, who'd spent the previous four years lobbying for Georgia. That logic seemed a stretch, but the Bush administration did its best to lend plausibility to Scheer's conspiracy theory by choosing that very moment to locate in Poland Patriot missiles [pointed at Russia](#). Apparently worried that this international crisis might keep bubbling through the election, Obama [chose Joe Biden](#), Beltway veteran and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to be his running mate. Biden is famous for putting his foot in his mouth. (At a recent Missouri appearance, Biden [called out](#) to a paraplegic state official, "Chuck, stand up, let the people see you.") But so what? *Biden knows a lot of foreign leaders*.

Advantage: McCain.

**Story No. 2: A resurgent culture war?** McCain [chose as his running mate](#) Sarah Palin, a [Christian-fundamentalist](#) hockey mom less than halfway through her first term as Alaska governor who [opposed teaching teenagers about contraception](#), [favored teaching teenagers about creationism](#), and displayed a striking lack of sophistication in [a series of TV interviews](#) with Charlie Gibson of ABC News. Commentators [speculated](#) that the choice might prove so disastrous that McCain would have to [replace](#) her, as Democratic nominee George McGovern [replaced Sen. Thomas Eagleton](#) in 1972 after revelations concerning Eagleton's psychiatric treatment. Instead, Palin pounded Obama and the media hard in her [convention speech](#) ("in small towns ... we tend to prefer candidates who don't talk about us one way in Scranton and another way in San Francisco"), created a sensation, and was even [credited](#) with giving McCain his post-convention bounce. The culture wars, *Politico* explained, were "making a sudden and unexpected encore in American politics, turning more ferocious virtually by the hour." Palin was, the prevailing cliché became, [a "game changer,"](#) [a "Hail Mary pass"](#) that paid off. Republican strategist Ed Rollins [pronounced](#) that she "has deflected the arc of Obama's campaign" at a moment when "we are down to a 100-yard dash." David Shribman, executive editor of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and a longtime political reporter, [wrote](#), "It's hard to draw many conclusions about the 2008 race at this distance from Election Day. But it's hard to resist the notion that the selection of Ms. Palin changed the fundamentals of the race in several critical categories ..."

Advantage: McCain

**Story No. 3: Financial calamity!** The credit crisis brought on by the bursting of the housing bubble [puts Lehman Bros. into bankruptcy](#); nearly does the same to Merrill Lynch, saved when the Bank of America [purchases it](#); and [may yet sink](#) American

International Group Inc., the world's largest insurance company. "All of a sudden, the culture war seems entirely beside the point," [writes](#) columnist E.J. Dionne, "an unaffordable luxury in a time of economic turmoil. What politicians actually believe about the economy, what fixes they propose, whether they side with the wealthy few or the hurting many—these become the stuff of elections, the reasons behind people's votes." McCain [promises](#) "tougher rules on Wall Street," but he's haunted by his Republican party affiliation, his [longtime dependence](#) on the fervently antiregulatory Phil Gramm for advice on economic issues, and his comment this past March to the *Wall Street Journal*, "I am fundamentally a deregulator." Obama [moves in for the kill](#).

Advantage: Obama.

You can see why I was tempted to predict this would clinch the election for the Democrats. But, on further reflection, we probably have time for four or five more transformative events between now and Nov. 4.

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## corrections

### Corrections

Friday, September 19, 2008, at 7:05 AM ET

In the Sept. 16 "[Music Box](#)," Jody Rosen originally misspelled the name of Nicolas Sarkozy as Nicholas Sarkozy. The article also makes a playful, sarcastic reference to Sarkozy being "13 years older and 13 inches shorter than his new wife." According to their published heights, Sarkozy is 10.16 centimeters shorter than Carla Bruni.

In the Sept. 5 "[Spectator](#)," Ron Rosenbaum called James Fenton the British poet laureate. He is not. Rosenbaum also wrote that the central object in the film *2001* is an obelisk. It is a monolith.

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

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## culturebox

### Read Me a Story, Brad Pitt

When audiobook casting goes terribly wrong.



By Nate DiMeo  
Thursday, September 18, 2008, at 11:15 AM ET

For all the column inches downloaded to Kindles this year about how electronic books will someday replace traditional ones, little has been made of the steady rise of another rival to the printed word: audiobooks. Nearly \$1 billion worth were sold last year, meaning 15 percent of all books sold these days are the kind that read themselves.

Today's recorded book has come a long way from its humble, federal origins. In 1931, Sen. Reed Smoot (he of the arguably Depression-spurring [Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act](#)) helped bring forth the Books for the Adult Blind Project—a bit of progressive do-goodery intended to give the gift of literature to the sightless. The result was audiobooks with a vaguely institutional air, employing bland, monotone narrations thought appropriate for the incapacitated. They remained this way through the 1970s, until the gas crisis brought over more fuel-efficient Japanese cars and their standard-issue cassette decks. Soon commuters in their Datsun B210s discovered the time-killing properties of audiobooks.

The industry came of age in the '80s: Sales grew, and the listening experience improved. Nowadays, narrators are recruited from the ranks of top-notch voice-over talent, big-name authors, renowned stage actors, and Hollywood stars. Audiobooks can be spectacular. But too many fine books are still being turned into bad audiobooks; worse still, their producers are making the same mistakes over and over. What follows are the three most common pitfalls—and how to avoid them.

### **The Perils of Genre Rigidity**

Genre fiction can make for great audiobooks. Detective novels come to life when read by a well-cast, hard-boiled narrator, and the smoky-voiced actresses of Great Britain are these days by the demand for erotic audiobooks. But producers get flummoxed when a title bumps up against the confines of genre. Take *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, David Simon's nonfiction account of the year he spent shadowing the Baltimore Police Department's homicide unit. Simon's remarkably well-observed account is written in matter-of-fact prose that destabilizes the reader who has previously encountered city police only through Hollywood stereotypes. The audiobook is read by actor Reed Diamond, a regular on the TV series inspired by Simon's book. Diamond's tough-guy noir narration is dissonant with the text: The dismal reality of Simon's work gets undercut by the unreality of Diamond's .

A similar fate befalls Alex Ross' *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Ross' history of Classical composition in the age of mechanical reproduction, atonality, and world wars is written with a passion and urgency that helps make the esoteric relatable. [Appropriately](#), it reads like a really long *New Yorker*

article, and in a more perfect world the audio version would sound like a really long episode of public radio's *Studio 360*—smart, witty, and intimate. Instead, audiobook veteran Grover Gardner comes off like a tweedy prat holding court at a dinner party. The stentorian, lecture-hall tone is off-key; just as *Homicide* is miscast as a potboiler, *The Rest Is Noise* is miscast as a dusty dissertation in an unvisited corner of a university library. With Gardner reading, Ross' vibrant book about Life and Art and Passion becomes a book about Classical Music.

### **One Reader + Multiple Voices = Multiple Problems**

The audiobook experience descends from that of the old radio-plays, but full-cast dramatizations are rare (though, typically, rad; Max Brooks' smarter-than-it-has-any-right-to-be zombie novel, *World War Z*, and Phillip Pulman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy are great listens in large part due to their full casts). Usually, the listener gets one reader who uses tone and inflection to distinguish between the narrator and the book's characters. The best readers aren't necessarily great at "voices"; they're able to differentiate between characters without resorting to showy parlor tricks. British actor Jim Dale has achieved a deserved rock-star status (of the peculiar, audiobooky sort) for his work on the *Harry Potter* series, modulating between Lavender Brown, Parvati Patil, and Gilderoy Lockheart with a nimbleness that should be the model for all school librarians and bedtime-story readers.

But too often, an overreaching reader ruins a book. Nothing is less intimidating than a noir tough guy voiced by a hammy female narrator, and nothing is less sexy than a literary seductress voiced by a dude in falsetto. Too often a narrator will opt for bad audio drag when "she said" would suffice.

While gender bending can grate, racial drag can offend. Consider Columbia sociologist (and occasional *Slate* contributor) Sudhir Venkatesh's best-seller, *Gang Leader for a Day*. The book recounts the author's decade-plus immersion in a decaying Chicago housing project. His observations about the social and economic lives of crack dealers, prostitutes, project-squatters, and poor strivers reveal a side of American life few readers—including academics and policymakers—have ever experienced. The book humanizes characters that most of America has encountered only through crime statistics. The audiobook does something quite the opposite.

The reader, actor Reg Rogers, is a white guy. Every character but the Indian-American narrator is black. This is always tricky audiobook territory, but here, not only has Rogers unwisely chosen to bring a little "sound of the street" to his characters, he's opted to bring the sound of the street from movies of the 1960s. JT, a twentysomething gang lieutenant, Sydney Poitier circa [In the Heat of the Night](#). Ex-gang members in their 50s veer toward Fred Sanford at best, Uncle Remus at worst.

After forcing us to suffer through seven hours of Rogers, the producers of the *Gang Leader* audiobook make an interesting choice: The book's final hour is read by the author. In that hour, the lives that Venkatesh worked so hard to bring to the page become real lives. He's no professional voice actor—he doesn't always punch the right words for emphasis, the art of the dramatic pause eludes him—but he tells a straightforward story. No outrageous accents. No audio blackface. And the listener, and his subjects, are better off for it.

### Read Me a Story, Brad Pitt

Actors can often find in the audiobook realm a stardom that has eluded them on stage and screen. Roles such as "Deputy" in the direct-to-video *The Killing Grounds* have not made Scott Brick a household name, but the man has narrated more than 200 books—he has a devoted following and is one of the most in-demand readers in the business. (His tone is cultured with a dash of swagger—he's brought an enjoyable air of righteous indignation to books like Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven*.)

Lately, with the audiobook business booming, actual Hollywood stars are frequently stepping behind the mic. Kevin Spacey has read Bob Woodward. Matt Damon reads *A People's History of the United States*. While a big-name Hollywood actor may help sell a title, using a big star can backfire on the listener. I can't read Bob Dylan's autobiography without thinking, "That's Sean Penn reading Bob Dylan's autobiography."

You can't help but wonder if the demands of celebrity prevent the Hollywood star from taking the time with the source material that an audiobook star would. Whether it's a clumsy cadence or a preponderance of retakes (which jump out at you when listening on headphones), there seems to be an inverse proportionality between the size of the star and the quality of the experience. Here, Brad Pitt while reading Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*.

But we can't really blame Brad Pitt or, for that matter, any of the mis- or overmatched narrators who keep good books from becoming good audiobooks. The unsatisfied listener should direct her complaints to the producers making the casting and directing decisions, who keep making the same mistakes. As Brad might put it, *no más*.

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## culturebox

### Finite Jest

Editors and writers remember David Foster Wallace.

By Sven Birkerts, Charis Conn, Jordan Ellenberg, Colin Harrison, Gerald Howard, Joyce Carol Oates, Martin Riker, and

Sean Wilsey

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 1:13 PM ET

*David Foster Wallace hanged himself at his home in California on Friday, Sept. 12, 2008, at the age of 46. A precocious and preternaturally talented writer, Wallace was regarded by many critics, novelists, and readers as the foremost novelist of his generation. He is perhaps best known for Infinite Jest, a 1,000-plus-page epic published to wide acclaim in 1996. In the following roundup, editors and authors remember Wallace and the qualities that made his work indelible.*

### Gerald Howard, editor, Random House

One fine—really, really fine—day in this editor's life in 1986 the manuscript of David Foster Wallace's *The Broom of the System* arrived in my inbox at Viking Penguin. This is why I get up in the morning and go to work. It was the dammedest thing. With Carver Style still reigning supreme in the MFA programs and the Brat Packers still riding high, some nervy kid had gone and brilliantly recapitulated the imperial novel that had held sway in the '60s and '70s—the sort of book I adored as a younger reader. Here is what I wrote on the dust jacket when I got to publish it: "The inventiveness, reach, and fine disdain for 'reality' of this novel will remind many readers of the works of John Irving, Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, and especially the Thomas Pynchon of *The Crying of Lot 49*. *The Broom of the System* is one of the most ingenious, original and exciting novels to appear in recent memory." That's a heavy burden to pile onto any novel, let alone the work of an unknown (and at that time you really could be unknown) 24-year-old who had published precisely nothing until then, but I'm glad I wrote that because it is clear now that I got it right.

I would go on to publish one other book by David, the wonderful short-story collection *Girl With Curious Hair*. I have read every word he has written, including the entirety of *Infinite Jest* (yeah, the footnotes, too), which I consider the greatest American novel since *Gravity's Rainbow* and its worthy successor in its diagnosis of our American disease. I have vivid memories of David from our too short years as author and editor—all sorts of triumphs and crises. His letters to me, usually explaining, why, yes, Mr. Howard, I understand exactly why you are suggesting that I try to do this to my book, and I am sure you are completely right, Mr. Howard, but you see I ... (there then followed three pages of insanely closely argued reasons why he could not do it, worthy of the virtuoso practitioner of analytical philosophy that he was) were all typed (not word-processed) single-space without a typo or correction. They went on, big surprise, for pages and pages and were the product of a mind firing on more neural cylinders than any I encountered before or since. I have wondered endlessly what it might be like in there, inside David's mind. Clearly there was terror as well as exaltation. Lost in the fun house? I know this: We have lost the most original and profound

(and, not to forget, the funniest) American writer born after 1950.

**Martin Riker, associate director, Dalkey Archive Press**

David Foster Wallace was a pen name. It was also the author's actual name, but he never went by it. Using *Foster* was his agent's idea, he said, because Da-vid Wal-lace was syllabically unmemorable. This has proven to be sound marketing advice, although I don't think David or Dave Wallace was ever very comfortable with it. He was deeply skeptical of all contemporary mythologies, particularly the ones about himself.

I knew Dave for 10 years, the first two as his student. (He directed my master's thesis.) Much has been written already about his teaching—I'll add only that his real strength was in his example. He was an exceptional listener, probably the best listener I've known. The kind of person who could walk into a room full of heart surgeons and walk out 20 minutes later able to perform bypass surgery or, at least, to describe the procedure convincingly. He listened to his students, and he listened to our culture, and he gave discerning responses to both.

The last time I saw him in person was just before he left central Illinois for Pomona, Calif. I was dog-sitting in the countryside for John O'Brien (Dalkey Archive's publisher), and Dave brought his own two dogs out to play with John's, and we sat on a porch swing and talked about writing and life. He said there are plenty of mediocre writers who are able to make careers for themselves, and that's fine, but what's tragic are the few really promising writers who give up before they ever publish anything. I remember one thing I said to him, which was that his intelligence and generosity were not the only things he had to offer students, and that personally I had gained a great deal simply from knowing him as a human being. I said that coming to think of him as Dave Wallace rather than David Foster Wallace was actually very important for me. It realigned my sense of what matters.

**Joyce Carol Oates, author**

Like so many other readers, I was much engaged by David Foster Wallace's enormous energy, ebullience, and brilliance. His vision was both playful and apocalyptic and beautifully matched by his inimitable style. There is a heartbreaking short story of his, of only four pages, titled "Incarnations of Burned Children"—which I was fortunate enough to include in the *Ecco Anthology of Contemporary American Short Fiction*. Known as a "maximalist"—for his massive novel *Infinite Jest*—David Foster Wallace could be a brilliant minimalist as well. Two years ago we had hoped to get David Foster Wallace to give a reading at Princeton; he had been scheduled to visit, then cancelled and never rescheduled. It's very sad to think that he will never come now, and those of us who had not met him now never will meet him.

**Sean Wilsey, author**

I met David Foster Wallace during a writing residency in the town of Marfa, Texas, where we lived across the street from each other in houses on loan from the Lannan Foundation. The first time I saw him, he was running back and forth, just outside my window, where a wall cut off the lower 3 feet of my view, shouting encouragement to something hidden from sight. I stood up and saw that he was walking a pair of exuberant golden retriever puppies. So I went outside to say hello. He told me the dogs belonged to a local rancher. He was dog-sitting. Or, it became clear as I watched him, dog-training. After talking about Marfa for a bit and agreeing that the monotony of West Texas food—Dairy Queen, beef, refried beans—was getting us down, I said I was planning to blow off a morning's writing to drive 50 miles through the desert and buy fish at a supermarket called Furr's.

He looked intrigued but advised, "You'd better give that the old sniff test."

A week or so later we went down to Mexico, looking for a fish restaurant, and he spent the whole car ride teaching my friend's son, a 9-year-old Icelandic boy, American show tunes: "There is nothing like a dame: Nothing ... in the ... world!" They were both incandescent with joy by the time we arrived in the blasted-out town of Ojinaga—where our quest for fresh fish met with resounding failure. Then, after I mistakenly drove through a puddle of raw sewage and our vehicle commenced failing the sniff test, we all sang show tunes, with the windows down, led by Wallace—"Tssssssteam heat!" When we got to the border, an agent took one sniff, said "Woah!" and waved us through.

After his residency was over, he gave me the keys to his place, saying, "If you ever need some space, you should use my house. Nobody'll bother you. I don't think they've got anyone else coming." I sat in his living room, where he'd turned all the foundation's copies of his books spine-to-the-wall, and, attempting to relive my reform-school days, shouted and cried and took notes for a memoir I was working on. This did not go unnoticed in a small town. Locals, I discovered later, thought that my cries were coming from David Foster Wallace and gossiped about his passionate outbursts. But in my brief encounters with the real David Foster Wallace, I knew only a writer who was humble, kind, gentle, and playful in everything he did.

**Sven Birkerts, essayist**

I first encountered David Foster Wallace's work in 1989. I had a monthly column in what turned out to be a very short-lived magazine called *Wigwag*. My mandate was to find the unlikely, to ponder things that were off the main spectrum, and his book of stories *Girl With Curious Hair*, which had snagged me with its title, was just the business I needed. The prose was beautifully abrasive and seemed to be filtering something from the moment that no one else was filtering. It was a sardonic cloth

with a lyric lining. I offered my praises in the column. A few weeks after the piece came out, I received a letter—thankful, sweet, even ingenuous—from the author. He said he was living in Cambridge, Mass., and wondered if we might not have coffee.

We met at the Café Pamplona. David would have been in his late 20s then, and it is with shocked disbelief that I peel away the accreted overlays, so many of them, to get my image of a tall, thin, and, yes, young-seeming man standing on the sidewalk. Smoking a cigarette then and never not smoking one from the time we sat down until we parted. My kingdom for a better memory! We talked about John Barth and Harvard (he was doing work in philosophy), and he told me about his father, who had, if I have this right, studied with Wittgenstein's disciple Norman Malcolm in England. And David told me with very great seriousness how his father had read philosophy to him when he was putting him to bed. He was nervous and polite to a fault.

Our paths crossed only a few times after that. In the early mid-'90s (pre-*Infinite Jest* and pre-*The Corrections*), he and his great friend Jonathan Franzen agreed to join me on a panel assessing the outlook for fiction that I hosted at the Arlington Center for the Arts (Arlington, Mass.), and we had maybe 30 people in attendance. And then—maybe five years ago—we were paired at a Boston radio station, talking over ... the outlook for fiction. By then he had doubled into his shaggy eminence, and I spent our studio time doing double takes. I remember that one of the callers, the last, was Cynthia Ozick and that when we were off the air, he asked our host, Chris Lydon, if he could finish his conversation with her. I had to hurry off and tapped him on the shoulder to say goodbye. He looked over. He was saying—I remember this—nervous and beautifully polite, "Thank you, Miss Ozick." His tone was perfectly deferential. I think he said "Miss."

#### **Colin Harrison, author and editor, Scribner**

You didn't really edit David. Instead you played tennis with him using language as the ball. At *Harper's*, we did three lengthy pieces together—on attending the Illinois State Fair, on sailing on a luxury cruise, and on the usage of the English language—and with each one I increasingly came to see how competitive David was. Not with me, his magazine editor, nor particularly with other writers, but with the great maw of horridness, to choose a word he might use. He was competing against the culture itself, and his pieces arrived on my desk way too long, letter-perfect, and appended with a one-line note that said something like "Here, maybe you'll like this."

Well, of course at *Harper's* we did like his pieces—knew immediately that they were fabulous, the work of a genius. But then we had to get them into the magazine. Our publisher, Rick MacArthur, was generous with space for David's pieces. But still they needed to be cut, sometimes by many thousands of words, and this was where the tennis came in. The trick was to make a

perfect thing smaller but still perfect and still itself. In David's case, this meant confronting the corresponding substructure of footnotes, which interlaced not only with the main text but with each other. And simply getting the footnotes into the bottom of the same narrow magazine column was a challenge. It made for some very long conversations, going over every comma, period, and Wallace-esque construction. David liked the push and push-back of this, the here's-what-I-think, what-do-you-think rallies that sometimes went on for many minutes. It was exhausting and exhilarating, with points won, points lost. He liked defending his work, explaining the motivations behind his choices, but like a great athlete, like the great writer he was, he also enjoyed the opportunity for the spontaneous shot, the sudden chance to make something even better. And he did—literature.

#### **Charis Conn, author and editor**

Although I edited David's fiction in *Harper's* for years, I met him the way that many have, through good old-fashioned letter writing. The only fan letter I have ever sent was inspired by his first story collection, which walloped me not only with its brilliance but on a more profound personal chord than I had ever experienced as a reader. My instinct was right, and we became good friends. He was always generous with praise of my own efforts, as a writer as well as an editor, and when I took a leave to work on a novel, he insisted I spend it in his home, dubbing it Yaddo West, a reference to the artists' colony we both adored. The landscape of autumnal, suburban Normal, Ill., was indeed a perfect place to work—flat, featureless, chilly—but especially because of the sound of DFW clicking away in the next room (a room painted black, which I found surprisingly soothing and inspiring). Between teaching, errands, endless favors for friends, and caring for his enormous dogs, he made a point of devoting increments of as little as 15 minutes to writing if that was all that was available. His social world then was not what any of his readers might imagine, I suspect. Our entertainments during those months included a hayride, some fairly goofy movies on video (he had no TV), and several evenings lounging on the living room carpet of a local middle-aged couple, overeating and watching goofy crap on *their* TV.

Although his own brilliance, along with the accolades it brought, could easily have cut him off from the vast majority of people (who, after all, still don't recognize his name), David truly connected with everyone he encountered. Unlike many literary stars, he had a foot in both worlds, and he often found his new fame utterly uncomfortable and embarrassing. I remember hiding out with him in a tiny room high atop a screaming nightclub at what must have been his *Infinite Jest* book party. We had fled there after a barrage of flashbulbs had unnerved him, agreeing that the party was best enjoyed from this vantage point, viewed from behind a tiny window, safely hidden. David was as amazed as a yokel by New York City, (where, by the way, his very first reading boasted a crowd of four, including me and Gerry Howard). He was a person who drew—unironically—little happy faces beside his signature on letters and was prone to uttering the syllable "awwwwww," also unironically, at anything

he found adorable. He once made this sound over a drawing I did of his dog Jeeves, and it seemed to me at the time perfectly eloquent. Because when someone like David chooses this simple sound, among all his vast array of things to say, and ways to say them, it is reborn as a true expression of humanity, as are all the words and sounds and symbols he chose and arranged with such loving, raging care.

### Jordan Ellenberg, author and professor

David Foster Wallace was well-known as an appropriator of prose registers that are not conventionally literary: the language of the bureaucrat, of the academic theorist, of the focus group, of the Hollywood agent. Less spoken of is the debt his writing owed to the language of mathematics—presumably because that language has no native speakers.

Some of the mathiness of Wallace's prose was superficial—he liked to present careful definitions of terms to be used, and he decorated his arguments with side remarks and corollaries, labeled as such. He liked numbered lists and specialized acronyms (cf., w/r/t., u.s.w.) For mathematicians, this business imparts a kind of homey charm.

But there's a deeper likeness, too. "We live today," he told the *Believer* in 2003, "in a world where most of the really important developments in everything from math and physics and astronomy to public policy and psychology and classical music are so extremely abstract and technically complex and context-dependent that it's next to impossible for the ordinary citizen to feel that they (the developments) have much relevance to her actual life." Technical complexity, a turnoff to most, was Wallace's bread and meat. He was never interested in the kind of truths that you could sum up in 10 words—which is why it's so hard to quote Wallace 10 words at a time. You usually get something as inert as a single line of a long proof.

Wallace's writing was driven by his struggle with contradictions. He was in love with the technical and analytic; but he saw that the simple dicta of religion and A.A. offered better weapons against drugs, despair, and killing solipsism. He knew it was supposed to be the writer's job to get inside other people's heads; but his chief subject was the predicament of being stuck fast inside one's own. Determined to record and neutralize the mediation of his own preoccupations and prejudices, he knew this determination was itself among those preoccupations, and subject to those prejudices. This is Phil 101 stuff, to be sure; but as any math student knows, the old problems you meet freshman year are some of the deepest you'll ever see. Wallace wrestled with the paradoxes just the way mathematicians do. You believe two things that seem in opposition. And so you go to work—step by step, clearing the brush, cataloging what you find there, separating what you know from what you believe, your intuition sounding at all times the nauseous alarm that somewhere you've made a mistake. And until you find the mistake, there's always a bit of hope—that your intuition is wrong, that your work isn't

wasted, that what seems like a paradox really isn't one, that maybe the incompatible beliefs you hold can be satisfied all at once.

Usually it doesn't work out that way.

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## day to day Greed Isn't Good

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 10:06 AM ET

**Wednesday, Sept. 17, 2008**

### *The Big Money: Did Greed Cause Markets To Tumble?*

After the huge drop in the U.S. market Monday, markets in Europe and Asia tumbled as well. First, Madeleine Brand speaks with Henry Blodget, a former analyst for Merrill Lynch, about what he sees as a culture of greed on Wall Street. Then, Alex Cohen talks with James Ledbetter about why he thinks the government should have bailed out Lehman Bros. And finally, Madeleine Brand speaks with Motley Fool senior analyst Bill Barker about what the turmoil on Wall Street means for those of us who are not investment bankers or stock brokers. [Listen](#) to the segment.

### **Politics: Why the Economy Might Benefit McCain**

When asked which party can best handle the economy, voters give Democrats a 20-point advantage over Republicans. Consequently, the timing of the Wall Street collapse would seem to boost Democratic candidate Barack Obama's popularity. Not so, according to John Dickerson. [Listen](#) to the segment.

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## dear prudence Brutal Beginning, Happy Ending

How do I tell my daughter she's the result of a sexual assault?  
Thursday, September 18, 2008, at 6:54 AM ET

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

### **Dear Prudence,**

I was raped by an unknown person and as a result have a lovely daughter who is now 10. My family and close friends know all about her origins. She has always asked about her father, but when she was younger I could deflect the topic. Now I feel that she needs to know something, but I don't know what to say. I've

asked my family: My mom is at a loss, and my dad and siblings think I should just tell her that her father died.

—What Do I Do?

Dear What,  
How could you not be at a loss? What you have to convey is so painful and fraught with consequences for how your daughter views herself, her relationship to you, her understanding of sex, and so much more. For help, I contacted Dr. Alan E. Kazdin, Yale child psychologist and *Slate* contributor. First, you have to tell the truth. Lying may seem like the kindest thing to do, but too many people know; eventually your daughter will find out, and you will have done terrible harm to her trust in you. Kazdin points out that when you have the conversation with your daughter, keep in mind that what you say will be matched in importance by how you say it. You need to express in your manner and tone that even though this subject is difficult, you are comfortable and at peace. Also remember that opening this subject does not mean opening a floodgate. You don't have to tell everything in the first conversation. Your daughter will derive comfort from knowing that this topic is allowed and that she will be able to bring it up with you over many years.

Pick a time when you are both relaxed to tell her you want to discuss the questions she's had about her father. Because this involves things she's still too young to understand, Kazdin says you might be able to get her agreement to delay the actual talk for now. You can tell her that she's asked important questions that deserve an answer and promise her she will get one. But explain that the answer is complicated and will be hard to understand. Ask if she'd be willing to wait until she's a little older before you give her the details. She might be satisfied enough to know that you *will* tell her—that the subject isn't taboo—and agree to wait. If she says she wants to know now, you have to give her just enough information to satisfy her. You can say something like, "You remember how we talked about how babies get made? The best way for that to happen is between two people who love each other. But it's not always that way. The way it happened for Mommy was different. I know this is going to sound strange, but I didn't know the man who is your dad. But what matters to me is that I got the most wonderful thing in the world: you."

If she asks for more details, then you can say, "We are going to talk about this many different times, and it's good we can have this conversation. But we'll save what you're asking for when you're a little older and you can understand better." Rehearse all this so when you bring it up, you can control the tempo and tenor. And keeping in mind the joy your daughter brings you will help you express to her that however this story began, it has a happy ending.

—Prudie

### *Dear Prudence Video: Flirtatious Boyfriend*

**Dear Prudence,**

I am a college student doing an internship at a nonprofit organization. Last week, my boss, who has always been very professional, asked me if there was a way to reach me outside of work. I gave her my cell phone number, and she called me last weekend. She asked me to meet her away from work to talk about a "strictly nonwork-related" business opportunity. The meeting was a ploy for a pyramid scheme involving a health product. After we listened to a speaker talk about this "amazing opportunity" for two hours, my boss said that she wanted me to be part of her business network. I didn't want to be rude, so I told her that I would think about it and talk to my parents, and she scheduled another meeting for us over coffee. Was it right for my boss to ask me, an employee 25 years her junior, to be part of a creepy business venture, even if she did so outside of work? My parents say that I shouldn't even have coffee with her, but I don't want to appear rude. I have no intention of getting involved, but I don't know how to say no.

—Perplexed Among the Pyramids

Dear Perplexed,

Wouldn't you just love to forward her some financial opportunities you've received by e-mail from Nigeria and tell her if she springs for these ventures, you'll go for hers? Of course she's exploiting your youth and position for her potential personal gain—that's why she's trying to pretend she's avoiding this conflict by pressuring you outside of the office. Your parents are right: Don't go for that coffee with her. Instead, see her at work and politely and firmly say you've thought about her offer and talked about it with your parents. Tell her it's just not for you, and you can't get further involved. If your boss is not experiencing sun stroke from too much time among the pyramids, she'll be smart enough to drop it. If you have a professor who supervises your internship, you could tell him or her what happened and how you handled it. And definitely do so if your boss keeps bringing it up or starts acting hostile.

—Prudie

**Dear Prudence,**

My mom just remarried last year, and I have a new stepbrother the same age as me—we are both 21. I never really knew him before they got married because he does not live around here. I've seen him a total of five times, and I have never really considered him my stepbrother. The problem is that we have really come to like each other and would like to be in a relationship. We do not think that there is much wrong, since we are not really related, but we know others will think this is wrong. We haven't told anyone yet. If we had met two years ago, this wouldn't have been a problem, but what do we do now?

—Step by Step

Dear Step,

You two don't know yet if you want to be in a relationship; you just know that you want to see if you might possibly want to be in a relationship. You're right, if you'd met two years ago, your attraction would have preceded your parents' trip down the aisle. But now that you are stepsiblings, it doesn't mean that you shouldn't have the chance to date—it does complicate things, though. You're both adults, so even if your families have qualms, they can't stop you. And since you're adults, you don't have to ask their permission to act on your interest. But what you should do is go very slow. Think of this as a Victorian-style courtship. I can't give you a schedule, but put off holding hands, or that first kiss, for many dates. And don't even think of getting into bed until you both agree you're serious and exclusive. If you end up being soul mates, how lucky that your parents have brought you together. If you realize you don't want a romance but just enjoy each other's friendship, terrific. What you want to avoid is ending up with a failed romance and bad feelings, which will get stirred up for decades of Thanksgivings and Christmases to come.

—Prudie

**Dear Prudence,**

My wife recently left her two-week-old MacBook computer at my sister's house. While I offered to drive the 90 miles to pick it up, my wife and sister agreed to have it mailed via UPS. I warned them both to pack it very, very carefully. My sister stated that through her workplace, it would be insured for \$3,000—more than the value. It arrived the next day with a broken screen. The repair cost is \$700-plus. When I saw the inadequate box it was shipped in, I was absolutely appalled. Because it wasn't packaged properly, UPS won't honor the claim. Is my sister obligated to pay for the damages? Or is it my wife's fault for allowing it to be shipped? Should we just forget the whole situation and chalk it up to bad judgment? It's causing a huge rift in my family.

—Tech Spouse

Dear Tech,

I don't see how it's your wife's fault. By that logic, the only safe way to get a MacBook to anyone's house is for Steve Jobs to pick it up from the factory and personally deliver it to each customer. If the computer was broken because of improper packaging and your sister promised to take care of the packaging, she should at least offer to pay part of the damages. I assume the rift is over the fact that she's said what happened to the computer after it left her hands is not her responsibility. So, you could seethe for years over everyone's idiocy and endlessly reiterate that if only these women had let you make the drive, none of this would have ... blah, blah, blah. Or you could pay for the screen to be fixed, enjoy this delightful piece of technology, and let it go.

—Prudie

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**dispatches**

## **Barack's Angels**

Lilly Ledbetter, Jill Biden, and Michelle Obama on the trail in Virginia.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 9:58 PM ET

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va.—They're an unlikely trio: the earnest, affectless professional in the bland dark pantsuit; the stunning blonde in the lipstick-red shift dress; and the elegant, cerebral brunette in the slim pants and cardigan. But in the manner of [Kate Jackson](#), [Farrah Fawcett](#) and [Jaclyn Smith](#), there's something about Lilly Ledbetter, Jill Biden, and Michelle Obama at a University of Virginia rally on Wednesday that clicks. They aren't crime-fighting women, they're fighting a crime against women: the Republican vice presidential nominee. And they must take her down without speaking her name.

The crowd here comes primed for some flying sideways karate kicks. Kristin Solomon, 29, a Charlottesville architect, is here because "I'm just tired of being angry all the time. I'm tired of all the focus being on a woman I don't admire. I needed to be surrounded by a community of smart, intelligent women I can look up to." For her, there's [Lilly Ledbetter](#), the [Clarence Earl Gideon of equal pay](#).

Ledbetter tells slowly, and in a heavy Alabama accent, her story about what happens "when the American commitment to equality is betrayed." She tells about decades of work at a Goodyear Tire plant in Alabama and how she discovered, by way of an anonymous note, that she was being paid far less than her male colleagues for the same work. She sued, and a federal jury in Alabama agreed she'd been wronged. (At this point the crowd roars. The woman behind me sighs, "They don't know how this is going to end, do they?") Ledbetter describes how the Supreme Court reversed her jury award, punishing her for the fact that her company discriminated in secret.

Then she explains that when Congress tried to pass legislation reflecting the ways discrimination happens in the real world, "Senator Obama was one of the strongest supporters of that bill." Sen. McCain, on the other hand, "didn't even show up to vote on it, but he said he would have voted against it."

Hilary Rice is a graduate student at the school of education. She says she hopes the Obama campaign will deliver the kind of change that will ensure a better life for the kids she will teach and equal pay for her. The campaign sends her Jill Biden—introduced as *Dr. Biden*—whose brief message is that American women, and consequently their families, are in trouble. Biden

introduces herself as a teacher. She tells the crowd that American women earn 77 cents for every \$1 earned by men; African-Americans earn 62 cents to the dollar and Latinas 53. She reminds the crowd that equal pay is "not just a women's issue, it's a family issue."

Paul Hesse, a UVa senior from Richmond, is here looking to make some noise. He's a senior majoring in foreign affairs. When I catch up with him, he's stirring up a group of students in the nosebleed section, because they haven't been handed any "Change We Need" signs to wave around. "Signs! Up here! We want signs!" he's hollering, as he explains to his friends that this is the way to do these things: You make some noise and get your way. To inspire him, there's Michelle Obama.

The first thing you notice—especially in the sleeveless top after she shucks the cardigan—are the guns. Not the sort used for shooting God's creatures out of helicopters. Just these incredibly ripped, muscular arms that suggest Michelle Obama could toss a guy through a plate-glass window if she wanted to. Which she doesn't because that was never Jaclyn Smith's job. Those stunts always went to Farrah.

After she's introduced, Obama hitches up her pants, strides to the stage and grins at the crowd. "Fired up?" she hollers. "Ready to go?" She lavishes praise upon her co-angels, then tells the audience: "What we decide Nov. 4 is going to change the world." She urges the crowd to register voters and talk to their friends and their parents and their grandparents. She says, "What I want to hand over to my little girls is vastly different from the world we have." And then exhorts them again to "change the world."

Michelle Obama is [not a hater](#). There are no hateful signs at this rally to demonize or berate. No bumper stickers here [belittle other women](#). It's very, very ladylike and really extremely nice. The women gathered here are not happy about Sarah Palin, and one or two admit they'd have enjoyed watching Michelle dole out a teensy little karate chop to the beehive. But it doesn't happen. The Obama campaign has had two weeks to absorb the lessons of Sarah Palin, and it appears to have concluded that there is nothing to be absorbed, nothing that warrants mention. They are evidently certain that after that first peachy Harlequin Romance glow wears off the Alaska governor, women will rally around women's issues, not female candidates.

Maybe. The message today is spot-on for women: McCain and Palin are bad for workers, bad for families, bad for the economy, bad for health care, and bad for women. It's delivered with glamour and poise and a lot of gorgeous, shiny hair. Maybe it's just me, but after all that Republican nattering on about shattering the glass ceiling, I was hoping for just a little broken glass here myself tonight. Nothing much. One smallish plate-glass window would do. The magic of *Charlie's Angels* lay in the fact that while they were angels on the outside, they were

some crazy kung fu mammas on the inside. Maybe we needed to see just a little less angel tonight. And just a little more kung fu.

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## drink

### The Last Great California Chardonnays

Wines so lean and elegant they could be Burgundies.

By Mike Steinberger

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 4:01 PM ET

In 1976, a pair of upstart American wines, the 1973 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars cabernet sauvignon and the 1973 Chateau Montelena chardonnay, beat out some of the biggest names from Bordeaux and Burgundy in a tasting that came to be known as the Judgment of Paris. This glass-shattering moment in wine history is the subject of a new movie called *Bottle Shock*, which puts the Montelena chardonnay at the center of the story. The film opened to mixed reviews; I haven't seen it, so I am in no position to moonlight as Gene Shalit. But I am delighted the Montelena is getting a Hollywood close-up, not only because of what the wine achieved in Paris 32 years ago, but because of the style of California chardonnay that it represents. Montelena has always produced a lithe, elegant, very Burgundian chardonnay, which is why it managed to win over (read: fool) the group of French wine eminences who participated in the 1976 showdown. This type of chardonnay fell out of fashion beginning in the 1980s, supplanted by richer, heavier, oakier renditions. But Montelena and a handful of other venerable California wineries defied the trend and have continued making chardonnays that emphasize finesse over power. To my mind, these remain the best American chardonnays around and consistently demonstrate the heights California winemaking can achieve.

Chardonnay, of course, is virtually synonymous with California winemaking. With nearly 100,000 acres planted, it is the state's most widely cultivated wine grape and currently accounts for one of every four bottles of California wine consumed in the United States. But it wasn't always thus. A half-century ago, chardonnay was hardly found in California. There was little consumer demand for it, and vintners generally shunned it in favor of more prolific varieties that could better withstand the warm climate. Several estates that were established in the 1940s and '50s—Mayacamas, Stony Hill, Mount Eden, Hanzell, Ridge—saw potential in chardonnay and set out to craft premium wines from it. They are considered visionaries now; back then, however, they were seen as cloud chasers, and where they led, few others were inclined to follow. As recently as 1970, there were just more than 3,000 acres of chardonnay in California.

It was during the 1970s that consumer interest in chardonnay began to blossom and the California wine industry started devoting more space to it. In 1972, Jim Barrett, an oenophilic



attorney from Southern California, bought Chateau Montelena, which hadn't produced wine commercially since Prohibition, with the intention of turning out cabernets to rival the best of Bordeaux. Barrett and his winemaker, Mike Grgich, decided to make chardonnay simply as a way of generating some income while they waited for their newly planted cabernet vines to bear sufficient fruit. Their first chardonnay vintage was 1972, which made the victory in Paris of the 1973 Montelena Chardonnay all the more improbable and impressive. But interviewed after the Paris tasting by *Time's* George Taber, who covered the event (and three years ago published a very engaging book about it, *Judgment of Paris*), Barrett said that the success of a California chardonnay came as no surprise to him: "We've known for a long time that we could put our white Burgundies against anybody's in the world and not take a backseat."

California didn't actually make white Burgundies, of course—only Burgundy makes white Burgundies (which are composed of chardonnay). But Barrett's comment spoke to a larger truth: For most of those early chardonnay producers, the goal was to craft wines in the Burgundian mold. One means to that end was to use French oak barrels to age the wines. James Zellerbach, Hanzell's original owner, was the pioneering figure on this front; he imported small barrels of Limousin oak, purchased from one of the top coopers in Burgundy, for his chardonnays. Employed judiciously, oak aging imparts greater complexity to wines, and although Zellerbach's neighbors were apparently dubious, the results he achieved were so impressive that the practice quickly caught on. The 1973 Montelena spent eight months maturing in French barrels before being bottled.

Burgundy remained the inspiration even after the Judgment of Paris, and as chardonnay's toehold in California turned into a foothold, many newer producers, determined to faithfully adhere to the Burgundian playbook, began putting their wines through malolactic fermentation. Malolactic fermentation is a process that converts tart malic acid (at this point, it is customary to say, "Think green apple," so I'll say it: Think green apple) into softer, more palate-friendly lactic acid. It is a necessary step in Burgundy, where the northerly climate can leave the grapes with too much acidic bite. California, though, has the opposite problem: Because the weather is so warm, the grapes are often short on acidity.

Although some of the first serious chardonnays in California benefited from malolactic fermentation, the process became a standard feature of chardonnay production in California in the 1980s, frequently yielding thick, creamy, amorphous wines that also displayed a pronounced buttery note (a byproduct of this secondary fermentation). It didn't help that a lot of vintners were harvesting overripe fruit that was notably deficient in acidity. At the same time, the use of oak turned increasingly indiscriminate, to the point where the wood tended to overwhelm the wine. Thus the irony: Classic Burgundian methods ended up taking California chardonnay in a distinctly un-Burgundian direction.

And this was true across all price points—from discount bottlings to high-end ones. Sweet, fat, and oaky emerged as the signature California style.

It is an undeniably popular one, a point underscored by the fact that the amount of California chardonnay sold annually has quintupled since 1990 and currently stands at nearly 50 million cases per year. But none of them are in my cellar. I find the wines clumsy and cloying; even the most skillfully executed ones taste like melted popsicles to me. They are exhausting to drink and pretty much impossible to pair with food (they are often described as cocktail wines, and that's precisely what they are—except I wouldn't want to drink them for cocktails, either). Nor am I a solitary refusenik; there are lots of grape nuts who now live by the acronym ABC (as in, Anything But Chardonnay). It is periodically suggested that consumers and vintners alike are growing weary of butterball chardonnays. Some undoubtedly are, but I don't see any indication that these confections are yet going the way of bell bottoms.

Fortunately, the Hanzells, the Stony Hills, the Montelenas and a few others never went over to the tutti-frutti side. They kept the oak influence in check, and with the exceptions of Ridge and Mount Eden, both of which produce chardonnays from cool, high-altitude vineyards that provide plenty of natural acidity, they eschewed malolactic fermentation. (Hanzell does a partial one; around 30 percent of the final blend undergoes the process.) In the half-century or so since most of them laid down roots, these producers have gone from being avant-garde to old guard, but they still make what I and many others think are California's finest chardonnays—graceful, refreshing wines that offer a strong sense of place but also, paradoxically, evince a real Burgundian sensibility. Better yet, most of them are very affordable for the quality they offer. Now that one of their number has reached the big screen, demand and prices may well spike (indeed, *Bottle Shock* has evidently triggered a run on the 2006 Montelena chardonnay). But if they do, it will only mean that the judgment of the market has finally caught up with the Judgment of Paris.

Even the most Cali-phobic wine buffs will be impressed by these chardonnays. The **2006 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay** (\$42) does its 1973 forebear proud. Marked by lime, pear, honeysuckle, and mineral scents, it is a crisp, zesty wine, but one that also packs the same subtle underlying richness that one finds in top-flight white Burgundies. Note: Adding irony to cinematography, the Barretts recently agreed to sell Montelena to the owner of Château Cos d'Estournel, a Bordeaux second growth. The **2006 Ridge Vineyards Monte Bello Chardonnay** (\$70) is sensational, too. (It will be released in September 2009; the 2004 Monte Bello chardonnay is the currently available vintage.) Tangerine, honeysuckle, and mineral aromas burst out of the glass, along with Meursault-like notes of oatmeal and roasted nuts. (Meursault is one of the leading white Burgundy appellations.)

The **2005 Mount Eden Estate chardonnay** (\$48) serves up a big whiff of pineapple, along with flowers, lanolin, minerals, and a lick of vanilla. It is a rich, dense chardonnay that is unmistakably Californian, but there is plenty of acidity to balance out the fruit and keep the wine from sprouting love handles. The terrific **2006 Mayacamas Vineyards Chardonnay** (\$35) displays a real cool-climate character, with pronounced green apple, tart peach, and lemon notes and a steely acid-and-mineral backbone. The **2005 Hanzell Vineyards Chardonnay** (\$65) is another winner. It is a little reticent at first, but aeration brings out an excellent bouquet punctuated by honey, pear, and citrus aromas. The Hanzell shows lots of ripe fruit and has a rich, creamy texture, but there is also an admirable restraint and sense of proportion to the wine. The **2006 Stony Hill Vineyard Chardonnay** (\$36) has an attractive bouquet redolent of green apples, honeysuckle, and—catnip for me—marzipan. Here, too, exuberant fruit is parried by bright acidity, making for a thoroughly enjoyable chardonnay.

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## election scorecard

### Change You Can Measure

An ARG poll shifts three states closer to Obama.

Thursday, September 18, 2008, at 11:10 AM ET

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## explainer

### Banks, Firms, and Houses

Deciphering the terms in the financial crisis coverage.

By Abby Callard

Thursday, September 18, 2008, at 6:29 PM ET

On Tuesday, the U.S. government [announced](#) that the Federal Reserve, the nation's central bank, would loan \$85 billion to American International Group, an insurance firm, for fear that other financial institutions, such as investment banks and securities firms, would go belly-up in its wake.

What are all these banks and other financial institutions in the news?

#### Banks

*Central bank, reserve bank:* A country's central bank maintains the stability of its national currency. In the United States, the Federal Reserve functions as the central bank and acts as a last-resort lender to failing financial institutions. The Fed was

created in 1913 to provide financial stability in response to the [Panic of 1907](#).

*Commercial bank:* A commercial bank, also known as a business bank, takes deposits and gives loans, mostly to corporations. After the Great Depression, Congress required that commercial and investment banks be separate with the Glass-Steagall Act; that restriction no longer applies today. Bank of America is currently the largest commercial bank in the United States.

*Investment bank:* An investment bank raises money by selling securities to companies and to the government. They also provide advice to corporations about mergers and buyouts. With Lehman Bros. and Merrill Lynch out of the picture, Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley are [the two largest investment banks](#) in the United States.

*Retail bank:* A retail bank deals directly with consumers instead of companies or other banks. (The latter business is conducted by a commercial bank.) A retail bank primarily handles savings and checking accounts, mortgages, and personal loans.

*Universal bank:* A universal bank participates in the banking activities of a commercial bank and an investment bank. Bank of America is a universal bank—in addition to being the leading commercial bank, it is also an investment bank.

#### Other Financial Institutions

*Savings-and-loan association or thrift:* A savings-and-loan association primarily accepts deposits from consumers and makes mortgage loans. During the [savings-and-loan crisis](#) of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the number of such associations declined by 50 percent after the housing market experienced a downturn.

*Clearing house:* A clearing house is a private company or a part of a bank that helps settle transactions. For example, it might ensure that a checking account has sufficient funds for a certain debit card transaction before the money goes through. LCH.Clearnet, Europe's largest clearing house, [declared](#) Lehman Bros. in default and suspended the bank from operating in the London market.

*Brokerage firm, securities firm:* A brokerage firm acts as a mediator between a buyer and seller of stocks or securities. When someone wants to buy something in the stock market, they usually go through a brokerage firm, such as Wachovia Securities. While brokerage firms aren't insured under any federal agency, they can register to be insured under the Securities Investor Protection Corp., which was [created](#) by Congress in 1970.

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

*Explainer thanks John Heine, deputy director of the office of public affairs of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, and Josephine Wang, general counsel at the Securities Investor Protection Corp.*

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## explainer

### Where Did the Government Get \$85 Billion?

Was it just lying around somewhere?

By Noreen Malone

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 7:21 PM ET

On Tuesday the U.S. government agreed that the Federal Reserve would supply \$85 billion to [bail out American International Group](#), the world's largest insurance company. Does the government really have a spare \$85 billion lying around just in case?

Yes. There's no stack of unused money gathering dust in the federal coffers, but the Federal Reserve can always raise cash by selling off some of the securities it keeps in reserve. The Fed maintains a [massive balance sheet](#) that shows exactly what its assets are; right now, its reserves are estimated to be [less than \\$200 billion](#), down from \$800 billion at the beginning of this year. These reserves take the form of securities, often purchased from the U.S. Treasury. The securities function as a kind of "under the mattress" stash that can easily be converted into cash on the open market.

In fact, the government didn't actually hand over any cash to AIG today. Rather, the bailout deal represents an assurance from the Fed that an \$85 billion loan will be available to AIG at any point during the next 24 months. If and when the company decides it wants the money, it will supply the Federal Reserve with the routing number of its clearing bank—an institution that specializes in transferring securities from one institution to another—and an electronic transfer of funds would be made.

The Fed padded its reserves on Monday with the help of ["repurchase agreements"](#): It bought \$70 billion in securities that it will sell back to the issuing banks at an agreed-upon date. (This is also how the government "injected" money into the market.) And on Wednesday, the Treasury Department announced it was creating a "Supplementary Financing Program" to auction off \$40 billion of Treasury bills, with the profits going to the Fed. (This is an unprecedented step; normally, money from Treasury bill auctions goes back into the Treasury coffers.)

The AIG deal may not end up being for the full \$85 billion. It is what's known as a ["bridge loan"](#), meaning that the Federal Reserve is offering to lend the money for the short term, at a fairly steep interest rate. AIG doesn't have to take it all, which is precisely the point—the lousy terms of the loan give the company an incentive to find other sources of cash.

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

*Explainer thanks Lou Crandall of Wrightson ICAP, LLC; Douglas Elmendorf of the Brookings Institution; and Adam Posen of the Peterson Institute.*

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## explainer

### Driving That Train

How does a locomotive engineer get his license?

By Jacob Leibenluft

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 6:46 PM ET

A deadly commuter crash in Southern California is now being attributed to a locomotive engineer who [failed to stop](#) at a red signal—possibly because he was [text-messaging](#) while on the job. How do locomotive engineers prove they know the rules of the tracks?

They pass knowledge and skills tests. The government doesn't issue laminated driver's licenses to locomotive engineers; instead, each railroad must determine its own procedure for certifying the engineers in accordance with [these federal rules](#). Since most engineers start out as conductors, they begin their training with a decent knowledge about railroad safety. Federal law requires that new engineers take classes on the basics of how a train operates and spend a "significant portion of time"—usually more than 120 hours—behind the controls of a locomotive while under supervision. In addition, prospective engineers are screened to make sure their vision and hearing is in order and that they don't have a substance-abuse problem.

At the end of their training, the engineers must pass a closed-book, written exam that tests whether they know operating procedures for the train as well as the physical characteristics of the territory they will be working in. (For example, an engineer is expected to know where the track turns sharply or where the stations are on his route.) Likewise, they must pass a "skills" test, which can take place either in an actual train or in a [simulator](#) that looks like the full-size controls of a locomotive. (By federal law, a simulator used in testing should be programmed to illustrate the specific line a student will operate on and should "graphically and audibly" illustrate the consequences of the user's actions.) According to government

[recommendations](#), a good skills test would monitor, for example, whether an engineer conducted the right inspections before moving, followed signals and speed restrictions, and used the horn appropriately.

For one example of how this process can work, consider [this training program](#) operated by the [Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway](#)—one of the nation's largest. BNSF begins its training program for new engineers with three weeks at a center in Overland Park, Kan. There they learn the basics about air brakes and train handling and get their first exposure to a simulator. The next 15 weeks involve on-the-job training back at their home location, where trainees are assigned a specific territory and a trained engineer to supervise them as they man the controls during regular operations. The final two weeks involve a little more time in the classroom, along with the written test and the skills test, which involves two hourlong runs on the simulator. To earn certification, a student must pass each test with at least 90 percent—with one makeup try allowed for each—and then complete a successful evaluation behind the controls in their home area.

Engineers can have their certification revoked based on their performance on the job. (They are also required to go through recertification—including new tests—every three years.) In particular, railroads speak of the "six cardinal rules" that, if broken, will result in an automatic suspension. These include running a stop signal, exceeding the speed limit by more than 10 miles per hour, failing to use the air brakes safely, occupying a track without permission, tampering with safety equipment, and operating the train under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Breaking these rules will usually result in an engineer's license being revoked for at least 30 days, with repeat offenders sidelined for longer.

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

*Explainer thanks Steve Kulm of the Federal Railroad Administration, David Rangel of Modoc Railway Academy, and James Stoetzel of Transit Safety Management Inc.*

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## explainer

# Can You Really See Russia From Alaska?

Yes, but only the boring parts.

By Nina Shen Rastogi

Monday, September 15, 2008, at 5:25 PM ET

In her Sept. 11 interview with ABC's Charlie Gibson, Sarah Palin had this to say about Russia: "They're our next-door

neighbors, and you can actually see Russia from land here in Alaska, from an island in Alaska." Is that true?

Yes. Russia and Alaska are divided by the Bering Strait, which is about 55 miles at its narrowest point. In the middle of the Bering Strait are [two small, sparsely populated islands](#): Big Diomedes, which sits in Russian territory, and Little Diomedes, which is part of the United States. At their closest, these two islands are a little less than two and a half miles apart, which means that, on a clear day, you can definitely see one from the other. (To see the view of Big Diomedes from Little Diomedes, check out this [webcam](#).) The Diomedes Islands are often blanketed by persistent fog, which makes visibility difficult. On a clear day, though, a person standing at sea level can see a little less than three miles across the ocean. [You can see farther if you go higher](#)—at the highest altitude on Little Diomedes (919 feet), you can see for about 37 miles. (Between mid-December and mid-June, when [the water between the two islands freezes](#), an intrepid explorer can just walk from one to the other.)

The tactical importance of this proximity is debatable, however: Big Diomedes [has no permanent population](#) though it does house an important weather station. Alaskans can, however, see into the future from Little Diomedes since Big Diomedes (or Ratmanov Island, as it's known to the Russians) is on the other side of the [International Date Line](#).

You can also see Russia from other points in Alaska. According to [a New York Times article](#) written in the waning years of the Cold War (when the Alaska-Siberia border was known as the "Ice Curtain"), if you stand on high ground on the tip of St. Lawrence Island—a larger Alaskan island in the Bering Sea, southwest of the Diomedes—you can see the Russian mainland, about 37 miles away. The same article claims that you can see Russia from the Tin City Air Force facility at Cape Prince of Wales, which is the westernmost point of the mainland Americas. The station chief at Tin City confirms that, for roughly half the year, you can see Siberian mountain ranges from the highest part of the facility.

It's not as if Alaskans can see into the heart of the Kremlin, though. The region you'd be seeing from these vantage points is the [Chukotka autonomous district](#), a massive, desolate expanse of about 285,000 square miles with a population of about 55,000. (That's an area roughly the size of Texas with a population the size of [Pine Bluff, Ark.](#)) Chukotka has fewer than 400 miles of road and no railroad infrastructure; the population is mostly employed in mining and subsistence hunting. The more strategic areas of the Russian coastline, militarily speaking—the Kamchatka Peninsula, home to a nuclear submarine base, or Vladivostok, headquarters of the Russian Pacific Fleet—are not visible from Gov. Palin's home state.

Palin does have Obama beat, though: The closest foreign territory to Hawaii is the Micronesian [Republic of Kiribati](#), but

at more than 1,000 miles away, it's not remotely visible with the naked eye.

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

*Explainer thanks Stephen Blank of the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, Greg Durocher of the Alaska Science Center, Clifford Gaddy of the Brookings Institute, and Vance Spaulding of the Tin City Long Range Radar Site.*

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## fighting words

### Pakistan Is the Problem

And Barack Obama seems to be the only candidate willing to face it.

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, September 15, 2008, at 12:04 PM ET

An excellent [article](#) by Fraser Nelson in London's *Spectator* at the end of July put it as succinctly as I have seen it:

At a recent dinner party in the British embassy in Kabul, one of the guests referred to "the Afghan-Pakistan war." The rest of the table fell silent. This is the truth that dare not speak its name. Even mentioning it in private in the Afghan capital's green zone is enough to solicit murmurs of disapproval. Few want to accept that the war is widening; that it now involves Pakistan, a country with an unstable government and nuclear weapons.

"Don't mention the war," as Basil [insists](#) with mounting hysteria in *Fawltly Towers*. And, when discussing the deepening crisis in Afghanistan, most people seem deliberately to avoid such telling phrases as "Pakistani aggression" or—more accurate still—"Pakistani colonialism." The truth is that the Taliban, and its al-Qaida guests, were originally imposed on Afghanistan from without as a projection of Pakistani state power. (Along with Pakistan, only Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates ever recognized the Taliban as the legal government in Kabul.) Important circles in Pakistan have never given up the aspiration to run Afghanistan as a client or dependent or proxy state, and this colonial mindset is especially well-entrenched among senior army officers and in the [Inter-Services Intelligence](#) agency, or ISI.

We were all warned of this many years ago. When the Clinton administration sent cruise missiles into Afghanistan in reprisal for the attacks on our embassies in East Africa, the missiles missed Osama Bin Ladin but did, if you remember, manage to kill two officers of the ISI. It wasn't asked loudly enough: What

were these men doing in an al-Qaida camp in the first place? In those years, as in earlier ones, almost no tough questions were asked of Pakistan. Successive U.S. administrations used to keep certifying to Congress that Pakistan was not exploiting U.S. aid (and U.S. indulgence over the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan) to build itself a nuclear weapons capacity. Indeed, it wasn't until after Sept. 11, 2001, that we allowed ourselves to learn that at least two of Pakistan's top nuclear scientists—Mirza Yusuf Baig and Chaudhry Abdul Majid—had been taken in for "questioning" about their close links to the Taliban. But then, in those days, we were too incurious to take note of the fact that Pakistan's chief nuclear operative, A.Q. Khan, had opened a private-enterprise "Nukes 'R' Us" market and was selling his apocalyptic wares to regimes as disparate as Libya and North Korea, sometimes using Pakistani air force planes to make the deliveries.

The very name *Pakistan* inscribes the nature of the problem. It is not a real country or nation but an acronym devised in the 1930s by a Muslim propagandist for partition named [Chaudhary Rahmat Ali](#). It stands for *Punjab, Afghania, Kashmir, and Indus-Sind*. The *stan* suffix merely means "land." In the Urdu language, the resulting acronym means "land of the pure." It can be easily seen that this very name expresses expansionist tendencies and also conceals discriminatory ones. Kashmir, for example, is part of India. The Afghans are Muslim but not part of Pakistan. Most of Punjab is also in India. Interestingly, too, there is no B in this cobbled-together name, despite the fact that the country originally included the eastern part of Bengal (now Bangladesh, after fighting a war of independence against genocidal Pakistani repression) and still includes Baluchistan, a restive and neglected province that has been fighting a low-level secessionist struggle for decades. The P comes first only because Pakistan is essentially the property of the Punjabi military caste (which hated Benazir Bhutto, for example, because she came from Sind). As I [once wrote](#), the country's name "might as easily be rendered as 'Akpistan' or 'Kapistan,' depending on whether the battle to take over Afghanistan or Kashmir is to the fore."

I could have phrased that a bit more tightly, since the original Pakistani motive for annexing and controlling Afghanistan is precisely the acquisition of "strategic depth" for its never-ending confrontation with India over Kashmir. And that dispute became latently thermonuclear while we simply looked on. One of the most creditable (and neglected) foreign-policy shifts of the Bush administration after 9/11 was away from our dangerous regional dependence on the untrustworthy and ramshackle Pakistan and toward a much more generous rapprochement with India, the world's other great federal, democratic, and multiethnic state.

Recent accounts of murderous violence in the capital cities of two of our allies, India and Afghanistan, make it appear overwhelmingly probable that the bombs were not the work of local or homegrown "insurgents" but were orchestrated by agents of the Pakistani ISI. This is a fantastically unacceptable

state of affairs, which needs to be given its right name of state-sponsored terrorism. Meanwhile, and on Pakistani soil and under the very noses of its army and the ISI, the city of Quetta and the so-called Federally Administered Tribal Areas are becoming the incubating ground of a reorganized and protected al-Qaida. Sen. Barack Obama has, if anything, been the more militant of the two presidential candidates in stressing the danger here and the need to act without too much sentiment about our so-called Islamabad ally. He began using this rhetoric when it was much simpler to counterpose the "good" war in Afghanistan with the "bad" one in Iraq. Never mind that now; he is committed in advance to a serious projection of American power into the heartland of our deadliest enemy. And that, I think, is another reason why so many people are reluctant to employ truthful descriptions for the emerging Afghan-Pakistan confrontation: American liberals can't quite face the fact that if their man does win in November, and if he has meant a single serious word he's ever said, it means more war, and more bitter and protracted war at that—not less.

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## food

### What's in a Number?

How the press got the idea that food travels 1,500 miles from farm to plate.

By Jane Black

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 6:48 AM ET

Food critics may be finicky when it comes to celebrity chefs, but their affection for local ingredients never flags. It's hard to open a magazine without finding an article about a photogenic farmer making handcrafted cheese or a happy family that has reduced its carbon footprint by planting a victory garden. And it seems like nearly every one of these stories offers up the same disheartening statistic to wean Americans off their penchant for industrially farmed suppers: On average, food travels 1,500 miles from farm to plate.

Back in May, chef Dan Barber [noted on the \*New York Times\* op-ed page](#) that \$4 per gallon diesel fuel means "it's no longer efficient to transport food 1,500 miles from where it's grown." When Wal-Mart decided to start [buying more local produce](#) last July, the company issued a press release stating that an average meal travels 1,500 miles "before it gets to you." The stat has popped up in *Newsweek*, *Time*, even *Slate's* own [2006 "Green Challenge."](#) Not since *Newsweek* announced that a woman had a [better chance of getting killed by a terrorist](#) than getting married after 40 has a statistic been embraced so enthusiastically.

There's just one problem. It's only sort of true—and only if you live in Chicago.

The statistic was first published in 2001 when Rich Pirog, associate director of Iowa State University's [Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture](#), wanted to figure out which food distribution system—local, regional, or national—is the most environmentally friendly. To do so, he and a team of researchers looked at food miles, long a common measure in Europe. By calculating how far food traveled, they could determine the corresponding amount of carbon dioxide released into the air.

For the [report](#), researchers examined how far 33 fruits and vegetables that had been grown in the United States traveled to a produce market in Chicago. The data, collected by the Department of Agriculture, aren't ideal; over the last 30 years, [terminal markets](#) have declined in importance, in part because retailers like Wal-Mart manage their own distribution. In 1998, the last year data were collected, the country's 22 terminal markets handled only 30 percent of the nation's produce. But the data are public and therefore free to academics.

In addition to being a limited sample, terminal market data indicate only the state where the produce was grown, not what part of the state. So, for example, Pirog could have known oranges came from Florida but had no way of discerning whether they came from around Palm Beach or Orlando. For practical purposes, his team assumed that all produce came from the geographical center of each state. They then used MapQuest to determine the route a truck might take to the Chicago market. That's a decent approximation for a high-production state like California, where crops are grown from north to south. But it's flat-out wrong for Oklahoma, whose capital city is smack dab in the center of the state.

In the end, Pirog tallied that produce arriving in Chicago from within the United States traveled 1,518 miles. But even if you live in the Windy City, that doesn't account for milk or meat, which make up a significant part of American diets. Nor does it account for kiwis from Italy, apples from New Zealand, or grapes from Chile. This, despite the fact that imports make up a growing percentage—15 percent of U.S. food in 2005—of what ends up on our tables.

Researchers have done little work to calculate food miles for areas outside the Midwest. A 1997 study showed that produce travels an average of 1,129 miles to Austin, 34 percent fewer than to Chicago. In 2001, an analysis of the Jessup, Md., terminal market concluded that U.S.-grown produce traveled an average of more than 1,685 miles. And though there's no formal research to support it, Pirog says it's safe to assume that, on average, food travels fewer miles to get to diners in California than to those in New York.

All statistics, of course, are based on a series of assumptions. And Pirog is quick to point out that whether or not the 1,500-mile figure applies to everyone and everything—or how it's been misused—it has raised consciousness about where food comes

from. It sends a message: It matters what you buy, and where you buy it. Of course, the media's enthusiastic embrace of this statistic has as much to do with a growing sense of urgency about where food comes from as their need for quick ways to explain complex problems. Just as the fake stat that plastic takes [500 years to break down in landfills](#) has become shorthand for America's myopic attachment to one-time-use packaging, the 1,500 mile-figure has become a breezy way for the media to explain America's Byzantine food system and its consequences.

There are consequences, too, for oversimplifying. If we all think in food miles, the answer is obvious: Buy local. But new studies show that in some cases it can actually be more environmentally responsible to produce food far from home. According to a [2006 report](#) from New Zealand's Lincoln University, it is four times more energy efficient for Londoners to buy New Zealand lamb, which is grass-fed and shipped halfway 'round the world, than to buy lamb raised on grain in England. And if we want to combat global warming, [cutting back on meat](#) may be more effective than buying local produce.

New measures are being put in place to help guide our decisions. Pirog, for one, has moved on from food miles to studies that focus on consumer impact: Does it make sense, for example, to pick up your farm share or have it delivered? Across the Atlantic, British grocer Tesco has [rolled out](#) carbon labels that attempt to calculate the exact amount of greenhouse gases created by everything from shampoo to potato chips and fruit smoothies. Like food miles, these new numbers raise as many questions as they answer. For example, how are these [carbon labels calculated](#)? How will they stay up to date as producers change their business models to respond to rising oil prices or tax incentives for green companies? You're more likely to get killed by a terrorist than find a simple answer.

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## foreigners

### Reasons To Be Gloomy

Four things to worry about.

By Ian Bremmer

Thursday, September 18, 2008, at 12:31 PM ET

In July, I spoke at a London conference with the gloomy title "Darkest Before the Dawn." That darkness hung over the meeting, as economists and strategists, both behind the podium and in the audience, detailed the growing international anxiety over America's financial crisis and its potential impact on global markets. Nevertheless, most of them seemed convinced that better days are coming.

As a political scientist, I fear the dawn may be farther behind the horizon than some expect, as four emerging trends pose broader and deeper challenges to the international order than we've seen in several decades.

The first of these drivers of long-term change involves energy. In 1990, the world consumed about 66 million barrels of crude oil per day. By 2007, that number had climbed to 86 million. The U.S. Energy Information Administration [projects](#) that by 2030, daily demand will soar to 118 million barrels. As energy consumption soars in developing countries like China and India, supply is struggling to keep pace.

The problem is not that the world is running out of oil. It's that future supplies will come increasingly from politically less stable parts of the world—the broader Middle East, the Caspian Sea basin, and West Africa. These regions are especially vulnerable to political turmoil, terrorist and insurgent attacks, war, government collapse, and other serious threats.

And, of course, the sixfold increase in oil prices since 2002 has empowered the governments of some oil- and gas-exporting states to use their newfound market leverage as a political weapon. Political leaders in Russia, Iran, Venezuela, and others already use their hydrocarbon wealth to pick political fights. High prices allow even marginal energy exporters like Sudan and Burma to resist international pressure for political reform.

Finally, as energy becomes an ever more precious commodity, the governments of developing states are micromanaging their energy policies by investing in national energy champions, state-owned companies that give government officials near-complete control of the country's most valuable natural resources.

The largest energy companies in the world today are state-owned firms like Saudi Aramco, Gazprom (Russia), CNPC (China), NIOC (Iran), PDVSA (Venezuela), Petrobras (Brazil), and Petronas (Malaysia). The leading multinationals—Exxon Mobil, Chevron, BP, and Royal Dutch Shell—produce about 10 percent of the world's oil and gas and hold just 3 percent of its reserves.

Collectively, national oil companies now own more than three-quarters of all crude oil reserves. The men who run them answer to political bureaucrats, not shareholders. That's a big problem for supply growth, because some of these state officials divert profits toward political projects (or line their own pockets) instead of reinvesting them in efforts to find new reserves and to build the pipelines needed to bring them to market.

The effects of all these risks can increase the prices that consumers pay for energy, weighing on growth in America, Europe, and Japan. They can embolden governments like Iran's to pursue high-risk political strategies—like aggressive development of a nuclear program—secure in the knowledge

that energy exports will generate plenty of cash and help the country resist international pressure for change. Few governments around the world want a nuclear Iran. But the country's energy customers won't support sanctions that might cost them access to badly needed oil and gas supplies.

The second shift in the international balance of power is a related one. The growth of state capitalism, particularly in China and the Middle East, gives authoritarian governments with opaque political systems and large amounts of cash unprecedented levels of political and economic influence.

With the end of the Cold War, the dynamism and market power of the United States, Western Europe, and Japan—fueled by *private* wealth, *private* investment, and *private* enterprise—seemed to have established the dominance of the liberal economic model. But *public* wealth, *public* investment, and *public* enterprise have returned with a vengeance. An era of state capitalism has dawned, one in which governments are again directing huge flows of capital—even across the borders of capitalist democracies. The trend has important implications for free markets and international politics. Best recent estimates are that sovereign wealth funds, state-controlled pools of capital fueled by large reserves of foreign currencies, already account for about 12 percent of international investment—double their share of five years ago. Some credible forecasts suggest their assets could grow 500 percent by 2015. Twelve new funds have been established since 2005. More than 20 countries now have sovereign wealth funds, and several more have indicated an interest in creating them.

Yet despite the fast-growing market power of these sovereign wealth funds, we still don't know much about them. "Very few of them publish information about their assets, liabilities, or investment strategies," warns the International Monetary Fund. Some fear the states that control them will use these funds to gain political leverage inside other states.

This shift in the international balance of market power is generating considerable anxiety among U.S. and European policymakers, who fear that emerging-market-based national oil companies, state-owned enterprises, and sovereign wealth funds threaten the economic stability and national security of other countries. Whatever the political motivations for creating them, state-run companies and investment funds are burdened with the same bureaucracy, waste, and political cronyism that plague the (often authoritarian) governments that control them.

The third important geopolitical shift flows from technological advances that arm ambitious and aggressive governments, organizations, and even individuals with powerful new weapons. The tools of the information age help citizens connect and collaborate with one another and with the world outside. In recent years, we've witnessed the birth of a truly global talent pool—and have seen what it can do to generate prosperity in

several countries at once. At the same time, weapons technologies—missile-guidance systems, chemical and biological agents, and nuclear know-how—are also cheaper and more widely available than at any time in history. In the past 10 years, India, Pakistan, and North Korea have officially joined the nuclear club, and the trend toward proliferation will likely intensify over the next decade.

The fourth and broadest shift in the international order flows from the transition from a U.S.-dominated system toward a nonpolar world, one in which the leading political and economic institutions no longer reflect the true balance of global power.

As U.S. hegemony gradually fades, the international leadership vacuum will grow. Other states, profiting from America's troubles or at least not wanting to share in them, will resist taking on new international responsibilities that come with costs and risks. All this comes at a historical moment in which the usefulness and legitimacy of the United Nations, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund are already open to question. On a variety of transnational issues—nuclear nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and public health and environmental worries—this trend means that problems can easily become crises.

So much for the darkness; where's the dawn? As rising energy prices create political problems for the governments of countries that depend on oil-supply growth, we'll see a surge in investment in new energy technologies and infrastructure. That process, still in its infancy, is already moving forward.

State capitalism will threaten the performance of global markets until the demands of the marketplace push a range of authoritarian states toward the fundamental political reforms that bring greater transparency. Addressing the diffusion of dangerous technologies will require, among other things, a new and more effective nonproliferation regime. But as more countries develop an interest in preserving a profitable status quo, we're likely to see more movement in that direction.

None of these transformations is right around the corner. Lifting the darkness will take more than a new business cycle, a new oil find, or a new American president. Without fundamental changes in the global system, none of these challenges can be met. The good news is that necessity remains the mother of invention, and that almost everyone appreciates a beautiful sunrise. As a greater number of governments and citizens own a stake in global economic growth, more people than ever will be looking for ways to coax the sun from behind the horizon.

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## foreigners Of Course We Can Win in Afghanistan



*If we're willing to pay the price of victory.*

By Anne Applebaum

Monday, September 15, 2008, at 7:50 PM ET

URUZGAN PROVINCE, Afghanistan—From the top of Cemetery Hill, just outside town, the village of Chura looks like a thin, green ribbon, winding along the bottom of a narrow valley. To the east, west, and north are dry, uninhabitable mountains. To the south, through a gap in the mountains, it is just possible to see the next narrow valley.

For the Dutch captain whose soldiers graciously invited me along on their patrol up that hill, this geography means a great deal. The green valley of Chura, he explains, is "secure." That means that when his Charlie Tiger Company patrols the one-street bazaar, nobody shoots at them. It also means that the Dutch "provincial reconstruction team"—NATO's name for military troops who deliver aid, and the central focus of the Dutch mission here—can keep up its work on Chura's small health clinic, bring better seeds to Chura's farmers, and build Chura's schools. During the patrol, villagers come out to shake hands with the reconstruction-team leader who is walking with us and to ask the medic for advice. Children put their thumbs up and shout, "*Alles gut*," their version of the Dutch equivalent of "OK."

It is a positive, happy story: not just a success for the Dutch but for NATO, which also works with French, Australian, American, and Afghan troops in Uruzgan and which sponsored my trip here. It is an important story, too: Uruzgan, in the Pashto-speaking south of Afghanistan, is the birthplace of Mullah Omar, the Taliban's founder.

Unfortunately, the story is not complete without explaining that the next valley, the one clearly visible through the gap in the mountains, is "insecure." There is no Dutch base there, and when Charlie Tiger Company goes on patrol in that direction, they don't bring journalists. "Insecure" means that there are snipers and roadside bombs, like the one that recently blew up a Dutch vehicle; it means the tribal leaders there are rivals of the tribal leaders here; it also means that a German aid group has indefinitely postponed plans to build a road to Chura and that Chura's doctor doesn't feel safe far from his clinic. Not all Taliban, he explains in a low voice, approve of medicine.

And this, in a microcosm, is the dilemma we face in Afghanistan, well understood on the ground but occasionally worth restating for outsiders: Where there is a real military presence, it is possible to bring peace and development to Afghanistan. But where there are no foreign troops, there is often anarchy. Though European governments like to draw a line between bringing "security" and engaging in counterterrorism in Afghanistan, on the ground those missions blur. Americans like to talk about "winning" and "losing" the war in Afghanistan, but

on the ground it's clear that those categories aren't relevant. Though there has been much talk about "winning" and "losing" the war in Afghanistan, those aren't really relevant categories. Of course we can "win." The real question is whether we are willing to pay the high cost of victory.

The problem is complicated by the nature of the enemy in Afghanistan, best described by the [International Security Assistance Force](#)'s commander, Gen. David McKiernan, as an "insurgent nexus" that includes not only remnants of the original Taliban but also new "Taliban" who work for the money they receive from across the Pakistani border, tribal leaders with their own agendas, criminal syndicates, and opium dealers. These groups cannot dislodge a Dutch or American base, they cannot rule the country, and they cannot win mass popular support. But with a handful of weapons and some homemade bombs, they can make the coalition forces in Afghanistan pay a high price for their good intentions—and erode support for the Afghan mission in foreign capitals.

And this they will succeed in doing unless the extraordinary ambition of this enterprise, impossible to appreciate from outside, is better understood. None of the governments with troops in Afghanistan has explained to its voters that their achievements are so fragile and that safety established in one valley does not imply safety in the next and that the task of "reconstruction" is so integrally linked to military work. The 4,500 or so new troops [promised](#) by President George W. Bush last week represent the beginning of a recognition of the scale of the challenge, but only that.

Other resources are needed, too, as widespread use of the newly fashionable word *surge* well indicates. A NATO official in Kabul spoke of the need for a "civilian surge," meaning an increase in the already high levels of aid; a U.N. official wants a "political surge," meaning greater attention to the negotiations that will ultimately bring insurgents in from the cold. They are right, but so is the U.S. military, which has quietly invested billions in training the Afghan army—joint missions are now the norm. On a gleaming new air base outside Kabul, I watched an American colonel, a survivor of the Sept. 11 attack on the Pentagon, proudly show off the embryonic Afghan air force, created with American mentors, refurbished Soviet helicopters, and older Afghan pilots with Russian training. "I am out fighting Taliban, even in my dreams," one of them told me.

And someday he may be able to do that, even without our help. But in the meantime, that extraordinary, multimillion-dollar air base, just like the blond Dutchmen patrolling Mullah Omar's province, serves as a reminder that we haven't exactly "neglected" Afghanistan, as Sen. Barack Obama and others often say. It's just that we haven't yet faced up to what we have undertaken to do here. Afghanistan is bigger than Iraq, more rugged, more impoverished, and vastly more complicated, with

more languages, more ethnic groups, more tribes, and more lethal neighbors. It has only begun to test our stamina.

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## **gabfest**

### **The Economic Collapse Gabfest**

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

By Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz

Friday, September 19, 2008, at 10:37 AM ET

*Listen to the Gabfest for Sept. 19 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, David Plotz, and special guest Bill Smee talk politics. This week: the dismal state of the economy and how the presidential candidates are addressing it, whether John McCain invented the BlackBerry, and Joe Biden as champion of women everywhere.

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

The week's big story was the [continuing difficulties](#) affecting the U.S. economy, starting with the collapse of investment bank [Lehman Bros.](#) and including the near-collapse of [AIG](#). Many observers think the economy will now be the No. 1 topic for the rest of the presidential race.

John McCain is calling for [the firing of the chairman](#) of the [Securities and Exchange Commission](#), even though the president has little control over that position. McCain called for the people responsible for the financial crisis to be thrown out, but John Dickerson points out that he would then [need to throw himself out](#), since he was a strong proponent of deregulating the financial industry.

Earlier this week, a McCain aide implied that the senator had invented the BlackBerry, leading some to [draw comparisons](#) between McCain and the urban legend surrounding Al Gore and the Internet.

On *Slate V* this week, John talks about his five favorite [historical presidential campaign ads](#).

Public opinion polls are showing that [Obama is regaining](#) some of the support he lost following the Republican Convention. In

part, [the poor shape of the economy](#) is being blamed for [slowing McCain's poll surge](#).

Emily says she'd been angry at Joe Biden for some recent remarks perceived as sexist, but [an article](#) in [the New Republic](#) by Fred Strebeigh reminded her that Biden has a great pro-women Senate record.

Bill says he is an insufferable bore about the [baseball pennant races](#) under way, especially the fact that his [beloved Mets](#) are not doing well. His chatter suggestion is to avoid talking baseball.

John chatters about a story in this week's *Weekly Standard* in which writer Matt Labash [describes a fishing trip](#) with Vice President Dick Cheney. Apparently, Cheney is a very good fisherman.

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

Posted by Dale Willman on Sept. 18 at 10:50 a.m.

### **Sept. 12, 2008**

*Listen to the Gabfest for Sept. 12 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's topics include the state of the presidential race to date, the Barack Obama campaign, and how the Sarah Palin phenomenon rolls on.

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

John wonders if Palin will experience a fate similar to what became known as "[Obama fatigue](#)."

Emily says that with fewer than 55 days left before the election, it's time to talk about [issues](#).

John discusses [Fred Thompson](#), who recently [criticized Obama](#) by saying he must be "the first fellow in the history of presidential politics who thinks that running for president is a qualification for being president."

Several national polls now show Obama and McCain in a tie. The most recent was the [NBC/Wall Street Journal poll](#). Nevertheless, Obama is still ahead in the race for [Electoral College](#) votes.

McCain [continues to express outrage](#) over an Obama remark about [putting lipstick on a pig](#). McCain claims it was an attack on Palin, although many commentators, including a number of [prominent Republicans](#), disagree.

David chatters about the *Slate* feature "[80 Over 80](#)."

John discusses a new Web site from the [Museum of the Moving Image](#) called [Living Room Candidate](#), which rounds up political ads dating back to 1952.

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

Posted by Dale Willman on Sept. 12 at 11 a.m.

Sept. 5, 2008

*Listen to the Gabfest for Sept. 5 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, they discuss John McCain's yawner of a convention speech, the power of Palin, and the Republican flip-flop from experience to change.

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

Republican vice-presidential candidate [Sarah Palin](#) used [her convention speech](#) to [rally the troops](#).

David called Palin's speech rhetorically masterful but [mean-spirited and vicious](#). Meanwhile, John McCain [vowed to end partisan rancor](#) during his address Thursday.

As far as Emily is concerned, there was no substance to McCain's speech, a view [echoed by Barack Obama](#).

John points out that a [CBS poll](#) shows that the race between Obama and McCain is now a tie.

Emily says Palin is [the tar baby](#) of this presidential election: If Democrats keep verbally punching her, they will get stuck.

The three discuss the [debate over Palin as working mom](#).

Emily chatters about her newly acquired [koi](#). She says they appear to be multiplying at an alarming rate.

John discusses the season-opening loss of his beloved [Washington Redskins](#), noting that the team has not done well since they moved to their [new stadium](#), which opened in 1997.

David talks about Palin's high-school nickname, [Sarah Barracuda](#), and how the Republicans [got into trouble](#) for using the [Heart](#) song of the same name Thursday night.

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

Posted by Dale Willman on Sept. 5 at 7 p.m.

***Listen to the Gabfest for Aug. 29 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 wrap up the Democrats' big week in Denver. The news of John McCain's [vice-presidential pick Sarah Palin](#) came in during the taping, so the gabbers give their first impressions.

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

Posted by Andy Bowers on Aug. 29 at 4:18 p.m.

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**hot document**

**Lehman Brothers' Bankruptcy Petition**

Anybody got a spare \$613 billion?

By Bonnie Goldstein

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 4:09 PM ET

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**From:** Bonnie Goldstein

Posted Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 4:09 PM ET

On Sept. 15, [Lehman Bros. Holdings](#) petitioned the U.S. Bankruptcy Court to allow the company to work out a plan under [Chapter 11 of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code](#) to repay \$613 billion in debt (excerpts below and on the following 10 pages; full petition ). Lehman, until this week one of America's [most admired](#) businesses, owes "over 100,000" unsecured creditors (below). The financial services company's "30 largest unsecured claims" (Pages 3-10) include \$156 billion in investment [bonds](#) (Pages 3-4); nearly \$17 billion in loans from Japanese banks; unpaid notes from lenders in Australia, Taiwan, Singapore, Korea, and Norway; and loans from a handful of American institutions.

Under supervision of the court, the investment bank has begun to [sell off assets](#) that were worth \$639 billion as recently as May 31 (Page 11). They are worth far less now.

Send Hot Document ideas to [documents@slate.com](mailto:documents@slate.com).

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Posted Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 4:09 PM ET

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military research field called [STTW](#), usually translated as "sense-through-the-wall." Has this ability been extended to a distance that allows it to be used by aerial drones?

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Posted Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 4:09 PM ET

Fozzy cites a March 2008 Army [technical report](#) on the latest progress in STTW radar methods. (Warning: Most of the documents I'm linking to here are PDFs, and some take a long time to open.) With a few more clicks, I pulled up an [April 2008 report](#) from the same research team. Both reports focus on "detecting and identifying humans enclosed in building structures." "Through-the-wall sensing is currently a topic of great interest to defense agencies both in the U.S. and abroad," says the April report. "The U.S. Army Research Laboratory (ARL) has been active in all these fields of investigation, approaching these issues both through hardware design and radar measurements and through computer simulation of various STTW scenarios."

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Posted Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 4:09 PM ET

STTW has been around for a while. A 2006 report from the [National Defense University](#) mentions a DARPA system that can "detect the presence of personnel within rooms (stated to be successful through 12 inches of concrete)," as well as a commercially developed system with a "30-foot standoff capability." The next step, to protect U.S. personnel, is to put the technology on "[unattended](#)" mobile devices. Since the initial context is urban warfare, the pioneering client is the Army, and the introductory platform is unmanned [ground vehicles](#). But the goal is to increase "[standoff distance](#)" and spread the technology to other platforms.

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Posted Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 4:09 PM ET

Meanwhile, up in the air, drone designers have been struggling with a similar problem: seeing through "[darkness, bad weather, and tree canopies](#)." The crucial contribution drones have made in Iraq—providing [instant, on-demand customized video](#) to ground forces—doesn't work where the drones' cameras can't see. So American engineers are developing radar that [penetrates](#) outdoor obstacles.

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## human nature Nowhere To Hide

Killer drones that can see through walls.

By William Saletan

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 11:49 AM ET

For the last couple of days, in the Human Nature [blog](#), I've been looking into a breakthrough [cryptically reported](#) in Iraq and Afghanistan: the ability of U.S. unmanned aerial vehicles to identify and track human targets "[even when they are inside buildings](#)." Several [recently reported technologies](#) might account for it, but *Slate* reader [fozzy](#) suggests looking for the answer in a

What seems to be happening is that these two projects—STTW and UAVs—are converging. In other words, unmanned vehicles that can see through walls. In some planning documents, the merger is explicit. A 2006 "[Operational Needs Statement](#)" from the military's [Joint Urban Operations Office](#) calls for a "STTW sensor mountable on both manned and unmanned vehicles," including "UAV platforms." A Navy bulletin calls for the [same thing](#).

Conceptually, the merger serves every tactical objective. It increases standoff distance and mobility. It makes aerial drones useful in bad weather and urban settings. It also integrates them into a more ambitious plan: to see the enemy through every wall, not just one. A 2005 DARPA report, for example, proposes to "image through multiple walls and even penetrate whole buildings using [distributed sensors on or around buildings](#)," with UAVs assisting ground forces. A 2007 Army Research Lab

study explores the ability of ground sensors, working with UAVs, to capture "images from [different angles](#)," thereby providing "intelligence on the configuration, content, and human presence inside enclosed areas (buildings)."

Three years ago, according to a defense contractor, the goal was to extend STTW capability to "[distances in excess of 100 m](#)," which would start to bring UAVs into the game. Boeing was in discussions to put STTW radar into a UAV. The Army was seeking "a suitable lightweight and compact imaging sensor to be hosted by the [Camcopter](#)-small UAV, capable of lifting 65 lbs of payload." The requirement for true aerial mobility was to make the system "lightweight (less than 30 lbs) and portable (less than 4 cubic feet)."

That sounds a lot like the mystery devices now being placed aboard drones in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the *Los Angeles Times* [describes](#) them, "The devices are roughly the size of an automobile battery, but are heavy enough that outfitted Predators in some cases carry only one Hellfire missile instead of two." The effect of these devices, according to a former U.S. military official interviewed by the *Times*, is that insurgents, even indoors, "are living with a red dot on their head."

Cool, huh? Except that if their walls are now transparent, so are yours. As fozzy astutely asks: "What happens when the government '[brings this technology home](#)'?" And do you think our government is the only one merging STTW with UAVs? Heck, even the Canadians are well into it. "We will put the UWB radar on mobile platforms such as robots or unmanned airborne vehicle," says a 2002 report from [Defence R&D Canada](#). "We are confident that a through-the-roof surveillance capability could be implemented using UWB radars installed on helicopters or small UAV."

Congratulations. The good news is, we might win in Iraq and Afghanistan after all. The bad news is, now we all have red dots on our heads.

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## human nature

### Evolving Predators

Clues to the growing power of military drones.

By William Saletan

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 7:42 AM ET

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## juicy bits

### Cheney Unchained

The best details from Barton Gellman's new book on the vice president.

By Juliet Lapidus

Thursday, September 18, 2008, at 5:26 PM ET

It's often said on late-night TV that given Dick Cheney's cardiovascular problems, George W. Bush is just a heartbeat away from the presidency. In his new book, *Angler*, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Barton Gellman suggests that this joke contains more than just a grain of truth. By immersing himself in details about national security and numerous other hot-button issues that the president was too lazy or too incurious to study, Cheney often managed to position himself as the real "decider."

For those of you who are too lazy or too incurious to read Gellman's lengthy exposé, *Slate* has put together a breezy executive summary. Grab a copy of *Angler* from the nearest bookstore and skim along.

### How To Hire Yourself

As is well-known, Bush tapped Cheney to head his VP search during the 2000 campaign. Cheney asked a few contenders to fill out lengthy questionnaires, turn over copies of all medical records, and reveal any events that might leave them "vulnerable to blackmail or coercion." He pocketed this sensitive information and then tapped himself. As a result, no one ever vetted the veep.

Page 22: Cheney short-listed a few rival candidates, but Bush never "held a face-to-face interview for the job" with any of them.

Page 23: David J. Gribbin, an old friend of Cheney's who was on the initial vetting committee, told Gellman: "I don't know who vetted Cheney or what process they used. It was not something I was involved in or that anybody ever told me. At some point there was a decision that all these names were going to be set aside, and they were going to select Cheney. It was a shock to me."

Page 25: Bush claimed he commissioned an independent review of his running mate's fitness, but that's not quite true. Denton A. Cooley, an acquaintance of Bush senior and the founder of the Texas Heart Institute, called up Cheney's physician, who offered a "personal assurance that his [patient's] cardiac status was sound." Cooley never looked "at Cheney's films, electrocardiac data, or any other records."

### Deadly Dick and the Star Chamber

Page 160: Cheney earned several nicknames at the White House. Bush just called him "Veep"; after his hunting accident he was known as "Deadly Dick." The most prevalent was "Dark Side," but perhaps the most apt was "Management," as in, "Better check with Management first."

Page 74: According to Cheney staffer Candi Wolff, "a lot of people" called Cheney's Senate office "the Star Chamber" after the court that heard treason cases in medieval England. She added: "Like it was some torture thing. It was this feeling of ... if you have to go see him you must have been bad."

Page 244: Gellman writes that, on a typical day, Cheney would wake up at 5:45 a.m. to browse "newspapers during his workout on an elliptical trainer." At 7 a.m., Scooter Libby would arrive, and then a CIA analyst would walk "them through the President's Daily Brief"—a classified newsletter on recent intelligence. He'd attend the same briefing an hour later at the Oval Office and draw Bush's attention to subjects he found interesting.

Page 189: After serving as Condoleezza Rice's legal adviser for three years, John Bellinger realized that "every time he wrote a memo to his boss, a blind copy was routed to the vice president's office." According to another official, Cheney's chief of staff, I. Lewis Libby, "made the [blind copy] arrangement with Steve Hadley, Rice's deputy. It was not advertised, and neither was it reciprocated: what happened in Cheney's office stayed in Cheney's office."

### **The Road to Iraq**

Pages 217-19: In September 2002, House Majority Leader Dick Armey said publicly that he saw no need for war with Iraq, so Cheney called him into his office for a little chat. "For a full hour he walked the majority leader through a blood-chilling narrative, the graphics produced on cue by a military aide. The vice president by then had dialed up his public rhetoric, warning not only that Saddam had an arsenal but that 'the United States may well become the target.'" Armey told Gellman, "The upshot of the briefing is, it's a gathering threat that's really *more* imminent than we want to portray to the public at large. ... [The Iraqis] were developing weapons, they were miniaturizing weapons, developing packages that could be moved even by ground personnel." Armey left the meeting feeling "a very deep sadness" about his relationship with Cheney and suspecting that he'd "just got a good BS'ing," but he voted for war anyway.

Pages 231-32: Cheney, Gellman contends, "did not press for war with Iraq because Saddam really topped the list of 'grave and gathering threats,' as he led the Bush administration in asserting." According to Cheney's deputy assistant for national security affairs, Aaron Friedberg, the vice president wanted to show that "we were able and willing to strike at someone. That sends a very powerful message."

Page 250: Although Cheney was one of the chief architects of the war, he had his doubts. Directly before the invasion, military historian Victor Davis Hanson said Cheney was "reflective, quiet, sober. ... He was very depressed about both the options of

going to war and not going to war. He didn't think either were good options."

### **Torture Guidelines**

Page 177: John Yoo, who worked in the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel from 2001 until 2003, rejected only one proposed investigation technique on legal grounds. He said that "the CIA could not bury a subject alive, even if it planned to dig him back up in time."

### **Warrantless Wiretapping**

Page 292: National Security Agency Director Michael Hayden was worried he'd get hauled before a congressional committee over his agency's surveillance program. When Deputy Attorney General Jim Comey got his first briefing on the subject, Hayden said, "I'm so glad you're getting read in, because now I won't be alone at the table when John Kerry is elected president."

Page 308: David Addington, Cheney's legal counsel, hated keeping the FISA court even partially in the loop about the NSA's surveillance program. He once said, "We're one bomb away from getting rid of that obnoxious court."

Page 294: After Jack Goldsmith of the Office of Legal Counsel refused to certify the NSA's program, David Addington tried pressure tactics: "If you rule that way, the blood of the hundred thousand people who die in the next attack will be on your hands."

Page 322: The top echelon of the Justice Department came very close to resigning over the NSA controversy. Mark Corallo, John Ashcroft's communications director, told Gellman that Bush's presidency couldn't have survived the ordeal. "You know, one guy resigns on principle and it can be uncomfortable, it can even be damaging. If six or seven of your top lawyers—and, excuse me, think about this. And this is the truth. If John Ashcroft resigned, the entire political leadership of the Justice Department goes with him. ... We would have all walked out the door, because we would have said, 'If this is big enough for Ashcroft to resign over, we're all out of here.' ... The rush to hearings on the Hill, both in the House and Senate, would be unbelievable. The media frenzy that would have ensued would have been unlike anything we've ever seen. That's when you're getting into Watergate territory."

Page 318: After months of squabbling with David Addington over the NSA program, Jim Comey had a one-on-one meeting with Bush about his misgivings. The president, it seems, had been left entirely out of the loop over the controversy; he complained to Comey, "I just wish you weren't raising this at the last minute." He didn't realize that Comey, along with every

other political appointee at the Justice Department, was on the brink of resignation.

## Succession Plan

Cheney and his staffers, especially legal counsel David Addington, were obsessed with the possibility of a "decapitating attack on Washington"—that is, what would happen if the president were to die.

Page 154-155: David Addington carried the Constitution in his suit jacket as well as note cards with "all the executive orders and statutes on succession."

Page 158: Addington didn't like the idea that the speaker of the House and the president pro tempore of the Senate are included in the order of succession. An unnamed Cheney admirer told Gellman that the vice president and his staff had "plans" for an alternate succession, "and their plans were going to be by fiat."

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## jurisprudence Mistaken Authority

Congress should say no to Bush's last-gasp bid for more executive power.  
By Neal Katyal and Justin Florence  
Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 4:20 PM ET

Seven years ago Thursday, Congress passed a [statute](#) in response to the horrible attacks of 9/11, inflicted on our nation the week before. That law became the basis for sweeping assertions of government power, including warrantless wiretapping, detentions in the continental United States and at Guantanamo Bay, targeted assassinations, extraordinary renditions, and coercive interrogations. Now, in the few days it has left, the Bush administration wants to expand this law. That would be a mistake.

We are not referring to the USA Patriot Act, passed in October 2001, which quickly became a proxy for the administration's civil-liberties controversies. (As Al Gore put it, "I believe that the Patriot Act ... became a kind of Tonkin Gulf Resolution conferring Congress' blessing for this president's assault on civil liberties.") Instead, we write about the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force—viewed at the time simply as congressional approval for a military response in Afghanistan. While the Patriot Act comprises more than 100 sections and more than 50,000 words, the AUMF is just two short sections and a few dozen words.

Although you would not know it from comparing the public responses to these two laws, the Bush administration has

depended on the AUMF, not the Patriot Act, to authorize its boldest practices. Now, President Bush and his supporters in Congress are seeking a new AUMF because even conservative judges on the federal courts have trimmed the exaggerated readings that the administration has given the 2001 law.

Why would the Bush administration seek to renew these powers as it exits office, with the possibility of a Democratic presidency a few months away? Two reasons. First, in light of the Supreme Court's decision last June in the latest Guantanamo case, [Boumediene v. Bush](#), habeas petitions filed by the Guantanamo detainees are moving through the courts. And for the first time since detainees were brought to Guantanamo more than five years ago, the federal courts have undisputed authority to inquire into the government's legal authority to hold people—there are no more jurisdictional hurdles that the government can erect. That's reason for the administration to want to bolster its authority to hold some people who were either captured away from the battlefield or had little to do with 9/11. A second reason for the administration's interest may be its belief that grants of war powers to the president are a one-way ratchet: If Congress agrees now, it will be harder in future to dial back.

But reaffirming or expanding the AUMF would pose a number of dangers. The AUMF broadly states that the president may use "all necessary and appropriate force" to prevent future terrorist attacks. That breadth of language led the administration to claim the AUMF authorized a vast range of practices, such as warrantless wiretapping, that Congress never had any inkling of when it passed the law. Only some of those programs have come to light; we know little about what else lurks under the auspices of the AUMF.

The AUMF also has no time limit. The consequences are revealed in the administration's claims that it can detain an individual indefinitely in the war on terror, even after he has completely served the sentence imposed on him by a jury in a military tribunal. A law giving the president perpetual war powers is an anomaly in our constitutional system. Moreover, the AUMF gives Congress no ongoing oversight role in the war on terror. It does not mandate that the administration report to Congress on what it has done.

Consider how all of this contrasts with the much-maligned Patriot Act. Although the Patriot Act authorizes some detentions and additional surveillance, it does so with specificity, detailing what the government can do, to whom, and for how long. Because the Patriot Act spells out explicitly what the law is, the public and Congress can openly debate its merits. The Patriot Act's detailed enumeration of new anti-terrorism laws allowed critics to know where to attack—it lays out a tangible and fixed target. This is precisely the system our founders envisioned.

The AUMF has avoided political scrutiny because nobody, including members of Congress, knows what it allegedly



authorizes. In many cases, including its warrantless surveillance program, the administration has never publicly acknowledged the policies it bases on the AUMF. In addition, the Patriot Act's sunset provision, requiring Congress to revisit it in 2005, gave lawmakers an opportunity to correct some potential civil-liberties abuses, including sneak-and-peek searches and roving wiretaps. And the Patriot Act includes reporting requirements, so that the administration must inform Congress about what it's doing. The Patriot Act is not perfect, but it is a far better model than the rush-job AUMF.

The new legislation before Congress would reaffirm "that the United States is in an armed conflict with al Qaeda, the Taliban, and associated forces and that those entities continue to pose a threat to the United States and its citizens, both domestically and abroad." In addition, the new bill would explicitly confer broad and novel preventive-detention authority on the president. It also "reaffirms" that "the President is authorized to detain enemy combatants in connection with the continuing armed conflict with al Qaeda, the Taliban, and associated forces, regardless of the place of capture, until the termination of hostilities."

Congress has never really done this before in the War on Terror, other than through the extremely limited provisions in the Patriot Act. Neither the original AUMF, nor subsequent legislation about the legal rights of the Guantanamo detainees (the 2005 Detainee Treatment Act or the 2006 Military Commissions Act), explicitly authorizes the president to detain a group of people.

The phrasing of the new legislation has several aims. First, "reaffirm" acts as if the president already had this authority for detentions that are now being challenged in court, when in fact he didn't. Second, the language about "continuing armed conflict" and "associated forces" expands the scope of the original AUMF—those who attacked us on 9/11—to any number of interlinked groups around the world. Third, "regardless of the place of capture" would give the president authority to detain people right here in the United States, a power that has been hotly contested in the court cases of [Jose Padilla](#) and [Ali al-Marri](#). And, fourth, "until the termination of hostilities" would provide for indefinite detention, purportedly preventing courts from imposing any sort of time limits.

Seven years ago, the AUMF made sense as an immediate response to 9/11. But now it can no longer be the legal foundation for the war on terror. Rather than doubling down by expanding the law, Congress should work with the next administration to lay out a clear statutory framework for what powers the president has, who exactly we are engaged in armed conflict with, and how long these powers may be used. Two must-haves: a sunset provision and detailed reporting requirements so that Congress knows what the president is doing in implementing the law. In fact, the Patriot Act just might serve as a pretty good model.

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## jurisprudence

### Justice Barracuda?

Why John McCain should put Sarah Palin on the Supreme Court.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Saturday, September 13, 2008, at 7:49 AM ET

If there is a lesson to be learned about Sarah Palin's dizzying political ascent, it's that America really, really loathes Washington insiders, especially those tasked with working inside Washington. The surest way to affront the American voter is to offer up a candidate with an Ivy League education, experience inside the Beltway, and robust D.C. connections. If Palin stands for anything, it's that when it comes to both the presidency and Pixar movies, nothing good ever happens until the stranger comes to town.

But while our contempt for the Washington life touches everyone in the legislative and executive branches, it's become almost a job requirement at the Supreme Court. This third branch of government is wildly overrepresented by insider lawyers with identical résumés. Sure, you can swap out one Ivy League law school for another, but beyond that, the bench is ever more populated by folks like Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas, John Roberts, and Samuel Alito—brilliant legal thinkers whose chief job experience has consisted of work for the executive branch followed by a stint on the federal bench. It's not that these are bad qualities in a jurist. It's just that a court that once included governors and senators and former football stars is now overrun by an elite cadre of mostly male, mostly East Coast lawyers. If ever there were a branch of government crying out for jurists with checkered and varied life experiences, it's the Supreme Court. And if any branch of government is in need of a mother of five who likes shooting wolves from helicopters, the court is it.

It's not just that Palin would be great for the ever stuffier Supreme Court. Closer scrutiny suggests that the Supreme Court might actually be a better fit for Gov. Palin. Consider her interests: Palin has little background in national security, health care, immigration, or foreign policy. Her main concerns have been the hot-button social issues that cannot be settled by fiat in the executive branch. Palin wants to do away with abortion and strongly opposes gay marriage. She supports teaching creationism in schools and believes in promoting religious free expression. These are constitutional issues on which Republican presidents have been thwarted for decades and on which she would offer swift and certain fixes from the court. Since the Supreme Court has often been the lone defender of the rights of women, gay couples, and atheists, installing a Sarah Palin there would do far more to undo these things than getting her into the White House ever could.

The office of the vice president may actually be the one place in which Palin's status as the pre-eminent D.C. outsider would be more a hindrance than a help. Whatever your views of Washington insiders, some knowledge of the ins and outs of Congress, the various agencies, NGOs, and lobbyists is clearly helpful in a vice president. This kind of granular understanding of how D.C. actually functions made both Al Gore and Dick Cheney such powerful vice presidents. Failure to understand it wrecked the political careers of Harriet Miers and Alberto Gonzales. Why should McCain play to Palin's weaknesses when he can capitalize on her strengths?

Sarah Palin is well aware of the awesome power of the courts. That's why, when the Alaska Supreme Court struck down a controversial abortion restriction last year by a 3-2 margin, she excoriated them for "legislating from the bench," named a new justice to the court, and pushed for the passage of an even harsher version of the same law, explicitly intended—said its sponsor—"to overturn (the Alaska Supreme Court)." Gov. Palin understands the fundamental tediousness of constitutional checks and balances. She knows that if a court gets it wrong, you just build a better one.

And finally, Palin has revealed, both as the mayor of the small Alaska town of Wasilla and then again as the chief executive of Alaska, a style of governance that features the not-infrequent firing of dissenters. Among the growing list of those dismissed or threatened with removal on Palin's watch were Mary Ellen Emmons, the Wasilla town librarian and vociferous opponent of Palin's proposal to dabble in book banning, and John Bitney, Palin's legislative director, who was dating the not-yet-quite-ex-wife of one of her husband's friends. Palin is also the subject of an ethics investigation for firing Walt Monegan, the Alaska public safety commissioner who declined to fire the state trooper divorcing her sister. I can't help but wonder if following two years of scandals surrounding Bush administration terminations of nine U.S. attorneys for their imagined disloyalty, John McCain might be nervous about installing a vice president with a proclivity toward doing the same thing. If McCain puts Palin on the Supreme Court, however, she has only a trio of law clerks and a secretary to hire, and each can be vetted for ideological purity. Once installed at the high court, Justice Palin need never again encounter a subordinate who would offer a point of view that differs from her own.

No fair arguing that Sarah Palin isn't experienced enough to sit on the highest court of the land. What matters—far more than experience—is one's unyielding moral certainty; one's gender, and being "relatable." And Palin has these qualities in spades. Washington's old-boy problem hardly begins and ends at the Oval Office. If ever there were a D.C. institution in dire need of a place to plug in a breast pump, it's the Supreme Court. And Sarah Palin has already proven that neither the courts, nor precedent, nor even the Constitution itself will be a match for the force of her will. In Sarah Palin, John McCain has found

someone perfectly suited to put the "law" back into scofflaw. He shouldn't waste her talents on state funerals and photo ops.

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

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## map the candidates Strategy Flip

Convinced that Iowa is back in play, the McCain campaign sends Palin to the state.

By E.J. Kalafarski and Chadwick Matlin

Thursday, September 18, 2008, at 10:56 AM ET

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## moneybox

### "The Fundamentals of Our Economy Are Strong"

Is there any excuse for McCain's gaffe?

By Daniel Gross

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 11:51 AM ET

*Listen to Daniel Gross in an audio podcast, "Everyday I Read the Book," by pushing the play button below or downloading the podcast [here](#):*

John McCain set off a firestorm Monday when he [said](#), "The fundamentals of our economy are strong," while also noting that these are tough times. McCain, for whom the economy is not comfortable terrain, was simply repeating a formulation he's used before. In August, he [told](#) radio host Laura Ingraham, "I still believe the fundamentals of our economy are strong. We've got terribly big challenges now, whether it be housing or employment or so many of the other—health care. It's very, very tough times."

Commenting on the seaworthiness of the nation's economic ship even as it is being swamped by gale-driven waves is a staple of the modern presidency. When there's upheaval in the markets or a discouraging run of economic news, the president or the Treasury secretary trudges out to tell us to remain calm. On Monday, as Lehman Brothers was filing for bankruptcy, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson [said](#), "Well, as you know, we're working through a difficult period in our financial markets right now as we work off some of the past excesses. But the American people can remain confident in the soundness and the resilience of our financial system." After 9/11, President Bush told a press conference, "I want to assure the American people that the fundamentals for growth are very strong." Treasury Undersecretary John Taylor told reporters on Oct. 4, 2001,

"[O]ur basic fundamentals are very sound." In December 1991, with the economy stubbornly refusing to get out of its funk, President Bush the elder declared in a speech, "I remain convinced America's fundamentals are sound—not just the economic indicators that I mentioned a few moments ago, but the broad fundamentals that sustain American society." In October 1987, when the stock market crashed, Ronald Reagan reassured the public that "the economic fundamentals remain sound."

It's ironic that presidents (and would-be presidents) would continue to use such phrasing, because the president who seems to have minted the phrase is the one with the worst economic record of all time: Herbert Hoover. In the wake of a big stock-market downdraft, Hoover on Thursday, Oct. 24, 1929, proclaimed, "The fundamental business of the country, that is, production and distribution of commodities, is on a sound and prosperous basis." (The worst Depression-era attempt to calm Americans came from plutocratic Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon, in early 1930: "I see nothing in the present situation that is either menacing or warrants pessimism.")

It's easy to see why leaders resort to such banal, swaddling language in times of stress. It's a way of changing the conversation, redirecting attention away from the debacle du jour and tapping into Americans' basic pride and faith in their system. Yes, some of the numbers are less than optimal. But this too shall pass. A few windows may have been blown out, but the foundation of the building is just fine. One rarely hears protestations of soundness when the economy is doing well—the numbers and the markets speak for themselves.

The question remains: Are the fundamentals sound? Was McCain right, or hopelessly rosy-eyed? It depends on which fundamentals you want to emphasize. There are times when all the fundamentals are unsound, as was the case in 1931. And there are times when all the fundamentals appear to be sound, as was the case in the mid- to late 1990s. The rest of the time, the fundamentals reside somewhere between the two poles (the left pole signifying we're totally screwed and the right pole signifying that happy days are here again). Today, we're closer to being totally screwed.

Consider: The United States needs to create about 150,000 jobs per month just to keep pace with growing population. When [payroll jobs](#) fall for eight straight months and the unemployment rate spikes, and when [new weekly unemployment claims](#) remain above 400,000, the economy may not be fundamentally sound.

When [inflation](#) in the past 12 months has run at 5.4 percent, well over twice the level with which central bankers are comfortable, the economy may not be fundamentally sound.

When [foreclosures](#) are running at record rates and [housing prices fall by nearly 16 percent year over year](#), the economy may not be fundamentally sound.

When the two largest financial institutions in the nation, which guarantee about half of the mortgages, [fail and have to be taken over by the government](#), when the fourth-largest investment bank [files for Chapter 11](#), and when the Federal Reserve [effectively nationalizes a massive insurance firm that is a component of the Dow Jones Industrial Average](#), the economy may not be fundamentally sound.

In an economy in which consumption constitutes 70 percent of activity, [retail sales falling two months in a row](#) may indicate that the economy might not be fundamentally sound.

When [industrial production decreases](#), the economy may not be fundamentally sound.

When the nation's three major automakers, some of the largest remaining manufacturing entities, report sales declines of more than 20 percent and [beg the taxpayers for loans](#), the economy may not be fundamentally sound.

The litany of bad news has to be weighed against good news, of course.

When gross domestic product [grows at a 3.3 percent annual rate](#) despite weathering a series of shocks, the economy may be fundamentally sound.

When inflation [shows signs of moderating](#) and the prices of important commodities return to more reasonable levels, the economy may be fundamentally sound.

When [exports rise 20 percent from year-ago levels](#), the economy may be fundamentally sound.

When \$3.5 trillion is [parked in money market mutual funds](#) and corporations have vast piles of cash sitting on their balance sheets, it's an indication that money remains available for investment and consumption, and that the economy may be fundamentally sound.

On the whole, however, a reasonable observer would have to conclude that, on balance, the fundamentals of the U.S. economy are less than sound. And even John McCain has recognized his mistake. After a day of withering criticism, he abandoned his previous position. Now he's calling the situation "a total crisis."

*With research assistance from Slate interns Sophie Gilbert and Abby Callard.*

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moneybox

## How Not To Lose Everything

Merrill Lynch miraculously avoids the fate of Lehman Brothers.

By Henry Blodget

Monday, September 15, 2008, at 10:14 PM ET

Over the past year, Merrill Lynch and Lehman Brothers have provided a crash course in how to destroy century-old Wall Street firms. One company's shareholders are walking away with a \$50 billion consolation prize in the form of a merger with Bank of America, however, and the other's are getting hosed.

The difference is that Merrill Lynch's CEO, John Thain, played his cards wisely, while Lehman's CEO, Dick Fuld—along with the CEOs of Bear Stearns, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Washington Mutual, and many other financial-services companies—didn't.

Merrill's Thain is a former president of Goldman Sachs and CEO of the New York Stock Exchange. He was brought into Merrill last fall to fix the damage wrought by his predecessor, Stan O'Neal, the man who bears primary responsibility for Merrill's collapse. Thain's decisions can't be evaluated without understanding what he found when he got there, so here's some quick history.

O'Neal took over Merrill in late 2001, a few months before I left (I'd been a tech-stock analyst in the firm's research department since 1999). Merrill had previously been run by a charming bull of a man named David Komansky (think Tony Soprano meets Ralph Kramden), who was the last in a line of CEOs who oversaw a familial culture known as "Mother Merrill."

Merrill's ranks during the Komansky years were as hefty as he was, and O'Neal's first move upon seizing power was to fire about one-third of the firm. He replaced most of Merrill's senior managers with younger, more aggressive executives. He moved away from steady, fee-based businesses in favor of riskier origination and trading. And he took more risk with the firm's capital.

For several years, O'Neal's strategy was phenomenally successful: In rising markets, the firm minted money, and its stock soared to almost \$100 a share. When the real-estate market finally broke, however, the subprime-mortgage securities and other products Merrill had been selling began to pile up on its balance sheet. A few quarters later, when the value of these securities had plunged, Merrill was forced to take a massive write-off, and Stan O'Neal was gone.

Enter John Thain.

When Thain arrived at Merrill, he did what almost every incoming CEO does: flushed the memory of his predecessor with another massive write-off. Thain also raised billions of dollars of new capital to replace the money O'Neal's mortgage-gambling operation had lost. When he finished with this housecleaning, Thain pronounced his new firm in solid shape. And, for a few minutes, it was.

Over the next few quarters, however, as the real-estate and credit markets slid toward the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, the value of Merrill's assets continued to deteriorate. Soon analysts began to clamor that Thain hadn't done enough, that the firm needed to take more write-offs and raise more capital.

The same thing, of course, was happening across the entire financial-services industry. Thain, in other words, had been dealt a tough hand, but, unlike his compatriots at Bear, Lehman, Fannie, Freddie, and other firms, he played it well. Specifically, instead of blaming skeptics and short-sellers for Merrill's sagging stock price, Thain focused on strengthening the firm's balance sheet. Several times over the next few quarters, he swallowed his pride, took more enormous write-offs, and raised even more capital.

Over at Lehman, meanwhile, CEO Dick Fuld was dealing with the same problems and implementing the same solutions—but always a step behind.

Unlike Thain, Fuld hadn't been brought in to fix Lehman—he had built it. So, making the aggressive "de-risking" moves Thain was making would have meant dismantling his own aggressive growth and leverage strategy. It's unclear whether it was a reluctance to own up to his own mistakes that doomed Fuld or just a failure to recognize how rapidly the markets were deteriorating. Regardless, toward the end of last week, when Fuld finally realized how far up a creek he and Lehman were, it was too late.

The events of last weekend will forever be seared in Wall Street history: To have not one but two major brokerage firms nearly fail at the same time has, to my knowledge, never happened before, not even after the crash of 1929, and it's not likely to ever happen again.

Going into the weekend, Merrill's stock had already fallen to \$17. By Sunday afternoon, with Lehman's last hope to save itself having fallen through, it seemed as though the resulting market carnage might take Merrill right down to zero.

Once again, however, Thain played his weak cards wisely: Instead of wasting another precious day explaining to investors

why the market was wrong and the firm's balance sheet was strong, Thain acted. And this time, he fixed Merrill's problem once and for all.

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## moneybox

### Shattering the Glass-Steagall

The rise of the commercial banks.

By Daniel Gross

Monday, September 15, 2008, at 3:24 PM ET

Aside from signaling the end of an era for Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch, this weekend's activity definitively drew a line at the end of another historical era: the Age of Glass-Steagall.

The [Glass-Steagall Act](#) is the Depression-era law that separated commercial and investment banking. It was functionally repealed in 1998, when Travelers (the parent company of Salomon Smith Barney) acquired Citicorp. And it was officially repealed in 1999. But recent events on Wall Street—the failure or sale of three of the five largest independent investment banks—have effectively turned back the clock to the 1920s, when investment banks and commercial banks cohabited under the same corporate umbrella.

Glass-Steagall was one of the many necessary measures taken by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Democratic Congress to deal with the Great Depression. Crudely speaking, in the 1920s commercial banks (the types that took deposits, made construction loans, etc.) recklessly plunged into the bull market, making margin loans, underwriting new issues and investment pools, and trading stocks. When the bubble popped in 1929, exposure to Wall Street helped drag down the commercial banks. In the absence of deposit insurance and other backstops, the results were devastating. Wall Street's failure helped destroy Main Street.

The policy response was to erect a wall between investment banking and commercial banking. It outlasted the Berlin Wall by a few decades. In the 1990s, as another bull market took hold, momentum built to overturn Glass-Steagall. Commercial banks were eager to get into high-margin businesses like underwriting hot tech stocks. Brokerage firms saw commercial banks, with their massive customer bases, as great distribution channels for stocks, mutual funds, and other financial products that they created. Generally speaking, the investment banks were the aggressors. In April 1998, Sandy Weill's Travelers, which owned Salomon Smith Barney, merged with Citicorp. The following year, Congress passed and President Clinton signed the [Financial Services Modernization Act of 1999](#), known as the Gramm-

Leach-Bliley Act. This law effectively deleted the prohibition on commercial banks owning investment banks and vice versa.

Since then, the two industries have come together to a degree. And generally, the investment banks, which weren't subject to regulation by the Federal Reserve and didn't have to adhere to stodgy capital requirements, have been the alpha dogs. In 2000, the investment banking firm J.P. Morgan [bought](#) commercial bank Chase. Commercial banks like Bank of America and Wachovia have tried to build up their own investment-banking operations, but they haven't had much success in eating into the core franchises of the five big independent investment banks: Merrill Lynch, Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, Lehman Brothers, and Bear Stearns.

Up until the summer of 2007, the debt-powered independent broker-dealers who minted money with stock brokering, proprietary trading, and advising on mergers and acquisitions looked set to leave boring commercial banks in their dust. But 2008 has been another story. In March, faltering Bear Stearns was [swallowed](#) by JPMorgan Chase. Lehman has gone bankrupt. Now the investment bank with the largest brokerage force, Merrill Lynch, is [being bought](#) by Bank of America. The historic democratizer of stock ownership will henceforth be owned by the historic democratizer of credit.

And then there were two: Goldman Sachs (Wall Street's last great partnership until it went public a few years ago) and [Morgan Stanley](#) (a portion of the House of Morgan that was [set up](#) as an independent entity after Glass-Steagall). But there are now [doubts](#) as to whether even these titans can survive as independents. The reason: In the wake of the global credit crunch, the investments banks' 2006 source of relative strength has become a major 2008 weakness. Investment banks are creatures of the global capital markets. They can borrow seemingly unlimited amounts of funds from investors around the world and deploy them as they see fit. By contrast, fuddy-duddy commercial banks, which borrowed money from their depositors, from the Federal Reserve, and from outfits like the Federal Home Loan Banks, accepted greater restrictions on the amount of leverage they could use. Between 2001 and 2006, that meant investment banks were better businesses to own than commercial banks. In today's climate, that means highly leveraged independent investment banks now face continuing struggles to finance their operations while less-leveraged commercial banks enjoy relatively stable sources of capital. The alpha dogs have essentially turned tail and are now scared of their own shadows. After today's press conference announcing the sale of once-proud Merrill Lynch to Bank of America, Merrill CEO John Thain, one of the biggest shots on Wall Street in the last decade, practically scurried—*scurried!*—away as a reporter called out to bid him farewell and wish him luck.

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## movies

### Dead People Are Irritating

The new Ricky Gervais comedy, *Ghost Town*.

By Dana Stevens

Thursday, September 18, 2008, at 11:42 AM ET

*Ghost Town* (DreamWorks), a romantic comedy about a haunted dentist in New York City, doesn't do justice to the manifold gifts of Ricky Gervais, the co-creator and star of the BBC series *The Office* and HBO's *Extras*. Then again, giving Gervais the American star vehicle he deserves might be too much to ask. When he's performing his own material according to his own rules, Gervais is capable of comic sublimity. (I'm one of those *Office* purists who still refuses to watch the American version; why remake perfection?) He's less at ease in the lab-rat maze of a formulaic romance. Still, *Ghost Town* has inspired casting, a few memorable scenes, and enough laughs that mainstream U.S. audiences may finally get the point of that doughy English guy with the pointy canine teeth and the high-pitched giggle.

The story meeting for this movie must have run long. It's *The Sixth Sense* played for laughs! It's *A Christmas Carol* if Scrooge were a dentist! There's hardly a ghost-themed movie of the last century that doesn't contribute at least something to the mix. But most of all, *Ghost Town* recalls the 1937 film *Topper*, in which Cary Grant and Constance Bennett played two debonair ghouls about town who return from the beyond to show the stuffy title character how to live a little.

*Ghost Town*'s chief revenant, like *Topper*'s, is a tuxedoed cad who regards being dead as a blasted inconvenience. Frank Herlihy (Greg Kinnear) happens to get run over by a bus on the same day that his wife, Gwen (Téa Leoni), discovers he's been cheating on her. Wandering the streets of New York, Frank realizes he's invisible to the living but surrounded by other unquiet souls with scores to settle. Meanwhile, Bertram Pincus (Gervais), a deeply misanthropic and perpetually angry dentist, is preparing to undergo a routine colonoscopy. After he briefly dies on the operating table (a fact withheld from him by his passive-aggressive doctor, a hilarious Kristen Wiig), Bertram wakes up with a paranormal gift. He sees dead people, and he finds them really irritating.

The stretch of the movie that follows, in which Frank convinces Bertram to prevent Gwen's upcoming wedding to a stodgy human rights lawyer (Billy Campbell), is an uphill climb. It's never clear why Frank, a fairly unpleasant fellow, is able to press his case more convincingly than all the other ghosts who besiege Bertram with their requests. And Gervais' character in the early scenes is so silent and dour that the actor has no chance to exercise the foot-in-mouth logorrhea that is his specialty.

But once Leoni's Gwen comes on the scene, the movie starts to bubble along nicely. Not just because Leoni is a screwball heroine worth, er, screwballing—at 42, she's more attractive than ever—but because her character is given a weight and texture that's rare in a movie of this type. Gwen is an up-and-coming Egyptologist who's curating a big show at the Met while quietly pining for her dead, unfaithful husband. She admires her lantern-jawed, do-gooding boyfriend but can't bring herself to laugh at his jokes. The scenes between Leoni and Gervais—most notably one in which they examine a mummy together—lift the occasionally pedestrian script to another level. It's a sad comment on the state of romantic comedy when you find yourself thinking: *Wow, in this one I can actually see why the two leads like each other!*

Every ghost story is really a story about mourning, which is why the genre will never die. David Koepp, directing from his own script, is best known as a screenwriter of blockbusters (*Spider-Man* and the last *Indiana Jones* movie), but he also made the delicately spooky 1999 thriller *Stir of Echoes*, which touched upon some of the same themes as *Ghost Town*: What do the living owe the dead, and how can those stuck on both sides of the divide learn to let go? *Ghost Town* doesn't rank among the great ghost-themed movies; it's no *Ugetsu* or *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. The metaphysical questions it does raise get resolved too quickly and neatly, even for a comedy. But the last two lines of dialogue may be the best kicker I've heard in a movie this year. They leave us convinced that Téa Leoni, catch that she is, could go weak in the knees for the likes of Ricky Gervais. If they're smart, American audiences will, too.

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## music box

### First Diva

Carla Bruni proves that it's possible to be too French.

By Jody Rosen

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 6:54 AM ET

If opinion polls are to be believed, the French are still ambivalent about their first lady, Carla Bruni. Bruni, of course, is a former supermodel and current multimillion-album-selling singer-songwriter, but she is still best-known for her avocation: wooing, and discarding, powerful men. Her conquests include rock stars (Mick Jagger, Eric Clapton); movie stars (Vincent Perez); film directors; writers; philosophers; and, in a previous foray into politics, Laurent Fabius, the socialist former prime minister. (Like many French of her generation, Bruni's tastes have drifted rightward as the years have passed.)

[Bruni](#) officially became Mrs. Nicolas Sarkozy\* in February, the culmination of a whirlwind courtship conducted in full public view, complete with [kissy-face photo ops in the shadow of the](#)

[Great Pyramid of Giza](#), strolls on the beach, and press conferences in which the *président de la République* ruminated on love and destiny and how great it is to date a smokin'-hot model babe. The affair, which seemed to flout all the cherished traditions of Gallic discretion, was seen by many commentators as evidence of the American-style tabloidization of French political life. The happy couple was photographed snuggling [on the streets of Euro Disney](#), *quand même*.

But say this for Bruni: As a musical artist, she is quintessentially, almost comically, French. Her extraordinary looks are merely par for the course, a uniform of severely angled bangs and cheekbones passed down to [Bruni](#) from [Juliette Greco](#), [Jane Birkin](#), and other chanteuses. Her sound is similarly *classique*. Bruni sings [folk-inflected pop songs with calming tempos and textures](#)—an ideal soundtrack for a languid lunch on a cafe terrace. Her lyrics mix confessions and meditations on love with the literary pretension that is a hallmark of the *chanson*. "[Raphaël](#)," from Bruni's 2004 debut *Quelqu'un m'a dit*, is a part love ode, part post-structuralist grammatical essay. Bruni sings: "*C'est le tréma qui m'ensorcelle dans le prénom de Raphaël/ Comme il se mêle au 'a' au 'e,' comme il les entremêle au 'l,' Raphaël*." (Rough translation: "It's the dieresis in Raphaël's name that bewitches me/ The way it mixes the 'a' with the 'e,' the way it entwines them with the 'l,' Raphaël.") Bruni's second album, *No Promises*, was an even more ambitious adventure in literary studies, with Bruni setting to music a dozen English-language poems by [Yeats](#), Dickinson, Auden, and others.

Now comes a new record, *Comme si de rien n'était*, which I think it is safe to call—with apologies to fans of the [Dear Socks](#), [Dear Buddy audiobook](#)—the greatest album ever released by the wife of a sitting head of state. It's also a strong record on its own terms. Bruni writes fine, shapely songs and sings them in a voice that is, at its lower and upper limits, pure sexiness: rumbling and raspy on the low end, breathy and gasping when she reaches for the high notes. She has mastered the vocal tic pioneered by Serge Gainsbourg and the stable of female singers he produced: the whisper-singing style that makes every song sound like a [slightly scandalous confession](#).

And scandal and confession, after all, are what Bruni is all about. Non-Francophone audiences may relish *Comme si de rien n'était* for its stylish, traditionalist sound—fingerpicked guitar set against strings, woodwinds, and soft-shoe percussion, in songs that move from [blues-accented swing](#) to [cocktail jazz](#) to ['50s-style torch ballads](#). But it's Bruni's lyrics that have made tongues wag in France. *Comme si de rien n'était* is, quite simply, a roman à clef about falling in love with Nicolas Sarkozy. The title—"As if nothing happened"—winks at the hullabaloo that has surrounded *l'affaire Sarko-Bruni*. The songs hide little, musing frankly on *l'amour fou* and Bruni's own infamy. In "[Ta Tienne](#)," she sings: "Let them curse me and damn me/ I don't care, I'll take all the blame."

Bruni is a different kind of pop diva. Anglo-American female stars tend to revert to the role of victim: wounded warriors in the battle of the sexes, storm-tossed by their own emotions and the misdeeds of callous men. But Bruni plays a different type: the player. The cover profile of Bruni in the [September Vanity Fair](#) quotes a friend of the singer's: "Carla is the hunter, not the hunted. ... She is a female womanizer." Bruni once confessed her longing for a man "with nuclear power," an ambition she has now [literally fulfilled](#).

The question is, how long will Bruni's latest conquest, nukes and all, hold her attention? Even the sweetest and most lovelorn songs on *Comme si de rien n'était* hold hints of menace; the swooning single "[L'amoureuse](#)," is a confession of puppy love, but also of romantic impetuosity—this is a woman who's always falling in love with someone. Then there's [the luminous acoustic cover of "You Belong to Me](#)," the 1950s ballad popularized by Jo Stafford, which Bruni croons in English. She sings just a single verse, nine times in succession until the record fades: "See the pyramids along the Nile/ Watch the sunrise on a tropic isle/ Just remember, darling, all the while/ You belong to me." Those pyramids can't be an accident: Bruni is chuckling at the famous [Giza photo op](#). But what of that "you belong to me"? Is it a pledge of devotion or an assertion of iron-fisted control, of dominion over a relationship that can be discarded on a whim? In his darker moments, [Nicolas Sarkozy](#)—13 years older and 13 inches shorter than his new wife\*—must wonder. Bruni's record, like her life, makes it clear that she is a rogue, capable of stepping from bed to bed and man to man at a moment's notice—leaving the past behind as if nothing happened.

**Correction, Sept. 18, 2008:** *The article originally misspelled the name of Nicolas Sarkozy as Nicholas Sarkozy. It has been corrected throughout the article. (Return to the corrected sentence.) The article also makes a playful, sarcastic, reference to Sarkozy being "13 years older and 13 inches shorter than his new wife." According to their published heights, Sarkozy is 10.16 centimeters shorter than Carla Bruni. (Return to the sentence.)*

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## obit

### Infinitely Sad

David Foster Wallace, self-absorbed genius.

By Troy Patterson

Monday, September 15, 2008, at 1:41 PM ET

David Foster Wallace began his review of John Updike's *Toward the End of Time* by classing Updike, along with Philip Roth and Norman Mailer, as "the Great Male Narcissists who've dominated postwar American fiction." The word *narcissist* isn't strictly disapproving there. One reason that the piece, 10 years

after its publication, remains more memorable than its ostensible object is that Wallace offhandedly engaged the "radical self-absorption" of this Greatest Generation of Quality Lit—"probably the single most self-absorbed generation since Louis XIV"—in a complicated way. He saw that narcissism as the force both animating moving prose and repelling younger readers in its involute explorations. He imagined—in a gorgeous little gesture of telescoped perspective—how things might appear to the GMNs, "in their senescence": "It must seem to them no coincidence that the prospect of their own deaths appears backlit by the approaching millennium and online predictions of the death of the novel as we know it. When a solipsist dies, after all, everything goes with him."

Of the three older writers, Wallace most closely resembled Mailer. Both earned their celebrity and electric esteem—becoming not just famous writers but author-heroes—on the strength of maximalist novels of ambition-announcing bulk and scope (Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Wallace's *Infinite Jest*). And both produced nonfiction so bold and inventive as to surpass their achievements as novelists. As a journalist, Wallace, who died in a suicide last Friday at the age of 46, left American literature with a body of work as fine as any produced in America in the last two decades.

His own self-absorption played no small part in the achievement. In his fiction, Wallace drew on the examples of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and their less famous peers in an attempt to invest Postmodernist high jinks with pathos—to give soul to novels about novels. The journalism shows him as practitioner of metafiction not merely by trade but by fundamental inclination. The implicit premise of his reporting is that reporting the stories behind and around and beneath the story is an essential part of reporting the story. You could say that he always intruded on these pieces—loudly announcing his methods, coughing just a touch coyly at the process of writing a piece for "a swanky East-Coast magazine," stage-whispering to his editors, and appending his own doubts, anxieties, and second thoughts (of which there were usually plenty) as both a writer and a human.

Mailer, striding through *Armies of the Night* in the third person, was, even at his most unsparingly buffoonish, a royal presence. Wallace's autobiographical *I*, whether writing about tennis, porn, television, or John McCain, was humble, curious, always on high alert for glinting irony, and consistently ingratiating in practicing a strain of confessionalism that was somehow ego-abasing. The *I* was frequently to be seen sweating heavily in its nervousness, a condition exacerbated by its frequent worrying about serving the reader by working to get at that most un-Postmodern abstraction: the truth. Naturally, then, the nerves would be part of the article, each "self-indulgent twinge of neurotic projection" emerging as a figure in a sweeping interior landscape. It requires a fair deal of writerly nuance and human

understanding to pull off such shenanigans without achieving instant audience alienation. Do not try this at home.

That "twinge" line above is from the title piece of Wallace's first essay collection, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, an account of a week of strenuous relaxation on a luxury cruise line first published in *Harper's* in 1996. In its Balzac-like detail and fervent curiosity—Midwestern skepticism gone to Northeastern grad school—the article was an instant classic. It stands as the second work in a trilogy of what you might undersell as travel pieces or exalt as insightful tours into all-American pleasure domes. Two year before, *Harper's* ran "Getting Away From Pretty Much Being Away From It All," in which the writer, who grew up on the outskirts of Urbana, Ill., went back to Illinois for its state fair and, without condescension, threw new light on what we're doing when we amuse ourselves with such a "self-consciously Special occasion of connection."

### David Foster Wallace in a 1997 excerpt from *The Charlie Rose Show*:

In 2004, the editors of *Gourmet*, doubtlessly expecting another further late-model Tocqueville-izing, sent Wallace to the Maine Lobster Festival. He sent back an essay on "the whole animal-cruelty-and-eating issue" so acute and supple in its consideration of uneasy questions about aesthetics and morality that it ranks as a must-read for anyone even thinking of having dinner. In memorializing a writer who has killed himself, there is an impulse—wholly human and totally ghoulish—to rifle through the work in search of clues and cries and suicide footnotes, and in the case of Wallace, the rifling requires no strain. (Like any smart writer aspiring to greatness, despair was a regular theme, and "A Supposedly Fun Thing ..." got some of its considerable energy from the author's association of "the ocean with dread and death." Despair, he wrote, is "wanting to jump overboard.") But if you must dwell on pain and suffering, why not pay the man tribute by [reading the \*Gourmet\* essay](#), the title piece in *Consider the Lobster*. It's about boiling lobsters. It's about the neurological capacities of crustaceans and the spiraling motions of the human mind. It's not a tract, just an argument guided by a sure sense of "moral duty," and Wallace's achievement was to make thinking about the facts of Postmodern life, and thinking about thinking about them, one of the keenest pleasures of being alive.

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### other magazines **Fishing With Dick**

The *Weekly Standard* challenges Cheney to a fly-fishing contest.

By David Sessions

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 3:14 PM ET



### ***The New Yorker, Sept. 22***

An [article](#) profiles Echo of Moscow, an independent Russian radio station that, at its inception in 1990, was a lone beacon of "fair and balanced" news and commentary in the Soviet world. After Putin's media crackdown, the station is "the last of an endangered species." The Kremlin is reluctant to suppress Echo because of its reputation and its example of free speech, but Putin has informed the station's producers that they are being watched. Still, Echo's personalities refuse to parrot his talking points. ... An [article](#) surveys the political landscape of Alaska, which was as sensational and tumultuous as Alaskans had ever seen it *before* John McCain selected its governor as his running mate. Most of the discussion, of course, involves Sarah Palin's governing style: unorthodox in tone but substantively in keeping with Alaska's nonpartisan, economics-focused political culture.

### ***Weekly Standard, Sept. 22***

In the [cover story](#), senior writer Matt Labash takes a trip to Wyoming to profile Dick Cheney the fly fisherman. Cheney granted the interview request only because he "wanted to see what kind of reporter had the cojones to convince his editors to pay for him to come up to fish the South Fork." Labash spends a day practicing in the new environment before his contest with Cheney, then loses by a wide margin. "In several decades of watching him," Labash writes, "I've never seen him smile this big." ... An [article](#) [relates](#) the founders' debate over political aristocracy to skepticism about Sarah Palin's qualification for office. "The issue is not whether the establishment would let ... Palin cross the bar into the certified political class, but whether regular citizens of this republic have the skill and ability to control the levers of government without having first joined the certified political class."

### ***Newsweek, Sept. 22***

The [cover story](#) compares women's response to Geraldine Ferraro's vice-presidential nomination in 1984 with their reaction to Sarah Palin's two decades later. Women didn't like Ferraro; they found her threatening to their stay-at-home lives. Palin is a different story: "Republican women, who have long been loath to vote for mothers of small children, are suddenly defending the right of women, or a woman, rather, to return to work three days after giving birth, and to seek higher office with five kids." ... A [column](#) by Fareed Zakaria compares the foreign-policy views of John McCain, who focuses on the abstract enemy of Islamic extremism, with those of Barack Obama, who focuses on specific enemies like al-Qaida. Zakaria considers Obama's view more optimistic and closer to reality: "We live in remarkably peaceful times. A University of Maryland study shows that deaths from wars ... are lower now than at any point in the last half century."

### ***New York, Sept. 22***

The [cover story](#) profiles Ron Galella, the famous paparazzo whom Jackie Kennedy Onassis once restrained with a court order. "His art was a corrective to the artifice of the star system. ... Only by seeing someone shocked and spontaneous can you tell if their charisma is genuine." What does Galella think of today's ubiquitous amateur paparazzi? "They're unskilled. It's terrible." ... A [column](#) posits that "Wal-Mart moms"—downscale white women with weak party allegiances—will decide the presidential election. Sarah Palin's first interviews indicated she's out of her depth, but that doesn't matter if her strongest appeal is emotional. She may be the Wal-Mart moms' perfect excuse to reject Obama, to whom they weren't warming in the first place. ... This week's [approval matrix](#) loves "PMS Buddy," a Web site that alerts men when it's that time of the month.

### ***Atlantic, October 2008***

The [cover story](#) chronicles how John McCain's involvement with past wars has shaped his understanding of the way future conflicts should be fought and won. McCain insists that he doesn't overthink Vietnam, but close friends say it is always on his mind. He believes his detailed knowledge of failed strategy in Vietnam can prevent the same mistakes from happening in Iraq. McCain doubts the United States will ever fight another war in which victory is clear-cut, but national defense and American honor, which he sees as inseparable, is the one realm in which he is truly "unbending." ... An [essay](#) by Ross Douhat cautiously argues that the immediacy of modern pornography has made the experience "much closer to adultery than ... most porn users would like to admit." Porn isn't the society-eroding disease its loudest critics claim, but it is something we should consider before trading our sense of decency for "sophistication."

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### **poem**

## **"Lord Forgive Me"**

By Kathryn Maris

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 6:54 AM ET

*Listen to Kathryn Maris read .*

*Kyrie eleison!* I said it in the pub.  
I said it to my bitter, then I said  
it to my heart, with nothing not to dread:  
my sins were great: I drank there with my love.

*Kyrie iesu christe, God above*  
and me below, drinking at the Hog's Head.

"So. Will you love me better when I'm dead?"  
He knew it was no joke and didn't laugh

but turned away to look at the TV.  
(Arsenal was playing Everton.)  
Another man was fixed upon the game

and held his hands together on his knee  
and chanted and rebuked. But not my man,  
who recognizes neither loss nor blame.

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## politics

### The Old Neighborhood

My Alaska, and Sarah Palin's, deserves better from America.

By Jim Albrecht

Thursday, September 18, 2008, at 6:43 PM ET

For a long time I've been an Alaskan in exile, spending only a portion of each year (the sunny part) in the homeland. As a result, I am the only Alaskan that most of my friends know. So, when Sarah Palin was picked as the Republican vice-presidential nominee, the e-mail poured in. "Not all Alaskan families are as weird as the Palins, right?" wrote a friend from California.

"Let me assure you," I wrote back. "They are all freaks."

I then described, at some length, the neighborhood I grew up in. There were my parents, superorthodox Catholics, complete with backyard statuary. Across the street, an Air Force officer and family. Next-door to them, a gay couple. Not just gay, but extra-flaming, mow-the-front-lawn-in-a-nightshirt-and-nothing-else kind of gay, walk-into-a-bar-yelling, "A beer for the queer!" kind of gay (in *Alaska*, in the 1960s!). My parents kept an extra set of house keys for "T-Bird Tommy," as the more flamboyant partner was known, so that when he came home drunk and couldn't find his keys, he would have a nearby spare.

Next-door to Tommy was my best friend. His father, a fun guy much of the time, once hit him with a belt in front of the whole neighborhood because he had "allowed" his 4-year-old little brother to piss in the front yard. His mother was a nurse. She was once wheeling Tommy into the operating room to have some kind of procedure, and he said to the surgeon, in his tremendously raspy lisp, "Doctor, if my heart stops while I'm under, just put a cock in my mouth, and I'll come to immediately."

Down the street from me was a family of redheads, like, eight of them. To say the house was dirty is like saying the abandoned space station in *Aliens* was dirty. It was covered in scum, like someone had left rotten bananas on every surface. The oldest

boy, a teenager, had an eerily overfriendly manner about him and used to dress in combat fatigues and invite people to go out into the woods to "play war games." Also on the street was a sort of commune. I never really figured it out, but there were women, children, and farm animals but no men. Some suggested the men were at a farm in a nearby town. My sister claims she visited the farm once and saw no men but otherwise reported nothing too unusual—but remember, my sister is a lesbian.

Later they all moved to Israel and lived on a kibbutz, which I never quite understood, since these people were obviously some kind of Christian evangelicals (or so I thought). But then I recalled that when they returned a few years later (I was about 10), my brother and I asked one of the kids what it was like to live in Israel, which might as well have been the moon to us. The kid said it was more or less good, but that learning Hebrew had been a real drag. Hebrew? A real kibbutz? Who were these people, Jews for Jesus?

The miracle of my childhood—what still casts a sunny light on my *social* memories of Alaska in the '70s—is that we all got along so well. Not just coexisted, but actually had relationships with one another: We played together, shared garden produce and salmon, pushed one another's cars out of the snow, and, in that pre-cable era, found each other's idiosyncrasies entertaining rather than infuriating.

The great thing about living among freaks is that you have to do something really special to be shunned. By contrast, when I went off to an Ivy League university, my chance at social advancement was snuffed out in the dining hall in the first week of school when I unceremoniously consumed a small bowl of lettuce with my hands.

I know the Internet was supposed to help us get beyond our divisions—regional, linguistic, ideological, utensiliary—and share in a kind of technologically enabled solidarity. But it has done the opposite. Witness the blogosphere feeding frenzy over the "true" maternity of Sarah Palin's child. (BTW, you think the name *Trig* is weird? I had a teacher who named her daughter 9. Not *Nine*, mind you, but 9.) Witness the conviction with which some people still discuss Obama's allegiance to Islam.

I imagine Sarah Palin grew up in a neighborhood much like my own: It was a neighborhood where, although Tommy used to refer to his partner as his "husband," there was never a debate about gay marriage; a neighborhood where, although my mother was a founder of Alaska Right-to-Life and the Air Force officer's wife was staunchly pro-choice, their friendship (and her occasional role as my babysitter) never faltered. We identified not by our ideologies but by our geography. On my block, you never imagined that any of these freaks—gay, straight, military, religious, redneck, kibbutzim—didn't love America. After all, we loved one another.

This sense of responsibility for the welfare of one's neighbors—even those whose lifestyles or beliefs give you the creeps—is still alive in glimmers. Palin's enduring popularity across party lines in Alaska would not be possible without it. She has governed pragmatically and without ideological rancor. In 2006, the Alaska Supreme Court ruled that the state was obliged to extend employee benefits to same-sex partners of its employees. The legislature subsequently passed a bill that would block the state from extending these benefits. Palin vetoed the measure, even though she, too, opposed the court decision. "Signing this bill," she explained, "would be in direct violation of my oath of office." In other words, she saw her ideological views as subordinate to her obligation to the rule of law. And unlike the legislature, she apparently saw no sense in creating further division when the only practical result would be more litigation and a heightened sense of division and offense.

But, eventually, politics poisons everything. And now there is the home girl, nearly my own age, in front of the network cameras, styled as the attack dog and set up to read churlish lines about her fellow citizens—who, for their part, will villainize her and her family and her religion and her region.

I never thought it possible for Alaska to be the anvil of such partisan animosity—for Alaska, the land of libertarian neighborliness, to be sent to the front in the culture wars. I suppose the circumstances of one's childhood always tend to melt away slowly into new construction and nostalgia and loss, so I don't claim to be unique. But the harshness of the light on Sarah Palin calls up those distant memories, and their dissipation seems now abrupt, as if the old neighborhood was subject to aerial bombardment and civil war.

In the old days, people used to leave their cabins unlocked in the winter (with notes saying, "Take what you need, leave what you can") because it was considered reckless to lock a shelter against those who might come across it in desperate straits. Growing up, we had no Internet to bring us together, but we had a shared geography that did so in a much more powerful way. Wilderness has a bully pulpit all its own, and, back when we could still hear it over the cell phones and the four-stroke snow machines, it preached a repetitive sermon. 1) We don't all have to agree about everything, 2) but we do all have to survive the winter. If the Alaska of my childhood could be put on the stump, I believe that would be the content of its speech.

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## politics

### What, Me Worry?

Why Obama acts like he's 10 points up in the polls.

By John Dickerson

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 10:02 PM ET

Barack Obama apparently has not gotten the e-mail. He's supposed to be panicked. He's [blowing a historic opportunity](#). He [could lose the election](#). Worried Democrats have done everything but employ skywriting to get the message across that he needs to do something dramatic. Fast.

If there was a place to get hot and bothered, it was Elko, Nev., where Obama spoke Wednesday afternoon. He stood in the open on a black stage under the midday sun while flies buzzed relentlessly. He didn't appear fazed. He sounded like a man who was ahead by 10 points. He wasn't exactly listless—he implored voters to join his campaign for change and [attacked John McCain](#)—but he wasn't urgent or exercised, either. He unveiled no new gambits. The only moment of sparkle came when he questioned whether McCain could make good on his challenge to take on the "old boys' network." With so many former lobbyists in his campaign, said Obama, the old boys' network is what they call a staff meeting.

When this election is over, the Obama campaign's cool demeanor will either be seen as its signature genius ("They kept their heads about them") or its signature flaw ("They failed to respond to their opponent's strategy"). We'll know in 48 days.

Why are they so calm in Obama-land? I can't find an account of Obama yelling at anyone during the entire campaign, and it's not just the candidate who seems calm. His aides aren't perfect, but given the level of chatter in the political echo chamber doubting their work, you'd expect them to be more snappish or bleary-eyed. There are no blind quotes from disgruntled aides sniping at each other in the press, which seems almost to defy human nature—even in the sunniest organizations, pressure plus high stakes usually creates at least one misanthrope (or, as we like to call them: sources). Even the famously disciplined Bush 2000 operation went squirrely in August under the pressure.

Maybe the Obama campaign is deluded, or spinning. Even if they're really worried in his Chicago headquarters, no one dare let on because voters won't want to elect a candidate whose team can't take the heat.

Or maybe they're not rattled because they've been through this before. If they'd listened to the polls and Democratic experts, they'd never have gotten in the race. In the summer of 2007, there were lots of Obama supporters who thought he should panic a little more—or risk losing to Hillary Clinton. The Obama campaign stuck to its plan and won. Aides often cite this lesson in explaining why they're not going to overreact now.

Obama can also stay calm because he got a break this week. The public focus is now on the economy, an issue where Obama has advantages. It's also harder for McCain to manufacture distractions—it would look out of touch. Plus, the Palin novelty has started to wear off. Obama is back in the lead in [some polls](#).

All of this means he doesn't have to do anything flamboyantly out of character to get attention.

Obama can also remain calm on the outside because his campaign is changing in lots of ways to meet the shift in the landscape. The overall strategy and theme are the same—change vs. more of the same—but the campaign has adjusted some tactics. (McCain, by contrast, completely changed strategy by picking Sarah Palin and putting so much emphasis on reform.) Biden is attacking McCain more. To address the criticism that Obama doesn't tell voters precisely how he will help them in the economic downturn, he released a two-minute ad highlighting the specifics of his plans. He's added more into his stump speech, too. Tough ads are also running in swing states, like this one in Pennsylvania that [accuses McCain of selling out workers](#).

On the stump, Obama has stopped talking about Palin, which was distracting him from drawing contrasts with McCain. Obama's polling suggests initial interest in her is diminishing, and his aides scoff at the McCain campaign's contention that Palin has put Iowa back in play as a battleground state. Obama had been comfortably ahead in the state, and it seemed out of McCain's reach, but now McCain is planning a visit to the state based on what his aides say are signs that Palin has reignited his campaign there.

Meanwhile, Obama is in Elko, Nev.—just the kind of place you'd go if you were sure of your game plan. Just as Obama focused on caucus contests that came late in the Democratic nominating process, he's focusing on places like Elko in the general election. Tuesday was his third visit there. Elko County hasn't voted Democratic in a presidential election since 1964, but the Obama campaign thinks that a little attention in Elko, where he benefits from an organization built during the Democratic caucuses, could help give him the margin he needs to win a state Bush carried by only 20,000 votes.

Obama has asked us to look at his campaign to understand how he would govern. Like McCain, Obama has said he will not make Bush's mistake of holding on to dead-end strategies in the face of changing circumstances. So for Obama, who talks so much about change, the question is when and how he will change his own campaign when circumstances warrant. Part of the answer may be found in Elko.

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## politics

### Barack-Seat Drivers

Barack Obama does not need your two cents.

By Christopher Beam

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 5:31 PM ET

If there's one piece of advice Barack Obama should heed, it's this: Don't listen to advice. As John McCain overtakes Obama in the polls, pundits and bloggers have turned into political versions of "Dear Abby." They advise him about his message (Mark Halperin says: Talk about the economy!), his style (Arianna Huffington wants to see *more* MLK references), and his themes (Ellen Malcolm of Emily's List [says](#), "Talk about who really is able to change the direction of this country"). So many people have added their two cents, no wonder Obama's breaking fundraising records.

It would be logically impossible for Obama to follow all this advice. It would also be unwise. To understand the first point, let's review some of the advice he's received in the last few weeks:

#### Link McCain to Bush!

[Everyone says this](#), as if Obama doesn't do it every day. It's the Democrats' grand strategy. Unclear if it's working.

#### Don't Just Link McCain to Bush!

"The problem is not that Obama hasn't hit McCain hard enough or linked him to Bush often enough," [offers](#) columnist Michael Goodwin. "The problem is that he hasn't done anything else." The problem with this advice, unfortunately, is that McCain is Obama's opponent.

#### Get Mad!

The consensus on the left is that Obama is a wimp. People want passion. And that doesn't just mean [saying you're "mad"](#) and that wage disparity makes your "blood boil." It's like they say in film class: Show, don't tell. It's time to get furious—maybe even nasty—about McCain's lies and distortions and carbon sequestration agenda. "They know that's how the game is played," [said](#) one miffed Democratic strategist.

#### Don't Get Mad!

[Stop whining](#) about McCain's "lies," advises *Slate's* own Mickey Kaus. It makes Dems look weak; it's impossible to prove 100 percent that something is a "lie"; and it reinforces stereotypes of preachy, self-satisfied liberals. The only person you're swaying is yourself. Michelle Cottle [suggests](#) "urgency" rather than anger: "[U]nrelenting cool may not be what voters are longing for this election."

#### Take the High Road

Judge not the message by its messenger—in this case, Karl Rove. "Stop the attacks," Rove [advised](#). "They undermine your claim to a post-partisan new politics. You soared when you seemed above politics, lost altitude when you did what you criticize. Attacks are momentarily satisfying but ultimately corrode your appeal."

### Lie Like McCain

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Truth-telling and "fact-checking" are a joke. As it turns out, Democratic voters [don't punish their candidates](#) for lying as much as Obama might think. And every once in a while, they do like winning.

### Go After Palin!

She took earmarks! She banned books! She supported the Bridge to Nowhere! She never went to Iraq! She doesn't even know what the Bush Doctrine is! (Gasp for air.) Some armchair advisers view Palin as the ever-yielding river of oppo gold rather than a Teflon mom. Dems complain of a "perceived lack of aggressiveness" on Obama's part. *Fire away!* they [say](#). Particularly on abortion. A combative Bernard-Henri Lévy [would have](#) Obama "speak directly, solemnly, to the women of this country, asking them if they are prepared to see themselves in this caricature of a free woman who plans to deny her peers one of their most cherished and hard-won rights, the right to an abortion. ... I would advise him to assign this task to Hillary." Although perhaps "assigning" her a "task" isn't the best way of framing it.

### Ignore Palin

This is one area in which Joe Trippi and Karl Rove agree. "Don't react," [says](#) Trippi. "Not directly. Let somebody else do that." Obama "won't come off well" if he keeps comparing himself to Palin, [writes](#) Rove. Others [argue](#) that she's impossible to defeat because she's smart, attractive, fresh, and a celebrity—*just like Obama*. "She's sort of bullet-proof," [says](#) former Clinton press secretary Dee Dee Myers.

### Use the Clintons!

Hillary is stumping for Obama. Bill [says](#) he'll do "whatever I'm asked." Not enough, say adviserati. Repeat after me, Hillary, [says](#) Joan Vennoch of the *Boston Globe*, "I want you to ask yourselves: Were you in this campaign just for me?" Others think Hillary is the only one who can help Obama defeat Palin, but Clinton has been [reluctant](#) to engage. Howard Wolfson [warns](#) us not to expect a "catfight."

### Ignore the Clintons

Bill and Hillary "do not wish Barack Obama well," [argues](#) blogger Bill Harrison. Don't invite them on the trail because "some way the two will find a way to make those appearances primarily about themselves."

### Go Back in Time and Pick Hillary Clinton

After Palin's speech, one columnist [called](#) Obama's veep pick a "huge mistake." Rudy Giuliani—suddenly Hillary's biggest defender—[agreed](#). Even Joe Biden [admits as much](#). Is there a control-Z for campaign decisions?

### Stop That Time Machine!

Second-guessing is normal. But buyer's remorse doesn't mean you return the puppy. As usual, Gail Collins [talks the hysterics](#)

[down](#) off the ledge: "If [Hillary] had not been in the race, the Democrats would probably be bemoaning the fact that they hadn't stuck with John Edwards and nailed down the critical swing-state philanderer vote." Moreover, Palin was a last-minute decision made in response to Obama's choice of Biden—McCain may not have picked her if Obama had chosen Hillary. Then again, maybe that's the point.

### Fewer Big Rallies!

By packing stadiums, Obama just plays into the Republican's "celebrity" caricature. "I would recommend any possible stagecraft to minimize the event's scale," Michael Crowley of the *New Republic* [suggested](#) prior to Obama's acceptance speech in front of 80,000-plus people in Denver. Replace the giant love-ins with small gatherings, [says](#) Gov. Phil Bredesen of Tennessee: "[G]ive straight-up 10-word answers to people at Wal-Mart about how he would improve their lives."

### More Big Rallies!

Are you crazy? Obama is *made* for big rallies. Since when was popularity such a bad thing? Strategy '08 [called](#) Crowley's advice "the worst I have ever seen this entire campaign cycle. Change Obama's strength because the Republicans will attack it?" The solution is more, bigger events since they emphasize Obama's "inspirational" appeal. "And, by the way," he writes, "there's no reason you can't give concise policy specifics in that forum."

### Screw the 50-State Strategy

Sorry, Howard Dean. "Their 50-state strategy is insanity," [said](#) former Clinton pollster Doug Schoen. Best to focus resources on the swing states that need them most—Ohio, New Mexico, Florida, Pennsylvania, Michigan. There are signs the Obama camp is [heeding this advice](#), dialing back advertising and pulling staff out of Georgia.

### Screw the Swing States

Why settle for 50-plus-one? Arianna Huffington [calls it](#) the "tried-and-untrue swing voter strategy" and blames it for the party's "prolonged identity crisis." "[G]o after everything remotely in play," [recommends](#) *Nerve* blogger Brian Fairbanks. Obama's record-shattering \$66 million August haul makes this strategy slightly less dubious—but only slightly.

### Get Specific!

Change *schmange*, hope *schmope*. Let's get dirty. *How* would you provide relief for middle-income families? *When* would we be out of Iraq? *Who* would be your deputy secretary of transportation? Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland [calls](#) for "concrete, pragmatic ideas that bring hope and change to life." Others want even more details. "It wouldn't be bad if he came out early and said who his secretary of defense and secretary of state would be—that would address and stabilize the concerns about his experience," [said](#) former Louisiana Sen. John B. Breaux. Our

FOIA request for the complete 2009 schedule of the White House screening room is still pending.

### ... But Not *Too* Specific

Numbers scare people. Give them examples of change, but nothing too boring or fact-laden. A recent speech on education "started out with lots of numbers," [writes](#) George Lakoff. "True, but dull. And he is promising more of the same policy wonk speeches. ... [T]he old inspiring Obama just isn't there."

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The point here, of course, is that Obama can't possibly heed all this advice without occupying several parallel universes at once. It's a good thing, too. Had he accepted past unsolicited advice, he would have [picked Tom Daschle as his running mate](#), [accepted McCain's invitation to town-hall meetings](#), [gone on the attack in January](#), and [opted into public financing](#). Terrible ideas, all.

Which brings us to the second point about all this advice: Ignoring advice is an essential skill for any president. (And it's one they can learn a little *too* well, as the last seven years have made all too clear.) During the Cuban Missile Crisis, John F. Kennedy eventually rejected the advice of respected statesman Dean Acheson, who recommended an airstrike instead of a blockade. Obama is known for seeking dissenting opinion and [calling on the quiet guy](#) in the room. But there's a fine line between soliciting dissent and being buffeted by contradictory advice, à la [Al Gore in 2000](#).

The trick, says one decision-making expert, is to get the advisers to talk to one another. Michael Roberto, a professor of management at Bryant University, calls this the "point-to-point" model, as opposed to the "hub-and-spoke" model, in which the leader confers separately with each adviser. By having advisers debate, the decision-maker is more likely to spot counterarguments he might have missed. Plus, he won't be biased toward more recent arguments.

Of course, Barack Obama is unlikely to gather all the advice-lending pundits, journalists, bloggers, party bigwigs, elected officials, and campaign staffers into the same room for a powwow. Not that anyone's advising him to do that.

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## politics Loose Change

Why bad economic news doesn't hurt McCain, or help Obama, as much as you think.

By John Dickerson

Monday, September 15, 2008, at 7:12 PM ET

This is the change the Obama campaign has been waiting for. After two weeks of political news dominated by Sarah Palin, bad weather, a reunified GOP, and nervous Democrats, there is suddenly real news: Wall Street banks are collapsing. Everyone is talking about the economy (a pig that can't be improved by lipstick, or [Honeybaked](#)), and the economy is an issue with which Barack Obama has had an advantage with voters. Even better, as luck would have it, he'd already planned to devote the week to addressing the issue and showing America just how out of touch John McCain is.

McCain, for his part, must have felt guilty about his [recent wave of attacks](#), because he immediately chipped in to help Obama, producing just the kind of out-of-touch sound bite his opponent needed. "The fundamentals of the economy are strong," [said McCain](#) at a Florida rally after addressing people's jittery feelings. Instantly, the Obama team [jumped on the remarks](#). Joe Biden, who has started sharpening his attacks on McCain, [poked fun at his Senate colleague](#) while campaigning near Detroit: "Ladies and gentlemen, [I could walk from here to Lansing](#), and I wouldn't run into a single person who thought our economy was doing well, unless I ran into John McCain."

All in all, it adds up to a huge win for Obama, right? Not exactly. (At this point in the campaign, the only huge wins are in contests of height or age.) For Obama to take advantage of this moment, he has to convince voters he's going to change their lives. He can't use it as merely another opportunity to paint McCain as out of touch.

The McCain team knew its candidate had messed up by suggesting the economy was strong on a day when panic reigned. Only an hour after his initial remarks had bounced around the Internet, McCain aides were releasing excerpts of remarks the candidate was scheduled to make later in the day: When he said "fundamentals," McCain was referring to "'American workers'—they're the ones who are 'strong.'" He was clearly backpedaling, but in a sign of how complicated this issue can be, McCain got an assist from New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, whom Obama has been courting for months. Bloomberg said that the fundamentals—by which he meant the underlying economy, not the workers—*were* strong.

One Democrat, a veteran of successful campaigns, pointed out an additional complication. If Obama spends too much time claiming the fundamentals of the American economy are not strong, he risks becoming the candidate of gloom instead of the candidate of hope.

Obama supporters may already be gloomy about the idea that McCain has extricated himself from this gaffe or that Obama has already wrung as much benefit as he can from it. Lord knows, Obama hasn't been starved for opportunities. Since the start of the general election race, the Obama campaign has been

pounding McCain as out of touch. It started with McCain's admission that he doesn't know as much about the economy as he does about foreign policy. From there McCain went on to declare the economy strong, claim (jokingly) you were rich only if you had more than \$5 million, and forget how many houses he owns. Top McCain economic adviser Phil Gramm [said](#), when talking about the economy, that America had become a "nation of whiners." McCain recently admitted he was distanced from regular people's lives, and Obama jumped on that, too.

McCain was already in a tough spot before he opened his mouth. Voters give Democrats a [nearly 20-point advantage](#) over Republicans. They are also very upset with the performance of President Bush, who nominally still heads the party McCain now leads. And when it comes to which party voters trust more to handle the economy? You'd think pollsters would almost have to create a new category (as in, 28 percent of respondents doubled over in laughter when asked the question).

And yet voters have been remarkably forgiving of Republican economic stewardship. In mid-July, Obama held a 17-point lead over McCain when voters were asked which candidate they trusted to handle the economy. Now he has only a five-point lead. This tightening has been reflected in the [other polls, too](#).

Why isn't Obama killing McCain on this issue? Part of the answer may be that polls have narrowed across the board as McCain has solidified his base. (Voters like McCain better, so they like his ability to handle the economy better—even though they may have no idea what his policies are.)

Some portion of the tightening also comes from McCain's advocacy of oil drilling. High gas prices have been voters' No. 1 [concern](#) for some time, and McCain's plan for drilling is popular. "Drill, baby, drill!" may be [intellectually infuriating](#), but it's working for McCain among voters who are looking for some kind of solution.

McCain's other economic plans also have a similar action-oriented feel. He's going to cut earmarks! Cutting earmarks isn't going to do much to improve people's lives (in fact, if you benefit from them, your life could get worse) because [they're only a small portion of the budget, and it'll be hard for McCain to cut what's left](#). But McCain can sound like he's going to take action when action is what voters want, and it's an issue with which he has a record.

What about McCain's policies on the specific topic of the recent market turmoil? He's going to clean the mess up, he promises. If voters see him as the action candidate, perhaps they'll take his word for it. On the specifics, though, he's not in a very strong position. Though he offered a new ad today touting his "experience" to handle the crisis, he doesn't have much of a record at all. When McCain talks about eliminating earmarks, his record is a mile long. When he talks about cutting CEO pay

and regulating the financial industry, his aides can provide only one amendment to an accounting-reform bill to show his history on the issue. He offered it six years ago.

Still, Obama can be pushed around on the economy because voters don't know what he's for. Yes, he's for change—but what does that mean when it comes to their daily lives? Yes, he's for a middle-class tax cut—but a July poll showed that nearly 50 percent of the country was unfamiliar with his economic policies. In this vacuum, McCain has been able to mischaracterize Obama's position on taxes. McCain says Obama will raise taxes, [which isn't true for the majority of Americans](#). Yet in a recent ABC/*Washington Post* poll, 51 percent of respondents said Obama would raise their taxes, while only 34 percent said McCain would.

If Obama can't get anything more out of the McCain-is-out-of-touch strategy, then a day full of lampooning McCain may not do much to help Obama. Voters would miss any programs he was offering to fix the crisis in the blizzard of McCain mocking. Obama has struggled throughout his campaign to show that he has both a plan and the ability to execute it. That's why last week he [was at pains](#) in New Hampshire to walk voters through exactly what his tax-cut plan would deliver for them. It was not his most stirring performance, but it may be one Obama needs to deliver more often.

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## press box

### Bill O'Reilly's "Shut Up" Revisionism

According to the talk show host, he rarely uses the phrase.

By Jack Shafer

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 5:13 PM ET

In August 2003, I ran up a ridiculous Nexis bill documenting how much Bill O'Reilly of *The O'Reilly Factor* loves the phrase "shut up." A couple of weeks after my [column](#) on that topic appeared, he denied having read the article to *New York* magazine—"I don't read *Slate*! ... Why would I read that?"

Yet immediately after the piece appeared, he *stopped* flinging the phrase on television. So exemplary was his behavior that I published a follow-up on [March 15, 2004](#), commending him for shutting up about telling people to shut up.

Even so, the charge that he overflows with shut-ups obviously bothers O'Reilly, and he's protested the charge a number of times in recent years. Here he is in the transcripts:

Well, the "shut up" line has happened only once in six years. ...  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, Nov. 15, 2002

Do you know how many times I told people to shut up? Six. Three times in anger and three times just, ah, you need to shut up about things.  
—*60 Minutes*, Sept. 26, 2004

I said, "Look, do you know how many times I said 'shut up' in six years on *The Factor*? Six."  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, Sept. 27, 2004

Well, enjoy your Kool-Aid, sir, and [in] more than nine years on the air, you can count the shut-ups on this program on one hand.  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, Dec. 6, 2005

In the past 10 years *The Factor* has been on the air, I've commanded someone to shut up five times. And they all deserved it. That's once every two years. It's not real hard to count that high.  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, June 29, 2006

Also, our pals in the *L.A. Times* continue to print that I tell guests to shut up. That has happened in a serious way exactly four times in 10 and a half years.  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, Feb. 12, 2007

Then, last week, O'Reilly [told](#) *Time* magazine (Sept. 22, 2008, issue):

I've said "shut up" six times in 12 years, and they all deserved it. They were either bloviating, filibustering or lying.

Not so fast. O'Reilly has said "shut up" dozens of times on his show, something my [original article](#) shows. On the assumption that O'Reilly wants to get Clintonesque and only wants to count the times he's instructed an *individual* to shut up on his show, I count at least nine instances. Evidence of backsliding comes in the fact that he used the phrase once in 2007 and once in 2008. Again, to the transcripts:

**To actor Alec Baldwin:**

He has dodged this program, Alec Baldwin has, for years. Bottom line: If you're going to sling it, Alec, then stand up to some fire. If not, shut up and don't be ridiculous.  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, Jan. 2, 1999

**To Dick Morris, Fox News colleague:**

I'm going to give you a plug, so shut up for a minute, Dick [Morris]. Here we go. You've got the State of the Union address coming up.  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, Jan. 27, 2000

**To Tom Daschle:**

Believe me when I tell you *The Factor* goes out of its way to get Democrats on this broadcast. But Daschle has been and remains too frightened to appear. So with all due respect, senator, shut up.  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, May 17, 2002

**To Mike McGough of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette editorial page:**

Hey, Mike, shut up.  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, Nov. 13, 2002

**To anti-war protester Jeremy Glick:**

Shut up. Shut up.  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, Feb. 4, 2003

**To Jimmy Carter:**

What Jimmy Carter should do is privately give Mr. Bush his opinion and shut up publicly.  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, Feb. 18, 2003

**To Tom Daschle again, via Sen. Evan Bayh:**

If you see [Sen. Tom Daschle] for me, senator, tell him to shut up. For me. You can be nice.  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, March 17, 2003

**To Rocky Mountain News columnist Dave Kopel:**

All right, so, Mr. Kopel, shut up for a minute, OK?  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, June 4, 2007

**To "body language expert" Tonya Reiman:**

OK. It's my turn; you shut up.  
—*The O'Reilly Factor*, June 16, 2008

And that's not even counting the Nov. 14, 2006, edition of *The Factor*, in which O'Reilly targeted the Holy See, saying, "And I think that the Vatican needs to wise up or shut up."

My unsolicited advice to O'Reilly: Accept that you are *shut up* and *shut up* is you.

Remember how you wistfully recalled your father telling you to shut up when you were a boy (Sept. 17, 1999) or the time you asked an atheist Eagle Scout why he didn't "just shut up" about his atheism when asked (Oct. 30, 2002)? Or the times you told



"Canadians" (April 16, 2003), "Swedes" (Nov. 20, 2002), "loyal Americans" (Feb. 27, 2003), "spin-meisters" (Nov. 9, 2000), Clinton "partisans" (Feb. 4, 1999), the two political parties (Aug. 15, 2003), gay celebrities (March 21, 2001), and other folks who want to talk about sex to just shut up?

What's your reticence? On [Sept. 11, 2007](#), you started running a regular segment called "Pinheads and Patriots" that "spotlights individuals who are helping the country and those who are harming it." If you're not ashamed of calling people you disagree with pinheads, why be shy about telling them to put a stopper in it?

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A tip of the hat and a "shut up" to [Jeff Bercovici](#), who beat me to the punch on O'Reilly's claim in *Time*. Send shut up e-mail to [slate.pressbox@gmail.com](mailto:slate.pressbox@gmail.com). (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate's* readers' forum; in a future article; or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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## press box

### Fannie Mae and the Vast Bipartisan Conspiracy

A list of villains in boldface.

By Jack Shafer

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 5:41 PM ET

The blowup and bailout of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac by taxpayers was foretold so many times in the last three decades by critics of the two federally chartered and subsidized mortgage giants that not even the data-searching powers of Nexis, Factiva, and Google combined can total them.

The *Wall Street Journal* editorial page deserves a special commendation for hammering these two outposts of corporate socialism, not that the page's many warnings over the years helped avert disaster. Mae and Mac—especially Mae—were just too nurtured by the Washington establishment for any mere pressman to dislodge them from the government's teat. In 1997, the *New York Times's* Richard W. Stevenson [pinpointed](#) Fannie Mae's strength when he wrote of the firm's "influential network that extends from the highest reaches of the Clinton

Administration to the ranks of conservative Republicans on Capitol Hill."

The bipartisan network provided the essential cover Fannie Mae needed to run its scam, which the news pages of the *Washington Post* ably [described](#) this week as:

[T]he nearest thing to a license to print money. The companies borrowed money at below-market interest rates based on the perception that the government guaranteed repayment, and then they used the money to buy mortgages that paid market interest rates.

The key to Fannie Mae's survival was the patronage operation it ran. As *Wall Street Journal* reporter James R. Hagerty wrote two summers ago, "For years, high-level jobs at Fannie Mae were lucrative prizes for lawyers, bankers and political operatives waiting for their next U.S. government post." Now that the jig is up, let's meet some of the bipartisan warriors who fought for Fannie Mae's right to plunder.

At the top of the list we must place [Franklin D. Raines](#), chairman and chief executive officer of Fannie Mae from 1998 to 2004. Raines, who served as director of the Office of Management and Budget [under](#) President Clinton, had previously worked at Fannie Mae as vice chairman. Before that, he worked on the Clinton transition team following the 1992 election. Before that, he was a [general partner](#) at Lazard Freres & Co. Raines, as the *Wall Street Journal* [reported](#), was forced to leave Fannie Mae in 2004, when regulators discovered it had broken accounting rules "in an effort to conceal fluctuations in profit and hadn't maintained adequate risk controls." The *New York Times* [reported](#) two year ago that regulators "have said that of the \$90 million paid to Mr. Raines from 1998 to 2003 at least \$52 million—more than half—was tied to bonus targets that were reached by manipulating accounting." Raines agreed to a \$24.7 million [settlement](#) with a federal regulator in exchange for charges being dropped, but he admitted no wrongdoing.

Next up is [Jamie S. Gorelick](#), whose official résumé describes her as "one of the longest serving Deputy Attorneys General of the United States," a position she held during the Clinton administration. Although Gorelick had no background in finance, she joined Fannie Mae in 1997 as vice chair and departed in 2003. For her trouble, Gorelick collected a staggering \$26.4 million in total compensation, including bonuses. [Federal investigators](#) (PDF) would later say that "Fannie Mae's management directed employees to manipulate accounting and earnings to trigger maximum bonuses for senior executives from 1998 to 2003." The *New York Times* would [call](#) the manipulations an "\$11 billion accounting scandal." Gorelick, it should be noted, has never been charged with any wrongdoing.

Republicans also proved willing to serve Fannie Mae. [Robert B. Zoellick](#), current head of the World Bank, has served President Reagan, President Bush 1, and President Bush 2 as a trade representative, deputy secretary of state, deputy secretary of the treasury, deputy chief of staff, and so on. Zoellick's first Fannie Mae tour of duty was from 1983 to 1985, when he was a vice president. His second tour was 1993 to 1997, and his title was executive vice president in charge of lobbying, public affairs, and affordable housing. According to a July 23, 1997, report in the *American Banker*, Zoellick "has used his close ties to Republicans in Congress, such as Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., to defend Fannie Mae from new taxes."

[John Buckley](#) worked at Fannie Mae for almost 10 years (1991-2001) but took a leave of absence to serve as Bob Dole's communications director during his 1996 run for the presidency. Before Fannie Mae, he worked at the National Republican Congressional Committee, served as press secretary to Rep. Jack Kemp, R-N.Y., deputy press secretary during the Reagan-Bush 1984 campaign, and press secretary to Lewis Lehrman when he ran for governor of New York. He hails from the political Buckley family, his uncles being William F. and James.

Moving back across the aisle, let's say hello to Mr. Democrat [James A. Johnson](#), who ran Fannie Mae from 1991 to 1998, served as vice chairman from 1990 to 1991, and earlier worked as a managing director at Lehman Bros. and for Vice President Walter F. Mondale. He currently leads the [American Friends of Bilderberg](#) and made news earlier this summer when he had to resign as vice-presidential-candidate vetter for Barack Obama "as new details emerged about loans Mr. Johnson received from mortgage lender Countrywide Financial Corp.," [according](#) to the *Wall Street Journal*. In his 1997 [profile](#) of Johnson, "The Velvet Fist of Fannie Mae," by Richard W. Stevenson writes that Johnson "hires lobbyists from both sides of the political aisle—last year the company had 36 registered lobbyists making its case in the hallways and hearing rooms of Congress. ... And Mr. Johnson has made Fannie Mae both a launching pad and a landing strip for officials moving in and out of politics and Government in Washington." According to the voluminous "[Report of the Special Examination of Fannie Mae](#)" by the Office of the Federal Housing Enterprise Oversight (warning, extra large PDF!), Johnson earned nearly \$21 million from Fannie Mae in 1998.

Moving down the Democratic Party food chain, we meet [William M. Daley](#), son of former Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley and brother of current Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley. Daley worked as special counsel to President Clinton and chairman of Al Gore's 2000 presidential campaign. He also served as a Clinton secretary of commerce from 1997 to 2000, and earlier as president of Amalgamated Bank in Chicago. He is now an executive at [JPMorgan Chase & Co.](#) Daley was appointed to the Fannie Mae board in 1993 by President Clinton.

As part of the "leave no Democrat behind" campaign, Johnson's Fannie Mae hired [Walter Hubbell](#), son of Webster L. Hubbell, in 1994. Walter Hubbell got his job, the *Times'* Stevenson reports, "after Mr. Johnson and other executives received calls from Administration officials—including Mickey Kantor, who was then the United States trade representative—urging them to do so. At the time, the White House had undertaken an effort to help the Hubbell family financially after the senior Mr. Hubbell's resignation from the Justice Department." He got a slot in the marketing department, where Johnson said he was an "outstanding" employee.

But Fannie Mae is nothing if not ecumenical. According to the [Associated Press](#), Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac have spent \$170 million on lobbying in the past decade. "Fannie Mae's 51-member lobbying stable" includes "former Reps. **Tom Downey**, D-N.Y., and **Ray McGrath**, R-N.Y.; **Steve Elmendorf**, a Democratic political strategist and former congressional aide; and **Donald Fierce**, a longtime GOP operative. Freddie Mac's list of 91 lobbyists includes former Reps. **Vin Weber**, R-Minn., and **Susan Molinari**, R-N.Y." The AP notes the Fannie Mae ties enjoyed by McCain campaign manager **Rick Davis** and **Arthur B. Culvahouse Jr.**, who helped in McCain's veep search. According to [Politico](#), McCain economic adviser **Aquiles Suarez** worked as Fannie Mae's director of government and industry relations, and McCain finance co-chairman **Frederic V. Malek** spent time on the Freddie Mac board.

A totally brilliant and prescient [Washingtonian](#) article from 2002 by Ross Guberman harvests a bunch of politicos who benefited from and supported Fannie Mae. [Arne Christenson](#), a former Newt Gingrich aide, was senior vice president for regulatory policy. [Tom Donilon](#) was Fannie Mae's executive vice president for law and policy and secretary to the board of directors until 2005. He worked in the Clinton State Department and as part of the 1992 Clinton-Gore transition. [William Maloni](#), Fannie Mae senior adviser, worked on the Hill as chief of staff for Rep. Richard Baker, R-La. Of Fannie Mae's board of directors, Guberman writes that it is "political by design."

The company's charter gives the President the right to appoint five of the board's 18 members. The idea was to ensure that Fannie fulfilled its public mission. Today the five appointees, considered big winners in the capital's game of spoils, promote the interests of Fannie's shareholders. Recent directors include **Ann McLaughlin Korologos**, Ronald Reagan's Labor secretary; **Ken Duberstein**, Reagan's chief of staff; Bill Daley, former Commerce Secretary and Gore spokesman during the 2000 election controversy; and **Jack Quinn**, counsel to Bill Clinton and lawyer to pardoned fugitive Mark Rich. [*Emphasis added.*]

The bipartisan Fannie Mae gang appears to have broken few, if any, laws. Their crime was to have practiced—without any thought of the consequences—"access capitalism," which Michael Lewis defined in the *New Republic* as "a neat solution for people who don't have a whole lot to sell besides their access, but who don't want to appear to be selling their access."

The easiest way to end this article—and I'll take it—is to cite Michael Kinsley's tidy formulation: "The scandal in Washington isn't what's illegal. It's what's legal."

**Addendum, Sept. 17:** *International Economy* magazine identified additional Fannie Mae enablers in its July-August 1999 issue in an article by Owen Ullmann titled "[Crony Capitalism: American Style](#)." Ullmann fingers **Duane Duncan**, a Fannie Mae vice president who previously worked as staff director for Rep. Richard Baker, R-La., who chaired the House banking subcommittee; **Ellen Seidman**, Fannie Mae senior vice president, who worked as director of the Office of Thrift Supervision; **Wendy Sherman**, president of the Fannie Mae Foundation, who was counselor to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright; **Dan Crippen**, who lobbied for Fannie Mae after heading the Congressional Budget Office; **Ann Logan**, executive vice president, who was a policy adviser to Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., in the 1980s; **Thomas Nides**, senior vice president, who served as chief of staff to both U.S. Trade Representative Mickey Kantor and Speaker Tom Foley, D-Mass.; and **Eli Segal**, director, who was a senior adviser to President Clinton.

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No discussion of Fannie Mae is complete without mentioning how vociferously it denigrated its critics. See this recent [column](#) by *Wall Street Journal* Editorial Page Editor Paul Gigot. He writes, "The abiding lesson here is what happens when you combine private profit with government power. You create political monsters that are protected both by journalists on the left and pseudo-capitalists on Wall Street, by liberal Democrats and country-club Republicans." What members of the Fannie Mae gang did I neglect to name? Send nominations to [slate.pressbox@gmail.com](mailto:slate.pressbox@gmail.com). (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate's* readers' forum; in a future article; or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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readme

## Politicians Lie, Numbers Don't

And the numbers show that Democrats are better for the economy than Republicans.

By Michael Kinsley

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 1:49 PM ET

If you're wondering why a formerly honorable man like John McCain would build his presidential campaign around issues that are simultaneously beside-the-point, trivial, and dishonest (sex education for kindergartners, lipstick on pigs), the numbers presented here may help to solve that mystery. Since the conventions ended, McCain has mired the presidential race in dishonest trivia because he doesn't want it to focus on what voters say is the most important issue this year: the economy.

There is no secret about any of this. The figures below are all from the annual [Economic Report of the President](#), and the analysis is primitive. Nevertheless, what these numbers show almost beyond doubt is that Democrats are better at virtually every economic task that is important to Republicans.

In other words, there are no figures here about income inequality, or percentage of the population with health insurance, or anything like that. This exercise implicitly assumes that lower taxes are always good and higher government spending is always bad. There is nothing here about how clean the air is or how many children are growing up in poverty. The only point is that if you find the Republican mantra of lower taxes and smaller government appealing, and if you care only about how fast the economy is growing, not how that growth is shared, you should vote Democratic. Of course, if you do care about things like economic inequality and children's health, you should vote Democratic as well.

**Tab 1** reports the performance of the U.S. economy in seven categories from the years 1959 to 2007. (Where the President's Economic Report doesn't include figures for 1959 or 2007, those years are left out.) The most important measure of a nation's economic strength is gross domestic product. But comparing GDPs among various presidents would be unfair. Since the economy does tend to grow over time (or always has), more recent presidents would enjoy an unfair advantage. And every president inherits a situation; the question is what he does with it.

So the measure I use is "Change in Real GDP Per Capita," which corrects for inflation and also for population growth. It asks: If the output of the economy were divided equally among the population, how would each share have changed during these years?

Of the other measures, inflation is self-explanatory. So is unemployment. Federal taxes, spending, and the deficit are

recorded as percentages of GDP: What part of the nation's economic output is commandeered by the government each year? How much of that does the government actually pay for, and how much does it finance by borrowing? And since defense spending is the one exception to the general dislike for government, figures are included for federal spending minus defense. At the bottom of Chart 1 is the average per year for every year of roughly the past half-century. I haven't cheated: These are the years the President's Economic Report reports.

The results are surprising, I think. **Tab 2** and **Tab 3** figure separately the averages for years with Republican presidents and years with Democratic ones. Then **Tab 4** compares those averages. On average, in years when the president is a Democrat, the economy grows faster; inflation is lower; fewer people can't find a job; the federal government spends a smaller share of GDP, whether or not you include defense spending; and the deficit is lower (or—sweet Clinton-years memory—the surplus is higher). The one category that Republicans win is, unsurprisingly, federal taxes as a share of GDP. But it is no trick to lower taxes if you don't lower spending.

Among many objections that could be made to this calculation, some of them legitimate, one is that a president's economic policy doesn't work overnight. To account for that, **Tab 5** goes back and recalculates everything with a one-year lag. That is, if George W. Bush's father was president in the years 1989 through 1992, inclusive (was he? Hard to believe ...), his years of economic impact are assumed to be 1990 through 1993. This changes the result remarkably little. Republicans win in two of the seven categories, with a tiny .01 percent lead in lower inflation.

Some people believe that the president has little or no effect on the economy. If so, that would be a serious flaw in this exercise. But it would also be a serious flaw in the exercise called democracy, since people tell pollsters that the economy is the most important issue for them in deciding whom to vote for. No doubt any particular bad year in any of these statistics can be explained by some extrinsic special event—a war, for example. But surely patterns that emerge over half a century account for these. At some point, if Republicans or Democrats tend to start more wars, and wars cost money, that can be a legitimate part of the calculation.

Finally, as economist Greg Mankiw [points out](#) in his blog, reacting to [a similar calculation](#) by Alan Blinder (both of them former chairs of the president's Council of Economic Advisers), correlation is not causation. Maybe economic statistics are better when the president is a Democrat for reasons having nothing to do with the president's skill in handling the economy. My own feeling about that is that as long as the pattern continues, who cares why? Correlation will do just fine.

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## recycled Exploit and Click

The fuss over Jill Greenberg's photography.

By Jim Lewis

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 4:20 PM ET

*The Atlantic offered [an apology](#) to John McCain this week after the photographer for the October cover, Jill Greenberg, posted doctored pictures of the Republican nominee on her personal Web site. It also emerged that Greenberg, a fierce anti-Republican, had photographed McCain for the magazine while he stood over a deliberately unflattering green light. In 2006, Jim Lewis discussed whether "the photographer who makes kids cry" unfairly exploits her subjects. The article is reprinted below.*

Like many people, I dislike having my picture taken, and the fact that I love to look at photography, to think about it, and sometimes to write about it, has done little to leaven my antipathy toward participating in it. Having a camera pointed at me makes me self-conscious, a feeling I do my best to avoid; and it pricks my vanity. (I used to tell myself I was simply unphotogenic, but in time I came to realize that, no, in fact I just look like that.) Moreover, I always wind up feeling slightly violated: My countenance is among my most intimate possessions, and when a photographer makes off with an image of it I feel like I've been fleeced. Anthropologists have described isolated tribes who would not allow themselves to be photographed by Western visitors because they were convinced that some part of their soul was being stolen. There is something to be said for such a belief.

Exploitation is photography's true métier: I take that to be a fact, though not such a damning one as it may appear to be. There are other professions, after all, that traffic in similar kinds of advantage-taking (psychoanalysis is one; journalism is another), and exploitation, like anything else, can be well or badly done. Some photographers negotiate it nimbly, with a kind of moral intelligence, and the art they make is brilliant and enlightening; and some are clumsy or crass. Which brings me to the work of Jill Greenberg and the quarrels that have sprung up around it in the past few weeks.

Greenberg is an L.A.-based photographer whose work, judging from her Web site, the all-too-aptly named [www.manipulator.com](#), has generally been commercial and editorial: ads for Target, portraits of celebrities, that sort of thing. But she also has a small art career, showing more conceptual work in galleries, and she has an exhibit up now at the Paul Kopeikin Gallery on Wilshire Boulevard. The show is titled End Times, and it consists of a few dozen large photographs of infants and toddlers throwing tantrums: sobbing,

red-faced, staring furiously. Fair enough. But they're not meant to be read as mere baby pictures; they're meant to be a statement. As Greenberg herself explains in the gallery's press release, "The first little boy I shot, Liam, suddenly became hysterically upset. It reminded me of helplessness and anger I feel about our current political and social situation." "As a parent," she continues, "I have to reckon with the knowledge that our children will suffer for the mistakes our government is making. Their pain is a precursor of what is to come."

This is the sort of art that makes one groan and roll one's eyes. It's political in the worst way: literal-minded, preachy as a bumper sticker, and, well, infantile. Moreover, the pictures themselves don't look very interesting (for one thing, Greenberg seems to think that size—the photos are 42 inches by 50 inches—is a substitute for power). But lots of people make bad art without inspiring the kind of fury that Greenberg drew down upon herself. Her mistake was not in her meaning, but in her method.

It turns out that Greenberg doesn't just hang around her studio waiting for one of her toddler subjects to melt down: She induces the tantrum, by, say, giving the child a lollipop, and then suddenly taking it away. When a photography enthusiast who goes by the pseudonym of Thomas Hawk discovered as much, he pilloried Greenberg on his blog, in a post that can be summarized by its headline: [Jill Greenberg is a Sick Woman Who Should Be Arrested and Charged With Child Abuse](#). The post generated a few hundred comments, and the discussion spread to Flickr, and then to other blogs, and then finally to [BoingBoing](#). Most of those who weighed in came down on Hawk's side. Greenberg responded in an [interview](#) on PopPhoto.com.

It looks like what's going on here is the standard "can good art be made by bad people" debate, but to the extent that that's so, it's uninteresting. As Faulkner once said, "If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is worth any number of old ladies." But Greenberg isn't Keats, and bad art neither deserves nor receives the kind of moral pass that Faulkner was endorsing. An asshole who makes great art is an asshole who makes great art; but an asshole who makes lousy art is just an asshole.

On the other hand, Greenberg isn't Leni Riefenstahl, either. Small children, as she points out in the PopPhoto interview, often have tantrums, and they usually blow over quickly, and are just as quickly forgotten. To provoke tears in order to take a picture is objectionable, and worthy of some condemnation. But it's not as if she beat them with a belt because she wanted to photograph their bruises. On this front, it seems to me, Greenberg was wrong, and Hawk overreacted, and there isn't much more to be said.

But an insight can be sifted out of Greenberg's peccancy and Hawk's cant. Photography tends to magnify and distort both deeds and misdeeds—more so than other art forms, and in fact more than almost any activity I can think of. The specter of exploitation hovers over it, and it's this, I think, that accounts for Hawk's disproportionate outrage. If Greenberg were making infants weep in the service of a psychological experiment, one might feel uneasy, but the dismay would no doubt be tempered by one's sense that a greater good was to come of it. If she were doing it because she wanted to, say, draw them, or write poems about them, many people might still find it objectionable, but not, I don't think, to quite the same degree. Indeed, if she were doing it just for the hell of it, we would consider her cruel and culpable; but the fact that she made them cry so that she could take their pictures somehow makes it worse.

The point becomes clearer, or at any rate starker, by comparison with pornography. In most states, the age of consent is 16 or 17, but federal law stipulates that you can only be photographed having sex if you're 18 or older. Two 17-year-olds can copulate to their hearts' content, and their friends can watch: However creepy it may be, no laws would be broken. But they can't be photographed in the act, nor can anyone, of any age, so much as look at such a photo. The picture has a legal status quite different from the thing it pictures.

This is as it should be, for many reasons; but one of them is simply that photography is, in its essence, a form of predation, and its being so transforms the meaning of the scenes it shows. The power of the photographer over his or her subject is immense, and not just because one can manipulate the other, or even because one acquires and owns an image of the other. A photograph is, as the vernacular has it, something you "take," but the taking isn't simply material: It's metaphysical, and it's moral (I would say it's spiritual, if the word didn't seem vapid).

Exploitation lies at the root of every interaction between a photographer and a human subject, and every photographer worth a damn knows this. It is unavoidable, it is intrinsic to the very act taking pictures, and the most sophisticated photographers work their understanding of it into their practice, in various subtle ways. I've watched dozens of them at work, and each has a different method: Some bond with their subjects, some boss them around, some flirt and seduce, some ignore, some distract, and some just watch. But with the best of them you can see something in their eyes, and in their work, that proves their trustworthiness and creates a kind of complicity. Jill Greenberg is decidedly not one of the best, but her clumsiness inadvertently reveals a fundamental truth: Taking a picture is a deep and ethically complex thing to do, and everyone who engages in it is compromised, right from the start.

I don't mean this as a condemnation of photography. On the contrary, I love the medium, and it fascinates me endlessly, precisely because it's so freighted with the problem of power and

responsibility. It is born in a bed of plunder and abuse; but in the right hands it can end in beauty, and how we get from one to the other is as profound a grace as any art can manifest.

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## recycled

### How Do They Estimate Hurricane Damage?

Why do the Ike numbers vary all the way from \$6 billion to \$18 billion?

By Daniel Engber

Monday, September 15, 2008, at 11:50 AM ET

*Damage from Hurricane Ike could cost [\\$6 billion](#) to [\\$18 billion](#), according to firms that specialize in making such estimates. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Daniel Engber explained how they arrive at these numbers. The original article is reprinted below.*

Hurricane Katrina could cost more than [\\$100 billion](#), according to the latest estimate from [Risk Management Solutions](#). On Tuesday, risk-modeling firms placed the potential costs at up to \$25 billion. Where do these numbers come from, and why do they vary so much?

Teams of mathematicians, statisticians, meteorologists, and structural engineers compile the figures. Risk-modeling companies predict damage by comparing weather forecasts with detailed information about what lies in a storm's path. Using data from the National Hurricane Center, they estimate the wind speeds generated by the storm at various locations. The damage analysis typically addresses entire neighborhoods at a time; for each ZIP code, the modelers know the total value of buildings in the area, what percentage of them are residential, how many of those are wood-frame houses, and so on.

Once the modelers make a guess as to which buildings will be affected, and by what wind intensity, they can start to project the damage—and assign dollar amounts. For this they use "vulnerability functions," which derive from historical data about previous hurricanes. If a residential neighborhood in New Orleans were likely to be hit by Katrina's 100-mph winds, the damage estimates might come from the insurance claims made after 100-mph winds hit a similar neighborhood during Hurricane Charley or Hurricane Andrew.

Historical comparisons don't work for unique or unusual structures in harm's way. When the insurance companies saw Hurricane Floyd [approaching Florida](#) in 1999, the potential damage to the space shuttle couldn't be determined from past experience. Since shuttle damage could contribute a significant

amount to the total cost of the storm, the modelers assessed the risk informally.

In general, information about previous storms comprises claims for all sorts of losses, like structural damage, destroyed equipment, and even interrupted business. The standard vulnerability functions incorporate all these factors into the final estimate. Overall projections can refer either to the insured damages or to the total costs of the storm. A [\\$9 billion](#) estimate reported in the news on Tuesday referred to insured and uninsured damages from the wind alone; the new \$100 billion estimate applies to the total cost including flood damage. These numbers reflect damage to the local economy and infrastructure, but they don't account for global effects—like the dramatic increase in [gas prices](#).

What good are these numbers? Insurance companies hire risk-modeling companies to help them prepare for the aftermath. They want to know how much money they'll need to settle claims, and how many agents they should send into the field. They don't care so much about the overall numbers—for the most part, those are computed for the risk-modeling company's press releases. Instead, the insurance companies use the same data and vulnerability functions to create estimates about their own specific liabilities.

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

*Explainer thanks Rick Clinton of EQECAT and Shannon McKay of Risk Management Solutions.*

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## Schoolhouse Rock

### More on Attrition

A "conveyor belt" model might keep discouraged low-income students from leaving challenging schools.

By Paul Tough

Friday, September 19, 2008, at 8:45 AM ET

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## slate v

### Cubez: Internet Startup

A daily video from *Slate V*

Thursday, September 18, 2008, at 10:57 AM ET

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## slate v

### Berlitz Chimps

A daily video from *Slate V*

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 12:09 PM ET

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slate v

## Damned Spot: All-Time Favorite Political Ads

A daily video from *Slate V*

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 1:28 PM ET

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slate v

## Dear Prudence: Flirtatious Boyfriend

A daily video from *Slate V*

Monday, September 15, 2008, at 12:46 PM ET

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sports nut

## Stopping Makes Sense

Vince Young might not be cut out for the NFL—and that's OK.

By Stefan Fatsis

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 3:58 PM ET

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A week before NFL training camps opened in late July, an Indianapolis Colts defensive lineman named Quinn Pitcock delivered a message to his employer: I quit.

A third-round draft choice out of Ohio State in 2007, Pitcock played in nine games as a rookie and was expected to see regular action this season on a team with Super Bowl aspirations. The money wasn't bad, either. Pitcock had a three-year contract worth \$1.267 million. By all accounts, there was [no glaring reason](#) for his departure. He wasn't chronically injured or dodging a suspension or sinking on the depth chart. He just didn't want to play football anymore. "It was firmly his decision to walk away," says Joe Flanagan of BTI Sports, the agency that represents Pitcock.

That a gifted 24-year-old athlete would voluntarily abandon a career in the glamorous NFL might make little sense to fans. After all, who wouldn't jump at the chance to play pro football—let alone grab one of the eight-figure contracts that veteran starters often earn? Ask a player, though, and you'll likely get a different reaction. I'm willing to bet that more than a few Colts privately admire Quinn Pitcock for having the stones to walk away from the NFL—and wish they had them, too.

Professional football is an absurd proposition. Players collide, physicist [Timothy Gay](#) reports, with a force equivalent to the weight of a small adult killer whale. Injuries are constant, and players live with the knowledge that they may wind up crippled,

depressed, or with Alzheimer's disease in their 50s. Coaches are merciless jerks. Contracts aren't guaranteed; you can be fired any minute. The media say a lot but know little. Fans scream and curse. The surprise isn't that a player like Quinn Pitcock quits the NFL. It's that it doesn't happen more often. "When I tell people that I left after five years on my own, you should see the looks on their faces," says Ed Cunningham, an offensive lineman with the Arizona Cardinals and Seattle Seahawks from 1992-'96 who's now a college-football analyst for ESPN. "Well, hey, man, it sucked. It was not fun. And oh, by the way, I was getting beaten up every single day at work."

That unhappy reality is rarely acknowledged in public by active players, but [it's there](#). And there might be no better—or more troubling—case study of the hidden stress of life in the NFL than the drama unspooling around Vince Young, the third-year quarterback for the Tennessee Titans.

Last week, Young had to be [prodded to return](#) to the team's season opener after throwing an interception; missed a scheduled MRI on a knee he injured later in the game; [mentioned suicide](#) after leaving home without a cell phone but with a gun; and was questioned by Nashville police after going AWOL for four hours. Young's mother told the *Tennessean* that her "[baby boy](#)" had grown tired of criticism over his performance, and the newspaper said Young had told friends he didn't want to play anymore. (In the spring, Young told a writer he [considered quitting](#) after his rookie season. He also reportedly [asked to sit out](#) the second half of a playoff game last season.)

Later in the week, Young was telling reporters that everyone had [overreacted](#), that he wasn't depressed, that football remains his "dream." Tennessee's head coach, Jeff Fisher, who is regarded in the league as laid-back and player-friendly, said many of the details getting reported were wrong. Everything is "fine," [he said](#), and Young just needs to focus on rehabilitating his sprained knee ligament, which is expected to keep him out two to four weeks.

The spin control is understandable. An unstable Vince Young is bad for the image of the NFL and bad for the financial and competitive future of the Tennessee Titans, who already have paid him [more than \\$20 million](#). It's also bad for the agents, marketing managers, companies, family members, and friends with a vested interest in the [Vince Young brand](#), which includes Vince Young Foods (smoked ribs, brisket, sausage), the Vince Young Football Camp, and Vince Young Gear—all prominently displaying the [Vince Young logo](#), which would look great as a hood ornament on a Vince Young luxury car. Everyone associated with the business of Vince Young needs Vince Young in a Titans uniform.

But it's not unreasonable to wonder, as his mother has, whether Vince Young the person might be better off without football—or would, in fact, already be out of football had he not been made

into a brand before becoming an established NFL player. When I [spent a summer in an NFL locker room](#), I learned that the emotional and psychological pressures of pro football are painful for almost all players, barely tolerable for some, and unbearable for a few. I don't know Vince Young personally and don't know whether he falls into the last group. But he does demonstrate some of the major signs of stress—and distress—of life in the NFL.

Performance, of course, is every player's sword of Damocles. Fans and media supply their vocal opinions. When Young balked at returning to the field, he had just been serenaded by a chorus of boos from home fans. Afterward, [idiot columnists](#) weighed in. Public opinion about Young's NFL talent is opposite what it was when he led the University of Texas to a national championship in the 2005-'06 season. Read some typical opinions [here](#). Or just Google "[Vince Young sucks](#)."

What fans or media say shouldn't matter—after all, their role isn't to view players as actual human beings—but to some athletes, it does. More burdensome are the daily critiques from coaches on the practice field and in meeting rooms, which do matter. After every game, players are "graded out" on multiple details of technique and execution. Young's internal reviews can't be good. In 2007, though the Titans made the playoffs, he finished 26<sup>th</sup> in the NFL in [passer rating](#) and threw just nine touchdown passes against 17 interceptions.

Titans coaches talk openly about what Young still needs to learn: how to better read defenses, see the field and find open receivers—how, in other words, to be a multidimensional quarterback and not a gimmick who can only run the ball, which remains his best-developed skill and security blanket. That can't be easy to hear. Moreover, as Peter Richmond noted in an article in Sunday's *New York Times Play* magazine, Young has had to learn a [new offensive system](#) this year under coordinator Mike Heimerdinger, who favors more traditional drop-back quarterbacks. "I want him to play the position like other quarterbacks did last year," Heimerdinger said, meaning that Young should run only as a last resort. Early returns are not good: Young's opening-day performance—a game Tennessee won, 17-10, over Jacksonville—ranks him [35<sup>th</sup> out of 36 quarterbacks](#) in the league, according to a comprehensive stat created by the Web site Football Outsiders. His replacement, 35-year-old Kerry Collins, stands sixth.

Injury is another common source of distress for NFL players. For some players, it can be a ticket out of the league. Young doesn't face that, but his sprained medial collateral ligament is the worst injury of his career. David McDuff, a psychiatrist for the Baltimore Ravens, says injuries can leave players feeling isolated, guilty, and fearful. A lack of experience with being hurt only makes it worse. "It can make your self-confidence plummet," McDuff says. "And I mean fast. Within six hours of an injury."

Then add this to a player's burden: responsibility to a host of other people. Having a mother who discloses her son's emotional state to reporters can't be helpful. Endorsing a debit card and an energy drink, as Young has, might pay well, but the companies count on you to live up to the deal. In our sports-obsessed culture, partying shirtless with a group of friends, as Young did this summer to the delight of [celebrity](#) and [sports](#) blogs, can require [a public apology](#).

So, Young faced a cocktail of stressors. McDuff says immediate intervention by team officials, health professionals, and trusted family and friends can quell an athlete crisis. But intense publicity can make it seem as if the triggering event "happened hundreds of thousands of times, not once, in the psyche of the public." Young's mental health, dedication, and competence have been questioned for two years now, never more than in the last two weeks.

How the Titans are handling Vince Young's personal issues hasn't been made public. According to a staff directory, the Titans don't have a psychologist on the payroll. But they do contract with a therapist, who met with Young during last week's events. (The Denver Broncos, with whom I embedded as a place-kicker, employ a full-time psychologist who has an office near the locker room, attends practices, and encourages players to talk.) Young didn't attend quarterback meetings last week or travel with the team to Cincinnati on Sunday (a 24-7 victory). And yesterday, Fisher announced that Young had been demoted in favor of Collins, a traditional drop-back quarterback, regardless of when his knee recovers. It would certainly be understandable if Young felt abandoned by his team.

As a culture, football isn't touchy-feely. "Because it's such a testosterone-driven sport, it's very hard to express any weakness at any time to anyone," player agent Peter Schaffer says. "It's like the remedy creates more problems than the actual problem." Or, to put it another way, a player who owns up to his problems might think he'll be perceived as less than tough, threatening his status in the locker room. And it's not as if sportswriters are sympathetic after the fact. In the *Tennessean*, columnist David Climer advises Young to "[get with the program](#)." In the *New York Times*, columnist William Rhoden links Young's problems to those faced by older African-American quarterbacks. "Young doesn't need a psychologist," Rhoden writes. "He needs a [history lesson](#)."

All might not be lost for Vince Young. At 25, he's still got plenty of time to become a great quarterback. The Titans have invested thousands of hours and millions of dollars in him. And plenty of other NFL players have suffered publicly before finding the emotional maturity to survive in the league. (Exhibit A: the Miami Dolphins' [worldly and thoughtful](#) running back Ricky Williams.) But there also are plenty of other players who have decided that the sport isn't for them. Some are comparatively anonymous, like Quinn Pitcock and Ed Cunningham. Others are



better known thanks to stellar, if short, careers, from the legendary Jim Brown to the superb 1990s running back Robert Smith.

Quitting outright is a dramatic endpoint, to be sure. But it shouldn't be an illogical one. Maybe Vince Young just isn't cut out to play in the NFL. "I'm really much more amazed by the people who continue to grind it out," says Joel Goldberg, who was a psychologist for the New York Giants and other NFL teams for more than two decades. "Honestly, the brighter ones quit."

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## technology

### Hacking Sarah Palin

Why it's not a good idea for politicians to use personal e-mail accounts.

By Farhad Manjoo

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 7:31 PM ET

Sometime on Tuesday, an unknown hacker [gained access](#) to gov.palin@yahoo.com, an e-mail account that Sarah Palin has used for personal and possibly also state business in Alaska. The hacker posted the e-mail password to the [/b/](#) group of 4Chan, a discussion site known as a [haven for Web "trolls,"](#) and for a brief while, Palin was an open book. 4Chan readers trudged through her inbox, saving screen shots of her correspondence with friends and supporters, a list of her frequent contacts, and pictures of her family. Then, a good Samaritan reset Palin's password, triggering a Yahoo security measure that alerted Palin to the breach. Soon after, gov.palin@yahoo.com and another account Palin has [reportedly](#) used to conduct official business—gov.sarah@yahoo.com—were deleted from Yahoo.

Gawker has posted a few [screen shots of the messages](#) found in Palin's account; they reveal nothing damaging about Palin, other than that she has a penchant for typing in ALL CAPS when exercised. ("Does he want someone OPPOSED to the life issue in Congress?" Palin wrote to Lieutenant Gov. Sean Parnell.) In a statement sent to reporters on Wednesday, the McCain campaign called the incident "a shocking invasion of the Governor's privacy and a violation of law."

The Yahoo breach does raise a few questions about Palin's e-mail habits. Why was she using Yahoo? Critics say she was taking a page from Karl Rove, who cooked up the idea of using an off-site e-mail address to confound investigations of his activities in the Bush administration. (In 2007, the White House [admitted](#) that Rove and other officials used Republican National Committee addresses for some of their correspondence; as a result, the White House said it couldn't track down a trove of e-mail messages requested by congressional investigators looking into those fishy U.S. attorney firings.)

Palin's e-mail policies do show a certain Rovian or perhaps Cheney-esque partiality for secrecy. The [New York Times](#) reported Sunday that shortly after she took office, Palin's aides discussed the benefits of using private e-mail accounts, with one assistant noting that messages sent to Palin's BlackBerry "would be confidential and not subject to subpoena." In June, Andrée McLeod, a Republican activist in Alaska, filed a public-records request for copies of all e-mails sent between two of Palin's aides, Ivy Frye and Frank Bailey. (McLeod had suspected the aides of [various ethical violations.](#)) Palin's office parted with four boxes of e-mail, but it refused to disclose more than 1,000 other messages, claiming executive privilege.

Rovian tactics aside, Wednesday's hacking episode proves that it's rather boneheaded to put state business on Yahoo. True, all e-mail addresses are vulnerable to hacking. But Yahoo is a big target—lots of people spend a lot of time trying to crack Yahoo accounts. Do a quick search for "[hack yahoo](#)," and you'll be presented with myriad methods of attack. Alaska's private e-mail system probably does not include a "Did you forget your password?" function. Yahoo, of course, does—and that function presents a key method of entry for hackers. The forgotten-password system is all the more vulnerable for addresses belonging to public figures like Palin. When you forget your e-mail address, Yahoo asks you a "challenge question" to verify your identity before giving you your password; because we know a great deal about Palin (her kids' names, her husband's favorite sport, her date of birth), the challenge question might not have been much of a challenge for the hacker. Indeed, that was the case in the other celebrity e-mail theft of recent memory: Paris Hilton's cell phone was hacked because the thief knew that her pet Chihuahua was named [Tinkerbelle](#).

Palin likely won't be the last politician whose e-mail gets hacked. Until now, this has been rare mainly because big-time pols don't e-mail—despite [inventing the BlackBerry](#), McCain abstains from e-mail, as do [George W. Bush](#) and Bill Clinton, who [sent just two messages](#) during his time in the White House (and one was a test e-mail).

But other politicians are addicted to e-mail: Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Mitt Romney, and Al Gore are always on their BlackBerrys. The BlackBerry is [known to be tough to hack](#); that is, it's shown no major tech vulnerabilities that would allow easy access by intruders. But keeping all devices safe from attackers takes work—choosing strong passwords, changing them often, making sure you haven't left them lying around somewhere. Politicians are probably no better at that than you or I. And we know all their pets' names.

## technology

# Sundance for Silicon Valley

The TechCrunch50 conference generates a lot fewer than 50 great ideas.

By Farhad Manjoo

Monday, September 15, 2008, at 4:29 PM ET

[TechCrunch50](#), the three-day tech conference that took place in San Francisco last week, bills itself as the Sundance of the Web start-up world. Like the film festival, TechCrunch50 attracts a clutch of celebrities to a beautiful city. While Ashton Kutcher did [show up](#) to pitch a [celebrity gossip site](#), he's not the kind of celebrity that makes waves here—the conference's real draws are [billionaire tech entrepreneurs](#) looking to pry open their wallets to fund the new new thing. TechCrunch50's organizers, bloggers Michael Arrington and Jason Calacanis, aim to [replicate the indie ethos](#) of Sundance's early years. Out of more than 1,000 applicants, they select 50 new tech firms "based purely on merit." Founders get eight minutes on stage to present their businesses and then a few minutes to spar with a panel of judges, who decide what company wins \$50,000 in seed funding.

Film buffs perennially complain that Sundance has been [corrupted](#) by the mainstream forces of Hollywood and that new filmmakers increasingly try to replicate last year's big hit. Because there's no such thing as an "indie" business world, TechCrunch50 is even more vulnerable to such banal corporate demands. [Yammer](#), this year's winner, offers a case in point: The company is Twitter for the office. People use [Twitter](#) to tell their friends what they're doing; the company's founders hope people will use Yammer to tell their co-workers what they're doing ... *at work*.

Not that there's anything wrong with copying. Some of the biggest names in tech—hi there, Bill Gates!—made their fortune by co-opting other people's ideas. Twitter is popular among geeks, but it's been hobbled by constant technological difficulties, and it doesn't offer a feature set customizable for corporate use. Yammer lets companies restrict people's conversations to a group of co-workers who share the same e-mail domain (everyone at [Slate](#), for example). It also does away with Twitter's 140-character limit on messages, and it displays conversations in a handy threaded view. (Here's [a video](#) of Yammer's TechCrunch50 presentation.)

Plus, unlike Twitter, Yammer has a way to make money though the tactic is pretty outrageous: The company plans to charge companies to silence their employees. While Yammer allows any worker to join his firm's Yammer network, the company's bosses have to pay to manage that network—to restrict certain topics of conversation, for example. Google's HR department, say, would have to pay Yammer if it wants to stop people from talking about Google's [stock price](#) or [controversial day care plan](#). (Alternatively, as several Yammer skeptics have pointed out,

Google could just send down an edict to its employees: Stop Yammering.)

Many of the founders on the TechCrunch stage tried the same tack as Yammer, promising a better or more targeted version of something that's already been successful online. There were two social networking sites for kids ([TweeGee.com](#) and [Hangout.net](#)), one for [people interested in fashion](#), another for people [into bird watching](#), and another for [people who've died](#).

Of those, the bird-watching site, [Birdpost](#), looked most promising. Its target audience is less narrow than you may think: There are 18 million birders in America, and they spend \$32 billion each year on their pursuit, according to the company's founders. Birdpost allows users to share data on where they've made their finds. If I'm birding at Lake Dell Valle in California and spot a bald eagle, I'll add the bird to my Birdpost profile. (I can do it from my computer or my phone.) If you've been looking for a bald eagle, you'll get an alert telling you where I've just spotted one. Birdpost also has a way to make money—it's free for now, but it'll begin to charge a subscription fee once it attracts many users.

A handful of TechCrunch50 presenters did offer groundbreaking ideas. Searching through videos for specific images—for instance, looking through all of YouTube for every scene in which Mandy Moore appears—has long been considered the [holy grail of search engines](#). A start-up named [VideoSurf](#) showed off a site that solves that problem pretty well; it can identify people's faces and other characteristics in a video and allow you to search for those characteristics.

Another company, [Swype](#), offered a novel way to enter text on a touch-screen device—instead of tapping at on-screen buttons, you slide your finger across the keyboard from each letter to the next. Say you want to type "macaroni": Trace a path from *m* to *a* to *c* to *a* ... and so on. Incredibly, even though you've touched many keys along the way, the software can guess the word you wanted. Why Swype instead of tap? Because it's much, much faster. You can trace 50 words per minute as opposed to fewer than 20 if you tap; if you find that hard to believe, watch [this amazing video](#).

But firms like Swype were an exception at TechCrunch50. What was remarkable about the conference was how many ideas seemed destined to fail—how many had no strategy for making money, or were replicating sites already on the market, or seemed to be solving problems that few people had. A company called [Alfabetic](#) promises to automatically translate Web sites into foreign languages, allowing publishers to make money in other countries. That idea sounds interesting in theory, but would a machine-translated [Slate](#)—with its focus on American politics and culture—attract readers in France or China? Probably not very many; most publishers looking for an international outlet choose to build dedicated sites for those readers. Another firm,

[iThryv](#), built a very slick online banking site for kids. I suppose some 10-year-olds will find it useful to track their earnings and spending on the Web, but I have a feeling that most of them would rather just hang out on Facebook.

Last year, TechCrunch50 was TechCrunch40; the organizers expanded it this year to satisfy the huge number of start-ups interested in joining. But this year's conference proves that finding 50 great ideas a year is difficult. If we're lucky, Silicon Valley spits out two or three great Web companies a year. Next time, a downsizing is in order—let's make it the TechCrunch10.

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## the big money

### "Everyday I Read the Book"

*The Big Money's* new business-books podcast.

By Daniel Gross

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 5:52 PM ET

*Slate's* new business magazine, *The Big Money*, presents a new podcast, "Everyday I Read the Book." Host Daniel Gross brings you interviews with the authors of today's best books on business and finance. His first guest is David Smick, author of [The World Is Curved: Hidden Dangers to the Global Economy](#).

Push the play button below to listen or download the podcast [here](#):

You can also subscribe to *The Big Money* podcasts in iTunes by clicking [here](#).

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## The Big Sort

### What Are the Politics Here? You Can Tell by Lookin'

What your neighborhood's yards and signs say about how you vote.

By Bill Bishop

Thursday, September 18, 2008, at 2:56 PM ET

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## the chat room

### What's the Big Emergency?

Zachary F. Meisel and Jesse M. Pines take readers' questions about E.R. abuse and its culprits.

Thursday, September 18, 2008, at 4:59 PM ET

*Drs. Zachary F. Meisel and Jesse M. Pines were online at Washingtonpost.com to chat with readers about why so many*

[people who are not urgently ill or injured go to the emergency room](#). An unedited transcript of the chat follows.

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** Hi everybody. Zack Meisel here ready to chat.

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**Alexandria, Va.:** The ER eventually will be split into emergency and routine areas. Just don't call the routine part universal health care.

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** Many ERs do just this—they have urgent or walk in sections for low acuity patients. However, the biggest issues are for patients with, say belly pain, who could have a minor or a major issue. By definition going to the ED automatically means by some standards that the patient thinks it's an emergency and it has to be treated that way, at least at first.

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**Jersey City, N.J.:** What are the main reasons people choose to go directly to the ER? Is it because of the convenience, or is it to save money??

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** Zack and I had mentioned in the article the main reasons that people go to the ER. The first is that they really need ER services, like they are having a heart attack, a stroke, or have just broken their leg. Another main reason is that they are worried they might be really sick, and they either can't schedule an urgent visit to see a doctor, can't get a hold of their doctor by telephone, or don't have a doctor altogether. One of the reasons that people don't have doctors is that they are uninsured. However, our article stated that the uninsured are just as likely to use the ER as the insured, indicating that it is more of an urgent access issue than an uninsurance one.

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**Washington:** I am frustrated by the current state of our medical community. In the past six years I woke up twice with a blistering earache that made me dizzy and was flat-out painful. Just last month I woke up with the worst sore throat I ever had in my life—something so painful I couldn't speak. In all three cases I woke up on a weekend. I called my different doctors' emergency lines and got no response. Nothing. I called the hospital referral line, and to this day I haven't received a call back from them—they clearly ignored my message.

In all three cases after a period of a few hours where I made multiple calls, I just drove to the emergency room or urgent care facility and got my ears or throat looked at. In the case of my sore throat, it was really strep. If the medical community really cares about lessening emergency room visits, then they have to

be in business on Saturday and Sunday for full days—until 6 p.m. or 7 p.m. If not, then what alternative do I have to ER or urgent care? Really, what?

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** Access to care when you need it is a major problem in the U.S. which is what drives people to ERs when they may have better been served in a primary care environment. I agree that a potential solution would be extended hours for clinics.

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** I think the answer is that of course you should go to the ER if you are really worried or in severe pain. However, there was a chance that a private doctor's office could have made an intervention that helped without sending you to an emergency dept. Consumers should have a way to assess if their primary doc's offices will be responsive at off hours or for urgent follow up. This type of transparency could be used to incentivize primary care providers to come up with systems to handle situations such as yours.

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**Philadelphia:** Decades ago, Philadelphia used to have free health clinics. Obviously they weren't profitable, but they served a large community. Should and could free health clinics ever return to the degree they used to exist?

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** In Philadelphia there are a number of places for people to go for free or reduced fee care—they are either run by the city department of public health or are private clinics with federal dollars that help support indigent care.

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** I'm not sure whether it is true that free clinics are unprofitable. But it is true that increased availability of free clinics may reduce the demand for ER services. However, people often come to the ER because we can provide more services than free clinics, like CTs, intravenous medication, and access to specialists.

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**Laurel, Md.:** Seems to me I've read a lot of illegal immigrants are abusing the ER, and I don't think by law you can turn them away, but it's unfair to the people who pay insurance. They get pregnant and have babies for free.

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** We cited several studies in the article that show that ER use is actually more common among those with insurance which mirrors the general population (i.e. more are insured than uninsured). And that the uninsured immigrants that you refer to are not actually disproportionate users of ER services overall. Immigrant use of ERs may be more dependent on the number of immigrants in the community than their individual healthcare seeking behavior.

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** I agree. A good source for information about who is using the Emergency Departments is the National Hospital Ambulatory Medical Survey. It's [easily available online](#) and can answer some of these questions.

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**Harrisburg, Pa.:** How much is the shortage of health care professionals contributing to the increased use of emergency rooms?

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** While there are shortages across the board for healthcare professionals (nurses, doctors), the major shortage is in primary care physicians. This is because the economics of primary care does not allow them to be paid a large amount per patient they see. As a result, they have to book their clinics at 100% to pay their staff. When clinics are 100% booked, there is little room for urgent patients or extra time to spend with those who are more complex. Most people don't plan on getting sick. Therefore, clinic overflow and more complex patients are directed squarely to the ERs.

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** There is some debate among economists about the physician supply. In Philadelphia, if you can pay or have coverage you can find good primary care. However, other communities do struggle with primary care shortages. In [our Slate piece](#), we are particularly interested in why patients who are covered and have doctors still choose (or are sent) to come to the ED when they may not have to.

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**Boston:** One thing you story didn't mention is that people get sick at night, on weekends, on holidays. I was recently in the ER for bronchitis. It was Saturday night, and I was having trouble breathing. I got way too much treatment—IV, X-rays, etc, just in case. I often have taken my kids to an ER. They've got a bad earache, it's 9 p.m., and when I call the doctor's office and finally get to talk to a nurse, she always says go to the ER.

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** Certainly very important to go to the ED if you can't breathe. Whether or not you got too much testing is probably debatable. One consequence of the ED usage for lower acuity issues is that ED docs and staff will treat your condition like an emergency, at least in the beginning (because by showing up in an ER you have declared that you think it is an emergency as well). Also they may not know you or have access to your outpatient records. This will probably lead to more testing.

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** I agree with Zack on this.

**Boston:** Walk-in quick clinics are just starting to be allowed in the CVS pharmacies around here. Do you think that type of thing, or more general neighborhood clinics, could help to alleviate some of the strain on ERs?

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** Walk-in clinics like CVS can alleviate some of the strain on ERs. However, while the waits may be shorter, they have fewer resources than ERs do. If they need a more complex assessment (like a CT or an MRI), they will need to come to the ER anyway. Or alternatively, if it is not truly emergent, they can see their doctor (if the doctor will see them in a timely way).

The other issue with walk-in clinics is that people have to pay for services up-front at CVS, where many ERs don't require this. So those who have fewer resources may just choose ERs because they may perceive out-of-pocket costs to be lower, even though the bill they get in the mail will certainly be higher.

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** Also many communities have tried to set up late night walk in clinics/urgent care centers and for many reasons, they have not been able to stay in business.

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**Seattle:** I have been to the ER three times in my adult life: Once for an ankle injury that may have been a break, but it was swollen to twice normal size and had turned purple, once for chest pains that turned out to be two months of un-treated GERD, and once for appendicitis. Were any of these abuses of the ER?

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** These all seem like reasonable reasons for using the ER.

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** Agree.

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**Gaithersburg, Md.:** I work with a population with severe and persistent mental illnesses. Many of them have difficulty differentiating between acute symptoms of their illness and non-emergencies. At what point would you consider an ER visit appropriate versus abusing the service? (By the way, I work with Jesse Pines' Mother at CBH Health Life Skills.)

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** You take care of a challenging population of patients and I commend you for that. Regarding their ER use, whether it is appropriate depends on what the complaint is. If it is something that can be taken care of in a primary care office (like a sore throat or a cough), you should take them there. If it is something more serious, like a trauma or they are having chest or abdominal pain, they should come to the ER. Say hello to mom for me.

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** We, as practicing emergency docs, also struggle with differentiating between serious and non-serious problems in patients with mental illness (despite having access to lots of tests and treatments in the ER). So this is not an easy question.

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**Washington:** Doctor availability is a big issue—even with good insurance, I have trouble finding a doctor who can see me today or tomorrow for something that's urgent. I have to wait days or sometimes weeks to get an appointment (and don't get me started on how long I have to sit in the waiting room once my appointment rolls around). In at least one case, during the wait my condition worsened, and I ended up in the emergency room. Insurance companies could save a lot of money by including urgent care centers in their plans.

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** Reportable standards for acceptable wait times for urgent care appointments might add transparency and benefit patients in the long run. We discuss this in [our article](#).

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** I would agree with Zack on this. The trick to good health care is getting the right doctor in front of the right patient at the right time. There is currently no system to measure this vital aspect of medical care.

The problem is that people often don't know who the right doctor is and they don't know if they are really having an emergency. If there was some mechanism to efficiently triage these complaints (insurance companies could do this), that would probably reduce ER visits because many issues could be addressed in primary care clinics or directly by specialists.

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**Washington:** The main people who abuse the ER are illegal immigrants. They know the hospital can't call ICE or the authorities, and they know there is no way to find them to pay their bills. It's just not politically correct to say ... but it's the truth, and numbers don't lie.

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** Take a [close look](#) at the article. There is now objective data that really debunks this myth that all of ER overuse is uninsured and/or illegal immigrants that are abusing the system. If you take a close look at the studies that we quote, the numbers suggest a different answer—it is the insured patients who actually have doctors who account for the increases in ER visits.

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** Right.

**Indianapolis:** Would you agree that people need to understand that offering preventive care will reduce ER usage overall—that it's worth the investment?

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** Investment in effective preventive care services is certainly less costly than investing in acute care services like ERs and hospitals.

The problem is that preventive care (like getting someone to quit smoking) doesn't pay nearly as well as a cardiac catheterization if someone is having a heart attack. Think from the perspective of a cardiologist: if you spend 30 minutes with your patient discussing smoking cessation, you get paid a tiny fraction of what you get for a procedure.

The system is built based on economics, which often is not beneficial to the overall health of the population and is certainly more costly.

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** Just telling people to get primary care may not be what changes their behavior. But realigning incentives (and improving information) so that patients and primary doctors can get more benefit by not going to the ER for a non-emergency problem may help.

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**Princeton, N.J.:** We wouldn't have these ER problems if we had an efficient single-payer health care system. Here are some facts about a single-payer system. The federal part of Medicare has an overhead rate of 2 percent (Canada's is 1.3 percent) while private insurers average more than 15 percent. This fact alone causes waste of over \$100 billion a year. In addition, the private insurers put tremendous bureaucratic burdens on physicians that waste more than \$200 billion a year. Here is a simple example to show what is happening.

Suppose you had \$100 to distribute to 10 people. You could give \$10 to each person. Alternatively, you could decide that perhaps not every person deserves the money. You could develop criteria to determine the deserving and then investigate the people to see who meets the criteria. If this costs you \$75, and you find out that according to your criteria, only five are deserving. You could take the remaining \$25 and give each of these five people \$5.

That's what we are doing in health care. We spend so much money trying to deny health care to people that it would be cheaper to give it to everyone. The point is that the rules—who gets covered for what—are made by the private insurance companies that have as their sole goal, as good corporations, maximizing return for their stockholders and executives. They are neither interested in efficiency or good health care. If they

can save a buck by having a physician fill out a 40-page form, they will do it.

Other industrialized countries have solved this part. They get much better health care as measured by all the basic public health statistics and they pay much less—half per patient of what we pay. Because of the waste mentioned above, we could give Medicare to everyone without limitation, co-pays or deductions, and with complete drug coverage, without spending a penny more than we do now.

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** There is an active debate in the field about whether universal health care would change the way people use EDs. Clearly, when the ED is one of the few places that uninsured people can get timely care, it will drive them to the ED in higher numbers. But 2 caveats: first, countries with universal care/single payer systems like Canada still have increasing numbers of patients who use the ERs every year. Also, as we point out in the article, patients with good coverage are still driving the increase in ED use.

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**Charlotte, N.C.:** Some of what happens in an emergency room happens because the staff's default assumption is that something is, in fact, an emergency. I had what turned out to be—seriously—an allergic reaction to nuts I'd never experienced before. Weird tingling, some swelling and dizziness. I really think that—had this happened during normal business hours my own doctor, who knows I have zero risks for heart issues—it would have investigated as something idiomatic. But the emergency room hears tingling and dizziness and, in spite of the fact that I'm an athletic-looking 40-year-old, starts running cat scans and EKGs and running up a bill of over \$5,000. *Five thousand dollars.* (I've got great insurance and my total co-pay was \$50.) But if you're an emergency room doctor or nurse, it makes sense that your assumptions tend toward the catastrophic, doesn't it?

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** Emergency physicians are trained to take care patients who are well or sick. But because we see more acutely ill patients than primary care providers, we may be more biased by experience to assume a patient is sicker than he may ultimately be. Also, as I said in one of the other responses, when a patient shows up in the ED (or is sent there) we are obliged to treat it as an emergency—which may bring on more testing.

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** Agree. Emergency physicians tend to think of the worse case scenario when they are seeing patients and make sure that all the emergencies are ruled out.

Much like if you show a rash to a dermatologist, he'll say 'rash' but if you show a rash to an oncologist, he'll say 'cancer'.

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Critical thinking about the topic and getting to the heart of who is using the ER and why will hopefully point us to solutions.

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**However, our article stated that the uninsured are just as likely to use the ED as the insured, indicating that it is more of an urgent access issue than an uninsurance one.:** But couldn't that simply be because the uninsured wait longer and sometimes just stay sick? And doesn't this increase costs in the long run?

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** Yes, absolutely. When people wait longer to be seen, if it is a treatable illness (like an infection), sometime they end up sicker in the end and require more resources. Same goes when people don't see primary care doctors, they don't get preventive services like blood pressure management and cholesterol lowering which can prevent heart attacks and strokes.

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**Re: Uninsured using the ER:** How many of the emergencies for which the uninsured use the ER were preventable, if they had had insurance? My guess is that "abuse" of the ER isn't the problem; it's that lack of insurance turns molehills into mountains.

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** Agreed. Lack of health insurance certainly makes the health of the population worse because they don't get preventive care. I'm not sure anyone has actually quantified the burden of preventable disease caused by uninsurance.

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**Menomonie, Wis.:** Good morning. I am not sure if this is off-topic, but I often have heard the term, "clinical futility." Do you know what this term means? Thank you.

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** That is somewhat off-topic, but clinical futility refers to when additional resources allocated to a patient's care will not change a poor outcome, for example, when there is brain death.

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**Re: Laurel, Md.:** I did a paper last year on this very subject, and believe it or not, American citizens are the worst offenders in using the ER as their own doctor's office. As Dr. Pines and Meisel stated, it is not just one-sided. If you read something that seems logical but may be considered racist, investigate the statement more thoroughly. There are many sites out there that give a truer picture of what is going on.

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** We certainly know that ER visits are going up—67 million in 1996 and 119 million in 2006 in the U.S.

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**Washington:** I work evenings/weekends as a telephone triage/advice nurse for an HMO with urgent care clinics open 24-7. Many callers with *non*-urgent conditions (e.g. rash unchanged for the past two weeks) want to go there or to an ER because they don't have any sick leave coverage at work, rely on public transportation and an unaffiliated ER is "just down the street," or they "just got tired of [the condition]" and want it fixed *now* (however unlikely that is). All are frustrating from "the system" viewpoint, but at least I have sympathy for the first two. Any suggestions for how to dissuade the third group from using "urgent" care settings for nonurgent problems, which slow response time for everyone else?

**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** Well first it is great that you have this job—I bet you are able to help people sort out whether or not they need to go to the ER (can you schedule urgent or follow up appointments?) So the answer may be creating more positions like yours and training those who staff it how to do a good job triaging patients by phone. But we still have to convince the patients to use the phone service and not just go to the ER because its there or its cheap. As we mentioned in the article, raising cost sharing for ER use (through higher co-pays) may help (but it won't be popular). However, people are already likely paying for low co-pays through their insurance premiums. So raising co-pays may not actually drive more out of pocket health consumer costs.

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**Dr. Zachary F. Meisel:** Thanks everybody for the great questions.

**Dr. Jesse M. Pines:** Excellent questions, goodbye everyone.

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**the green lantern**

**Grande Americano, Extra Green**

What's the best way to drink your morning joe?

By Jacob Leibenluft

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 6:54 AM ET

**My office recently switched from Styrofoam coffee cups to a "bring your own mug" policy. Sounds like the right idea, but with all the water and paper towels we now waste on washing mugs, I'm not sure this is a huge net gain for the**

## environment. What is the "greenest" way to drink coffee around the office?

Judging from all the letters the Lantern gets on this topic, you and your office-mates are not alone in being confused about how to balance a caffeine addiction with a concern about responsible consumption. It's true: You'll have a hard time finding a more eco-unfriendly product than the material most of us call Styrofoam. Those soft, white cups are made of highly processed petroleum (polystyrene, to be exact), and they're almost certain to languish in a landfill for centuries. Still, it may not always be the right move to switch over to ceramic or stainless-steel mugs. It all comes down to which aspects of the environment you care about most.

If your biggest concern is landfill waste, there's no question that a reusable cup is best. While it's technically possible to recycle a polystyrene cup or a paper cup, your office will be hard-pressed to find a way to do so: Polystyrene recyclers are difficult to find, and the waxy coating on paper cups—not to mention the leftover food residue—makes it equally unlikely that these cups will find a second life. If you use a disposable cup, it's going to linger a long while on this Earth—polystyrene isn't biodegradable at all, and for all practical purposes, you shouldn't expect a paper cup to degrade very fast in a landfill, either.

But water use matters, too—especially if you're living in parts of the country, like South Carolina or California, that have recently [faced droughts](#). By this measure, using a mug doesn't look quite as good, given that each wash will require substantially more water than it takes to make a polystyrene or paper cup.

Finally, there's the question of energy use and emissions. Here, the results get a little more complicated. Pound-for-pound, petroleum-based polystyrene is a pretty bad material—it takes twice as much energy to produce a gram of polystyrene as it does to produce the same quantity of ceramic. But you'll need at least 70 times as much energy to produce a ceramic mug as you will to manufacture a polystyrene cup, and probably even more to produce a stainless steel mug.

How could that be? Simply speaking, it's all about mass: A polystyrene cup is much lighter than a permanent mug. That means it requires far less material, so the fact that it's made from petroleum is more than made up for by the greater mass of the mugs. It also takes less energy to ship the lighter, disposable cups, and they're more likely to be produced here in the United States. (Stainless-steel mugs tend to come from overseas, although you should check the labels for yourself.)

Washing your mug will add to its energy burden. Research from the early 1990s suggests that each time you clean a mug in the dishwasher, it takes about [as much energy](#)—and would probably produce as many emissions—as it takes simply to produce a new polystyrene cup. Gains in dishwasher efficiency since then may

have changed the math a little, but if you wash your mug after every use, you could easily be talking hundreds of cups of coffee before your mug makes more sense than a daily dose of polystyrene. As the Lantern has [pointed out before](#), washing the mug by hand may not absolve you, either—although you can help your case by using cold water.

The Lantern uses a mug for office beverages, but he's chosen to go the scavenger route—using an old one someone left in his office. Your colleagues' instincts are right to avoid polystyrene, but they shouldn't buy brand-new mugs as a replacement (even the kind that come with [cheeky green messages](#)). Unless you absolutely need to drink your coffee on the go, ceramic is better than stainless steel. And when you wash, do it by hand, using phosphate-free soap and cold water. (If you want to use hot water, see if you can share washing duties throughout the office, so the water doesn't need to be heated separately for each mug.)

What if you get your coffee at the local Starbucks on your way to work? The nationwide chain deserves credit for including [10 percent recycled content](#) in its cups, and paper—unlike polystyrene—has the advantage of being a renewable resource. But in other ways, the wood-based *venti* cups are even worse than office polystyrene: They're heavier, which means more energy used to create the cup and more waste once the cups have been crushed. Other coffee retailers are experimenting with cups made out of [plant-based material](#), which can then be composted—a positive step, although one that raises a question of where all that extra corn will come from.

Starbucks and other coffee chains are also talking more seriously about encouraging people to use reusable mugs if they are drinking coffee in the store. (Starbucks, for example, says it wants to increase mug use [tenfold](#) by 2010.) That's probably a good step—but the Lantern hopes the company is thinking seriously about its baristas' dishwashing habits, too.

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

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## the has-been Lipstick on a Puck

Hockey's response to its newfound celebrity: Thanks, but no thanks!

By Bruce Reed

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 1:31 PM ET

## Wednesday, Sept. 17, 2008

**Ice Time:** When Joe Lieberman became the first Jewish vice-presidential nominee, Clyde Haberman



of the *New York Times* [summed up](#) the American Jewish reaction as one of initial pride, followed immediately by the question, "Is it good for the Jews?" When Mitt Romney launched his presidential bid, he ran into [similar worries](#) from many fellow members of the Church of Latter Day Saints, who wondered if it would be good for the Mormons.

So perhaps it's only natural that since Sarah Palin emerged as the most famous hockey mom in history, the reaction around the rink has been, is it good for hockey?

Other sports have made their peace with politics. For a century, major league baseball has asked presidents to throw out the first pitch on Opening Day. Both parties have elected retired football players to Congress, the Super Bowl is a major political event, and George W. Bush [risked his life](#) to watch an NFL playoff game. Barack Obama played basketball with troops; he and McCain both hyped their NCAA tournament picks.

Yet aside from Team USA's gold-medal upset in the 1980 Olympics, the worlds of American politics and hockey have tried their best not to collide. A few politicians may tout the sport in hockey-mad states like Alaska, Minnesota, and Massachusetts, and John Kerry nearly brought his skates all the way to the White House. But in general, the two arenas have kept their distance, each viewing the other as too rough, cold, and foreign.

Now comes Sarah Palin, who threatens to turn hockey into the biggest celebrity spectator sport in the world. Suddenly, ["hip check"](#) and [Zamboni](#) have entered the political lexicon. Last week, the *New York Times* examined the ["hockey way of life,"](#) suggesting that in Alaska, the game is at best a way to keep young people off the streets and at worst the reason Bristol Palin got pregnant. This week, hockey moms went viral with a Swift Boat parody, ["Hockey Moms for Truth."](#)

As a fading hockey player and below-average hockey dad, I have one reaction to the overnight surge of media attention to our once obscure game: Thanks, but no thanks! If we wanted to become a political football, we would have signed up for a different sport.

At first, the rush of Palin publicity seemed like a boon for the game. Before she introduced herself as "just your average hockey mom," "average" wasn't the first word most often associated with hockey parents. In popular culture, the more common adjectives were ["violent"](#) and ["homicidal."](#) USA Hockey, the governing body for the sport, frets enough about the stereotype to run chill-out ads [like these](#).

What's more, ice hockey suffers from the same problem as the Republican Party: not much of a female fan base. The scoreboard company Jumbotron makes the astonishing claim that [only 22% of NHL fans are women](#). By comparison, women make up nearly twice as big a share ([43%](#)) of Major League Baseball fans, [41%](#) of NBA fans, [40%](#) of NASCAR fans, and [37%](#) of NFL fans. (Hope is on the way: Ice hockey is [one of the fastest growing women's sports](#).)

But after a few weeks under the media spotlight, the hockey world is starting to remember why we preferred our rinks dimly lit in the first place. Stu Hackel, [a hockey blogger for the New York Times](#), wrote a long post recently on how much he resents the game being dragged into politics and used as a pawn. Several readers agreed -- and chided him for dragging politics into a hockey blog.

Over at [OnFrozenBlog](#), [pucksandbooks](#) tried to look on the bright side: "If you love hockey, how can you not like how hockey is being celebrated (associated with perseverance and toughness) in the rhetoric of 2008's political debates?" For readers, however, pride was tempered by grave concern about what the association with politics might do to hockey's reputation.

In my experience, we hockey parents are already a little grumpy from ice times that are too late or too early. For many, the sudden attention just brings up the sore subject of how little respect the sport gets in the U.S. "You know hockey is never going to be better than the fourth major sport," one OnFrozenBlog reader lamented, recalling how ESPN's SportsCenter used to make fans suffer through golf highlights before getting around to the NHL.

Then again, at least we don't live in [Canada](#), where politicians are always trying to put lipstick on a

puck. The current leader, Stephen Harper, is a self-styled "[hockey-dad-turned-Prime-Minister](#)." A Canadian hockey pol gets to have it both ways – screaming at the refs now and then shows you're a regular bloke, while sitting behind your kid on the bench [softens your image](#).

Yet even in Canada, the hockey schtick doesn't play well in all quarters. With national elections a month away, the Toronto *Globe and Mail* ran two articles last week after an "exclusive interview" with Harper. [One piece](#) discussed the Prime Minister's views on NHL expansion, noting that he has written an unpublished history of hockey. The [other](#) article took a different tack: "During a campaign stop at a winery in St-Eustache, Que., Mr. Harper, who many have called a Philistine, also spoke at length about his life-long passion for music and the piano." With great panache, Harper recounted writing poetry, suffering as a pianist from "nervous" hands, and overcoming one of the most unusual childhood hard-luck stories in political history: "For the first half year I was in lessons, we didn't have a piano and I would actually practice for my lessons on a cardboard keyboard."

If politicians start saying the difference between a hockey dad and a pit bull is a cardboard keyboard, hockey parents might decide we liked our old reputation better. ... **1:38 P.M.** ([link](#))

## Tuesday, Sept. 9, 2008

**NASCAR on Ice:** Every election, pollsters and pundits introduce another voter group whose views are certain to decide the outcome: [soccer moms](#), [NASCAR dads](#), [security moms](#), [office park dads](#), and (three times in the past week) [Wal-Mart moms](#). These categories, while sometimes useful, share an important methodological flaw: On Election Day, when undecided voters finally make up their minds, exit pollsters don't ask them where they work or where they shop, what sports they watch or what games their children play. Exit polls eschew these trendy questions in favor of boring demographic perennials like age, race, gender, education, and income level.

Precisely because exit poll questions don't change much from one cycle to the next, however, they provide an interesting portrait of how the

electorate evolves—or doesn't. Some segments of the electorate are fiercely loyal to one party; others lean toward one party but more dramatically in some years than others.

According to exit polls, the most volatile swing voter group over the last 20 years hasn't been hockey moms like Sarah Palin, commuter dads like Joe Biden, or soccer parents like Barack and Michelle Obama. Over the last two decades, the swing voters most prone to moving away from Republicans in elections Democrats won and toward Republicans in elections Republicans won have been white men with a degree from high school but not college. In other words, forget Sarah Palin: In recent elections, the biggest swingers looked more like her husband, Todd.

Democrats don't need to win a majority among white men without bachelors' degrees, but it's crucial to cut our losses. In 2000 and 2004, Democrats lost that group by about 30 percent. In the 2006 midterms, Democrats cut our losses in half. In 1992, with some help from Ross Perot, we managed to eke out a slim plurality. Because this voting bloc still makes up nearly one-fifth of the electorate, losing them by 30 points instead of 15 means a shift the size of George W. Bush's margin over John Kerry. The only group with a swing that comes close is white women with the same educational profile, who turn out in greater numbers but are less likely to switch sides.

Of course, past performance is no guarantee of future results, especially in a path-breaking year like this one. The Obama campaign has invested heavily in registering and turning out new voters, while the McCain campaign carries the albatross of an old, unpopular GOP brand. In an economy this troubled, and after an administration this bad, all kinds of voters who went Republican in the past should be up for grabs. Then again, that might be yet another reason men with no college degree should be among the most up-for-grabs of all.

So far, Todd Palin has attracted as much attention for [his looks](#) and [his nickname](#) as for his politics. No one knows whether he joined the Alaskan Independence Party because he wanted a vote on statehood, was a [Perot supporter](#) fed up with the two parties, or just liked this one's quirky platform: "[The AIP supports fishing!](#)" Sarah Palin called her

husband "a story all by himself"—fisherman, oil worker, snowmobiler, part Eskimo, and perhaps the first person ever to be [cheered](#) by a Republican Convention for belonging to the United Steelworkers Union.

The current vice-presidential spouse, Lynne Cheney, grew up in a small Western town, got a Ph.D., and used it to write [racy novels](#). Todd's passion is the 2,000-mile, NASCAR-on-ice [Tesoro Iron Dog](#). Last year, he told the [AP](#) that his principal cause as First Dude of Alaska was expanding training for noncollege workers: "For those of us who learn by touching and tearing stuff apart and for those who don't have the financial background to go to college, just being a product of that on-the-job training is really important."

Noncollege men aren't going to vote Republican just because they identify with Todd Palin—and in any case, he's hardly the stereotypical working-class swing voter. He's now a registered Republican, married to a passionately conservative one. Before he left his job as a production operator for BP, he was earning between \$100,000 and \$120,000 a year—about three times the Census Bureau average for men who haven't finished college. In contrast to the Lower 48, Alaska remains a land of opportunity where it is still possible to succeed beyond one's wildest dreams through what the AP called "a lifetime of manual labor." Many of my high-school classmates in Idaho headed north for the same reason.

The trouble with the GOP argument is that so far, their only plan to boost the incomes of non-college-graduates is the one Todd Palin came up with on his own 20 years ago: work in Alaska!

So in the rush to court more familiar voters, Democrats shouldn't concede Dude Dads to the Republicans. Democrats may not have a First Dude on the ticket, but we have a good plan to help the forgotten middle class do better again. The next president needs to help the United States [build the job-rich industries of the future](#), such as new energy-efficient technologies, and give Americans what Rep. Rahm Emanuel calls "[a new deal for the new economy](#)": health care they can afford, a 401(k) pension they can keep, a tax cut they've earned, and the chance to get more training and send their kids to college.

In this campaign, Americans have heard more than enough about [the Bridge to Nowhere](#). What millions of voters want out of this election is a bridge to somewhere. A [bridge to the 21<sup>st</sup> century](#) would be a good place to start. ... **5:19 p.m.** ([link](#))

## Saturday, August 30, 2008

**The New Frontier:** Flush from a pitch-perfect convention week and a crescendo of can-you-top-this speeches by Bidens, Clintons, and Obamas, Democrats in Denver had no trouble bounding out of bed Friday morning. After running up the score at Invesco Field on Thursday night, our biggest worry was getting penalized for excessive celebration. Then, just when the party thought its luck couldn't get any better, John McCain's choice of an obscure rookie governor sent Democrats popping champagne corks all over again. Giddy partisans rushed to the phones and microphones to trash Palin as "[Geraldine Quayle](#)."

I wasn't so quick to jump for joy. For one thing, I would have rather spent the fall poking fun at Mitt Romney, and got my hopes up when his stock soared to 80% in the political futures market shortly before the Palin announcement. Alas, passing up Romney deprives us of the perfect slogan: "[Four More Houses!](#)" While we weren't able to elect the first presidential android, his supporters and I can take heart that thanks to his campaign, there are now 4.7 million cracks in that plastic ceiling.

For me, the choice of Sarah Palin cuts a little too close to home. She was born a few miles from where I grew up, went to junior college in my hometown, and has now eclipsed Deep Throat and Larry Craig as [the most famous graduate in University of Idaho history](#). It's as if the McCain campaign were micro-targeting my wife's demographic: [exercise-crazed](#) hockey moms from Idaho who married their high school sweethearts. The Obama campaign can rest assured – universes don't get much smaller than that.

As governor, Sarah Palin helped stop the Bridge to Nowhere. Now she's the Candidate from Nowhere. That's a steep climb for any candidate, even one who shoots moose and runs marathons. Before every VP selection, the only people willing to talk about the choice don't know anything. With Palin, that was still pretty much the case even after her announcement. Republican congressman Mike Simpson doesn't know her, but told the *Idaho Statesman*, "[She's got Idaho roots, and an Idaho woman is tough](#)."

If national security experience is the measure of a potential Commander-in-Chief, Palin has an extraordinarily high burden to prove. To paraphrase the words Lloyd Bentsen used to destroy the last surprise vice-presidential choice, she's no Joe Biden.

But for a host of reasons, Democrats needn't rush to run down Sarah Palin. Obama seemed to come to that conclusion Friday afternoon, [striking the right tone](#) after Democrats had gone after her with a few early hip checks. Both Obama and Biden called Palin to wish her good luck, but not too much. Hillary Clinton echoed that Palin's "historic nomination" would nevertheless take the country in the wrong direction.

Why hold back? First, as Obama himself demonstrated in winning the Democratic nomination, 2008 is a tough year to handicap the relative virtues of being a fresh face and having experience. The natural reflex is to brand Palin as too great a risk. But McCain is practically begging our side to throw him into that briar patch. Convinced he can't win as a candidate of the status quo, he wants everyone to know he's willing to take a risk.

Second, anyone going after Palin for the important experience she lacks had better be careful not to dismiss the value of the experiences she does have. Raising a large family and running a small state may not be sufficient qualifications to assume the Presidency. But we're not going to get far by minimizing those jobs, either. Here again, the McCain campaign may be hoping that Democrats – or the press – will come down too hard on Palin, and spark a backlash that turns her into a working mom's hero.

Third, and most important, voters don't need our help to figure this out. In the end, they'll be the best and toughest judge of whether or not Sarah Palin is ready. Back in 1988, the Dukakis campaign actually ran an ad against Dan Quayle. It didn't work, and wasn't necessary. In any case, Quayle had only himself to blame for falling flat on the national stage. By straining so hard to compare himself to JFK on the campaign trail, he practically wrote Bentsen's famous line for him.

In fact, Quayle never recovered from his debut at the '88 convention, when voters witnessed his deer-in-the-headlights moment. Over the next few days and in the vice-presidential debate, Palin's reputation will be shaped in much the same way – by whether she can take the heat, or looks like a moose hunter in the headlights. ... [1:38 A.M. \(link\)](#)

## Friday, August 22, 2008

**Spoiler Alert:** When the McCain campaign floated the idea of a pro-choice running mate, social conservatives reacted with the same outrage they've been rehearsing for 40 years: Some threatened to bolt at the convention; others said they'd rather lose the election than expand the Republican tent. "If he picks a pro-choice running mate, it's not going to be pretty," Rush Limbaugh warned.

But the most explosive threat comes from former [right-hand-of-God](#) Ralph Reed, in his new novel, [Dark Horse](#), a "political thriller" that imagines this very scenario. Spoiler alert! Just hours after forcing his party to swallow a pro-choice VP, the Republican presidential nominee in Reed's pot-boiler is brutally murdered by radical Islamic terrorists at the GOP Convention. Reed's implicit threat to Republican candidates: The Christian right has so much power, they can even get someone else's God to strike you down.

Reed doesn't just kill off the character who named a pro-choice running mate—he has the running mate go on to destroy the Republican Party. For the Republicans (and the reader), the plot goes from bad to worse. With the pro-choice figure—an African-American war hero named David Petty—now at the top of the Republican ticket, evangelical leaders throw their support behind Calif. Gov. Bob Long, who just lost the Democratic nomination at a brokered convention and decided to run as an independent after going through a religious conversion in the chapel of the hospital where his daughter nearly lost her baby. Petty offends evangelicals, while Long—obviously a quick study—wows them with the depth of his knowledge of the Bible.

Petty's candidacy implodes when a YouTube clip shows him telling Iowans that his support for the GOP abortion plank is only symbolic. Days before the election, voters also learn that as defense secretary, Petty convinced a no-bid contractor to hire a lobbyist who moonlights as his mistress and madam of an exclusive Washington brothel.

Reed's clear warning: If you put a pro-choice Republican on the ticket, don't be surprised when he turns out to be a lying, cheating, no-bid-earmarking john.

By contrast, Reed's evangelicals love Long, who woos them with parables and waffles on abortion. "I've heard through the grapevine that he's become a Christian," says televangelist Andy Stanton, a composite of Limbaugh and Pat Robertson. "He may be someone we can do business with." With Stanton's enthusiastic blessing, Long sweeps the South and beats Petty 2-to-1 among evangelicals.

All three candidates come up short of 270 electoral votes, so the election goes to the House of Representatives. Even though Republicans control the House, Petty loses when Republican members of the evangelical caucus support Long instead. The message to McCain: Social conservatives will gladly support a maverick, as long as he says what they want to hear on their issues.

Of course, John McCain doesn't need to curl up with a Ralph Reed roman à clef to know that social conservatives won't budge on abortion. The more interesting question is why my evil twin decided to write the Great Republican Novel in the first place. True to his own life story, the book suffers from too much plot

and not enough character. But it's not nearly as bad as I'd hoped, and it's chock-full of accidental revelations:

- Ralph expects the Republicans to lose the White House in 2008 but win it back in 2012 and 2016. By the time the book takes place, Democrats haven't carried a single Southern state in five straight elections (2000 through 2016), and a Republican president who is retiring after two terms reminisces fondly about how "I did what I had to do" to win the 2012 election. Alas, his "botched effort to overthrow the Iranian government" inspires the terrorist attack on the 2020 GOP convention.
- Much as social conservatives and neocons can't stand liberals and the media, most of all they hate each other. Reed's hapless Republican nominee insists that "this election is about terrorism, not social issues" and doesn't hide his contempt for social conservative leaders and "their self-importance, single-issue litmus tests, and insufferable sense of entitlement." Meanwhile, social conservatives view themselves as "abused spouses" trapped in a "self-destructive codependence" with "the spineless wonders" who run the Republican Party. Reed says the Reagan formula can't save the GOP anymore: "A pro-business party with the religious right grafted in like a wild olive plant, it no longer appeals to the center of the country."
- Money-grubbing consultants are obsessed with alcohol, drugs, and sex. Long's adman is arrested for snorting cocaine, and his top strategist nearly costs his candidate the election by shacking up with a spy from a rival campaign.
- Novel-writing operatives, by contrast, are obsessed only with sex. Reed tries his best to turn social conservative politics into steamy beach reading. In *Dark Horse*, the operative always gets the girl, and she is invariably "bronzed," with swaying hips and tight designer clothes. One femme fatale is "a brunette lollipop" who captures her prey with lines like, "I thought I was dessert."
- Apparently, Reed does not have much experience courting the women's vote. Long's wife is an alcoholic who's upset that he found God. The Democratic VP candidate is a lightweight who can't remember her party's position on Iran. Two campaign operatives refuse to discuss their grand jury testimony but stop to answer press questions about the designer outfits they're wearing.
- Reed enjoyed running the Christian Coalition more than humping corporate accounts for Jack Abramoff. He writes himself into the book as a minor character named Ross Lombardy, "a veritable computer hard drive of political trivia" and "strategist-cum-organizer with a killer instinct who could quote 200 Bible verses from memory" and "had an uncanny ability to cite the precise vote percentages in every key U.S. House and Senate

race in the previous three election cycles." The Abramoff character, G.G. Hoterman, is a corrupt, ruthless multimillionaire lobbyist who crushes anyone who gets in his way. "Politics has a way of criminalizing the normative," Hoterman complains.

- Reed writes knowingly of the "time-honored Washington tradition" of "expressing false regret at the misfortune of someone caught in a scandal, when the truth was everyone enjoyed it." With a twinge of bitterness, he adds that "Washington scandals burn like funeral pyres, and only go out after the angry mob has tossed someone to the flames to pacify the gods.

That pyre suggests Ralph's next move. It's time to gin up the social conservative movement to forget about McCain's running mate and wake up to the GOP-bashing, sex-peddling novelist in their midst. Nothing could do more for slumping sales than an urgent edict from the religious right: Burn this book! ... **3:58 P.M.** ([link](#))

## Monday, August 11, 2008

**It's Your Money:** Over the next two weeks, the Obama and McCain campaigns will spend an impressive [\\$11 million](#) to advertise during the Olympics. Obama's first ad, "Hands," outlines his plan for a green economy. McCain's attacks Obama on taxes. Both ads reflect the campaigns' respective game plans, although Obama's fits in much better with the upbeat not-the-triumph-but-the-struggle spirit of the games that surround it.

If I had a few million to help NBC fill the time between tape delays, I might go after a topic that is on most American viewers' minds during these games and that seems destined to weigh heavily on the next president: China.

When the 2008 campaign started a few lifetimes ago, this election appeared to be all about China—or, at least, about the long-term competitive challenge that the emerging economic superpowers of China and India pose to the American way of life. But a host of urgent short-term economic problems have pushed our long-term economic challenges aside. For the moment, falling housing prices, rising gas prices, and soaring credit-card debts have made us more concerned about the threat the American way of life poses to the American way of life.

But if our next president ever gets done cleaning up after our current one, he'll confront China's

growing shadow on issue after issue. While the United States can make an enormous difference by finally doing its part on climate change, the Chinese have already passed us as the [largest producer of greenhouse gases](#), and our ability and willingness to make progress will depend in part on theirs. Meanwhile, China's [rising demand for oil](#) to fuel its relentless economic growth will continue to cost us at the pump.

When the next president decides what to do about education reform in the United States, China should be on his mind. The Chinese education system churns out 5 million college graduates a year, while we still paper over our high-school dropout rate and look away as half a million of the young people we send to college every year [never finish](#).

Perhaps most urgently, the next president will have to admit what George W. Bush would not—that if we don't put our fiscal house in order, China will foreclose on it. As Obama has pointed out, "[It's very hard to tell your banker that he's wrong](#)." This year's federal budget deficit will be a record \$500 billion, not counting wars and economic bailouts. One of history's headlines on this administration will be, "Bush Owes to China."

The rise of China is [the story of this Olympics](#) and [threatens](#) to be [the story of the next presidency](#). So it's only fitting to give viewers a sense of what's at stake.

My dream ad would show the robot [Wall-E](#) methodically stacking pressed blocks of discarded dollar bills to form giant structures, which turn out to be the [Bird's Nest](#) stadium, the [Water Cube](#) aquatic center, and the [CCTV tower](#). The script would go something like this:

### "Sponsor" (60 seconds)

*Voiceover:* "Ever wonder what Washington has done with your tax dollars? This Olympics is your chance to find out. For the last 8 years, the Bush administration has been paying China billions of dollars in interest on the trillions it borrowed for tax breaks, pork, and special privileges you never got. That money helped create thousands of businesses and millions of jobs—in China. So as you enjoy the games, keep an eye on your tax dollars at work. The way our economy's going, it's

tough to pay your bills. But take heart: You already paid China's."

*Tagline:* "America's Taxpayers. Proud Sponsors of the Beijing Olympics."

What's an Olympics without a little national pride? And with any luck, NBC might refuse to run it. ... **10:30 A.M.** ([link](#))

### Tuesday, July 29, 2008

**Trader Mitt:** As if John McCain didn't have enough reason to [keep quoting](#) JFK's line that [life isn't fair](#), consider this: According to the political futures markets, Mitt Romney now has a [better chance of being McCain's running mate](#) than [McCain has of winning](#).

Since the primaries, Romney has steadily [gained ground](#) in the VP sweepstakes through hard work and a [disciplined message](#): He'll help on the economy, he grew up in the swing state of Michigan, and he makes his current home in the right wing of the Republican Party. He seems at ease with the unattractive chores of being the vice-presidential nominee: raising money, playing the attack dog, telling the base what it wants to hear.

On paper, Romney's VP bid looks as picture perfect as his presidential campaign once did. Yet even as Mitt watchers revel in the current boomlet, we can't help wondering whether this Romneymania will last.

With that in mind, Romneystas everywhere need to start making new and urgent arguments on his behalf:

- **The French Are Coming!:** Romney was widely [mocked](#) last fall when he warned that France posed a clear and present danger to the American way of life. But after watching French President Nicolas Sarkozy embrace Barack Obama in Paris last week, conservatives may finally warm to Mitt's "[First, Not France](#)" slogan after all. Romney has impeccable credentials as a Francophobe; Sarkozy would never dream of saying of him, "[If he is chosen, then France will be delighted](#)." In a few short hours in Paris, Obama claimed the president

as a convert. Romney spent two whole years in France and converted no one whatsoever.

- **Leave 'Em Laughing as You Go:** One of McCain's heroes, Mo Udall, loved to tell the story of primary voters who heard him say, "I'm Mo Udall and I'm running for president," and responded, "We were just laughing about that this morning." Poor Mo wouldn't know what to make of this campaign. Two months into the general election, nobody's laughing about anything. No one much wants to [joke](#) about [Obama or McCain](#). If Romney were the VP, pundits across the spectrum would exult that at last they had someone fun to mess with. He's a [good sport](#) and a [happy square](#), with a track record of supplying ample new material.
- **WALL-E's World:** Mitt Romney's [Web site](#) is a shadow of its former self—no Five Brothers blog, no ad contests, no animatronic Mitt messages for your voicemail. Yet like WALL-E's [stash](#) of charming knickknacks, the few surviving objects on Planet Romney carry greater meaning. For example, [a striking photo](#) highlights a strength few politicians reveal: Unlike [McCain](#), Mitt Romney was born to read a teleprompter. In the official campaign photo of him rehearsing his concession speech, Mitt is barely visible. All the focus is on the words in big type to be loaded on the prompter.

McCain doesn't much like giving speeches and treats teleprompters accordingly. But you can see how a campaign that has struggled to follow a script might be tempted by the first completely programmable running mate. In 2000, McCain often joked that he was [Luke Skywalker](#). This time, Romney could be his C3PO. ... **12:47 p.m.** ([link](#))

## Tuesday, July 8, 2008

**Make My Day:** What a difference a month makes. At its June meeting, the D.C. City Council debated Mayor Adrian Fenty's emergency legislation to ban sparklers. After the Supreme Court struck down the city's gun ban, the Council spent last week's July meeting debating emergency legislation to let residents own handguns. Here in the District, we couldn't shoot off firecrackers over the Fourth

because they're too dangerous, but we can now keep a loaded pistol by our bedside, ready to shoot down prowlers in self-defense.

Like most D.C. residents, I have no plans to stockpile guns in the wake of the Supreme Court decision. But if the city wants to take away my sparklers, they'll have to pry them from my cold, dead, slightly charred hands.

When I was growing up, the rights to keep and bear firearms and fireworks went hand in hand. My grandmother used a revolver to shoot garter snakes in her garden. Well into her eighties, however, her greatest pleasure in life was to spend the Fourth setting off massive strings of firecrackers, 200 at a time. When she came to visit, she'd step off the airplane with a suitcase full of firecrackers purchased on an Indian reservation. As soon as we got home, she'd light the fuse with her cigarette, then squeal with delight as serial explosions made the gravel in our driveway dance.

In recent years, firearm regulation and firework regulation have gone their separate ways. The National Rifle Association has successfully opposed most gun laws, even ones aimed primarily at criminals. Armed with Justice Scalia's maddeningly unhelpful ruling on the D.C. ban, the NRA already has begun to target the rest.

By contrast, although fireworks aren't nearly as deadly as guns, the government treats them like what they are – a widely popular, sometimes dangerous American tradition. The federal government long ago banned once-commonplace explosives like cherry bombs. Most states – [even the libertarian bastion of Idaho](#) – have banned or restricted the use of firecrackers. According to the website [AmericanPyro](#), five states, including Iowa and Illinois, permit only sparklers and snakes. Five others, including New York and Massachusetts, [allow no consumer fireworks whatsoever](#). In general, states insist that fireworks must be "[safe and sane](#)" – a balance that has been all but impossible to strike with firearms.

Thanks to the enduring power of pyromania, sales haven't suffered. Since 1976, fireworks consumption has increased ten-fold, while [fireworks-related injuries have dropped](#). Fireworks

manufacturers can take heart in knowing that this year's survivors are next year's customers.

Because there is no Second Amendment right to keep and bear sparklers, fireworks law is a straightforward balancing test – between the individual right to burn a hole in the back porch and the mutual responsibility not to burn entire communities to the ground, the personal freedom to pyromaniacal self-expression and the personal responsibility not to harm oneself and others. These days, the fireworks industry has more to fear from climate change than from the authorities. This summer, the threat of wildfires led [Arnold Schwarzenegger to ask Californians to boycott fireworks](#). Drought forced John McCain to forego fireworks at his annual Independence Day barbecue in Arizona.

The trouble with the Supreme Court ruling in the *Heller* case is not that it interprets the Second Amendment as an individual right. The Second Amendment is the constitutional equivalent of the grammatical paradox *Eats Shoots & Leaves*, but whatever the Founders meant by its muddled wording and punctuation, most Americans now take it for granted. The real problem with the Court's decision is that the balancing test for gun rights and responsibilities is even less clear than before. Scalia's opinion devotes 30 pages to a grammatical history of the Second Amendment and a single sentence to how the courts should apply it to most other gun laws already on the books.

Alongside such vast imprecision, the Court went out of its way to strike down the requirement for trigger locks – an extraordinarily modest attempt to balance freedom and safety. Trigger locks can help prevent gun accidents and keep guns out of the hands of children. Far from impeding self-defense, new trigger locks can be unlocked with a fingerprint or a special ring on the gun owner's finger. That means today's gun owner can arm himself to shoot an intruder in an instant – compared to the 30 seconds or more it took to load a pistol or musket in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Over the long term, it's not clear how much of a boon the *Heller* decision will be for gun rights advocates. In winning the case, the gun lobby lost its most potent argument – the threat that at any moment, the government will knock on the door

and take your guns away. With that bogeyman out of the way, [the case for common-sense gun safety measures is stronger than ever](#). Perhaps now the gun debate will revolve around more practical and less incendiary issues, like what can be done to reduce illegal gun trafficking and trace guns used in crimes.

If it's any small consolation, the real winners in *Heller* may turn out to be the sparkler lobby. If cities have trouble banning handguns, they will be hard-pressed to take away sparklers. Of course, as with guns, the threat to sparklers may well have been exaggerated. The D.C. Council [rejected Mayor Fenty's sparkler ban](#) by a vote of 11-2, as members nostalgically recalled playing with them in their youth. Councilman and former mayor Marion Barry voted no "with a bang." As Barry knows, there are worse things in life to light than a sparkler. ... **9:51 A.M.** ([link](#))

**Friday, June 6, 2008**

**[The Fight of Her Life:](#)** Ten years ago, at a White House farewell for a favorite staff member, Hillary Clinton described the two kinds of people in the world: born optimists like her husband who see the glass as half-full, and born realists like herself who can see the glass is half-empty.

As she ends her campaign and throws her support behind Barack Obama's remarkable quest, Hillary could be forgiven for seeing her glass as, quite literally, half-empty. The two candidates traded primary after primary down the stretch, two titans matching each other vote for vote. In the closest race in the modern era, she and Obama split the Democratic wishbone nearly right down the middle, but she's not the one who got her wish.

Yet for Hillary and the 18 million of us who supported her, there is no shame in one historic campaign coming up just short against another. History is a great deal wiser than Chris Matthews, and will be kinder, too. The 2008 contest has been one for the ages, and the annals will show that Hillary Clinton has gained far more than she lost.

The Obama-Clinton match will go down as the longest, closest, most exciting, most exhausting ever. Obama ran an inspired campaign and seized



the moment. Clinton came close, and by putting up a tough fight now, helped fortify him for the fight ahead.

Our campaign made plenty of mistakes, none of which has gone unreported. But Hillary is right not to dwell on "woulda, coulda, shoulda." From New Hampshire to South Dakota, the race she ran earned its own place in the history books.

While the way we elect presidents leaves a lot to be desired, it has one redeeming virtue, as the greatest means ever invented to test what those who seek the job are made of. In our lifetimes, we'll be hard-pressed to find a candidate made of tougher stuff than Hillary Clinton. Most candidates leave a race diminished by it. Hillary is like tempered steel: the more intense the heat, the tougher she gets.

And has any candidate had to face fiercer, more sustained heat? As a frontrunner, she expected a tough ride, and as Hillary Clinton, she was accustomed to it. But if she was used to the scrutiny, she could not have anticipated – and did not deserve – the transparent hostility behind it. In much the same way the right wing came unglued when her husband refused to die in the '90s, the media lost its bearings when she defied and survived them. **Slate** at least held off on its noxious [Hillary Deathwatch](#) until March; most of the press corps began a breathless Clinton Deathwatch last Thanksgiving. The question that turned her campaign around in New Hampshire – "How do you do it?" – brought Hillary to tears out of sheer gratitude that someone out there had noticed.

For a few searing days in New Hampshire, we watched her stare into the abyss. Any other candidate forced to read her own obituary so often would have come to believe it. But as she went on to demonstrate throughout this campaign, Hillary had faith that there is life after political death, and the wherewithal to prove it.

In New Hampshire, she discarded the frontrunner mantle and found her voice. For a race that was largely won or lost in Iowa, the discovery came a few days too late. But the grit Clinton showed with her back to the wall all those months will make her a force with a following for years to come.

The chief hurdle for Clinton's presidential bid wasn't whether she could do the job; Democrats never doubted she would make a good president. Ironically, the biggest question she faced for much of the race is one she answered clearly by the time she left it: whether America was ready for a woman president. No one asks that question any longer. For all the sexism she encountered as the first woman with a serious shot at the White House, voters themselves made clear they were ready. The longer the race went on, the more formidable she looked in the general election. In this week's CBS News poll, she was beating John McCain by nine points, even as she was losing the Democratic nomination.

Last year, the press and other campaigns insisted that Clinton was too polarizing and that half the country was united against her. Now, a woman who was supposed to be one of the most polarizing figures in America leaves the race with handsome leads over McCain in places like North Carolina, a state her husband never carried.

When her campaign started, aides often described Hillary as the least known, least understood famous person in America. During this campaign, it became clear that in certain quarters she's the most deliberately misunderstood person as well. The recent RFK flap was yet another attempt to suggest that her every miscue was part of some diabolical master plan.

Yet while talking heads imagined the evils of Hillary Clinton, voters finally came to know and understand her. They saw someone who knew what they were going through, who would stick with them, fight for them, and get back up when she got knocked down. The phony, [consultant-driven shadow boxing](#) of the last few years has dulled Democrats to the party's historic mission – to defend the values and stand up for the interests of ordinary people who are doing all they can just to get ahead. For those voters, Hillary Clinton was the champion they've been looking for, a fighter they can count on, win or lose, not to let them down.

That's a fight she'll never quit. Like the woman in New Hampshire, we still wonder how Hillary does it, but this time, the tears are on us. As we wish her well, our hopes are high, our hearts are full –

and [if our glass is empty](#), it was worth every drop. ... **11:58 P.M.** ([link](#))

**Friday, May 30, 2008**

**The Adventures of Bobble-Foot:** For enough money, any McClellan or Stephanopoulos in Washington will write a kiss-and-tell book these days. But the memoir Larry Craig just announced he's writing could launch a whole new genre: don't-kiss, don't-tell.

Craig revealed his plans [on Boise television](#) during Tuesday's coverage of the Senate primary to choose his potential successors. For the senator, if not his viewers, it was a poignant moment, one last point of no return in a three-decade-long political career.

With a touch of empathy, the local reporter told Craig, "You're looking forward now to a much different life for yourself." Alas, the life Craig described isn't much different from any other retiring pol's, nor does he sound like he's looking forward to it. He hinted that he is entertaining a number of lobbying offers. Because of ethics rules, he explains, "There are some one-way conversations going on, 'cause I've said I can't talk, but I certainly can listen." Perhaps they can figure out some kind of code.

These are heady times for the Idaho senator. Last Sunday, on National Tap Dance Day, the first-place St. Paul Saints, a minor league baseball team, drew their biggest crowd of the year with a special promotion in Craig's honor: a [bobble-foot doll](#) commemorating the bathroom stall at Minneapolis-St. Paul airport. The team website reported, "[Saints Have Toe-Tapping Good Time, Win 9-3.](#)"

The bobble-foot promotion gave Craig a way to test his market value even beyond the lobbying and book worlds. Scores of Craig bobble-feet are now available [on eBay](#), selling for upwards of \$75 apiece. You'd better hurry: Like successful appeals of uncoerced confessions, supplies are limited.

The upcoming memoir may be the last we ever hear from the man, so it's worth asking: What kind of book will Larry Craig write? Consider the possibilities:

- *The Broken Branch:* Left to his own devices (never a good idea), Craig seems likely to write an insiders' version of the [woe-is-gridlock lament](#) popularized most recently by political scientists Norm Ornstein and Tom Mann. "The thing that's important for someone with my experience to talk about is the state of politics in Washington," Craig said Tuesday. "It's created what I call an extremely dysfunctional, hyperpartisan Senate. We're getting little to nothing done." Craig cites immigration and energy policy. As his agent and editor will surely tell him, this sober approach is not the way for Craig to put his best foot forward. No one wants to read the case for decisive action written by a man who claimed his innocence after pleading guilty and remained in office after promising to quit. Then again, Craig might not be a household word if he had listened to the advice of Ornstein and Mann, who urged members to bring their families to live with them in Washington.
- *The Packwood Diaries:* With slight modifications, Craig has modeled his entire Senate career after his friend, former Oregon Sen. Bob Packwood. Craig [sobbed on the Senate floor](#) the day Packwood resigned. Packwood dug in his heels and remained in office for three years after his sex scandal became public. Craig has done the same, and is only leaving because his term is up. Considering how much Packwood served as his role model, it's possible that Craig tried to emulate another part of the Oregonian's legacy: [the Packwood diaries](#). Packwood kept a meticulous journal of [all his exploits](#), with an eye to history and none on the lookout for [satire](#) or [federal prosecution](#). We can only hope Craig has done the same.
- *What Happened:* Every publisher is looking for the next Scott McClellan, who told lies for a living but was scared straight after his escape. Craig could play this role with gusto. The pitch: It wasn't his idea to stand up in front of the press time after time and insist he wasn't gay. Karl Rove made him do it, in a deliberate cover-up to protect the Republican brand – and he'll never forgive Rove for it.

- *If I Did It*: O.J. Simpson never got to keep a dime of his controversial book, [If I Did It: Confessions of the Killer](#). Craig, on the other hand, could hypothesize all the way to the bank. Senators love to write loosely autobiographical fiction. Gary Hart and Bill Cohen wrote [The Double Man](#) about a politician who wanted to be president. Barbara Boxer wrote [A Time to Run](#) about a woman who becomes a liberal senator from California. Craig could write a great book about an imaginary conservative senator who happens to be gay. His hypothetical musings would wow the critics and sell like crazy. Besides, what does Craig have to lose? Hinting he did it would be no more an admission of guilt than the misdemeanor plea he was just kidding us about last June. ... **8:48 P.M.** ([link](#))

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## today's business press

### Another Day, Another Bailout

By Bernhard Warner and Matthew Yeomans  
Friday, September 19, 2008, at 6:58 AM ET

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## today's papers

### Rescue Dawn

By Daniel Politi  
Friday, September 19, 2008, at 6:49 AM ET

All the papers lead with news that the federal government is working on a comprehensive plan to try to prevent the financial crisis from spreading. The [New York Times](#) says it "could become the biggest bailout in United States history," while the [Los Angeles Times](#) and [Wall Street Journal](#) say it could be [the most extensive](#) government intervention into the financial markets since [the Great Depression](#). Congressional leaders met with Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke last night and vowed to work through the weekend so they could vote on a measure [by the end of next week](#). The [Washington Post](#) gets word that Paulson and Bernanke presented a "chilling" picture of the U.S. financial system as they warned lawmakers that the situation could [get much worse](#) if they don't pass legislation by next week.

Investors were so desperate for [some good news](#) that "the mere rumor of such major government intervention fueled a massive stock rally," reports [USA Today](#). The Dow Jones industrial

average shot up from what was a 200-point loss to close with a gain of 410 points, or 3.9 percent, which was its biggest percentage gain in almost six years. The rally continued [around the world today](#) as stock markets in Europe and Asia soared as soon as they opened. "There is a general acceptance that the government's plan will finally cage the wild beast," an analyst [tells USAT](#).

Details of the proposal haven't been released but everyone says the crux of the plan would involve using hundreds of billions of dollars of government money to buy distressed assets from financial companies so banks could carry on with their normal borrowing and lending. The move would leave "banks with more money and fewer problems," [summarizes the Post](#). The [NYT](#) notes that the plan [could add up to](#) "the most direct commitment of taxpayer funds so far in the financial crisis." The [LAT](#) points out that at the meeting with lawmakers, Paulson and Bernanke suggested that once the markets calm down the government would be able to [sell the assets](#) to recoup taxpayer money and perhaps even make a little profit on the side.

Almost all the papers compare this rescue model to the formation of the Resolution Trust Corp., which was created in the 1980s to deal with the fallout from the savings-and-loan crisis. The [WSJ](#), however, says that the program is likely to look more like the Reconstruction Finance Corp., which was created in 1932 to [pump liquidity into the markets](#). The [NYT](#) also notes that a key difference between the Resolution Trust Corp. and the plan likely to be unveiled today is that the government would take over just [distressed assets](#) and not entire institutions. It's not clear how all this would be structured, but the [WSJ](#) hears word that Paulson wants it to be either part of the Treasury Department or an entirely separate division of the government.

The move isn't exactly surprising, since top financial experts have been pushing similar plans over the last few days. Many have been critical of the seemingly ad-hoc nature of the recent rescue effort, where it seemed the federal government was making haphazard, split-second decisions and [jumping from one crisis to the next](#) without coming up with a comprehensive plan to deal with the issues at hand. Still, says the [NYT](#), the late [meeting with congressional leaders](#) "took most of Washington by surprise, especially since Congress had been trying to finish up its business and head home to campaign for re-election."

It's not exactly clear how the meeting with lawmakers came together, and the series of events described in the papers make it all seem a bit strange. The [Post](#) says House Speaker Nancy Pelosi [called Paulson's office](#) in the midafternoon to discuss the crisis, and it was during this call that the Treasury Secretary "asked to meet" with key lawmakers. So, if Pelosi hadn't called, the meeting wouldn't have been arranged? Of course, it's likely that Paulson was planning to make the call anyway and Pelosi just beat him to the punch, but the fact that the meeting came

together so quickly and without prior discussions illustrates the fast-moving nature of the crisis.

Regardless, it would be a mistake to think that the meeting with administration officials was all love and that passing such a huge bailout in a week will be an easy task. It's important to remember that lawmakers had already been feeling snubbed throughout the week as they were relegated to the spectator seats during what many are now calling the worst crisis since the Great Depression. The *NYT* says the "[atmosphere was tense](#)" last night, and the *Post* says one lawmaker scoffed at the idea that Paulson was asking them for "[a blank check](#)." Republicans are particularly skeptical of devoting so much taxpayer money to the effort, particularly since Paulson and Bernanke were honest and said they couldn't affirm whether this latest plan would actually succeed in stabilizing the market.

Bernanke and Paulson may have been hesitant to show too much optimism simply because no one knows whether the plan will work. In a front-page analysis, the *LAT* notes that while everyone agrees a comprehensive solution is needed, just because a similar plan worked during the [savings-and-loan crisis](#) doesn't mean it will work now. The distressed assets we're talking about now are owned by financial institutions that aren't under federal regulation, not to mention that they're also much more complicated and may still decline in value. "Creating a bureaucracy that takes paper that has no value and tries to sell it is just going to look like more smoke and mirrors," one expert said. Plus, if the government is going to buy these assets at a discount it would mean the financial institutions would have to record it as a loss, which is what they've been trying to avoid in the first place. But if they don't, then the federal government would certainly be accused of wasting taxpayer money.

In other crisis-related news, the *WP* and *WSJ* note that the Fed is considering creating some sort of federal insurance for investors in [money-market mutual funds](#). In the last few days, investors have been rushing to get their money out of these funds that were once considered one of the safest investments. Also, the *NYT* devotes a separate story to, and everyone points out, that the Securities and Exchange Commission is considering following in the steps of its British counterpart to [ban short selling](#).

John McCain joined the outcry against speculators and short-sellers, who bet on the decline of a company's stock price, and he took aim at the SEC's chairman, Christopher Cox, for allowing the financial markets to turn "[into a casino](#)." Saying that Cox had "betrayed the public's trust," McCain emphasized that "if I were president today, I would fire him." The White House said it stands by the chairman, and Cox himself released a statement saying that a time of crisis is "precisely the wrong moment for a change in leadership."

Meanwhile, both Obama and McCain are using the financial crisis as an opportunity to "audition for who could best handle a national economic emergency," [notes the NYT](#). Each candidate is trying to come up with quick responses to a changing situation as if they were actually sitting in the Oval Office, even though neither of them is at the center of the action yet, they're "expected to act as if they have the best information available." But, of course, they're also using the opportunity to dig into each other. McCain, continuing with his image as an "angry populist," [as the LAT puts it](#), accused Obama of "cheerleading" the crisis because it's good for him politically and said Obama's running mate thinks raising taxes is "patriotic." Obama mocked McCain's call for firing Cox, saying it [would not erase](#) his "lifelong record" of supporting the "people who helped bring on this disaster."

In case you haven't heard enough about the Gravina Island Bridge (aka the "Bridge to Nowhere") and Gov. Sarah Palin's role in the whole debacle, the *LAT* fronts a dispatch from [Gravina Island](#) that clearly explains what happened and why many in the area aren't happy with the vice-presidential nominee. While the construction of the bridge was canceled, work on the \$26-million road that was designed to connect to the bridge began anyway. Residents say they don't understand why Palin, a self-avowed fiscal conservative who campaigned in support of the bridge, didn't redirect the money for the Road to Nowhere elsewhere. "Here's my question," said the mayor of the town where the bridge was supposed to end. "If Sarah Palin is not being truthful on an issue like the Gravina bridge project, what else is she not being truthful about?" He's apparently considering posting a sign on the road: "Built Under Gov. Sarah Palin, Paid for With Federal Earmarks."

Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel, who has never been shy about breaking with his party, became the most prominent Republican lawmaker to question whether Palin is ready to be president due to her lack of [foreign-policy experience](#). "I think they ought to be just honest about it and stop the nonsense about, 'I look out my window and I see Russia and so therefore I know something about Russia,'" Hagel said. "That kind of thing is insulting to the American people."

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## today's papers Fear Factor

By Daniel Politi

Thursday, September 18, 2008, at 6:33 AM ET

Widely reported hopes that the bailout of American International Group was going to lead to a market rally went out the window yesterday morning with the opening bell as stocks plunged, credit markets seized up, and investors around the world

scrambled to put their money into safe [government bonds and gold](#). In short, it seems investors decided that it's officially Time To Panic. Knowing full well that casual readers might chalk up this latest development as simply another in a string of bad days on Wall Street, the papers make sure to emphasize that if you were worried yesterday, you should be terrified today. Right off the bat, the [New York Times warns that](#) the "financial crisis entered a potentially dangerous new phase," and the [Washington Post](#) says [Wednesday was](#) "one of the most tumultuous days ever for financial markets." The Dow Jones industrial average dropped almost 450 points, or 4 percent.

Investors were so panicked as they rushed to sink their money into U.S. government debt, which is considered the safest investment, that at [one point yesterday they](#) "were willing to pay more for one-month Treasuries than they could expect to get back," reports the [Wall Street Journal](#). "That's never happened before." Investors were also so eager to snap up gold, which has always been considered a safe haven during turbulent times, that its price increased by more than \$70, which the [Los Angeles Times](#) calls "[its biggest one-day gain ever in dollar terms](#)." Meanwhile, the average American might not understand the ins and outs of the crisis, but they still "[know that something's wrong](#)," says [USA Today](#), which reports on a new poll that shows 23 percent of adults think the economy is in a depression. That's nearly double the number of people who thought so in February.

Early-morning wire reports suggest that it's not going to be a pretty morning on Wall Street, as [Asian markets plunged today](#).

Many contend that investors right now are simply acting out of blind fear, which, of course, just makes things worse. "While investors' decision to protect themselves may be perfectly rational," [notes the NYT](#), "the crowd behavior could cause a downward spiral with broader ramifications." Right now, investors "are worried there is a lot more out there," an [economist tells the WP](#). "What other firms are going to collapse?"

The [LAT](#) says Morgan Stanley and Washington Mutual might be the next financial powerhouses [to be acquired](#). Morgan Stanley is one of two remaining independent investment banks along with Goldman Sachs, and their stocks suffered the steepest decline in their history. In this climate where such little money is flowing and banks don't even want to lend to one another, everyone notes that Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs are particularly vulnerable. The [NYT](#) and [WSJ](#) report that Morgan Stanley is in [preliminary merger talks with Wachovia](#). The plunge in "the last two titans left standing on Wall Street" ([NYT](#)) was somewhat of a surprise considering that they both reported respectable numbers on Tuesday, but everyone sees it as a sign of just how [far the fear is spreading](#).

As credit markets essentially froze, one of the most worrisome—and "surprising," [according to the Post](#)—aspects of yesterday's fast-moving events had to do with money-market funds, which have long been billed as an ultra-safe investment. One fund reported that its net assets fell below \$1 a share, which is so rare "that many investors consider them as safe as cash or a checking account," [notes the NYT](#). The development raised even more fears that spooked investors would rush to get their money out of other funds.

As the crisis that many are calling the worst since the Great Depression spreads, any hopes that it would end quickly "are fading fast," [notes the WSJ](#). In an extended comparison, the [WSJ](#) says that the American financial system "resembles a patient in intensive care" who is trying to fight a disease that is spreading. The doctors at the Treasury and the Fed are "resorting to ever-more invasive treatment, and are now experimenting remedies that have never before been applied." The disease, if you will, has been identified as deleveraging (sure to be in the running for word of the year), or the unwinding of debt. Just like the people who took on mortgages they couldn't afford, financial institutions took on way more debt than they could handle. And just like most people dealing with the credit crunch, these institutions now must learn to live without so much borrowed money, "a painful and drawn-out process that can choke off credit and economic growth."

The [WP's Steven Pearlstein](#) characterizes it as a "Category 4 financial crisis" that may be resulting in "the greatest destruction of financial wealth that the world has ever seen." And while there may be a lot of psychology of fear going on and no one's gone broke overestimating the importance of confidence in the markets, what is really happening "at the most fundamental level" is that foreign creditors are forcing the United States "to begin living within its means." As [USAT succinctly puts it](#), "the party's over." The problem is that if everyone cuts back, that would almost certainly lead to a recession, and while that's bad in and of itself, it could also translate into big problems for regional and local banks that have issued lots of loans to businesses that will inevitably suffer. "Think of that ... as the inevitable second round of this financial crisis that, alas, still lies ahead," Pearlstein writes.

To prevent more banks from failing—11 have already failed this year—the [NYT](#) reports that to little fanfare [regulators](#) proposed "a significant change in accounting rules to bolster banks and encourage widespread industry consolidation by making them more attractive to prospective purchasers." Also, in a move that everyone reports, the Securities and Exchange Commission imposed new limits on short-selling.

So, what does all this mean for the average American? [USAT](#) does a good job of clearly laying out how different types of people might be affected. In short, this [new period of tight credit](#) "could mean jobs lost, retirement plans pruned, college deferred

and lifestyles diminished," *USAT* summarizes. As usual, experts say retirement investors shouldn't panic and shouldn't rush to get all their money out of stocks.

All of the quick decisions that the Fed and Treasury Department have had to make this week mean that lawmakers have been relegated [to the spectator seats](#), a development that they're not happy about, reports the *Post*. There was lots of grumbling on Capitol Hill yesterday along with vows to hold hearings. In the meantime, the idea to create a new federal entity that would buy mortgages and debt that no one wants is gaining ground, even if nobody expects quick action on the matter. One thing that has come quickly is finger-pointing, [notes the NYT](#). This blame game is also playing out on the campaign trail, where Barack Obama has been quick to link the current problems with the Republican administration.

In another look at the quick-changing John McCain, the *LAT* fronts a look at how the Republican nominee is having a hard time figuring out how to [respond to the financial crisis](#). There's probably no better example than what happened yesterday. On Tuesday, McCain was adamant that "we cannot have the taxpayers bail out AIG or anybody else," a view he had apparently forgotten about by Wednesday when he issued a statement supporting the decision. This is only one stark example of how McCain has been trying to find a balance between talking about the need for small government while also pledging "stringent oversight" of Wall Street.

Although it's probably too soon to tell, all this talk about McCain's inconsistencies may be hurting his image with voters. The *NYT* fronts a new poll that seems to suggest the surge of support McCain got after the convention—particularly among white women—may have been nothing more than [a temporary blip in the radar](#). The latest poll has Obama ahead among registered voters though still within the margin of error. Horse-race numbers aside, voters also see Obama as more likely to change Washington and view McCain as a "typical Republican." In addition, voters continue to say the economy is their top concern and affirm that they trust Obama more than McCain on the issue. But it's not all bad news for McCain, whose selection of Gov. Sarah Palin as his running mate has clearly energized the conservative base.

The *LAT* catches late-breaking news that [seven U.S. troops](#) died in Iraq when their helicopter crashed outside of Basra. The military said the helicopter didn't come under fire and the crash appears to have been an accident. In other Iraq news, local police say 99 people have died in a variety of bombings across the country over the last week.

The *WP* is alone in fronting yesterday's well-coordinated attack [on the U.S. Embassy in Yemen](#) that killed 10 guards and civilians as well as six of the assailants. The attackers weren't able to breach the compound's gates, and no Americans were

killed. U.S. and local officials were quick to say the tactics were similar to those employed by al-Qaida in the past, and the *Post* notes that the use of two vehicle bombs is a strategy used by the Sunni insurgent group al-Qaida in Iraq.

On the *NYT*'s op-ed page, [Paul Wilmott](#), a quantitative-finance expert whom [Portfolio](#) has described as the editor of "the most influential magazine you've never heard of," compares the current financial crisis to *Hamlet*. "We've had the deaths of Polonius, Claudius and Laertes—that is, the falling house prices, the rising commodity prices and the collapse of banks. As of now there is no sign of Hamlet himself, a catastrophic fall in the markets," Wilmott writes. "Yet it's difficult to believe that markets are not going to undergo a climactic implosion some time soon. If the current situation doesn't fill investors with fear, then what are they smoking?"

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## today's papers In for a Pound

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 6:42 AM ET

News keeps pouring out of Wall Street, and all the papers lead with the Federal Reserve's startling decision to lend insurance giant American International Group up to \$85 billion in a bailout deal that would give the government control over the company. The [New York Times calls it](#) "the most radical intervention in private business in the central bank's history." In exchange for its cash, the government would get a 79.9 percent equity stake in the company. The [Washington Post](#) notes that the rescue package "effectively nationalizes one of the central institutions in the crisis that has swept through markets this month." The [Wall Street Journal points out](#) that this is "a historic development, particularly considering that AIG isn't directly regulated by the federal government."

The move marked an astounding about-face for the government that had been resisting AIG's pleas for help over the last few days and earlier chose to let Lehman Bros. fail rather than put forward more taxpayer money. "The main difference between the two situations: AIG is so huge and its operations so intertwined in the financial system that the Fed feared an AIG failure could harm the broader economy," [USA Today summarizes](#). Or as [the WSJ puts it](#): "This time, the government decided AIG truly was too big to fail." The [Los Angeles Times](#) notes that while Fed officials said the action was due to the fact that AIG insures the assets of millions of Americans, it seems [the main reason](#) "was fear that the company's failure could weaken or destroy nearly a half-trillion dollars' worth of financial protection that AIG provides Wall Street firms and the biggest companies of Europe and Asia."

In the last few days, government officials had been talking tough about how this was a private-sector problem that needed to be solved by the private sector. But once all efforts to secure private financing failed, federal officials decided they couldn't just sit on their hands and [watch AIG collapse](#). "The spillover effects could have been incredible," an economics professor [tells the NYT](#). Under the terms of the agreement, AIG is putting up all its assets as collateral for the two-year loan. Fed officials insist that they fully expect AIG to repay the loan either through its day-to-day operations or the [sale of its assets](#). The *WSJ* highlights that "taxpayers could reap a big profit" if the company manages to turn around.

As part of the deal, AIG's senior management will be replaced, and the government will have veto power over any major decision that the company makes. The *LAT* says that in private conversations, lawmakers expressed "[deep wariness about the loan](#)" but for the most part talked about it as the best choice in a slew of bad options. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, however, was not shy about [criticizing the deal](#), a move that suggests Bush administration officials will face tough questions in congressional hearings. "An \$85 billion loan is a staggering sum and is just too enormous for the American people to bear the risk," Pelosi said.

The *NYT* points out that one of the big worries is that the AIG bailout "[won't be the last](#)." Indeed, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke told lawmakers there was no way to know whether this would be the last major government intervention into the market. For those keeping track at home, the next company that could soon be approaching the government hat-in-hand is Washington Mutual.

"How far will the bailout binge go?" asks the *LAT* in a Page One piece that notes this year's "[cornucopia of handouts and guarantees](#)" is already larger than the rescue of the savings-and-loan industry, which cost taxpayers around \$124 billion. Of course, proponents of the bailouts insist that not doing anything would end up being much more expensive in the long run, but critics say the practice helps companies get out of messes that they themselves created. Also, as more money is handed out, more companies are likely to seek the government's help, which means the next president is going to face some difficult decisions trying to figure out who deserves to be rescued and who doesn't. For example, if Congress approves a loan program for automakers that could reach as high as \$50 billion, there's no reason why airlines wouldn't ask for the same thing. Some contend the big problem here is that there is no clear set of rules that can help guide the decisions, which could mean that those with the biggest lobbying prowess or companies that are based in key swing states could have an unfair advantage.

The *NYT*'s [David Leonhardt](#), who is back from a particularly ill-timed leave, praises Bernanke and Paulson, who may have had "some early missteps" but lately have been acting "aggressively

to keep the financial system functioning." The problem now, though, is that while everyone is rushing to deal with the current crisis, no one is trying to figure out how to resolve the problems that created this mess. Bernanke and Paulson "have done a nice job of playing defense," writes Leonhardt. "But when will someone start playing offense?"

In the meantime, there's still a lot of defense to play. The *WSJ* fronts a look at how banks suddenly [stopped lending to one another](#) or began charging exorbitant rates yesterday across the globe as fears grow that any financial institution could be the next on the chopping block. Central banks in several countries, including the United States and Japan, injected billions into the banking system to try to keep the money flowing. Meanwhile, the Fed decided to keep its benchmark interest rate steady yesterday. The move is seen as recognition that there's little the Fed can do on interest rates that can help alleviate the current crisis. "The market is not short of liquidity; it is short of confidence," an economist [tells the NYT](#).

Amid all the gloom and doom, the *WP* takes a look at a rare bit of good news for consumers as oil prices fell again yesterday and [closed at \\$91.15](#). Earlier this year, it seemed oil was on an unending upward spiral, but prices have been steadily dropping over the past two months, saving the world more than \$4 billion a day in energy costs. In related news, the House of Representatives passed an [energy bill](#) that, among other things, would end a ban on offshore oil drilling. The measure would let states decide whether they would permit drilling 50 to 100 miles off their coasts.

There was also a bit of good news out of Lehman as the *WSJ* reports that Barclays, the British bank, has agreed to buy "a stripped-clean version of Lehman's North American business" for [\\$1.75 billion](#). The move allows Barclays to take over Lehman's securities business without getting into the risky mortgage assets. It's certainly a gamble for Barclays, but it seems to have gotten a good deal, particularly considering that Lehman's headquarters building is also included in the package, and that alone could be worth as much as \$900 million. It's unclear how many of Lehman's employees will get to keep their jobs, but early estimates put the number at around 10,000. "If you want to transform yourself from a minor player into a major firm, this is the time to do it," an analyst [tells the NYT](#).

The *NYT* and *WP* both take a look at the difficulties facing John McCain as he tries to convince voters that he's the best candidate to deal with the mess on Wall Street. The *NYT* takes the wider view, noting that McCain is not only sounding more like a populist, he is also trying to portray himself as someone who has lots of experience dealing with economic issues due to his time on the [Senate commerce committee](#). McCain appeared on pretty much any network that would have him to say that he understood the economy is in crisis and called for a commission to study the problem. His campaign stumbled in the effort

yesterday though as one of his advisers suggested McCain had helped to create the BlackBerry, which, of course, brought back memories of the whole Al Gore-invented-the-Internet flap. (The campaign quickly called it "a boneheaded joke.")

For its part, the *WP* focuses on how McCain, who "has usually reverted to the role of an unabashed deregulator," is now busy pushing [for new regulation](#) on businesses. The change isn't lost on Barack Obama, who used the opportunity to highlight what he called McCain's "newfound support for regulation." Democrats usually have an advantage when there is trouble in the economy, and McCain's long record of opposing regulation in a variety of industries clearly gives Obama a straight line of attack.

The *WP*'s [Richard Cohen](#), who has often been accused of giving McCain a free pass on several issues, has now officially joined the ranks of those who once admired the Republican nominee but now can't stand what he has become. Cohen's moment of reckoning came while watching *The View*, where McCain was questioned about two anti-Obama ads and said, "They are not lies," even though they are. "McCain has turned ugly," says Cohen. McCain might think that if he wins the election he can return to being his old self and tell the truth, just as he did in South Carolina during the 2000 primary. "It won't work," Cohen writes. "Once is tragedy, a second time is farce. John McCain is both."

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## today's papers

### Down and Out in Wall Street

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 6:43 AM ET

All the papers lead with the fallout from the demise of Lehman Brothers and the sale of Merrill Lynch, two monumental events that shook up the markets and raised fears that the worst may still be to come [for the U.S. economy](#). Investors were [quick to press the sell button](#) yesterday and they managed to plunge the Dow Jones industrial average 504 points, or 4.4 percent, which made it the worst one-day decline since the first day of trading [after the Sept. 11 attacks](#). Markets across the world also dropped sharply, and several in Asia that were closed yesterday rushed to catch up on all the selling this morning. The [Los Angeles Times](#), [Washington Post](#), and [Wall Street Journal](#) all use banner headlines to emphasize the severity of the news and warn Wall Street insiders that they can look forward to lots of sleepless nights in the next few days—assuming, of course, that they're lucky enough to keep their jobs. For some, it's a race against time. The *WSJ*, which, once again, devotes most of its front-page real estate to the ongoing crisis, reports that Lehman officials

were frantically working all day yesterday to try to sell off some of its [most valuable businesses](#) before it's too late.

While the problems originated in the real-estate market, the credit crunch "has emerged as a full-blown financial crisis threatening the global credit markets," declares [USA Today](#). The [New York Times](#) notes that the downward spiral began [as soon as the markets opened](#), "and the mood later turned even gloomier" despite efforts by the Bush administration to reassure investors. The *LAT* points out that, in fact, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson's remarks, which were meant to give investors confidence, ended up having [the opposite effect](#) when he emphasized that the government isn't planning to intervene in the markets. "People don't believe anything that's being said," a stock trader tells the *LAT*. "They're selling first and asking questions later."

Despite all the bad news, the *WP* manages to [keep some perspective](#) and notes that while "it was a horrible day for the market, it was no worse than Treasury and Fed officials had expected when they declined to intervene to save Lehman." The *WSJ* agrees and points out that for most of the day most U.S. indexes were [down 2 percent](#), "which, while a good-sized decline, was smaller than many had thought would be the case." But the markets plunged in the last hour of trading, largely due to concerns over the future of insurance giant American International Group, which was downgraded by major [credit rating agencies late yesterday](#). AIG officials are now trying to raise as much as \$75 billion after the Fed rejected its request for a \$40 billion temporary loan. AIG shares were battered yesterday and plunged another 60 percent.

The *WSJ* [notes that AIG](#) "is such a big player in insuring risk for institutions around the world that its failure could shake the global financial system." Meanwhile, rumors continue to float around that if the company doesn't get fresh money by Wednesday, it might have to file for bankruptcy. In the *NYT*'s op-ed page, [Michael Lewitt](#) argues that if AIG goes under, it will make the fall of Lehman look like a walk in the park. The insurance giant is involved with pretty much every financial institution in the world, but most importantly, "it is a central player in the unregulated, Brobdingnagian credit default swap market that is reported to be at least \$60 trillion in size." And that's just an estimate, because no one really knows how big that market actually is. "Regulators knew that if Lehman went down, the world wouldn't end," writes Lewitt. "But Wall Street isn't remotely prepared for the inestimable damage the financial system would suffer if AIG collapsed."

While investors keep one eye on AIG this morning, the other will be firmly fixed on the Federal Reserve. Fed leaders weren't planning on cutting interest rates at their regularly scheduled meeting today, and the *WP* says their plans are [unlikely to change](#). The *NYT*, however, says Fed leaders are [considering it](#), but it "is far from a certainty." The *WSJ* reports that while



officials [aren't eager](#) to change the rate now, the thinking could change if the markets are in free-fall by the time they gather. And even if they don't actually cut rates today, officials could still hint that they will do so in the future if market conditions worsen.

Still confused about what's actually happening on Wall Street and why? The *NYT*'s [Joe Nocera](#) does an admirable job today in getting past the confusing aspects of the crisis to clearly explain the situation. Once "you get past the mind-numbing complexity of the derivatives that are at the heart of the current crisis, what's going on is something we are all familiar with: denial." Just like homeowners across the country had a hard time recognizing that their homes weren't worth as much as they thought, big Wall Street firms have also been late to admit that their investments suddenly "weren't worth very much." Lehman, for example, could have probably been saved if its executives had been willing to lower the price of its securities.

Besides, they were probably thinking that if worst came to worst, the federal government would come to the rescue at some point. As the *WP* details in a Page One reconstruction of the weekend's events, it seems the Wall Street insiders simply [weren't willing to believe](#) Bush administration officials when they said over and over again that no taxpayer money would be used to rescue troubled companies.

Meanwhile, the Wall Street mess has become fodder for the presidential candidates on the trail. The *WP* notes that after two weeks where Sarah Palin dominated the news, "[the campaign may be heading back to fundamentals](#)." John McCain "faces the bigger challenge" because he must find a way to separate himself from the current administration. But that doesn't mean Obama will have an easy time since he has "struggled through much of the year to develop a compelling economic message." Neither candidate brought any fresh ideas to the table yesterday, but there was plenty of back-and-forth after McCain declared in his first event of the day that "the fundamentals of our economy are strong." His tone quickly changed as the day wore on, but Obama was quick to challenge his opponent, not only for what he said but also by tying him to an economic worldview that opposes tougher regulations.

In a Page One piece, the *NYT* essentially says that Obama's portrayal of McCain is accurate because he has always "[been in his party's mainstream on the issue](#)" and has often championed deregulation. Now he's trying to talk more positively about government regulation even as some of his closest financial advisers include some of the most prominent deregulators. As much as all this may seem to be good news for Obama, the Democratic nominee can win from this only if he manages "to convince voters he's going to change their lives," writes *Slate*'s [John Dickerson](#). "He can't use it as merely another opportunity to paint McCain as out of touch."

In other election news, the *NYT* points out that after lots of talk on the issue it seems [independent groups are gearing up for a comeback](#) in the presidential race. These groups have so far been on the sidelines but are starting to take on a more prominent role as the campaign enters its final weeks. Although both candidates once tried to discourage these groups from operating, they now seem to be more willing to look the other way. Now that the groups can campaign until Election Day, it's predicted that many of these ads will seemingly come out of nowhere and overwhelm voters in battleground states, even if it's unlikely they'll reach the same levels of activity as in 2004.

The *NYT* got a hold of some intercepted telephone calls that the Georgian government insists prove that Russian forces moved into separatist [South Ossetia](#) almost a day before Georgia attacked. This is part of Georgia's effort to dispel talk that the war with Russia broke out only once Georgia decided to attack and to try to portray its actions as defensive rather than offensive. Russia, of course, denies the claim and says the troop movements were part of the normal rotation of peacekeepers in the area. The paper talks to analysts and says that while the evidence is hardly conclusive, it does at least seem to show that the Russian military moved "earlier than had previously been acknowledged."

In continuing with the trickle of hints that have been coming out and suggesting that the United States plans to be in Afghanistan for a long time, *USAT* says the Pentagon is seeking to fill new interrogator and intelligence analyst jobs at the bigger [Bagram prison that is scheduled to open next year](#).

The *LAT* takes a look at how the United States is quickly losing influencing in Iraq as Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has managed to [consolidate his power](#). Although Maliki once depended on Washington support, he's now placing demands of his own on the U.S. military and is now asking that U.S. forces withdraw from all cities by June. Although in some ways this is what U.S. officials wanted, it also means that Iran is now in a better position to influence the Iraqi government because of the close economic and political ties between the two countries. Analysts say the next president will have to work quickly in order to prevent the United States from losing all its leverage in Iraq.

The *WP* notes that the new book by reporter Barton Gellman on Vice President Cheney, which was dramatically excerpted in the paper [on Sunday and Monday](#), reports that former House Majority Leader Richard Arney of Texas says Cheney told him that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had [personal ties to al-Qaida](#) in the run-up to the Iraq war. Cheney's statements "crossed so far beyond the known universe of fact that they were simply without foundation," writes Gellman. Arney, a Republican, had spoken up against the war but reversed himself after Cheney warned that Iraq posed a bigger threat than what the administration was willing to say publicly. "Did Dick

Cheney ... purposely tell me things he knew to be untrue?" Army asked. "I seriously feel that may be the case."

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## today's papers

### The Nightmare on Wall Street

By Daniel Politi

Monday, September 15, 2008, at 7:15 AM ET

The [New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#), and [Los Angeles Times](#) lead with, and the [Wall Street Journal](#) devotes most of its front-page real estate to, the Sunday that shook up Wall Street. The [LAT](#) and [WSJ](#) announce the news with banner headlines this morning, and the [Journal](#) doesn't mince words: "Crisis on Wall Street." The fast-moving story has several parts to it, but here's the gist: Lehman Bros. will file for bankruptcy, Merrill Lynch [agreed to be sold](#) to Bank of America, and insurance giant American International Group could be the [next big casualty](#) of the [global credit crisis](#). In an effort to prevent more trouble, the Fed announced it would make it easier for securities firms to [borrow money](#), and 10 big banks agreed to create a \$70 billion fund that any of them could access if they find themselves in desperate need of cash. The [WP](#) says that the [American financial system](#) "faced its gravest crisis in modern times" this weekend.

[USA Today](#) fronts the news [out of Wall Street](#) but goes high with the trail of devastation left by [Hurricane Ike](#): It might take months to fix. Millions of people across three states don't have power, and the state's largest rescue effort in history is under way. Things could have been much worse, though, as the number of deaths attributed to Ike stood at 21 even though thousands of people chose to ignore the evacuation orders. Meanwhile, pressure on gas prices continued as much of the oil and gas industry along the Gulf Coast continued to be shut down yesterday.

The [NYT](#) says [Sunday was](#) "one of the most dramatic days in Wall Street's history" that will "reshape the landscape of American finance." The [WSJ](#) [agrees and notes that the](#) "American financial system was shaken to its core" yesterday, an assessment that is easily backed up by all the panicked statements from Wall Street insiders, who are bracing for bad news when the markets open today. "These are the most extraordinary events I've ever seen," said the co-founder of the private equity firm the Blackstone Group. "We are in a hysteria," [a banking analyst tells USAT](#). "This is frightening as hell," [another analyst](#) summarizes to the [LAT](#).

The unraveling began when the U.S. government, which only a week ago was announcing the bailout of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, made it clear that no taxpayer money would be used to [prop up Lehman](#). Potential buyers then balked at the idea

of taking on so much risk and Lehman announced it would be filing for bankruptcy, a move that would force the 158-year-old firm to close its doors. In a separate front-page analysis, the [NYT](#) characterizes the events as a high-stakes "[game of chicken](#)" in which neither the federal government nor Wall Street backed down.

After the talks to find a way to save Lehman collapsed, Bank of America announced a \$50 billion deal to buy Merrill Lynch at \$29 a share, which represents a 70 percent markup on the firm's Friday [closing price](#). The move instantly made Bank of America the biggest winner of the current crisis, as the nation's largest retail bank, credit card company, and mortgage lender will now take control of the country's largest army of stock brokers.

If approved by shareholders, the move would "create a bank of vast reach, involved in nearly every nook and cranny of the financial system," [notes the WSJ](#). The move is particularly sweet for Bank of America because it has [long tried](#) to build up its own investment arm without much luck. And although it does carry a lot of risk, Bank of America "compared the choice to fighting a fire: Executives felt that Merrill Lynch could be saved, but Lehman was lost already." The [WSJ](#) says the Federal Reserve may have been involved in [orchestrating the sale](#).

Meanwhile, executives at American International Group spent the weekend frantically trying to raise cash as the insurance giant faced the prospect of a potentially devastating downgrade in its credit rating "that could spell its doom," [reports the NYT](#). AIG was seeking to borrow \$40 billion from the Federal Reserve, without which the company may not survive past Wednesday. The [NYT](#) calls AIG's efforts to get money directly from the Fed an "extraordinary move" that could motivate other companies to try the same tactic, but it's far from clear whether the Fed will be willing to play along.

In its analysis, the [NYT](#) says there are hopes that the purchase of Merrill Lynch could be enough to [reassure investors](#). But there's still no getting around the fact that, including the demise of Bear Stearns, by the time the markets open today, "three of the Street's five major independent brokers could end up disappearing," [as the WSJ points out](#). And no one thinks this will actually be the end of it. The [WP](#) says [these were merely](#) "the first steps" in trying to find "a fundamentally new architecture for the financial world." And, hold on, because the [WSJ's editorial board](#) says that the "only thing anyone knows for certain is that today will be tumultuous for financial markets."

In other news, the [NYT](#) fronts, and everyone notes, Barack Obama's raising of [\\$66 million in August](#), a personal record that included money from half a million people who had never given money to his campaign previously. It amounts to the most money that a presidential candidate has ever raised in one month, but still may not give Obama a clear advantage over his rival because of the huge fundraising success of the Republican

National Committee. And while he's not constrained by the same financial limits as McCain, who accepted public financing, Obama also has to spend much more time fundraising.

The *WP* notes that despite all the talk about changing the electoral map, the campaigns are devoting most of their energy and resources in the final 50 days to [familiar battleground states](#). As was the case in the last two campaigns, the four states that will receive the most attention from the candidates are Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, and Florida. In addition, Obama hopes to turn five states that voted for President Bush in 2004: Iowa, New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, and Virginia. For his part, McCain is working on turning two states to his side: Wisconsin and New Hampshire.

**Well, that's a relief ...** "Will the U.S. financial system collapse today, or maybe over the next few days?" asks the *NYT*'s [Paul Krugman](#). "I don't think so—but I'm nowhere near certain."

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## today's papers Settling Dust

By Lydia DePillis

Sunday, September 14, 2008, at 5:44 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with the aftermath of Hurricane Ike, which officials say could be the worst since Hurricane Alicia 25 years ago. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with the aftermath of a giant train wreck, which has so far killed 25 people due to an engineer who [ignored a traffic signal](#) and a lack of recommended safety equipment, which would have provided some insurance against human error. The *Washington Post* leads with the slightly more remote aftermath of the Cheney vice presidency with [another installment](#) in its award-winning series, this time laying out the high-level play-by-play around the presidential wiretapping program. A picture emerges of lawyers in the office of the general counsel attempting to bring the program in line with the law and loop in the attorney general's office, each time to be thwarted by the vice president's top lawyers. The story ends with a cliffhanger, to be resolved in tomorrow's paper.

While not as bad as federal officials feared, Ike has done a [serious number](#) on the Gulf Coast—so serious, in fact, that Barack Obama canceled an appearance of Saturday Night Live, and a game between the Texans and Baltimore Ravens might have to be postponed, since the storm has torn large chunks of steel off Reliant stadium. The *NYT* has the stories of those who [rode out the storm](#) rather than fleeing for Texas' tranquil interior—fully 140,000 ignored evacuation orders, frustrating state officials—while the *Post* surveys the resulting [bump in gas prices](#) around the country. The *LAT*'s later deadline picks up [three deaths](#) as being storm-related. The paper also documents

rescue efforts slowed because highways were blocked by the wreckage of boats tossed ashore by a "wall of water."

All of the papers cover the unfolding bank crisis, as the federal government [continues to balk](#) at taking over Lehman Brothers in the way it bailed out Fannie, Freddie, and Bear Stearns—steps that have largely failed to stabilize turbulent markets—insisting that other large financial institutions find a way to shoulder the burden. But Lehman may be beyond the help of struggling groups like AIG and Merrill Lynch. Meanwhile, the hedge-fund managers who bet against the banks' stock prices come out with millions.

In what may be a credit to new executive editor Marcus Brauchli's first week on the job, the *Post* fronts an excellent [biopsy of Fannie and Freddie's collapse](#), starting back in 1992 with the creation of a weak regulatory agency that the mortgage giants ensured was poorly funded and largely powerless. The companies had become part of the ideology of home ownership and soon became untouchable even as they extended fat lines of credit with the government and manipulated financial data. Their collapse, the paper contends, was entirely a result of the federal government's failure to police their activities ... whoops. But, channeling Phil Gramm, an adviser to the McCain campaign argues on the front page of the *Post*'s Outlook section that the economic situation "[just isn't that bad](#)," meaning not as bad as it's been made out to be by media accounts and a certain Democratic presidential candidate.

The *NYT* reports that U.S. arms manufacturers are doing [nearly three times the business](#) to foreign governments that they did in 2005, concentrated mostly in the Middle East but reaching across the globe. The U.S. government helps out countries like Israel and Egypt in purchasing sophisticated weapons systems, but the majority of sales are financed by the countries themselves and have often supplanted contracts with Russia. "This is about building a more secure world," said a U.S. Army rep. The *Post* has [more good news](#) for the U.S. defense industry, reporting that the U.S. military is handing out private contracts in Afghanistan like candy—mostly to make up for shortages in its own thinly stretched forces—which the paper sees as a foreshadowing of a longer-term buildup in military operations.

It's a light day for political coverage, but the *NYT* finds space for an above-the-fold [laundry list of complaints](#) about Sarah Palin's leadership in Alaska, from being completely inaccessible as governor to attempting to fire those who stood in the way of campaign fundraising, to appointing childhood friends to statewide posts ("The Wasilla High School yearbook archive now doubles as a veritable directory of state government"). The *Post* fronts a similar story homing in on her [reign in Wasilla](#), where she didn't have to deal with many of the typical duties of a small-town mayor like social services and environmental regulations, which fall under the jurisdiction of the regional government.

In other political news, the [full story](#) behind Sarah Palin's hairdo, a dissection of the [Facebook page](#) devoted to John McCain and Sarah Palin, and documentation of how Barack Obama has [steered clear](#) of attacking Sarah Palin (played [brilliantly](#) by Tina Fey).

Meanwhile, the Swift Boaters have [returned](#) in the form of the ironically named American Issues Project, and the *LAT* stunningly reveals that [both presidential candidates lie](#)—but only mentions one example that's not McCain.

The *NYT* business section has [way more than you ever needed to know](#) about the Florida sugar industry, a story of titanic landowners and a state determined to protect the Everglades—even at the cost of handing an industry monopoly to a vertically integrated sugar producer and refiner owned by a Cuban exile family.

In advance of the much-anticipated rollout of the Chevrolet Volt this week, the *NYT* gives General Motors the best kind of publicity a car company could ask for: [free publicity](#). The paper asks whether G.M. will make its second century about something other than internal combustion, complete with "spy photos" to shed light on the latest in the car's design.

In a story that might have gotten cover treatment were it not for the train wreck, the *LAT* takes a look at the new "[green chemistry](#)" movement, making noxious household products less so.

RIP David Foster Wallace, the literary innovator known most widely for his 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*, whom his wife found had hanged himself in their Claremont, Calif., apartment.

And [mazel tov](#) to the latest Teddy Roosevelt—may your marriage prove as strong as your great-great grandfather's!

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## today's papers

### The Hazards

By Barron YoungSmith

Saturday, September 13, 2008, at 7:09 AM ET

The *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* lead with, and the *Los Angeles Times* fronts, an emergency meeting between major bank heads and the Federal Reserve. Sick of underwriting bailouts, the government is hoping to broker an "industry solution" for the impending liquidation of Lehman Brothers Inc., the ailing investment bank. The *NYT* gives [equal billing](#) to Hurricane Ike's touchdown on near Houston—and the *WSJ* [tops](#) its world-wide news box with the storm, which the *Washington Post* features and the *LAT* fronts.

The *LAT* devotes its front page to coverage of a horrific passenger-train [crash](#) in Los Angeles, which killed 15 and injured 135. Safety mechanisms didn't kick in, allowing the train to plow head-on into a freight train headed in the opposite direction. The *WP* [leads](#) with the Washington, D.C., city council's move to repeal handgun restrictions that conflict with the Supreme Court's ruling in *District of Columbia v. Heller*.

The papers describe a cinematic "game of chicken" between financial titans and the Fed. The government refuses to do another bailout—having exhausted its patience and political capital saving Bear Stearns, Fannie Mae, and Freddie Mac over the past year. The banks are wary of expending their own capital on a bad risk, so they're demanding federal support. Someone has to compromise by Monday, or losses will ripple through the economy.

The *NYT* says Hurricane Ike, the 600-mile-wide storm that hit Texas last night, is "poised to become one of the most damaging hurricanes of all time." Officials are most worried about the 20-foot storm surge, a "[tsunami](#)" that could flood 100,000 houses, overflow the city's seven bayous, and wreak havoc on the country's second-busiest port. A million people have already fled the hurricane—but the government is telling many Houstonians to shelter in place, fearing that a mass evacuation would cause unnecessary casualties.

All the papers include dispatches from Galveston, Texas, an island city hit by Ike earlier Friday. Forty percent of its residents—which a separate *NYT* [piece](#) calls a "stubborn bunch"—[ignored](#) an evacuation order even though the National Weather Center warned that they "may face certain death."

The Gulf Coast also [houses](#) a quarter of the country's oil production and 40 percent of its refining capacity, which won't be back on line until at least midweek. A [dispatch](#) from the *LAT* says that oil rigs are largely undamaged but that it's too early to know what will happen to the refineries.

The *LAT* [says](#) Metrolink officials don't know how two trains could have collided, though they think it has something to do with the sharply curved section of track where the accident happened. Passengers [saw](#) the freight train bearing down on them at a 45 degree angle seconds before the crash.

The *WP* [says](#) Washington, D.C., legislators are rushing to eliminate elements of the city's gun ban that conflict with the Supreme Court's recent ruling. The piece hints that they're trying to pre-empt pro-gun members of the House of Representatives, who are threatening to pass even further-reaching legislation against the ban.

The *WP* goes up top with [news](#) that the U.S. government has slapped terrorist finance sanctions on three of Venezuelan

President Hugo Chavez's top aides, who stand accused of helping the Colombian terrorist group FARC sell drugs and buy weapons. According to the [WSJ](#), the move is a calculated response to diplomatic provocations by Chavez and Bolivian president Evo Morales, who've been escalating tensions in order to dampen domestic unrest.

The *NYT* goes up top with a [piece](#) describing how John McCain's liberal use of untrue statements is starting to generate a backlash—most dramatically, he was accused of "lying" during a testy [appearance](#) on *The View*.

The *WP* [fronts](#) a look at Sarah Palin's ambiguous characterization of the Bush Doctrine during an ABC News interview yesterday. Since the Bush administration has put forth so many doctrines, foreign-policy experts aren't sure which doctrine is the real Bush Doctrine, either.

The *WP* [fronts](#) a look at the next flash point in Iraq: Kurdistan. The Kurds have provocatively extended their influence over a strip of majority-Arab cities—and U.S. officials are straining to find a resolution that averts future ethnic conflict.

The *WP* goes [inside](#) with news that "the First Dude" of Alaska has been subpoenaed. Alaska legislators want Sarah Palin's husband to testify in the Troopergate scandal. McCain calls the subpoena a politicized decision designed to help Obama.

**A testament to character.** Obama may be a celebrity in Europe, but the *WSJ* [reports](#) John McCain has some unlikely overseas fans, too: His former Vietnamese captors are strongly supportive of his presidential bid.

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## what's up, doc?

### When Healing Hurts

Post-traumatic stress disorder in ICU survivors.

By Sydney Spiesel

Wednesday, September 17, 2008, at 11:42 AM ET

**Question:** What can cause post-traumatic stress disorder? Symptoms of stress following traumatic experiences have been reported since people began writing about war. But PTSD didn't come into formal use until 1980, when severe psychological symptoms were seen in Vietnam veterans. As the condition was studied, it became clear that it didn't apply only to Vietnam veterans. Almost anyone who had been exposed to severe stress or a traumatic event—surviving a tsunami, living through a terrorist attack—could experience PTSD. Typically, patients re-experience their trauma as flashbacks and nightmares and often have trouble sleeping. Many perform badly in their jobs or have difficulty with social relationships, perhaps because they are

excessively prone to anger or irritability. A less obvious cause of PTSD, [just recently written about](#) in the journal *General Hospital Psychiatry*, involves the experience of being seriously ill or injured and treated by hospitalization in an intensive-care unit.

**Findings:** The analysis found that about 20 percent of patients who had spent time in an intensive-care unit showed evidence of PTSD. Does the PTSD associated with admission to an intensive-care unit have a significant long-term effect on the patient's quality of life? Here, the answer is a little less clear because the question was addressed by only two of the 15 studies that contributed to the broader analysis relating the ICU experience and PTSD. The patients in these studies were tracked for only six to nine months after ICU discharge. However, both studies reported a poorer quality of life in those patients who were suffering from PTSD at the time of follow-up.

**Method:** The analysis put together 15 previous studies encompassing more than 1,700 intensive-care-unit survivors. The studies were performed in several European countries and the United States and made use of multiple different methods to ascertain the prevalence of PTSD in ICU survivors (generally excluding patients who had known psychiatric histories or who arrived at the ICU because of a suicide attempt).

**Link:** Terribly serious illness and the treatments that are sometimes required to save a patient are remarkably like being in a war zone. The desperate struggle to breathe and the discomfort associated with mechanical ventilation are painful and stressful experiences. Furthermore, imagine having little or no control of your life. Picture yourself almost (or, indeed, completely) unable to communicate; being in a constantly lit, always-noisy environment; and even having your visual field limited to a patch of ceiling, with the occasional interruption from someone's face. All these circumstances contribute to the enormous stress experienced by many ICU patients. Medications given to ICU patients also contribute to the problem. Some drugs given to maintain blood pressure can also increase a sense of anxiety. Paradoxically, even drugs in the same class as Valium—intended to sedate and decrease anxiety—can lead to nightmares and hallucinations that a trapped and constrained patient [might not be able to distinguish](#) from reality.

**Conclusion:** How can this problem be prevented in the future? To some extent, it probably can't. Sedation might lead to disturbing nightmares, but it's nevertheless needed by patients on a mechanical ventilator and can't be eliminated because otherwise the treatment would be intolerable and the patient's oxygen demand would increase unacceptably. But we can be sensitive to the patient's physical circumstances in the ICU and make a serious effort to decrease the nighttime noise and light that interfere with restful sleep. We can do things that promote autonomy in ICU patients and, as much as possible, give them a sense of control over their circumstances. Similarly, we should

be very careful in our choice of medication, so the drugs and doses don't contribute to confusion and delirium. And, finally, we must be alert for signs of PTSD in ICU survivors and be prepared to treat the condition when and if it appears.

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An [earlier study](#) looked at the effect of the ICU admission on memory problems. The researchers found that the ICU setting and the medications given to many ICU patients can lead to delirium, sleep disturbance, and often a period of amnesia for the duration of hospitalization—greatly distressing for someone trying to recall and make sense of a traumatic experience. In addition, the medications given for sedation and pain control (especially in the ICU circumstance of physical constraint and social isolation) may increase hallucinations, nightmares, and paranoid delusions—all very hard to separate from reality after a patient has physically recovered.

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## xx factor xxtra

### Blogette Girl

The shrewdly constructed persona of Meghan McCain.

By Noreen Malone

Tuesday, September 16, 2008, at 1:44 PM ET

Meghan McCain's first major appearance to promote her [children's book](#) version of her dad's life was going beautifully. On [The Today Show](#) last week, Meghan was composed, warm, and flawlessly made-up. On-air she managed to work in the fact that she'd attended a Reagan convention in utero, Republican street cred that's tough to top. And then came the flub. Responding to a question about Barack Obama saying her father "doesn't get it," she rambled her way through talking points into a [disastrous sound bite](#): "No one knows what war is like other than my family. Period."

The misstep was, of course, [perfect fodder for the lefty blogosphere](#). But the real danger to the campaign was that voters on the right might construe Meghan's remark as evidence that the McCain campaign doesn't value the contributions of average soldiers nearly enough. And so Meghan quickly [went to her own blog](#) and clarified her statement. Next, she [uploaded a YouTube video](#) of an amputee veteran saying that Obama's stance on the Iraq war disrespects the sacrifice that soldiers have made, and

that McCain understands all that they've given for their country and for the Iraqi people. The video says what Meghan should have said in that interview, and it's visually arresting and has a soundtrack. In all, it was a wisely calculated response—and a far more typically shrewd Meghan McCain move than the earlier gaffe.

Meghan is the only one of McCain's seven children to campaign actively for him. Young, pretty, and tech-savvy, she's a tremendous asset, because she's got a better feel for the way the campaign news cycle works in this era than lots of highly paid strategists. [Watch her freely volunteer that](#), yep, her dad uses that "lipstick on a pig expression," too—she knows that [footage will always come back to haunt you](#). Or see her deftly [put away a query](#) about whether it's hurtful when people mock her father's age by laughing "He IS old!" The best way to neutralize a joke is by getting in on it.

Meghan McCain's [blog](#), branded with an icon of a young woman in killer red heels bathed in the glow of a computer screen, bills itself as "musings and pop culture on the campaign trail." The pop-culture part consists of "songs of the day," and, for the most part, the musings are achingly simplified captions for the pictures and videos that make up the bulk of the content. After her *Today Show* appearance, for instance, Meghan posted backstage pictures of the interview prep and an encounter with Judge Judy. She also often puts up pictures of her family at home or on the campaign bus. A professional photographer and producer work on the blog, too, so the photos always look great.

Journalists love interviewing Meghan since she'll tell them almost anything about her personal life, in the vein of her dad in his maverick years. See [this slightly heavy-breathing GQ interview](#) for lots of questions from a man about her love life, or whether she's ever considered a bull's-eye tattoo. (Answer: No way, they're "overplayed.") Or consider [this profile](#) in the *Washington Post*, written by a woman, which has one of the cattiest ledes I've ever seen (Meghan is "not terribly interested in matters of policy, but she is acutely attuned to matters of footwear") and quotes verbatim her every verbal tic. [This interviewer](#) from the *Today Show's* blog asked Meghan about her Decision '08 crush (Luke Russert), her favorite TV shows (cops to a reality addiction), her diet on the trail (pizza for breakfast). It's the stuff of celebrity puff interviews, and it staves off questions that could be harmfully revealing. Meghan's actually far more socially liberal than her father, for instance, but by mixing her views on abortion with her declaration that Barack Obama is sexy, she helps ensure that her politics aren't the main aspect of her coverage. Instead, she doles out faux intimacy and the generically affirming language of the pages of *People*: "I'm always who I am, which is why I think people have related to the blog. I'm not afraid to say things like 'I'm not a size zero, I have bad days.' "

If some of the snippets seem to signal ditz, the big picture is a smartly composed one. Meghan is an Ivy League grad who interned at *Newsweek* and *Saturday Night Live*, and she has constructed an image that jibes precisely with one expectation of 23-year-old women. She's [often compared somewhat unfavorably](#) with 28-year-old Chelsea Clinton, who has in spades the gravitas that Meghan seems to lack. The two are on opposite ends of a mini-generation gap. At Stanford, Chelsea was largely able to escape from the press. Most of Meghan's time at Columbia took place in the Facebook era, when [politician's children's pages were suddenly fair game](#). Seriousness was rewarded for Chelsea and her cohort. But it's been attention-grabbing that has thus far been rewarded for younger women like Meghan—and me—who've grown up in a post-YouTube, post-Britney era. We've been shown that it pays to behave like permanent teenagers, and Meghan has slickly figured out a way to get the most out of this. She calls her blog a Blogette. She writes a book that's aimed at no one who's old enough to vote.

And her confessional style is one whose most devoted practitioners may be middle-school girls with MySpace and Blogger accounts. Meghan tells *People* about what it was like for her when her mom was addicted to pills, or Meredith Viera that her dad dated a stripper, or confesses that she's gained weight on the trail. People will point these things out anyway, so why not pre-empt them, and in the process, make them feel at ease? As we've seen recently with the Palin family, there's a strong appetite for "Political Stars, They're Just Like Us!" As with girls all across America, Meghan often channels the haute-trashy look of *The Hills* (though she's been in Cindy-esque suits on the book blitz). Like the most lovable celebrities, she manages to strike a balance between being someone whose life people want and who reminds them of themselves. (She [got to have lunch with Heidi!](#) But she looked totally awkward!) All of this probably makes it easier for her audience to forget that her Louboutins are real or that her parents bought her a \$700,000 condo. Of her future ambitions, Meghan says, "I'd really like to do something like Jessica Simpson's done, taking high-end things and making them accessible to everyone."

After news of Bristol Palin's pregnancy broke, Meghan put up a post on her blog titled "[Daughters](#)." In the simple prose that typifies the blog, she told the story of a reporter asking her father during his first presidential campaign whether he'd allow Meghan, then 14, to have an abortion. John McCain said it "would be a private decision that we would share within our family and not with anyone else:" This didn't play well with abortion opponents. Meghan writes that the incident changed her life but doesn't say how. She expresses solidarity not just with Bristol but with Chelsea Clinton, the Bush twins, and Mary Cheney, without saying why. On *The Today Show*, Meghan declared that she's fair game because she has put herself out there—but that Bristol Palin (to whom she sees herself as a "godmother" figure) is still a child. Meghan could probably write

a dishy tome on the loss of political innocence. Instead, she gives us on her blog the understatement of the year: "It's a rough go being the son or daughter of a politician"—demonstrating her skill at negotiating that terrain. Meghan knows how to give up just enough of her privacy that we forget she didn't really reveal anything.

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