

ing America's economic foundation" (he suggests investing in schools to reeducate displaced workers and in highways to link rural and suburban workers to jobs), rather than helping people buy McMansions.

Homeownership is a good thing as long as it allows families to build a stake not only in their house but in their community as well, Rosner concludes. But "a home without equity is really just a rental with debt."

SOCIETY

Ghost Bird

THE SOURCE: "Bottomland Ghost: Southern Encounters and Obsessions With the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker" by Michael K. Steinberg, in *Southern Cultures*, Spring 2008.

THE IVORY-BILLED WOODPECKER has fascinated the public since Native Americans used the bird's skins to carry medicine bundles and traded its remains as far

north as Canada. John James Audubon compared the beauty of its stunning plumage and prominent bill to the works of Flemish painter Anthony Vandyke, and it inspired writers such as William Faulkner and Walker Percy. But relentless hunting and the disappearance of the ivory-bill's habitat in southern bottomland forests took their toll. The last documented sightings were in the 1940s.

Over the years, bird experts and rural residents reported occasional sightings, but their claims were ridiculed, writes Michael K. Steinberg, a geographer at the University of Alabama. "Few die-hards seem capable of believing that anybody else—whether a knowledgeable outdoors person or even a respected ornithologist—could actually see or hear an ivory-bill." So when a team of scientists declared in 2005 that they had laid eyes on an ivory-bill in eastern Arkansas, and produced a fuzzy 11-second video as evidence,

there was much rejoicing about this "official" sighting. But skeptics have questioned whether the video shows the famous bird or its common, similar-looking relative, the pileated woodpecker.

Such disputes are frequent in the scientific world. But because "the ivory-bill is the Holy Grail among birders," and because millions in federal money for conservation efforts hang in the balance, the debate stirs deep passions among both ornithologists and rural residents such as Steinberg's neighbor who, after a few drinks, often threatens to "go into the swamp and 'find that damn bird.'"

What really ruffles Steinberg's feathers is the marginalization of locals who report glimpsing the elusive woodpecker. "These people are often far more familiar with the sights and sounds of deep swamps than academics or birders who seldom venture into southern bayous," he says. Local hunters and fishers are also the

EXCERPT

Plugged In, Left Behind

In recent years I have administered a dumbed-down quiz on current events and history early in each semester. . . . Results have been, well, horrifying. Nearly half of a recent class could not name a single country that bordered Israel. In an introductory journalism class, 11 of 18 students could not name what country Kabul was in, although we have been at war there for half a decade. . . .

It is hard to reconcile [college] students' lack of knowledge with the notion that they are a part of the celebrated information age, creatures of the Internet who

arguably have at their disposal more information than all the preceding generations combined. Despite their BlackBerrys, cell phones, and Wi-Fi, they are, in their own way, as isolated as the remote tribes of New Guinea. They disprove the notion that technology fosters engagement, that connectivity and community are synonymous. . . .

The noted American scholar Robert M. Hutchins said, decades ago . . . that "the death of a democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment." I fear he was right.

—TED GUP, professor of journalism at Case Western Reserve University and author, most recently, of *Nation of Secrets: The Threat to Democracy and the American Way of Life*, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, (April 11, 2008)

most likely to brave the mosquitoes, alligators, snakes, and prickly palmettos of the birds' favored environment.

In preparing a book on the search for the ivory-billed woodpecker in Louisiana, Steinberg ran down many of the reported sightings. Photos are few, which is no surprise given the forbidding, dense terrain; the ivory-bill's reportedly fast, straight, ducklike flying pattern; and the likelihood that after generations of intense hunting, any surviving birds are probably selected to be wary of humans. But Steinberg concludes that the sightings are consistent enough to suggest that ivory-bills still exist.

The next evidence of the ivory-bill's existence, he predicts, will be produced by "a rural resident who may have little experience or even interest in bird watching." The birding world should prepare to take heed. To discount rural dwellers' reports "is not only shortsighted, it may be detrimental to ivory-bill preservation."

SOCIETY

School Choice Apostasy?

THE SOURCE: "School Choice Isn't Enough" by Sol Stern, in *City Journal*, Winter 2008, and "Is School Choice Enough?" responses, www.city-journal.org, Jan. 24, 2008.

THE INITIAL GAINS FROM THE school choice movement have fizzled, concludes Sol Stern, author of *Breaking Free: Public School Lessons and the Imperative of School Choice* (2003). While efforts to give parents vouchers for private

schools and establish charter schools have liberated thousands of children from stultifying public classrooms, experience has dashed Stern's hope that a powerful dose of the free market would cure morbidity in the nation's public schools.

Choice is not enough, he argues. Evidence is "meager" that voucher-financed competition from private schools has made public schools any better. Voters have resoundingly defeated voucher programs in five straight

School choice is not enough, one long-time advocate of the policy has concluded.

state referendums. Prospects for future voucher programs are undermined by the financial crises of inner-city Catholic schools. What is needed is not merely the invisible hand of competition fostering the best schools and driving out the worst. In a contest between economically oriented free-market visionaries (the incentivists) and curriculum and pedagogical reformers (the instructionists), Stern now tilts toward the instructionist camp. Improving the education of the nation's 50 million public-school children will require a rigorous, content-based curriculum and stricter teacher licensing.

This conclusion is borne out in New York City and the state of Massachusetts, he says. On the Monopoly board of school reform, New York City has placed all of its

hotels on choice and competition. Unfortunately, the city has pushed the free-market philosophy "far beyond where the evidence leads," Stern believes. New York City principals and teachers can get cash bonuses if they produce better student test scores, and parents can get money for showing up at parent-teacher conferences. But fourth- and eighth-grade readers have shown no improvement. By contrast, Massachusetts, where school choice is limited to only a few charter schools, has raised scores in both reading and math. The real Massachusetts miracle, according to Stern, is the state's strong content-based curriculum, certification regulations that require teachers to master that content, and serious testing.

Stern's critics have since responded to his article not only by attacking his ideas and facts, but also by accusing him of "apostasy and moral flaws," he laments. Jay P. Greene, the head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, charges that Stern has broken a "truce" between education reformers who push choice and those who advance curriculum changes. Education reform is like curing cancer, Greene says. It's a slow process, but that's no reason to give up. Without competitive pressure, what would cause education leaders to adopt any changes at all in curriculum or teaching methods?

Andrew J. Coulson, director of the Cato Institute Center for Educational Freedom, says that Stern has mistakenly confused tiny and highly regulated school choice programs with real free-market schooling, which would require hundreds of