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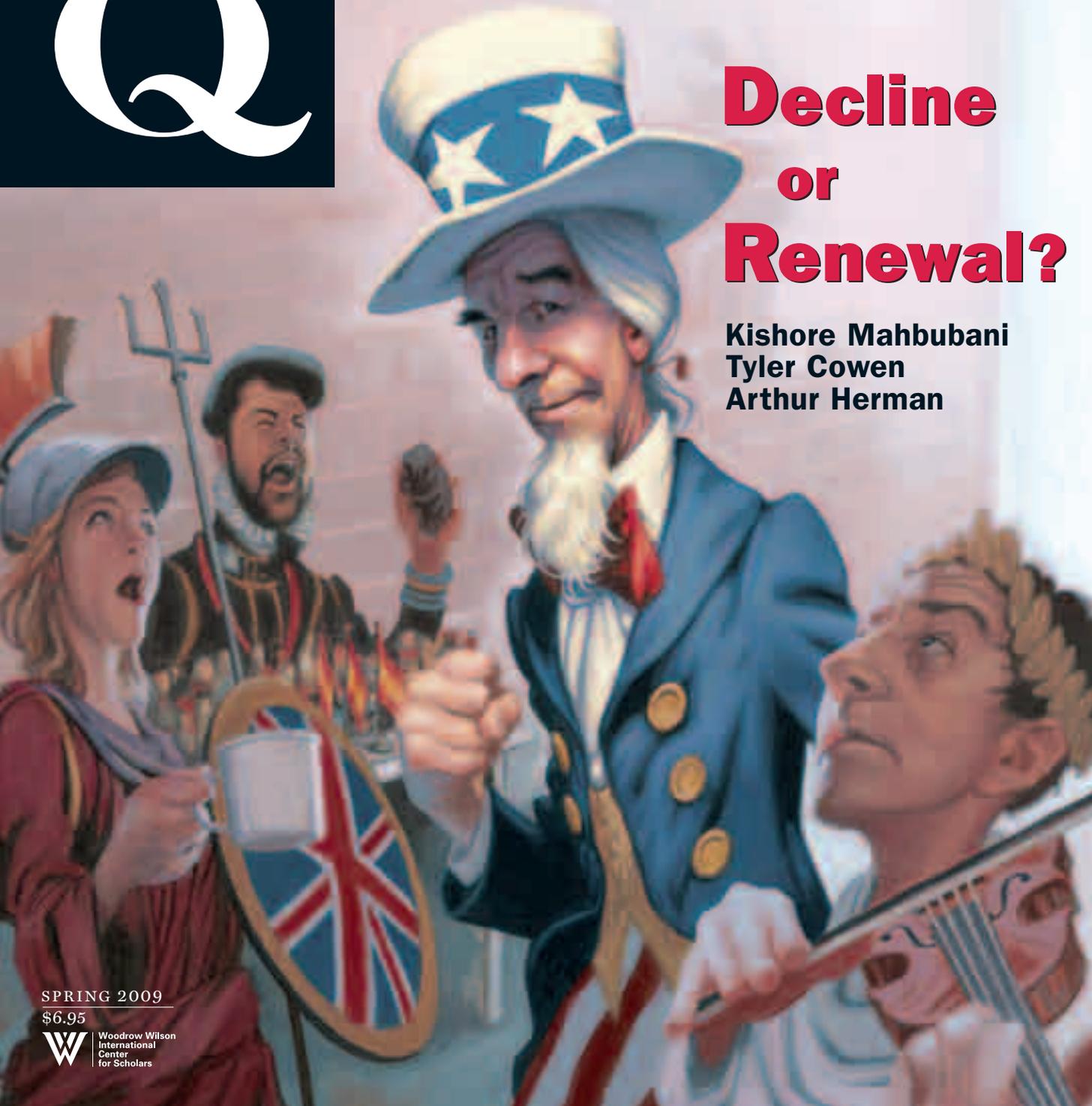
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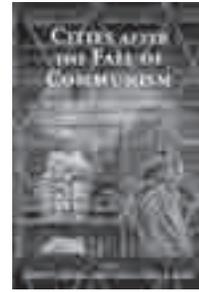
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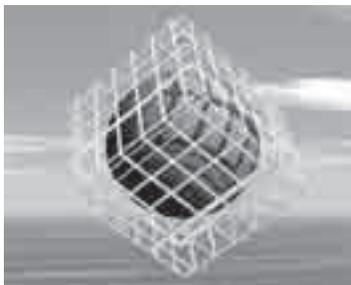
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EDITOR'S COMMENT

A Future for the Making

To speculate about the future is, for most of us, as natural as breathing. The French political thinker Bertrand de Jouvenel observed, in his marvelously well-titled book *The Art of Conjecture* (1967), that this impulse to contemplate what we cannot know is one of the defining human characteristics. As we peer into the future in this issue's featured cluster of articles on the American prospect, it's humbling to play the soothsayer, looking at where the world stood a century ago. In 1909, the Bolsheviks were a fringe political party in Russia, Adolf Hitler was a failed 20-year-old painter living in a Vienna homeless shelter, and Albert Einstein was still six years away from publishing his revolutionary paper on the theory of general relativity.

There are some useful ways of gaining insight into future possibilities, if we understand their limits. One is common sense. A diet of bourbon and chocolate, for example, will likely lead to no good—that is the essence of one strand of Kishore Mahbubani's article, "Can America Fail?" History, too, can be instructive, even if, as Arthur Herman shows, it's a history that teaches us that successful societies often have a weakness for prophets of doom. Tyler Cowen employs a variety of scenario thinking, arguing that whatever America's current weaknesses, there is no other power with greater strengths. And elsewhere in this issue, Martin Walker adds a lesson on the hazards of trend mongering.

I've come to one conclusion of my own about the future: Pessimism doesn't pay. Despair—especially the apocalyptic keening of ideologues left and right when their rivals assume power—is regularly defeated by experience. The little-anticipated factor—what this year's celebrity stock-market seer, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, calls a "black swan"—surely deserves some of our attention: The latter-day Lenin or Hitler or (says the optimist) Einstein can change everything in a historical instant. But while it makes sense to keep an eye out for such winged change makers and to be wary of easy predictions, it would be foolish to become paralyzed by doubt. In the end, we must make our own future.

—STEVEN LAGERFELD



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LETTERS

ROBOTS AT WAR

P. W. SINGER'S ARTICLE CONTRIBUTES significantly to a discussion that is long overdue ["Robots at War: The New Battlefield," Winter '09]. Singer illustrates clearly how the trend toward autonomous fighting machines is inexorably driven by the logic of war. He correctly notes that technological developments carry grave ethical risks. The hope of keeping humans "in the loop" is already elusive because of pressures to grant greater autonomy to robots carrying lethal weapons.

In our recent book, we focus on the prospect of building moral decision-making faculties into autonomous systems, a possibility that is already being explored by researchers with military funding. Considering the limitations of existing technology, we suggest that it will be impossible to create such machines.

Singer does not mention the possibility of using artificial intelligence to mitigate ethical problems. Nevertheless, his explicit ethical concerns represent a significant step in the right direction. In contrast, a recent Department of Defense report on military robotics, *Unmanned Systems Roadmap: 2007-2032*, does not mention the word "ethics" once; nor does it discuss the risks raised by robotics, with the exception of one sentence that merely acknowledges

that "privacy issues [have been] raised in some quarters."

Can robots be made to respect the differences between right and wrong? Without this ability, autonomous robots are a bad idea not just for military use but in other settings as well, such as eldercare facilities. Singer suggests that machines are easier to program for intelligent warfare than human soldiers are to train. But he and the military may underestimate the difficulties of such programming. Overly optimistic assessments of technological capacities could lead to a dangerous reliance on autonomous systems that are not sufficiently sensitive to ethical considerations. Overly pessimistic assessments, on the other hand, could stymie the development of some truly useful technologies or induce a kind of fatalistic attitude toward such systems.

Mechanisms for gauging the known and potential future dangers are needed. Whether legislatures and international bodies such as the United Nations have the will to create effective mechanisms for the oversight of military robots remains to be seen.

Colin Allen

Bloomington, Ind.

Wendell Wallach

Bloomfield, Conn.

Coauthors, Moral Machines: Teaching Robots

Right From Wrong (2009)

P. W. SINGER'S OTHERWISE EXCELLENT essay on the growing role of robots in the American way of war glosses over a few important points. Singer cautions about the dangers of replacing thinking, feeling soldiers with emotionless robots that lack any qualms about killing, but describes military circles as enthusiastic about this new technology. In fact, some of the greatest resistance to robotic weapons on moral grounds has come from inside the military. The Air Force, for example, has stymied the development of autonomous fighter aircraft in part because of a belief that human beings are better and more just decision makers in chaotic, potentially lethal situations. In the Army, soldiers and their commanders repeatedly have expressed mistrust of robotic systems. A human soldier can do the same job nearly as well, they insist, and with greater accountability.

"[Robotic technologies] are changing the experience of war itself," Singer writes. This statement is true only for a small subset of warriors. Some people involved in air warfare have seen their jobs radically altered by the introduction of drones. But on the ground, robots have done very little to change the ageless experience of close combat. Today, as much as ever, a young infantryman with a rifle, two hands, two eyes, and a brain is the single most important and powerful weapon in any army's inventory. He might use robots for

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specialized roles such as bomb disposal and certain kinds of urban scouting, but he still does the fighting on his own, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

David Axe

*Author, War Bots (2008)
Columbia, S.C.*

P. W. SINGER SUGGESTS THAT we are at the beginning of another major change in the way we conduct war, or what is known in military circles as a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). Previous RMAs have come about because of new military technologies, such as armored vehicles. However, the RMA arising from robotic technology has the potential to radically mutate the way we wage war because it involves the usurpation of decision-making processes. Machines may make life-and-death choices. The “deeper questions” Singer poses—What message do we send by dispatching robots to fight humans? How do we keep humans “in the loop”? How do these new technologies fit in with existing legal and ethical codes?—are never fully answered in his article, but are critical for military decision makers to consider.

What may be the greatest issue is not discussed: the future availability of these technologies to any nation or group that can afford them. Once the genie is out of the bottle, warfare could be much more devastating than anything humankind has previously experienced.

William O. Waddell

*Director
Command and Control Group
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AT THE CENTER

THE CONTRARIAN

IT'S EASY TO IMAGINE THE DIMINUTIVE, ANIMATED Doh Shin as the eager South Korean schoolboy he was in the 1950s. It's also easy to imagine why he was "always getting into trouble," as he says with a hint of satisfaction, when he was a graduate student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, after he came to the United States in 1964. In the guarded world of academe, Shin, currently a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center, is something of a rarity, a plainspoken observer willing to make big, often contrarian, statements about subjects in his area of expertise, such as Asian culture. "Many Asian men die intellectually by the time they are 50 or 55," he declares.

Shin frets about his own intellectual mortality, but his vital signs seem robust. Since the mid-1980s, he's devoted himself to the study of democratization in Asia, and he remains a prolific researcher and writer. A visitor to his office at the Wilson Center is likely to walk away with a formidable sheaf of his recent papers, such as "The Third Wave in East Asia: Comparative and Dynamic Perspectives," published last year in *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, his ears ringing with Shin's excited description of his current collaboration with the noted political scientist Ronald Inglehart and other scholars on a reevaluation of democratic citizenship around the world. Shin is also heavily involved in the Asia Barometer, a project that gauges citizens' evolving political attitudes and values through surveys administered in 18 Asian nations, from China to the Philippines.

Shin's Wilson Center project is a study of Confucian values and the prospects for liberal democracy in Asia, and the University of Missouri political scientist is characteristically blunt about his views: "I have always been a pessimist," he says. Unlike most other American scholars in the field, he explains, he has experienced authoritarian rule first-hand, in the South Korea of his youth, and in ensuing years seen "how difficult it is to transform nondemocratic hearts and minds into democratic ones."

More than personal experience, however, there is research behind Shin's views—page after page of it. In intri-

cate readings of public opinion survey data from the Asia Barometer and other sources, he has teased out a portrait of Asian democracy that doesn't leave much room for optimism. Since the "Third Wave" of global democratization began in 1974, only seven of the 14 countries in East Asia have made the transition to democracy, and two of them (Cambodia and Thailand) have reverted to authoritarian rule.

But even the sturdiest East Asian success stories aren't democracies in the Western liberal sense, Shin says, and a majority of their citizens don't want them to be—though they almost universally endorse democracy as an abstraction. Even those countries that have democratic institutions still have Confucian values—an emphasis on community and harmony, for example, over individualism and competition—that don't fit a liberal democracy. In a soon-to-be published paper, for example, Shin notes that overwhelming majorities of people surveyed in Southeast Asia agree with the authoritarian proposition, "Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions."

In the *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, the verdicts are delivered with Shinian brio. The scholarly community has made a mistake in turning its back on ideas about the influence of Confucian values that it once embraced. China? "The existing authoritarian regime is likely to endure for many years to come." And, emphatically, "*Democracies in East Asia may never resemble the liberal democracies of the West.*"

Yet briskly as Shin's judgments may be delivered, they are not quickly formed. In his office, he tells of being asked to give a public lecture on his work. He doesn't want to do it. "It's not ready!" he exclaims. "It's a mess!" On his desk is a stack of books on Confucian culture, which suggests what's still not ready. If democracy is not going to be the main path to good government in Asia, then a way will have to be found in Confucianism, especially its notion of virtuous leadership. Look for a bracing argument, and lots of italics.



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P. W. SINGER'S SMART, THOROUGH, and insightful piece has about it a whiff of Cassandra. And with good reason. It is time to draft new rules of engagement for the increasingly robot-driven warfare that surely awaits us, whether we invent it or someone else does.

But Singer's piece also carries a hint of technological determinism. It suggests that we already have one foot on the slippery slope to creating a HAL, the all-knowing computer in the classic science-fiction movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* that seized control of a spaceship from the human crew. Lots of historical evidence supports such concern, but there is nothing inevitable about robotic warfare. As Melvin Kranzberg, founder of the Society for the History of Technology, was fond of saying, "Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral." It can be what military people call a force multiplier, but humans can decide if that force is used for good or ill. Thus it is with robotic soldiers. As Singer points out, they could just as easily have exposed or arrested or perhaps even prevented the carnage in Rwanda as they could have seduced us into expecting an easy victory in Iraq.

The key to ensuring that our intentions for such technologies are not swamped by second-order consequences is to raise awareness of their potential for good and ill and to stimulate the kind of thoughtful contemplation and discussion that Singer and many of his interlocutors have already begun.

Alex Roland

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TRUSTING GOVERNMENT

WILLIAM A. GALSTON HAS written a fine, nuanced piece about why Americans' faith in government has so diminished over the last generation ["The Right Bite," Winter '09]. Although such shifts in national attitudes usually have multiple causes, I would emphasize the failing economy of the 1970s and its broad and painful consequences significantly more than he does.

High inflation and high unemployment vexed policymakers and frustrated the nation, and conservative rage against regulation, simmering since the 1950s, was unleashed against big government. Conservative thinkers, including Milton Friedman and William F. Buckley Jr., gained national prominence. Barry Goldwater had lost in a landslide, but his ideas persisted. Well-financed advocacy groups such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute provided supporting, if dubious, research.

By the end of the 1970s, government was accepted as the problem, not the solution. A bull market in the 1980s gave Wall Street more political clout to demand financial deregulation and provided ostensible proof that Ronald Reagan's policies were expanding prosperity. Now we see that the resulting policies failed far more ignominiously than any government excess. To return to robust and smart uses of government will require the establishment of programs that work well and that restore confidence in government. This work is the principal challenge for the Obama administration.

Jeff Madrick

Director of Policy Research
Bernard Schwartz Center for
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New York, N.Y.

I AM IN COMPLETE AGREEMENT with William A. Galston's overview of the reasons why so many Americans distrust and dislike our government as it currently operates. Yet I am in total disagreement with him about the actions he cites as possible ways to restore public confidence. Galston believes that Congress can effect necessary changes. But the only concerns among those working on the Hill—to be reelected and further their own ambitions—are at odds with the work that must be done: making government less intrusive and slashing spending. The Founders would be disgusted at the size and incompetence of our bureaucracy. We need less government, not just a reformed one.

Jeremy R. Rose

Hilliard, Ohio

EXPEDITIONARY GOVERNMENT

AS A FIELD ARTILLERY OFFICER working on rule-of-law issues during my third tour in Iraq, I am very sympathetic to John A. Nagl's call for increased expeditionary capacity in the civilian agencies of the U.S. government ["The Expeditionary Imperative," Winter '09].

Servicemembers have demonstrated remarkable adaptability in counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Tank commanders have trained police; riflemen have designed water projects; rocket crewmen have organized elections. Similarly, a handful of civilian officials from the Departments of State, Justice, and Agriculture, as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development and other agencies, have performed brilliantly, building capabilities to provide essential services for local populations.

However, the pride we rightly feel for these heroic actions should not obscure the underlying institutional failures that made them necessary. The United States requires servicemembers to perform tasks for which they have little or no training, and it fails at many vital counterinsurgency tasks due to a lack of resources. Nagl is right—we can do better.

Nagl erred only in not making clear the scale of reform necessary and the time it will require. Fragile governments in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, sub-Saharan Africa, and elsewhere require thousands of skilled professionals to accomplish the ends Nagl advocates. Even if the U.S. government made a commitment today to build a cadre of professionals, it could take a decade or more to field them on the scale required. For the immediate future, the Department of Defense will have little choice but to continue to perform work that would be better left to more qualified civilian officials.

The scale and pace of reform are not reasons for continued inaction. Rather, these obstacles are sobering reminders of the price servicemembers pay for the government's failure to adapt to the demands of irregular warfare.

John Nagl has captured and codified hard-won lessons from more than seven years of war. Now it's time to act.

Paul L. Yingling

Lieutenant Colonel

U.S. Army

Baghdad, Iraq

JOHN A. NAGL HAS BEEN AT THE forefront of efforts to revive the tools of counterinsurgency. As that strategy emphasizes, the keys to winning stability and enduring peace are found not in military action but in economic development and good governance. Nagl is

right to point out that the major threats to stability today emanate from states too weak to provide for their citizens or fulfill their global responsibilities.

There are three points to take to heart if the United States is going to get governance and economic development right. First, allocating more money to the State Department and other civilian agencies is important, but success on the civilian side cannot be achieved simply by hiring more people in an effort to scale up existing tools and practices. Much more important than additional staff is smarter design. Just as the U.S. military is reinventing itself through a counterinsurgency strategy, U.S. civilian actors need new instruments, practices, and training.

Second, if the United States does not want to bear the costs of stabilization and development alone, it would do well to invest in organizations such as the World Bank and, at the regional level, the Asian Development Bank, which have strong track records in reconstruction and economic development.

Third, success in governance is determined not by what we (foreign actors) do, but what they (national leaders and managers) do. What we need is not thousands of "deployable civilians" sent from the West to other countries, but investment in vocational training and higher education in the countries we seek to help. The most effective investment in good governance will come from rebuilding universities in those countries and granting scholarships to American universities for future leaders who will forge enduring partnerships with the West.

Clare Lockhart

Director

Institute for State Effectiveness

New York, N.Y.

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR COUNTRY

AMY WILKINSON NAILS THE central cause of Washington's performance problems: the federal government's chronic inability to attract and retain top talent ["Teaching a Hippo to Dance," Winter '09]. Her recommended remedies—better outreach to the young and idealistic, root-and-branch reform of ossified personnel systems—are entirely sound but insufficient to the task.

The origins of government's personnel shortfalls lie in a decades-old divergence between America's public and private worlds of work. In the private sector, from the mid-1970s on, the bottom fell out of pay distribution and the ceiling blew off. This did not happen in government, which remains a relic of the middle-class economy of the early postwar years. Gaps widened between the sectors at both the high and the low ends of the labor market. Public service turned into a safe harbor for less skilled workers seeking shelter from a hostile private economy, and into a backwater—dull, stingy, and slow—in more fortunate workers' eyes. Thus, government is not smart enough, because private alternatives drain away the best people, and not supple enough, because workers taking refuge in this middle-class bastion quite rationally resist change. Even the best personnel systems can't overcome this massive structural handicap.

An otherwise lamentable development ironically promises some relief. The economy's deep swoon is ravaging high-level employment and thus narrowing the pay and status deficit of public service. Restoring



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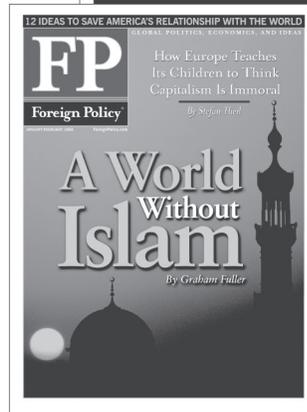
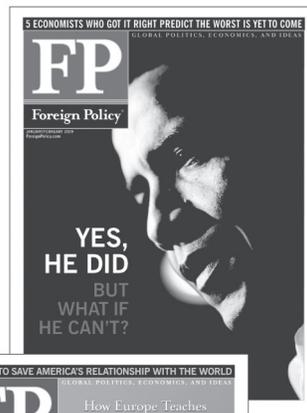
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the flow of talent to Washington may turn out to be the most important upside to the downturn.

John D. Donahue

*Raymond Vernon Lecturer in Public Policy
Kennedy School of Government
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Cambridge, Mass.*

I AGREE WITH THE BASIC PREMISE, so aptly argued by Amy Wilkinson, that the government can be slow to change and too often “plod[s] along.” I can relate to the comments of surprise she received when she decided to go into government. Upon graduating from law school and my master’s program, I went straight to Washington, D.C., to work as an intern at the Department of Defense; the vast majority of my law school colleagues went to law firms.

Attracting the best and brightest of our youth has presented a consistent challenge for government. What is needed now are not just new and energetic people in government who can teach the hippo to “dance in sync with private-sector and nonprofit partners,” as Wilkinson puts it. We need a makeover of the hippo itself. Why? These massive bureaucracies will have to learn more than a few new steps to keep up with the demands of our times.

Fortunately, there are plenty of young dance teachers out there who know new steps and beats, and are ready to move. Today there is an excitement about working in the federal government that has not existed in a long time. The energy and enthusiasm surrounding President Barack Obama’s administration are bringing young people to Washington, D.C., as is the scope of the challenges we face as a nation.

Great dancing requires commitment, raw energy, coordination,

responsiveness to partners, flexibility, and thoughtfulness. A generation of fresh talent could help get us moving.

Bonnie Jenkins

*Program Officer
Ford Foundation
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IT IS IMPORTANT TO KEEP IN mind that as frustrating as the current federal government’s personnel system is, one of the major reasons it was implemented was to eliminate the cronyism inherent in a patronage system. Proposals to make the system more “nimble” or “flexible” must guard against a re-introduction of cronyism. The specific State Department case Amy Wilkinson cites as a triumph of seniority over merit, by the way, was in my opinion rightly regarded within the State Department as an instance in which an individual improperly tried to influence the accepted process to grab a choice assignment. Surely we can find ways to improve government management without returning to cronyism.

Stephen Muller

*Foreign Service Officer, retired
Troy, N.Y.*

TRANSLATION BOUND

AVIYA KUSHNER IS TO BE thanked for a fine and valuable article about our neglect of translation and over-reliance on bicultural writers to tell us, in our own language and on our own terms, about what is going on in the rest of the world [“McCulture,” Winter ’09].

We’d have no trouble recognizing the problem if we were to hear a French intellectual boast of expertise in Amer-

ican culture based solely on his reading of Alexis de Tocqueville, Jean Baudrillard’s *America*, French biographies of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, and the recent account of travel in America by Bernard-Henri Lévy. And yet many of the American responses to the recent charge of literary insularity leveled by Horace Engdahl of the Swedish Academy have amounted to making the same kind of claim.

There is, however, a long tradition of American writers who, like Kushner herself, have made it their role to breach linguistic barriers and use their status in the English-speaking world to help create an audience for translations of writers who work in other languages. Philip Roth’s promotion of eastern European writers, Paul Auster’s translations of French literature, Susan Sontag’s lifetime dedication to expanding U.S. literary horizons beyond English, and Francisco Goldman’s devoted and tenacious promotion of a number of Latin American writers (including the recently acclaimed Roberto Bolaño) are some of the examples that come to mind.

The PEN World Voices Festival, which Kushner mentions, was founded five years ago under the guidance of Salman Rushdie with the aim of building on and reinforcing this tradition of literary translation. If the seven bilingual writers on *Granta*’s list of best young American novelists and others like them choose to follow in it, American literature and all the world’s literatures will be greatly enriched.

Esther Allen

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DOING JUSTICE TO DR. JOHNSON

IN HER REVIEW OF MY BIOGRAPHY of Samuel Johnson, Brooke Allen makes some quite nasty and egregiously unfair remarks ["First Man of Letters." Winter '09]. She calls me, rather enviously, a "prolific and facile writer who has produced a range of biographies so large and varied . . . as to preclude a deep knowledge of any one area of study." I believe that my two books on Wyndham Lewis, two on T. E. Lawrence, three on Ernest Hemingway, four on George Orwell, and four on D. H. Lawrence testify to a deep knowledge of modern literature—far deeper, I might add, than her own. Nowhere in the review does Allen show that my knowledge of Johnson, the subject of my doctoral dissertation and earliest articles, is deficient. Since she agrees that my argument about Johnson's chains and whips is more convincing than Peter Martin's, it seems gratuitous to call my interest in Johnson's sexuality "prurient" and my conclusion "self-justifying."

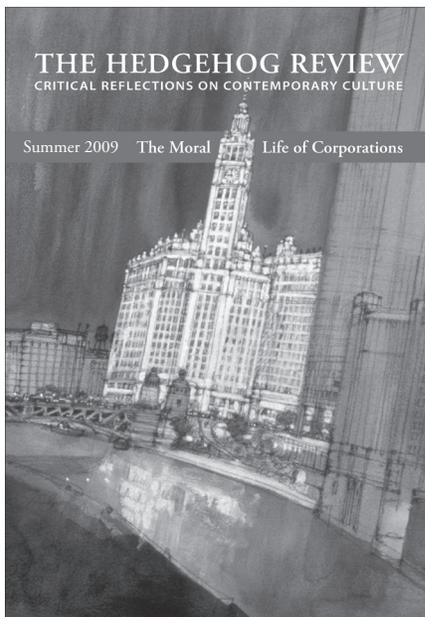
She also states that neither Martin nor I discuss the importance of Johnson's writing to modern readers. Martin certainly does not. I discuss this important question in an epilogue that shows Johnson's influence on Jane Austen, Nathaniel Hawthorne, A. E. Housman, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, and Vladimir Nabokov.

Allen may think that Martin's biography is better than mine, but her review does not substantiate this judgment. When she compares us on two crucial issues—Johnson's sexuality and his influence—she shows that my book is superior to his.

Jeffrey Meyers

Author, Samuel Johnson: The Struggle (2008)

Berkeley, Calif



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Brooke Allen responds: It seems to me that Jeffrey Meyers overreacted a bit to my review, which was not actually a negative one. In fact, I admired and enjoyed his *Samuel Johnson: The Struggle*, as I stated. It was Meyers's misfortune to have his biography appear at the same time as Peter Martin's; otherwise no necessity for comparison would have arisen.

I didn't quite say that Meyers's interest in Johnson's alleged sado-masochistic practices was prurient. All I said is that it was more prurient than Martin's, which was not prurient at all—not enough so, indeed, since he refused even to consider these persuasive allegations. Again, I didn't say Meyers's conclusion was "self-justifying;" I said it might seem self-justifying in view of the prominent place he chose to

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give Johnson's sexuality in his biography, but that it was probably accurate. Neither did I ignore Meyers's discussion of Johnson's influence on posterity, remarking that "Meyers is correct to emphasize the influence Johnson exerted on Jane Austen," an influence that undoubtedly continues to be filtered to 21st-century readers through her ever popular novels.

Meyers has produced a valuable work, but I do not agree with him that it is "superior" to Martin's. A great part of what makes any biography successful is the almost intangible emotional and imaginative empathy between writer and subject. Peter Martin's book perfectly demonstrates such empathy, while Jeffrey Meyers shows a less instinctive identification with the prickly Dr. Johnson.

FINDINGS

BRIEF NOTES OF INTEREST ON ALL TOPICS

Screen Slavers

Hazardous to your health

Facebook, MySpace, and similar websites may be supplanting human contact, says Aric Sigman, fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, and that's bad news. "Social-networking sites should allow us to embellish our social lives, but what we find is very different," Sigman told London's *Daily Mail* in February. "The tail is wagging the dog. These are not tools that enhance, they are tools that displace." In *Biologist* (February), Sigman cites studies showing that children spend more waking hours at home staring at computers and TVs than doing anything else. We need real friends, he says, not virtual ones. A dearth of human contact correlates with a propensity to develop inflammatory diseases, cardiovascular disease, strokes, and dementia.

Screen time may lead to depression, too, according to Brian A. Primack and four coauthors, writing in *Archives of General Psychiatry*

(February). Researchers interviewed adolescents in 1995, then re-interviewed them as young adults in 2002. "Participants had significantly greater odds of developing depression by [the second interviews] for each hour of daily television viewed," Primack and colleagues report. The correlation was stronger for males than for females. Doctors may want to ask young patients about TV use "as a marker of vulnerability to the development of depressive symptoms."



Add Playstation palmar hidradenitis—a syndrome characterized by painful lesions—to the list of ills caused by excessive video gaming.

That's not all. *The British Journal of Dermatology* (March) features a case report on a 12-year-old girl with painful lesions on the palms of her hands. In a condition called hidradenitis, such lesions sometimes develop on the soles of children's feet after jogging or other physical activity, but the girl's soles were lesion free, and she hadn't done anything strenuous. In response to the doctors' questions, her parents remembered that she had been spending several hours a day clutching the

controls of a Sony PlayStation. The doctors prescribed a video game-free period. Ten days later, she was fine. Dermatologist Behrooz Kasraee and two coauthors propose to call the syndrome "PlayStation palmar hidradenitis." Sony says in a statement, "This is the first time we have ever heard of a complaint of this nature."

Of course, doctors gaze at screens of their own, writes Abraham Verghese, an author who teaches at Stanford University School of Medicine. In *The New England Journal of Medicine* (December 25, 2008), Verghese

argues that medical students serving their hospital residencies often see the human patient as “an icon” for the true object of attention, the electronic medical record—the “iPatient,” in his term. “The iPatient’s blood counts and emanations are tracked and trended like a Dow Jones Index, and pop-up flags remind caregivers to feed or bleed. iPatiens are handily discussed . . . while the real patients keep the beds warm.”

Carsick?

Unfit to drive

Like many innovations, the automobile gave rise to conflicting health claims, Brian Ladd recounts in *Autophobia: Love and Hate in the Automotive Age* (University of Chicago Press). “At the end of the journey,” British philosopher C. E. M. Joad wrote of the motorist in 1927, “he descends cold and irritable, with a sick headache born of rush and racks. He clamors for tea or dinner, but, lacking both bodily exercise and mental stimulus, he eats without appetite, and only continues to eat because at a motoring hotel there is nothing else to do. It is at such places that the modern fat man is made.” Not so, argued New York City health commissioner Royal S. Copeland in 1922: “Most of us get enough exercise in the walking necessary, even to the most confined life, to keep the leg muscles fairly fit. It is from the waist upward that flabbiness usually sets in. The slight but purposeful effort demanded

in swinging the steering wheel reacts exactly where we need it most. Frankly I believe that steering a motor car is actually better exercise than walking, because it does react on the parts of the body least used in the ordinary man’s routine existence.” For today’s rampant obesity, blame power steering.

Whose Terms?

The name says it all

A well-known exercise in moral reasoning asks whether it would be ethical to kill a hefty man by pushing him onto the tracks to stop a train or trolley before it crashed into a group of people. Eric Uhlmann of Northwestern University and three fellow researchers asked 88 students if they would cause one such death in order to save a busload of musicians. Half of the students were told that they could push Tyrone Payton onto the rails; the others were given the chance to push Chip Ellsworth III. Self-described liberals proved more likely to sacrifice white-sounding Chip than black-sounding Tyrone. Conservatives were just as likely to throw either fellow. The authors suggest in an as yet unpublished paper that “antipathy toward antiblack prejudice played a greater role in influencing liberals’ judgments compared to conservatives. . . . Our Chip-Tyrone manipulation presented liberals with choices likely to alert their implicit sensitivities to issues of racial inequality.” Affirmative action on wheels, or under them.

Names matter in other realms,



Hnegripitrom, anyone?

too. In *Psychological Science* (February), Hyunjin Song and Norbert Schwarz report on an experiment in which subjects were given lists of 16 made-up food additives and asked to rank them by perceived peril. The additives’ names, 12 letters apiece, ranged from relatively straightforward (Magnalroxate) to nearly unpronounceable (Hnegripitrom). Participants deemed the hard-to-pronounce additives riskier than the others. The researchers derive a lesson: Names that are tough to pronounce may help awaken consumers to the dangers of products, “possibly motivating them to pay closer attention to warnings and instructions.” Maybe it’s time to rename cigarettes Hnegripitrom.

Yes, Problem

Lost language

“No problem” seems to be replacing “You’re welcome” as the response to “Thank you.” “People complain about that all the time,” says Peggy Post, great-grand-

daughter-in-law of Emily Post and the author of *Excuse Me, But I Was Next* (2006) and other books on etiquette. “But it has definitely become part of our language. It’s hit the tipping point.” She gets complaints about “you guys” for mixed company, too, but “I don’t know how widespread that is.” Just wait.

Failure and Excess

Leave it to Cheever

In 1975, before he quit drinking, the author John Cheever led a fiction workshop at Boston University. It wasn’t a success. “He went through the motions, more or less, but didn’t bother to disguise his drunkenness or do much in the way of teaching,” Blake Bailey writes in *Cheever: A Life* (Knopf). On some occasions, Cheever “would either read one of his own stories or just sit there looking depressed until his students gradually drifted away,”

Bailey reports. “He also kept a rather flexible schedule. ‘Should we go looking for him?’ his worried students murmured one day when he was 15 minutes late for class. An expedition was forming when they spotted their teacher shuffling past the door. ‘Mr. Cheever?’ they called. ‘Mr. Cheever?’ An elegant voice floated down the hall: ‘Ye-ess. . . ?’ ‘We sort of talked him back into the room,’ one student recalled. ‘He returned with this big grin and went around the table kissing all the women and shaking hands with the men.’”

Those were the days, Amy Shearn suggests in *Poets & Writers* (March–April). “Why don’t writers get to be barely functional, substance-abusing eccentrics anymore?” Novelist Ed Park is just too busy. “I basically work four jobs. . . . There’s little time for me to indulge in anything rehab worthy,” he says. Novelist and essayist Charles Baxter

posits a different explanation: “When an artist is no longer envied, when hopes are no longer invested in her or him, the aura fades, as does the glamour. Rock stars still have the aura; they are gods, and gods drink and get drugged up and go wild. . . . Writers are no longer gods; everybody knows that.” When a drunken writer falls at a party, does he make a sound if nobody cares?

The Uncommitted

Something in the way he moves

Americans are about twice as likely as Europeans to change residences in a given year. “The path of moving somewhere new, starting at the bottom and working your way up, is accepted, even taken for granted, in ways not found in most other countries,” writes Andrew J. Cherlin, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University. But that way of life has its costs. Data from 1990 indicate that U.S. counties with the most mobility, based on people who had moved within the past five years, tended to have the highest proportions of divorced men. “Clusters of divorced men were most common in the West and in parts of Florida and least common in the upper Midwest,” Cherlin writes in *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today* (Knopf). One state in the West, though, had markedly fewer divorces: Utah, with its high proportion of Mormons. “Divorce rates are lower among Mormons than among any other Christian or Jewish religious group.”

Cherlin acknowledges that mobility may not cause divorce. “Mi-



Novelist John Cheever, according to biographer Blake Bailey, “didn’t bother to disguise his drunkenness or do much in the way of teaching” during a university stint in the 1970s.

grants could be different kinds of people—more prone to marital breakups—than people who stay in one place,” he writes. “Even if they had stayed home, they might have gotten divorced more often.” Yet migrants aren’t the only ones getting divorced in high-mobility areas. Longtime residents of Phoenix divorce more frequently than longtime residents of Fargo, North Dakota, Cherlin reports. People surrounded by newcomers are more likely to divorce than those in other places. A divorce virus?

Bleeding Indicators

Crime econ

Will the declining economy boost the crime rate? One study found that young men with no college education were more likely to commit property crimes when wages were low and unemployment was high, Michael Moyer reports in *Scientific American* (February). In another study, the murder rate rose as the Consumer Sentiment Index fell. The index hit a 28-year low in November. Rick Rosenfeld, a criminologist, believes that the economy-crime relationship may be indirect. “I don’t think that newly unemployed people become criminals,” he says. “Marginal consumers—the shopper who goes to discount stores—many of those consumers turn to street markets during an economic downturn. These are often markets for used goods, but some are stolen goods. As demand increases, incentives for crim-

inals to commit crimes expand.” And property crimes often lead to violent crimes.

But mitigating factors play a role, too. The economic stimulus may tamp down crime: “Communities in the 1930s that spent more on public-works programs had lower crime rates than other communities,” writes Moyer. And law enforcement tactics are improving. Crime may not pay after all.

Novel Explanations

The audacity of nope

Regardless of whether government interventions are stimulating the economy, they’re stimulating attention to Ayn Rand’s paean to unfettered capitalism, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). “Many of us who know Rand’s work have noticed that with each passing week, and with each successive bailout plan and economic stimulus scheme out of Washington, our current politicians are committing the very acts of economic lunacy that *Atlas Shrugged* parodied,” economist Stephen Moore wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* in January. Rand—whose acolytes include former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan—is growing increasingly popular. Sales of *Atlas Shrugged* on Amazon soared when the Bush administration proposed to aid banks, *The Economist* reported in February. And the announcement of President Barack Obama’s stimulus plan caused a major uptick. For a short time, *Atlas Shrugged*

even outsold Obama’s *The Audacity of Hope*.

Monster Mash-Up

From Austen to zombie

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains,” write Jane Austen and her new collaborator, Seth Grahame-Smith, in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Quirk Books). The enterprising Grahame-Smith has zombified the entire text. Elizabeth and Darcy, for example, now grow



Will slaughtering zombies help Elizabeth and Darcy find true happiness together?

closer by jointly slaughtering “a herd of unmentionables” they encounter while strolling. A discussion guide asks if the living dead “represent the authors’ views toward marriage—an endless curse that sucks the life out of you and just won’t die.”

—Stephen Bates

A Fighting Chance

As Mexico steps up its war against the brutal cartels that supply the United States' drug habit, leaders on both sides of the border face tough questions about how to combat a problem that threatens the very fabric of Mexico's democracy.

BY ALFREDO CORCHADO

NEWSPAPER HEADLINES AND TABLOID PICTURES TELL the story: headless corpses, blood-soaked vehicles, and a growing array of victims—drug traffickers, cops, politicians, journalists, and, increasingly, civilians. The lazy, tranquil Mexico I grew up in is engulfed in the bloodiest drug violence anywhere in the Western Hemisphere.

Nine years after an opposition party came to power—an event that was supposed to solidify the democracy that had been little more than a word in Mexico during several decades of oligarchic rule—Mexico's rule of law is withering before it takes root. Since 2006 more than 10,000 people have been killed in drug-related violence—1,000 of them in the first 45 days of this year alone. Last year, more Mexicans died in Mexico's drug war than Americans have died in Iraq since 2003.

To be sure, the Mexican government has scored important victories, though these successes, expressed in numbers, also suggest the scope of the problem. More than 57,000 cartel kingpins, couriers, hit men, and lookouts—known as falcons—have been arrested since 2006. In the last two years, as many as 77 tons of cocaine, 585 kilos of heroin, and thousands of tons of marijuana have been seized. Authorities have impounded more than 33,000 firearms and some 4.5 million rounds of ammunition tied to trafficking.

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Many U.S. and Mexican officials say that a crime problem—albeit a grave one—is being overblown. They scoff at a year-end Pentagon report calling Mexico and Pakistan the two countries most at risk of becoming failed states. “Failed states do not have functioning executive, legislative, and judicial branches,” says Tony Garza, former U.S. ambassador to Mexico. “They do not boast the world’s 12th-largest economy, nor do they trade with the United States at a pace of more than \$1 billion a day.”

Mexico's attorney general, Eduardo Medina Mora, said in a recent interview with *The Dallas Morning News* that Mexico's president, Felipe Calderón, had to make fighting cartels the country's top priority upon taking office, but he dismissed the notion that Mexico is on the verge of collapse. “Mexico has never been a weak state,” he said. “It is not today. It will not be in the future. We do have a critical problem that needs very bold, determined action by the government, which is taking place.”

Calderón's administration insists that much of the country remains immune to the ongoing violence. Federal officials stress that more than 60 percent of the killings are confined to three of Mexico's 31 states: Baja California, Sinaloa, and Chihuahua. And they say that 90 percent of the victims are people tied to drug traffickers, though this number invites skepticism, as so few crimes are ever solved.

Since the 1930s, cartels have been a fact of life in Mexico. Sinaloa, a state on the Gulf of California that today is



Mexican soldiers roll into Ciudad Juárez, across the border from El Paso, in March. In all, 7,500 troops occupy Juárez, Mexico's most violent city.

known as the country's narco-capital, was home to the first cartel, established by a single family. Over the years, other regions with gateways to the United States gave rise to their own organizations. These include Baja California's Tijuana cartel, controlled by the Arellano family; the Juárez cartel, controlled by the Carrillo Fuentes family; and the Gulf cartel, with the paramilitary group known as Los Zetas serving as its armed enforcers and eventually spawning their own criminal organizations.

Accommodation between cartels and political leaders was common, as it has been in other Latin American countries, including Colombia. Ultimately, however, such an arrangement cannot hold. Greed takes over. In 1986, Colombian president Virgilio Barco described the three stages of narco-power that had gripped his country: "The first phase was the amusement. It was the period of the grand orgy with

the drug dealers, when everybody was in bed with them and nobody paid any attention. . . . The second phase was the discovery period, when drug bosses no longer could depend on that more-or-less peaceful coexistence," and violence erupted. "The third phase began when the drug bosses wanted to take over the state."

From all indications, Mexico is in phase two, and is within sight of phase three, as midterm elections loom this July. The possibility that drug money may influence the candidates' campaigns is yet another sign that Mexico's democracy hangs in the balance.

For too long, Mexican officials turned a blind eye to the growing menace in their country. Today, an estimated 600,000 people participate in organized crime. The foot soldiers, or hit men, who come to mind when we think of drug trafficking compose fewer than 10,000 of that number,

says Raúl Benítez, a professor at the National Autonomous University in Mexico who specializes in security issues. The rest are marijuana farmers, truck drivers, money launderers, and other ancillary criminals.

Their numbers will likely grow. The deepening economic recession has already left more than 350,000 Mexicans unemployed, and jobs that were once plentiful in the United States are scarce. Mexico's mammoth underground economy offers a cornucopia of lucrative occupations—kidnapping (for ransom, to intimidate rival criminals, or to collect on debts), extortion, or murder for hire. In Mexico, crime pays.

This is the massive problem Calderón inherited when he took office in 2006 and decided on a policy of confrontation with the cartels. Local law enforcement—corrupt or simply stretched too thin—is overwhelmed. Some former policemen serve as drivers for the cartels. Many others are suspected of collusion with traffickers and have been fired or jailed. Still others have fled for their lives and now live in cities across the U.S. Southwest. In El Paso, I've met former Mexican cops working as fast-food cooks, gardeners, and roofers.

Just days after he took office, Calderón sent some 25,000 federal troops to regain control of areas beset by drug violence. In the three years since, that number has increased to about 45,000. In March, 5,000 new soldiers arrived in Ciudad Juárez—now the epicenter of the country's violence—to take charge of security. Today, more than three-quarters of the soldiers in Mexico's army work simply to keep peace in their own country.

Recently, the U.S. State Department issued travel alerts for the northern state of Coahuila, which borders Texas, and even for my native state of Durango, farther to the south. My hometown in Durango traditionally had local human smugglers, people who vouched for the safe passage of emigrants along established routes into the United States. No more. Those routes, which have been taken over by ruthless drug traffickers who often use migrants as mules to smuggle locally grown marijuana or heroin, sometimes resemble killing fields.

The story of drug violence and cartels overwhelming vulnerable democracies is one of the oldest tales in Latin America. Indeed, Mexico is proving—as have Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia—that the war on drugs is unwinnable as long as Americans fail to curb their insatiable appetite for illicit drugs.

“If Mexico is the springboard, the United States is the swimming pool,” remarked Mexican ambassador Arturo Sarukhan in a recent talk at Harvard. Mexican drug traffickers earn anywhere from \$15 billion to \$38 billion from U.S. consumers every year. It's American-style capitalism at its most effective. Supply and demand are bound like magnets, operating according to the “just-in-time” delivery concept that has made billions for companies such as Wal-Mart. Some of the narcotics are grown in Mexico; the rest arrive at this gateway to the United States from elsewhere. About 90 percent of all cocaine originating in South America—much of it from Colombia—passes through Mexico.

Mexico doesn't rely on the United States only for consumers. More than 90 percent of the weapons used to generate terror in Mexico, where gun laws are more restrictive, are believed to be of U.S. origin. America also originates most of the bulk cash drug proceeds smuggled into Mexico. More than half of this hoard is used to bribe law enforcement officials, politicians, journalists, even administrators of homeless shelters, where cartels often hide their hit men. The corruption extends to the U.S. side of the border, where a growing number of law enforcement officials have been busted for complicity.

In Mexico, corruption of top officials is pervasive. In a particularly glaring example, drug czar Noé Ramírez Mandujano was detained last November for allegedly receiving about \$450,000 a month to share U.S. and Mexican intelligence with drug kingpin Arturo Beltrán Leyva. One U.S. intelligence official lamented that the war against drug traffickers is often really a war within the government itself.

Mexico's drug problem has become an urgent American domestic one as well. The magnitude of the violence and the powerful reach of the transnational cartels, coupled with the help of a vast network of gangs across the United States, have strengthened distribution routes from El Paso to Boston, and from Tijuana to Anchorage. Mexican drug cartels are even using U.S. public lands in the West to cultivate marijuana. A recent Justice Department report declared that Mexican cartels, with a presence in at least 230 American cities, represent the United States' single greatest organized crime threat.

Kidnappings in Phoenix are rampant. In total, 368 people, the majority of them suspected of involvement in the Mexican drug trade, were kidnapped there last year. In Texas cities such as Laredo, McAllen, and El Paso, kidnappings are also common, and rarely reported to U.S. author-

ities. In Dallas, suspected murders tied to Mexican drug cartels are a frequent occurrence.

Meanwhile, an influx of refugees, ranging from business owners to law enforcement officials, is flowing into cities from San Diego to El Paso. Mexican citizens, once hopeful that Calderón and the military were up to the job of restoring order, are losing faith. In cities such as Ciudad Juárez and Nuevo Laredo, many residents and local politicians tell me that what they want most is a peace pact between the cartels and the government.

One canary in the coal mine is the Mexican news media. More than 30 journalists have disappeared or been killed this decade. The result: growing self-censorship, particularly along the Mexican border.

“The essence of Mexico’s young democracy is under attack,” warned Carlos Spector, an attorney representing Mexico’s new class of refugees, including three reporters who formed an organization called *Periodistas Mexicanos en el Exilio* (Mexican Journalists in Exile). “Journalists, the cornerstone of any democracy, are the targets. Democracy is slipping away.”

Consider Chihuahua, Mexico’s largest state, which borders both New Mexico and Texas. In the 1980s, I began my journalistic career by covering Mexico’s nascent democratic movement in Ciudad Juárez, across the Rio Grande from El Paso. There, Mexicans who opposed the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) were staging hunger strikes, bridge takeovers, and other acts of civil disobedience in support of the National Action Party. It was a long, sometimes bloody fight. In 1992, Chihuahua finally elected its first opposition-party governor, but many of its underlying political maladies remained.

When Vicente Fox won Mexico’s presidency from the PRI in 2000, he promised that the rule of law would follow. I had my doubts. The PRI was leaving behind a massive power vacuum, and many pressing problems remained. Perhaps the largest was Ciudad Juárez’s inability to solve the killings of hundreds of women beginning in the mid-1990s, an issue

that has galvanized international human rights organizations. Nonetheless, I left for Washington to cover U.S. policy toward Latin America, thinking that the relationship between Fox and President George W. Bush would lead to a more fruitful approach. But the attacks on September 11, 2001, dashed all expectations of increased U.S. attention to Mexico, as America’s focus shifted to Iraq and Afghanistan.

In late 2003, I returned to Ciudad Juárez to investigate

MEXICO IS PROVING that the war on drugs is unwinnable as long as Americans fail to curb their insatiable appetite for illicit drugs.

the murders of these women. By then, democracy seemed a distant promise. My investigation fingered drug traffickers in some of the killings, though getting proof was impossible, as much of the case paperwork had been destroyed or had disappeared mysteriously. In one case, an employee at a forensics lab washed the remaining clothes of a victim, thus removing bloodstains, hair, and other evidence. Why? Because, the employee told a U.S. investigator, the clothes smelled bad.

Today, Ciudad Juárez, with a population of 1.6 million, is the most violent city in Mexico. Two cartels, Juárez and Sinaloa, are fighting for control of routes into El Paso. Last year El Paso recorded 16 murders; Juárez, more than 1,600. The city is slowly dying. Texas state senator Eliot Shapleigh estimates that as many as 10,000 people from Mexico’s northern region have migrated to El Paso since January 2008. That number is nearly impossible to confirm since many of Juárez’s well-to-do already commute between the two cities. Shapleigh has called for El Pasoans to help accommodate these newcomers, much as Houston took in refugees from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

A few examples illustrate the gravity of the situation in Ciudad Juárez. Mayor José Reyes Ferriz owns homes in both El Paso and Juárez. Today, people close to him say, his family spends much of its time on the U.S. side. His children are enrolled in El Paso schools. Reyes, who has been threatened

with decapitation because he has allegedly defied traffickers, shuttles between the two cities.

Jorge Luis Aguirre fled to El Paso after a colleague, crime reporter Armando Rodriguez of *El Diario de Ciudad Juárez*, was slain outside his home. As he was returning from Rodriguez's funeral, Aguirre says, he was threatened by a state employee with ties to the Juárez cartel. "I was told

lifeless city on the other side. A Juárez cab driver charged me three times the normal fare—a hardship rate—because, he explained, "only crazies or desperate people drive the streets of Juárez on this day."

Washington clearly has been jolted by the violence. Veteran congressional aides can't remember so many hearings about Mexico on Capitol Hill as have occurred this year. President Barack Obama sup-

ports the Mérida Initiative, a multiyear, \$1.4 billion anti-narcotics plan introduced by his predecessor. Much of the aid goes to Mexico, though some Central American countries will also receive money. The plan aims to provide new technologies, training, and intelligence-gathering mechanisms, and

to fortify Mexico's weak judicial institutions. Perhaps now that the hypocrisies are exposed and Latin America's drug war has reached the United States, real progress is possible. Maybe now, the two sides will talk as partners and not point fingers.

A JUÁREZ CAB DRIVER charged me three times the normal fare because, he explained, "only crazies or desperate people drive the streets of Juárez on this day."

I would be next," Aguirre recalls. "And I believe him. Because in Mexico today anyone can kill you at any time and nothing ever happens."

Last summer, 12-year-old Alexia Moreno and two other girls walking near her home were picked up by two panicked gunmen on the run from rival traffickers. Alexia, according to local press accounts, had told her parents she felt increasingly unsafe and wanted to move to El Paso. Days after that conversation, she became a human shield for two strangers. Shots rang out. The two gunmen were killed, and Alexia was found crunched in the back seat of the car with a bullet in her head.

While the innocent aren't the vast majority of victims, the impact of their deaths is magnified for ordinary Mexicans. The cartels play on that fear by posting threatening messages in city streets, on walls and statues, on the bodies of victims. YouTube, blogs, and Internet websites are also popular forums for spreading fear. "The tactics used coincide with what we know as terrorism," explains Phillip Heymann, a Harvard law professor and terrorism expert. "In Mexico it's called narcoterrorism."

One e-mailed message last year warned of the bloodiest weekend in Ciudad Juárez's history. Residents were urged to stay away from the city's streets, restaurants, and shopping malls. On the designated Saturday, a cab driver from El Paso refused to take me to the Juárez airport. So I walked across the border—and found an empty,

After nearly 40 years, U.S. drug policy, at a cost of \$40 billion a year, is generally viewed as a failure. In a recent report by the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, three former heads of state, of Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil, called for a new approach, namely, decriminalizing marijuana.

Yet any proposal that smacks of decriminalization is taboo, even political suicide, in the United States.

Consider El Paso city councilman Beto O'Rourke. Concerned about the violence in Ciudad Juárez and spillover into El Paso, O'Rourke proposed in January that the city lead the nation in debating whether to legalize or decriminalize drugs. A motion to discuss the issue was approved, but Mayor John Cook vetoed the measure, expressing concern that a vote to decriminalize drugs would send the "wrong message to Washington." His action forced a second vote a week later. What followed in the intervening seven days was a free-for-all of personal attacks on O'Rourke. Some even questioned whether he was "smoking something," he recalled. The proposal was eventually voted down.



Members of a drug gang arrested in Monterrey, Mexico, last year possessed uniforms of Mexico's elite Federal Investigations Agency.

Privately, some officials from both governments entertain the possibility of moving beyond intelligence sharing to joint military operations, particularly if top Calderón administration officials are targeted for assassination. President Obama told *The Dallas Morning News* he has no intention of militarizing the border, but he didn't rule out calling on the National Guard to help police it. That possibility isn't altogether palatable to Mexicans, who don't fancy having U.S. troops breathing down their necks.

The parallels with Colombia grow ever more striking. Since 2000, the United States has spent roughly \$5 billion on the drug war there under a program called Plan Colombia. Violence decreased dramatically, but today drug traffickers are still very much a part of Colombia's socioeconomic fabric.

"Cocaine production remains mostly unchanged," says Álvaro Jiménez Millán, national coordinator of an anti-land mine program and a former member of the guerrilla group known as M-19. "Pablo Escobar is dead, but you have dozens of smaller drug lords who are now supplying Europe and Africa. So what Plan Colombia did was transfer the violence to Mexico and move cocaine to

Africa, Europe. Is that success?"

A few months ago I spent a day touring the Mexican state of Tamaulipas with a source, someone in good standing with Los Zetas, some members of which were once elite soldiers in the army before deserting to do paramilitary work for drug traffickers. I was on a journalism assignment, seeking to confirm the existence of mobile camps near the Texas border where young Americans and Mexicans are trained as assassins. My agreement with my source was that I would not reveal exact locations.

Before entering any community on the Mexican side of the border, my source had to clear our vehicle so that there would be "no confusion, which could lead to bullets directed at us." We drove endlessly, and he repeatedly phoned ahead to check with sources he didn't identify. I saw Mexican policemen helping traffickers by calling in license plate numbers to ensure that vehicles didn't belong to rival cartels. More than once, I spied an altar to Santa Muerte, or St. Death, a pre-Christian folk deity, by the roadside. The faithful, some loaded with high-powered weapons, leave candles, bottles of tequila, and other offerings. They pray for protection and for the destruction of their enemies. ■

The World's New Numbers

“Here lies Europe, overwhelmed by Muslim immigrants and emptied of native-born Europeans.” That is the obituary some pundits have been writing in recent years. But neither the immigrants nor the Europeans are playing their assigned roles.

BY MARTIN WALKER

SOMETHING DRAMATIC HAS HAPPENED TO THE world's birthrates. Defying predictions of demographic decline, northern Europeans have started having more babies. Britain and France are now projecting steady population growth through the middle of the century. In North America, the trends are similar. In 2050, according to United Nations projections, it is possible that nearly as many babies will be born in the United States as in China. Indeed, the population of the world's current demographic colossus will be shrinking. And China is but one particularly sharp example of a widespread fall in birthrates that is occurring across most of the developing world, including much of Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. The one glaring exception to this trend is sub-Saharan Africa, which by the end of this century may be home to one-third of the human race.

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The human habit is simply to project current trends into the future. Demographic realities are seldom kind to the predictions that result. The decision to have a child depends on innumerable personal considerations and larger, unaccountable societal factors that are in constant flux. Yet even knowing this, demographers themselves are often flummoxed. Projections of birthrates and population totals are often embarrassingly at odds with eventual reality.

In 1998, the UN's "best guess" for 2050 was that there would be 8.9 billion humans on the planet. Two years later, the figure was revised to 9.3 billion—in effect, adding two Brazils to the world. The number subsequently fell and rose again. Modest changes in birthrates can have bigger consequences over a couple of generations: The recent rise in U.S. and European birthrates is among the developments factored into the UN's latest "middle" projection that world population in 2050 will be just over 9.1 billion.



An unexpected baby boomlet in Europe has forced demographers to revise some projections.

In a society in which an average woman bears 2.1 children in her lifetime—what’s called “replacement-level” fertility—the population remains stable. When demographers make tiny adjustments to estimates of future fertility rates, population projections can fluctuate wildly. Plausible scenarios for the next 40 years show world population shrinking to eight billion or growing to 10.5 billion. A recent UN projection rather daringly assumes a decline of the global fertility rate to 2.02 by 2050, and eventually to 1.85, with total world population starting to decrease by the end of this century.

Despite their many uncertainties, demographic projections have become an essential tool. Governments, international agencies, and private corporations depend on them in planning strategy and making long-term investments. They seek to estimate such things as the

number of pensioners, the cost of health care, and the size of the labor force many years into the future. But the detailed statistical work of demographers tends to seep out to the general public in crude form, and sensationalist headlines soon become common wisdom.

Because of this bastardization of knowledge, three deeply misleading assumptions about demographic trends have become lodged in the public mind. The first is that mass migration into Europe, legal and illegal, combined with an eroding native population base, is transforming the ethnic, cultural, and religious identity of the continent. The second assumption, which is related to the first, is that Europe’s native population is in steady and serious decline from a falling birthrate, and that the aging population will place intolerable demands on governments to maintain public pension and health systems. The third is that population growth in the developing world will continue at a high rate. Allow-

ing for the uncertainty of all population projections, the most recent data indicate that all of these assumptions are highly questionable and that they are not a reliable basis for serious policy decisions.

In 2007, *The Times* of London reported that in the previous year Muhammad had edged out Thomas as the second most popular name for newborn boys in Britain, trailing only Jack. This development had been masked in the official statistics because the name's many variants—such as Mohammed, Mahmoud, and Muhamed—had all been counted separately. *The Times* compiled all the variants and established that 5,991 Muhammads of one spelling or another were born in 2006, trailing 6,928 Jacks, but ahead of 5,921 Thomases, 5,808 Joshuas, and 5,208 Oliveres. *The Times* went on to predict that Muhammad would soon take the top spot.

On the face of it, this seemed to bear out the thesis—something of a rallying cry among anti-immigration activists—that high birthrates among immigrant Muslims presage a fundamental shift in British demography. Similar developments in other European countries, where birthrates among native-born women have long fallen below replacement level, have provoked considerable anxiety about the future of Europe's traditionally Christian culture. Princeton professor emeritus Bernard Lewis, a leading authority on Islamic history, suggested in 2004 that the combination of low European birthrates and increasing Muslim immigration means that by this century's end, Europe will be “part of the Arabic west, of the Maghreb.” If non-Muslims then flee Europe, as Middle East specialist Daniel Pipes predicted in *The New York Sun*, “grand cathedrals will appear as vestiges of a prior civilization—at least until a Saudi-style regime transforms them into mosques or a Taliban-like regime blows them up.”

The reality, however, looks rather different from such dire scenarios. Upon closer inspection, it turns out that while Muhammad topped Thomas in 2006, it was something of a Pyrrhic victory: Fewer than two percent of Britain's male babies bore the prophet's name. One fact that

gets lost among distractions such as the *Times* story is that the birthrates of Muslim women in Europe—and around the world—have been falling significantly for some time. Data on birthrates among different religious groups in Europe are scarce, but they point in a clear direction. Between 1990 and 2005, for example, the fertility rate in the Netherlands for Moroccan-born women fell from 4.9 to 2.9, and for Turkish-born women from 3.2 to 1.9. In 1970, Turkish-born women in Germany had on average two children more than German-born women. By 1996, the difference had fallen to one child, and it has now dropped to half that number.

These sharp reductions in fertility among Muslim immigrants reflect important cultural shifts, which include universal female education, rising living standards, the inculcation of local mores, and widespread availability of contraception. Broadly speaking, birthrates among immigrants tend to rise or fall to the local statistical norm within two generations.

The decline of Muslim birthrates is a global phenomenon. Most analysts have focused on the remarkably high proportion of people under age 25 in the Arab countries, which has inspired some crude forecasts about what this implies for the future. Yet recent UN data suggest that Arab birthrates are falling fast, and that the number of births among women under the age of 20 is dropping even more sharply. Only two Arab countries still have high fertility rates: Yemen and the Palestinian territories.

In some Muslim countries—Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Lebanon—fertility rates have already fallen to near-European levels. Algeria and Morocco, each with a fertility rate of 2.4, are both dropping fast toward such levels. Turkey is experiencing a similar trend.

Revisions made in the 2008 version of the UN's *World Population Prospects Report* make it clear that this decline is not simply a Middle Eastern phenomenon. The report suggests that in Indonesia, the country with the world's largest Muslim population, the fertility rate for the years 2010–15 will drop to 2.02, a shade below replacement level. The same UN assessment sees declines in Bangladesh (to 2.2) and Malaysia (2.35) in the same period. By

2050, even Pakistan is expected to reach a replacement-level fertility rate.

Iran is experiencing what may be one of the most dramatic demographic shifts in human history. Thirty years ago, after the shah had been driven into exile and the Islamic Republic was being established, the fertility rate was 6.5. By the turn of the century, it had dropped to 2.2. Today, at 1.7, it has collapsed to European levels. The implications are profound for the politics and power games of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, putting into doubt Iran's dreams of being the regional superpower and altering the tense dynamics between the Sunni and Shiite wings of Islam. Equally important are the implications for the economic future of Iran, which by midcentury may have consumed all of its oil and will confront the challenge of organizing a society with few people of working age and many pensioners.

The falling fertility rates in large segments of the Islamic world have been matched by another significant shift: Across northern and western Europe, women have suddenly started having more babies. Germany's minister for the family, Ursula von der Leyen, announced in February that the country had recorded its second straight year of increased births. Sweden's fertility rate jumped eight percent in 2004 and stayed put. Both Britain and France now project that their populations will rise from the current 60 million each to more than 75 million by midcentury. Germany, despite its recent uptick in births, still seems likely to drop to 70 million or less by 2050 and lose its status as Europe's most populous country.

In Britain, the number of births rose in 2007 for the sixth year in a row. Britain's fertility rate has increased from 1.6 to 1.9 in just six years, with a striking contribution from women in their thirties

and forties—just the kind of hard-to-predict behavioral change that drives demographers wild. The fertility rate is at its highest level since 1980. The National Health Service has started an emergency recruitment drive to hire more midwives, tempting early retirees from the profession back to work with a bonus of up to \$6,000. In Scotland, where births have been increasing by five percent a year, Glasgow's *Herald* has reported “a mini baby boom.”

MUSLIM BIRTHRATES are falling around the globe, and Iran is experiencing what may be one of the most dramatic demographic shifts in human history.

Immigrant mothers account for part of the fertility increase throughout Europe, but only part. And, significantly, many of the immigrants are arrivals from elsewhere in Europe, especially the eastern European countries admitted to the European Union in recent years. Children born to eastern European immigrants accounted for a third of Scotland's “mini baby boom,” for example.

In 2007, France's national statistical authority announced that the country had overtaken Ireland to boast the highest birthrate in Europe. In France, the fertility rate has risen from 1.7 in 1993 to 2.1 in 2007, its highest level since before 1980, despite a steady fall in birthrates among women not born in France. France's National Institute of Demographic Studies reports that the immigrant population is responsible for only five percent of the rise in the birthrate.

A similar upturn is under way in the United States, where the fertility rate has climbed to its highest level since 1971, reaching 2.1 in 2006, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. New projections by the Pew Research Center suggest that if current trends continue, the population of the United States will rise from today's total

of some 300 million to 438 million in 2050. Eighty-two percent of that increase will be produced by new immigrants and their U.S.-born descendants.

By contrast, the downward population trends for southern and eastern Europe show little sign of reversal. Ukraine, for example, now has a population of 46 million; if maintained, its low fertility rate will

a country whose young male work force looks set to decrease by half.

The Russian future highlights in exaggerated fashion another challenge facing the European countries. Even absent Russia's dire conditions, the social and political implications of an aging population are plain and alarming. At a 2004 conference in

Paris, Heikki Oksanen of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs noted that the European social model of generous welfare states is facing a crisis because the number of retirees is rising while the number of working-age people is

A VERY LARGE QUESTION mark must be placed on the future of Russia, whose population of working-age men looks set to decline by half.

whittle its population down by nearly 50 percent by mid-century. The Czech Republic, Italy, and Poland face declines almost as drastic.

In Russia, the effects of declining fertility are amplified by a phenomenon so extreme that it has given rise to an ominous new term—hypermortality. As a result of the rampant spread of maladies such as HIV/AIDS and alcoholism and the deterioration of the Russian health care system, says a 2008 report by the UN Development Program, “mortality in Russia is 3–5 times higher for men and twice as high for women” than in other countries at a comparable stage of development. The report—which echoes earlier findings by demographers such as the Woodrow Wilson Center's Murray Feshbach—predicts that within little more than a decade the working-age population will be shrinking by up to one million people annually. Russia is suffering a demographic decline on a scale that is normally associated with the effects of a major war.

It is important to consider what this means for the future of the Russian economy. Identified by Goldman Sachs as one of the BRIC quartet (along with Brazil, India, and China) of key emerging markets, Russia has been the object of great hopes and considerable investments. But a very large question mark must be placed on the economic prospects of

declining. “People are aware that there is a problem, but they do not know how serious it is and [what] drastic reforms are necessary,” he said.

Oksanen went on to describe the dire implications for European tax systems. A pay-as-you-go pension scheme would take “only” 27 percent of wages if Europeans had replacement-level fertility, retired at age 60, and lived to 78. But if fertility decreased to 1.7 while longevity increased gradually to 83—close to where Europe is now—the tax would rise to 45 percent of the wage bill. Because of its low birthrate, Germany's problem is particularly acute. It currently has about four people of working age for every three dependents. Under one scenario for 2050, those four working-age Germans would be required to support five dependents.

But these sorts of projections don't capture the full picture. There are at least three mitigating factors to be considered, which suggest that the German welfare state and others in Europe might not have to be dismantled wholesale.

The first is that the traditional retirement age of 60 in Italy, France, and Germany is very early indeed, especially considering that life expectancy is approaching 80 and that modern diets and medicine

allow many elderly people to continue working well into their seventies. An increase of the retirement age to 65, which is being slowly introduced in France and Germany, would sharply reduce the number of non-workers who depend on the employed for support, as would more employment for people below the age of 20. A retirement age of 70 in Germany would virtually end the problem, at least until life expectancy rose as high as 90 years.

Second, the work force participation rate in Germany (and much of continental Europe) is relatively low. Not only do Germans retire on the early side, but the generous social welfare system allows others to withdraw from work earlier in life. An increase in employment would boost the revenues flowing into the social security system. For example, only 67 percent of women in Germany were in the work force in 2005, compared with 76 percent in Denmark and 78 percent in Switzerland. (The average rate for the 15 “core” EU states is 64 percent; for the United States, 70 percent.)

David Coleman, a demographer at Oxford University, has suggested that the EU’s work force could be increased by nearly a third if both sexes were to match Denmark’s participation rates. The EU itself has set a target participation rate of 70 percent for both sexes. Reaching this goal would significantly alleviate the fiscal challenge of maintaining Europe’s welfare system, which has been aptly described as “more of a labor-market challenge than a demographic crisis.”

The third mitigating factor is that the total dependency ratios of the 21st century are going to look remarkably similar to those of the 1960s. In the United States, the most onerous year for dependency was 1965, when there were 95 dependents for every 100 adults between the ages of 20 and 64. That occurred because “dependents” includes people both younger and older than working age. By 2002, there were only 49 dependents for every 100 working-age Americans. By 2025 there are projected to be 80, still well below the peak of 1965. The difference is that while most dependents in the 1960s were young, with their working and saving and contributing lives ahead of them, most of the dependents of 2009 are older, with more dependency still to come. But the

point is clear: There is nothing outlandish about having almost as many dependents as working adults.

Population growth on a scale comparable to that which frightened pundits and demographers a generation ago still exists in 30 of the world’s least developed countries. Each has a fertility rate of more than five. With a few exceptions— notably, Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories— those countries are located in sub-Saharan Africa. Depending on the future course of birthrates, sub-Saharan Africa’s current 800 million people are likely to become 1.7 billion by 2050 and three billion by the end of the century.

One striking implication of this growth is that there will be a great religious revolution, as Africa becomes the home of monotheism. By midcentury, sub-Saharan Africa is likely to be the demographic center of Islam, home to as many Muslims as Asia and to far more than inhabit the Middle East. The non-Arab Muslim countries of Africa—Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Senegal—constitute the one region of the Islamic world where birthrates remain high. In several of these countries, the average woman will have upward of five children in her lifetime.

Christianity will also feel the effects of Africa’s growth. By 2025, there will be as many Christians in sub-Saharan Africa—some 640 million—as in South America. By 2050, it is almost certain that most of the world’s Christians will live in Africa. As Kenyan scholar John Mbiti writes, “The centers of the church’s universality [are] no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, London, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa, and Manila.”

But awareness of Africa’s religious revolution is usually overshadowed by the fearful possibilities raised by the continent’s rapid population growth. By 2050, the national populations are expected to more than double in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda, reaching 147 million and 91 million, respectively. Smaller countries—such as Liberia, Niger, Mali, Chad, and Burundi—are expected to experience growth of 100 to 200 percent. These are the countries with the weakest state institutions, the

least infrastructure, the feeblest economies, and thus the poorest health and education systems. They also face daunting problems of environmental degradation—and the lesson from Darfur and the Rwanda genocide is that disaster can follow when population growth strains local environments so badly that people cannot feed themselves.

The various demographic changes I have described arrived with remarkable speed. At the turn of this century, the conventional wisdom among demographers was that the population of Europe

**THE GLOBAL DEMOGRAPHIC
transformation now unfolding is going to
make the world look a lot more like Europe.**

was in precipitous decline, the Islamic world was in the grip of a population explosion, and Africa's population faced devastation by HIV/AIDS. Only a handful of scholars questioned the idea that the Chinese would outnumber all other groups for decades or even centuries to come. In fact, however, the latest UN projections suggest that China's population, now 1.3 billion, will increase slowly through 2030 but may then be reduced to half that number by the end of the century.

Because there are so many assumptions embedded in it, this forecast of the Chinese future could well be wrong. There is one area, however, in which demography relies on hard census data rather than assumptions about the future, and that is in mapping the youth cohort. All of the teenagers who will be alive in 2020 have already been born. So a strong indication of the eventual end of China's dominance of world population statistics is apparent in the fact that there are now 372 million Indians under the age of 15, but only 270 million Chinese. This gap will grow. India seems very likely to become the world's most populous country by 2030 or thereabouts, but only if nothing changes—China maintains its one-child policy and India does not

launch the kind of crash program of birth control that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi so controversially attempted in the 1970s.

There is another development that could affect future Indian and Chinese birthrates: the use of sonograms to ascertain the sex of a fetus. Wider availability of this technology has permitted an increase in gender-specific abortions. The official Chinese figures suggest that 118 boys are now being born in China for every 100 girls. As a result, millions of Chinese males may never find a mate with whom to raise a conventional family. The Chinese call such lonely males "bare branches." The social and political implications of having such a large population of unattached men are unclear, but they are not likely to be happy.

Gender imbalances are not limited to China. They are apparent in South Korea, Taiwan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and increasingly in India, particularly among the Sikhs. Valerie

Hudson of Brigham Young University and Andrea den Boer of Britain's University of Kent at Canterbury calculate that there 90 million "missing" women in Asia, 40 million each in China and India, six million in Pakistan, and three million in Bangladesh.

In a recent paper Hudson and den Boer asked, "Will it matter to India and China that by the year 2020, 12 to 15 percent of their young adult males will not be able to 'settle down' because the girls that would have grown up to be their wives were disposed of by their societies instead?" They answered, "The rate of criminal behavior of unmarried men is many times higher than that of married men; marriage is a reliable predictor of a downturn in reckless, antisocial, illegal, and violent behavior by young adult males." Resulting cross-border "bridal raids," rising crime rates, and widespread prostitution may come to define what could be called the geopolitics of sexual frustration.

The state's response to crime and social unrest could prove to be a defining factor for China's political future. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency asked Hudson to discuss her dramatic suggestion that "in 2020 it may seem to China that it would be

worth it to have a very bloody battle in which a lot of their young men could die in some glorious cause.” Other specialists are not as alarmed. Military observers point out that China is moving from a conscript army to a leaner, more professional force. And other scholars contend that China’s population is now aging so fast that the growing numbers of elderly people may well balance the surge of frustrated young males to produce a calmer and more peaceful nation.

China is also a key site of another striking demographic change: the rapid growth of the global middle class, perhaps the fastest-growing discrete segment of the world’s population. While the planet’s population is expected to grow by about one billion people by 2020, the global middle class will swell by as many as 1.8 billion, with a third of this number residing in China. The global economic recession will retard but not halt the expansion of the middle class—nobody expected growth without interruption.

The lower the birthrate, the greater the likelihood that a given society is developing—investing in education, accumulating disposable income and savings, and starting to consume at levels comparable to those of the middle classes in developed societies. Absent a shock factor such as war or famine, a society with a falling birthrate tends to be aspirational: Its members seek decent housing, education for their children, provision for health care and retirement and vacations, running water and flush toilets, electricity and appliances such as refrigerators and televisions and computers. As societies clamber up the prosperity chain, they also climb the mobility ladder, seeking bicycles, motor scooters, and eventually cars; they also climb the protein ladder, seeking better, more varied foods and more meat.

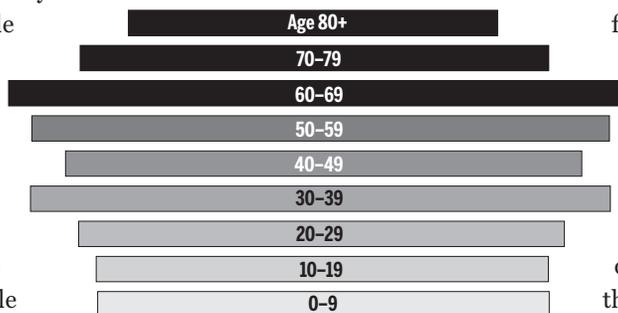
This pattern is apparent in China, India, and the Middle East. China’s new middle class, defined as those in households with incomes above about \$10,000 a year, is now estimated to number between 100 million and 150 million people. Some put the figure in India as high as 200 million. But it is apparent from the urban landscape across the developing world—whether in Mumbai or Shanghai, São Paulo or Moscow, Dubai or Istanbul—that a growing proportion of consumers seek to emulate a Western-international lifestyle, which includes an air-conditioned house with a car in the garage, a private garden, satellite TV, and Internet access, along with the chance to raise a limited number of children, all of whom will have the opportunity to go to college. Whether the biosphere can adapt to such increases in consumption remains a critical question.

Perhaps the most striking fact about the demographic transformation now unfolding is that it is going to make the world look a lot more like Europe. The world is aging in an unprecedented way. A milepost in this process came in 1998, when for the first time the number of people in the developed world over the age of 60 outnumbered those

below the age of 15. By 2047, the world as a whole will reach the same point.

The world’s median age is 28 today, and it is expected to reach 38 by the middle of the century. In the United States, the median age at that point will be a youngish 41, while it will be over 50 in Japan and 47 in Europe. The United States will be the only Western country to have been in the top 10 largest countries in terms of population size in both 1950 and 2050. Russia, Japan, Germany, Britain, and Italy were all demographic titans in the middle of the 20th century. Today, only Russia and Japan still (barely) make the top 10. They will not stay there long. The world has changed. There is more and faster change to come. ■

China’s Gray Future



By 2050, China’s over-60 population will vastly outweigh its youngest age groups, and the country could be on a course of rapid population decline.



They Call It Home

Ethnic and religious violence keep Russia's North Caucasus region in the news. A portrait of daily life in one small village reveals a richer, more hopeful reality.

BY MARGARET PAXSON

AKHMED DOESN'T LOCK HIS GATE AT NIGHT. HE doesn't lock his doors, and he leaves his windows open to let the curtains twitch in the breeze. The night sounds with frogs and yipping dogs. Not so long ago, in his village of Baliiko* in the Russian republic of Kabardino-

Balkaria, you could hear the Chechen War exploding at night in the distant mountains. A few years ago Chechens kidnapped the brother of a rich man in Baliiko for ransom, along with his friend; the friend was murdered in the woods when he didn't run fast enough to keep up. In Nalchik, the Kabardino-Balkarian capital, roughly 20 miles away, violence in

*I have changed the name of the village and the names of its people.



The high walls around family compounds in a typical Kabardino-Balkarian village give little hint of the profusion of life inside their gates.

2005 left scores dead in the city's tree-lined boulevards.

Akhmed doesn't lock his doors, but he is not a foolish man. He remembers being poor enough as a boy to experience the kind of hunger that drives children to eat grass while their parents toil on collective farms. In adulthood, he mastered the art of trade to sell the produce he grows. Now he works from before the sun rises until long after it sets to make a pretty home for his wife and daughters. Akhmed—a thick, strong man of 56 with an easy smile and a shock of white hair—knows what is important to him: his family. The endless conversation of birds and dogs and sheep and cows, the call to prayer that wafts from the local mosque at dusk, the flood of stars at night: This is the background of his life.

Akhmed's world is not defined by war or the baroque nuance of ethnic identification. In an off-hand way, he has been known to say about the two chief ethnic groups of his region, "The Balkars and the Kabardians, they're pretty much the same." A

Kabardian himself, Akhmed is simply not used to thinking of the world as divided into irreconcilable ethnic units. Many in his region—particularly in cities and capitals where power is parsed—do. Power grabs flared between Kabardians and Balkars in the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and there have been far more destructive clashes in other parts of the North Caucasus, such as Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan.

The Kabardians trace their history to great Circassian principalities, and the Balkars to Turkic tribes. Perhaps the more important difference between these peoples is that the Balkars were the traditional inhabitants of high mountain villages—where they raised horses, herded sheep, and grew potatoes and cabbages—and Kabardians were herders and farmers in the rolling foothills and plains.

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Traveling between mountain aeries and grassy farmlands, Balkars and Kabardians—despite speaking different languages—have worked together and traded with one another for hundreds of years.

Akhmed doesn't spend his days fretting about who will get more seats in the local parliament, which languages dominate on television, or whether a particular dish his wife cooks is Kabardian or Balkar. He worries instead about his children's health and education and prospects for happiness in marriage. He wonders if the price for cucumbers will rise if local government officials start selling cucumbers of their own. Or if some Chechens will come by and give a good price for radishes. Or if he will be able to trade tomatoes for potatoes and cabbages with the Balkars in the mountains. War does worry him, and he expresses concern about some of the more violent nationalist movements he's heard about over the years. But Akhmed—born and raised in the countryside, far from the passions that drive power struggles in urban capitals—doesn't define himself by how different he is from others. His first concerns, like those of so many of his compatriots, are deeply and intimately local.

Famous in history for the romance of its warriors and the diversity of its cultures and languages, lately the region around the Caucasus mountain chain—that magnificent topographic crush that marks the boundary between Russia and its southern neighbors Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—has been known best for its troubles. In the past 20 years, in Russia's North Caucasus alone, two wars in the Republic of Chechnya have caused tens of thousands of deaths. Though Chechnya's conflict began as a struggle for independence, as conditions deteriorated over time the conflict took on religious dimensions. Russia now has its own suicide bombers and homegrown terrorists, a reality that brings an existential sense of danger to authorities in Moscow, and to regular citizens as well.

There have been horrifying acts of terrorism, such as the 2004 attack by Chechen separatists on a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, that resulted in the deaths of nearly 200 children. There have been significant conflicts between the Ingush and the North Ossetians in the region west of Chechnya, and religious and ethnic violence regularly spills into the Republic of Dagestan, east of Chechnya on the Caspian Sea. Last year, Russia and

Georgia went to war over the contested territory of South Ossetia—which has been a de facto independent state since 1991—and brought the region to the brink of international conflict. Even Kabardino-Balkaria has had its troubles. People across the republic were deeply affected by the violent clash in Nalchik four years ago. Some blamed an extreme version of Islam adopted by a band of disaffected youth; others pointed a finger at brutal police practices fostered by the previous presidential administration.

In Russia and, indeed, the United States, the Caucasus region—wedged between Europe and Asia, the vibrant host of Persian, Ottoman, and Russian empires over the centuries—has been reduced to the most caustic terms: It is a “tinderbox,” a “cauldron,” ruled by “fire and swords” and “ancient ethnic hatreds.” Many policymakers and political analysts take as writ that Islamic extremism is inching its way up out of Middle Eastern deserts and down into European plains. To this way of thinking, the Caucasus is all dashing, dangerous mountain people, fierce, half-mad, and out of control.

When we stop to take in the full, rich social world in and around the Caucasus Mountains, we get a different picture: It is not a place riven by ethnic hatreds, nor are its people wrapped in old ideas, clinging to poverty and resentment. Certainly there is tumult, but that is not all. If we look closely at individual lives, it is possible to see another, equally important picture of the Caucasus, where there is movement and the air of possibility, and where belonging deeply to a place fortifies people to move out into the world.

I came to know Akhmed and his family last year, while conducting anthropological research. I had met him and his wife, Haishet, a couple of years earlier through their daughter, Asya, a dazzling young woman. At the time she was teaching at the local elementary school in Baliiko, and I sat in on one of her classes; the students performed skits in English, clearly besotted with their teacher. When I returned on a recent trip, I was looking, carefully, for a place in the countryside where I could live while I worked. Eventually, after discussing matters with his wife and daughters, Akhmed said to me, “All our doors and windows will be open to you!”

My research in Russia began in the mid-1990s in a

tiny village in the north, where I lived for a year studying social memory. I have returned to that village many times, and watched as the villagers slowed, nearly to their death. The sinking of that village into tangled grasses and bare ground has been a bewildering thing to witness. Villages die in that part of the world, and with them die the habits and ways accumulated over centuries. But in Kabardino-Balkaria, to my great surprise, villages seemed simply to bloom.

The first time I went to Akhmed and Haishet's house, I was ushered into the largest room in their compound, decorated with rugs on the wall and a bright chandelier hanging

from the ceiling. I was fed a rich meal of local dishes: meats—including rabbit, slaughtered in my honor from their own stock—vegetables, grains, and breads fragrant with garlic and herbs. Before the meal, the daughters of the family took me to their garden, a green expanse where tomatoes weighed down the vines. Haishet told me, "This is the girls' work; it's all theirs."

Over time, I learned that there are poorer and richer families and villages in Kabardino-Balkaria. But there is no mistaking the air of freshness and youth there. In Baliiko, days begin as early as four in the morning and finish at the sunset call to prayer. In between are work and family meals and cleaning, and resting to get ready for more work. There is silliness and teasing between family members and guests. Nothing that I had read before coming to Kabardino-Balkaria prepared me for this: the presence of everyday thriving.

Statistics on the region paint a dire picture. In important and rare survey research conducted in 2006, American scholars Theodore Gerber and Sarah Mendelson found that unemployment among young males in Russia's North Caucasus hovered around 30 percent (as compared with around 11 percent in the rest of Russia). In Kabardino-Balkaria, the figure was 35 percent. The majority of young men who responded to the survey said they did not earn enough money "to sustain themselves." A Chechen man who came by one day to buy cucumbers from Akhmed told me, "This generation is broken. If you knew what really happened in Chechnya, your head

would explode [with grief]. . . . Every family lost somebody." Poverty and disenfranchisement are very real, but they are not the whole story.

Walking the broad streets of Baliiko, you see children playing with a tire, someone loading hay or hollering at a cow, dogs napping in piles of dirt, boys and girls smiling at one another with bright eyes on the way to the bus

THOUGH STATISTICS PAINT a dire picture, there is an air of freshness and youth in Kabardino-Balkaria.

stop. But more than anything, a visitor sees straight dirt roads lined with benches and trees, and high walls punctuated by metal gates. No windows are visible from the street, no laundry hanging, no obvious domesticity. Normally, the gates are kept closed; they are only opened wide if there is a marriage or death. You would never guess that inside those gates there are sometimes up to three generations of a family.

Within these compounds Kabardians first understand the moral and social code they call *khabza*, which dictates how to behave rightly and with *guakach*, or "heart talent," and young Muslims learn to wash themselves, cover their heads, and turn to Mecca for their daily prayers. Garden work is done that can pay for children's educations or nicer clothes or Internet service. The money earned by old and young is pooled and, as needed, redistributed. Married couples with troubles come to elders for guidance; the frail, the ill, the young men without work or just back from obligatory stints in the Russian army, go there for healing. Survival and thriving, in homes such as these, are ensured by mutual obligations to family, to neighbors, and to the broader lineage clan.

One morning, while I sat writing in the compound courtyard, Akhmed put down a heavy sapling he was stripping to use as a pole in the garden, and told me the story of how he built his home.

He'd grown up in Baliiko. His aged mother—the source of his and his eldest daughter's strikingly pale skin, fair hair, and light green eyes—still lives two doors away. As a young man, he'd studied construction in a nearby town and had done so well that when he graduated, he had his pick of where to work, unlike many of his friends, who, in keeping with the centralized Soviet system,

same time, vigorously exploit them for resources, trade, and access to other empires.

Various strategies were used, including treaties and agreements, subjugation, and, when imperial armies were finally able to flush communities out of their high mountain homes, ethnic cleansing. In the 19th century, Russia attempted to clear the indigenous

FOR VARIOUS EMPIRES, the Caucasus Mountains have presented a quandary: how to keep peace with the people and also exploit them.

Circassian peoples from the mountains, driving many of them in a treacherous exile, to the regions that would become Turkey, Israel, and Jordan. The Circassians who remained behind were the ancestors of Akhmed and his family. In the 20th century, Stalin exiled four peoples of the Caucasus,

ended up in Central Asia or far to the north. Akhmed didn't choose a bigger, richer city, but Baliiko. Home.

He was given a stony plot of land at the edge of the village and had to build his compound from nothing. And so he did. First a small set of rooms for living. Then another, larger living room, and a wash room with running water and cheery dolphin tiles over a bathtub. Then a little building to cook in. First one barn, then others, to house chickens, sheep, rabbits. An outhouse. The large garden plot connected to his compound was built up in neat rows over the years. There, he grows radishes, cucumbers, tomatoes, and green onions; cherry and plum trees and berry bushes bloom. Over time, a full compound formed where this family, like all Kabardian families in the countryside, could live securely.

Home has a mighty pull in the Caucasus: Much of life consists of forming, maintaining, and enriching the world that abides behind the gate. For hundreds of years, empires dealt warily with the mountain peoples of the Caucasus. As the poet Mikhail Lermontov—the great 19th-century Romantic of the Caucasus—mused, “Savage are the tribes of these gorges; their god is freedom; their law is war.” For Persian, Ottoman, and—as early as the 16th century—Russian overlords, these mountains presented a quandary: how to keep the peace with entrenched and able mountaineers and, at the

accusing them of collaboration with the Germans in World War II: the Chechens, the Balkars, the Karachays, and the Ingush.

Today, Kabardino-Balkaria, like many parts of the Caucasus, is made up of people (and their descendants) who were forced to leave but came back, and people who managed to stay but now have kin living in faraway lands. Though home is a powerful vector pulling people toward courtyard, kitchen, and hearth, there's a lot of moving going on. There are the Meskhetian Turks who returned to the Caucasus from Central Asia after their exile in the Soviet period; Balkars, Chechens, and Ingush live in nearby towns. There are those who live and work in Russia's steppe country but return in the summers, hoping their children won't forget their language and ways so they can marry according to the customs of *khabza*. Many young men go to Moscow or St. Petersburg to work for a time and send home money; some go to Turkey for business, others to Egypt for religious education, returning with soft beards and polite handshakes and the new honorific of *effendi*, which means they can conduct religious rites in local mosques. There are those who return from holy pilgrimage to Mecca, now hajis and somehow changed.

In the Soviet period, Akhmed doubled his income by selling vegetables on a long trade route in his little green

Lada for weeks at a time, winding his way through Penza and Saransk in Russia, Tbilisi and Kutaisi in Georgia, Yerevan in Armenia. While I was in Baliiko, five of us piled into the Lada and traveled to the mountains for a day to trade cucumbers for potatoes with a Balkar family he has known for years. Sometimes, this family is too poor to give him the potatoes they owe. But Akhmed brings his cucumbers anyway. An open, entrepreneurial spirit has lifted his family—and many of the people in his region—above the post-Soviet poverty that afflicted so many of his Russian compatriots to the north.

Years ago, Akhmed began building what will be his crowning achievement, a two-story house he designed himself. This is what Kabardians do: They build houses for years, sometimes never finishing them. In village after village, half-built houses peek over the heights of the highest metal gates. Akhmed's half-house is currently used as a summer kitchen and for storage. Birds dart in and out of its gray, heavy structure, fighting with Haishet and her daughters over who will have control of nesting there. Akhmed has slowed work on the building lately. But there it stands, a concrete skeleton filled with the bright outlines of still-invisible futures.

Haishet, Akhmed's wife, has black hair, nut-brown eyes, and a curl in the side of her mouth, ready to give way to a smile. She is constantly singing songs in Russian, Kabardian, and Hindi. These last, my favorites, she memorized note for note from Bollywood movies as a girl. She recites silly poems and serious ones. (She recited to me one she'd written in Russian, "Don't choose a man for his beautiful eyes . . . but for a warm, good heart.") In Kabardian, the word for "spouse" translates literally as "head-together." Haishet is indeed the other head that meets and merges with Akhmed's own. From early in the

morning until bedtime, she cooks, visits with sick family and neighbors, and orchestrates the garden tasks as she keeps in mind the big picture: how to make a family function, a garden blossom, how to create order and hospitality.

Akhmed and Haishet's household swirls with feminine chatter and laughter. Kabardian girls are raised to be modest and demure, and to respect hierarchies of age and status. At the same time, the girls fill the house with irrepressible ebullience. The eldest, Asya, fair of face and voice and mind, recently married a young man from Baliiko. She lives with him in Turkey, and visited home last summer in a happy whirlwind of stories about her new life. There is Marita, the second daughter, warm and open and also just married. She lives in Egypt with her husband, who is studying Islam at a theological school; she telephones regularly and constantly exchanges text messages with her sisters. Zalina, raven haired like her mother, and with an easy stream of laughter, studies Kabardian at the university in Nalchik and loves the arts; Liana, with a sweetheart mouth and freckled nose, studies physics and possesses a sure, skeptical eye; lit-



Russia's North Caucasus region, home to dozens of languages and cultures, is one of the world's most ethnically complex places—and has a reputation for unrest.

tle Amina, who in her 17 years has bravely endured several operations to correct a twisted spine, now studies Arabic. Like the daughters in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, these girls are placed socially by their virtues and talents.

For each daughter, marriage will be the defining adventure of her life. How will her talents and skills reflect on her family? What will her mother-in-law—a powerful figure in her new life—be like? Will the young woman master the new home and bring pride to her husband and her family? Or will she suffer bullying and debasement? Has she chosen a man of character? Or will he, in time, beat her or drink or shame her in other ways? Young women are, in a sense, the truest ambassadors in Kabardian society.

THERE IS A KABARDIAN saying: “If someone strikes you with a stone, return the blow with bread.”

They link one family to the next, one courtyard to the next, one clan to the next. They make the leap into new homes, new lands. When they are first born, girls can bring tears to the eyes of mothers for not being sons; in life, daughters cast themselves into the world, permanent pilgrims.

And for the young women in Akhmed's family, there are other kinds of pilgrimage. Though Akhmed and Haishet never learned a great deal about Islam, each of their daughters is devoted to exploring the religion. Kabardino-Balkaria has been, historically, a Muslim—specifically Sunni Muslim—region. Most people there today call themselves Muslim, but they mean vastly different things by this label. Some focus on moral law, others on political identification, still others on the poetry and mysticism of sacred texts. The Soviet period effectively wiped out a great deal of the theological expertise on Islam. But this purge never managed to affect deep moral codes such as those of *khabza*, local in their orientation and wound into the symbol systems of Kabardian, a seemingly

impenetrable language. Religion is complex in Kabardino-Balkaria; being a seeker there is a highly dynamic affair.

Renewed spiritual interest in Islam is especially apparent among the youth in the Caucasus since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their parents look on their religious children with interest and sometimes a measure of puzzlement, wondering what this new devotion will mean. What are young people looking for? Order where there has been chaos in their lives? Holiness where there has been transgression? Belonging where there has been estrangement? Akhmed and Haishet—so respected, themselves, by their neighbors and kin—are supportive of their daughters' seeking. While I lived with the family,

Haishet would plan to serve dinner after the sunset call to prayer—as the first stars flickered into the twilight sky. In this way, she did her daughters the honor of letting them set the family clock.

The girls pray five times daily, though they do not attend mosque. Privately, they strive to understand what Islam is and what it should be. This is hard sometimes. They love to sing, but resist doing so because somewhere they heard that Islam forbids it. They are of open and warm natures, but they also wonder if they should be wary of those who are not Muslims. There are very few non-Muslims in their everyday world (only Russians and Ukrainians in the city, mostly), and the girls have learned at home to treat all strangers with kindness and respect. They love to dress in the latest fashions, but should they limit themselves to long skirts when they leave the house? Marita, now married, covers her head prettily with a scarf, but most young Kabardino-Balkarian women, including her older sister, do not. Here and there, the girls question the rightness or righteousness of certain customs of *khabza* that appear to contradict what they are learning. They seem to want simply to be good; religion offers new and dynamic aesthetics of holiness.

Amina listens to chanted verses from the Qur'an

all day long on her cell phone, an instrument that also allows her to make videos and send text messages to her sisters in Egypt and Turkey—as well as her other sisters in the kitchen—which she seems to do ceaselessly. Marita, head covered, looks jauntily into the camera in photographs taken in tourist spots in Egypt. Their cousin Lena, who is studying law, has Muslim friends from the Caucasus who live in Brooklyn; she's never met them, but they write silly letters back and forth all day while her cousins crowd around and comment. Asya, who had plenty of suitors before settling on her husband, said to her parents after one offer from a village boy: "I don't want a garden! I don't want a cow!" She was the first in her family to fly in a plane, and phoned them after she landed to tell of her amazing trip on the metal bird soaring to Turkey. From the inside of a village courtyard, the world opens wide.

In the Caucasus, the youth are moving. Akhmed's daughters reveal the bright side of this fact, but the sons of the Caucasus carry dynamism's heaviest social burdens. They are coming back from the army, looking for work. They are laboring in their family gardens and waiting for something better. A young man has lost a brother in Chechnya, maybe; maybe his family lost its wealth to some dark misfortune; he goes to Moscow to work, far from home; there is bad treatment there, sometimes. A young man who has no job, no wife of his own, is seen as somehow socially ill. But where will he turn for his cures? Religion? Drugs? Trouble? Where will his strong legs take him?

Just about anything could happen in Kabardino-Balkaria, even though it hasn't known the horrors that Chechnya and other parts of the Caucasus have. Ethnic strife could return, or spill over from other regions. Religious movements could morph into something frightening. The pressures of unemployment and other disenfranchisements could turn young people toward antisocial behavior. What is clear is that there are choices.

One day, after a particularly large job was completed in the cucumber garden, we loaded ourselves in the Lada with a lunch and drove for a couple of hours to a famous waterfall,

piling out of the car every several miles for photographs among the high, jagged rocks and cascading falls. After lunch, we started back home. The car moved slowly on the winding mountain road, thick with tourists and cows and donkeys and women selling wares and shish kebab. We were full and happy and getting sleepy.

We passed a Balkar boy on the road, walking alone, with a shaved little head—perhaps five years old. He looked up as the car passed, watching us with big brown eyes. Then, for no apparent reason but boyish mischief, he raised his hand in a rude gesture. What could this mean? Should something be done? Akhmed stopped the car with a jolt. Then he smiled and shifted into reverse.

We drew even again with the boy, and Haishet opened the car door on her side. In Russian—and looking straight at the child—she asked, "What is your name?"

The boy answered, assuredly, "Akhmed!"

Haishet gestured to her husband and said, "He's Akhmed too. Here!" She handed the boy a bag full of tomatoes and cucumbers, left over from our lunch. Balkar villages, high in the mountains, are often poor. Cucumbers and tomatoes are costly and rare. "You tell your father that this is from Akhmed to Akhmed!" She smiled.

The boy took the bag. Haishet shut the door and we drove off. On the long ride home, Haishet sang Russian and Hindi songs, her pure voice arching high to keep Akhmed awake.

Later, when we were home, I asked Akhmed about the Balkar boy. "What made you turn the car back?"

He said, "I don't know. He had an unhappy face. It was nothing for us, but something special for him. I wanted him to feel better."

There is a Kabardian saying: "If someone strikes you with a stone, return the blow with bread." When I lived in the north of Russia, in the small dying village, I learned another saying, "*Dobrom, dobro*," or "Good comes through good"—the elegant answer to how to solve the battle between good and evil: through good acts alone. In the Caucasus, the sounds of war are heard periodically. Young men die; cities and villages are destroyed. Without words and in perfect concert, Akhmed and Haishet fight back. ■

John Stuart Mill's “Very Simple Principle”

*Wherever there's a debate over gay marriage, free speech, or even smoking in public places, the arguments John Stuart Mill made in *On Liberty* are still in the thick of the action.*

BY CHRISTOPHER CLAUSEN

ALMOST EVERYBODY WHO CARES ABOUT SCIENCE or ideas knows by now that 2009 is the 150th anniversary of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, as well as the 200th anniversary of its author's birth. *Origin of Species* is rightly hailed by scientists and non-scientists alike as one of the foundations of modern thought, but it was far from the only important work that came off the presses in 1859. While we might well discount Samuel Smiles's mega-bestseller *Self-Help*, the eponym of a genre that flourishes like kudzu, the same momentous year brought forth John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, the most passionate treatise on human freedom ever written, and a perennially sacred scripture to the world's civil libertarians.

Like Darwin's great work, *On Liberty* bases its argument on a single elegant principle, the sort of all-illuminating idea that makes new readers wonder why they never thought of it themselves. In Darwin's case, the key is the evolution of living forms through

natural selection. With modifications accumulated over a century and a half of scientific progress, especially in the newer field of genetics, evolutionary theory as Darwin conceived it is now taken for granted by virtually everyone who works in science or accepts its most established findings. Those who still argue against it on religious grounds are far outside the educated mainstream.

Mill's intellectual reputation has followed a somewhat different course. Although he remains a revered figure among feminists and other reformers of many stripes, as well as one of the best known 19th-century philosophers, the argument that propels his most famous work remains as hotly debated today as it was in 1859. Its controversial status owes something to present circumstances—times of economic distress are proverbially unfavorable to individualism and its expression—but also to the uncompromising way Mill (1806–73) framed his position.

“The object of this essay,” he wrote near the beginning, “is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control,

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In San Francisco, protesters rally to denounce a California ballot proposition that banned same-sex marriage last year. Mill himself probably would have supported gay marriage, but advocates on both sides can find bases for their arguments in his ideas about social utility.

whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”

In his autobiography, Mill correctly predicted that “the *Liberty* is likely to survive longer than anything else that I have written.” Why was this little manifesto neither left behind as a relic in the history of political thought nor embraced as received opinion? The argument, if not the style, seems up to date while still attracting criticism from those on both right and left who want to compel people to take or avoid actions

because doing so would be better for them. “The only part of the conduct of anyone, for which he is amenable to society,” Mill insists, “is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”

Mill’s absolute statement, intended “to govern absolutely,” still sounds radical in a way that long-ago political assertions rarely do. Like its author, *On Liberty* is harder to pin down ideologically than its reputation suggests. Although Mill has often been described as the patron saint of liberalism, his dictum hardly sounds liberal by today’s standards. It would rule out requiring people to save for retirement or do a great many other things that modern democratic governments routinely demand of their citizens. On

the other hand, few conservatives feel quite comfortable with the notion that sovereign individuals can do whatever they want so long as they cause no harm (a slippery concept) to anyone else. Moreover, Mill explicitly excludes the operations of business from his principle on the grounds that business affects other people and can properly be regulated.

On Liberty could be called a libertarian book, but much of its argument runs contrary to what those who call themselves libertarians typically believe. Despite his ringing credo, Mill does not base his theory of liberty on the concept of innate, self-evident human rights that the Declaration of Independence immortalized and the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights later called "the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family." Nor does he make much reference to the enacted laws, royal grants, and judicial opinions from which English liberties were built up piecemeal over many centuries. His starting point is utilitarianism—the doctrine that the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the only rational foundation for morals and legislation. Modern utilitarianism had been largely formulated by the philosophical reformer Jeremy Bentham, of whom Mill's father, James, was a disciple. The younger Mill was brought up as an adherent and remained one throughout his life, though with growing ambivalence.

As a theory of ethics and government, utilitarianism retains considerable influence, which becomes understandable when one tries to think of a better basis for moral action than increasing happiness or reducing misery. As a foundation for individual liberty, however, it shows some major cracks. Suppose, for example, that a majority in Congress were to decide that mandatory health insurance would, on balance, increase Americans' happiness. Such a decision would seem to meet the utilitarian standard, but what happens then to the freedom of the individual not to be coerced for his own sake?

More damagingly, what if in 1859, also the year of John Brown's raid, an apologist for slavery had argued that the peculiar institution contributed to the greatest happiness of the greatest number so long as slaves were a relatively small minority? What could Mill, who (like Bentham) strongly opposed slavery, have

said to the contrary without temporarily abandoning utilitarianism in favor of an inherent human right to be free? Although Mill later published an essay called "Utilitarianism" in which he tried to reconcile its contradictions and his own, he never effectively answered such questions.

Mill defines liberty, or freedom (he uses the terms interchangeably), as the absence of coercion by law or public opinion, or even more simply as "doing what one desires." In mid-19th-century England, he felt, while legal limitations on speech and action were less onerous than they had been, public opinion had taken their place in many areas of life where individuals should be left to their own choices. One of Mill's lifelong concerns was "the tyranny of the majority"—the phrase was borrowed from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835–40)—which both men feared was a nearly inevitable consequence of democracy. It led, at best, to conformity, at worst, to a stifling of the originality and vigor a society needed to develop further—development of both the individual and his society being foremost among the advantages of freedom as Mill saw them.

The possibility that some individuals might choose not to develop, not to live up to what an idealistic intellectual regarded as their highest potential, was one that Mill acknowledged only intermittently and reluctantly. The general principle he lays out corresponds to "negative freedom," a concept later popularized by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, but the utilitarian Mill somewhat paradoxically argues that individual liberty is justified mainly by its social results. ("Positive freedom," in Berlin's words, means the specious liberty "to lead one prescribed form of life"—precisely what Mill opposed.)

Although his deeply Romantic feelings about freedom sometimes overpowered his utilitarian reasoning, he could never quite have endorsed the dictum of another Victorian liberal, Lord Acton, that liberty is not a means to a higher political end but is itself the highest political end. On the contrary, Mill asserts that "liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind

have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion.”

This utilitarian sense that freedom, far from being an entitlement, needs to be vindicated by its fruits, sometimes leads Mill to tie himself in knots. In the book's second chapter, “Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion,” he announces that three kinds of opinions exist: those that are true, those that are false, and those that are a mixture of the two. If a widely held belief is false, then an individual or minority that challenges it, however unpop-

ular their views may be, is doing a public service. Galileo's assertion that the earth orbits the sun, which he was forced to recant, is an obvious example, though one that Mill surprisingly fails to mention. He does point out that in the long history of superstition, persecution has often succeeded in quelling unpopular beliefs, and that complete freedom of speech is essential for truth to prevail over the almost gravitational pull of what we now call groupthink.

Hardly anybody would quarrel with this part of the argument. Similarly, where a prevailing belief is partly true and partly not, few would dispute that free debate offers the best possibility of improvement. But of course, the question of which category a particular opinion falls into—true, partly true, or demonstrably false—is the very point at issue. Should those scientists who believe that the evidence for man-made global warming is too uncertain to justify predictions of impending catastrophe be given a respectful hearing? By and large, schools and the news media have decided otherwise. Are the main precepts of contemporary feminism open to dispute? Not in most universities.

How to resolve cases in which the parties disagree irrevocably on the criteria to be applied, as in the claim that Darwin was wrong and God created all existing species either in six days or over a long span of millennia, is even

more controversial. Scientists are nearly unanimous that such ideas should not be taught in public schools even if evolution is given equal time, and the federal courts have consistently upheld them, though polls suggest that most Americans support teaching both points of view. (This sort of disagreement is the chief

MILL TIED HIMSELF IN KNOTS with his belief that liberty is not a birthright but something to be justified by its fruits.

reason Mill believed that governments should not run the schools.)

What Mill would have thought about the substance of this particular dispute is impossible to say, but his impassioned claim that even the most far-fetched views must be freely stated in order that the truth may be better understood sounds like a desperate argument for free speech. In many European countries, including Britain, making derogatory assertions about other races or ethnic groups is now a criminal offense. Statements whose legality (if not social acceptability) Americans take for granted can lead to jail sentences, not only in Europe but in Canada, where the question of what may lawfully be said about Muslims has become a point of heated contention. The British writer David Irving was actually tried and imprisoned in Austria in 2006 on a charge of denying the Holocaust.

If free speech has to be justified in hard cases by its social benefits, you have a situation very different from that in the United States, where even obnoxious expressions of opinion such as Irving's are protected because the First Amendment was based on an Enlightenment notion of inalienable individual rights. It would be difficult to argue persuasively that advocating incendiary racial views advances the interests of society as a whole, and therefore, by Mill's utilitarian criterion, easy to urge censorship. Yet one suspects he would have pleaded that such advocacy be tolerated, so long as it carried no incitement to vio-



“The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people,” wrote John Stuart Mill, shown here in 1873.

lence. Likewise, Mill probably would have parted company with those who condemn scientific inquiry into the explosive topic of the connections between race and intelligence, even though their arguments often rest on the utilitarian premise that such research can be socially harmful.

Mill runs into the same problems when he discusses “individuality as one of the elements of well-being.” Living in a time when, he believed, conformity was increasing, he valued diversity to the point of eccentricity and thought men and women should be free to live their lives as they chose so long as—returning to his original caveat—they caused no harm to others. An extensive literature has arisen on whether human actions can really be divided between what Mill calls “self-regarding” and “other-regarding” categories. A more basic difficulty is that, once again, he grounds individual freedom precariously on its social consequences.

It seems not to be enough that if individuals are free to pursue happiness in whatever way they wish, happiness will be maximized one person at a time. Instead, Mill feels a need to show that society—the ghostly abstraction that in other parts of his argument presents the greatest obstacle to liberty—profits collectively from the myriad choices of its members because it thereby avoids stagnation. In this tortured line of reasoning, liberty itself becomes a form of utilitarian social engineering. If it could be proved that rigidly stable societies were happier than innovative ones, as many social theorists have argued, then Mill’s rationale for the freedom of individuals would collapse.

Mill would have been on firmer ground had he based his “simple principle” on an inherent human entitlement to live as one chooses, but even in the land of Thomas Jefferson he would have found the same conflict between liberty and other values. As Berlin wrote in revisiting the same issues a hundred years after Mill, “The extent of a man’s, or a people’s, liberty to choose to live as they desire must be weighed against the claims of many other values, of which equality, or justice, or happiness, or security, or public order are perhaps the most obvious examples. For this reason, it cannot be unlimited.”

Since 2001 the war on terror has highlighted, as previous wars did, the multiple difficulties of balancing security and freedom. Reviling the Bush administration for shredding the Constitution and abolishing American liberties quickly became an academic and journalistic ritual, conducted many thousands of times with complete impunity. *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* won praise and prizes for revealing classified intelligence programs; no reporter or editor was ever prosecuted. More than one Hollywood director fearlessly portrayed the United States as a fascist dictatorship bent on enslaving the world for oil, and nobody ever got a knock on the door from the FBI. If Mill were still around, he would surely have something to say about the interrogation or detention of persons accused of being enemy com-

batants, the authority required to eavesdrop on suspected terrorist conversations, and other issues that remain conundrums for the new administration; but he would also observe that freedom of expression seems strikingly unimpaired.

Other anomalies in present-day America would look quite familiar to him. In Connecticut and Massachusetts (and briefly in California, until a 2008 referendum), court decisions have made it possible for two people of the same sex to marry—something new in history. If they want to visit a bar that caters to smoke-consenting adults and exercise their age-old freedom to light up, however, they have to find another state, one of the shrinking number where

smoking in enclosed public places is still allowed. As Mill shrewdly pointed out, whenever an old prejudice dies, a new one takes its place, as though the amount of tolerance in human nature were fixed and constant.

The Mormons, whose troubled history was widely publicized in 19th-century Europe, succumbed to government pressure more than a century ago and abandoned plural marriage, but male members of dissident sects in the Southwest who continue to practice it are still tried and imprisoned periodically. As a leading supporter of women's rights, Mill thoroughly disapproved of polygamy, and like most Englishmen he regarded Mormon revelations as fraudulent. Even so, he wrote, as long as women participated in plural marriages voluntarily, and "other countries are not asked to recognize such unions" or allow their own citizens to enter them, Mormons should be left free to practice their way of life in what was then the remote territory of Utah.

His conclusion sounds very much like one of the fragile compromises in effect nowadays to deal with same-sex marriage outside those states that recognize it. Opponents of same-sex marriage have often pointed out the inconsistency of arguing in its favor while continuing to criminalize another form of marriage that has been common in many cultures. Today Mill would probably urge that on both issues the law should follow where his principles led him in 1859, though he might well share the mixed feelings of

most Americans contemplating legal alterations to traditional monogamy.

I once had a teacher who was outspoken in her devotion to the American ideal of liberty, though whenever it threatened to become operational among her unruly charges, she would hastily point out that liberty is not license. She might just as well have added, as the British union leader Hugh Scanlon did in a 1977 interview, "Liberty in my view is conforming to majority opinion." Lord Scanlon (as he became) was on the far left politi-

**WHENEVER AN OLD prejudice dies,
Mill observed, a new one takes its place.**

cally, but his point of view is equally common on the right, as well as among people who are unconscious of having any strong political views at all. It coexists in complete harmony with the contemporary American style of mass individualism, in which vast numbers of people defiantly express their uniqueness by dressing alike, aggressively voicing the same opinions derived from television or the Internet, and buying the same products as everyone else in their peer group.

Mill would undoubtedly have felt that something essential had gotten lost, that the security of conformity was now masquerading as liberty. He might also have noticed with some chagrin that all these individualists firmly believe that a tyrannical force called society was oppressing them, and that their resistance, however hard an observer might be pressed to find it, was courageous and even heroic.

Nevertheless, he would probably have found these historical ups and downs unsurprising. Although an optimist about human possibilities, he rarely expected too much from human nature. America was the land of hope, immune to some European contagions, but in 1859 it was also the one advanced Western society that still practiced slavery. Of less importance but still worthy of criticism, he thought, was the moralistic intolerance of many Americans toward (among other things) alcohol and

displays of affluence that would have seemed quite normal in Europe.

As would Lord Scanlon, a century later, too many Americans in 1859 believed in individual freedom only when it did not violate what a British prohibitionist group called “social rights.” The prohibition of alcoholic beverages, which had so far made little headway in Britain but was now law in some American states, would be only one consequence of social rights. Other groups could use the same principle, Mill warned, against tobacco and other substances that were considered dangerous to their users. (In 1859, opiates and similar drugs were still legal in both Britain and America.) The theory of social rights, in effect an insistence that no one must ever behave in a way that offended others’ sensibilities, “acknowledges no right to any freedom whatever, except perhaps to that of holding opinions in secret, without ever disclosing them.” By uniting political power with the intimidating force of majority opinion, the growth of democracy encouraged just such threats to liberty.

Mill, like Tocqueville, was convinced that whatever its defects, America represented the future of Europe. Both freedom and the growing homogenization of modern societies were more advanced there than in Britain. Walt Whitman put the paradox squarely: “One’s-Self I sing, a simple separate person, / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.” Since Mill and Whitman’s time, not only democratic ideals, but most of the technology that simultaneously advances and retards individuality, from the automobile to the Internet, have spread from west to east. For most Americans, the car ranks with the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of personal autonomy. At first glance, nothing could be more liberating than the ability to drive wherever you choose, whenever you want. Yet few inventions have so increased government control over everyday life.

Governments build and own the roads, tax and regulate every machine that drives on them, bail the manufacturers out in hard times, license the drivers, install lights that peremptorily command us to stop or go, police the highways, and set mandatory standards for everything from speed to emissions to the age at which one can begin driving. As in other areas of life, some of the rules would strike Mill as incomprehensible. For example, in

most jurisdictions drivers and passengers are required to protect themselves with seatbelts, but in most states it remains perfectly legal to use a cell phone while driving, a practice that causes numerous fatal accidents every year. In spite of everything, most drivers feel free on an interstate highway so long as the traffic keeps moving.

Despite its apparent absoluteness, *On Liberty* refuses to fade away partly because its contradictions and confusions are much like our own. Is freedom really an end in itself, or a means to something else? What obligations does each individual have to all the other individuals who together make up a society? Governments in Britain, America, and other democratic countries are far more powerful and intrusive than they were in Mill’s day, sometimes interfering with liberty and at other times protecting it against other forces. The long-term trend toward bigger government shows few signs of reversing, to put it mildly. Yet on the whole, speech is freer than it was—although its equally important counterpart, the freedom to keep one’s secrets, has been greatly diminished by changing attitudes and technology—and so are many choices about how to live. Far more people possess the resources to exercise their liberties.

How would Mill balance his “very simple principle” with his earnest belief in cooperation and civic duty if he had to consider the prospect of mandatory national service for the young? How would he set about evaluating the tradeoffs between individual liberty and collective action as governments undertook to control something as comprehensive as the climate? Predicting which sides he would take in particular controversies is often impossible, but his searching ambivalence about freedom and the other good things that sometimes conflict with it may be the strongest reason that *On Liberty* remains such a living and urgent work.

Only the future, Mill felt, would show whether the democratic societies that he and many of his contemporaries saw as both desirable and unavoidable could overcome their tyrannical side effects. “It is then,” he predicted, “that the teachings of the *Liberty* will have their greatest value. And it is to be feared that they will retain that value a long time.” ■

Decline or Renewal?



The taller you stand, the farther you fall. That is one argument for the proposition that the United States is coming to the end of its reign as the world's dominant power. With its economy in crisis and its national debt mushrooming, the nation may in the future have little room for maneuver against less encumbered rivals. Yet, as our contributors make clear, it is easy to see more hopeful scenarios for postcrisis America.

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Can America Fail?

A sympathetic critic issues a wake-up call for an America mired in groupthink and blind to its own shortcomings.

BY KISHORE MAHBUBANI

IN 1981, SINGAPORE'S LONG-RULING PEOPLE'S Action Party was shocked when it suffered its first defeat at the polls in many years, even though the contest was in a single constituency. I asked Dr. Goh Keng Swee, one of Singapore's three founding fathers and the architect of its economic miracle, why the PAP lost. He replied, "Kishore, we failed because we did not even conceive of the possibility of failure."

The simple thesis of this essay is that American society could also fail if it does not force itself to conceive of failure. The massive crises that American society is experiencing now are partly the product of just such a blindness to potential catastrophe. That is not a diagnosis I deliver with rancor. Nations, like individuals, languish when they only have uncritical lovers or unloving critics. I consider myself a loving critic of the United States, a critic who wants American society to succeed. America, I wrote in 2005 in *Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust Between America and the World*, "has done more good for the rest of the world than any other society." If the United States fails, the world will suffer too.

The first systemic failure America has suffered is groupthink. Looking back at the origins of the current financial crisis, it is amazing that American society accepted the incredible assumptions of economic gurus such as Alan

Greenspan and Robert Rubin that unregulated financial markets would naturally deliver economic growth and serve the public good. In 2003, Greenspan posed this question: "The vast increase in the size of the over-the-counter derivatives markets is the result of the market finding them a very useful vehicle. And the question is, should these be regulated?" His own answer was that the state should not go beyond regular banking regulation because "these derivative transactions are transactions among professionals." In short, the financial players would regulate themselves.

This is manifest nonsense. The goal of these financial professionals was always to enhance their personal wealth, not to serve the public interest. So why was Greenspan's nonsense accepted by American society? The simple and amazing answer is that most Americans assumed that their country has a rich and vibrant "marketplace of ideas" in which all ideas are challenged. Certainly, America has the freest media in the world. No subject is taboo. No sacred cow is immune from criticism. But the paradox here is that the *belief* that American society allows every idea to be challenged has led Americans to assume that every idea *is* challenged. They have failed to notice when their minds have been enveloped in groupthink. Again, failure occurs when you do not conceive of failure.

The second systemic failure has been the erosion of the notion of individual responsibility. Here, too, an illusion is at work. Because they so firmly believe that their society rests on a culture of individual responsibility—rather than a culture of entitlement, like the social welfare states of Europe—

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Americans cannot see how their individual actions have undermined, rather than strengthened, their society. In their heart of hearts, many Americans believe that they are living up to the famous challenge of President John F. Kennedy, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” They believe that they give more than they take back from their own society.

There is a simple empirical test to see whether this is true: Do Americans pay more in taxes to the government than they receive in government services? The answer is clear. Apart from a few years during the Clinton administration, the United States has had many more federal budget deficits than surpluses—and the ostensibly more fiscally responsible Republicans are even guiltier of deficit financing than the Democrats.

The recently departed Bush administration left America with a national debt of more than \$10 trillion, compared with the \$5.7 trillion left by the Clinton administration.

Because of this large debt burden, President Barack Obama has fewer bullets to fire as he faces the biggest national economic crisis in almost a century. The American population has taken away the ammunition he could have used, and left its leaders to pray that China and Japan will continue to buy U.S. Treasury bonds.

How did this happen? Americans have justified the erosion of individual responsibility by demonizing taxes. Every candidate for political office in America runs against taxes. No American politician—including President Obama—dares to tell the truth: that no modern society can function without significant taxes. In some cases, taxes do a lot of good. If Americans were to impose a \$1 per gallon tax on gasoline (which they could easily afford), they would begin to solve many of their

problems, reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, dependence on Middle East oil, and the production of fuel-inefficient cars and trucks.

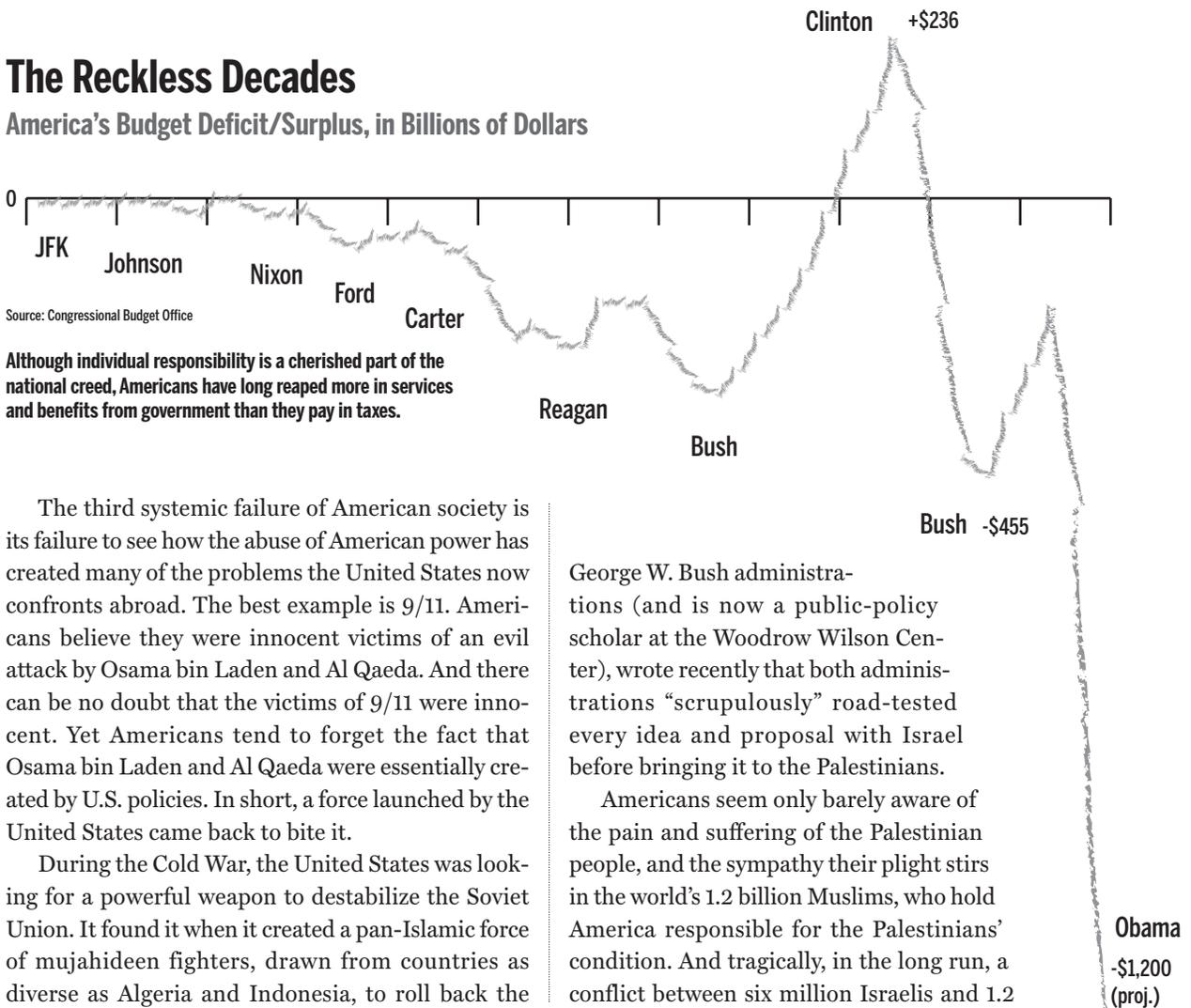
The way Americans have dealt with the tax question shows that there is a sharp contradiction between their belief that their society rests on a culture of individual responsibility and the reality that it has been engulfed by a culture of individual irresponsibility. But beliefs are hard to change. Many American myths come from the Wild West era, when lone cowboys struggled and survived supposedly through individual ingenuity alone, without the help of the state. Americans continue to believe that they do not benefit from state support. The reality is that many do.

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan after 1979. For a time, American interests and the interests of the Islamic world converged, and the fighters drove the Soviets out and contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time, however, America also awakened the sleeping dragon of Islamic solidarity.

Yet when the Cold War ended, America thoughtlessly disengaged from Afghanistan and the powerful Islamic forces it had supported there. To make matters worse, it switched its Middle East policy from a relatively evenhanded one on the Israel-Palestine issue to one heavily weighted toward the Israelis. Aaron David Miller, a longtime U.S. Middle East negotiator who served under both the Clinton and

The Reckless Decades

America's Budget Deficit/Surplus, in Billions of Dollars



The third systemic failure of American society is its failure to see how the abuse of American power has created many of the problems the United States now confronts abroad. The best example is 9/11. Americans believe they were innocent victims of an evil attack by Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. And there can be no doubt that the victims of 9/11 were innocent. Yet Americans tend to forget the fact that Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda were essentially created by U.S. policies. In short, a force launched by the United States came back to bite it.

During the Cold War, the United States was looking for a powerful weapon to destabilize the Soviet Union. It found it when it created a pan-Islamic force of mujahideen fighters, drawn from countries as diverse as Algeria and Indonesia, to roll back the

George W. Bush administration (and is now a public-policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center), wrote recently that both administrations “scrupulously” road-tested every idea and proposal with Israel before bringing it to the Palestinians.

Americans seem only barely aware of the pain and suffering of the Palestinian people, and the sympathy their plight stirs in the world’s 1.2 billion Muslims, who hold America responsible for the Palestinians’ condition. And tragically, in the long run, a conflict between six million Israelis and 1.2

billion Muslims would bring grief to Israel. Hence, Americans should seriously review their Middle East policies.

The Middle East is only one of many areas in which American policies have harmed the world. From U.S. cotton subsidies, which have hurt poor African farmers, to the invasion of Iraq; from Washington's double standard on nuclear proliferation—calling on non-nuclear states to abide by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty while ignoring its own obligations—to its decision to walk away from the Kyoto Protocol without providing an alternate approach to global warming, many American policies have injured the 6.5 billion other people who inhabit the world.

Why aren't Americans aware of this? The reason is that virtually all analysis by American intellectuals rests on the assumption that *problems* come from outside America and America provides only *solutions*. Yet the rest of the world can see clearly that American power has created many of the world's major problems. American thinkers and policymakers cannot see this because they are engaged in an incestuous, self-referential, and self-congratulatory discourse. They have lost the ability to listen to other voices on the planet because they cannot conceive of the possibility that they are not already listening. But until they begin to open their ears, America's problems with the world will continue.

It will not be easy for America to change course, because many of its problems have deep structural causes. To an outsider, it is plain to see that structural failures have developed in America's governance, in its social contract, and in its response to globalization. Many Americans still cannot see this.

When Americans are asked to identify what makes them proudest of their society, they inevitably point to its democratic character. And there can be no

doubt that America has the most successful democracy in the world. Yet it may also have some of the most corrupt governance in the world. The reason more Americans are not aware of this is that most of the corruption is legal.

In democracies, the role of government is to serve the public interest. Americans believe that they have

AMERICAN THINKERS and policy-makers have lost the ability to listen to other voices on the planet.

a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." The reality is more complex. It looks more like a government "of the people, by special-interest groups, and for special-interest groups." In the theory of democracy, corrupt and ineffective politicians are thrown out by elections. Yet the fact that more than 90 percent of incumbents who seek reelection to the U.S. House of Representatives are reelected provides a clear warning that all is not well. In *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), Barack Obama himself describes the corruption of the political system and the public's low regard for politicians. "All of which leads to the conclusion that if we want anything to change in Washington, we'll need to throw the rascals out. And yet year after year we keep the rascals right where they are, with the reelection rate for House members hovering at around 96 percent," Obama writes. Why? "These days, almost every congressional district is drawn by the ruling party with computer-driven precision to ensure that a clear majority of Democrats or Republicans reside within its borders. Indeed, it's not a stretch to say that most voters no longer choose their representatives; instead, representatives choose their voters."

The net effect of this corruption is that American governmental institutions and processes are now designed to protect special interests rather than public interests. As the financial crisis has revealed with startling clarity, regulatory agencies such as the Secu-

rities and Exchange Commission and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission have been captured by the industries they are supposed to regulate. And when Congress opens the government's purse, the benefits flow to special interests rather than the public interest. Few Americans are aware how severely

WHEN CONGRESS OPENS the government's purse, the benefits flow to special interests rather than the public interest.

special interests undermine their own national interests, both at home and abroad. The latest two world trade negotiating rounds (including the present Doha Round), for example, have been held hostage by the American agricultural lobbies. To protect 25,000 rich American cotton farmers, the United States has jeopardized the interests of the rest of the 6.8 billion people in the world.

Normally, a crisis provides a great opportunity to change course. Yet the current crisis has elicited tremendous delay, obfuscation, and pandering to special interests. From afar, America's myopia is astounding and incomprehensible. When the stimulus packages of the Chinese and U.S. governments emerged at about the same time, I scanned American publications in search of attempts to compare the two measures. I could not find any. This confirmed my suspicion that American intellectuals and policymakers could not even conceive of the possibility that the Chinese effort may be smarter or better designed than the American one.

An even bigger structural failure that American society may face is the collapse of its social contract. The general assumption in the United States is that American society remains strong and cohesive because every citizen has an equal chance to succeed. Because most Americans believe they have had the same opportunity, there is little resentment when a Bill Gates or a Sergey Brin amasses a great fortune.

This ideal of equal opportunity is a useful

national myth. But when the gap between myth and reality becomes too wide, the myth cannot be sustained. Today, research shows that social mobility in the United States has declined significantly. In the 2008 report *The Measure of America*, a research group, the American Human Development Project, notes that "the average income of the top fifth of U.S. households in 2006 was almost 15 times that of those in the lowest fifth—or \$168,170 versus \$11,352." The researchers also observe that "social mobility is now less fluid in the United States than

in other affluent nations. Indeed, a poor child born in Germany, France, Canada, or one of the Nordic countries has a better chance to join the middle class in adulthood than an American child born into similar circumstances."

Behind these statistics are some harsh realities. Nearly one in five American children lives in poverty, and more than one in 13 lives in extreme poverty. African-American babies are more than twice as likely as white or Latino babies to die before reaching their first birthday. People in more than half a million households experience hunger, data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture indicate. The education system is both inequitable and ineffective. In a recent international assessment of subject-matter literacy in 57 countries, America's 15-year-olds ranked 24th in mathematics and 17th in science. It should come as no surprise that though the United States ranks second among 177 countries in per capita income, it ranks only 12th in terms of human development.

More dangerously, many of those who have grown wealthy in the past few decades have added little of real economic value to society. Instead, they have created "financial weapons of mass destruction," and now they continue to expect rich bonuses even after they delivered staggering losses. Their behavior demonstrates a remarkable decline of American values and, more important, the deterioration of the implicit social contract between the wealthy and the rest of society. It would be fatal for America if the wealthy classes were to lose the trust and confidence

of the broader American body politic. But many of America's wealthy cannot even conceive of this possibility. This explains why so few of the Richard Fulds and John Thains have apologized with any sincerity for the damage they have done.

America's latest responses to globalization also reveal symptoms of a structural failure. Hitherto, Americans have been champions of globalization because they have believed that their own economy, the most competitive in the world, would naturally triumph as countries lowered their trade and tariff barriers. This belief has been an important force driving the world trading system toward greater openness.

Today, in a sign of great danger for the United States and for the world, the American people are losing confidence in their ability to compete with Chinese and Indian workers. More and more American politicians are jumping on the protectionist bandwagon (although almost all of them dishonestly claim they are not protectionists). Even the American intelligentsia is retreating from its once stout defense of free trade. Paul Krugman of Princeton and *The New York Times*, who won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2008, showed which way the wind was blowing when he wrote, "It's hard to avoid the conclusion that growing U.S. trade with Third World countries reduces the real wages of many and perhaps most workers in this country. And that reality makes the politics of trade very difficult."

At the moment of their country's greatest economic vulnerability in many decades, few Americans dare to speak the truth and say that the United States cannot retreat from globalization. Both the American people and the world would be worse off. However, as

globalization and global capitalism create new forces of "creative destruction," America will have to restructure its economy and society in order to compete. It will need to confront its enormously wasteful and inefficient health care policies and the deteriorating standards of its public education system. It must



Hard times make one thing more plentiful: wishful thinking about a retreat from foreign trade.

finally confront its economic failures as well, and stop rewarding them. If General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford cannot compete, it will be futile to protect them. They, too, have failed because they could not conceive of failure.

Every problem has a solution. This has always been the optimistic American view. It is just as true in bad times as in good times. But painful problems do not often have painless solutions. This is equally true of the current economic crisis. To deal with it, American leaders must add an important word when they speak the truth to the American people. The word is *sacrifice*. There can be no solution to America's problems without sacrifice.

One paradox of the human condition is that the

most logical point at which to undertake painful reform is in good times. The pain will be less then. But virtually no society, and especially no democratic society, can administer significant pain in good times. It takes a crisis to make change possible. Hence, there is a lot of wisdom in the principle, “never waste a crisis.”

Let me suggest for purely illustrative purposes three painful reforms the United States should consider now. The goal of these suggestions is to trigger a serious discussion of reform in American discourse.

First, there is a silver bullet that can dispel some of the doom and gloom enveloping the world and admit a little hope. And hope is what we need to get the economic wheels turning in the right direction. As Amartya Sen, another Nobel laureate in economics, said recently, “Once an economy is in the grip of pessimism, you cannot change it just by changing the objective circumstance, because the lack of confidence in people makes the economy almost unrescuable. You have to address the confidence thing, and that requires a different type of agenda than we have.” The completion of the Doha Round of world trade talks would go a long way toward restoring that confidence. The good news is that the deal is almost 95 percent cooked. But the last five percent is the most difficult.

One of the key obstacles to the completion of the Doha Round is the resistance of those 25,000 rich American cotton farmers. Millions of their poor West African counterparts will not accept a Doha Round agreement without a removal of the U.S. cotton subsidies that unfairly render their own crops uncompetitive. In both moral and rational terms, the decision should be obvious. The interests of the 6.8 billion people who will benefit from a successful Doha Round are more important than the interests of 25,000 American farmers. This handful of individuals should not be allowed to veto a global trade deal.

America’s rich cotton farmers are also in the best position to make a sacrifice. Collectively, they have received more than \$3 billion a year in subsidies over the last eight years, a total of about \$1 million each. If they cannot make a sacrifice, who in America can? Where is the American politician with the courage say this?

America has a second silver bullet it can use: a \$1

per gallon tax on gasoline. To prevent the diversion of the resulting revenues into pork barrel projects, the money should be firewalled and used only to promote energy efficiency and address the challenge of climate change. Last year, the United States consumed more than 142 billion gallons of gas. Hence, even allowing for a change in consumption, a gas tax could easily raise more than \$100 billion per year to address energy challenges.

This sounds like a painful sacrifice, one that America’s leaders can hardly conceive of asking, yet it is surprising that Americans did not complain when they effectively paid a tax of well over \$1 per gallon to Saudi Arabia and other oil producers when oil prices surged last year. Then, the price at the pump was more than \$4 a gallon. Today, with world oil prices hovering around only \$40 a barrel, the price per gallon is around half its peak price. A \$1 tax would still leave gas relatively cheap.

This brings me to the third silver bullet: Every American politician should declare that the long-term interests of the country are more important than his or her personal political career. As leaders, they should be prepared to make the ultimate political sacrifice in order to speak the truth: The time has come for Americans to spend less and work harder. This would be an extraordinary commitment for politicians anywhere in the world, but it is precisely politics as usual that led the United States to today’s debacle.

The latest budget presented to Congress by President Obama offers a great opportunity for change. Instead of tearing the budget apart in pursuit of narrow interests and larding it with provisions for special interests, Congress has the opportunity to help craft a rational plan to help people at the bottom, promote universal health care, and create incentives to enhance American competitiveness.

I know that such a rational budget is almost totally inconceivable to the American body politic. The American political system has become so badly clogged with special interests that it resembles a diseased heart. When an individual develops coronary blockages, he or she knows that the choices are massive surgery or a massive heart attack. The fact that the American body politic cannot conceive of the possibility that its clogged political arteries could lead to a catastrophic heart attack is an indication that American society cannot conceive of failure. And if you cannot conceive of failure, failure comes. ■

Last Man Standing

It's no cause for celebration, but the global financial crisis shows why the United States remains the indispensable nation.

BY TYLER COWEN

THE UNITED STATES HAS MILLIONS OF HOMES IN foreclosure, high unemployment rates, a failing General Motors, numerous insolvent banks, and unprecedented deficits. It is possibly on the brink of a second Great Depression. Yet the U.S. dollar has experienced one of its most rapid appreciations in history. Last summer, when it took about \$1.66 to buy a euro, American tourists in Paris gasped at the price of a Coke. Now, a stronger dollar means that a euro can be had for something like \$1.26.

What's up?

America's relative decline in global affairs has been foretold many times, but it never quite seems to happen. Today, the rest of the world is looking to the United States to pull it out of a recession (or depression), even though many countries also blame us for having started it. The truth is this: The worse things go for the world as a whole, the more the United States gains in relative power and influence. Maybe that sounds counterintuitive, but it has happened before. After the first and second world wars left many other parts of the world in devastation, the United States rose in relative stature. It fell in standing, at least arguably, during the years between 1989 and 2007, when the world as a whole was enjoying unprecedented prosperity and liberty.

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In the terminology of financial economics, the United States is, relatively speaking, a countercyclical asset. It's not that America profits from bad times or war but that we have a relatively greater capacity to limit our losses and eventually bounce back. We are "built to fail," so to speak.

Its size is one reason why the United States has such a robust polity and economy. In bad times, international cooperation tends to break down, which increases the relative influence of larger economic and political units. Smaller countries, such as Belgium, are generally more dependent on international trade than the United States. And in truly dire situations, military power counts for more—and the United States accounts for almost half of the world's defense spending. Even when military power is not wielded directly, it is understood that America cannot be intimidated easily.

The United States also has a more favorable demographic position than many other nations. The populations of Japan and many European countries may be cut in half over the next 30 or 40 years, mostly because families in those places, if they form at all, have fewer children. China, with its one-child policy, is in one of the toughest positions of any country. If nothing changes, the unimaginable will happen, and within a few decades China's population will begin a rapid decline. The United States is not expected to shrink in population, in part because its immigrants are having children at relatively high rates.

Finally, while Europeans and Asians commonly think of the United States as a kind of "baby state," in reality we have one of the oldest and most durable nation-states. With the

possible exception of the Civil War period, the United States has a continuous and consistent governmental history running back to 1789 or, by some accounts, to the colonial governments of the 17th century. American political and economic institutions have been time-tested in a way that few other countries can claim. If you doubt this, compare America's multicentury record with the discontinuous and tumultuous political history of France, China, or Russia.

Amid the flood of alarming commentary, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that the financial crisis has underscored the continuing strength of American global influence. Although the United States has been the epicenter of some of the eco-

responsible" member nations. And for almost 20 years, Germans have been paying higher taxes to reconstruct eastern Germany and ease the transition from communism. It's not a citizenry looking to fund more bailouts, especially in a major recession.

But now German citizens are told that they may have to bail out the Austrian banking system and possibly the government of Ireland, while paying additional subsidies to Hungary and perhaps to other eastern European nations as well. Further down the line, Spain, Italy, and Greece, which have all lost their premier AAA credit rating, may require some form of financial aid. The Germans might look to spread this burden around Europe, but there are few places to turn. France and the Netherlands could chip in, but the hat cannot be passed very widely. The United Kingdom had one of Europe's leading economies, but now it is one of the most financially vulnerable nations. You can think of London as a large hedge fund

AMERICANS TALK ABOUT institutions that are "too big to fail." In parts of Europe, it's more apt to speak of those "too big to be saved."

nomics problems, it has exhibited enviable economic and political stability, at least compared with Ireland, Spain, and most of Asia, to name just a few examples. The dollar's appeal as one of the world's safe havens has been redoubled by the recognition that the flexibility of the U.S. economy gives it a greater capacity than many others to adapt to shocks.

It has become increasingly clear that the problems in European governance are severe—and I am referring to the wealthier nations, not Bosnia and Albania. The European nations are tied to each other through the European Union and the euro, but they don't have a good method for making collective decisions in contentious times.

Consider Germany. In January, its industrial production plummeted at an annualized rate of about 7.5 percent. Could Germany now be the financial savior of Europe? When Germany joined the Eurozone, the 16-nation bloc that embraces the euro as its sole currency, the country's politicians promised voters that they would never have to pay for the profligate policies of the "less

based on Europe, specializing in speculative financing of major European projects. After finance, the two next-biggest British exports—pharmaceuticals and tourism—are solid but hardly economically impressive.

Part of the problem for Europe is that its biggest banks are very large relative to the economies of their host nations—in other words, its component national economies are too small. The major Austrian banks, for instance, have loans to eastern Europe equal to as much as 70 percent of their country's gross domestic product. The two largest Swiss banks, taken together, have assets four times larger than Switzerland's GDP. Even in the relatively large economy of Germany, the liabilities of Deutsche Bank have been measured at 80 percent of German GDP. These banks have grown too large to be handled or bailed out by their national governments. In the United States we talk about institutions that are "too big to fail," but in many parts of Europe it might be more apt to speak of those "too big to be saved."

In the United States, with its relatively unified system of governance, the Federal Reserve can simply print money to fund bailouts, and even if that is an ugly alternative, the government's ability to act underpins the credibility of the sys-



Concerns about unrest and political instability in China are growing as economic woes cost more workers like this man in Shaanxi Province their jobs.

tem as a whole. The European Central Bank (ECB) is explicitly banned from creating more euros for the purpose of bailing out national banks. The Swiss central bank could print money for financial bailouts, but the prospect of the resulting inflation and rapid depreciation of the Swiss franc makes this a very unappealing choice, especially for a country that has marketed itself as a haven of financial solidity. And a weaker franc would only make it harder for Switzerland's big banks to meet their obligations, many of which they must pay in other currencies.

Ideally, the ECB should take on a stronger role as lender of last resort in Europe, but the EU does not make such decisions easily. Fundamental alterations would be needed in the bank's charter, which was written precisely to make change very difficult, in part because Germany, with its historically rooted dread of inflation, insisted on biasing the ECB toward conservatism and inaction. Even if the bank's charter were amended, the member countries would surely impede any action by bickering over who would pay the bills for new initiatives. If the ECB is going to run bailouts, decision making will have to become a lot

more fluid, and that would require Germany to give up control and the bank to move away from price stability as its sole objective. Since the EU member states have not been able to agree on a reform of the Union constitution, it's not obvious they will be able to agree on changing the bank's charter. They've had time—and good reason—to do so, yet have taken no serious action.

It's not impossible that the ECB could at some point simply assume emergency powers and run a bailout on very short notice and without legal authorization. Recall that the Bear Stearns and AIG emergency deals were done by the Fed over weekends. At that point the question would be whether other EU procedural safeguards would maintain their credibility, or whether skeptics within the EU, such as Denmark, would feel that their precious veto rights were no longer being protected.

The relatively weak nature of the ECB reflects some of the problems of coordinating the actions of a number of smaller countries in difficult times. In the United States, coordination between the Fed and the Treasury Department is taken for granted, and Congress is usually

willing to back up those institutions. The Troubled Assets Relief Program bailouts passed in 2008 not because Congress thought they were a good idea, but because Treasury secretary Henry Paulson and Fed chairman Ben Bernanke told the legislators that they had better sign on or the sky would fall. This sort of bossiness won't solve every problem, but the European nations have no comparable process, and no comparable centralized power base capable of responding quickly and effectively to crises. In the final analysis, no one knows who is responsible for the European economies. If the Chinese are investing in the United States and they have a concern, they can pick up the phone and call Bernanke or the current Treasury secretary, Timothy Geithner, and receive a consistent answer, backed by a single national executive, a single legislature, and, ultimately, the world's most powerful military. You could say that when it comes to major foreign investors, the United States has a better "customer service department" (we at home call them politicians) than Europe or, for that matter, Asia.

It's not widely recognized that Europe, because of its systemic weaknesses, already has required implicit bailouts by the United States. European financial institutions are prominent on the list of the bailed-out creditors of AIG, the insurance company that, in effect, was nationalized by the Fed in 2008. Few U.S. financial regulators wish to stress this point, but one reason why the Fed rescued AIG was that it knew that European regulators could not handle the fallout from an AIG collapse.

It's commonly claimed that the economic future of the world lies in Asia, but that vision too has taken a beating lately. The export-based economies of Japan and Taiwan are contracting more rapidly than those of the United States and Europe. The two countries have not suffered banking crises, but their economies are dependent upon the expectation that global consumers will have more money to spend every year. Their economies are in this manner implicitly leveraged—arguably, more leveraged than the U.S. economy—even apart from whatever explicit levels of debt they hold. The value of Japanese and Taiwanese commercial investments depends on the ability of customers overseas to continue borrowing and spending money—and that doesn't look like a very good bet right now.

One of the most important economic questions is what will happen with China. The Great Depression of the 1930s came to China last, and that pattern could be repeated today. So far, the country's economic growth rate has dropped from 12 or 13 percent annually to a measured rate of about six percent. But given that there are doubts about the honesty of the Chinese government in reporting economic data, the true growth rate may be much lower than that. In any case, the Chinese real estate boom has ended, and massive layoffs are occurring in the export sector. Chinese financial and commercial enterprises are not very transparent, double-digit growth allowed many unsound or speculative enterprises to stay afloat ("The recession reveals what the auditor missed" is one version of an old saying), and the economic expectations of the Chinese citizenry have become high. The nation's leaders fear social unrest. No one knows if Chinese economic and political institutions will hold together in tougher times.

On the positive side, China has the luxury of high savings rates and an immense stock of accumulated foreign assets, especially U.S. government securities. If China survives the current crisis more or less intact, like the United States it will emerge as a large nation with its status and influence enhanced.

In the long run, the fortunes of nations depend on many factors, not just their response to a single financial crisis. Nonetheless, such reactions reflect strengths and weaknesses that show up in other areas of economic and social policy. Despite the separation of powers built into the American political system, U.S. political institutions have, by global standards, proven themselves unusually decisive and effective at critical times. The ability to react swiftly to new challenges is an underlying theme in American history, whether we consider the early missions to the moon, the breakthroughs of the civil rights movement, the pioneering of environmental regulation, or the pro-market Reagan reforms of the 1980s.

It's a paradox that it's the large, diverse nations such as the United States that have the greatest ability to maneuver in a crisis and turn on the proverbial dime. That's good for us, of course, but if a new American Century is about to be born, it's another sign that the world faces very serious challenges. And that's not a cause for anyone to cheer. ■

The Pessimist Persuasion

Throughout history, many intellectuals have been willing to write their society's obituary long before the game was up.

BY ARTHUR HERMAN

"America has become the symbol not of a strong, assured, confident giant, striding into the future—but of a society that now stands more than ever as a warning of where [defying] nature merely to become richer and richer without limit can lead to. . . . We wonder if the whole course of America has not been based on a false premise. Can she change that course—or is she inevitably heading for some ultimate disaster?"

These sobering words were not written under the shadow of the recent Wall Street collapse or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. British journalist Christopher Booker penned them in 1980, in an essay titled "Dear America: Meditation on a Lost Dream."

Later that year, Ronald Reagan was elected president. If Booker had predicted instead that America was on the brink of a turnaround from the malaise of Vietnam and the Carter years and in less than a decade would win the Cold War, he probably would have been branded a hopeless crank—not least by himself.

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Yet many elites continue to make a fetish of pessimism, rejecting those who disagree as Pollyannas who are out of touch with reality. However, our taste seems insatiable for Pollyanna's opposite, the professional pessimist. Books predicting the decline and death of civilization have been a staple for publishers almost from the moment the printing press was invented. As a cultural attitude, declinism goes back even further than that.

To whom can I speak today?

The iniquity that strikes the land

It has no end.

To whom can I speak today?

There are no righteous men

The earth is surrendered to criminals.

This is the authentic voice of professional pessimism from wall hieroglyphics in a New Dynasty tomb in Egypt dating from 2000 BC.

Today the purveyors of doom, gloom, and decline are back in force. After the Dow plunged 40 percent last year, Elizabeth Wurtzel, the author of *Prozac Nation* (1994), bade farewell in *The Wall Street Journal* to America as a significant force. *The Washington Post* asked, "Is Capitalism

Dead?” In February, *Newsweek* supplied the answer: “We Are All Socialists Now.” George Soros says that the times we are living through can only be compared to the collapse of the Soviet Union, while his archrival, Rupert Murdoch, announces that “nations will be redefined” as a result. That the American Century is finally, definitively over is the one proposition on which pundits Kevin Phillips, Peggy Noonan,

ica’s emergence as a global power, seem absurd. Yet Adams remains a respected, even admired figure—not least for his scathing critique of the America of his day. In fact, one might argue that declinism’s appeal is strongest when it bears the least resemblance to reality.

However, as historian Jacob Burckhardt (himself a confirmed pessimist) pointed out more than a century and a half

ago, if there is one defining characteristic of Western civilization, it is its capacity for renaissance. No other civilization has shown quite the same ability to hit the refresh button on its own principles and ideals and to find a spark for renewal where others only see darkness and chaos.

Just as the Black Death set

A CENTURY AGO, HENRY ADAMS predicted the planet itself would become extinct due to a steady loss of heat and energy—a kind of reverse global warming.

Pat Buchanan, and Fareed Zakaria, as well as the editors of *The Nation*, can all agree. Late last year, Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times* summed up our future in the title of a new book, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*. Now he can add Broke to his dismal list.

Ten years ago, I wrote a book called *The Idea of Decline in Western History*. In researching it, I discovered how often experts and pundits made virtually the same predictions when America’s economic fortunes took a turn for the worse: in 1873, again in 1893, again in 1929, and again in the post-Vietnam, stagflationary 1970s. The same gloomy forecasts of overpopulation, ecological collapse, and global economic disaster that permeated Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968), Barry Commoner’s *The Closing Circle* (1971), and the Club of Rome’s *Limits of Growth* (1972) also pervaded the works of the pessimists of the Gilded Age. “Two more generations should saturate the world with population,” Henry Adams wrote not long after the great financial panic of 1893, “and should exhaust the mines.” At that point, he said, the demise of capitalism would be inevitable. By 2025, Adams predicted, the planet itself would become extinct as the result of the steady loss of heat and energy in accordance with the inexorable laws of thermodynamics—a kind of reverse global warming.

In retrospect, these words, written on the eve of Amer-

the stage for the Renaissance, and the Great Depression for the Greatest Generation, so it would be foolish to assume that America or capitalism has suddenly, and in an unprecedented fashion, lost its capacity for self-renewal and recovery this time.

Of course, all societies feel the pain of circumstances at some point, whether in a major financial panic such as the Wall Street crash of 1929 or following a military catastrophe, such as France’s defeat in 1940. A reaction of gloom and pessimism may be inevitable. However, once the declinist mindset has taken hold, actual economic and geopolitical trends and possibilities no longer matter. In ancient Rome, 17th-century Spain, France in the 1930s, and even the United States at critical junctures in its history, we can see how an obsession with decline distorts people’s perception of reality and actually undercuts the basis of self-renewal.

Above all, the spread of pessimism has repeatedly triggered a flight to a secular savior, namely, the all-powerful state—often with catastrophic consequences. The real danger in our current exposure to the pessimist persuasion is that this will happen again.

The first sign of this inclination toward declinism is a pervasive sense that our best days are behind us, and that none in the present live up to the heroic standards of the past. This cultural theme has appeared at all times and in all societies, but ancient Rome remains the classic example of how this assessment can result in a strange bifurcation. Quite early in the Roman Republic a disaffected intellectual

elite became convinced that their country's days were numbered, even, ironically, as Rome was steadily expanding its empire, influence, and wealth.

What sociologist Daniel Bell in a 1969 book deemed “the cultural contradictions of capitalism,” namely the tendency of societies to spawn an intellectual class that revolts against the very society that makes its existence possible, describes perfectly the revolt of Rome's best and brightest more than two millennia earlier. It was the original *trahison des clercs*. Indeed, for more than 450 years, from the age of Pompey and Caesar in the first century BC until the Western Empire's last days, educated Romans would express amazement at the rampant corruption around them (against which they themselves were, of course, immune), and would live out their days convinced that their compatriots had sold out the sterling values of Rome's founding fathers.

The record is breathtaking, yet strangely familiar. In Julius Caesar's day, the historian Sallust chose Rome's final defeat of Carthage, in 146 BC, as the moment when “fortune turned unkind” against Rome. Before that time, Sallust declared, Romans had been better and nobler: “To such men no toil came amiss; no ground was too steep or rugged, no armed foe too formidable; courage taught them to overcome all obstacles.” Their only goals in life were honor and glory; “at home they lived frugally and never betrayed a friend.”

However, as Rome's empire grew, “growing love of money, and the lust for power which followed it, engendered every kind of vice.” To Sallust, the history of Rome was the story of the republic's steady, inexorable slide from virtue to



Roman intellectuals began bemoaning the decline of their civilization several centuries before the Visigoths brought down the Western Empire with the sack of Rome in AD 410, shown here in a 1654 painting.

vice. Another celebrated writer, Livy, composed his entire history of Rome from its foundation by Romulus and Remus, in order to reveal to his fellow citizens “the decay of the national character . . . until it reaches these days in which we can bear neither our diseases nor their remedies.”

Livy's successors painted imperial Rome as a cesspool of depravity. The historian Tacitus made his reputation tracing a steady trickle-down effect of corruption from emperors such as Tiberius, Nero, and Caligula that he said had triggered a decay of private morals and a blank passivity among Rome's leading families in the face of encroaching tyranny.

The irony is that by the time Tacitus died (c. AD 117), this supposedly decadent and declining Roman Empire had grown to more than 2.2 million square miles and contained 120 million inhabitants, with a network of 50,000 miles of stone-laid roads connecting its far-flung frontiers to its capital. New citizens from parts of the empire such as Greece, Syria, Africa, and the Danube basin brought fresh energy to the Roman Senate and government. Under the Caesars, Roman citizens enjoyed an unparalleled prosperity, until a combination of barbarian invasions, demographic

national bankruptcy (the first of several) in 1597.

The material losses of the Armada were made up in less than two years. In economic terms, Spain's bankruptcy made its future recovery and prosperity a priority to its European creditors, including its enemies. However, the Armada's failure and economic downturn "struck a society that was conditioned to success," as historian J. H. Elliott notes. "Spaniards felt an urgent need to explain to themselves what was happening to them." The explanation they found was *declinación*.

"LIFE IS NO LONGER a contest of great minds for great ends, but a pot house squabble," lamented Ralph Waldo Emerson.

An entire intellectual industry was born. The so-called *arbitristas*, the first modern policy wonks, flooded bookshops with their various and sometimes bizarre proposals for reversing the nation's supposed decline. A standard formula, then as now, was to bemoan

decline, and overtaxation finally doomed the Western Empire in the fourth century AD.

Yet the empire's finest minds found it all meaningless and empty, compared to an idealized image of their ancestors. When Rome did run into problems beginning in the third century AD, its best and brightest reacted with resigned despair. Many, such as Saint Augustine, turned to Christianity for consolation. Having lost its elite's loyalty at the height of material success, the Roman Empire could not count on their help when disaster really came.

The Roman example illustrates how a belief that the best days are behind us can take hold in the midst of success and prosperity. Seventeenth-century Spain shows how, in the face of genuine adversity, the world's greatest superpower can become fixated on the question of decline.

Hapsburg Spain in the 16th century ruled a series of dominions from Asia to the Western Hemisphere, enjoying an unprecedented flow of wealth from its American possessions that financed the largest and most professional army and navy in the world. Then Spain suffered a check on its global ambitions by the rising powers of England and Holland, epitomized by the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and a

failure to uphold society's founding ideals, in Spain's case those of the golden age of Ferdinand and Isabella, of Columbus and the conquistadors, when supposedly all Spaniards had led sober lives and practiced traditional religious and martial virtues without letup.

"Our Spain in all things reached its highest degree of perfection . . . in those times," wrote one celebrated writer, Martín González de Cellorigo. But then wealth flowing from the New World "corrupted the good customs of men" and made them lazy and complacent. "Idleness has destroyed the greatest empires in the world," wrote another *arbitrista*. Now it was destroying Spain.

"Never," wrote Luis Valle de la Cerda in 1600, "has Spain as a whole been as ruined and as poor as it is now." Yet foreign visitors could find no evidence of any decline. They found a nation as rich and as powerful as ever: able to wage war simultaneously on Holland and England, as well as threaten war with France, while still importing bullion from the Americas in the tens of millions of ducats. Still, the perception of decline became so widespread in the early 17th century that even the king, Philip III, began to speak of the days "when my monarchy, as everyone agrees, began to decline"—a decline that he, like other politicians, found himself powerless to stop.

It is not just imperial cultures that can be obsessed with this sense of decline from their ancestral stan-



Spain quickly recovered from the material impact of the Armada's defeat in 1588, but the psychological impact on Spain's leaders was profound.

dards. The same phenomenon surfaced in the United States in the 1840s and '50s, when there was a general sense that the young American republic, if not actually in decline, had already seen its best days. The Founding Fathers, it was believed, had snatched away all the glory; there were no great crises or achievements left for Americans as they entered an age of malaise and "the forcing-house of mediocrity," as James Russell Lowell put it.

"We can win no laurels in a war of independence," Daniel Webster proclaimed in 1843. "Earlier and worthier hands have gathered them all." Ralph Waldo Emerson agreed. "We have no prizes offered to the ambition of virtuous young men," he wrote. "Life is no longer a contest of great minds for great ends, but a pot house squabble" that would only attract the basest temperaments. To the author of an article published in *Putnam's Monthly* in 1855, it was clear that the heroic virtues of the Founders were dead. The American beau ideal, he wrote, "has passed away from the most of us, as nothing but a dream. We yield ourselves, instead, to calculation, money making, and moral indifference."

Yet in five years, the moral and political landscape of America would be dramatically transformed by secession and civil war. A generation that had been made to feel

that heroic achievement was beyond them, that "nothing more is to be made of them," in Lowell's dismissive expression, would launch the United States in a new epic direction and give birth to an age of unprecedented growth and prosperity.

The American example reveals that the idea that a society has lost its way and forgotten the standards of its forebears—the idea of "declension"—does not automatically spell doom or paralysis. On the contrary, it can serve as a spur to new creativity and a sense of resolve, as successive Great Awakenings in American history have demonstrated. However, when a society's genuine successes are redefined as moral decline, especially its economic successes, then recent setbacks can serve as the justification for a major restructuring of priorities, and the ideology of decline takes on a new relevance.

The Romans blamed their supposed moral rot on their wealth and luxury. In the Spanish case, many *arbitristas* blamed their country's defeats on its reliance on the very thing that was the main source of its power and wealth, the discovery of the New World. The *arbitristas* insisted that the easy money that resulted from a massive influx of gold, silver, and other commodities from the Americas, along with the emigration of Spaniards to the New World in search of

that easy money, had ruined Spain's economic future. "The poverty of Spain has resulted from the discovery of the Indies," wrote one author. "Our Spain has its eyes so fixed on trade with the Indies . . . that it has given up trading with its

nature," as Ronald Takaki, the dean of multicultural historians, wrote. It had taken Americans on "an irrational quest for power and destruction" throughout their history. Takaki's solution was what he termed a "revolution from within," substituting a new American history that undermined the

"myths" that America was built on equality of opportunity (instead of white solidarity) or individual free enterprise (instead of corporate capitalism)—in short, the version of American history largely presented in our schools and universities today.

A GOOD PESSIMIST not only can make past successes look like failure, but can present catastrophe as condign punishment for past sins.

neighbors." Others blamed the riches of the Indies for everything from the decline of domestic manufactures to growing inequality of incomes.

A good pessimist not only can make past success look like failure, but can present catastrophe as condign punishment for past sins, and anticipate impending collapse with hopeful, almost gleeful expectation. In the 1970s America endured stagflation, unemployment, high gas prices, and a steady loss of status in the world. Like the Spanish *arbitristas*, American intellectuals decided that their country's slide was payback for the sins of Vietnam and Watergate—not to mention the American obsession with economic success. Just as an earlier generation blamed the Great Depression on the excesses of the Jazz Age and the "perils of prosperity" of the 1920s, a generation of New Left puritans made the same charge against the American dream of the 1960s. American middle-class affluence, Beat Generation poet Allen Ginsberg wrote, made "insane demands" on us. Virtually every argument about the evils of material prosperity rehearsed today by advocates of global warming and "green alternatives" was invented in the 1970s by authors such as Barry Commoner and Jonathan Schell, who anticipated the collapse of Western developed economies with a sense of grim satisfaction.

Multiculturalism sprang from the same impulse, as the necessary corrective to what was seen as Western civilization's record of exploiting "subaltern" cultures and peoples, which had doomed it to obsolescence in a more inclusive future dominated by the Third World. At the heart of the triumph of the West was a drive that was "demonic in force and

However, even this revolution from within, which specifically seeks to undermine traditional sources of American self-confidence and renewal, is still not enough to trigger a full-scale internalization of the idea of decline. That would require the last fateful element: a search for hidden forces and conspiracies that are accused of being the causes of disasters and decline.

The "paranoid style" is not the exclusive property of Left or Right. However, it is a perennial adjunct of the pessimist persuasion. The belief that current disasters are the result of manipulation by unseen forces itself depends on a belief that society has reached a point of decline where it can no longer resist them. In the Roman case, it was easy to blame the woes of empire on Christians and other "outsiders." In the Spanish case, Jews, heretics, and foreigners of all kinds took the brunt of responsibility. However, the most graphic example of how the fear of decline and the paranoid style can combine to paralyze a democratic society has to be France in the 1920s and '30s.

The experience of World War I had left France victorious but exhausted, while the war's aftermath exposed the country's economic and political weaknesses. France during the Great Depression never suffered the kind of mass unemployment that America did; nor did it experience the kind of hyperinflation and economic chaos that beset the Weimar

Republic. Yet both Left and Right assumed that France's normal institutions had failed beyond the point of recovery.

Each blamed the other for that failure, or blamed outside conspiratorial forces, including Freemasons, Jews, and the Americans. The Right railed against the "decadence" of the Third Republic, while the Left decried the *embourgeoisement* of society and longed for "authenticity," which included glorifying violence and revolution. On both sides it was generally assumed that France was controlled by a secret syndicate, called variously the 100 Families or the "wall of money," *le mur d'argent*, against which France's normal political institutions were helpless. The politically committed yearned instead for what one observer, Arthur Koestler, called "a new human order," which would overthrow the old decadent system.

It was this fear of "the decadence of France," the title of a popular 1931 pamphlet, that drove young intellectuals to the political extremes. "The only way to love France today," wrote Pierre Drieu La Rochelle in the 1930s, "is to hate it in its present form." Those who did not choose fascism, as Drieu La Rochelle did, chose pacifism or, in Jean-Paul Sartre's case, communism. For the rest, there was only resignation to decay. "We are victims of what we are, and France, in particular, [is a victim] of her advantages." Thus Paul Valéry in June 1940, when defeat was staring the nation in the face.

When war came, both the Left and the Right in France were ready to lose in order to blame the other for the defeat. When Marshal Pétain learned of the French army's collapse, he remarked with grim satisfaction, "This is the result of 30 years of Marxism." André Gide tried to be more philosophical: "[France] was already falling to pieces to such a degree that perhaps the only thing that could save her was, is perhaps, this very disaster in which to retemper her energies."

The result was Vichy. France in defeat

turned desperately to a savior, Pétain, and watched as the entire French government and economy were restructured in order to purge the legacy of the past and settle old scores. Instead of rebirth, the French found themselves trapped in a self-destructive collaboration with their country's enemies. Instead of regeneration, Vichy brought humiliation and a legacy of dishonor with which France is still grappling, more than half a century later.

All too often this is where the pessimist persuasion winds up. Convinced that society has lost its bearings, that its greatest strengths are actually weaknesses, and that those weaknesses have exposed society to manipulation by unseen forces, people find themselves considering desperate measures, including turning to the state as the one institution able to contend with the magnitude of the crisis.



Remember Japan as No. 1? *Time's* 1981 cover reflects the then-popular belief that "the Japanese model" would render American-style capitalism obsolete.

This was how Romans ended up stripping power from their civilian government and handing it over to a military junta led by the Emperor Diocletian (AD 284–305). Diocletian and his successors did manage to shore up Rome's unstable frontiers and hold off the barbarian threat, but at the cost of a massive tax increase that crippled the empire's economy. People complained during Diocletian's reign that there were more tax collectors than taxpayers; the land tax consumed one-third of a typical farmer's gross output. The Diocletian state destroyed the natural roots of loyalty to the Roman mission. A new, otherworldly empire, that of Christianity, won that loyalty instead.

In Spain, it was a prime minister, the Duke of Olivares, who sought to overcome Spain's decline with massive tax increases and a centralization of imperial authority. By 1640, the result was regional revolts across the Spanish Empire. Instead of reversing Spain's decline, Olivares plunged the Spanish economy into a three-century abyss—all the while still blaming his failure on Spain's *declinación*. By 1700 Spain had been reduced to the sick man of Europe, a crippled empire over which the other European powers fought for spoils.

Is America in 2009 on the verge of this kind of vicious downward spiral? Are we on the verge of believing that only the power of the state can save us from ourselves?

Perhaps not. At the start of the current financial crisis, in October, a Rasmussen poll found that 59 percent of respondents agreed that government was not the solution to our current woes. This February, after a 3,000-point drop in the Dow and soaring unemployment numbers, Rasmussen found that the percentage still agreeing with that position was unchanged.

Of course, some of the warning signs of the self-fulfilling prophecy of decline are there. Still, the pessimists make it easy to underestimate the ability of the American people and markets, instead of government, to reverse direction and overcome failures. America is still the most innovative and creative economy in the world. (Great Britain, by contrast, has not developed a new industry since World War II.) And contrary to Thomas Friedman and others, the economic playing field is not flat—and

won't be for many decades in the future.

Even if this recession deepens, America is not about to be replaced by China or India as a financial and economic colossus. On the basis of gross domestic product per capita, China's economy ranks roughly 100th in the world, far behind those of Mexico and Brazil, much less the United States. Even if China maintains its present rate of growth (wildly improbable in this global recession), it will take at least 30 years before its standard of living matches that of the United States, and it will be a long time before it becomes as important an economic or financial market for the rest of the world. In fact, the current financial crisis, which has sent the world flocking to the relative safety of U.S. Treasury bonds, demonstrates just how vital the United States remains as the financial mecca of the global system.

There are other reasons to be optimistic. During the past year I have had the privilege of touring one of our most advanced naval vessels, USS *Mesa Verde*, and interviewing the officers and crew of another, USS *New York*. Anyone meeting these young people, or returning Iraq veterans, has to be impressed with their level of dedication, competence, and physical and mental fitness, and their positive expectations about the future—not just their personal futures in service to their country, but the nation's future. All are high-school educated, drug free, and trained in how to work with others to accomplish major tasks, whether fighting terrorists or delivering relief aid to people in the most remote places on earth.

No wonder American businesses seek out former junior officers for management positions, or that American voters are eager to elect them to Congress and statehouses. They want to bring that self-confident competence to bear to help solve the nation's problems. World War II gave us the Greatest Generation, which transformed America in the soaring decades that followed; there is every reason to believe that the generation now serving in Iraq and Afghanistan will do the same.

In 1980 Christopher Booker waved a sad farewell to the American dream. On the eve of Ronald Reagan's election and the longest stretch of American economic growth in history, that prediction of decline seemed a little premature. The same may be true of today's predictions that America's day is done; that is, *if* the pessimist persuasion doesn't take hold. ■

In ESSENCE

REVIEWS OF ARTICLES FROM PERIODICALS AND SPECIALIZED JOURNALS HERE AND ABROAD

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SOCIETY

He Told Us So

THE SOURCE: “Moynihan Redux: Legacies and Lessons” by Douglas S. Massey and Robert J. Sampson, in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Jan. 2009.

THE LATE DANIEL PATRICK Moynihan strode through public life as a supremely influential sociologist, professor, ambassador, senator, and adviser to four presidents, but as an author he experienced a uniquely dark hour. It occurred not because he wrote badly, but too well. Buried in the subcabinet depths of the Labor Department and vying for President Lyndon B. Johnson’s attention in 1965, Moynihan summoned his most vivid prose to build a case for a public-works program to create jobs for all able-bodied black men.

Moynihan argued that the Civil Rights Act, passed a year earlier, was insufficient to overcome the black poverty that was the legacy of the “most awful” slavery the world had ever known. This inheritance had produced a “crisis” rooted in the “Negro American” family, a “tangle of pathol-

ogy” characterized by illegitimate births and fatherless households. “The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut,” wrote Moynihan. In a society that “measures a man by the size of his paycheck,” black men were deprived of jobs and their manliness.

When these and other passages of

the so-called Moynihan Report were leaked to the press, the message was wrenched out of context and boiled down to a few sensational words: “humiliated” black males and family “pathology” caused by female-headed households. Moynihan was “pilloried not only as a racist, but a sexist to boot,” sociologists Douglas S. Massey of Princeton and Robert J. Sampson of Harvard write in their introduction to 12 scholarly articles in *The Annals* on the legacy of the report.

The leak had “entirely dysfunctional” consequences. The crucial



Liberals pilloried Daniel Patrick Moynihan after his memo on black family “pathology” leaked.

moment for jobs legislation passed without significant action. Along with his purple prose, Moynihan's sober facts were consigned to the realm of the politically incorrect. His erstwhile liberal friends branded him a bigot, President Johnson disowned the report, and scholars concluded that tackling "combustible racial issues" was dangerous. Researchers began to play up the strengths of the ghetto and the virtues of single motherhood, and to play down crime. The question of whether the behavior of poor people might contribute to their poverty became almost taboo, except among a generation of conservative scholars who linked it, not to slavery and joblessness, but to personal weaknesses and failings.

The Vietnam War began to consume the federal budget. Without money to help with black unemployment, government officials settled on the expedient of affirmative action, according to the authors. Then, when the economy faltered in the 1970s,

affirmative action pitted aspiring blacks against working-class whites, creating a backlash against the civil rights movement and a conservative realignment in politics.

Moynihan's core argument in that "prefeminist" era, say Massey and Sampson, was that whenever males lack reliable jobs, adequate wages, and access to social status, single parenthood will become more common, with terrible side effects on women and children. But such arguments were soon considered beyond the pale. As unemployment deepened in the 1970s and '80s, national and state lawmakers responded, not with employment programs but with crackdowns on crime. By the early 2000s, more than one in three young black noncollege-educated men was in jail. Out-of-wedlock births, one-quarter of the total in the black community in 1965, had shot up to two-thirds. Economic inequality had increased, with the poorest 20 percent of the population becoming

relatively poorer. Urban economies had changed as manufacturing declined and low- and semi-skilled introductory jobs disappeared. Poverty had become more concentrated in the inner cities.

Forty-four years after the Moynihan Report predicted that the "tangle of pathology" that created so many fatherless families would get worse unless the government acted, the "long-standing problems of poverty, segregation, discrimination, and family instability now unfold in a very different societal context," which is characterized by hyper-inequality, mass incarceration, and large-scale immigration, even as many blacks have achieved success.

Toward the end of Moynihan's life, lawmakers proposed tackling "family pathology" not with jobs programs but with federal benefits to promote marriage. Asked to comment, he said, "If you think a government program can restore marriage, you know more about the government than I do."

EXCERPT

Stockpiles of Leisure

There were fewer than 200 calendars for sale in 1976. Today there are more than 6,500 from which to choose. Part of this proliferation is due to the fact that we once got the bulk of our calendars for free, from banks, insurance companies, and other businesses eager to keep their phone numbers in front of their customers' eyes throughout the year. But it's not as if those businesses were giving away more than one copy to each customer, or offering them in multiple formats. . . . Clearly, we are far more concerned about the passing of

each day, each week, each month, than our carefree calendar-lite counterparts in the 1970s. . . .

Where does all the time go? we find ourselves wondering. How can we get it back, claim our due, slow down that imperceptible but steady leak of seconds that undermines us all? Through calendars, of course, those clunky, low-tech, but reassuringly tangible stockpiles of unused time, complete with bonus photographs of fluffy kittens and lightly clad Olympics sports babes. Forget cryogenics—if we slap a poster-sized calendar on the wall, and keep a novel-thick one on our desks, and maintain various backup editions in other strategic locations, we just might live forever.

—GREG BEATO, a contributing editor to *Reason*, in *The Smart Set* (Jan. 11, 2009)

SOCIETY

Bye-Bye Books?

THE SOURCES: "People of the Screen" by Christine Rosen, in *The New Atlantis*, Fall 2008, and "Apocalypse in the Stacks? The Research Library in the Age of Google" by Anthony Grafton, in *Daedalus*, Winter 2009.

THE 500-YEAR-OLD TECHNOLOGY of the book may be poised for assisted living, or maybe even perpetual care, writes Christine Rosen, senior editor of *The New Atlantis*. New communications technologies have irrevocably altered the act of reading itself, with "information foraging" replacing solitary deep reading. As computer users scan the screen for content, their eyes zooming across and down the page in search of a missing fact or useful nugget, an entirely different mental process is occurring than in traditional contemplative reading. Reading as we knew it for five centuries may be approaching the status of an "increasingly arcane hobby."

Television and computers are creating a two-class society: people of the screen and people of the book, according to Rosen. Research suggests that screen people are generating excessive amounts of dopamine, one of the natural neurotransmitters produced by the brain. In some studies, too much of this important but incompletely understood neurochemical has been shown to block activity in the pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain that controls judgment and measures risk. Screen people, in other words, may literally be thinking differently from book people.

There's another important difference between screen people and book

Television and computers are creating a two-class society: people of the screen and people of the book.

people. In reading a traditional book, the reader has to enter the world the author has created, to succumb to the story, perhaps become "attuned to the complexities of family life, the vicissitudes of social institutions, and the lasting truths of human nature." But with a screen, Rosen writes, readers become users, the masters. They aren't required to step outside themselves.

Online books, or devices that facilitate their use such as the Kindle, the most popular portable electronic reader, don't provide the same sensation as reading from a paper volume, Rosen says. Kindle browsing is a lot slower for her, and she finds the device's many instant search features distracting. It's particularly unsuited to reading to children. Anybody who tried to read *Goodnight Moon* to a three-year-old on a Kindle would almost certainly find the toddler more interested in the buttons and the scroll wheel than the story of the great green room itself.

Some of the most avid promoters of handheld devices over printed books dream of linking, manipulating, annotating, tagging, highlighting, bookmarking, and translating boring old works to create a new universal library. A generation raised to crave the stimulation of the screen might simply stop reading the paper book in favor of "fractured, unfixed information." Rosen fears that literacy, the most empowering

achievement of our civilization, will be replaced with a "vague and ill-defined screen savvy."

For Anthony Grafton, a professor of history at Princeton, a shift from book learning to screen skimming raises hard questions about the future of the ultimate citadel of the book, the research library. Ironically, research libraries designed to prepare new generations of scholars to maneuver in both the virtual and printed words face a financial crisis caused by the vast increase in the availability and cost of books, journals, and databases, and a space crisis caused by the flood of print materials. Princeton's Firestone Library adds enough new printed matter every year to fill more than a mile of shelves.

Research libraries, central to college campuses, seem to have diverged toward one of two stereotypes: "reactionary temples of leather and vellum" or ultramodern pseudomalls stocked with banks of humming computers. Most libraries have elements of both, but even untrue stereotypes matter, Grafton says, because they frame much of the current thinking and writing about the future of libraries.

It's time for collaboration among administrators, scholars, and librarians to bring the "collective intelligence of the swarm to bear on the hive it used to inhabit, and still needs," according to Grafton. Intelligent and collaborative design of new and renovated research libraries could incorporate both the old and the new. Well-designed ateliers of scholarship might just pull humanists, scientists, teachers, and students back into an environment where serious reading can occur.

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Establishment Restored

THE SOURCE: "The Return of the Best and Brightest" by R. R. Reno, in *First Things*, Feb. 2009.

THE DRAMATIC ACHIEVEMENT of the November election was not the selection of the nation's first African-American president, but the return to power of the Establishment—the northern, urban, and well-educated elite. Not since the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 has America chosen a president so closely associated with the Ivy League.

President Barack Obama holds two Ivy degrees, from Columbia and Harvard Law, and he taught at the near-Ivy University of Chicago Law School. His inner circle is replete with degrees from the colleges in the

upper reaches of the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings. No DePaul or Purdue grads, old-fashioned labor leaders, ward politicians, or in-laws with dubious resumé's, writes R. R. Reno, features editor of *First Things* and professor of theology at Creighton University. The new administration's credentials and achievements recall Franklin D. Roosevelt's Brain Trust, Dwight D. Eisenhower's advisers, and JFK's Whiz Kids.

The new president's early appointments included chief economic adviser Larry Summers (Harvard), Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner (Dartmouth), and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (Yale Law). To be sure, some of Obama's later picks did not fit the

pattern, such as Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood (Bradley University, in Peoria, Illinois), but the tone had been established.

Four decades after antiestablishment sentiment was whipped up against the "sound men" from "good backgrounds" who bungled the war in Vietnam, the Establishment has been restored, Reno says. The old Establishment went through a crisis when the paragons of trim physiques and well-disciplined lives stood accused in the 1960s of sustaining a social system that was morally indefensible: excluding blacks, maintaining a quiet anti-Semitism, keeping women in their place. Elite universities adopted new standards to build a new Establishment: carefully selected, diverse, merit driven. Credentialed "good men" from "good families" were replaced by "good men and women" from "good schools" who had won "important internships."

The Obama presidency "seals



The Ivy League elite who staffed the Kennedy administration and ran the Vietnam War gave the Establishment a bad name . . . until now.

EXCERPT

Cowardly Confessors

The “My Bad” syndrome, the act of being gutsy enough to accept responsibility for doing what one has unarguably done, is a cunning though ultimately cowardly way of deflecting attention away from the fact that no one else could possibly be held responsible for the screwup. It is similar to George Washington’s disingenuous declaration: “Father, I cannot tell a lie; I chopped down the cherry tree.” By declaring that the idea of telling a lie was morally repugnant to him, young George immediately diverted attention away from the fact that chopping down a cherry

tree, a far more serious offense, was not repugnant to him, and from the fact that nobody else could possibly have been fingered for this act of gratuitous arboreal terrorism. The whole point of false courage is to move the conversation away from one’s failings to one’s strengths: I am an idiot, I am a jerk, I am a lecher, I am a scoundrel, but at least I am man enough to admit it. Now, let’s turn the page.

The primary objective of false courage in this context is to accept blame without accepting punishment. . . . Of course, this tried-and-true, buck-stops-here brand of false courage is only one strain of an increasingly virulent social ill. . . . If it weren’t for false courage, most politicians would have no courage at all.

—JOE QUEENAN, writer and humorist,
in *In Character* (Winter 2009)

the ascendancy” of the reformed Establishment. Anyone familiar with the institutions from which the new elite have graduated knows what to expect: the “gentle progressivism” of the old WASP leaders. Ivy League universities themselves show what an Establishment-led administration will be like, Reno writes. Every leftist agenda has a sinecure, while institutions protect their academic predominance. When challenged, they guard the status quo. Establishment regimes govern from the middle. “Expect moderate economic interventions and no fundamental changes in foreign policy,” he says.

Centrist does not mean evenhanded. “The power of new money is always a threat,” Reno says. “It’s not an accident that the 1950s and 1960s, decades of Establishment dominance, saw high marginal tax rates” (to sepa-

rate the nouveaux riches from their money). Establishments are suspicious of grassroots movements and populism. Almost all forms of populism today are socially conservative. Universities, foundations, and the judiciary are the Establishment’s favored instruments for directing social change.

President Obama himself is the most difficult member of the new administration to slot into this picture, according to Reno. He seems to have been more influenced by his church than any president in memory, and he resisted being used as a permanent ornament of a university. Maybe, Reno writes, he’s not a résumé-building achiever, but an ambitious political animal in Establishment clothes. After all, he’s been known to engage on a regular basis in what the new elite sees as the ultimate personal sin: smoking.

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

In Praise of Trimmers

THE SOURCE: “Trimming” by Cass R. Sunstein, in *Harvard Law Review*, Feb. 2009.

THE VESTIBULE OF HELL IN Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1308–21) was populated with ancient representatives of what Cass R. Sunstein considers an underappreciated class, the “trimmers.” Dante wrote that a very large group of miserable souls had been sent to Hell because they had lived “without infamy and without praise.” Today they might be denigrated as lukewarm in their allegiances, wishy-washy in their politics, flip-flopers in their beliefs. Sunstein, a law professor recently appointed director of President Barack Obama’s Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs—

in effect, the government's regulatory czar—springs to their defense. Not only is trimming pervasive, he says, it is also honorable.

Trimmers inhabit both the legal and political realms. They are part of a great group averse to extremes. One type of trimmer is the compromiser. "Seeking to reduce social conflict, attempting to avoid public outrage, and believing that the middle position is presumptively best, compromisers try to give something to both sides," Sunstein writes.

Then there are preservers. They come in two varieties. One group attempts "to discern what they believe, on the basis of their own independent inspection, to be the deepest and most valuable parts of opposing positions." Other preservers are "concerned, not with their own independent judgments but with what is thought, by those who hold opposing positions, to be deepest and most important."

Compromisers and preservers can both be defended, according to Sunstein, but he advances a feeble justification of split-the-difference compromisers. He says that sometimes a risk-averse judge might choose to compromise because the hazards of either side seem dangerous, or because he or she might not have the time or capacity to think carefully—or reach a firm conclusion—about which position is right.

But Sunstein bursts with more compelling arguments—some based on U.S. Supreme Court

cases—in support of trimmers of the preserver persuasion. A "prominent example" of this kind of trimming is Supreme Court justice Lewis Powell's opinion in *University of California v. Bakke* (1978), which held that rigid quota systems for college admissions are unconstitutional, but that race may be treated as a "factor" in admissions decisions.

Trimming is a decision-making process, Sunstein says. Almost every judge has to "trim"

Not only is trimming pervasive, it is also honorable.

at least a little by deferring to past decisions. Indeed, he asks, "isn't any sane position a form of trimming?" On its surface, he says, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which invalidated laws that allowed "separate but equal" schools, doesn't seem like an instance of trimming. But perhaps the Court trimmed after all, he reasons, by not striking down laws that sounded neutral on the surface but had discriminatory consequences.

Trimming is different from minimalism—in which a court rules on the narrowest possible question, leaving the broader questions for another day. Sunstein is almost dismissive of Chief Justice John C. Roberts's view that "if it's not necessary to decide more to dispose of a case, in my

view, it is necessary not to decide more." Even so, Sunstein says that sometimes minimalism is defensible when the area of law is novel, judges lack information, or private and public institutions do not require a clear settlement.

But trimmers, Sunstein writes, believe that "in law as well as in life, it is sometimes best to settle on a course of action rather than to rest content with a series of narrow, ad hoc decisions." Minimalism can create confusion, leaving government and the public unsure of how to proceed.

Sunstein acknowledges that trimming is sometimes wrong. The Supreme Court's "separate but equal" decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) was a consummate act of malign trimming. It authorized segregation, allowing the provision of separate public services and facilities for blacks in order to placate segregationists in the South and elsewhere. And trimming can also go awry in the hands of decision makers who blunder or are confused, or when extremists deliberately exaggerate their position so that the only remaining middle path actually veers sharply in one direction.

"By their very nature, trimmers hope to reduce social conflict, to show a kind of civic respect, and to ensure that no side feels excluded, humiliated, or hurt," Sunstein says. Trimming is not always proper, he believes, but there are powerful arguments in its favor, and sometimes—despite its bad rap—it's simply the best thing to do.

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

First Steps With Iran

THE SOURCE: "The Republic and the Rahbar" by Gary Sick, in *The National Interest*, Jan.-Feb. 2009.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA'S proposal to open a diplomatic dialogue with Iran, despite the initial lukewarm response of Iran's leaders, could signal a momentous change in what Gary Sick calls "the poisonous domestic political climates in both Tehran and Washington." But, Sick cautions, "Iran is neither the most dangerous nor the most pressing problem to be faced by the new administration" in the region. That dubious distinction goes to the wobbling nations of Pakistan and Afghanistan; the ongoing war in those two states already carries the unsettling possibility that a stockpile of nuclear weapons could fall into the wrong hands.

Bucking the conventional wisdom about Iran, Sick describes the country as merely "a midlevel power with a largely unpopular and dysfunctional government headed by a firebrand populist president with limited power."

While Sick acknowledges that Iran's influence in the region has grown tremendously in the past seven years, he believes that has

mostly come about as an unintended consequence of U.S. actions. In 2001, the United States attacked and dispersed Iran's worst enemy to the east, the Taliban, and then in 2003 it brought down Iran's worst enemy



Ahmadinejad's baiting of Israel and America masks his limited power and unpopularity in Iran.

to the west, Saddam Hussein, which led to the creation of a friendly majority-Shia government in Baghdad.

What of Iran's development of nuclear technology? Sick calls that threat "overblown," basing his assessment on the fact that the country has only a single, non-functioning nuclear power plant, even though it commenced

its nuclear program in the mid-1980s. "According to U.S. intelligence," Sick reports, "Iran terminated its tabletop experiments with nuclear weaponization in 2003, after Saddam was defeated and the Iraqi threat to Iran was eliminated." The International Atomic Energy Agency continues to monitor and inspect the 6,000 low-capacity centrifuges Iran possesses, and even though the country produces low-grade uranium, its leaders publicly declare nuclear arms to be anti-Islamic. Although the IAEA remains suspicious of Tehran's nuclear intentions, it "has found no credible evidence of a nuclear weapons program in Iran," says Sick.

Even if the conventional wisdom about the danger Iran poses is right, the time will never be better for Washington to engage with Tehran, argues Sick, a senior research scholar at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs. Ahmadinejad is expected to face a serious challenge when he runs for reelection in June, and talking with the United States can only improve his shaky position. During his time in office, Ahmadinejad's practice of handing out "liberal quantities of cash and funding for public projects" has drained funds from Iran's coffers, already depleted by falling oil prices. His erratic policies have also "isolated Iran internationally, driven away foreign investment, and tempted external

military intervention.” He has largely ignored the Rahbar (Supreme Leader), Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who will have a major say in who is permitted to run against Ahmadinejad in the upcoming election.

Sick believes that the Obama administration should reaffirm a tenet of the U.S.–Iran Algiers Accords of 1981, that the U.S. will not “intervene, directly or indirectly, politically or militarily, in Iran’s internal affairs,” an assurance that would greatly ease tensions between the two countries. It should also get behind a proposal floated during the Bush administration to establish an interest section in Tehran, “in effect a consular office in Iran staffed by U.S. diplomats.” Neither of these gestures “will resolve the major differences between the United States and Iran concerning [Iran’s] nuclear program, its military support for organizations like Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, and its opposition to an Israeli-Palestinian settlement.”

Those issues are unlikely to be resolved before Iran’s presidential election anyway. But Iran can fill a vital role in “maintaining stability and calm during a period of transition,” Sick says, as the Obama administration begins to draw down troop levels in Iraq while increasing them in Afghanistan. (The current schedule calls for U.S. forces to leave Iraqi cities and suburbs by the end of June of this year, and for all combat forces to be out of the country by August 2010.) By taking small

diplomatic steps now, the United States can lay the groundwork for Iran to play a responsible role in regional politics, Sick believes.

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

Magnifying American Power

THE SOURCE: “Reshaping the World Order” by Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, in *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 2009.

THE INSTITUTIONS THAT GOVERN international relations, from the United Nations Security Council to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime, are about as well suited to their tasks as a 1950s Philco TV would be to screening the next Olympics. Dartmouth political scientists Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth call the architecture of the world’s international institutions a “relic” of the mid-20th century, out of sync with today’s challenges of rising nations, terrorism, financial instability, and global warming.

In a 2007 speech, Barack Obama himself named two of the agencies that critics think most urgently need reform, the United Nations and the World Bank. The UN Security Council, for example, is led by a different one of 15 nations every month, with important decisions subject to the absolute veto of any one of the five winners of World War II. The World Bank, which helps developing countries, always has a president from the United States.

America, far and away the

richest and most powerful country in the world, has the means to lead needed reforms, and strong motives to do so. “Overall, international institutions channel the United States’ power and enhance its security,” argue Brooks and Wohlforth. Such institutions can perform tasks—think inspecting nuclear facilities, gathering intelligence about Islamic terrorism, or enforcing free-trade rules—that would be much harder for the United States to do alone. Even building coalitions of the willing is an inefficient approach to national security, the authors say, because each potential partner must be recruited with a different set of carrots and sticks.

The Bush administration’s unilateralism hurt American prestige, but the damage can be reversed, Brooks and Wohlforth believe. Even some nations that oppose the United States think that its “leadership is natural under the circumstances or the best that can be expected.”

In fact, the Bush administration was a “strikingly successful” international leader when it put its mind to it. For instance, it pushed through the Proliferation Security Initiative, a framework for interdicting weapons of mass destruction at sea, on land, and in the air. Designed to give the U.S. Navy more latitude to stop ships that might be carrying weapons of mass destruction, the proliferation initiative was sold successfully as a “global effort” even though it tended to benefit the Americans more than anybody else.

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

A Leg Up From the Job Corps

THE SOURCE: "Does Job Corps Work? Impact Findings From the National Job Corps Study" by Peter Z. Schochet, John Burghardt, and Sheena McConnell, in *American Economic Review*, Dec. 2008.

THE JOB CORPS, A LEGACY OF the Great Society, has been under attack from one direction or another throughout most of its 45 years. But now the results are in: It's effective. It gives low-income workers about a year of extra schooling, counseling, and vocational training in one of 75 different trades. Its participants are less commonly arrested and locked up in prison, and the great majority who haven't graduated from high school are nearly twice as likely to earn an equivalency degree. They also earn more money than non-participants. Unfortunately, the effect on the incomes of younger Job Corps graduates is curiously short-lived.

The Job Corps is the only large-scale training program that has been shown to increase earnings for down-and-out youth, write Peter Z. Schochet, John Burghardt, and Sheena McConnell, researchers with Mathematica Policy Research in

Princeton, New Jersey. Designed for young people ages 16 to 24 who receive welfare or food stamps or have very low incomes, and who live in an "environment characterized by a disruptive home life, high crime rates, or limited job opportunities," the corps is the nation's largest job-training program, with about 60,000 new participants every year. Nearly 90 percent of those enrolled live in residential Job Corps centers, so it's also expensive, at \$16,500 per trainee.

The authors' intensive study of 15,400 young people eligible for the Job Corps, of whom 60 percent actually participated in the corps, found that those who enrolled earned about 12 percent more per week than those who didn't in the fourth year after training began, and were more likely to receive job-linked fringe benefits. (Training varies in length from three months to more than a year.) Both groups were most likely to work in service and construction jobs.

But after four years, the earnings boost disappeared, except for the oldest group at the time of enrollment, those 20 to 24. Their wages continued to be higher than those of their peers who were eligible but had not enrolled in the corps. The program staff described them as more motivated and

better behaved than the younger enrollees.

As the nation copes with millions of unemployed workers, the plight of Job Corps youths is easy to overlook. The bottom line of this survey, one of the largest social-science studies ever conducted: The corps helps its graduates. But cost-benefit analysis shows that the increased earnings and reduced crime and use of social services offset less than a quarter of the cost per enrollee after four years. The challenges for the corps are to improve its training for its younger participants and make the program cost-effective for the many youngsters who could use its help.

EXCERPT

Masters of Naiveté

[In] the current financial crisis . . . some of the most intelligent, sophisticated, and ruthlessly competitive people in the country now seem less greedy and corrupt than shockingly naive. Investigative reports have documented how executives and politicians alike countenanced practices that were clearly unsustainable, dangerous, and irrational: money lent without proof of income, repayment modeled on the basis of data from the most dramatic run-up in property values and equity borrowing on record, all while the entire system grew increasingly dependent upon credit markets built on this unstable foundation.

—DAVID FRANZ, a postdoctoral fellow with the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, in *Culture* (Spring 2009)

PRESS & MEDIA

The Zen of Spell-Checking

THE SOURCE: "Who Checks the Spell-Checkers?" by Chris Wilson, in *Slate*, Dec. 31, 2008.

EVEN THE COCKIEST GRAMMARIAN can be intimidated by the wavy red underline that signals a misspelled word in most word processing programs. But when Microsoft Word's spell-check routinely suggested that future president Barack Obama's last name be "corrected" to "Boatman" well into 2007, it made the widely used software program seem ridiculous.

Spell-checking doesn't need to be so backward, writes Chris Wilson, an assistant editor at *Slate*. All the technology needed to produce a timely spelling database already exists in search engines such as Google and Microsoft's own Live Search. Part of the reason for the disparity between the nimbleness of Google and the torpor of Microsoft Word's spell-check—and even that of Google's online word processor Google Docs—is that word processors and search engines try to do different things. Search engines tackle inquiries as broad as human curiosity; word processors are conservative, limiting their lexicons to words that are strictly kosher.

The two technologies update their dictionaries differently, Wilson says. Ten years ago, word processor

spelling lists were compiled from web pages or old Internet queries and scrutinized by human editors in software companies. Now, Microsoft keeps on top of change by scanning trillions of words in e-mail messages sent through its Hotmail service, gleaning such terms as "Netflix," "Radiohead," "Lipitor," and "all-nighter," but its spell checker—still overseen by relatively slow-moving humans—makes surprising errors.

Google automates its word harvesting, trolling the Web to discover new words that show up with "any appreciable frequency." Wilson found that Google offered alternate spellings for a word after it appeared only a small number of times, and was able to correct several misspellings of the unusual word "theothanatology"—the study of the death of God—when it had appeared online only 829 times.

A word is spelled correctly more often than not, so frequency of its usage is Google's first cut for correctness. The best algorithms can identify a mistake—and suggest a cure—even when each word is spelled correctly but the context is wrong. Typing "golf war" into a Google search box returns some results for "Gulf war" as well, Wilson notes. The method does have its pitfalls, though. If it were used as a spell-checker, more naughty

words might make it through; plus, a few instances of "Dalmation" (coast or dog) might turn up because the incorrect spelling with an *o* is almost as common as the correct "Dalmatian."

But it would produce much better results than the primary "edit distance" method used by most word processors. That method offers corrections by changing the fewest number of letters needed to get to a word deemed legitimate, such as "boatman" for "Obama."

PRESS & MEDIA

City of Niche News

THE SOURCE: "The New Face of Washington's Press Corps" by Tyler Marshall and the Project for Excellence in Journalism, in *journalism.org*, Feb. 11, 2009.

THE NUMBER OF U.S. NEWSPAPERS with a reporter based in Washington has plunged by half. The number of states with a Washington newspaper presence has fallen by a third. The number of television network correspondents and Washington-based TV bosses has shrunk from 127 to 84 in a generation. But the Washington press corps hasn't shriveled up. It's merely been transformed from a sea of journalists covering news for the general public to a fourth estate increasingly reporting for niche publications and foreign audiences.

Publications such as *Climate-Wire*, *Food Chemical News*, and *Bloomberg News* offer more specialized and detailed information to smaller elite audiences often built

Archive password: KITCHEN

around narrowly targeted financial, lobbying, and political interests, write Tyler Marshall, a former *Los Angeles Times* foreign correspondent, and the editors at Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. Newsletters covering Washington alone have increased by nearly two-thirds. Niche publications are frequently financed by high-priced subscriptions or image advertising from corporations trying to influence policymakers.

The effect of the change from mainstream to niche media is likely to be that people who seek to influence policy will have access to more information than ever, while those affected by it but not organized to shape it will have less, the authors write.

Meanwhile, the size of the Washington contingent of reporters for

foreign media outlets has mushroomed. In 1968, the U.S. State Department reported the presence of about 160 foreign correspondents in the capital. Last year, there were 1,490. The Washington bureau of the Arab satellite channel al-Jazeera has grown in eight years from zero to a staff of 105—nearly as large as that of CBS News's radio and television operations combined, according to Pew.

The foreign correspondents—who typically have little access to policymakers in Washington—are likely to explain American political events to their audiences in considerably different terms than the American news agencies that as recently as the 1990s dominated the dissemination of Washington news.

Viewing American events through the prism of the national and cultural interests of foreign

correspondents' home countries certainly makes a difference in what is considered newsworthy. On February 5, the BBC World Service gave prominent website display to Senate votes to soften a "Buy American" clause in the economic stimulus proposal. Al-Jazeera featured remarks by former vice president Dick Cheney that the new administration might be going "soft" on Al Qaeda by closing Guantánamo Bay. Al-Arabiya, another Middle East satellite channel, focused on how upcoming U.S.-European diplomatic talks might deal with Iran.

On the same day, CNN International featured a story on the president's push to pass his economic package, and his effort to expand the office of faith-based initiatives.

HISTORY

The First Civil War

THE SOURCE: "An Evenly Balanced County: The Scope and Severity of Civil Warfare in Revolutionary Monmouth County, New Jersey" by Michael S. Adelberg, in *The Journal of Military History*, Jan. 2009.

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION was not a simple matter of downtrodden colonists rising up as one against their British oppressors. Revolutionary fervor was a minority sentiment. President John Adams later estimated that the population split into thirds: one-third loyalist, one-third revolutionary, and one-third neutral. Throughout the colonies,

neighbor was pitted against neighbor in a series of local civil wars.

An analysis of thousands of records in a single New Jersey county by historian Michael S. Adelberg has produced a somewhat different picture of the split, with considerably more residents trying to be neutral than Adams estimated, some of them "trimmers" or "flip-floppers" who changed sides during the course of the conflict. Among the committed, supporters of the Revolution outnumbered Loyalists in Monmouth County, a relatively prosperous

jurisdiction of about 12,500 people along the Atlantic coast. It was a military frontier, only nominally under patriot control, and close enough to British encampments that Loyalists had ready access to supplies and sanctuaries. The last great battle of the war in the North was fought at Monmouth Courthouse in 1778, when a British general marched his troops and their 12-mile-long baggage train across the county to reach the safety of New York. After a dramatic battle waged inconclusively in 100-degree heat, the British escaped under cover of night, but the colonists had fought them to a standoff.

Throughout the war, Adelberg found, the county's population was split, with 1,933 individuals favoring



Astride a horse presented to him only that morning, George Washington rallies his retreating soldiers at Monmouth Courthouse in a battle that made him America's undisputed commander in chief.

the insurgency and 1,622 supporting British rule—a division only slightly greater in percentage terms to that between Barack Obama and John McCain in the 2008 election.

Another 2,910 persons were neutral, switched sides, or left no records, stories, or letters to identify their political leanings. Very little was recorded of the views of the county's women, and almost nothing is known about those of its 1,000 African Americans.

Antagonism between Americans contributed substantially to the cost of the war. Monmouth County's Joshua Studson was among those who paid dearly, but he did not die at the hands of the British. A successful privateer who captured three British ships, Studson was shot and killed in a militia boat in 1780 as he pursued a party of his own countrymen who had remained loyal to King George III.

Adelberg's statistical research in the Monmouth historical archives revealed that nearly one local man in five suffered direct, serious effects from the conflict. Of the 5,466 men for whom Adelberg could find

records, 143 were killed, 77 wounded, and 332 captured. Another 372 lost property and 379 were punished in the legal system. Twice as many Loyalists suffered as patriots.

HISTORY

History by Name

THE SOURCE: "The Child of Death: Personal Names and Parental Attitudes Towards Mortality in Bunyoro, Western Uganda, 1900–2005" by Shane Doyle, in *Journal of African History*, Nov. 2008.

ACCUSTOMED TO THE LUSH details of sources such as the Code of Hammurabi of 1760 BC, the Domesday Book of 1086, and the 1692 Salem court transcripts, many historians have disdained African history because it offers so few written records. But inventive researchers have recently found new sources. Baby names, for example, paint a remarkably revealing picture of village life in western Uganda from 1900 to 2005, particularly the rise of Christianity and the ever-present specter of death.

Parents in Bunyoro Province bestowed names on their children in the first few decades of the 20th century that revealed marital strife, neighborhood conflict, changing beliefs, and attempts at ethnic integration, writes Shane Doyle, a historian at the University of Leeds. Many of those names reflected all-too-common fears. Of all the recorded names given to newborns from 1900 to 1959, almost a third directly referred to death: Karafa (This child will die), Nkafrika (I am the only survivor), and Bagada (What a waste of energy).

The Bunyoro culture left a large collection of names referring to hidden enemies; for instance, Barungindoho meant "They are nice to my face." Some fathers selected names designed to trick death into thinking that the child was unimportant. Kunobere (I hate this child) and Kabaingi (So many children) were quite common, Doyle says.

During World War I, more than 40 percent of all recorded baby names were death related. (Bunyoro Province lost both doctors and farmers to the British war effort and suffered several epidemics.) The proportion dropped to 25 percent in the 1940s, and reached a colonial-era low of about 15 percent just before Uganda achieved independence in 1962.

The baby names Doyle analyzed were retrieved from baptismal records, which represented about 37 percent of all births in the province by 1924. Because the richest residents tended to become Anglicans and the poorest to remain Muslims or believers in indigenous spirits, the Christian

names provide a window into the middle-income Bunyoro family. The occurrence of death-related names rose and fell with the fortunes of the pre-World War II period, but during the 1940s, Christian religious names took off in popularity and never flagged. When the AIDS crisis hit Uganda in the 1980s, very few families gave newborns names such as “This child might die.” Education,

religion, and Uganda’s anti-AIDS program had “reduced the sense that death was either inexplicable or the result of malice.”

The new data provide unusual insight into village-level African life that is so often missing from spotty official records. Even census data from relatively recent times are problematic. The 1931 census of the colony, often cited, was an extrapolation

from enumerations of only 40 percent of villages. The 1948 tallies disappeared before reaching Kampala, and the figures from the first post-independence census in 1969 were marred by a failure to note ethnicity, making it impossible to determine the effect of immigration on population increases. In 1980, the results were stolen before they could be fully analyzed.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

God’s Speed Dial

THE SOURCE: “Celebrity Spirituality” by Daniel Harris, in *Salmagundi*, Fall–Winter 2008–09.

MODERN CULTS HAVE BECOME corporate enterprises, writes Daniel Harris, author of *Cute, Quaint*,

Hungry, and Romantic (2000) and other books. They grow by successfully recruiting celebrities, trying to “hijack” a star’s fan base and transform it into a worldwide franchise. For new religions, famous people become “brand ambassadors,” using

their glamour and reputations to give the cults their identity and coherence.

Madonna lends her allure to Kabbalah, Tom Cruise to Scientology, Harris writes. Celebrities do not describe themselves as religious; they are *spiritual*. But as Hollywood’s spiritual tourists reject the “despotism of pontiffs and preachers,” the designer religions they embrace are far more demanding of their bank accounts and personal lives than the most domineering

EXCERPT

Veni, Vidi, Vici

It wasn’t quite the Second Coming, but almost. For the six days in April [2008] that Pope Benedict XVI visited the United States, all the coverage, the hoopla, the accolades, the promotion, and the PR surrounding the visit could have led someone to believe that it had been Christ, and not His self-proclaimed vicar, who had come to America. . . .

The strong Protestant hold on American culture and thought has for many decades simply been dying away. And, because Protestantism itself—originally founded on

a revolt, a bitter one at that, against Roman Catholicism—was the main carrier of anti-Roman sentiment, it is only natural that as the influence of Protestant thinking has waned, so has anti-Catholic sentiment. . . .

Pope Benedict XVI’s visit is another symbol of an amazing historical shift in American and Protestant attitudes toward a political-religious institution that for many years had been viewed as antithetical to all that Americanism and Protestantism stood for. Even more amazing is how Protestants themselves have been the most eager ones to reach across that gulf and embrace Rome.

—MARTIN TRUEBLOOD, a commentator on church-state issues, in *Liberty* (Jan.–Feb. 2009)

clergy of the past. “Repelled by the atrocities committed in the names of Jesus, Jehovah, and Muhammad, most stars turn their backs on orthodox beliefs and cobble together their own sui generis theology, a spiritual Esperanto so unspecific and inclusive that it offends no one.”

The religions of celebrities are the ultimate expression of an ancient spiritual impulse, the worshiper’s desire to eliminate the mid-

What do you give a celebrity who has everything? A god.

dleman, the clergy, and achieve direct contact with the divine. Famous people are egomaniacs, gods in their own right, and they do not want to be kept waiting, Harris says. They want God to be accessi-

ble, a name in their BlackBerry.

Spirituality is the opiate not just of the masses but of the powerful. Hollywood stars have reached the summit of fame and fortune. They have achieved their culture’s highest aspirations in difficult careers but, at their very moment of triumph, have come face to face with feelings of meaninglessness. What do you give a celebrity who has everything? A god.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

The Lullaby of Taxis

THE SOURCE: “Not So Silent Spring” by Dawn Stover, in *Conservation Magazine*, Jan.–March 2009.

WHEN REPORTS STARTED TO trickle in a few years ago about European blackbirds imitating ambulance sirens, car alarms, and cell phone ringtones, researchers were skeptical, writes Dawn Stover, an editor at large for *Popular Science* magazine. Doubting scientists asked for tapes. What came back were “pitch-perfect” renditions of urban noises, even a recording made near a golf course of birds copying the annoying sound of a golf cart backing up.

Animals are literally changing their tunes in response to a growing human din, Stover says. While bird and animal calls were once thought to be randomly scattered across the acoustic spectrum, many researchers now say the distribution is not accidental.

When part of the spectrum is invaded by the noise of moving cars, passing ships, and overhead jets, animals begin to adapt. Great tits in the Netherlands are switching to higher frequencies to avoid being drowned out by low-frequency traffic noise. European robins now sing primarily at night, and researchers think they do it to avoid interference from street noise. In Berlin, nightingales sing louder on weekday mornings than on weekends, when there is less traffic to contend with. And male blackbirds have begun to imitate sirens and ringing cell phones to boost their evolutionary odds: An expanded song repertoire signals that a bird has reached maturity, and female blackbirds prefer mature males.

While most animal noise research has focused on birds, some scholars think undersea noise is increasing even faster than urban

clamor, affecting whales and other animals. About twice as many ships ply the oceans today as in the 1960s, and they are bigger, faster, and louder. Oceans have a “deep sound channel” in which noise can travel for hundreds of miles. Humpback whales are thought to dive down to the channel and sing into it to communicate with one another, but this channel can also transmit noise from offshore drilling and commercial shipping to distant locations. Canadian scientists have found that beluga whales change their frequencies in response to the presence of icebreakers, and other researchers have reported that orcas have altered their calls.

If such trends continue, new subspecies may develop that are unable to understand one another. And low-frequency-bound species could lose their ability to communicate. Could this be the end of orioles, great reed warblers, and house sparrows, which can’t sing in the higher registers? Stover concludes that “humans, already powerful conductors of the material world, may be extending their fierce control to the audible one.”

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Survival Art

THE SOURCE: "On the Origin of Art and Symbolism" by Michael Balter, in *Science*, Feb. 6, 2009.

ENGRAVED OCHER CHIPS FOUND in South Africa's Blombos Cave in recent years feature what could be triangles, waves, fans, or maybe just



This ocher fragment was etched by a human-like hand some 77,000 years ago.

fancy crosshatchings that are dated to between 77,000 and 100,000 years ago. Archaeologists disagree on whether they are art.

But a continual stream of discoveries is dramatically pushing back the dates of objects that were surely shaped by the hand of early man. There was room for doubt about whether the Venuses of Tan-Tan and Berekhat Ram, discovered in Morocco and in the Golan Heights and dated to 250,000 to 500,000 years ago, were fertility symbols or simply unusually weathered or chipped stone. But the newly discovered chunks of red ocher from Blombos were clearly left by a human-like hand. They may not be art, but archaeologists are quite sure they are symbols, the creation of which requires the cognitive ability to communicate meaning, writes Michael Balter, author of

The Goddess and the Bull (2004).

For many years, conventional archaeological wisdom held that a creative explosion occurred about 40,000 years ago when modern humans colonized Europe. British archaeologist Clive Gamble once described the evolution of symbolism as occurring so rapidly that it was like "flicking on a light switch." Now, the increasing number of finds at Blombos and elsewhere point to a far more ancient genesis for symbolic markings. Gamble has modified his metaphor, saying that the growth of symbolism may be more like a "stuttering candle." And it is now clear that the earliest clearly symbolic expression by humans occurred in Africa, not Europe.

Why would a few scratchings on ocher represent an evolutionary advantage over other hominid competitors in the race for survival?



The Venus of Berekhat Ram

Many scientists say that the answer is a no-brainer, especially when it is focused on the most sophisticated form of symbolic communication—language. The ability to communicate detailed, concrete information as well as abstract concepts allowed early humans to cooperate and plan in ways unique to our species, says Balter, thus enhancing their prospects for survival during times of hardship and boosting their reproductive success in good periods.

Art and other non-linguistic forms of symbolic behavior may have been key to cementing these bonds by expressing meanings that are difficult to put into words, Balter says. Indeed, artistic expression may have helped ensure the survival of the fittest.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

The Bulging Brain

THE SOURCE: "Sculpting the Brain" by Claus C. Hilgetag and Helen Barbas, in *Scientific American*, Feb. 2009.

EVERY TIME YOU READ AN *In Essence* article, responding to it by saying "hmmm," getting mad at the author, or even flipping the page, you are exercising your cerebral cortex, which is about as thick as a piece of cardboard and as big as an extra-large pizza. The cortex fits in your skull because it folds up into consistent patterns of bulges and valleys. The geography of the brain has been studied for hundreds of years. A pseudoscience called phrenology once did considerable harm to people whose brain and, particularly, skull measurements were judged to be savage. But Claus

C. Hilgetag, a neuroscientist at Jacobs University Bremen, and Helen Barbas, a professor at Boston University, say that the phrenologists may have been on to something. The shape of the brain may be critical to the causes of such mental disorders as schizophrenia and autism.

The cortex of a human fetus starts out smooth, and stays that way for about the first six months of development, according to Hilgetag and Barbas. Fetal neurons send out spindly fibers called axons that become tethered to target neurons in other areas of the cortex. As the cortex expands, the axons tighten up like bungee cords. That's how bulges are formed, as the two parts of the cortex are pulled together. By the time a baby is born, the brain has become characteristically wrinkled.

Animals lower on the evolutionary chain, such as zebra finches and platypuses, have nearly smooth cortices. Large-brained mammals such

Phrenologists may have been on to something. The shape of the brain may be critical to the causes of such mental disorders as schizophrenia and autism.

as whales, dogs, and apes have corrugated brains somewhat like those of humans. In *Homo sapiens* the major convolutions are remarkably regular, but the small folds are so diverse that they differ even in identical twins.

The cerebral cortex is crucial to a human's ability to perceive, think, experience emotion, and act. It's what people are talking about when they say "gray matter." There are "clear differences" between the cortical folds of healthy people and those of sufferers from mental disorders such as schizophrenia and

autism, the authors write. But the findings are controversial because there's no uniform pattern to the aberrations. Many scientists now believe that some diseases affect "neural networks" rather than specific areas of the brain.

As with so many other questions involving the brain, scientists are working zealously to understand how neurological diseases with different symptoms might be the result of something that went awry during crucial developmental periods. "The landscape of the brain does correlate with mental function and dysfunction," Hilgetag and Barbas write. Like the earliest archaeologists, today's neuroscientists know they have found something important, but are only beginning to investigate exactly what it is. For the moment, even with advanced imaging methods for measuring brains, experts still cannot distinguish between the cortex of a saint and that of a criminal.

ARTS & LETTERS

Postmodern Pews

THE SOURCE: "Building for Humans" by Matthew J. Milliner, in *Christian Century*, March 10, 2009.

PARTISANS OF MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE in the mid-20th century didn't mince words, writes Matthew J. Milliner, a doctoral candidate in art history at Princeton, even when the subject was sacred buildings. Gothic churches were dismissed as a futile "fight against the forces of gravity."

Chartres Cathedral was a "sentimental" vestige of the past and St. Peter's Basilica a "wretched failure."

Religious architecture now should communicate a "scientific spirit," wrote one Modernist enthusiast. Churches should forsake architectural façades, showcase new materials produced by industrialization, and be honest about a building's structural needs. Modernism should

rebel against historicism and overblown form, and should no longer pander to the rich.

But Modernist religious architecture was often a failure in the eyes of the average parishioner it was supposed to serve. Its mistake, Milliner says, was to "underestimate the needs of humans who inhabit buildings." In spite of the human love of color and variety, Modernism offered monotonous white planes; in the face of people's appreciation of ornamentation, Modernism preached plainness.

Modernism went from a world-saving mission to one among several furniture options on an Ikea

showroom floor, Harvard sociologist Nathan Glazer wrote in *From a Cause to a Style* (2007). While its simplicity produced “wonderful factories,” it largely failed to inspire great religious architecture. Indeed, Modernism begat some terrible buildings. For example, in Washington, D.C., the congregation of the Third Church of Christ, Scientist is fighting a bitter battle with historic preservationists over the fate of their 1971 Brutalist-style church, which stands only three blocks from the White House. Preservationists have spurred the city to declare it a historic landmark building, but the parishioners have gone to court to overturn the ruling. They want to tear down a structure they consider unsightly, unchristian, and prohibitively expensive to maintain.

Premodern buildings often admirably serve people who worship because their architects were worshipers themselves, according to Philip Bess, head of the graduate school of architecture at Notre



The Brutalist-style Third Church of Christ, Scientist in Washington, D.C., presents unadorned concrete walls and a projecting bar of bells to the street. The entrance (shown) is at the rear.

Dame, and author of *Till We Have Built Jerusalem* (2006). Churches and synagogues fail when they kowtow to architectural fashion instead of honoring the beliefs

professed within their walls. Improving Christian architecture, Milliner says, could start with a renewed appreciation of the Christian tradition.

EXCERPT

Extreme Fans

One distinctly modern form of obsessive weirdoism is fandom: becoming so devoted to a work of art that you want to augment or even inhabit it. Out of this impulse was born the Klingon Language Institute, the phenomenon of “fan fiction” (unauthorized stories by civilians advancing new plot lines of beloved films and TV series), and also, one might argue, my ever-growing Moby-Dick website, which now includes not only a full annotation but also links to artwork, poems, movies, and even cartoons based on the book. It’s one thing to fixate on your own masterpiece, as Melville

did. . . . Many would say it’s something far less worthy to fixate on another person’s masterpiece. But here, too, the distinctions break down, because everything is based on something. Melville himself was a fan, of his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. After bonding with the author of The Scarlet Letter, he tore up the lighthearted whaling yarn he’d been working on and set to work crafting something deeper. He also borrowed liberally from earlier whaling texts and real-life stories. The result may not have been as daft as a new X-Files episode written by a fan, but it is on the far side of the same emotional continuum—both are powered by the drive to exalt and augment what has come before. And, in so doing, to create something new.

—MARGARET GUROFF, creator of the website powermobydick.com, in *Urbanite* (Dec. 2008)

larism with “phallic arrogance.” Nationalist zealots described the Eiffel Tower as a potential instrument of treason because optical telegraphy sent from its 1,000-foot heights could reach potential invaders in distant locales. Anti-Semites branded Eiffel a foreigner because his great-grandfather had emigrated from Westphalia nearly two centuries earlier. Foreigners, in the language of the time and place, meant Jews. Eiffel was not Jewish, but his tower was attacked as the product of a Jewish conspiracy that could be used by spies betraying Paris to “hordes from the East.”

EXCERPT

Farewell, Good Flick

I think that cinema has run its course. I think that in these hundred years the cinema really has been exhausted—as in the third law of thermodynamics, that the world is running down—everything has been tried, everything has been done, all that remains are a few technical changes. . . . What remains is repetition.

—PHILIP FRENCH, a British film critic who saw his first movie in 1937, in *Standpoint* (Feb. 2009)

The tower was twice the height of the world’s next tallest monument at the time, and held that record until the completion of the

Chrysler Building in New York City in 1930. A leading religious newspaper predicted that the hubris of an engineer who tried to be “the equal of He who made mountains” would be punished, and four years later Eiffel was caught up in a scandal surrounding the collapse of a French company that had set out to build a Panama canal. Eiffel’s reputation was damaged, and he was heavily fined, but he went on to a life of scientific experimentation in meteorology and other

fields. And, of course, he left his name on the monument that now represents the quintessence of all things Parisian.

OTHER NATIONS

Brazil’s Bold Experiment

THE SOURCE: “Brazil’s Bolsa Família: A Double-Edged Sword?” by Anthony Hall, in *Development and Change*, Sept. 2008.

ASIDE FROM MICROCREDIT—the system of small loans that won its creator the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006—few social initiatives have been embraced as enthusiastically as Brazil’s Bolsa Família (family grant) program. The payments of up to \$104 a month go directly to Brazil’s neediest, who earn less than \$73 monthly. The program covers 44

million people, or nearly one in four Brazilians.

The grants, which began as state-level initiatives in the 1990s and were expanded under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, have helped to reduce

Brazil’s poor have enthusiastically embraced the Bolsa Família family assistance program.

poverty and inequality in South America’s largest country. They are made directly to mothers who agree to send their children to school, get them vaccinated, take them to health clinics, pay attention to proper nutrition, and take advantage of vocational training courses. Studies have shown that recipient families bought more food, educational materials, and children’s clothing than previously, and that school attendance among beneficiaries rose by 3.6 percent. Bolsa Família participants were more likely to be employed than other impoverished Brazilians, and their children were less likely to drop out of school.

So what could be wrong with a

program that produces better health, education, and welfare for the abject poor? Hall says there is evidence that the grants have been used in some areas to buy votes. Some economists believe that increases in the minimum wage do a better job of reducing poverty. Others think that the \$545 million transferred every month to the mothers in poor families might be more usefully invested by the government in measures to improve health and education and to prepare people for better jobs. Federal spending on basic sanitation and housing fell in real terms by 46 percent between 2002 and 2004.

The Bolsa Família program also may draw families away from “formal” work—which might render them ineligible for the grants—toward the informal sector of the economy, where income is less regular but easier to hide. That sector has grown dramatically in recent years, and was expanding before the family grants were widespread. In São Paulo, the nation’s largest city, the informal sector doubled in size to 51 percent of the local economy between 1991 and 2004. In 1995, regular paychecks produced about 90 percent of household income in Brazil, but by 2004 the figure had fallen to 48 percent.

Even so, both the public and the politicians have ignored the academic grumbling about the overwhelmingly popular family grants. The program is likely to grow, Hall predicts. Researchers say that 60 percent of the eligible population has yet to be touched by the Bolsa Família.

OTHER NATIONS

Catch and Release

THE SOURCE: “Fighting Pirates: The Pen and the Sword” by James Kraska and Brian Wilson, in *World Policy Journal*, Winter 2008–09.

CRIMINAL GANGS OPERATING out of a failed state with a population the size of greater Chicago captured at least 97 ships, kidnapped 600 seamen, and raised insurance rates in the Gulf of Aden last year from about \$500 to as much as \$20,000 for a single trip. But the solution to piracy off the coast of Somalia, according to U.S. Navy lawyers James Kraska and Brian Wilson, isn’t simply sending in a few more warships. It is nearly impossible to police 2.5 million square miles of ocean. What is needed is not only the sword but the pen—better communications, faster legal responses, and improved treaties.

The typical vessel attacked by Somali pirates is registered in one nation (such as Greece), owned by a corporation in another nation (such as South Korea), and operated by a crew hailing from other places (such as the Philippines and Pakistan), and it is transporting cargo owned by corporations based in the United States and elsewhere. Chances are that the protective vessel that foils the attack will be from yet another country (such as India or Denmark), or be manned by a private military security contractor (such as Blackwater, based in North Carolina). The multiple jurisdictions blur the lines of legal responsibility for bringing suspected pirates to justice.

National interests are so entangled that some countries have adopted what is derisively called a “catch and release” policy. Last September, the Danish Navy dropped off 10 captured pirates on a beach because jurisdiction was unclear and Somalia lacked the ability to prosecute them. In 2006, the U.S. Navy blew up a fishing vessel after the pirates piloting it fired on two U.S. warships. When the fishing craft caught fire, U.S. seamen had to rescue 12 Somalis, five of them wounded, provide the men with medical treatment, and hold them aboard ships without functional brig facilities for several months before the U.S. government decided not to prosecute them and set them free.

The long-term answer to regional piracy, write Kraska and Wilson, is the establishment of law and order in Somalia, which has been without a functioning government since 1991. In the meantime, piracy must be fought by “coordination, not kinetic action aimed at sinking pirate mother ships and destroying coastal havens.” Shipping nations must develop agreements to temporarily detain suspected pirates, make victims and witnesses available, and sort out where a case will be prosecuted—before incidents occur. Under the auspices of the United Nations, warships can now go in “hot pursuit” of pirates into Somali territorial waters, to deny them a safe haven while they await payment of ransom for their prizes.

Like cities that fail to erect stop lights at dangerous intersections until someone is killed, the world’s maritime nations have generally

moved lethargically or not at all until tragedy occurs. The Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation was signed three years after Leon Klinghoffer, a wheelchair-using American vacationing on the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro*, was shoved overboard by terrorists. After the 2001 World Trade Center attacks, 90 nations agreed to adhere to rules designed to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction on the seas. New international protocols have been written to establish a legal framework for criminalizing the maritime transport of terrorists or weapons of mass destruction at sea, but they have been ratified only by Comoros, the Cook Islands, Estonia, Fiji, Spain, Switzerland, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Vanuatu.

International maritime officials point to the successful resolution of a 2006 piracy case as proof that obstacles can be overcome. When an Indian dhow was overtaken in international waters by Somali pirates armed with grenades and assault rifles, USS *Churchill*,



Eight men captured in January after allegedly trying to hijack a cargo ship in the Gulf of Aden are transferred to a French ship before being handed over to authorities in the dysfunctional Somali state.

which was in the vicinity, seized control of the pirates' vessel and detained the pirates. Kenya eventually stepped forward, tried the malefactors in court, and convicted and sentenced them to seven years in prison. After Kraska and Wilson wrote their article, the United States, Britain, and Kenya signed legal agreements under which Kenya will try a "limited" number of cases in its courts. The first 16

alleged pirates to be covered by the agreement were captured in mid-February.

But other than Kenya—which itself is wary that its courts will become overwhelmed—most of Somalia's neighbors in the Horn of Africa lack sufficient lawyers, judges, confinement facilities, and even basic office supplies to handle piracy prosecutions. Without an effective system of punishment, there is little to deter unem-

EXCERPT

The Tongue-Tied West

Today, in most of the capitals of once-Christian Europe, there are more Muslims attending services in mosques on Fridays than Christians at worship on Sundays. In some ways, the pluralism of the West is a blessing, even an advantage—and yet its profoundest historical weakness lies in its own divided spirit. The

ultimate issue between Islam and the West is not military force. It is the depth of intellect and engagement. In matters of the spirit, we seem always to become tongue-tied, as if lacking in spirited confidence. We do not insist on presenting better arguments in recognition of the inalienable rights to human liberty that our totalitarian opponents deny. Mere secular force will not do when the fundamental battle is spiritual.

—MICHAEL NOVAK, twice U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, and scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, in *AEI Newsletter* (Jan. 2009)

ployed Somali fishermen, as well as politically and financially motivated buccaneers, from seizing ships for ransoms that can run to millions of dollars. The resulting piracy not only impinges on freedom of the seas but undermines basic economic development and the rule of law in one of the poorest areas in the world.

OTHER NATIONS

Breaking the Chinese Mold

THE SOURCE: “Chinese Political Attitudes and Values in Comparative Context: Cautionary Remarks on Cultural Attributions” by Steve Chan, in *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Dec. 2008.

IF THERE IS ANYTHING AMERICANS know for sure about the Chinese, it is this: They are nationalistic, authoritarian, conformist, and deferential. They also follow the ancient Confucian tradition of filial piety, place great store in maintaining “face,” and manifest the Middle Kingdom syndrome of belief in Chinese moral and cultural superiority. Such traits go a long way toward explaining why the Communist Party remains in power while communism has succumbed almost everywhere else, and why growing national wealth has failed to trigger popular pressure for democratic rule.

But nearly every one of these presumptions is wrong. The World Values Survey, in which citizens in more than 80 countries responded to questions about culture and values, showed that between 1990 and 2000, Chinese people expressed the opposite of conventional wisdom on

many of the most important issues of the day, writes Steve Chan, a political scientist at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Hypernationalism? Only 26 percent of Chinese said they were proud of their nationality, compared with 72 percent of Americans. Authoritarianism? A total of 19 percent of Chinese said that it would be good to have a “strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections,” compared with 30 percent of Americans. Conformity? Three-quarters of the Chinese found independence an important quality for children to learn in the home, compared with 61 percent of Americans. Deference? Fifteen percent of Chinese stressed obedience as an important attribute, compared with 32 percent of those surveyed in the United States. Filial piety? More than 60 percent of Chinese said it is important to make parents proud, compared with 83 percent of Americans.

The World Values Survey does not inquire directly about the importance of not losing face, but surely this concern is akin to worry in many parts of America about being disrespected, or “dissed.” The survey also doesn’t ask about the Middle Kingdom syndrome, but it is hard to believe that the average Chinese thinks the nation morally and culturally superior when only slightly more than one in four indicated pride in country, Chan says. Chinese people, according to the survey, actually thought slightly more highly of democracy than Americans, perhaps, Chan says, because of their “lack of experience” with it.

Some stereotypes did turn out to be true. Chinese parents were two

and a half times more likely than Americans to consider it important that their children learn thrift. Chinese respondents were almost totally irreligious, yet they indicated vastly less tolerance of homosexuality, prostitution, abortion, divorce, and euthanasia than people polled in the United States. They also had more traditional views about women, with more than a third believing that women need to have children to be fulfilled compared with 15 percent in America, and half saying that men make better leaders, compared with 23 percent in the United States.

How can the conventional wisdom be so wildly out of sync with the expressed views of the people in question? Chan wondered if the findings were wrong, and compared them with those for similar cultures (China to Taiwan, and the United States to Canada). He found that the Canadian responses corresponded “generally” to the American ones. And he noted that the Taiwanese survey results also undercut stereotypes. He discounted the possibility that the Chinese respondents felt strong pressure to give “politically correct” answers to some of the questions, because nine out of 10 said that democracy is the best form of government—hardly a response likely to please Chinese authorities.

Chan thinks that differences between East and West were exaggerated in the beginning and have lessened over time. Political culture changes, Chan emphasizes, and it fails to account for the influence of environmental factors. Using cultural proclivities to explain contemporary events may be a mistake—even if we judge the proclivities correctly.

Also in this issue:

Sarah L. Courteau
on great Americans

Thomas Toch on
the new urban
schools

Robert Litwak on
the Godfather
Doctrine

Kembrew McLeod
on the commons of
the mind

Matthew Battles on
early American art

Michael Moynihan
on Bright Young
People

Andrew Curry on
Pompeii

Gerald J. Russello
on John Lukacs

John Omians on
aesthetics and
evolution

CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

Oiling Our Progress

Reviewed by Tom Vanderbilt

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, STEVEN CHU, currently the head of the U.S. Department of Energy, told *The Wall Street Journal*, “Somehow we have to figure out how to boost the price of gasoline to the levels in Europe.” This was the voice of the rational scientist, correctly positing that higher gas prices will lead to less driving, and thus fewer tailpipe emissions. By the time of his confirmation hearing in January, he was forced to modulate his tune: “What the American family,” he said, using that great signifier of required political pandering, “does not want is to pay an increasing fraction of their budget, their precious dollars, for energy costs, both in transportation and keeping their homes warm and lit.” Politics, of course, is hardly as elegant as physics, but Chu articulated a sort of third way: efficiency.

“Efficiency” is a soothing, lovely word that means little on its own: efficient as compared to what? Take the American car (please). As veteran transportation and energy specialists Daniel Sperling and Deborah Gordon write in *Two Billion Cars*—their authoritatively prescriptive challenge to the “transportation monoculture” that plagues the United States and Europe and

looms in China and India—automakers have been making their cars more fuel efficient on the order of two percent annually. And yet the actual “corporate average fuel economy” of cars has made less commendable gains: “The bottom line is that although technologically the modern U.S. car is more efficient than ever before, gaining more work from a gallon of gasoline, those efficiency gains don’t show up as fuel economy gains.”

What happened? All the efficiency gains were consumed, by size and horsepower (not to mention increased driving). In 1976, the Honda Accord, which captured the wallets, if not the hearts, of Americans reeling in the wake of high fuel prices, weighed 2,000 pounds and got a reported 46 miles per gallon in highway driving. “Ten million Accords later, the car had ballooned,” write Sperling and Gordon. “The 2008 model is 78 percent heavier, equipped with an engine nearly four times as powerful and loaded with power options.” It also gets 17 miles per gallon less on the highway than its predecessor.

TWO BILLION CARS:
Driving Toward
Sustainability.

By Daniel Sperling and
Deborah Gordon.
Oxford Univ. Press.
304 pp. \$24.95

sor. This example is not atypical: “Today’s *granny* car would have qualified as a performance car 25 years ago.” Neither increased weight nor greater horsepower provides any real societal good. Heavy vehicles are safer for their occupants (with certain exceptions, such as the SUV), but increase the risks to everyone driving a lighter vehicle. Increased speed increases crash risk and crash damage. What these traits appeal to is individual consumerist desire.

M*ixed Signals* may as well be the title of the book, for that is what U.S. consumers have been receiving from Detroit and federal policymakers over the last several decades. Rather than lock in and build upon the fuel efficiency gains made in the 1970s, automakers seized upon the emissions loophole for “light trucks” (a questionable label for vehicles that weigh several thousand pounds) and began building minivans, SUVs, and pickups—vehicles that Japan and Europe initially (and for good reason) had little interest in producing. And thus these vehicles, which occupied, as the authors note, a marginal 15 percent share of the market in 1971, made up more than half of sales in 2004.

The recent film *Gran Torino* can be read as a parable of Detroit: Walt Kowalski, the retired autoworker played by Clint Eastwood, is hostile to the changes occurring all around him, clinging to the past glory of his eponymous muscle car (and his pickup truck), yelling “get off my lawn” at interlopers. (As Sperling and Gordon note, Detroit still benefits from a 25 percent tax on imported pickup trucks.) Kowalski also embodies the typical Detroit customer these days: older, and living in a place where income and population are growing least.

While carving out a profitable, if precarious, niche in inefficient vehicles, American manufacturers were ceding ground in technological innovation to Japan. As the authors recount, in 2003 General Motors, “in the midst of its expansive hydrogen and fuel cell R&D program,” was granted fewer than 50 patents, while Honda secured more than 300. Meanwhile, GM head

Robert Lutz was denouncing the science of global warming. The historian Lewis H. Siegelbaum, in *Cars for Comrades* (2008), his study of the Soviet automobile, noted that Detroit—with its bloated bureaucracy, expensive “pretend to work” job-bank schemes for downsized workers, and debilitating health insurance costs—resembles nothing so much as the Soviet car industry before its collapse. And that was before Detroit manufacturers asked the U.S. government for billions in bailout money.

But the problems extend far beyond Detroit. U.S. car companies, amid recent difficulties, were chastised in some quarters for not building the fuel-efficient cars that people wanted. In fact, apart from loyal drivers of the EV-1 (the first mainstream production electric vehicle) and its ilk, consumers were voting with their dollars for larger, less fuel-efficient vehicles. And why shouldn’t they? Gas was cheap, the federal gas tax hadn’t been raised—not even to adjust for inflation—since 1993, and the government even gave tax credits for the purchase of “light trucks,” heavier vehicles once used for “work” but now becoming personal cars. Perversely, tax breaks on hybrid vehicles were curtailed as their sales increased.

For a variety of reasons, more emotional than practical—some dim fantasy of a last unpaved frontier to be traversed, a misplaced feeling that being higher makes you safer (SUVs are prone to rollovers), or just a desire to dominate others—U.S. consumers bought trucks and SUVs, as family farming and manufacturing shriveled. The authors cite “expanding baby boomer families” as one reason for these vehicles’ popularity, but U.S. household size—in numbers, that is; people were getting heavier, and thus requiring more fuel to get around—was actually shrinking as the number of large vehicles grew. Consumers had little incentive to drive efficient vehicles, and producers had little incentive to make them. The number and design of cup holders, the authors note, has been a more important consideration for vehicle buyers than fuel efficiency.

Things are changing, of course. For years,



In *Gran Torino*, retired autoworker Walt Kowalski takes a cue from the industry that employed him: Change is downright unwelcome.

Washington actively blocked states' efforts to improve efficiency and reduce emissions, but the political capital of the reform-minded Obama administration and a vastly weakened Detroit may have finally ended this obstructionism. And even automakers are talking about establishing a kind of "floor" for gas prices. The reason is simple: The large investments they make in more energy-efficient vehicles, mostly in response to increases in the price of gas, seem to evaporate when the price declines. For example, Toyota recently canceled plans to complete a new factory in the United States to manufacture the hybrid Prius, whose sales plunged as gas dropped below \$2 a gallon. Many propose higher gas and carbon taxes as a way to curb driving, encourage fuel efficiency, and keep fewer dollars from flowing to corrupt oil-producing regimes. These taxes might also go some small distance toward compensating for negative impacts of driving—including road damage, air pollution, noise, congestion, and higher crash risk for other drivers—for which motorists are currently given a free pass. But Sperling and Gordon caution against raising

taxes as a silver-bullet policy instrument. "Producers and consumers would barely respond to even a \$50-a-ton [carbon] tax, well above what U.S. politicians have been considering," they write.

One problem is consumers' dependency on (some would say addiction to) gasoline, which means, as the authors note, that demand (at least in the short term) is extremely price inelastic. The price has to rise a lot—the recent \$4 per gallon level was a new psychic benchmark—before consumption drops. (Gasoline is much more price inelastic than addictive substances such as cocaine and heroin, though most of us don't need those to go to work in the morning.) A gas-price floor is thus one of a basket of proposals laid out in the book, most of which center on two themes: innovation and incentives.

The urgency of these proposals hinges on a looming fact: Within the next 20 years, the planet is likely to host two billion cars. "One-fourth of all the oil consumed by humans in our entire history will be consumed from 2000 to 2010," the authors write. "And if the world

continues on its current path, it will consume as much oil in the next several decades as it has throughout its entire history to date.” Much of that will be due, of course, to the demands of China, which has reportedly surpassed the United States as the leading emitter of greenhouse gases.

There is a certain irony in the authors’ suggestion that “to promote progress, it’s in the interest of the rest of the world to enthusiastically back China in its pursuit of a more benign transport-energy path.” Shouldn’t that innovation and leadership be coming from the more advanced countries, which have been dealing

with mass motorization for a century, not less than a decade? But whatever the roads not taken, the stakes are clear: By 2050, China may have as many as 600 million cars on the road. What will the price of fuel be in 2050? That’s really a moot question, for the reasons the world cannot afford another automobile century have little to do, in the long term, with fuel prices. As former Saudi oil minister Sheikh Zaki Yamani noted, “The Stone Age did not end for lack of stone, and the Oil Age will end long before the world runs out of oil.”

TOM VANDERBILT is the author of *Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do (and What It Says About Us)* (2008).

Made in America

Reviewed by Sarah L. Courteau

THE SELF-MADE MAN OR WOMAN COMES OFF as something of a charlatan anymore. Nearly every day, genetic researchers seem to discover another human trait on which personal gumption doesn’t have all the traction. Genes aside, there’s the latest salvo in the nature vs. nurture debate. In *Outliers* (2008), America’s sweetheart sociologist, Malcolm Gladwell, argues that the success of those we dub “geniuses,” from Bill Gates to Michael Jordan to, well, Malcolm Gladwell, is little more than the snowballing of luck, privilege, cultural legacies, and other advantages—and that the disadvantages of circumstance and bad luck are overwhelmingly likely to consign us to mediocrity.

The American creed has never been this deterministic: Smarts and courage are the raw materials of success, yes, but it’s what we choose to do with them that counts. With enough perseverance and hard work, anybody can be somebody. To read *How Lincoln Learned to Read* with the new calculus in mind makes for a fascinating though ulti-

mately frustrating journey. In this difficult-to-classify volume, Daniel Wolff traces the educations of a dozen influential Americans, ranging from conventional choices, such as Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy, to the likes of Paiute schoolteacher Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins and swivel-hipped crooner Elvis Presley. Wolff himself—poet, music journalist, documentary filmmaker, and author of a book about the New Jersey town where Bruce Springsteen made his name—is difficult to categorize, which is probably why he could get his arms around this disparate cast of characters.

The question that guides Wolff is simple: “How do we learn what we need to know?” His poet’s sensibility homes in on the telling detail or the haunting image. The resulting essays resemble daguerreotypes that time and wear have rendered mostly indistinct, leaving

**HOW LINCOLN
LEARNED TO READ:**
Twelve Great
Americans and the
Educations That
Made Them.

By Daniel Wolff.
Bloomsbury.
345 pp. \$26

only a few bold lines. Perhaps unwittingly, they show how hard his question is to answer. While Wolff excavates the origins of his subjects deftly enough, he shies away from speculating much about exactly how their “educations,” in and more often out of the classroom, bore on the people they became. Still, his essays remind us that greatness in America can bubble up just about anywhere, and that even the great have trouble understanding the ingredients of their own success.

Whatever the facts of their lives, public figures in America have tended to play up their humble beginnings. In his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin encouraged the idea that he arrived in colonial Philadelphia in 1723 a runaway just shy of 18, hungry, broke, with no advantages to speak of. In reality, he grew up in the home of a respectable Boston candle and soap maker, was sent to school at age eight for a spell, and cut his rhetorical teeth as an apprentice to his older brother, a printer. When Abraham Lincoln ran for president, 70 years after Franklin’s death, he traded on the same homespun lore, declaring it “a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of me or my early life.” His education—a patchwork of winters spent in makeshift schools—he dismissed as “defective,” but it was more than many other frontier children received. Both his intellectually inclined mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, and his book-toting stepmother, Sally Bush Lincoln, strongly influenced him, and during his teenage years tending a store in Rockport, Indiana, he acquainted himself with the raw new nation by reading several newspapers. Yet we’ve tended to perpetuate the “log cabin myth” (as though Lincoln sprang into office directly from a pile of wood shavings), for, Wolff writes, it “confirmed not only Lincoln’s genius but the country’s.”

By the time Elvis Presley, Wolff’s final subject, was of school age, in the 1940s and ’50s, the son of what many dismissed as poor



Abraham Lincoln called his frontier education “defective,” but he had a booster in his stepmother. “We took particular care when he was reading not to disturb him,” she said.

“trash” could spend eight months out of the year in a classroom. Presley’s more important education was his exposure to gospel singing at the Assembly of God churches his family attended in Tupelo, Mississippi, and later in Memphis. Yet Wolff notes that one of the few times Presley grew visibly angry in public was when an interviewer suggested that his style drew from his “holy roller” background.

“That’s not it at all! . . . My religion has nothin’ to do with what I do now, because the type of stuff I do now is not religious music.”

Yes, our origins are a touchy business. “An American education,” Wolff observes, “is going to bear the marks of rebellion.” And it stands to reason that go-against-the-grain individuals will reject the notion that their early lives had a whole heap to do with how they got where they are. As Gladwell notes in *Outliers*, the Horatio Alger mythos is so

strong that we reflexively resist the idea that anything but “pluck and initiative” influenced our success. Jeb Bush—son of one American president and brother to another—once described his family roots as a “disadvantage” in his business career, and when he ran for governor in Florida he repeatedly referred to himself as a “self-made man.”

Whatever stories Wolff’s great Americans told themselves and the country, none of them—even the former slave Sojourner Truth—built their success in a vacuum. Much had to go right for that greatness to build, like a pearl around a grain of sand. But still, there’s that small hard nodule of . . . intelligence? ambition? grit? Henry Ford wrestled to account for his success, and finally concluded—conveniently for his mass-production empire—that though hard work is important, some men are born great, while “the average worker, I’m sorry to say . . . wants a job in which he does not have to think.”

Gladwell’s model of success, that opportunities great and small nudge us toward the heights, doesn’t entirely account for the fact that adversity seems to spur some to achievement and simply to crush others. Nor does it explain the trait that marks every individual in Wolff’s book: the ability to see beyond their present circumstances, to imagine another life for themselves. Henry Ford couldn’t reconcile himself to the life of a farmer that was his lot in rural Michigan. He wanted to take machines apart and figure out how they worked. Environmental writer Rachel Carson grew up in Springdale, a Pennsylvania industrial town where women were “expected to settle down with a man and raise a family.” Her older sister took a stenography job after the 10th grade and entered an early, disastrous marriage. Rachel commuted to a neighboring town to finish her high school education, then attended college, rejecting “the idea that she would func-

tion as a second-class citizen in a man’s world.”

Wolff’s biographies highlight how little we know, aside from the facts of these lives, about what drove these men and women. Their own accounts reveal more about how they wished to be perceived than about what went on in their minds during those years in schoolhouses, childhood bedrooms, or farm fields. When asked about the education that had made him, Lincoln answered in part: “I can remember going to my little bedroom, after hearing the neighbor’s talk, of an evening, with my father, and spending no small part of the night walking up and down, and trying to make out what was the exact meaning of some of their, to me, dark sayings. I could not sleep, though I often tried to, when I got on such a little hunt after an idea, until I had caught it.” Another boy would have lain down and shut his eyes. If Lincoln paced his room because he was born that way, few of us are ready to discount entirely the idea that some spark in him ignited the curiosity encoded in his DNA.

What drives any of us to greatness? Awash as we are in genetic research, sociological studies, and standardized-test results, we’re not much closer to answering that question. And perhaps that’s for the best. When self-knowledge tempts us to sit back and let DNA and destiny do the heavy lifting, we’re treading where Adam and Eve got into trouble—and in danger of pinning our failures on any number of snakes. What Wolff’s innocent little biographies do illustrate is that, gifted and driven as our leaders and geniuses are, they’re a whole lot like the rest of us—and not immune to the same foibles. Sure, it’s nice to dwell on the positive. But in these times, I can’t help wishing for a companion volume to *How Lincoln Learned to Read*. Perhaps *How Madoff Learned to Steal*, or maybe *How Greenspan Learned to Miscalculate*.

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Educating Urban America

Reviewed by Thomas Toch

IT IS EASY TO FORGET THAT IN 1965 YOUNG African-American men were slightly more likely than their white peers to hold a job. Over the next two decades, as blue-collar work declined with the rise of the information economy, employment rates among black males plummeted. At the same time, middle-class African Americans moved en masse to the suburbs. Together, these trends helped turn America's inner cities into centers of concentrated poverty. Today, the task of educating the mostly African-American and Latino students in urban schools is the nation's toughest educational test.

Many states and the federal government have sought a regulatory solution to the problem: setting universal achievement standards and calling out schools that don't measure up. While this strategy has highlighted the chinks in the nation's educational armor—more than 31,000 of the country's 97,000 public schools currently are required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act to improve their performance—it hasn't yet fixed many failing schools, a fact that's sure to spur debate when the law comes up for renewal this year or next.

Over the past decade, a different, grassroots response to the urban education crisis evolved, as social entrepreneurs bankrolled by hundreds of millions of philanthropy dollars established new types of schools and nonprofit organizations. These ventures have attracted glowing attention from *60 Minutes*, *Nightline*, Oprah Winfrey, and even Prince Charles and Nelson Mandela. Three recent books offer more probing looks at these efforts to crack the code of successful urban schooling. Though they present sympathetic portraits of promising new strategies, these reports are as sobering as they are heartening on the prospects for many deeply disadvantaged students.

In *Sweating the Small Stuff*, David Whitman, who spent nearly two decades covering social policy for *U.S. News and World Report*, profiles in rich detail half a dozen schools that are educating inner-city students under a model that he calls a “new

paternalism,” which attempts to condition students with scant structure at home to the discipline and order required for learning. At KIPP Academy, a middle school in the South Bronx, and Amistad Academy, a New Haven middle school, students must follow a strict code of classroom conduct called SLANT: Sit up, Listen to speakers, Ask and answer questions, Nod to signal that you're following conversation, and Track teachers with your eyes. In a number of the schools Whitman profiles, kids chant and do rhythmic clapping in class and assemblies. Students wear uniforms, and so little as an untucked shirt is censured. At SEED, a public boarding school for seventh through twelfth graders in Washington, D.C., and Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago, students must take etiquette

classes, where they learn everything from the difference between a salad fork and a dinner fork to how to blow your nose in public politely.

Skeptics of “new paternalism” may invoke authoritarian parochial schools of the past or, worse, the public “paternalism” that eroded the cultural heritage of Native American students a century ago by packing them off to government boarding schools. But Amistad and similar schools I've visited don't just make rules. They also give their students a lot of individual help. They are small, with enrollments of 250 to 500, so teachers and principals tend to know every student by name. If discipline is tough, it's frequently combined with recognition and rewards for high grades and good citizenship. This tough love is designed to give students with few role models a sense that adults care

SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF:

Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism.

By David Whitman.
Fordham Institute.
365 pp. \$16.95

WORK HARD. BE NICE.

How Two Inspired Teachers Created the Most Promising Schools in America.

By Jay Mathews.
Algonquin.
328 pp. \$14.95

WHATEVER IT TAKES:

Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America.

By Paul Tough.
Houghton Mifflin.
296 pp. \$26

about them, and that hard work will pay big dividends.

“Learned optimism,” champions of these schools say, is key to coaxing students to put in the long hours needed to catch up with middle-class kids. Many of the new generation of schools—whose charters don’t bind them to district regulations or teacher union contracts—run two and a half hours

Behind the flattering headlines, KIPP schools and others like them are fragile institutions, built on relentless work and no small amount of luck.

longer a day than traditional public schools, teach students in the summer and on Saturdays, test them frequently, and tutor them relentlessly. KIPP Academy even provides an “extended warranty,” continuing to tutor and

counsel students after they move on to high school.

Whitman argues that paternalism is a better alternative to the educational progressivism he sees pervading public education. Progressive schools, he contends, fail to give students sufficient direction. But the division between paternalism and progressivism is not a bright line. As Jay Mathews makes clear in *Work Hard. Be Nice*, public schools are hardly dominated by romantics who think students can teach themselves. And the new urban schools Whitman admires embrace a range of progressive priorities, from educating the “whole child” to building field trips into the curriculum.

Launching and sustaining high-performing schools in tough neighborhoods is exceedingly difficult, as Mathews, a veteran *Washington Post* education reporter, reveals in his account of KIPP Academy’s parent organization, the Knowledge Is Power Program, a national network of 66 schools. KIPP was founded by David Levin and Michael Feinberg, Ivy Leaguers who met in 1992 at a summer training program for Teach for America, a nonprofit that recruits top college students for teaching jobs in underserved public schools. Smart, naive, and passionate about educating urban kids, Levin and Feinberg drafted the KIPP model out of frustration with their perform-

ance during two years in Teach for America classrooms in Houston, drawing heavily on the ideas of two veteran public school teachers who served as their mentors, Harriett Ball and Rafe Esquith.

After launching KIPP with Feinberg in 1994 with 47 fifth graders in a single Houston classroom, Levin decamped for New York (he’d grown up rich on the Upper East Side), and in 1995 he started KIPP Academy in the South Bronx. One of his early innovations was an orchestra that incorporates most of the school’s students and has given the institution a powerful identity. The two tiny KIPP charter schools bounced from building to building (and trailers) until 1999, when *60 Minutes* profiled them. Within a year, Doris and Don Fisher, the billionaire founders of the retailing giant The Gap, were financing KIPP’s national expansion.

But even in Mathews’s highly sympathetic telling, it’s clear that behind the flattering headlines, KIPP schools and others like them are fragile institutions, built on relentless work and no small amount of luck. Feinberg, Levin, and their colleagues labor more or less 24/7—knocking on doors in search of new students, battling attrition and reluctant school officials, scavenging space, tracking down donors, finding teachers. The pace often seems unsustainable, the schools never far from the edge of collapse.

In any case, Paul Tough argues compellingly in *Whatever It Takes* that new school models cannot by themselves transform urban education. A writer and editor at *The New York Times Magazine*, Tough tells the story of the Harlem Children’s Zone, a nonprofit agency working with 7,000 kids in 97 square blocks of central Harlem. To Geoffrey Canada, a product of the South Bronx who escaped to Long Island and then to Bowdoin College in Maine before founding the organization, “it wasn’t enough to help out in just one part of a child’s life: [Harlem’s Children’s Zone] would need to combine education, social, and medical services.”

Tough finds support for Canada’s flood-the-zone strategy in cognitive research. By the time kids start kindergarten, he writes, summarizing several studies, there is “a large and disturbing difference” between the cognitive ability scores of poor kids



Educational entrepreneurs are trying to reshape urban schools. Can their models work on a big enough scale to make a real difference?

and their middle-class counterparts. Contrary to the view Charles Murray articulated in his controversial book *The Bell Curve* (1994), Tough concludes that the problems of poverty don't flow from a lack of innate intelligence. (He points out that students born into poor families and adopted by wealthier ones outscore their impoverished peers.) But neither do these disparities reflect merely an absence of economic opportunities. Rather, the poor are poor in no small part because they lack cognitive skills that can be taught.

A major factor is children's experience with language. By the age of three, the children of professional parents have a vocabulary of about 1,100 words, while the children of parents on welfare have mastered fewer than half that number. The children in more affluent families also hear about 500,000 "encouragements" (words of praise and approval) and 80,000 "discouragements" (admonitions such as "stop that"). For welfare children, the scale is weighted heavily the other way: 80,000 encouragements and 200,000 discouragements. Researchers have found that a child's experience of language has more impact on IQ and achievement

than either race or social class.

Canada discovered the hard way that poor kids lack cognitive skills when he opened an elementary-middle charter school in 2004 and watched it struggle to satisfactorily improve middle-school test scores. He had run a handful of programs for Harlem kids since 1990—including antiviolence training for teenagers—and when he launched the Harlem Children's Zone in 1997, he added more: obesity and asthma initiatives; a parenting program called Baby College; language-rich, all-day, 11-month pre-kindergartens. When the charter school stalled, he added yet another link to this "conveyor belt": a longer and more advanced parenting program covering discipline, brain development strategies, and health for the 200 winners of a kindergarten lottery. And he took steps to ensure that more kids moved through the organization's entire early-childhood program. Now he's waiting to see the outcome.

A number of the new "no excuses" schools, meanwhile, have produced stellar results. For example, Whitman reports that 87 percent of KIPP Academy students passed the New York State

Regents eighth-grade math test in 2005–06, compared with 54 percent of students statewide, and no more than 16 percent in KIPP's neighboring South Bronx middle schools. Some critics have suggested that stronger students self-select into the schools' applicant pools, and that there's more attrition among the schools' weaker students. Whitman acknowledges that incoming students at KIPP Academy have "significantly stronger" skills than most South Bronx students, but says that "creaming" isn't commonplace in KIPP schools nationally. High rates of student attrition, Mathews concedes, are a "common occurrence" in KIPP schools.

The big question is whether the new models can be scaled up to reach the many students who need help. The answer is, not easily. In a decade, education entrepreneurs have created at most a couple hundred very strongly performing schools, serving perhaps 55,000 of the nation's more than eight million urban students. Among the major obstacles to a broader effort: Talented teachers and principals are hard to find and burn out quickly; the schools' longer calendar and other features that

are key to their success are expensive; and most of the schools have to pay for their own buildings and often receive less than their full share of state and local education aid. Lacking large infusions of philanthropy, many of the schools would founder financially, and the economic downturn has made the schools' plight even more precarious. The Harlem Children's Zone recently cut staff in the face of diminishing donations.

The challenge, then, is clear: Creating intensive educational environments without philanthropy would require more public funding, in many states and school systems, than charter schools—or many traditional public schools—currently receive. Impoverished students are most likely to climb the achievement ladder if they are given the kind of comprehensive help the Harlem Children's Zone supplies. But in bleak economic times, it's hard to be hopeful about funding. Then again, President Barack Obama has pledged to launch federally sponsored children's zones in 20 neighborhoods nationwide.

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CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

Mr. Wilson, It's Only Business

Reviewed by Robert Litwak

GEORGE KENNAN. HENRY Kissinger. Michael Corleone? Yes, at this critical historical juncture, the fictional antihero is making a foreign-policy offer that two specialists in the field believe we can't refuse. *The Godfather's* "unlikely wisdom" for our challenging times—as a new president attempts to preserve America's global standing in

THE GODFATHER DOCTRINE:
A Foreign Policy Parable.

By John C. Hulsman and
A. Wess Mitchell.
Princeton Univ. Press.
85 pp. \$9.95

the face of war, economic crisis, and rising great powers—is elucidated in this funny, smart book, an expanded version of a widely read article John C. Hulsman and A. Wess Mitchell published last year. *The Godfather Doctrine* creatively transposes the iconic 1972 film that director Francis Ford Coppola intended as an allegory of American capitalism onto contemporary geopolitics.

The parable unfolds with the attempted hit on Don Vito Corleone, head of New York City's paramount organized-crime family, by Virgil "the Turk" Sollozzo. The young Turk turns to violence after the old-school Don rejects his proposal to expand the family's business into the lucrative but dirty drug trade. With the wounded Don out of action, the Corleone sons respond to this catalytic event—a frontal assault on the existing

order by a “rogue power”—with competing strategies, each emblematic of a major American foreign-policy approach.

Adopted son and consigliere Tom Hagen—the liberal institutionalist—does not recognize the magnitude of the threat posed by the Turk and urges the illusory course of dialogue and “institutionalized restraint” to preserve the Mafia’s existing order, “a kind of Sicilian Bretton Woods” that benefited all the families. Hotheaded Sonny Corleone—the neoconservative—recognizes the Turk as an “existential threat” and overrules Tom to initiate military action against Sollozzo and his allies without the legitimizing imprimatur of the other crime families. Sonny’s recklessness, which the authors liken to the Bush administration’s heedless charge into Iraq, triggers counterbalancing moves by the other Mafia families to check the Corleones’ unrestrained power. After Sonny falls victim to his own “gangland free-for-all,” his younger brother Michael—the realist—takes up the reins of family power and, comprehending the forces of systemic change represented by the Turk, skillfully adapts to the new reality through a strategy combining Tom’s carrots and Sonny’s sticks.

Through this inspired metaphor, Hulsman and Mitchell carry out a cold, intellectual hit on Wilsonianism—the foreign-policy school whose core idea is that international peace can be achieved through the spread of democratic governments to states around the world. This motivating belief has spawned contending Democratic (liberal institutionalist) and Republican (neoconservative) versions. Few would challenge the authors’ assertion that neoconservatism is bankrupt: Its champions have been mugged by reality in Iraq; the goal of “ending tyranny” set out in George W. Bush’s second inaugural address is widely derided as vacuous utopianism.

Yet liberal institutionalists are sure to dispute *The Godfather Doctrine’s* analysis and policy prescriptions. They point to the failure of realism to account for the dog that did not bark in the 1990s: When the United States emerged from the Cold War as the sole remaining superpower,

no countervailing coalition of states stepped forward to balance American power, as realist theory would have predicted. Political scientist John Ikenberry has convincingly argued that America went unchallenged because its hyperpower was channeled through international institutions, which made that power legitimate and less threatening to other states. Liberal institutionalists now argue that America must return to this winning strategy. Hence, their response to an increasingly autocratic Russia’s assertion of its interests in Georgia is to focus not on isolating and containing Russia, as the realists advocate, but on redoubling efforts to integrate it into the international order.

In one key respect, the authors acknowledge the limits of their metaphor. Americans do not hold to the realist tenet that countries do not have friends, only interests. In the 1970s, Kissinger, the balance-of-power realist, found that the balance he sought abroad did not balance at home. While Kissinger strove to transform the United States’ Cold War relationship with the Soviet Union through détente diplomacy, the American public would not rally behind a realpolitik seemingly divorced from concerns about human rights and the promotion, more broadly, of American values. For Americans, foreign policy is not “just business.”

Americans do not hold to the realist tenet that countries do not have friends, only interests. . . . For Americans, foreign policy is not “just business.”

American foreign policy can be thought of as an ongoing conversation between Wilson and Kissinger. In that dialogue, the choice between realism and liberal institutionalism is a false one. Policymakers can strive at best to manage, not resolve, the inherent tension between these approaches. And indeed, managing that tension is at the heart of the foreign-policy challenges facing our new president.

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Whose Is Whose

Reviewed by Kembreu McLeod

EARLIER THIS YEAR IT CAME to light that guerilla artist Shepard Fairey, whose iconic poster helped to define Barack Obama's presidential campaign, based his design on a 2006 photograph by an Associated Press freelancer. The fact that it was well over a year before someone tracked down the source material indicates the extent to which Fairey altered the photographic image. Now the AP—which claims the rights to the photo—is caught up in a legal battle with Fairey, who argues that he didn't violate copyright law because he dramatically changed and reinterpreted the original work. Whatever the outcome, this incident underscores how the once obscure body of intellectual property law has crept into virtually all areas of contemporary life—sometimes for better, but often for worse.

It's this point that Duke law professor James Boyle hammers home in his remarkable book *The Public Domain*, the long-awaited follow-up to his deliciously titled study of rights in the information age, *Shamans, Software, and Spleens* (1996). Today's restrictive intellectual property laws don't just make it possible for recording industry executives to sue teenagers who download music from the Internet. They help determine the food we eat (a patent has been granted for making a sealed crustless peanut butter and jelly sandwich), the medicines available to us, and how freely information can spread. Exploring an eclectic range of topics—the book's index lists Benjamin Franklin directly below actor/singer Jamie Foxx—Boyle makes imaginative connections between environmentalism, the Internet, home video-recording technologies, and open-source software.

Boyle worries that culture and knowledge are increasingly fenced off and privatized, despite the fact that the Constitution articulates a theory of intellectual property law that is much more open than what we have today. In the early 19th century,

THE PUBLIC DOMAIN:

Enclosing the Commons of the Mind.

By James Boyle.
Yale Univ. Press.
315 pp. \$28.50

a copyright lasted 14 years and could be renewed just once. Under legislation passed over the last three decades, a copyright now lasts the life of the author plus 70 years. Furthermore, in 1980 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that patent law covers living organisms, such as bacteria, paving the way for patents on human DNA sequences. These expansions occurred as intellectual property was becoming an engine of the economy and, not coincidentally, as technological advances were making copy production increasingly easy.

The intellectually dexterous chapter "I Got a Mashup" underscores what is at stake when copyright extends its reach into previously untouched areas of culture and creativity. Boyle traces a genealogy of rapper Kanye West's 2005 hit "Gold Digger," a song that has already been sampled, and which itself quotes from Ray Charles's 1955 breakthrough hit "I Got a Woman." That song heavily borrowed from one, perhaps two, earlier gospel songs. This sort of appropriation was common in the mid-1950s, when Charles and other singers



Artist Shepard Fairey had the audacity to hope he wouldn't have to credit the photo that inspired his iconic poster.

such as Sam Cooke scandalized the gospel world by secularizing church songs—inventing soul music along the way.

While jazz and soul were able to evolve and thrive midcentury, hip-hop, a more recent African-American musical genre, has been stymied by heightened copyright restrictions. Multiplatinum artists such as West can afford to pay \$50,000 or even \$100,000 for the use of a song snippet that may last only a few seconds. But the dense sonic collages produced in the late 1980s by experimental artists the likes of De La Soul and Public Enemy would be prohibitively expensive to distribute today.

Boyle persuasively maintains that we cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the harm that pervasive intellectual property law is doing. “A better intellectual property system certainly will not end world hunger;” or, for that matter, cure AIDS, fight malaria, or save the planet. “But,” he concludes, “overly broad, or vague, or confusing patents could (and I believe have) hurt all of those efforts.” Still, Boyle assures us that there is no need to succumb to doom or gloom. In the final chapters, he documents the ways ordinary citizens have successfully pushed back against the law’s expansionist tendencies—for example, by attaching generous terms of use to their own work. The future is still up for grabs.

KEMBLEW McLEOD teaches communication studies at the University of Iowa. He is a coproducer of the forthcoming documentary *Copyright Criminals: This Is a Sampling Sport*, and is the author of *Freedom of Expression®: Resistance and Repression in the Age of Intellectual Property* (2007).

India’s Pilgrims

Reviewed by Vikram Johri

AMITAV GHOSH’S EXCELLENT 2008 novel *Sea of Poppies* acquainted readers with early-19th-century India, delving into the lives of “coolies”—indentured laborers—who were transported to islands as distant as Fiji and Mauritius to work on British plantations, even after slavery was

LEAVING INDIA:
My Family’s Journey
From Five Villages to
Five Continents.

By Minal Hajratwala.
Houghton Mifflin
Harcourt. 430 pp. \$26

outlawed in the British Empire in 1834. When I picked up Minal Hajratwala’s *Leaving India*, I was delighted at the prospect of reading a tale about a real family from the state of Gujarat that spread across the globe. The book did not disappoint. It is a fascinating study of a few of the emigrants whose tentative steps eventually resulted in today’s Indian diaspora of as many as 30 million people.

Hajratwala, a journalist who currently lives in San Francisco, begins by drawing an elaborate portrait of her paternal clan, the Solankis. According to the *varna* system that designates social standing, Hindus descended from four distinct groups: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (artisans), and Shudras (laborers). The Solankis are Kshatriyas, and Hajratwala builds on this seemingly inconsequential fact to narrate an account, based on community lore, of how her ancestors turned from warriors to weavers, and how that dovetails with her paternal great-grandfather’s intrepid journey in 1909 to seek his fortune in Fiji. There he worked as a tailor—a first step on the way to building one of the South Pacific’s largest department stores.

Hajratwala’s maternal grandfather, Narotam, also left India to improve his lot. In 1930, he walked with Gandhi during the famous march to Dandi to protest a colonial salt tax. A year later, to support his young family, Narotam joined the Gujarati community in Fiji and began sewing women’s clothes. Eventually, he and his brother opened a store that sold ready-made clothing. His last child, Bhanu (the author’s mother), was born in 1946, a year before India gained independence from Britain.

It is a tribute to Hajratwala’s writing that she is able to coalesce the disparate factions of her family into a satisfying whole. And we are not even halfway there. It’s 1963, and a young man is about to make use of the recently relaxed U.S. rules for foreigners wishing to study in America. Bhupendra, the author’s father, enrolled at the University of Colorado, Boulder, to study manufacturing. He was among the first generation of Asian immigrants to come to the United States for skills

training—and permanently change the composition of the country.

The families arranged an alliance between Bhupendra and Bhanu, who was still in Fiji at the time. The two had nothing in common except the “Gujarati from Fiji” tag. He was stern and no-nonsense; she was sweet and artistic. The wedding was hastened so that Bhupendra could return to the United States in time for the start of the new school year. The newlyweds haltingly made their lives in America, which required numerous adjustments, large and small. When she first arrived, Bhanu, not a vegetarian, was nevertheless aghast at the bloody look of the meat on offer—especially beef, which she had never

tasted—and for a whole day ate nothing but *chevdo*, a traditional Indian snack mix.

When the author’s mother arrived in the United States, she was aghast at the bloody look of the meat on offer.

The day Hajratwala was born, in 1971, her father sent out three telegrams, one each to Fiji, Toronto, and Lon-

don. He also received a telegram offering him an academic position in New Zealand. And so this peripatetic family was again propelled to new shores. “Gain and loss, give and take: These are the fundamental tropes of migration, the ebbs and flows that are as certain as travel itself,” Hajratwala writes.

Perhaps the most prominent symbol of change in her family was the cultural openness in America that allowed Hajratwala to come out as a lesbian to her parents. It may be the limited scope of the book that prevents Hajratwala from fully exploring how immigrant communities handle the explosive subject of homosexuality. Yet her spirited and sympathetic representation of the rapidly expanding Indian diaspora testifies to the truth of the Indian adage, “What Destiny writes, neither human nor god may put asunder.”

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ARTS & LETTERS

National Subject

Reviewed by Matthew Battles

IN THE 18TH AND EARLY 19th centuries, many Americans saw no place for art in their new nation. The country lacked professional art academies, patrons who commissioned work for palaces and cathedrals, and

the leisure to appreciate art. In fact, however, this new land presented painters and sculptors with a host of opportunities. Wealthy colonists wanted their portraits limned; they lined their studies with paintings and ornaments. And, as Hugh Howard shows in *The Painter’s Chair*, post-colonial America’s political culture called on a generation of artists to develop new means of representing history, power, and achievement.

The painter’s chair of Howard’s title is no mere stool or Windsor armchair, but a technical apparatus—a seat on gimbal and screw—that permitted the artist to revolve a sitter without altering his pose as the light changed throughout the day. George Washington became intimately familiar with the chairs of many artists. By Howard’s count, Washington sat for at least 28 painters, several of them on numerous occasions. The resulting portraits were endlessly reproduced. Despite his frequent expressions of impatience, Washington keenly understood the manifold purposes of the visual arts in his time—to provide a record of people and events, mementos of loved ones, and the images that helped form public discourse and popular mythology.

Whether Washington was sitting for artists or presiding over the Constitutional Convention, his impassive countenance belied a sensitive apprehension of events. One of Howard’s most delightful scenes, in which Washington lies on a large table at Mount

THE PAINTER’S CHAIR:

George Washington and the Making of American Art.

By Hugh Howard.
Bloomsbury.
297 pp. \$30

Vernon breathing through quills in his nostrils while the sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon trowels his face with warm plaster, is described by the subject himself. The first president recorded the procedure in his journal with plainspoken precision, noting that the process began with pieces of gypsum broken into lumps “the size of a pullets egg,” and that the plaster was ready to apply to his face when “made as thick as Loblolly or very thick cream.”

Howard, who has written extensively about the Founding Fathers’ attitudes toward architecture, has produced in *The Painter’s Chair* a serious work of art history. Alternating Washington’s turns in the chair with episodes in the lives of painters such as John Trumbull and Gilbert Stuart, he shows us how the course of human events in the young nation helped to break new ground in image-making as well. Paintings that might appear stodgy and stale to the modern eye were innovative in their time. By depicting General James Wolfe’s death in the 1759 Battle of Quebec in a realist style, for instance, showing soldiers and officers in contemporary dress rather than classical attire, Benjamin West broke with convention and caused a sensation in London. That painting paved the way for West’s pupil John Trumbull to depict the signers of the Declaration of Independence in the same fashion. But Trumbull’s painting took innovation a step further, Howard argues, by treating the signing of a document as an occasion as momentous as a battle. Trumbull’s work cast the Enlightenment occupation of political thinking in heroic mode. “Although it records a legislative moment rather than a military confrontation,” Howard writes of the painting that bears the name of this founding document, “*The Declaration of Independence* would ring out over the centuries louder than a cannon shot.”

Howard’s story turns melancholy after Washington’s death, as the next generation of artists contends with the deepening complexi-



Rembrandt Peale’s *Patriae Pater* (1795), in the U.S. Capitol, portrays a modern George Washington as a hero for the ages.

ties of life in the new Republic. Rembrandt Peale, troubled son of the Revolutionary War figure and portraitist Charles Peale, painted the elderly Washington in 1795 as a fragile paterfamilias. Many years later, the younger Peale produced another portrait of the father of the country. In *Patriae Pater*, which hangs in the U.S. Capitol, we see a vigorous Washington framed in a heavy stone porthole festooned with graven oak leaves and the head of Jupiter. Peale had returned to the classicism eschewed by his father’s generation, but it’s a twisted classicism, bathed in shadows and crepuscular light. The painting glowers with romantic intensity. Between us and glory stands history, cold and immobile as stone. It’s as if we’re looking through the oculus of a mausoleum—yet it’s impossible to tell whether the tomb is Washington’s or our own.

MATTHEW BATTLES writes regularly for the Ideas section of *The Boston Globe*. He is the author of *Library: An Unquiet History* (2003) and is at work on a book about the history of writing.

Flibbertigibbets

Reviewed by Michael Moynihan

ON JULY 26, 1924, *THE Daily Mail* reported that an insouciant gang of youths had been spotted, extravagantly costumed, trundling through London on an evening treasure hunt. The actress Tallulah Bankhead had been in attendance, as well as various less famous, but no less well-heeled, members of London's smart set. The carefree party culture of England's bourgeoisie predated this event, of course, but the *Mail* made clear that its reporter had just witnessed the debut of the "Bright Young People." Those who think America's rapacious celebrity culture—heirs and heiresses whose only discernable talent is the effortless credit card swipe—is unique in its excess and vapidness are advised to read British writer D. J. Taylor's *Bright Young People*, an engrossing social history of the blue bloods, bohos, and bobos who constituted the "lost generation" of post-World War I England.

Readers familiar with Evelyn Waugh's early novels—notably *Vile Bodies* (1930), the *ur-text* of Bright Young culture—will find the milieu that Taylor describes familiar. Waugh shifted between participant and observer of the Bright Young parties, and had a keen eye for the minutiae of upper-class society—the generation-specific neologisms, the absurdly posh names. Not only was this cultural hothouse the *mise en scène* for writers such as Waugh and gadabout journalist Tom Driberg, but, as Taylor writes, the Bright Young circle also midwived the careers of "half a dozen leading figures in ballet, photography, and surrealist painting."

In many respects, Taylor writes, the Bright Young People were "a symptom of the continuing reaction against the stuffiness of prewar social arrangements." The children of the Brit-

BRIGHT YOUNG PEOPLE:

The Lost Generation of London's Jazz Age.

By D. J. Taylor.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 384 pp. \$27

ish bourgeoisie, having just watched a generation of young men slaughtered at the Somme, rapidly took to indulging in drug- and alcohol-fueled parties, which had the side effect of blurring traditional class boundaries. The "doomed youth," too young to have fought in the Great War but unconscious beneficiaries of the melancholic poetry and literature it produced, banded together in bacchanalian revelry. "England," Taylor writes, "was turning more democratic."

It was an age when parties had names and themes, at which the assembled mugged for the cameras and drowned themselves in drink. Widely publicized events such as the White Party are clear predecessors of Truman Capote's 1966 Black and White Ball, while the infamous Bruno Hat exhibition, a collection of Modernist paintings by a fictitious artist, doubtless influenced Scottish novelist William Boyd's "discovery" of the "artist" Nat Tate in a 1998 biography, later revealed as a hoax. It was a Bright Young hobby—the hopelessly pretentious puncturing of pretension.

But the story is also deeply tragic, as evidenced by the fate of party fixture Elizabeth Ponsonby, the socialite daughter of Labor Party member of Parliament Arthur Ponsonby. Using hitherto unpublished family diaries, Taylor provides a running narrative of the young woman's aimlessness and ultimately fatal decline into substance abuse. Her father sighed that she possessed "all the crudest faults of the modern girl," and lamented that his daughter's "preference for disreputable people is . . . incorrigible." She was dead from alcoholism before she reached 40.

The political and economic crises of the 1930s pushed some partygoers toward more serious pursuits. The writer Beverley Nichols, a circuit regular in the 1920s, declared that he "could not go on much longer, drinking cocktails and talking nonsense while the clouds were gathering over Europe," and became a pacifist. Diana Mitford adored the pageantry of the 1920s party culture, but soon cuckolded

her husband and embraced the political pageantry of fascism. Betrayed by his first wife, Evelyn Waugh escaped the scene that had provided him fame, converted to Catholicism, and remarried.

It is difficult to divine just what the collapse of the movement presaged. A rather uninteresting answer is that the participants' inexorable slide toward adulthood was as much responsible for the end of Bright Young culture as anything. And as Taylor notes, media scrutiny made bohemian culture seem labored and inauthentic, the movement transmogrified "from an original style to a mass-market imitation of it," and the label Bright Young Person came to apply to "all the young in Britain who did anything unusual at all." Nevertheless, the alternative youth culture of the Bright Young Things defined an epoch in England—while helping to redefine the British class system.

MICHAEL MOYNIHAN is a senior editor of *Reason* magazine.

HISTORY

Preserved in Time

Reviewed by Andrew Curry

ON A SUMMER DAY 1,930 years ago, Italy's Mount Vesuvius erupted, overwhelming the town of Pompeii and its inhabitants within minutes in a flood of superheated gas and volcanic ash. Since the 1700s, when the town's excavation began, generations of archaeologists and historians have regarded the site as an invaluable snapshot of life in a typical Roman city: Pompeii, in the popular imagination, is a city "frozen in time."

But is it really? The truth, as University of Cambridge classics professor Mary Beard emphasizes in *The Fires of Vesuvius*, is quite different. Pompeii, near modern-day Naples, was apparently a midsize port and popular

vacation destination for wealthy Romans. Yet far from a snapshot of daily Roman life, what archaeologists unearthed was a town under extreme duress. The numbers tell the tale:

Only 1,100 bodies have been found in the ruins, while estimates for the town's population range from 6,400 up to 30,000. In Pompeii's final hours, its populace fled, carrying their valuables. The ghoulish plaster casts of the dead for which the site is famous capture not unsuspecting townspeople, but the final moments of an unlucky few who waited too long to clear out. And some of the ruins we see today may have been ruins back then too: At the time of the eruption, Pompeii was still rebuilding after a severe earthquake that had devastated the area 17 years earlier.

In a survey that encompasses Pompeians' religion, diet, and even traffic patterns, Beard sets out to correct many of the misimpressions that countless guidebooks—and guides—have foisted on tourists. The town's ruins became a mandatory stop on the Grand Tour of 18th- and 19th-century Europeans. Visitors were captivated by the idea of witnessing a moment in time—and by the twisted forms of ancient Romans. Writers from Percy Bysshe Shelley to Edward Bulwer-Lytton penned Pompeii-inspired reflections on the fragility of life and love. The town's residences were given romantic names such as the House of the Tragic Poet, the House of the Golden Bracelet, and the House of the Prince of Naples by excavators, visitors, and sponsors. More than two centuries of tourism and excavation have left a legacy of assumptions that cloud our understanding of the site—and, since Pompeii contains some of the best evidence about daily life in the Roman world, about Rome itself.

The Fires of Vesuvius lays out decades of specialist debate in clear, reader-friendly prose. To present the scholarship as smoothly as possible, Beard has gathered her sources in an appendix, often alluding to them in the main text with frustratingly vague phrases

THE FIRES OF VESUVIUS: Pompeii Lost and Found.

By Mary Beard.
Harvard Univ. Press.
304 pp. \$26.95



Plaster casts of the impressions Pompeians left in volcanic ash are ghoulish emblems of an ancient disaster.

such as “some historians have suspected” and “fascinating details continue to be discovered.” But the various scholarly debates she describes are themselves fascinating, even if she stops short of providing many new interpretations or conclusions of her own.

Take the Pompeian Brothel Problem, a debate among scholars as to which of the hundreds of buildings in town can plausibly be called houses of ill repute. The estimates range from a lusty 35 bordellos to just one, a somewhat depressing five-cell affair whose erotic murals and more than 150 (unprintable) graffiti make it one of the most popular sights in town today. Or what about the proliferation of penises, which pop up everywhere you look—over bread ovens, carved into paving stones, painted on frescoes, and scrawled on walls. “Phallus birds” adorned with little bells even hung over the entrance to many of the town’s inns and bars. Were the

Romans wildly oversexed—or was the phallus simply a symbol of good luck, a little like our four-leaf clover today? For all we think we know about Pompeii and the Romans, there are some questions that continue to tease.

ANDREW CURRY, a freelance writer living in Berlin, is a contributing editor to *Archaeology*.

Personal History

Reviewed by Gerald J. Russello

JOHN LUKACS IS ONE OF the last great narrative historians. Over the course of his career he has written some 30 books, erudite histories accessible to the wider public, without much attention to academic fashion. His books on World War II remain essential reading, and his reflection

LAST RITES.

By John Lukacs.
Yale Univ. Press.
187 pp. \$25

on how we think about the past, *Historical Consciousness* (1968), is a classic.

Now in his eighties, Lukacs came to the United States from Hungary in 1946, a refugee from the emergent communist bloc. He found a home at Chestnut Hill College, where he has remained, deeply rooted in the small institution and in its hometown, Philadelphia, about which he wrote a discerning book. This dual heritage—a connection to the perhaps less understood eastern portion of Europe and his devotion to the Anglo-American civilization he found in the United States—is evident in much of his scholarship. Lukacs is a conservative who exasperates other conservatives; last year he penned a sharply critical review of Patrick J. Buchanan's book on Adolf Hitler, and he has styled himself an "anti-anticommunist," attributing Soviet aggression not to Marxism but to deep-seated features of the Russian national character.

Last Rites picks up the themes of Lukacs's 1990 book *Confessions of an Original Sinner*, which he described as an "auto-history," to distinguish it from autobiography. Like that earlier book, *Last Rites* is organized around his thoughts and beliefs rather than a linear life chronology. In it, Lukacs considers his native Hungarian pessimism and his ambient American optimism, explains his conviction that Winston Churchill almost alone saved Europe from Hitler, and writes sensitively and profoundly about his three marriages (he was twice widowed) and his children.

Lukacs is perhaps best known for his conviction that human knowledge is "participatory," and for holding that the barrier set up by Enlightenment thinking between subject and object is an illusion. History, properly considered, is not concerned with attaining objectivity, but with seeking understanding. "The ideal of objectivity is the total, the anti-septic separation of the knower from the known. Understanding involves an approach, that of getting closer. In any event, and about

everything: there is, there can be, no essential separation from the knower and the known." Drawing on his lifelong engagement with the work of the physicist Werner Heisenberg, Lukacs finds even scientists improperly focused on false "facts" in creating an illusory objectivity. For what makes a scientific fact of interest is primarily that we are there to observe it, and, as Heisenberg taught, our very observance changes the observed event itself.

This may seem simply postmodern *avant la lettre*, but to label it that would be to mistake

Lukacs's point. All does not dissolve into subjectivity.

Because we are historical beings, our understanding of the past and the world

around us must be a

deeply moral and humbling enterprise. Humans invested the universe with meaning, according to Lukacs, and we are responsible for what we do with it. "The universe is such as it is because at the center of it there exist conscious and participatory human beings who can see it, explore it, study it."

In addition to providing a window into the mind of a great historian, *Last Rites* is a delight to read. Lukacs refers as easily to physics as to literature, and he includes intimate snippets from his unpublished diary. Witty and engaged, he has polished the art of the diverting footnote or illustrative anecdote to a high sheen. This makes his elegiac tone all the more striking. Like Jacques Barzun, George F. Kennan, and Samuel Huntington, Lukacs writes in defense of a lost world. He mourns the end of what he calls the Bourgeois Age—roughly the last 500 years of European civilization—which saw the development of cities and economic security, and, more important for Lukacs, the evolution of the "self" into its recognizable modern form.

GERALD J. RUSSELLO is the editor of *The University Bookman*.

Historian John Lukacs is a conservative who exasperates other conservatives.

Legal Limits

Reviewed by Alexandra Vacroux

EQUAL IS THE STORY OF THE resolute and plucky lawyers (many female, some male) who tackled one obstacle after another to reverse gender-based discrimination in the United States. Fred Strebeigh, a writer who teaches nonfiction at Yale, draws us into his tale by tracing the careers and accomplishments of U.S. Supreme Court justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sandra Day O'Connor, feminist legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon, and many lesser-known but no less-determined women. All the action takes place in the few short decades since American law schools began admitting women in more than token numbers.

Strebeigh begins with the fight against rules that arbitrarily preferred men over women in the allocation of government rights and benefits. As a law professor at Rutgers and then Columbia, Ginsburg worked with a few close allies to advance cases that strategically undermined the Supreme Court's interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause. Since the amendment's enactment in 1868, the Court had not subjected the charge of discrimination against women to the same scrutiny as a charge of racial discrimination. Only as a Supreme Court justice herself did Ginsburg finally succeed in nudging the Court to apply "skeptical scrutiny"—though still not the highest standard of "strict scrutiny"—to laws that may violate the U.S. Constitution's promise of "equal protection of the laws" for women. In 1996, in *United States v. Virginia*, she wrote the majority opinion finding that the Fourteenth Amendment required the exclusive Virginia Military Institute to admit women.

Elsewhere, Strebeigh examines the struggles to open law schools and the legal profession to women, to ensure that pregnant women were not discriminated against, and to codify sexual harassment and domestic violence as crimes. The

EQUAL:

Women Reshape American Law.

By Fred Strebeigh.
Norton. 582 pp. \$35

narrative of incremental legal change is enlivened by Strebeigh's gift for fleshing out the human drama underlying key cases. His extensive interviews with those who prepared and argued those cases, as well as the use of Court and personal archives, allow him to piece together some of the personal dynamics on the Supreme Court.

Strebeigh is particularly good at dramatizing how the Supreme Court works, and how it vies with Congress to shape the law. For example, he devotes a chapter to the 1976 case *General Electric Co. v. Gilbert*, which arose because GE (which employed 100,000 women) excluded conditions relating to pregnancy from its disability plan, in part because of the cost. In the words of GE president Gerard Swope, "Women did not recognize the responsibilities of life, for they probably were hoping to get married soon and leave the company." In the Court's majority opinion, William Rehnquist wrote that the 1964 Civil Rights Act did not define the word "discrimination" in a way that made it clearly illegal to discriminate against pregnant women. An outraged Congress quickly passed what became the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, which President Jimmy Carter signed in 1978.

The parallel between the struggle for equality for people of color and efforts to apply civil rights protections to women—which came later—runs through Strebeigh's account. President John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act of 1963 just before introducing a draft of the legislation that would become the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The draft only prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin. A Virginia congressman proposed adding "sex"—he said later, "as a joke"—as an additional category in Title VII, the section that concerned employment, hoping this would kill the bill. It didn't. But enforcement was another matter: For years, the newly created Equal Employment Opportunity Commission dealt grudgingly with cases of gender discrimination. Susan Deller Ross, a lawyer who joined the EEOC in 1970 to work on women's rights, recalls being greeted by a

female colleague who grumbled bitterly, “I hear you’re one of those feminists.”

Equal is a sobering reminder that these battles were fought within the lifetime of any woman older than 30. In the absence of a ratified constitutional amendment guaranteeing women equal rights, recognition that women are entitled to the same legal protections as men has emerged gradually. This book generates a genuine appreciation for the legal entrepreneurs who fought long and hard to make possible the careers of many a professional woman, including this one.

ALEXANDRA VACROUX is a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Evolved Tastes

Reviewed by John Onians

THE TRIUMPHS OF CULTURE ARE the product not of fashion, but of deeply rooted instincts. This is the central argument of Denis Dutton’s tour de force *The Art Instinct*, in which he shows that the most compelling works of art in all societies, from the most urban to the most scattered, have common attributes. These characteristics are so universal that they are best understood not as having been built by a process of “social construction” over millennia, but as forged by the powerful selective pressures to which our ancestors were exposed starting roughly 1.6 million years ago during the Pleistocene Epoch, “the evolutionary theater in which we acquired the tastes, intellectual features, emotional dispositions, and personality traits that distinguish us from our hominid ancestors.” Dutton examines the consequences of this exposure in *The Art Instinct*, leading us to reconsider some of the central problems of aesthetics.

Sometimes Dutton focuses on a particular artistic manifestation, as when he reflects on the preference of people from Kenya to Iceland—as expressed in a 1993 worldwide poll—for bluish

landscapes containing people, animals, and some water. This taste results, Dutton argues, not from contemporary exposure to such images, as the prominent art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto has claimed, but from an inborn taste for a landscape resembling the African savanna in which our ancestors thrived during the Pleistocene.

Sometimes Dutton’s viewpoint is truly Olympian, as when he identifies the “cluster criteria” that define art: “direct pleasure,” “skill and virtuosity,” “style,” “novelty and creativity,” and so on. These qualities, he suggests, are manifest to different degrees in Schubert songs, Shakespearean sonnets, and the Sepik shields of New Guineans. Because his criteria “are not chosen to suit a preconceived theoretical purpose,” they provide a “neutral basis for theoretical speculation.”

Dutton—who founded the popular website *Arts & Letters Daily* and teaches the philosophy of art at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand—cites leading philosophers, biologists, sociologists, and evolutionary psychologists. Some he challenges, others he co-opts. Always he is incisive, as when he robustly disputes the claims of some anthropologists that the artifacts of the communities they study—such as Hindu *jjonti* paintings—share nothing with Western conventions. Usually, in spite of his evident impatience, Dutton is respectful, allowing his opponents to have their say before dispatching them.

He is less convincing when advancing his own core idea, that all the activities he groups together as artistic are the product of a rich but unitary mental inclination shaped by sexual selection—the evolutionary process that pits suitors against one another. Charles Darwin proposed this mechanism to explain excesses, such as the peacock’s tail, that appear incompatible with the economy of “natural selection,” and Dutton invokes it to explain the richness and elaboration of art. In his view, it was the persistence of the selective pressures associated with obtaining a mate that led to the development of a single “art instinct.” Although he strives to defend this suggestion against the notion that the many forms of artistic activity are simply spinoffs from

THE ART INSTINCT:
Beauty, Pleasure,
and Human
Evolution.

By Denis Dutton.
Bloomsbury.
278 pp. \$25

a myriad of abilities shaped by natural selection, he is unable to explain the advantage of his reductive view. The very complexity of artistic expression suggests deeper roots than the need to impress and attract a mate.

Dutton's thesis is also undermined by his brilliant penultimate chapter, in which he shows that the senses of smell and hearing, both vital to survival, have not developed to the same potential as vehicles of artistic expression. Music, in particular, presents a challenge to his theory about the unity of the arts as evolved under the pressures of sexual selection. He bluntly admits that "annexing music wholly to the procreative interests in the way that sexual selection suggests misses a great deal of the art itself as we understand it today." As he goes on to point out, "Much music making is communal on a large scale (chorus or orchestra before a large audience), whereas love-making remains cross-culturally a private transaction." At the end of his chase, the single explanation eludes him.

Still, the odd bent feather does nothing to diminish the overall achievement of this peacock's tail of a book. Taking us on a world tour of creative masterpieces and exploiting a rich spectrum of the mind's resources, Dutton succeeds in persuading us that we will never understand human culture unless we understand human nature.

JOHN ONIANS is professor emeritus of art history at the University of East Anglia and the author, most recently, of *Neuroarthistory: From Aristotle and Pliny to Bazandall and Zeki* (2008).

Down With Dogma

Reviewed by Theo Anderson

READERS MAY BE SURPRISED to see the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau likened to the fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell in *The Future of Liberalism*. But Rousseau is only one among many unwitting bedfellows with fundamentalists, according to Alan Wolfe, a political scientist and the direc-

tor of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. Others include sociobiologists, extreme atheists, and anti-globalization activists. What they have in common is an illiberal worldview. To some degree, they all lack liberalism's resistance to dogma and its commitment to openness and pragmatism.

The Future of Liberalism—part history, part prescriptive treatise, part polemic—defines liberalism not by strict adherence to any particular ideology but as "a set of dispositions." Among these are a sympathy for equality; a preference for "realism," which Wolfe defines as a reliance on facts; and a taste for deliberation and governance. He sets liberalism's dispositions against conservatism, which originated in opposition to the democratic ferment of 18th-century Europe. Traditionally, conservatism endorsed high levels of social inequality and relied on strong state institutions to enforce the status quo. But in the United States, a nation committed in principle to equality, conservatives recognized that anti-egalitarianism had a dim political future. Rather than align themselves with the state, they have cast it as the great enemy of "the people."

Wolfe believes that antistatism has become a dysfunctional dogma among conservatives. Its logical outcome was put on full display by Hurricane Katrina, which tested the idea—one of conservatism's first principles—that private charities and local governments are best suited to delivering relief and supporting communities. The disastrous aftermath of the storm, and the failures of government at all levels, he writes, "should therefore be viewed as a decisive event in the history of political philosophy, at least as far as the United States is concerned."

The relevant question in Katrina's wake, according to Wolfe, is not whether we need strong governmental institutions, but how to harness their powers wisely. By denying this reality, conservatives have consigned themselves to long-term irrelevance. The corollary of this striking claim is Wolfe's equally striking—and

THE FUTURE OF LIBERALISM.

By Alan Wolfe.
Knopf. 325 pp. \$25.95

exaggerated—assertion that liberalism is the only viable political philosophy left standing, at least in the West. Yet after decades of defending themselves from attacks on “big government,” liberals are timid at a moment when they should be proclaiming liberalism’s triumph. One of Wolfe’s central aims is to fortify liberals by explaining why they should be proud of their tradition and aggressive in advocating their philosophy.

Wolfe is deft in tracing the development of political ideas and worldviews. He covers many of the familiar thinkers of European and American intellectual history and introduces readers to lesser-known figures such as German jurist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), one of the most influential antiliberals of recent times. This historical dimension is the book’s great strength. Wolfe is less persuasive in his role as prophet of liberalism’s triumph. His title borrows from an address the philosopher John Dewey gave in 1934, and the homage is appropriate. Like Dewey, Wolfe possesses a deep faith in the powers of reason and democracy. Consistent with his optimism, he believes that there is much more uniting Americans

than dividing us. Perhaps so.

But it is worth noting that in the early 1930s, Dewey and many of his colleagues were similarly convinced. They believed that old sources of division—particularly orthodox religion—were dying and that a new era of cooperation and reason was dawning. They said as much in 1933, in the “Humanist Manifesto.” Four decades later, Dewey and the “Manifesto” became powerful galvanizing tools for the rising Religious Right in the United States, as leaders such as Falwell warned that Dewey’s “secular humanism” had poisoned American life.

Wolfe has a keen sense of irony, and he surely understands this one: What he sees as liberalism’s great virtues—openness, tolerance, and faith in national and international institutions, informed by reason—many others see as fatal flaws worth fighting against. If liberalism has indeed triumphed, liberals can take little comfort in that fact. As they should know, its victories are—and always must be—provisional and profoundly uncertain.

THEO ANDERSON is a writer living in Evanston, Illinois.

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PORTRAIT



TURNING OF THE TIDE

A brokerage house receives an order to buy ten shares of Goldman Sachs

Double Exposure

In 1932, *The New Yorker* poked fun at the plight of Goldman Sachs Trading Co., a highly leveraged subsidiary of the famous investment bank and one of the most dramatic falling stars of the crash of 1929.

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