

Slate.com

Table of Contents

[Advanced Search](#)

[art](#)

Spain's Greatest Living Painter

[books](#)

Spring Books in Brief

[books](#)

Best in Verse

[books](#)

Criminals Without Borders

[bushisms](#)

Bushism of the Day

[chatterbox](#)

Peggy Noonan's Litmus Test

[Convictions](#)

Secret Law

[corrections](#)

Corrections

[culturebox](#)

Lawn Pox

[culturebox](#)

iHero

[culturebox](#)

The Sweet Smell of Success

[culturebox](#)

Mickey Mouse Operation

[dear prudence](#)

The Object of His Obsession

[Deathwatch](#)

The Hillary Deathwatch

[did you see this?](#)

Top Five Laziest Inventions

[dispatches](#)

Darfur

[election scorecard](#)

Glimmer of Hope

[explainer](#)

Do Text Messages Live Forever?

[explainer](#)

What's a Botnet?

[explainer](#)

Life in an Austrian Dungeon

[explainer](#)

Six Thousand Gallons of Regular, Please

[fighting words](#)

One Angry Man

[foreigners](#)

Jimmy Carter's Magic Words

[foreigners](#)

Boris vs. Ken

[gaming](#)

It's Not Just About Killing Hookers Anymore

[green room](#)

The Carbon Olympics

[hey, wait a minute](#)

Is India More Equal Than the United States?

[hollywoodland](#)

Analyze This

[hot document](#)

So You Want To Be a Scientologist

[hot document](#)

Canada's Baby-Bottle Decree

[human nature](#)

Don't TNT Me, Bro

[jurisprudence](#)

Gaming Indiana

[jurisprudence](#)

Getting Away With Torture

[jurisprudence](#)

How Dumb Are We?

[map the candidates](#)

Five Days Out

medical examiner

The Doctor Is in Your PC

moneybox

There Will Be Blood Orange Juice

moneybox

Stop Blaming the Insurers

moneybox

The Agony of the Food Snob

moneybox

Going, Going, Not Gone

moneybox

The Age of Grand Dilution

movies

Iron Man

music box

Bigger Than Elvis

other magazines

The Teenybopper Factory

poem

"Abundance"

politics

Campaign Junkie

politics

Obama and Orwell

politics

Hillary for Mother Superior

politics

Slate's Delegate Calculator

politics

That's Hysterical

politics

Obama Tries To Get Back on His Good Foot

press box

Let Murdoch Be Murdoch

press box

The Times' Travel Section Plays Hide the Salami

reading list

Better Read Than Red

recycled

How Much Do Racehorses Pee?

recycled

Beware of the Blob

slate v

Interviews 50 Cents: Serious Writer's Block

slate v

Did the Rev. Wright Persuade?

slate v

Dear Prudence: Quaint Clichés Run Amok

sports nut

Why Doesn't Anybody Go to the Horse Races?

sports nut

Sheik Mohammed's Billion-Dollar Question

sports nut

Zero Effect

television

Funny Woman

the chat room

Kill Joy

the green lantern

Paper Recycling—Is It Worth It?

today's blogs

Say It Ain't So, Joe

today's blogs

The Day After

today's blogs

Wright Stuff

today's blogs

ID, Please

today's papers

Size Matters

today's papers

A Higher Toll

today's papers

Breaking Up Is Hard To Do

today's papers

With Friends Like These

today's papers

Lenders' Remorse

today's papers

Hunger Artists

Advanced Search

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

art

Spain's Greatest Living Painter

The haunting Realism of Antonio López García.

By Christopher Benfey

Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 6:51 AM ET

Click [here](#) to read a slide-show essay about Antonio López García.

books

Spring Books in Brief

What *Slate's* reading this spring.

By Reza Aslan, Stephen Burt, Amanda Fortini, Nathan Heller, Melinda Henneberger, Troy Patterson, David Plotz, Jack Shafer, John Swansburg, Justin Taylor, and June Thomas

Friday, May 2, 2008, at 7:07 AM ET

Nonfiction

[*The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century*](#), by Steve Coll. In the past four years, *New Yorker* writer Steve Coll has published two amazing books about America's misadventures in the Islamic (and Islamist) world—first [*Ghost Wars*](#) and now *The Bin Ladens*, which is one of the most enthralling family stories ever written.

Coll had the insight to recognize that the Bin Ladens embody the most important conflicts of our age. Tribalism, nationhood, Islam, Islamism, secularism, modernity, and technology—the Saudi family struggles with all of them. He begins with Mohamed Bin Laden, who rose from tribal poverty in Yemen to

the right hand of the King of Saudi Arabia. After his death in 1967, Mohamed's dozens of children spread the family fortune around the world, struck deals with American elites, and also gave us the world's most notorious terrorist. Coll paints vivid portraits of many of Mohamed's 29 sons but two in particular: Salem, who led the family after his father's death, a party-hopping, nocturnal daredevil who longed to marry a French woman, a German, a Brit, and an American—all at once; and Osama, the overlooked, soft-spoken, glory-seeking troublemaker.

Coll gets inside Saudi Arabia like no reporter before him, uncovering facts about Osama's finances and family relationships that even the CIA missed. There's a wonderful interlude about the brothers investing in a satellite phone company at the very moment Osama realizes sat phones are the perfect tool to run his global terror network. Particularly rich in detail is Coll's explanation of Osama's radicalization, from the Muslim Brotherhood teacher who promised to play soccer with Osama and his schoolmates but taught them the Koran instead to the way in which Osama's increasing fundamentalism at first helped the family by reinforcing its Islamic bona fides with conservative Saudi royals, then caused huge trouble when Osama started blowing things up. —[David Plotz](#)

[*The Future of the Internet—And How to Stop It*](#), by Jonathan Zittrain. The Internet blossoms into something more powerful and fantastic every couple of months because it's a *generative* technology, writes legal scholar and activist Jonathan Zittrain, open to modifications from a wide group of people. Like other generative technologies—the PC, Windows, the Firefox browser—the Internet unleashes unexpected innovations from unanticipated corners, thereby enriching us all. Example: When Jobs and Wozniak invented the Apple II, nobody had any idea that somebody would come along and create a killer application like the spreadsheet. (On the downside, generativity makes spam, viruses, and spyware possible, too.)

Zittrain worries about a growing countertrend: Nongenerative devices, such as the iPhone and the Xbox, which are born locked down. Because a nongenerative device can be adapted or improved only by its creators, it dead-ends the processes of discovery and invention that have typified the last three decades of computing. Zittrain fears that the freedom to create that we take for granted will vanish and be replaced by a world of "sterile appliances tethered to a network of control." Unless we resist.—[Jack Shafer](#)

[*Ghost: Confessions of a Counterterrorism Agent*](#), by Fred Burton, and [*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*](#), by Mohammed Hanif. Spy memoirs, like pornography, appeal to readers who crave novelty rather than originality. Connoisseurs of both genres will tell you that sticking to the well-worn formula is a virtue, and, in that sense, [*Ghost: Confessions of a Counterterrorism Agent*](#) is very virtuous indeed. Fred Burton

tells the story of his years in the Diplomatic Security Service with a mélange of brand names (three in the book's second sentence alone), clichéd emotions, and studiously displayed stoicism. (Protecting the homeland impinges on family life, but so it goes.) Still, he supplies just enough scoop on his role chasing terrorists to keep things interesting.

One of the cases Burton describes is his investigation into the 1988 downing of Pakistani President Gen. Zia-ul-Haq's plane. As far as he's concerned, the KGB did it. Mohammed Hanif's first novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, explores the death of Gen. Zia in a far more entertaining and original way and offers a very different culprit. The main protagonist, Pakistani Air Force Junior Under Officer Ali Shigri, seems too obsessed with his silent drill squad to be responsible for the assassination, but other suspects abound: Shigri's perfume-wearing bunkmate Obaid, resourceful laundry man Uncle Starchy, pot-smoking American Lt. Bannen, perhaps even a mango-loving crow. Or did a higher power intervene? Hanif's book is sexy, subversive, and magical, a soaring counterpoint to Burton's earth-bound realm of facts.—*June Thomas*

***God in the White House: How Faith Shaped the Presidency From John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush*, by Randall**

Balmer. I am surely the sort of reader the author had in mind: a left-leaning believer tired of the assumption that those two words don't go together. Yet the book didn't work for me because it seemed so biased against believers on the right. And if Balmer lost me, I'm not sure what choir he is preaching to.

He begins promisingly, with a sprightly refresher course on the anti-Catholic bigotry JFK faced as a presidential candidate. ("I think it's so unfair of people to be against Jack because he's Catholic," Jacqueline Kennedy said of her husband during the 1960 campaign. "He's such a poor Catholic.") Yet Balmer's assumption that the religious right is not motivated by faith at all but only by politics is exactly the sort of bullying claim on the moral high ground that I'm so weary of. And his narrative is highly selective. For instance, he argues that *Roe v. Wade* "was not the precipitating cause for the rise of Religious Right" and instead traces it to another court case, *Green v. Connally*, which found that church (and other) schools with discriminatory policies are not entitled to tax-exempt status. Interesting, but why cite as supporting evidence the fact that the Southern Baptist Convention initially shrugged over *Roe*—only to leave out the fact that abortion was one of the major reasons for a subsequent revolution within that church? After a while, all the gratuitous little digs begin to grate: "Beverly LaHaye started a new organization, Concerned Women For America, in 1979," he writes, "claiming that she resented the assumption on the part of feminist leaders that they spoke for all women." Claiming? Here's my claim: Balmer's credibility seems compromised, even to a true believer like me.—*Melinda Henneberger*

***A Pocket Full of History: Four Hundred Years of America—One State Quarter at a Time*, by Jim Noles.** It was nearly a decade ago that *Caesar Rodney* first galloped across a *Delaware* quarter; later this year, when *King Kamehameha* takes his rightful place on *Hawaii's*, the U.S. Mint's State Quarters *program* will be complete. By all accounts, it's been a great success. A Mint survey *cited* recently by the *Times* claims that nearly half of Americans collect the coins "in casual accumulations or as a serious numismatic pursuit." As a not-entirely-casual accumulator—I got a little worked up when I finally found the strangely elusive *Indiana*—I figured I'd be an easy mark for Jim Noles' new study of the series.

Noles divides the book into 50 chapters, decoding each coin's iconography in a short historical essay. For some states, this approach makes good sense. I've always admired the understated beauty of the *Connecticut* quarter, but it wasn't until Noles filled me in on the rollicking tale of the state's *Charter Oak* that I fully appreciated its pluck as well. More often, however, Noles' essays do little to illuminate the coin at hand. *Nebraska's* quarter, which depicts *Chimney Rock*, inspires a detailed account of that geological formation, complete with a meditation on its Native-American name—Elk Penis.

Noles only hints at the far more interesting stories of how the states arrived at their varied *designs*. In Michigan, a 25-member gubernatorial commission reviewed more than 4,300 proposals ... then chose a map of *Michigan*. Other states, though forced to fight through just as much red tape, came up with elegant, often surprising symbols: *Iowa* selected a *Grant Wood* schoolhouse; *Alabama* chose Helen Keller. Noles tantalizingly mentions, in passing, that before deciding on a bridge as its emblem, *West Virginia* entertained the idea of honoring *Anna Jarvis*, the woman who invented Mother's Day. There's a fascinating case study in federalism in these quarters—and a window into the dreams and insecurities of the 50 states—but Noles, sadly, is too distracted by arboreal and geological history to notice.—*John Swansburg*

***The Post-American World*, by Fareed Zakaria.** Despite the somewhat alarming title, this is a book, as Zakaria states at the outset, "not about the decline of America but rather about the rise of everyone else." With that caveat, Zakaria launches into a far-reaching analysis of how globalization has resulted in a fundamental shift of power—political and economic but not military—away from American dominance and toward the rising powers of China and India, the first- and second-fastest growing economies in the world. And while much of the data in the book has been cataloged and discussed at length in a number of recent publications (I prefer Parag Khanna's *The Second World*), Zakaria's strength lies not in striking new ground but in offering a lens through which to understand America's role in a globalized world.

It is time for America to abandon its hyperpower ambitions and instead learn to act as an "honest broker"—a referee of sorts—between the powers that may one day overtake it (much as Britain has done). In the future, Zakaria argues, America's most vital export will be the universal ideals upon which the country is founded—ideals that can form a kind of hub around which the rest of the world can gather—but only if we ourselves are committed to live by those very same ideals, regardless of whatever threats we may face. So far, we've had a pretty lousy start on the future Zakaria imagines. —[Reza Aslan](#)

Fiction

[Last Last Chance](#), by Fiona Maazel. This debut novel is several books at once: a wacked-out farce about families, a critique of contemporary culture, and a welcome addition to a heretofore male-dominated streak of apocalypse narratives (Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Jim Crace's *Pesthouse*, Matthew Sharpe's *Jamestowne*, and so on). The story is told by Lucy Clark, the eldest daughter of a Centers for Disease Control doctor who kills himself after a batch of so-called "superplague" disappears from a lab on his watch. Suddenly the focus of national scrutiny, the Clark women—Lucy; her mother, Isifrid; her 12-year-old half-sister, Hannah; and her grandma, Agneth—must learn to cope with negative attention while preparing for the (possibly) impending pandemic. Each woman seeks comfort where she can: Hannah chooses Christian Identity (read "white power") summer camp, Grandma gets into reincarnation theory, and Lucy and her mother both choose drugs.

It's a fast-moving book full of insight and surprise, and Maazel's prose is at least as compelling as the story itself. She writes with a kind of ecstatic swagger—freewheeling and cocksure, intelligent and loopy and funny as hell. "[I]t's not that I'll be at a funeral and laugh because it's funny. I'll just laugh. And maybe, from strain of withholding laughter, I will get aroused. And maybe, from horror of arousal, I will get a headache that hurts so bad, I'll end up crying anyway." I relished every page.—[Justin Taylor](#)

[The Story of Forgetting](#), by Stefan Merrill Block. When the mother of 15-year-old aspiring scientist Seth Waller is diagnosed with a rare strain of Alzheimer's disease, he devotes his summer to "empirical investigation" of the illness. Bumbling and intellectually overconfident, he tries to make sense of his mother's genetics by researching her family, which she refused to discuss. Block interweaves Seth's efforts with two other stories: a C.S. Lewis-type fable about a fantastical, amnesic land called Isidora and a memoir by a hunchbacked Luddite who (in a plot twist never wholly explained) lures his brother's wife to bed by masturbating outside her window in a tree. The hunchback and his unlikely paramour conceive a girl; his brother, back from Cold War Army service, raises the girl as his own. Seth struggles with his mother's oblivion and the boilerplate anxieties of high school; the elderly hunchback struggles with his secret

paternity—and so on toward a satisfying, not-so-unexpected denouement that draws the three stories together.

The province of ailing-parent literature is hardly underpopulated, but *The Story of Forgetting* earns its claim to the territory. It's fast-moving and raw without being emotionally heavy-handed: Block's characters share despair through apathy and awkwardness, not fireworks. Granted, less-fraught passages often stall into cliché (on New York: "four miserable years of temp work in the strange city of sneers and dirt and car horns") or else an unfortunate third-drink brand of philosophizing. ("Was science, in fact, advancing toward anything? Or was it giving more intricate form to a hopelessness as old as human history?") But the novel's energy outweighs its familiarity and fuzziness; Block tells an emotionally demanding tale with honesty and charm.—[Nathan Heller](#)

Poetry

[The One-Strand River: Poems, 1994-2007](#), by Richard Kenney. Richard Kenney's big new book of short poems took him 14 years to write, and the best poems make the wait worthwhile. They are encyclopedically informed (especially in the sciences) yet warmly personable and richly worked (even ornamented) despite their small scale. A sonnet called "Hydrology: Lachrymation" begins, "The river meanders because it can't think" and then investigates "lesser weather systems ... troubling the benthos where the ice caps shrink." Kenney (who won a MacArthur "genius" grant 20 years ago) makes the concerns of a comfortable middle-aged West Coast writer—married love, parental love, parental fears, ecocatastrophe—not only vivid but quirky, even bizarre, in part by drawing on the pleasures of rhyme. Addressing his infant daughter in lines that mimic her unrest, Kenney is cute but not cutesy, a genuine charm: "You are nothing if not a little otter./ You are a murmurous moon-miss of a wriggle./ You are one burped girl/ and no other." Not all the poems are so much fun; the first and the last quarters of this capacious collection, though, show good-humored depths no other poet now has.—[Stephen Burt](#)

Essays

[Everyday Drinking](#), by Kingsley Amis. An editor's note to this omnium-gatherum of Amis' notes on potation observes that the author was not just a drinker but "a drink-ist," making this volume a dipsographical classic. Amis teases the brain with a 30-part quiz ("How did the bubbles get into the champagne in the first place?") and relays such seductive recipes as Evelyn Waugh's Noonday Reviver (big shot of gin, half-pint of Guinness, ginger beer) with a drollery that even a teetotaler will savor. He further offers the overindulger practical knowledge in a chapter on having been drunk, which includes instructions on treating both the physical and metaphysical hangover. For the P.H., Amis prescribes vigorous sex, copious water, and

unsweetened grapefruit; for the M.H., a special regimen of literature or music. "A good cry is the initial aim," he writes, recommending Sibelius' incidental music for *Pelléas and Mélisande*, which "carries the ever-so-slightly phoney and overdone pathos that is exactly what you want in your present state." —[Troy Patterson](#)

[The Modern Element: Essays on Contemporary Poetry](#), by Adam Kirsch. What makes a poem modern, and what makes a modern poem a work of art? These are the questions that animate *The Modern Element*, a critical survey of contemporary poets—from John Ashbery to Jorie Graham, Philip Larkin to Richard Wilbur—by Adam Kirsch. With this volume, Kirsch, whose smart, muscular, and at times acerbic criticism has been dazzling and infuriating readers for a decade, steps into a distinguished line of literary essayists. He derives his title from a Lionel Trilling essay; he writes in the accessible, generalist vein of Edmund Wilson; and he builds his own definition of modern poetry on the one advanced by T.S. Eliot in "The Metaphysical Poets." Eliot defined the modern poet, Kirsch writes, "not as his age's interpreter but as its exemplary specimen or willing victim." For Kirsch, "a good modern poem," which is to say a meaningful or significant poem, can be written only by "poets who put themselves generally at risk in their work"—technically, emotionally, intellectually—and who avoid the "fraudulent self-exposure" and "otiose experimentalism" too many writers fall back on.

Kirsch employs these criteria—sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly—in evaluating the poets in this collection. His approach seems especially relevant now, when so much poetry reads (and is read) as journaling or therapy. Poets who, in Kirsch's estimation, merely transcribe raw perceptions get the gloves-off treatment: "[Sharon] Olds has no interest in abstracting from the contingent details of her life to a larger, more universally valid idea or symbol." Kirsch values discipline and rigorous craft; he abhors "mental laziness." Yet he also objects to the deliberate obscurity that has become so fashionable in poetry. (Kenneth Koch is "close to [John] Ashbery in his ability to sound like sense without always making it.") But even at his most astringent, Kirsch, a poet himself, exhibits an understanding of the emotional demands of writing: "It means hollowing out one's self, in order to allow all the bitterness and joy of life to take up residence there and find expression." —[Amanda Fortini](#)

books

Best in Verse

It's National Poetry Month—what should you read?

By Jordan Davis

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 3:02 PM ET

Poets talk about the attention brought by National Poetry Month the way kids talk about food at summer camp—it's terrible, and there's not enough of it. For the rest of the reading world, the initiative has all the appeal of a charity drive. While there's plenty of good poetry being written today, there's at least six times as much of the not-so-good variety. Take heart: *Slate* has winnowed the stack down to a manageable few.

Mark Doty, [Fire to Fire: New and Selected Poems](#)

Mark Doty is one of the premier elegists of the AIDS crisis, and his best poems seldom have time for mere description. In early pieces such as "Days of 1981," the speaker hovers, bewildered, on the border between spectator and active participant, the poem moving in and out of rhyme:

The smokestacks

and office towers loomed, a half-lit backdrop
beyond the baseball diamond. I didn't want
him ever to stop,
and he left me breathless and unsatisfied.

He was a sculptor, and for weeks afterward I
told myself
I loved him, because I'd met a man and wasn't
sure
I could meet another—I'd never tried—

and because the next morning, starting
off to work, the last I saw of him, he gave me a
heart,
ceramic, the marvel of a museum school show

his class had mounted. No one could guess
how he'd fired hollow clay entirely seamless
and kept it from exploding.

In later poems like "My Tattoo" or "Theory of Marriage," Doty displays a gift for interweaving arresting image with tender narrative. A selection of 80 of Doty's best pages along these lines would be a pleasure; *Fire to Fire*, however, is four times that length.

Doty is on record defending his right to make verbal art out of something other than plain (straight) speech, but this principled refusal to pin meanings down isn't the only obstacle the reader encounters. In his less successful poems, nothing ever *is*; it always *seems*. Doty habitually conflates yearning with minimizing—a *little*, *nearly*, *almost*, and *not exactly* are his go-to qualifiers. And he asks a lot of questions, mainly unanswerable ones ("how could they/ compete with sunset's burnished/ oratorio?"). These are quibbles, though. Doty's new work is getting clearer without giving up its hard-won beauty.

Sidney Wade, *Stroke*

Sidney Wade's imagination is as powerful as any American poet's since Wallace Stevens. The poems in her fifth collection, *Stroke*, are apocalyptically cheerful elegies for the body politic. They sometimes sound like an arts section taking back material (and a mood) long abandoned to the science or front pages:

The imperatives of the dominant glib prevail

and there's no hope for the culture.
It's monoploid and tick-rich,

filled with words that will kill you.

(from "Nothing but the Truth")

Wade studs her poems with \$10 words—say, *manumission* and *necrosis*—some of which she turns into portmanteaus worthy of George W. Bush's "misunderestimate": *protruberant*, *hystericalectomy*, *immargination*. She rhymes in an equally confident manner, matching *barques* with *largesse*, *ruthless* with *toothless*, and *corrosive* with *explosive*.

Though they are often transporting, Wade's poems always yield to paraphrase, pointing to something recognizable in the real world or the news. Her project—to remain sane despite the gloom these words point to—requires that she reassure herself and the reader that while we really are seeing what we're seeing, the consolations of light and love still exist:

I didn't have a forever grant,
but we dealt with that as masterful adults.
We approached the ultimate adding machine
and grabbed us a statue bereft of sin

and some mausoleum gear.
*There's not enough shriek and swagger
in our utterly transgressive faith*, he confessed,
but he looked down on the others

in their cold, crawling context.
Those people are injured by the time of day,
he sniffed. As we entered a carnelian cloud,
I suggested we leave early and often.

(from "The Visionary from Apopka")

The poet-critic Richard Howard has referred to the Parnassian quality of Wade's poems, to their insistence on beauty, glory, and exalted feeling, and he is exactly right: She believes that "A planetful of pure desire/ Is all a poet should require/ To set the commonplace afire." She persists in this belief even as she diagnoses irreversible national damage. Having enlarged her

scope with each collection, she's becoming something of an oracle of the outlook for intelligence and happiness. Here's hoping more and more readers come to consult her.

Darcie Dennigan, *Corinna, A-Maying the Apocalypse*

Prizewinning books sometimes resemble the work of the judges who choose them. Fordham Poets Out Loud winner Darcie Dennigan and judge (and MacArthur winner) Alice Fulton both favor cleareyed lyricism and overboard neo-metaphysical conceits. Dennigan is as comfortable intercutting the legend of St. Ursula with a girls'-night-out birthday party at a bar in Boston as she is imagining a foundling hospital where the nurses simulate maternal heartbeats by putting swaddled clocks in the cribs:

And the papers covered it—a *new invention*
from orphans' nurses—a *babybalm device*, a
mother apparatus—but really it was just
meter, after all, just a pattern of beats—but the
papers liked that too—that meter was
portable—they thought it was cute that we
were teaching the babies to say meter instead
of mother.

(from "The New Mothers")

There is little chance of mistaking the cadences of Dennigan's long lines and paragraphs for ordinary prose. Her rhythmic phrasings come in consistently pleasing variation, not in lock-step imitation of the ones coming before and after. She also makes music when signaling her themes. Taking literally Pound's poetic command to "make it new," she includes the word *new* in the titles of four poems; every poem in the first half of the book includes the word *mother*.

New poets, when they are very good, can transmute confusion into excitement. Dennigan is excellent. "I didn't know exactly what I was doing there, so I was going/ to do it harder," she writes. It should not take another contest to bring Dennigan's next book to print.

Eavan Boland, *New Collected Poems*

Director of the creative writing program at Stanford University, Eavan Boland is a commanding poet, capable of great intimacies and public gestures: Her 1998 collection, *The Lost Land*, is dedicated to Mary Robinson, the former president of Ireland and the U.N. high commissioner of human rights. In the narrative of her collected work so far, the turning point from Irish national treasure to international ambassador of letters comes about halfway through, with the 1987 poem "The Glass King":

If we could see ourselves, not as we do—
in mirrors, self-deceptions, self-regardings—
but as we ought to be and as we have been:
poets, lute-stringers, makyres and abettors

of our necessary art, soothsayers of the ailment
and disease of our times, sweet singers,
truth tellers, intercessors for self-knowledge—
what would we think of these fin-de-siecle

half-hearted penitents we have become
at the sick-bed of the century: hand-wringing
elegists with an ill-concealed greed
for the inheritance?

There are passages in her work up to this point that attain similar intensity, some metrical sentences six or seven lines long, but nothing like this verse paragraph, a moving dragon of fiery righteousness.

After Boland catches onto the power of packing an extended speech in a compressed space, her phrasings get clearer and stranger: A water bucket makes "zinc-music," a neighbor's stream makes a "fluid sunset," bad luck might see "an unexplained/ fever speckle heifers." In her more recent collections, she aims to soar from a standing start. She interrupts her fable "Embers" to pierce the reader with a look:

When he woke in the morning she was young
and beautiful.
And she was his, forever, but on one
condition.
He could not say that she had once been old
and haggard.
He could not say that she had ever ... here I
look up.

You are turned away. You have no interest in
this.

Among her near-contemporary countrymen, two have already become last names: Heaney, Muldoon. Boland is due to join them, and *New Collected Poems* is, for the moment, the book to find and read.

books

Criminals Without Borders

The revolution in smuggling and international crime.

By Moisés Naím

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 7:49 AM ET

You don't have to be an international-affairs expert to know that, nowadays, civil wars, terrorism, insurgencies, ethnic conflicts, separatist movements, guerrillas, and other forms of *intranational* strife are more common than the traditional wars that pit the army of one nation-state against that of another. But the greatest toll of all is exacted by the wars that governments are waging against the illegal commerce of people, drugs, weapons, counterfeits, timber, human organs, diamonds, and myriad other goods. Civil wars are geographically concentrated, and few international wars last longer than a decade; smuggling is not bound by time or space, and it is now growing faster than ever. This boom is occurring despite (and in some cases because of) the "wars"—as they have been labeled—that governments everywhere are fighting against international traffickers.

Richard Nixon launched the United States' "war on drugs" in 1969, and in the last two decades, new technologies have spawned new wars. Police officers no longer raid college dorms looking just for stashes of marijuana; now they also go looking for the heavy users and distributors of illegally downloaded music. Relatively recent medical innovations that dramatically lowered the risk of organ transplants have created an unprecedented demand for kidneys, livers, and corneas. The supply has not kept pace, and, inevitably, the new international black market in human organs is also soaring. Brazilian kidneys are sold in Europe, and Chinese corneas are transplanted in India.

But the dramatic transformations in smuggling and international crime that the world has witnessed since the late 1980s have been driven by more than revolutions in technology. The political revolutions of the last two decades have also created needs and business opportunities that smugglers and criminals have been quick to exploit. The collapse of the former Soviet bloc flooded world markets with weapons and mercenaries that were once under the control of governments but that are now available to whoever can afford them. China's economic liberalization has transformed it into the world's largest manufacturer and exporter of illegally copied products. Everywhere, economic reforms aimed at stimulating international trade and investment helped make national borders even more porous than they already were. And sustained economic growth in the United States and other wealthy countries created an insatiable demand for foreign workers, legal and illegal, and for everything else, including drugs for weekends, special wood for fancy kitchen floors, coltan for cell phones, and money-laundering services for the wealthy and unscrupulous.

Misha Glenny's [*McMafia: A Journey Through the Global Criminal Underworld*](#) offers many examples of this altered landscape. Glenny is a British journalist whose coverage of the Balkan wars in the 1990s gave him a front seat from which to watch how the mayhem created by war continued after the

conflict ended. Glenny increasingly found himself reporting on the ways in which criminals and traffickers filled the economic and political vacuums left by the wars. In trying to understand the new insecurity of the former Yugoslavia, Glenny quickly discovered what all writers who try to make sense of how criminals can overrun a society have discovered: The phenomenon may look very local, but it is fundamentally influenced by powerful foreign players and shaped by new global forces.

So Glenny branched out from the Balkans and traveled to Colombia and British Columbia, Nigeria and Japan, South Africa, China, Israel, India, and many other places, particularly in Eastern Europe. His account of what he found in his travels confirms what a few writers have been stressing, and what most international-affairs analysts acknowledge but largely ignore when discussing world politics and economics: Global crime is one of the most potent forces at work in today's world. It is impossible to make sense of what is going on—politically, economically, or even geopolitically—in countries like Russia, China, or Mexico—or even in entire regions in Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia, or Latin America—without taking into consideration the economic weight of illicit trade and the political power wielded by the criminal networks that control these trades.

As Glenny reports, in many countries crime not only pays but is often the most lucrative game in town, and its players are some of the most influential members of society. He also documents how the profits involved stimulate creativity, innovation, and risk-taking to an extent that is rarely, if ever, matched by the government agents who battle the traffickers. The Bulgarian Ilya Pavlov, one of many characters profiled by Glenny, epitomizes the intertwining of crime, government, and business that threatens democracy, economic progress, and security in a growing number of countries.

A former wrestler who married the daughter of a high-ranking secret police officer, Pavlov began his career as a small-time thug. In the 1990s, the combination of a collapsing state, unregulated markets, and lawlessness created enormous opportunities, which he exploited with entrepreneurial zest and murderous violence. Glenny explains that in less than a decade, Pavlov had created a conglomerate that spanned many sectors (extortion, prostitution, smuggling, drug trafficking, car theft, and money laundering) and many countries, including the United States, where his subsidiary Multigroup U.S. owned two casinos in Paraguay, then the Latin American epicenter of the illicit trades (since displaced by Venezuela). By describing the thousands of mourners who attended Pavlov's funeral in 2003, Glenny conveys how deeply entangled his criminal enterprise was with Bulgaria's power elite. Everyone who mattered in business, politics, government, trade unions, sports, religion, the media, or the military seemed to be there.

The world is slowly beginning to realize that global crime in the 21st century is not merely more of the same. Continuing to call crime-fighting a "war" is not unlike employing the term "war on terror": It is a misnomer that leads to wrongheaded efforts and failed strategies that add to the problems instead of alleviating them. The governmental emphasis on prohibition, criminalization, and interdiction very often serves to boost prices and criminal incentives. Of course, the most dangerous and intolerable illicit trades—for example, in children, nuclear materials, or lethal fake medicines—demand comprehensive attention. But burdened as struggling governments currently are with enforcing a plethora of prohibitions, it's hardly surprising that their efforts are diluted and largely ineffective.

Thanks to their global reach, immense financial muscle, and ruthless inclination to rely on harrowing violence to advance their business interests, international criminals have acquired new political potency, which creates unique dangers and poses a new challenge. This threat cannot be tackled by traditional, nationally based law-enforcement techniques. In some instances, for example, the more realistic goal is not to build a jury-proof criminal case against a few kingpins but to disrupt the far-flung networks on which criminals depend for their international operations—no small undertaking. Deregulating and decriminalizing some of these trades is another obvious move that most governments still don't recognize as necessary and, in some instances, even inevitable. In general, the supply of fresh ideas on how to deal more effectively with this new global scourge is not surging.

McMafia will disappoint readers interested in solutions or original analytic insights, but it is a welcome addition to a growing genre. A spate of books (Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra*, Loretta Napoleone's *Rogue's Capitalism*, Kevin Phillips' *Knockoff*, Douglas Farah and Stephen Braun's *Merchant of Death*, Peter Andreas and Ethan Nadelman's *Policing the Globe*, Peter Reuter and Edward Truman's *Chasing Dirty Money*) and many films (*Traffic*, *Blood Diamond*, *Eastern Promises*, *Maria Full of Grace*) are heightening our awareness of the unprecedented threats posed by the new forms of global crime. As we all know, no problem was ever solved before it was recognized as such—and this hydra-headed danger can't receive too much attention.

bushisms

Bushism of the Day

By Jacob Weisberg

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 7:30 AM ET

"We want people owning their home—we want people owning a businesses."—Washington, D.C., April 18, 2008

Click [here](#) to see video of Bush's comments. The Bushism is at 21:49.

Got a Bushism? Send it to bushisms@slate.com. For more, see "[The Complete Bushisms](#)."

chatterbox

Peggy Noonan's Litmus Test

Does Obama love Sutter's Mill? America demands an answer.

By Timothy Noah

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 7:08 PM ET

When I think about all the hoops Barack Obama is being made to jump through in order to prove he's a patriotic American, I feel nostalgic for the days when the press thought Obama's biggest negative was his supposed inexperience relative to Hillary Clinton (see "[Hillary's Experience Lie](#)").

First Obama had to [distance himself](#) from some [bizarre comments](#) made by his former pastor. Then he had to explain why he doesn't wear a flag lapel pin [often enough](#) to suit Charlie Gibson of ABC News. Then he had to [distance himself](#) from a former member of the Weather Underground [to whom he was introduced](#) when he decided to run for the Illinois Senate but with whom he has since had scant contact. Then he had to distance himself from Hamas, a terrorist organization he has [repeatedly condemned](#), simply because its chief political adviser, Ahmed Yousefat, [expressed admiration](#) for him. Now Peggy Noonan of the *Wall Street Journal* [demands](#) that Obama demonstrate he carries sufficient love within his breast for ... Sutter's Mill.

I'm not making this up. Here is what Noonan wrote:

Hillary Clinton is not Barack Obama's problem. America is Mr. Obama's problem. He has been tagged as a snooty lefty, as the glamorous, ambivalent candidate from *Men's Vogue*, the candidate who loves America because of the great progress it has made in terms of racial fairness. Fine, good. But has he ever gotten misty-eyed over ... the Wright Brothers and what kind of country allowed them to go off on their own and change everything? How about D-Day, or George Washington, or Henry Ford, or the losers and brigands who flocked to Sutter's Mill, who pushed their way west because there was gold in them thar hills? There's gold in that history.

Let me pause here to point out that if *Barack Obama* were ever to refer to the '49ers of the California gold rush—even with *affection*—as "losers and brigands," then Sean Hannity would demand his immediate impeachment from the Senate, Bill Kristol would cite it as evidence that Obama was a member of the Communist Party, and Noonan herself would grieve over this condescension toward the starry-eyed dreamers who constitute the heart, soul, and viscera of this proud land.

I'm sure Obama is as sentimental as the next guy about the Wright brothers and D-Day and George Washington (to whom he is [distantly related](#)). Henry Ford is a harder case. On the one hand, he is the father of mass production and the inventor of the Model T. On the other hand, he was a raving anti-Semite. Between 1920 and 1922, [Ford published](#) in the *Dearborn Independent*, which he owned, no fewer than 81 articles on what he called "The Jewish Problem in America." These screeds were so odious that they prompted the resignation of the *Dearborn Independent's* editor, who refused to print them. [Ford's rants](#) about the international Jewish conspiracy, published in book form, were a [formative influence](#) on Baldur von Schirach*, leader of the Hitler Youth, according to von Schirach's testimony at the Nuremberg Trials. One of these books—*The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem*—has been [posted online](#) by the American Nazi Party. At the very least, such affinities make it a challenge to love *both* Ford *and* D-Day, the Allied invasion that ultimately landed Ford's most influential disciple in Spandau prison for 20 years.

But I digress. Of this golden history, Noonan continues:

John McCain carries it in his bones. Mr. McCain learned it in school, in the Naval Academy, and, literally, at grandpa's knee. Mrs. Clinton learned at least its importance in her long slog through Arkansas, circa 1977-92.

Please note the presumption that it is impossible to acquire affection for the history of the United States in the states of Illinois, Massachusetts, or Connecticut, where Hillary Clinton lived before she lived in Arkansas. Conservatives long ago managed to establish as unchallengeable fact that the real America cannot be found in the places where a majority of its population resides. Exceptions are made for the greater Washington, D.C., area *only* when the persons involved belong to the U.S. military. No, America's authentic heart beats only in the states where people are scarce, for the simple reason that the few people you *do* find there tend to be Republicans. One would think this widely accepted (if faulty) proposition would benefit Obama, since he hails from the sparsely populated state of Hawaii. But conservatives don't recognize Hawaii as the real America (Vermont has this problem, too) because its inhabitants tend to vote Democratic. [Never](#) mind that it was a foreign power's deadly attack on Hawaii that brought the U.S. into World War II.*

Noonan continues:

Mr. Obama? What does he think about all that history? Which is another way of saying: What does he think of America? That's why people talk about the flag pin absent from the lapel. They wonder if it means something. Not that the presence of the pin proves love of country—any cynic can wear a pin, and many cynics do. But what about Obama and America? Who would have taught him to love it, and what did he learn was loveable, and what does he think about it all?

Noonan is beating about the bush here. When people complain that a flag pin is too often absent from Obama's lapel—and I am not convinced very many people do—it's for the same reason that Henry Ford complained that a yarmulke was too often present on Bernard Baruch's head. It's because they don't believe such people *are one of us*. Baruch was the Other because he was Jewish. Obama is the Other because his (largely absent) father was a foreigner from Kenya, because he spent part of his childhood in *Indonesia* and the rest of it in *Hawaii*, and because his mother was, in the *New York Times*' words, "a [free-spirited wanderer](#)."

Noonan is ready for this line of attack:

Another challenge. Snooty lefties get angry when you ask them to talk about these things. They get resentful. *Who are you to question my patriotism?* But no one is questioning his patriotism, they're questioning its content, its fullness.

If you object to having your patriotism questioned on the basis of your religion, or your foreign parentage, or your having lived in a foreign country, or your having lived in Hawaii, or your harboring "lefty" beliefs, then according to Noonan you are "snooty." Calm down, Noonan says. I'm not questioning whether you're *patriotic*. I'm questioning whether you're *patriotic enough*. This is a distinction without a difference.

Then, of course, there's race. Is Noonan characterizing Obama as the Other because he's black? I'd find this interpretation hard to dismiss if Noonan hadn't already assured me, in her [Journal column of Feb. 8](#), that

No consultant, no matter how opportunistic and hungry, will think it easy—or professionally desirable—to take [Obama] down in a low manner. If anything, they've learned from the Clintons in South Carolina what that gets you. (I add that yes, there are

always freelance mental cases, who exist on both sides and are empowered by modern technology. They'll make their YouTubes. But the mad are ever with us, and this year their work will likely stay subterranean.)

With Mr. Obama the campaign will be about issues. "He'll raise your taxes." He will, and I suspect Americans may vote for him anyway. But the race won't go low.

It seems to me that with this column the race has *already* gone "low," even if Noonan *didn't* mean to suggest that an African-American must be assumed unpatriotic until proven otherwise. Do you know what I love about America? I love that one *isn't* pestered on an hourly basis about one's presumed failure to be *patriotic*, or patriotic *enough*, or patriotic in the *right way*. We are a tolerant people who tend to judge all, including presidential candidates, as individuals. For the most part, anyway. An exception must be made for conservative pundits like Noonan who make their living by imagining the United States to be overrun with xenophobic, bigoted morons; who pretty up that misapprehension by calling it patriotism; and who then try to foment culture war in the name of these make-believe "real Americans." As to this latest litmus test, I doubt Obama has strong feelings one way or another about the prospectors who overran Sutter's Mill in 1849, though he may now be forced to pretend that he does. Why a grown woman, much less a member of the working press, should pose such an idiotic question is not easy to understand.

Correction, May 1, 2008: An earlier version of this column misspelled von Schirach's name. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.) Also, an earlier version of this column stated that Hawaii was "the most recent place in the United States to be attacked by a foreign power." In fact, that distinction belongs to Alaska's Aleutian Islands, which Japan [invaded](#) six months after it bombed Pearl Harbor. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

Convictions

Secret Law

How democracy dies behind closed doors.

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 11:10 AM ET

corrections

Corrections

Friday, May 2, 2008, at 7:03 AM ET

In the April 30 "[Art](#)," Christopher Benfey originally and incorrectly referred to the film *The Spirit of the Beehive* as *Secrets of the Beehive*.

In the April 30 "[Press Box](#)," Jack Shafer mistakenly included Jennifer Dunn in the Special Committee. Dunn was appointed to the committee but died. She was replaced by Susan M. Phillips.

In the April 29 "[Music Box](#)," Jody Rosen incorrectly stated that Leona Lewis won Britain's *Pop Idol* show. It was *X Factor*.

In the April 28 "[Chatterbox](#)," Timothy Noah described Hawaii as "the most recent place in the United States to be attacked by a foreign power." That distinction belongs to Alaska's Aleutian Islands, which Japan [invaded](#) six months after it bombed Pearl Harbor. In addition, Noah misspelled the name of the man who led Nazi German's Hitler Youth. It was Baldur von Schirach, *not* Balder von "Shirach."

Due to an editing error, *Ottawa* was misspelled in the April 28 "[Hot Document](#)."

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

culturebox

Lawn Pox

Children's play equipment and the decline of the American yard.

By Tom Vanderbilt

Friday, May 2, 2008, at 7:13 AM ET

The next time you drive down a street in suburban or exurban America, pay careful attention to the yards. Lurking somewhere, either peeping out from the back or nakedly displayed right in front, some form of children's play equipment, typically in plastic and typically in some bright primary color, will probably be splayed on the grass.

I'd like to raise just one question about this picture of domestic bliss: How often do you actually see a child playing on, or near, one of these devices?

On a recent weekend trip through a posh Connecticut suburb, the kind with moss-covered stone walls and dense canopies of mature trees, I was dismayed to find the sylvan harmony of the scene constantly disrupted by garish blights, from wavy slides to

inflatable contraptions of the kind once relegated to seasonal carnivals. It was as if a McDonald's PlayPlace—some alien, mother-ship PlayPlace—was spawning its miniaturized brood across the landscape (and simultaneously vaporizing the kids).

The Web site of [Little Tikes](#)—which boasts an American flag banner noting that some of its polycarbonate products are "Made in the USA" and then, just below, slightly less triumphantly, "or Made in the USA with US and Imported Parts"—offers a representative field guide to this kiddie sprawl, listing such injection-molded contraptions as the "Endless Adventures Slide & Hide Tower" and the "6-in-1 Town Center."

The phrase "fun that lasts" pops up often on the Little Tikes Web site, as if the manufacturer were trying to allay the suspicion of the purchasing parent that the giant red, yellow, and blue elephant he or she is buying will soon be nothing more than a mowing obstacle. For parents were once children, and they know the iron law: The more time spent in assembling a toy, the less it will actually be used. (A corollary: The packaging is inevitably more interesting than what's inside.) My sister-in-law reports that each year, her upstate New York town's annual "cleanup" day produces a massive haul of slides, swings, tubes, and tunnels, all of which seemingly have half-lives of one weekend and swiftly find themselves headed for the landfill.

The environmental implications alone—each piece of equipment must represent a lifetime's worth of plastic shopping bags—are reason enough to eschew this stuff. Then there are the aesthetics. On this, I'm hardly alone in my displeasure. In her account of the perils of suburban gardening, [Paths of Desire](#), Dominique Browning recounts how a new neighbor installed an enormous swing-set with a plastic slide facing her house: "Obviously, I had developed an exaggerated aversion to the plastic; I'm the first to admit it. But brightly colored plastic (and who decided kids enjoy these colors anyway?) in the garden is one of my peeves." Or, as one blogger more bluntly [put it](#), "The only thing worse than a neighbor with fifteen different pieces of play junk in his front yard is a neighbor with fifteen different pieces of insanely brightly colored play junk in his front yard."

Before you dismiss such complaints as mere aesthetic snobbery, consider another of Browning's pet peeves: "Why [does] every yard have to replicate the same debris, swing after swing, marching down the backs of the houses?" Her question highlights a few larger problems with this seemingly benign landscape element. The first is the decline of the playground. In her book [American Playgrounds](#), Susan Solomon notes how the fear of injuries and their litigious consequences forced the closing, or banal "[post-and-platform](#)" retrofitting, of many playgrounds. Gone are the kinds of things that defined my own childhood: terrifying metal "monkey bars" pitched over a pit of hard gravel or the towering, twisting, all-metal "[tornado slide](#)," as we called it, which was at once the most exhilarating and the most dangerous thing in my young life.

But, injuries aside, a larger specter began to haunt playgrounds, Solomon notes: "Told incessantly to be mindful of lurking dangers and the people who might inhabit the outdoors, [paranoid] parents often defer trips to public spaces. Going to a playground becomes too exhausting for a parent to contemplate." And so instead of a communal play space, each yard becomes a (rarely used) playground unto itself.

It's not just fear that underlies the American tendency toward elaborate play furniture. One parent-blogger [recounted](#) how his wife had purchased a [massive water slide](#) from Sam's Club. This led him to reflect that, once upon a time, only one house on each block had "the cool thing." "Today," he writes, "I live in a neighborhood where, if one kid gets a toy, everybody else eventually ends up with the same thing, albeit bigger and more ghastly looking."

Yes, it's the aspirational spending race brought to the lawn. Of course, it was already there, in the execrable outrages committed in the name of "outdoor living," the kind routinely chronicled in the pre-recessionary Weekend section of the *Wall Street Journal* (the Masters and Johnson of bourgeois anxiety): the grotesque waterfalls coursing over volcanic rock from Hawaii, the waterproof plasma televisions hovering over the pool, the backyard pizza ovens. But this impulse has spread to the short-pants set. How else to explain the ridiculous ensembles found at the higher end of the children's play equipment market? At Posh Tots, for example, one can purchase, for \$122,000, a "Tumble Outpost" filled with ropes and swings and ladders, the kind that would sustain an entire playground but is meant for private consumption. Or feast your eyes on the capacious "luxury playhouses," like the "pint-sized plantation" known as "Oakmont Manor."

I have come to think of all these things, in both their lack of use and aesthetic alien-ness, as being symptomatic of the decline of the American lawn. I don't mean grass per se but, rather, the whole relationship of the house to its exterior; the meaning of the outdoor space as a pastoral enclave in a larger natural setting; the civility and beauty brought by the carefully considered arrangement of plants, trees, and shrubs—the sort of things one used to see in the so-called "garden suburbs."

U.S. Census Bureau data tell us that as American house sizes have grown (despite shrinking family sizes), the size of lots has actually shrunk. It is now not uncommon to see massive houses crowding to the very edge of their property line. Whatever lot is left is typically barren grass with a few random shrubs installed by landscapers (the lawn version of a bad hair-plug job). The scalped appearance of these lots is usually not accidental—developers often find it easier to cut down mature trees than to work around them.

And so then one sees it: the asymmetrical, triple-garage-fronted, architecturally confused house, towering over a lawn that's

utterly stark—as if surrounding a prison so escapees can be seen—except for the assemblage of plastic junk and recreation equipment scattered here and there. Which is not being used, of course, because the entire family is inside the giant house, where the sounds of Nintendo echo off the high walls of the great room. The bright plastic begins to look like a memorial to the noble, dated *idea* of children playing outdoors. As historian Kenneth Jackson notes in his book *Crabgrass Frontier*, the shift to largely indoor living, accompanied by the much-reported decline of gardening and encouraged by everything from air conditioning (often now needed because houses seem to lack shade cover from trees) to front porches being replaced by garages, has left yards—when they even exist—curiously empty. "There are few places as desolate and lonely as a suburban street on a hot afternoon," he writes.

The unused plastic playthings and private playgrounds scattered in the barren yard speak not only to vanishing outdoor play but to a larger cultural disconnect from nature, from one's own environment. But there is a simple solution for this. Instead of buying cheap, potentially toxic plastic water slides and the like, plant a garden. Plant a tree. Plant *something*. It may not impress your neighbor, but it will last longer, it will look better, and it will have [a better effect on the environment](#) than plastic slides. And there is another benefit. In his book *Second Nature*, Michael Pollan writes touchingly about a hedge of lilac and forsythia at his childhood home on Long Island, N.Y. To the adult eye, the hedges were simply flush against the fence. But he had his own secret garden, a space between the hedge and the fence. "To a four-year-old, though, the space made by the vaulting branches of a forsythia is as grand as the inside of a cathedral, and there is room enough for a world between a lilac and a wall." He didn't need a plastic playhouse or an obscene mini-McMansion to find space to play. The natural world, when it is embraced, not only provides the opportunity for play—I imagine many of you, like me, have fond childhood memories of a swing hanging from a tree, or a tree house, or jumping in leaves, or running through the sprinkler as it watered the tomatoes—but connects us all to something larger and more lasting.

culturebox

iHero

Why Iron Man is like Steve Jobs.

By Grady Hendrix

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 6:24 PM ET

"Capitalism is based on self-interest and self-esteem; it holds integrity and trustworthiness as cardinal virtues and makes them pay off in the marketplace, thus demanding that men survive by means of virtue, not vices. It is this superlatively moral system

that the welfare stats propose to improve upon by means of preventative law, snooping bureaucrats, and the chronic goad of fear."—Alan Greenspan

It's not quite as catchy as Spider-Man's "With great power comes great responsibility," or Superman's "Truth, justice, and the American way," but in 1963, Stan Lee decided that the world needed a superhero for whom the tenets of capitalism would be a solemn vow, and thus was born Tony Stark, aka Iron Man. Partially based on Howard Hughes, Tony Stark was no self-doubting teenager dressing in spidery fetish gear, no family unit of four with fantastic powers, no hulking monster who just wanted to be left alone. Stark was a millionaire, an inventor, a ladies' man, a defense contractor, and a card-carrying member of the military-industrial complex. "I'm gonna make him the kind of guy that normally young people hate," Lee gloated.

Further alienating his young-people demographic, Lee set Iron Man's creation story in Vietnam: 1963 saw the United States send 16,000 American military advisers to South Vietnam, and Tony Stark went with them. Hobnobbing with American soldiers while they tried out his new flashlight-size mortars on the Vietcong, Stark is captured by a warlord named Wong-Chu in an ambush that leaves a piece of shrapnel lodged near his heart. With only a week to live, Stark is forced to manufacture weapons for Wong-Chu but instead builds the Iron Man armor, basically a giant pacemaker that just happens to be super strong and can fly. Stark uses the suit to best Wong-Chu in a wrestling match (Wong-Chu fights back by throwing a filing cabinet full of rocks at him) and then escapes to civilization.

To the world, Tony Stark was the head of Stark Enterprises, a company that made high-tech weaponry, like rocket-powered roller skates, for the United States Army. Iron Man ostensibly served as his bodyguard and corporate mascot. But readers knew that Stark was secretly Iron Man and that in this identity he could take care of business—literally. Assuming that what was bad for Stark Enterprises was bad for America, Iron Man destroyed his competitors (who all turned out to be insane, anyway) and battled anyone who endangered his ability to land fat defense contracts. Lazy employees were fired and usually went on to become supervillains, retroactively validating Stark's human-resources acumen. Plus, he hated Commies.

Iron Man's early enemies were Communist evildoers such as the Red Barbarian, the Crimson Dynamo, the Black Widow, the Titanium Man, Boris Bullski, the Red Ghost and his Super Apes, and even Nikita Khrushchev himself. They were all a cowardly, weak, homicidal lot, defective and deviant products of the Communist state. Iron Man was also continually menaced by Asians. His nemesis is still the merciless Mandarin, constantly revived by tone-deaf writers who try, and fail, to drag him out of Fu Manchu's shadow—with his 10 fashionable power rings and his Chinese supremacist agenda, the Mandarin will always be an embarrassing Yellow Peril cliché. In one thrilling story, the anti-

Asian and pro-business agendas of *Iron Man* collided when the Mandarin tried to destroy Stark Enterprises by unionizing its employees.

Throughout the series's history, Oriental enemies have reared their evil heads: the Yellow Claw, China's Radioactive Man, Fu Manchu himself. Japan fielded Samurai Steel, as well as the right-wing nationalist Monster Man, and even when the nation came up with its own superhero, Sunfire, he was really just a front to expand Japanese corporate interests in Vietnam. In a display of good taste, Marvel Comics published a very special Vietnam issue of *Iron Man* in 1975 dedicated to "peace" and featuring bright-yellow-skinned, bucktoothed Vietnamese soldiers.

If *Iron Man* sounds like your embarrassing uncle who drinks too much at Christmas and then rails against "Commies" and "coloreds," why is he still around? Perhaps because 1963 wasn't just the year we escalated our involvement in Vietnam but the year when Kennedy was assassinated. Comic-book readers found a father figure in Tony Stark. He was responsible but not stodgy. He could keep them safe, but he was hip to new technology. Also, within the Marvel comics universe, Iron Man has been treated with respect, unlike his peer Captain America. Over the past few years in the pages of *Iron Man*, the shielded hero has been appointed the secretary of defense and become the director of the comic-book-world version of the U.N. Captain America, on the other hand, has been arrested, shot, and, in a truly humiliating moment, forced to admit not only that he didn't know what MySpace was but that he didn't watch *American Idol*.

Even now, *Iron Man* represents Stan Lee's adolescent dog-eat-dog version of capitalism, the version that appeals to our "might makes right" monkey brains: Innovation is good; monopolies rock when we run them, suck when we don't; big corporations need CEOs rich enough to own space jets; and regulations should be a result of the CEOs' benevolence and wisdom, not imposed by outsiders. Tony Stark is a self-made man who believes that we can build ourselves out of trouble. He's one of America's romanticized lone inventors who, like Steve Jobs, solve problems by locking themselves away in secret workshops to emerge later with their paradigm-shifting inventions.

These days, the *Iron Man* comic book sells worse than not only the Hulk, Daredevil, Captain America, and Thor but the six different titles featuring Wolverine. So why an *Iron Man* movie? In a maneuver worthy of Tony Stark himself, Marvel Comics is producing *Iron Man* on its own after getting burned on licensing deals for the lucrative Spider-Man and X-Men franchises. Who's left in the stable? Captain America and Daredevil have already bombed on film, and the Hulk and Thor are in movies coming later this year, and so Iron Man it is. The *Iron Man* movie is a decision born of greed and pragmatism, a decision based on Marvel's best corporate interests. It's a purely capitalist decision,

and according to Iron Man ethics, that makes it practically heroic.

culturebox

The Sweet Smell of Success

The mysterious art of writing about perfume.

By Jim Lewis

Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 1:42 PM ET

Some years ago, I dated a French economics student named Ariane, a woman of many charms and qualities, among them a flawless and effortlessly elegant sense of taste. Not so much in men, perhaps, since I was somewhat callous and *louche* at that age, but in furniture, clothing, jewelry: things like that. What's more, she wore a fragrance so gorgeous—rich, worldly, slightly concupiscent—that I can still call it clearly to mind. It was my first intimate experience of the art of perfume, more specifically, of the supreme magic and high style of Chanel. We all have a catalog of ineffaceable memories: Mine includes the scent of Coco on a black cashmere scarf, encountered on the wintry streets of the Upper West Side. I would wear the stuff myself if I thought I could get away with it.

There are thousands of perfumes on the market. They're as manifold and distinct as wines but far more important to get right. Which, after all, is more likely to spoil your meal: a bad cabernet in your own glass, or a bad perfume or cologne on anyone in the room? Besides, the mystery of wine is mitigated by an enormous wing of writing: histories, guidebooks, magazines, Web sites. Not so with scent; there's almost nothing to steer the novice. At least, there hasn't been until now.

Now there's a book called *Perfumes: The Guide*, by the husband and wife team of Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez, which is not just enlightening, but beautifully written, brilliant, often very funny, and occasionally profound. In fact, it's as vivid as any criticism I've come across in the last few years, and what's more a revelation: part history, part swoon, part plaint. All of the other reading I was supposed to do was put aside while I went through it, and it took me some time to finish, in part because I was savoring it and in part because I kept stopping to copy out passages to e-mail off to friends. In the library of books both useful and delightful, it deserves a place on the shelves somewhere between Pauline Kael's *5001 Nights at the Movies* and Brillat-Savarin's incomparable *Physiology of Taste*. It's not the first book on scent as an industry and an aesthetic, and it's not the most obvious, but it's a real original and almost equal in epicurean pleasure to the substance that inspired it.

Consider, for example, a fragrance by Robert Piguet called Fracas, another scent I love, though I couldn't begin to explain what it smells like or why it appeals to me. The professional vocabulary of perfumers tilts in two directions: the generic (*amber, citrus, floral*), and the technical (*beta-santalol, aldehydes*). One is vague and the other is opaque; both are insufficient. By contrast, here is how Luca Turin begins his review of Fracas: "A friend once explained to me how Ferrari achieves that gorgeous red: first paint the car silver, then six coats of red, then a coat of transparent pink varnish..."

That is perfect. It's casual and indirect but uncannily precise: a little poem about a glossy scent. There are hundreds of equally inspired passages in *Perfumes: The Guide*, though not all of them are quite so terse. Here is Turin's full review of a perfume called Sacrebleu: "If you travel at night on Europe's railways, near big stations you can sometimes see lights the size a teacup nestled between the rails, shining the deepest mystical blue-purple light through a filthy Fresnel glass. They appear to be permanently on, suggesting that the message they convey the train driver is an eternal truth. Since childhood I have fancied the notion that it may not be a trivial one like 'Buffers ahead' but something numinous and unrelated to duty, perhaps 'Life is beautiful' or some such. Sacrebleu has the exact feel of those lights, a low hum that may be eclipsed by diurnal clamor but rules supreme when, at 3 a.m., you know you're looking into your true love's eyes even though you can't see them." I don't know what Sacrebleu smells like, but I'll bet he's right.

Those are some of the raves. The denunciations tend to be quick and deadly, like a serpent's bite. One perfume is described as "a shrill little floral that feels like music heard through someone else's headphones," and another begins, "The bathrooms in hell smell like this." And sometimes the authors seem to drift a little, and so much the better. Here is the entirety of Tania Sanchez's notes on Dior Addict—one of my very favorite short reviews ever written about anything: "I liked it very much in Macy's when I went there drunk one day, and told everyone afterward I found the perfect bourbon vanilla with orange blossom, as if it'd been a life quest. Sadly the bourbon was all me."

As with wine, again, perfume worship is wide open to snobbery and pretense. And, yes, it's all a matter of taste, but then, so are many things that matter. I should report that Turin and Sanchez have a preference for Chanel and Guerlain, but that strikes me as a reasonable call; and they decry most celebrity fragrances, but they're not against the idea altogether. Sarah Jessica Parker's *Lovely* earns some real praise, even David Beckham's *Intimately* gets a few compliments, and Britney Spears' *Believe* gets a higher rating than L'Oréal's *Le Parfum*. (Of the latter: "Vile, cheap, obnoxiously chemical, it sits somewhere between Allure and Amarige. I hope to live long enough to see this sort of faceless dreck wiped off the face of the earth. Nice bottle.") And they hold Stetson, of all things, in especially high regard. ("It's gorgeous," Sanchez writes, "as rugged and masculine as the

lingerie level at Saks Fifth Avenue, and about ten bucks per ounce.")

It's hard not to keep quoting from *Perfume*, but I'll stop here. It's hard, too, to keep from complimenting it, so I'll include one small complaint. The book is organized somewhat haphazardly: Perfumes are listed in alphabetical order, but there's no index to speak of, and if you're looking for an easy way to find, say, all the perfumes by Bulgari, or all the florals, or even to distinguish the men's fragrances from the women's, you're out of luck. I hope this will be corrected in the next edition. I hope there will be a next edition. There are hundreds of new fragrances introduced every year. I have no interest in smelling them all, but I'm looking forward to reading about them.

culturebox

Mickey Mouse Operation

Forget Miley Cyrus. Check out Disney's Chinese underwear ad.

By Daniel Brook

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 6:23 PM ET

The May issue of *Vanity Fair* hits newsstands tomorrow, but it's already made the cover of the *New York Post*. The issue features a photograph of Miley Cyrus, star of the Disney Channel's mega-hit *Hannah Montana*, clutching a satin sheet to her otherwise naked torso. Cyrus quickly disavowed the photograph, which was taken by Annie Liebovitz: "I took part in a photo shoot that was supposed to be 'artistic' and now, seeing the photographs and reading the story, I feel so embarrassed," she said in a statement. "I never intended for any of this to happen, and I apologize to my fans who I care so deeply about." Disney, for its part, shared Cyrus' outrage. Disney spokeswoman Patti McTeague [told](#) the *New York Times* that "a situation was created to deliberately manipulate a 15-year-old in order to sell magazines."

Reading McTeague's comment over coffee yesterday morning, I couldn't help but think of an advertisement I'd seen a few months ago while on a reporting trip to China. I was walking from my Beijing bed-and-breakfast to a nearby subway station when I was stopped in my tracks by a billboard that made the controversial 1990s [Calvin Klein underwear ads](#) look artistic by comparison. Staring down at the throngs of shoppers on Beijing's Xinjiekou Nandajie Avenue, a busy commercial thoroughfare about a mile west of the Forbidden City, was a white girl who looked all of 12, reclining in a matching bra-and-panties set adorned with Disney's signature mouse-ear design. In a particularly creepy detail, the pigtailed child was playing with a pair of Minnie Mouse hand puppets. In the upper left-hand corner was the familiar script of the Disney logo.

Not believing my eyes, and on an assignment that touched on images of Westerners in the Chinese consumer's imagination, I snapped a photo:

After reading of the Cyrus flap, I e-mailed my photo to Disney's McTeague. I was curious: How did the company square its position on the Liebovitz photo with its risqué billboard in China?

McTeague passed on commenting and forwarded the image to Gary Foster, a spokesman for Disney's consumer-products division. He called me from a business trip (to China) to disavow the ad. "It has caught us totally by surprise," Foster told me by phone from Guangzhou. He explained that Disney contracts with a host of licensees, who produce and market products for the Disney brand. Foster said that licensees are contractually bound to clear all advertising with Disney's corporate offices. "We have literally hundreds of licensees making our products. They are supposed to submit any kind of imagery to us before it is used, but it's hard to enforce that sometimes," he said.

Foster said he didn't know which ad agency prepared the ad, how old the model was, or where the photo shoot took place. But he was sure it was the work of a Disney licensee: Shanghai Zhenxin Garments Co. Ltd., which makes underwear for girls and teens. China is notorious for its intellectual-property pirates, and Disney is a frequent victim, with people illegally slapping the Disney name and logo on items all the time. Could this have been the case with the billboard, I asked Foster. "No. Unfortunately not this time," he replied. He assured me the billboard would be removed immediately.

It is legitimately difficult for a company as big as Disney to keep track of all its subcontractors. Then again, Disney has learned the hard way the importance of keeping track: Disney's response to the billboard recalls its response to [exposés](#) of labor conditions in the factories of its Chinese licensees', where subcontractors were actually breaking local wage, health, and safety laws. Here, of course, it's rules of taste and propriety that are involved, and the ad may play differently to a local audience than it did to me and Foster. The age of consent in China is 14, compared with 18 in Disney's home state of California. "I don't want to make excuses for them at all because it is not anything that we would ever approve, but in other parts of the world this is not unusual at all," Foster said. "In fact, in Europe, they have similar type of taste, if you will. Here in China that's not unusual at all, but it's not usual for the Disney brand."

It may be a small world, after all, but not everyone shares Burbank's mores, and you can't be too careful protecting your

brand: You never know when a Chinese licensee, or an American glossy, will deviate from the Disney way.

dear prudence

The Object of His Obsession

My boyfriend interrogates me about my romantic past. How can I stop his badgering?

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 6:57 AM ET

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

Dear Prudence,

Last summer I reconnected with the first love of my life—my boyfriend during my high-school sophomore year. He is at the tail end of his divorce (to be with me), and I have been divorced for two years. He is sweet, sensitive, attractive, healthy, fit, successful, smart—everything I ever wanted in a man. He loves and cares for me deeply, does not want me to do anything that might put me in danger, takes great care of me, and is fantastic to my young kids. He wants to marry me and raise our kids together. What is wrong, then? He is obsessed with my sexual and emotional history. He wants and expects me to remember everything I said and did with every man and boy I was ever with. Not only do I not remember everything in the detailed way he wants it told to him, I have told him repeatedly that I don't think it is healthy to go into that kind of detail. Once, he interrogated me for over two hours and would not let me leave the house until I told him the number of people I had slept with. No amount of talking, threatening, or begging will make him stop. Now I've begun hanging up on him, something we both agree is disrespectful, but I don't know how else to end the interrogating! He says he just "needs to know," but I think there is an underlying issue or insecurity that no amount of answers will resolve for him. What should I do?

—Talked Out

Dear Talked,

Rent *There's Something About Mary* and pay special attention to the character Dom "Woogie" Woganowski. He starts out as a smart, successful guy, but you discover he is actually an unhinged stalker, Mary's former high-school boyfriend whose "love" forced her to move and change her name. But *There's Something About Mary* is a comedy; you may end up having to change your name because you find you're in a horror movie. You say your beau is everything you've ever wanted, but surely "disturbed psychosexual bully" was not in your Match.com profile's description of your ideal man. You think he's, ah, overbearing now? If you marry him, I suggest you have a good lawyer on retainer and know the addresses of all the local

battered women's shelters. Besides the fact that he spends hours torturing you over things that are none of his business, there are other little bombs in your letter showing that you are losing sight of normal behavior. You praise him because he doesn't want you to do anything that might put you in danger. What's that mean? He's talked you out of your habit of running into traffic, or he's shown you that being friendly to other men might be misinterpreted and end up with you getting hurt (by him, presumably)? Then you say you that when you stop his phone interrogations by hanging up on him, you're being "disrespectful." I assume this acknowledgment of your "bad" behavior is the result of more badgering by him (and it's healthy to hang up the phone on someone who's subjecting you to an abusive tirade). I suggest you demonstrate your self-respect by terminating not only his phone calls, but all contact with him—immediately. And since you and he agree about your need to stay out of danger, be prepared to get a restraining order.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence Video: Quaint Clichés Run Amok

Dear Prudence,

I'm a sophomore in high school, my boyfriend is a senior, and we have been together for six months. Recently, we were out to dinner and discussed him going to college in the fall. I am very excited for him and proud of him, too. On the drive home, however, he noticed I had grown quiet and asked what was wrong. I said, "Everyone at school is asking what we're going to do when you go to college, and I don't know. So what are we going to do?" He said, "To be honest, I've seen people try to make it work when one of them goes to college and it's really hard, and I don't want to put you through that, so I think I'm just going to let you go at the end of the summer." To say the least, I was completely stunned. I was ready to drive there on weekends, since it's only about an hour away, and survive on phone calls, e-mails, and text messages. It seems like the most logical thing to do is to have a one- or two-month trial period at the beginning of next year and see how things go. What is your advice?

—Teen Love

Dear Teen,

Sure, you could maintain your relationship through weekend visits, calls, e-mails, and text messages. The problem with your plan is that your boyfriend just broke up with you. At least he's given you notice that he's willing to stay together for the next few months, but once he's off at college, he wants to be free to ask out that cute girl in history class. There's nothing wrong with that; what is wrong is that he told you in a cloddish and hurtful way. However, there isn't a really great way to break up with someone you are enjoying because you hope someone you'll enjoy a lot more will show up in the fall. Instead of hanging around in this lame-duck relationship, let your (ex)boyfriend know that you understand so well his desire to go to college

unencumbered that you're letting him finish high school that way, too. And maybe you will find there's a cute guy you've overlooked in history class. (Please, just make sure his name isn't Woogie.)

—Prudie

Dear Prudie,

My husband has been serving a 15-month tour in Iraq and has an 18-day R&R break in September, when we will celebrate our first anniversary, as well as take the GMAT exam and fill out applications for graduate school. His combat tour will be complete in February 2009. We had already discussed his R&R, and he said he just wanted to see me and was fine with not seeing family. But now his parents want to visit while he's here. His father talks incessantly and can be abrasive. He's a Vietnam vet and likes to express his reservations about the Iraq war. I just don't think that's what my husband needs, and others who have already had their R&R recommend spending all of it together and not trying to see others. What's the best plan here? Can I suggest they wait until February when he is (hopefully!) back for good, and we'll go visit them for a long weekend? Can I limit them to a four-day visit here? Or am I out of line for thinking a new wife has a say-so about familial guests at a sensitive time?

—Out-law

Dear Out-law,

You're not out of line to decide with your husband what to do with this precious time. But as annoying as your father-in-law may be, and as much as you and your husband may just want to drink in being with each other, it would be cruel not to let his parents get the comfort of spending some time with their son. All three of you are doing your best to get through the days until he is safely home. Do not deprive your in-laws of the relief of seeing for themselves that their soldier is all right. But there is nothing wrong with limiting them to a long weekend. When you tell them, don't say how little time you're giving them. Instead, explain that despite the leave being so short, and with the two of you squeezing into it both a second honeymoon and preparations for graduate school, you are really happy that you will be able to devote four days to their visit. If you're working during part of your husband's leave, it might be best if they came during the week—that way they could maximize their time with their son, and you could minimize your time with his father. And please express my gratitude to your husband for his service.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence,

I work in an office with a "business casual" dress code. The other day, I decided to wear a skirt and found, as often happens when I've worn skirts to work in other offices, that I'm constantly asked, "Wow, why are you all dressed up?" or "So, are you going to a party after work or something?" I find these

questions very awkward, considering I have no special plans for the evening, and I can't simply answer with a "Thank you." Why should I be made to feel overdressed just because I happen to have chosen a skirt instead of slacks that morning? It's such constant commentary that despite the implied compliment, I almost feel hassled about it, as if I'm dressed inappropriately. Are women expected to wear pants in public at all times unless there is a formal event? And what would be an appropriate response to my co-workers' questions?

—Not Formal

Dear Not Formal,

At least no one has said to you, "Wow, a skirt. This must mean you've ended your presidential bid, Hillary!" Your co-workers are making small talk. Yes, you'd prefer they say, "Nice outfit." (You wouldn't construe that as sexual harassment, would you?) But since you don't want to answer their rhetorical questions, just act as if they are compliments. Smile and say, "Thanks, glad you like it."

—Prudie

Deathwatch

The Hillary Deathwatch

A Clinton traitor is in Obama's midst. Plus: The gas tax pollutes Hillary's campaign.

By Chadwick Matlin

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 4:01 PM ET

Obama woos a superdelegate away from Clinton, Hillary's own supporters dislike her gas-tax holiday, and new polls suggest the Obama-Clinton split is getting deeper but that Democrats are still likely to win the White House. Clinton dives half a point to **12.1 percent**.

Former DNC chair Joe Andrew sounded a clarion call for superdelegates by endorsing Barack Obama today. Andrew is an impressive get because he's the kind of establishment Democrat that Obama could win over only by brute political and mathematical force. (Not to mention he has two first names.) In [an interview with the Associated Press](#), Andrew said that Obama wisely rejected the gas-tax holiday and [deftly handled the Rev. Wright imbroglio](#) and that it was time to heal the rift in the Democratic Party.

Any time a superdelegate publicly shifts from one candidate to another, [it's major news](#). But Andrew's endorsement is especially important for Obama at this juncture. According to polls, Clinton is closing in on him in North Carolina, and she's the tentative front-runner in Indiana. On balance, superdelegates have

continued to trickle toward him at a quicker rate. But equipped with a high-profile flip, Obama can show—rather than tell—superdelegates that it's time to move on from Rev. Wright and Obama's "bitter" comments.

Meanwhile, the gas-tax issue still leads this week's news—policy alert!—and [experts are roundly panning](#) Clinton's and McCain's stances on the issue. Making matters worse for Clinton, the Obama campaign is pointing out that staunch Clinton supporter New York Gov. David Paterson agrees with Obama on this one. Candidates are bound to have disagreements with their supporters, but even minor dissent can remind superdelegates of other [Clinton infighting](#).

Back to the polls, Democrats are growing increasingly partisan within their own party. An [NBC/Wall Street Journal poll](#) reports that 30 percent of Clinton supporters won't vote for Obama in the general election if he's the nominee and 22 percent of Obama folks won't swing Clinton's way. On its face, this is a potentially ripe datum for Hillary—more Democrats won't vote for the Democratic nominee if Obama is the chosen one.

But once you explore the poll further, you realize that those numbers may not mean much. Fifty-three percent of surveyed voters want a Democrat to become president; 33 percent say they'd prefer a Republican. Based on that metric, it seems that regardless of who the nominee is, the Democrats will win. But that, of course, is also hogwash, especially considering McCain's neck-and-neck polls with both Democrats. The moral of the story, as always, is that polling only makes us more confused.

For a full list of our Deathwatches, [click here](#). For a primer on Hillary's sinking ship, visit [our first Deathwatch entry](#). Send your own prognostications to hillarydeathwatch@gmail.com.

Deathwatch

The Hillary Deathwatch

Obama slams Wright, Clinton's gas-tax plan gets jeers, and Indiana is still a tossup.

By Christopher Beam

Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 1:27 PM ET

Barack Obama slams the Rev. Wright, Clinton's gas-tax plan receives jeers, and Indiana is still a tossup, all of which brings Clinton down 0.3 points to **12.6 percent**.

Obama's decision to cut Wright loose Tuesday was an investment in the future: Let the story dominate news for one more day, then hope it tapers off. In a press conference, Obama said he's "outraged" at Wright's recent remarks about Louis Farrakhan, the government inventing AIDS, and U.S. military

efforts being equivalent to terrorism. These comments "should be denounced," Obama said, adding, "I do not see the relationship being the same after this."

It's too early to say whether this move diffuses the Wright issue. Now that Wright got a taste of the spotlight, he probably doesn't want to go away. (Obama had better hope Wright's [book tour](#) happens *after* Nov. 5.) But at least Obama can dissociate himself fully from his pastor, as opposed to upholding the earlier wishy-washy (some would say nuanced) disown-the-words-but-not-the-man stance he articulated in his Philadelphia speech last month.

Meanwhile, Clinton is making her "gas-tax holiday" the centerpiece of a [new ad campaign](#), condemning Obama for failing to address high prices at the pump. But among pundits, her proposal (and McCain's similar plan) is getting laughed out of the room. The normally sympathetic Paul Krugman [calls](#) Clinton's plan "pointless" and McCain's "evil," while his colleague Thomas Friedman [denounces](#) the plan as "money laundering: we borrow money from China and ship it to Saudi Arabia and take a little cut for ourselves as it goes through our gas tanks." Still, it's the kind of pander that could work, no matter how transparent or absurd. If voters associate Clinton with cheap gas, mission accomplished.

The superdelegate scene is something of a wash today. Obama snags Iowa Rep. Bruce Braley and Indiana Rep. Baron Hill, while Clinton picks up Pennsylvania AFL-CIO president Bill George, narrowing Clinton's lead to 21 supers. Some people think [more are on the way](#). The trickle of supers is telling, though: It shows that the worst Wright week ever has not yet been enough to drive superdelegates away from Obama.

In the polls, Indiana hasn't shed its tossup status. A new Howey-Gauge survey shows the two candidates [statistically tied](#), with Obama at 47 percent and Clinton at 45 percent. But the [last few Indiana polls](#) show Clinton leading. The fate of the race hangs in the balance! Indiana is all-powerful! Except, not really. If, like us, you believe that superdelegates are going to be *very* squeamish about voting against the pledged delegate count, then Indiana merely determines whether Clinton drops out in May or June.

For a full list of our Deathwatches, [click here](#). For a primer on Hillary's sinking ship, visit [our first Deathwatch entry](#). Send your own prognostications to hillarydeathwatch@gmail.com.

Deathwatch

The Hillary Deathwatch

More Wright fallout and a North Carolina endorsement buoy Clinton once again.

By Christopher Beam
Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 1:27 PM ET

A media frenzy over the Rev. Wright, a bump in matchup polls, and a key North Carolina endorsement buoy Clinton's chances 0.5 points to **12.9 percent**.

The response to the Rev. Wright's speech at the National Press Club was so negative, some papers must be prepping Barack Obama's obituary. "PASTOR DISASTER," screamed the *New York Post*. The *Washington Post*'s Dana Milbank, under the headline "Could Rev. Wright Spell Doom for Obama?," [argues](#) that Wright "added lighter fuel" to the controversy by repeating some of his most inflammatory ideas. Indeed, Wright criticized America's foreign policy, praised Louis Farrakhan, and reiterated his conviction that the government created AIDS as a method of population control. In Bob Herbert's words, Wright went to Washington "not to praise Barack Obama, but to bury him."

Think back, though, to when Wright's remarks first emerged. The sky was falling, the horse race was over, and Obama was getting shipped off to the glue factory. Yet his national poll numbers [hardly moved](#). In Pennsylvania, he continued to close the gap with Clinton. It's impossible to isolate cause and effect in flaps like this, but in retrospect the Wright flap (at least version 1.0) looked much more media-driven than voter-driven. There's little to indicate that Wright's "[revenge tour](#)" will be any different. It doesn't bode well that Wright enjoys the spotlight. But in the long run, [Obama is lucky](#) that Wright came out of hiding now rather than in October. There's no doubt that ties to Wright would hurt Obama in the general (even though [more than half of Americans](#) don't believe Obama shares Wright's views), but anybody who was going to vote against Obama because of his crazy preacher had probably already heard of him.

Superdelegates are a different story. Obama continues to close Clinton's lead, picking up endorsements from [Sen. Jeff Bingaman](#), N.M., and Rep. Ben Chandler, Ky. Clinton now leads by [23 supers](#). But Clinton [snaps up](#) the biggest endorsement of the day, North Carolina Gov. Mike Easley. Easley's backing is symbolic for several reasons. First, he's got cred among NASCAR voters, which could help Clinton perpetuate the Obama-is-elitist narrative. Second, he initially backed John Edwards, suggesting that this could foretell an Edwards announcement. (Elizabeth Edwards is reportedly [pushing him](#) to endorse Clinton.) And lastly, his state will almost certainly go for Obama, making his decision that much more difficult. Some reports claim Easley was disappointed with Obama for refusing to debate Clinton in his state.

In the polls, Clinton gets a boost as well. A new AP/Ipsos poll has her leading John McCain, 50 percent to 41 percent. Obama, meanwhile, remains tied with McCain, 46 percent to 44 percent. Obama should be concerned, certainly, but for now this poll is

an outlier: The last several matchup polls show both [Obama](#) and [Clinton](#) roughly even with McCain.

For a full list of our Deathwatches, [click here](#). For a primer on Hillary's sinking ship, visit [our first Deathwatch entry](#). Send your own prognostications to hillarydeathwatch@gmail.com.

Deathwatch

The Hillary Deathwatch

The Rev. Wright resurfaces, buoying Clinton's chances.

By Chadwick Matlin

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 3:44 PM ET

With every new sound bite, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright bails another bucketful of water from Hillary Clinton's campaign dinghy. Meanwhile, Barack Obama is being pegged as a liability for Democrats in congressional races. Clinton's chances float up 0.5 points to **12.4 percent**.

By the time [Wright took to the stage](#) this morning at the National Press Club, he had already made two high-profile appearances, [on PBS](#) and at an [NAACP dinner in Detroit](#). Even though his rhetoric was calmer today than in Detroit, he managed to keep his name in the news, and, combined with his earlier remarks, he's sure to dominate the cable-news cycle. The conventional wisdom says that every time Wright shows up on a television screen, it hurts Obama, which we're inclined to believe for now. [There's an outside chance](#) that by going public with new comments, Wright can drown out the older, more inflammatory ones. But that's a nuanced view, and if this primary season has taught us anything, it's that nuance doesn't win elections.

But even if Wright wasn't making appearances in the flesh, he'd still be showing up on TV screens in some markets. A Mississippi Republican is using Obama and Wright [in a new ad](#) to attack his Democratic challenger for Congress. Obama has endorsed the Democratic candidate, Travis Childers, and the ad scolds Childers for not distancing himself from Obama after Obama didn't distance himself from Wright. This plus an earlier ad from the North Carolina GOP featuring Wright and Obama may make some superdelegates skittish about supporting the senator. Picking a nominee isn't just to ensure your party controls the White House but also to help your party pick up seats in Congress. If Obama and Wright become a liability down-ballot, then Clinton may be seen as a better alternative.

With all of this bad news for Obama, we should note that the entire country doesn't hate him quite yet. [A new Newsweek poll](#) reports that more people have an unfavorable opinion of Hillary Clinton than favorable. Obama and McCain, meanwhile, both have favorable numbers above 50 percent and unfavorable

ratings in the low 40s. Interestingly, both Democrats' favorability rankings have gone down considerably since March, but McCain's has stayed relatively level.

For a full list of our Deathwatches, [click here](#). For a primer on Hillary's sinking ship, visit [our first Deathwatch entry](#). Send your own prognostications to hillarydeathwatch@gmail.com.

did you see this? Top Five Laziest Inventions

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 5:58 PM ET

dispatches Darfur

Rebellion from the margins.

By Shane Bauer

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 6:58 AM ET

Getting into Darfur isn't easy. The Sudanese government rarely gives visas to journalists, so on my two visits between 2006 and 2007, I entered through the back door, crossing the border from the refugee camps in Chad into the rebel-controlled territories in Darfur. I traveled on the backs of trucks, drove for days through the desert, rode in Toyota Land Cruisers with anti-aircraft guns bolted in the back, and spent a week traveling by horse and cart, sneaking through the territory of a government-allied rebel group to make my way back to Chad.

In the four months I've spent in Darfuri villages, rebel bases, and refugee camps in Chad, I saw a side of Darfur that was very different from the typical story that we hear, where people fall into one of two camps: ruthless warlords or helpless victims. By now, most of us have heard the stories of the Janjaweed militias, galloping through the Sahel, torching villages and slaughtering their inhabitants. Many of us have heard about bodies dropped in wells to spoil the water, fields of sorghum and millet set ablaze to guarantee that no one returns, and mass rapes to strike fear into anyone that dares to venture back into the hinterlands. In Darfur, these stories are ever-present and inescapable.

But Darfur is still very much alive. Throughout the time I've spent between Sudan and Chad, I've wanted to show another side of Darfur—where people are fighting back and refusing to leave the homes that form the basis of their livelihoods. By torching those villages and bombing thatch-roofed huts, the Sudanese government has unsuccessfully tried to squash an uprising made up of blacks and Arabs who are fighting for roads, schools, clinics, electricity, clean water, and participation in a

government that has marginalized their region and others in Sudan for decades.

election scorecard Glimmer of Hope

Clinton supporters are beginning to think Hillary has a shot again.

By Chadwick Matlin

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 6:32 PM ET

The new CBS/*New York Times* [poll](#) (PDF) suggests not much has changed in the hard metrics of the Democratic race nationwide. Obama continues to lead with 46 percent, and five points' worth of Clinton's support has transferred over to the undecided category.

The real data of interest are in the polling of politics, where Barack Obama's aura of inevitability has taken a drastic hit. A month ago, nearly 70 percent of Democrats thought Obama was going to be the nominee. Now half of Democrats think he'll be crowned, and 34 percent say Clinton will. This, obviously, does not indicate any erosion of support for Obama. Instead, it shows that Clinton supporters—38 percent of Democrats, according to the poll—have hope that their candidate will prevail.

One more stat to chew on: Sixty-four percent of Obama voters would be satisfied if Clinton was the nominee; 50 percent of Clinton voters would be dissatisfied if Obama represented the Democrats in November.

Election Scorecard uses data supplied by Mark Blumenthal and Charles Franklin at [Pollster.com](#).

Delegates at stake:

Democrats	Republicans
Total delegates: 4,049 Total delegates needed to win: 2,025	Total delegates: 2,380 Total delegates needed to win: 1,191
Delegates won by each candidate: Obama: 1,626; Clinton:	Delegates won by each candidate: McCain: 1,325; Huckabee

1,486

(out): 267; Paul: 16

Source: CNN

Source: CNN

Want more **Slate** election coverage? Check out [Map the Candidates](#), [Political Futures](#), [Trailhead](#), [XX Factor](#), and our [Campaign Junkie](#) page!

explainer

Do Text Messages Live Forever?

How a dirty SMS can come back to haunt you.

By Jacob Leibenluft

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 6:51 PM ET

On Tuesday, a Michigan court [released](#) yet another batch of romantic text messages sent between Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and his former chief of staff Christine Beatty in 2002 and 2003. In the [messages](#), Kilpatrick and Beatty—who are charged with perjury for denying their affair in court—professed their love to one another and graphically described their sexual encounters. If you delete an old text message, can someone (or his lawyer) still find it?

Probably not—although there are exceptions. Most cell phone carriers don't permanently save the [enormous](#) amount of text-message data that is sent between users every day. AT&T Wireless, for example, says it keeps sent text messages for 48 hours only—after that, they are wiped off the system. Sprint, on the other hand, keeps messages on its server for approximately two weeks. A [court order](#) could force a carrier to retain certain messages as part of an ongoing investigation, but it would probably be impossible to get the contents of a 2002 text message from most cell phone companies.

But as the *Detroit Free Press* [noted](#) after it uncovered the first trove of messages in January, Kilpatrick got in trouble because he used a government-issued SkyTel pager. SkyTel—which does much of its business through [government and corporate contracts](#)—offers message archiving as one of its key features. The mayor himself had reauthorized a [directive](#) noting that even deleted electronic communications sent and received by

government employees would be stored automatically, although the memo did not explicitly mention text messages.

But even if your deleted text messages are off your carrier's server, they may not be [gone forever](#). When you press the delete button on your phone, the data that make up your message don't disappear in an instant. Instead, the code is marked with a sort of tombstone that indicates which data can be overwritten. But until enough new information is added to fill that memory, your old text message will remain on your device. If you used a [SIM card](#) to store your text messages before you erased them, then there might be space for the remains of 30 or so deleted messages; if the messages are downloaded directly to your phone, several hundred deleted messages could stick around on your device. Eventually, of course, the deleted messages will disappear as memory is filled with new messages, photos, or videos. (See [this Explainer](#) for more on how to delete things permanently.)

Still, it isn't always easy to recover a deleted message before it's overwritten. First, you have to find a way to get the code off the cell phone. Then, you need to translate that code back into the human language of the original text message. If your messages are stored on a SIM card, you can purchase a device for [as little as \\$150](#) that allows you to recover erased data on your own. But if your messages are stored directly on your phone, recovering deleted texts can be a long, technically challenging, and expensive process. While [cell phone forensic specialists](#) have emerged to help police and private investigators explore old phones, it could cost you several hundred dollars to ask them to find that text message you accidentally deleted.

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

Explainer thanks Rick Ayers of the National Institute of Standards and Technology, Denise Howell, Gary Kessler of Champlain College, Rick Mislan of Purdue University, and Lee Reiber of Mobile Forensics, Inc.

explainer

What's a Botnet?

An army of infected computers that can send out 100 billion spam e-mails a day.

By Chris Wilson

Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 6:57 PM ET

Microsoft [revealed this week](#) that it is helping law enforcement officials track down the operators of "botnets," or networks of computers that can be used to send out spam messages without the knowledge of their owners. Though the software company is tight-lipped about the specifics, Canadian security forces have

already used Microsoft's information to bring down a botnet that infected close to 500,000 machines. What is a botnet, exactly?

It's a virus, worm, or other piece of software—the "bot"—which runs covertly on a series of computers—the "net." While several researchers are attempting to construct "good" botnets capable of protecting servers or undertaking massive computations, the term most often refers to viruses and other malicious programs that install on a computer without permission. Once a computer has been infected by a bot and recruited into the network—i.e., turned into a "zombie"—it surreptitiously communicates with a central command server or with other bots. Popular botnet activities include sending spam or flooding a targeted site with so much Web traffic that it's forced to shut down. (The latter is known as a "denial of service attack.")

At a [recent conference](#) of security analysts, one malware researcher reported that the 11 biggest botnets in the world [comprise 1 million machines](#), and can send 100 billion spam e-mails per day. As security researchers develop more and more sophisticated means of tracking and detecting these threats, the authors of the predatory programs continue to find innovative ways to spread their bots and hide their tracks.

For example, early botnets tended to set up a direct line of communication between the infected computer and the person controlling the network—sometimes known as the "botmaster." This was done via a communication system called [Internet Relay Chat](#) (which was also used in early instant messaging systems). But a system like this makes it relatively easy for researchers to isolate a copy of the bot software, dissect it, and track down the server where the bot is phoning home. More sophisticated virus programmers have now turned to peer-to-peer systems, where bots disseminate commands through the network, in a "pass it along" system of giving orders. This makes it harder for investigators to find the source of the commands.

Until recently, the most infamous of these threats was a botnet called Storm Worm, so named because it [originally propagated through e-mails](#) in early 2007 with the subject line "230 dead as storm batters Europe." Microsoft claimed last week that its bot-hunting software had [finally crushed Storm](#), but others [were suspicious](#). In any case, Storm Worm is at the least significantly scattered, but several other botnets have taken its place. While researchers continue to track the newest threats, study their code, and devise new ways to detect and combat the bots, most concede that the computer security arms race won't end anytime soon.

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

Explainer thanks Elizabeth Clarke and Joe Stewart of SecureWorks.

explainer

Life in an Austrian Dungeon

What 24 years in a windowless basement will do to your health.

By Juliet Lapidos

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 4:52 PM ET

Josef Fritzl, the Austrian man who imprisoned his daughter in a cellar for 24 years and fathered seven children with her, [is facing prosecution](#) for rape, abduction, incest, and possibly murder. One of the seven kids died (hence the possible murder charge), three were raised by their grandmother aboveground, and three others spent their entire lives in a windowless, [60-square-meter hellhole](#). Is living in a dungeon bad for your health?

Yes, but not as bad as you might think. From a medical standpoint, there's one major problem with underground living: the absence of natural light. Lack of exposure to sunshine increases the risk of [vitamin D deficiency](#), which causes [rickets](#) and other bone diseases including [osteoporosis](#). Vitamin D malnutrition may also lead to chronic diseases such as high blood pressure. Unless you eat huge amounts of fish—cod liver oil every day for lunch, for example—it's difficult to obtain sufficient vitamin D from natural food sources alone. It's possible, however, to get the vitamin through dietary supplements.

Another health hazard for the forcibly homebound is lack of exercise. Sixty square meters isn't much space for a cardiovascular workout. If the dungeon dwellers weren't getting their heart rates up regularly, then they're all at risk for heart disease and obesity.

While fresh air isn't a health requirement per se, poor ventilation can lead to a host of medical problems. Humidity encourages the growth of mold, which can trigger allergies and asthma attacks. If one person gets sick, it's dangerous for others to breathe the same air. Of course, the subterranean family never had direct contact with the outside world, but they were exposed to bacteria via contact with Josef, so they weren't entirely cut off from diseases, airborne or otherwise.

Scientific studies on the physical effects of long-term confinement in prison aren't especially pertinent here since prisoners generally have more space to roam around and more access to fresh air than the Fritzl's did. But another famous Austrian kidnapping case might shed some light. [Natascha Kampusch](#) was abducted at the age of 10 in 1998 and held captive in a small, windowless cellar. After the first several months, she had access to the upstairs house and, occasionally, to the garden, but she spent nights in the basement. When she

finally escaped in 2006, she was thin (just a little more than 100 pounds) and hadn't grown much (about 6 inches), but otherwise, she was in good health.

Explainer thanks Mark Schattner of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and Slate contributor Sydney Spiesel of the Yale University School of Medicine.

explainer

Six Thousand Gallons of Regular, Please

How much does it cost to fill up a corporate jet?

By Jacob Leibenluft

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 5:59 PM ET

The Senate was set to vote Monday afternoon on a bill that would [raise taxes on fuel](#) for private jets from 21.8 to 36 cents per gallon. The higher tax would require corporate jet passengers to pay a larger share of the cost for upgrades to the U.S. air traffic control system. How much will that set you back when you pull your jet up to the pump?

As much as a few hundred extra dollars on top of the thousands you're already paying. Small corporate jets, like their jumbo-jet brethren, run almost exclusively on a kerosene-based fuel known as [Jet-A](#). (Piston-engine airplanes, the vast majority of small "general aviation" planes, run on [avgas](#), a leaded gasoline closely related to what you would put in your car.) As of Monday afternoon, Jet-A is selling to corporate jets for an [average](#) of \$5.21 per gallon. (Fuel is usually more expensive on the coasts and cheaper in the Midwest.) Because the cost of Jet-A [closely tracks](#) the price of a barrel of oil, fuel costs for private jets have quadrupled since 2000.

As with cars, the amount of fuel required for a corporate jet varies depending on the model of the aircraft, and newer jets tend to be more energy-efficient. But the most important variable is usually the size of the jet: The 48,000-pound [Gulfstream G550](#), which can fly from Chicago to Rome with 15 passengers, burns through more than [400 gallons of fuel per hour](#). The [Eclipse 500](#)—a lighter jet now being used as an [air taxi](#)—can [fly more than 1,200 miles](#) on less than 185 gallons of fuel.

For an example of how much a private flight might set you back at the pump, consider the [Cessna Citation Excel](#)—a popular midsize corporate jet that has made headlines recently for its [role](#) in John McCain's presidential campaign. With four passengers on board, the Citation Excel has a maximum range around 1,850 miles, and filling the tank for a long haul would require

purchasing about 800 gallons worth of Jet-A. (A newer model, the [Citation XLS+](#), is a bit more fuel-efficient.) That would add up to \$4,168 at today's average fuel prices; a tax hike would add about \$114 to the bill. (For the Gulfstream G550, with a maximum fuel capacity of about 6,000 gallons, the tax increase could result in an additional \$850 or so for a full tank.)

While carbon-offset purchases are becoming [more popular](#) in the corporate aviation world, there isn't much of an eco-friendly alternative to Jet-A. Virgin Atlantic recently completed a flight from London to Amsterdam using a blend that included 20 percent [palm oil](#), and researchers are hopeful about fuels derived from [algae](#). But "cold flow" problems—the inability of diesel fuels to function properly at low temperatures—limit the viability of biodiesel for jets that cruise at 45,000 feet.

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

Explainer thanks Bill de Decker of Conklin & de Decker, Max Shauck of Baylor University, and Larry Weaver of Dellem Associates.

fighting words

One Angry Man

Should we worry about John McCain's temper?

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 12:08 PM ET

So, a fresh and sly political subtext in a very bizarre campaign season. The two Democratic nominees remain icily calm when in each other's vicinity—plain as it is that they cordially loathe and despise one another—while huge shudders of molten rage continue to shake the ample and empurpled yet graying frame of Bill Clinton as he broods on the many injustices to which life has subjected him. What a good time to shift the subject to the temperament (or temper) of Sen. John McCain and to hint, as did Michael Leahy in a [major piece](#) in the April 20 *Washington Post*, that we should wonder whether the Republican nominee has his tray table in the fully locked and upright position, whether he lives happily or unhappily in his own ZIP code, whether there are kittens in his granary or bats in his belfry, and whether his elevator goes all the way to the top.

"Anger management" is the euphemism that allows this awkward matter to be raised. In a solemn version of the old "Whose finger on the trigger?" question, Leahy was able to recruit the views of former Sen. [Bob Smith](#), R-N.H., who opined that McCain's rage quotient "would place this country at risk in international affairs, and the world perhaps in danger." I once went on a TV panel with Smith and passed some green-room

time with him, and I can assure you that premature detonations of any kind would certainly not be his problem. He combines the body of an ox with the brains of a gnat. Indeed, if his brains were made of gunpowder and were to accidentally explode, the resulting bang would not even be enough to disarrange his hair. He moved from being the most right-wing Republican senator from New Hampshire, switching to the U.S. Taxpayers Party after a distinct absence of what we call "traction" in his presidential run of 2000, tried to rejoin the GOP when he saw a nice, fat chairmanship become vacant on the death of Sen. John Chafee, failed at that, lost the nomination in his own state, moved to Florida, endorsed John Kerry in 2004, endorsed Duncan Hunter for the Republican nomination in December last year, and was last [spotted](#) on the Web page of the [Constitution Party](#): a Web page that's tons of fun to check out. And this cretinous dolt, who managed to do all the above without bringing out so much as a sweat on his massive and bovine frame, is the chief character witness against the impetuous McCain. Nice work.

However, we are still obliged to ask ourselves whether the senior senator from Arizona is a brick short of a load or, as heartless people in England sometimes say, a sandwich or two short of a picnic. Because "anger," make no mistake about it, is the innuendo for instability or inadequacy. What if McCain doesn't really have both oars in the water or is either too tightly wrapped or not tightly wrapped enough?

The anecdotes are both reassuring and distressing, and the best and the worst both come from Arizona. About two decades ago, facing a group in his state GOP that resisted proclaiming a state holiday for Martin Luther King Jr., he shouted, "You will damn well do this" and rammed the idea home with other crisp and terse remarks. Fair enough. However, a bit later, in 1986, he was pursuing a Senate career and took extreme umbrage at an Arizona Young Republican who had given him too small a podium on which to stand before the cameras. It can be tough being 5 foot 9 (as I am here on tiptoe to tell you), but most of us got over it before we were out of our teens, let alone before donning the uniform of the U.S. armed forces.

The podium example is the worrying one, because otherwise one could defend McCain by arguing that some things are worth becoming enraged about. Michael Gerson got this exactly wrong when he recently [indicted](#) McCain for denouncing the Christian right in 2000, calling them "agents of intolerance," comparing them to Louis Farrakhan, and accusing them of being "corrupting influences." Who could possibly have looked at the Jerry Falwell-Pat Robertson riffraff and said anything less? There was nothing "out of control" about that address. The problem there was not the senator's rough speech but the way that he later sought accommodation with the same frauds and demagogues.

One reason that I try never to wear a tie is the advantage that it so easily confers on anyone who goes berserk on you. There you are, with a ready-made noose already fastened around your neck. All the opponent needs to do is grab hold and haul. A quite senior Republican told me the other night that he'd often seen John McCain get attention on the Hill in just this way. Not necessarily hauling, you understand, but grabbing. Again, one hopes that the nominee has been doing this for emphasis rather than as a sign that he is out of his pram, has lost his rag, has gone ballistic, has reported into the post office that he's feeling terminally disgruntled today. (Or, as P.G. Wodehouse immortally put it, if not quite disgruntled, not exactly grunted, either.)

Thomas Jefferson used to note of mild George Washington that there were moments of passionate rage in which "he cannot govern himself." We often forgive what we imagine, to use Orwell's words about Charles Dickens, are the moments when someone is "generously angry." Yet how are we to be sure that we can tell the hysterical tantrum from the decent man's wrath? The answer ought to be that we cannot know in advance of a presidency what causes people to become choleric, so anger management is yet another name—and yet another reason—for the separation of powers.

foreigners

Jimmy Carter's Magic Words

Should we talk to our enemies?

By Shmuel Rosner

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 5:13 PM ET

Jimmy Carter holds the trump card when he talks about the need to speak to one's enemies. His advantage is the instinct harbored by most Americans, who reject "the policy of isolating problem countries" and believe "that the United States should be willing to enter into talks with them," as one [public-opinion poll](#) put it in December 2006.

In that poll, only 16 favored "pressure," while a whopping 82 percent was "willing to talk." Eighty-four percent of respondents supported the proposition that "communication increases the chance of finding a mutually agreeable solution." So although Carter wants you to think he is working against the odds, calling for talks is, in fact, the easier political position.

It is easier for Barack Obama to explain why he is ready to meet with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad than it is for Hillary Clinton to explain why she opposes such a meeting. It is easier for Carter to explain why meeting the leader of Hamas is preferable to "isolating" him. It is easier because no details are

necessary. All you have to do is use one of the magic words: *engage, communicate, talk*. The burden of proof lies with those who oppose engagement. They have to make their case and clarify why they don't want to talk.

Carter met with Hamas leaders last week, and he explained his position in Monday's *New York Times*. In his [op-ed](#), two reasons emerged for the necessity of such talks, but Carter, misleadingly, turned them into one.

The first is that "Hamas [is] steadily gaining popularity." That's the let's-just-deal-with-reality argument: Hamas is strong, Hamas makes the rules, and we have to talk to the party in power. The second is "there can be no peace with Palestinians divided." That's the what-we're-trying-to-do-here-is-help-make-peace argument. Presumably, Carter is not in the business of sabotaging the peace talks being conducted by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas or undermining his efforts to rebuild a moderate, democratic Palestinian Authority. It just looks that way.

It is no accident that in Carter's version, these two arguments are mashed together and left unrecognizable. Carter is a calculating diplomat, and he knows his way around land mines. He needs the arguments to be confusingly entangled, because neither can stand on its own feet. Helping the cause of peace by engaging a party that expresses no interest in a two-state solution makes no sense. Talking to a villain because he is strong while giving up on the possibility of moderates being able to overcome their difficulties is a despairingly defeatist goal.

"[D]irectly engaging Hamas would not only empower a terrorist group designated by the United States and the European Union, it would pull the carpet out from under Palestinian moderates who are truly interested in pursuing peace and are trying to contest support for Hamas through non-violent means," [wrote](#) Matthew Levitt, author of the authoritative book *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*. And Levitt is not alone. The Israeli government, the U.S. administration, the European Union, and the so-called international Middle East Quartet all reject engagement and support the isolation of Hamas.

Carter is defying them all, and he is trying to erode international support for isolation. "This policy" he argues, "makes difficult the possibility that such leaders might moderate their policies." The hope of eventual moderation is another easy argument made by proponents of engagement, who fail to recognize that in some cases, moderation is not a reasonable expectation. Here, Carter is guilty not only of miscalculation but of hubris. He apparently believes that by the force of his personality and powers of persuasion, he can make Hamas change a deeply rooted ideology. Unfortunately, he can't.

Carter goes on to add Syria into the mix. He claims, "Israel cannot gain peace with Syria unless the Golan Heights dispute is resolved." That is probably true. He also uses the "desire of high Israeli officials" to negotiate with Syria to show that the U.S. government's stance against such talks is counterproductive. (Conveniently enough, Carter listens to Israelis' desires only when they bolster his arguments, but that's another story.)

But what Carter fails—or, more likely, doesn't want—to explain is why the Bush administration is reluctant to encourage Israeli engagement with Syria. Reading his article, you might think that preventing bilateral peace talks is the reason—that Washington is somehow opposed to peace between Israel and Syria. This makes no sense. Why would the administration oppose a peace agreement—any peace agreement?

Again, it is those damned details that skew his reasoning. The Bush administration does not oppose an Israeli-Syrian peace accord, but it does oppose an accord that Syria will interpret as a license to keep meddling in Lebanon's affairs or an accord that will let Syria off the hook with respect to its unhelpful Iraq policies.

There's no moral virtue in talking to one's enemies. Engagement is a tool, but so are disengagement and isolation. Both are effective, if used wisely; both can be damaging if used in haste. Talking to one's enemies is a tool—as is complaining about one's reluctance to talk to one's enemies. This is the tool now being used by Hamas and Syria—assisted by Carter—as they try to escape and counter the isolation being applied to them. Making the case for engagement helps them achieve their strategic goal.

Carter's bouillabaisse of Hamas, Syria, and the Maoist guerrillas of Nepal, whom he uses as a positive example of his approach, allows him to offer a one-approach-fits-all solution: Get Carter on board, engage, solve. This should come as no surprise to the people following his diplomacy in recent years. Professor Kenneth Stein, who [worked with Carter](#) for more than 20 years—until he chose to break their ties over the controversial book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*—[wrote](#) in the *Middle East Quarterly* that throughout the book Carter "allows his premises to supplant the facts."

He "possesses missionary zeal," Stein wrote of the former president. Last week, writing about Carter's visit to Israel for *Ha'aretz*, I [revisited](#) this zeal and "the fundamental hypocrisy which is the basis for the political partisanship concerning Carter." Why is it, I asked, that people who have attacked a president such as Bush for "distorting facts in order to push a political goal" have no problem with Carter's book? Why is it that people suspicious of the religious faith that serves as the foundation of Bush's political actions have "no problem with the same religious motives of Carter's messianism"?

foreigners

Boris vs. Ken

London's postmodern mayoral election.

By Anne Applebaum

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 8:00 PM ET

First, a disclaimer: I have known [Boris Johnson](#), the Conservative Party candidate for mayor of London, for some 15-odd years. During that time, I've also met his first wife, his second wife, and his mistress, though I don't think the last merited that title at the time. I worked for some of the same editors as he did during his earlier journalism career and can remember many of his columns. One—it concerned the dubious legal status of one of his children ("Congratulations, it's a Belgian")—still makes me laugh when I think about it.

And now, a second disclaimer: I first met Ken Livingstone, the current mayor of London, now up for re-election, some 15-odd years ago, too, when he was still a member of Parliament. I don't know his mistresses—though I gather there are several—or his colleagues. But I do recall one memorable dinner, organized by a London newspaper, during which we argued at some length about whether Stalin was evil. I said yes. He disagreed. No one laughed.

Given that I know both candidates personally, I should probably be disqualified from writing about the London mayoral election, which takes place on May 1. But in this case, it doesn't matter. Although there are some actual issues at stake—police, traffic, housing—this particular campaign has in fact been completely dominated by discussion of the candidates' remarkably different, and remarkably vivid, personalities. This is no sober clash of ideas, a race between Mr. Livingstone of the Labor Party and Mr. Johnson of the Conservative Party. It's a contest between Ken and Boris, a race in which personal anecdotes have mattered more than policies from the start.

The candidates haven't exactly gone out of their way to discourage this kind of commentary. Though he's been more staid than usual during the mayoral campaign, Boris is a man who can't stop telling jokes, whether at the expense of the aforementioned mistress or the people of Portsmouth (a city of "[drugs, obesity, underachievement and Labour MPs](#)").

Adjectives like *mop-haired*, *blustering*, and *old Etonian* appear in just about every profile of him ever written. So does his [most famous quotation](#)—"Voting Tory will cause your wife to have bigger breasts and increase your chances of owning a BMW M3"—though that line is misleading since his sense of humor is usually far more self-deprecating. "Beneath the carefully

constructed veneer of a blithering buffoon," he once remarked, "there lurks a blithering buffoon."

Ken, by contrast, isn't funny or self-deprecating at all. His need to attract attention manifests itself in other ways: the expensive celebration he had planned to [commemorate 50 years of Fidel Castro's dictatorial rule](#), for example, or his public embrace of a [Muslim cleric who defends suicide bombing and advocates the death penalty for homosexuals](#). Like Boris, Ken often offends people, though his insults are less likely to have started out as jokes. He called the U.S. ambassador to Britain a "chiseling little crook" and told a Jewish journalist he was behaving "[like a concentration camp guard](#)." I'm told he sometimes makes good decisions about transportation, though central London traffic still seems pretty bad to me.

As I say, this is a personality contest, and a deeply unserious one at that: If the good people of London really thought their traffic mattered that much, Boris wouldn't be a candidate, and Ken would never have been elected in the first place. But it's nevertheless worth watching because this campaign could well be a blueprint for the elections of the future since it is postmodern and post-ideological in the deepest sense: In a world in which "issues" are not the issue and no one takes political parties seriously anymore, there's nothing left to talk about except who said what to whom and whose tongue was sharper while doing so.

Usually, we don't have this problem in the United States, our politics being too partisan and our nation too divided to allow for it. But a glimpse of what it could be like is available in the form of the Democratic primary, which has also deteriorated, unsurprisingly, into a particularly nasty personality clash. Any long, drawn-out contest between two people who don't—let's face it—differ that much on fundamental issues will invariably turn into farce; whether it's an amusing one, as in London, or a "bitter" one, as in Pennsylvania, depends on the characters of the candidates involved.

So three cheers, then, for ideological politics—or at least for real clashes of ideas—and let's hope our presidential elections, when we get to them, include some. At least they make everyone talk about things that matter. And, yes, I do hope Boris wins.

gaming

It's Not Just About Killing Hookers Anymore

The surprising narrative richness of Grand Theft Auto IV.

By Chris Baker

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 12:32 PM ET

As you'd probably expect from the reputation of the series, **Grand Theft Auto IV** includes—let's quickly consult the label—blood, intense violence, partial nudity, strong language, strong sexual content, and use of drugs and alcohol. Yes, concerned teenage boys of America, if your parents are irresponsible enough to let you get your hands on this, you can still kill and maim and plunder and screw until your heart is full. But there's a difference this time: The violence is no longer cartoonish. Shoot an innocent bystander, and you see his face contort in agony. He'll clutch at the wound and begin to stagger away, desperately seeking safety. After just scratching the surface of the game—I played for part of a day; it could take 60 hours to complete the whole thing—I felt unnerved. What makes [Grand Theft Auto IV](#) so compelling is that, unlike so many video games, it made me reflect on all of the disturbing things I had done.

I didn't do much reflecting during the earlier GTA games. Sure, there was always some snappy dialogue and a few interesting twists, but the GTA story arc never amounted to much more than a pastiche of classic crime and gangster thrillers—the fun was spotting plot points lifted from the likes of *Goodfellas* and *Miami Vice*. After about 10 or so hours of play, though, I would always start to lose interest in the core story. But while the plotlines have been relatively predictable (if unrepentantly violent and profane), the games' worlds are so large, and the range of activities you can engage in so limitless, that Grand Theft Auto is known less for its game play than for free-form mayhem. As such, GTA's image has come to be defined by the most extreme stuff that players are *allowed* to do, not the comparatively tame stuff that they're *compelled* to do. Grand Theft Auto is known as the game in which you can pick up a prostitute, have sex with her, then kill her and get your money back. You never *have* to do that to advance in the game; the world is simply so open-ended that you *can* do it. (I imagine that's no comfort to [Joe Lieberman and Hillary Clinton](#).)

The distinction between what you're allowed to do and what you're compelled to do is more meaningful to people who actually play games. All of us have tested the limits of what [Will Wright](#) calls a game's "possibility space." In a World War II game, for instance, it's informative to try to shoot your own sergeant the first time you play. It tells you instantly if the game will let you kill your comrades—some do, and some don't—and whether you need to worry about causing a friendly-fire incident. More often, players will resort to this sort of boundary-testing when they become bored or frustrated with the game's more concrete goals. I'm the type of GTA player who polishes off around half of the missions, an accomplishment that unlocks large swaths of the game world and scores you access to nicer crash pads and more powerful weapons. But then there's invariably some mission that's so involved and difficult, or requires me to crisscross the town so many times to get back to the starting point, that I give up and go for lower-impact

entertainments, like turning on the cheat codes so I'm invulnerable and have a tank and a rocket launcher with unlimited ammo. Then I try to rack up a body count that would make Attila the Hun jealous.

I'm guessing that fewer players will reach that breaking point with GTA IV. I'm not even close to finishing, but based on my play experience so far, and in talking with reviewers who have finished the game, I get the sense that freewheeling killing sprees will no longer be the main draw. This is partly because the central missions and story are so well-conceived and well-written compared with previous iterations of the game and partly because the violence is far more disturbing.

The narrative of GTA IV is a variation on the rags-to-riches tales found in gangster movies dating back to the original *Scarface* and *Little Caesar*. (Only you don't get your just deserts in GTA. Or if you do get your just deserts, you can simply restart from your last save point and try again.) Our anti-hero is Niko Bellic, an immigrant from Eastern Europe who has done terrible things that he'd like to forget. Follow the game's missions—he'll do work for the Russian mob, Irish gangsters, the Mafia, biker gangs, Latino drug kingpins, Rastafarian arms dealers, and corrupt congressmen—and you'll commit innumerable murders and thefts to get ahead.

The plot of GTA IV doesn't just rehash moments from *The Sopranos*—it's full of surprise and laced with moral dilemmas. In Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, in which you played as a coldblooded ex-con, the toughest decision you had to make was whether to wear the plaid golf pants or the blue jogging suit. The protagonist of GTA IV, by contrast, was a combatant in some Kosovo-like conflict, and it's clear that he's haunted by it. He occasionally shows flashes of conscience, and some missions are designed to make you feel uneasy. Bellic works in crime because it's what he knows how to do, not because he has to satisfy his blood lust.

The game's supporting characters are also impressively fleshed out and nuanced. Hanging out and building relationships helps you get ahead in the game, but it can be its own reward. One night, a character named Dwayne invited me out for a night at a strip club. I agreed, part of an ongoing effort to get in good with him, so that he'd make some of his minions available to me when I needed backup. In the car, he told me about his state of mind, about the horrible things that he'd witnessed in prison, about how he'd lost the will to live. The quality of the script, the motion capture, and the voice acting made his monologue far more compelling than the C.G. exotic dancers gyrating in thongs. (In general, the character design is good and slightly stylized. But the more skin you can see, the deeper you fall into the [Uncanny Valley](#).)

The game's improved characterizations give far greater weight to the act of killing. Grand Theft Auto was never the most violent

game going. In the sci-fi shooter *Gears of War*, you can chain saw enemy aliens until fountains of blood seem to splatter onto the inside of your monitor. But since the game's world is firmly entrenched in the clichés of 1980s blockbusters like *Aliens*, you feel some distance from it all. There's no such distance in *GTA IV*, where the physics of death feel shockingly real—bodies can't be blown apart or torn to pieces, but they react convincingly to explosions and severe impacts. Each death is a decision. At one pivotal moment, Bellic has to choose between killing two people—one a total jerk who could help advance his career, and one a good friend who can't do much for him. There's no right or wrong decision here—well, actually, there are two wrong decisions—and players will struggle to make the choice. No cheat code or online FAQ can help you here.

As you go through the game, your terrible deeds will stick with you. And not just in your memory—you'll hear them reflected back at you through television and radio newscasts. Yes, the game world is so detailed that it even has its own mass media. *GTA IV*'s Liberty City is one of the most amazing virtual environments ever made, an ersatz New York City that includes everything from Central Park to Coney Island. You can spend hours listening to the in-game radio (many of the DJs are celebs—fashion icon Karl Lagerfeld holds down the mike on K109, where "Disco Never Dies!"), watching TV (there are cartoons, a Fox-like news network, and reality shows like *America's Next Top Hooker*), and admiring the architecture (there are homages to the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building, as well as lesser-known landmarks like the Bohemian Hall & Beer Garden in Astoria, Queens). Most amazingly, there's a full-fledged Internet with hundreds of Web sites (surf over to the home pages of the in-game version of Starbucks and Ikea for a few chuckles).

Each player will encounter a million different facets of this virtual world at his own pace and in his own unique order. It's the sort of experience that you can't get from any other medium, and no game has ever done it better than *GTA IV*. The reputation of the series might be too far gone for nongamers and politicians to appreciate the depth and richness of this amazing game. But *Grand Theft Auto IV* is not an orgy of death. It's a living, breathing place—and when you're forced to kill, it's nothing to celebrate.

green room

The Carbon Olympics

Keeping track of the Olympic torch's carbon footprint—one leg at a time.

By Chadwick Matlin

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 7:40 AM ET

The 2008 Olympic torch relay has not exactly inspired warm

feelings of international cooperation, as in years past. Pro-Tibetan activists mounted protests [in Paris](#) and [London](#), and even managed to [force the extinguishing of the flame](#) on a few occasions. But in the long run, the torch could generate more pollution than political dissent. Its journey across the world (and back again) is leaving a historic trail of CO₂ emissions.

Assuming the International Olympic Committee doesn't snuff out the relay in the face of mass protests—it says [that won't happen](#)—our calculations estimate that the entire trip will unfold over 50,000 miles in 20 countries. (Including a 31-city tour in mainland China, the entire thing will cover 85,000 miles.) [As Wired reports](#), the flame gets its own private plane, so those 50,000 miles of travel demand 270,000 gallons of jet fuel. (The torch's plane needs 5.4 gallons of fuel for every mile flown.) With every gallon of fuel burned, [23.88 pounds](#) of CO₂ [get pumped into the air](#), which means air travel alone will generously offer the environment 6,447,600 pounds of CO₂. That's the equivalent weight of more than 1,000 Hummer H-2s.

To track the flame's slow assault on the atmosphere, we created a map that charts its total carbon emissions as it flies. (Find it below.) Through Thursday's stop in Canberra, the relay has traveled an estimated 40,875 miles, burned 220,725 gallons of jet fuel, and released 5,270,913 pounds of CO₂. We'll be updating the map regularly over the next few weeks as the torch makes its way back to China. Click on the red lines between stops to see the impact of each leg of the trip on the environment.

[View Larger Map](#)

To put this in perspective, the average American leaves an annual carbon footprint of 42,000 to 44,000 pounds of CO₂ emissions, according to the [United Nations](#). That means the Olympic torch will spew as much greenhouse gas during its international travels as 153 Americans do a year. Put another way, the four-month torch relay puts twice as much carbon in the atmosphere as you will over the course of your entire life.

The numbers get even more lopsided when you compare the torch with the average Chinese national. The flame's 50,000-mile journey has an annual carbon footprint equivalent to 624 Chinese citizens'. (Keep in mind that China [claims it's offering a green Olympics](#).)

The above calculations don't include the carbon emissions of the torch itself—nor [the lantern that keeps the official Olympic flame lit 24/7](#). The torch—or rather, all [10 thousand to 15 thousand](#) torches—are fueled by propane, which puts out another 12.669 pounds of CO₂ per gallon burned. We can't calculate the carbon footprint of the torch while it's being paraded around by Olympic heroes because neither the company that designed the

torches nor the Beijing Olympic Committee answered our questions about how much propane was burned every hour.

hey, wait a minute Is India More Equal Than the United States?

Inequality is important, but the way we measure it is stupid.

By Mark Gimein

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 5:22 PM ET

Consider two facts about India. Fact No. 1: Every year, nearly [4,000 people die](#) in the Mumbai commuter train system, most because they fall out of overcrowded cars in the cheap standing-room carriages, or try to hold onto the outside of the train to avoid paying the fare. Fact No. 2: According to an [international survey of rental prices](#) released earlier this month, Mumbai is the world's sixth most expensive place to rent an apartment, falling just behind London pricewise and well ahead of Paris and Rome.

Now add to these a third fact: Measured by the [Gini index](#)—the standard yardstick of inequality and the number that's being referred to whenever you read that, say, the Scandinavian countries are "more equal" than the United States—India is substantially more equal than the United States. It is also a little bit less equal than [Israel and Japan](#). If you rank the countries of the world from most to least equal by the Gini index, India falls just a little behind Italy.

As the election season heats up, we hear ever more discussion of the problem of inequality, much of it driven by the assumption that growing inequality is creating an American underclass—you know, those folks clinging to guns and religion because they're falling behind. These odd facts about India highlight a couple of points about inequality that tend to get buried in the debate. Measuring inequality, or what most people think of as inequality, is not simple. And, perhaps more importantly, the standard measure of inequality tells us a lot less about poverty than we might think or hope.

To see why, let's look a little bit into the mathematics of inequality. The Gini index is a number that expresses the proportion of income that goes to people on various steps on the economic ladder. In a country in which everyone has exactly the same income, the Gini coefficient will be zero. On the other hand, in a country in which *all* the income goes to one person, the Gini coefficient will be 1, and the Gini index will be 100 (technically, it'll never reach the perfect 100, but it'll be incredibly close). In real life, the United States has a Gini index of 45, and Norway's is 28.

This is useful information, and by common-sense measures, Norway probably is more equal than the United States. But here's a thought experiment: Imagine that in some post-apocalyptic, global-warming-induced future the United States breaks up into a bunch of independent minifiefdoms.

One of these fiefdoms will be the Republic of Missoula, where 10,000 people live. Of these, 8,000 are getting by on \$20,000 a year, or its equivalent in lentils and steel rods. Two thousand people, however, are doing much better. They've maintained a very comfortably upper-middle-class standard of living, with an income of \$120,000 a year each.

Not far from the Republic of Missoula is the Principality of Sun Valley, where some part of the remaining über-class has built a series of fortified enclaves. A full 6,000 of Sun Valley's 10,000 residents are rich. Let's say they have the post-apocalypse equivalent of \$300,000. The other 4,000, however, have *nothing* except for the alms they manage to beg at the side of the computer-controlled ski lift. Their income is essentially zero.

Now, which of these two states, the Republic of Missoula or the Principality of Sun Valley, would you say is more equal? My inclination, and I suspect most people's, will be to say that Missoula is the more equal of the two; you might feel differently. But either way, the Gini index will not help us, because in both of these cases, the Gini index is exactly the same. (For the mathematically inclined, both will have a Gini index of 40—less equal than India's 36.8 but more equal than the United States' 45.) The problem here is that Gini index alone does not yield enough information to indicate what proportion of a country's people are poor—even if we know the country's total income. A measure omitting that crucial concept doesn't get to what people really mean when they talk about inequality. Take it out, and most of the rhetoric about inequality loses its soul.

So if the Gini index doesn't really tell us very much about poverty, what is this measure of inequality good for? Well, in the case of real-world countries, which are less stratified than our post-apocalyptic mininations and have incomes that rise more smoothly as you move up the economic ladder (rather than taking a sudden jump), the Gini index will indeed yield a sense of how steep that rise is. And so it is useful as a measure of a fairly narrow kind of inequality, the difference in income of a typical person from the income right above and below him. Think of this in the real world as the difficulty of keeping up with the Joneses.

How important you think this is will depend in some part on how important you think it is to keep up with the Joneses. But it also may depend on whether you are an economist. The American economist most associated in recent years with concern over inequality is Cornell professor Robert H. Frank, author of *The Winner-Take-All Society*. Frank points out that while neoclassical economists think that more is better, many

people, when asked if they would rather make \$110,000 while their neighbors make \$200,000 or \$100,000 while their neighbors make \$85,000, will choose the second. They would, in other words, rather have less if they will have more than the folks around them.

Or at least they say they would. But the question itself is loaded, because it presumes a much greater ability to look into the neighbor's wallet than people actually have. Economists are in the business of measuring the average bank account; noneconomists are not. I often have lunch in a restaurant near my apartment that looks surprisingly fancy (it was featured as a luxe Los Angeles restaurant in the movie *Garden State*, even though it's actually in Brooklyn, N.Y.). I sit by a huge indoor pool, by a floating boat filled with flowers, under a skylight. The lunch special, including an appetizer, is \$7.50, or \$8.50 with a shrimp dish. I don't know if the people at the next table are millionaires or spending their last \$10.

Both are possible. When economists talk about inequality, they are talking about something that can easily be captured in an equation about national income. When noneconomists talk about inequality, however, they have in mind not their neighbor's wallet, which they can't see, but their own, which they can. They are thinking of what they can and cannot afford, and also of the most visible extremes of wealth and poverty around them. That's why India's Gini index may be lower than our own, and yet it will be the rare person who will say that India is more equal in any sense that matters. When we talk about inequality, it's not about resentment of the next door neighbors' pool. It's about gut issues: whether we feel poor, whether we feel that those around us are poor. That's why it's worth thinking about in the first place. Unfortunately, the usual way that economists talk about and measure inequality tells us next to nothing about it.

hollywoodland

Analyze This

How did a Robert De Niro flop get chosen to close Cannes?

By Kim Masters

Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 6:29 PM ET

Weird: We've never been to the Cannes Film Festival, which is our loss, no doubt. But luckily we've already seen this year's closing-night selection, *What Just Happened?*, which leads us to ask, what did just happen?

We saw the movie months ago, when it had a much-hyped premiere at Sundance. Robert Redford was there, and Robert De Niro turned up with producer Art Linson to introduce the film. In it, De Niro plays a fictionalized version of Linson—an

embattled Hollywood player dealing with an out-of-control director and star (Bruce Willis puckishly playing himself) and winding up with a very bad movie.

Expectations were high that night. The film was directed by Barry Levinson and has a cast that includes Catherine Keener, Stanley Tucci, John Turturro, and Sean Penn. But the film fell flat. After its glittering night at Sundance, it laid there like an overpriced egg—no distributor bought it from that day to this.

So how does this failed venture turn up at Cannes? We asked a prominent producer who has nothing to do with the film to speculate.

"Who is the president of the jury this year?" he asked, as if to imply that we are not very smart. "Sean Penn." And Robert De Niro is a Cannes favorite. "So who promises to show up? Because it's always about movie stars. So Sean Penn shows up, Robert De Niro shows up. ... It just seems so unlikely because the movie has been well-roasted. It was a bad move to take it to Sundance. It was considered at best an inside joke."

The most amusing bit in the movie, to us, is when De Niro-as-Linson stands in the shower, his no-longer-firm flesh exposed to the world as he desperately slathers dye on his hair. That scene would seem to show a wry awareness that an aging producer (not to mention an aging star) doesn't appear at his best when struggling to hold back the hands of time. And that it's quite a challenge, in our culture, to stay graceful after 50.

But the handling of this film seems like an exercise in how profoundly all of them—Linson, Levinson, De Niro—don't get that at all. It was an enormous act of ego to spend the estimated \$30 million on this film, another one to take it to Sundance. And now, Cannes—which is funny because *What Just Happened?* ends with the Linson character taking his very bad film (where else?) to Cannes. *Wag the Dog* indeed.

All this reminded our producer friend of a memo, supposedly created by an anonymous CAA agent in the wake of De Niro's recent departure from the agency. This has been [pinging around the Hollywood blogosphere](#) for a couple of weeks now, but we pass it along in part:

Why did Bobby leave us?

They promised they could turn back time.

They promised they could get him 20m a picture.

They promised they could get a release for his "Something happened," a Barry Levinson

show biz pic that's has no market, and Mark Cuban lost a fortune on.

They promised they could get him the \$1m production fee on every picture he does, that he and his partner put their names on, and do nothing to earn.

They promised they could convince Hollywood that they should still pay that 1m vig on top of his acting fees.

They promised him they'd find a respectable release for the Pacino picture he did last summer, that basically stars two 65 year old guys as detectives—while the audience is under 35, and has no interest in seeing.

As I said, they promised him they could turn back time, and make him 50 again, and relevant, and hot, and interesting to today's moviegoing audience.

And they probably promised that they'd find a way to erase the memory of all of America about the number of god-awful paycheck films he did during the past ten years.

De Niro had a choice ten or so years ago. He could either go the Nicholson route—very selective, very particular, protect the brand—or go out sending himself up in tripe like *Analyze This*, which made money but turned him into that "old psycho guy."

And he could have concentrated on quality stuff, but instead wanted to keep funding his little empire in New York. ...

Bobby blames everybody but himself for the way he's squandered his career, and refused lots of quality pictures because they wouldn't give him producer credit.

Good luck in the Hotel Business, pal. ([link](#))

April 23, 2008

New World Order: NBC has pronounced that with its reinvention of the business of television, it is green-lighting shows without pilots to save money.

Exhibit A was *The Philanthropist*, a show about a rich guy who helps those in need. Why take a chance on a show without seeing a pilot? Because of NBC's belief in the talent associated with it. Specifically, Tom Fontana and Barry Levinson, whose credits include *Homicide: Life on the Streets*.

Now Levinson and Fontana are out over "creative differences" before the show has even gotten rolling. This was a show that NBC Universal touted at its "in-front" last month, when it was selling its upcoming schedule of (in some cases, nonexistent) shows to advertisers ahead of the usual May upfronts.

The *Hollywood Reporter* summed it up this way: "True to his gritty roots, Fontana focused on such social issues as immigration, drug addiction and the use of children soldiers in parts of world, while the network was looking for [a] more escapist and fantastical approach to fit the rest of its lineup." So it appears that NBC chief Ben Silverman jumped all over *The Philanthropist* on the basis of talent whose merits were somehow unfamiliar to him.

Escapism is the new mantra at NBC in the Silverman era. But does this mean it's a good idea to green-light shows on the basis of talent that escapes before the first episode is shot? Who's in charge now? We have posed these questions to NBC but, so far: radio silence. ([link](#))

April 21, 2008

Silence: Well, that's it. Bert Fields won't be called to testify in the [Anthony Pellicano](#) trial. The lawyer who linked clients with the now-imprisoned detective walks away.

Is Fields damaged in the eyes of the community by his longtime association with the man who allegedly conducted dozens of illegal wiretaps? Certainly some of us in the media who worked with him over the years feel that he should be convicted in the court of public opinion. One reporter acknowledges a feeling of powerful self-loathing at the memory of many cozy and mutually beneficial conversations with Fields. That reporter is now convinced that he "cheated" his way to success.

We understand this entirely, having had cozy dealings with Fields ourselves. (None of which caused him to hesitate to threaten to sue us when representing a client—like, say, Tom Cruise.) Fields helped more than one journalist manage legal muddles involving their own interests. He assisted in getting trials opened (notably Jeffrey Katzenberg's suit against Disney). And when it suited him, he served up the dish. From a journalist's point of view, what wasn't to love? He is charming and wily. He is a man of parts: He has written a book about Shakespeare and another about Richard III. He is also [the author \(under a pseudonym\) of potboiler thrillers](#).

However remorseful journalists may be, others aren't feeling so dismayed about the tangled web that seems to have Fields in the middle. We asked one of Fields' very high-profile clients whether he was looking for new counsel. The answer was an emphatic "No." Fields has been under a cloud for an unconscionably long time, he told us, and the feds didn't have the goods. We pointed out that it's hard to believe Fields knew nothing of Pellicano's alleged wrongdoing. He chided us for making assumptions. "There's an Arthur Miller play about that," he said. "Just because you think it doesn't make it true." ([link](#))

April 9, 2008

How to piss off Steve Martin: If you've been dying to see Steve Martin reunited with Diane Keaton and you thought your thirst was about to be slaked, think again.

The story about the two starring in a movie called *One Big Happy* broke a few days ago. Turns out someone made one big boo-boo.

Keaton was interested in doing a project with Martin, and, we're told, he's fond of her, too. But he was not so sure about *One Big Happy*, an idea for a family comedy from Chris Keyser and Amy Lippman, who created *Party of Five* (and that was a while ago, wasn't it?).

Apparently Martin remained strictly noncommittal about the idea. But on March 30, *Variety* trumpeted that Paramount made a high-six-figure deal for the pitch with Keaton and Martin attached to star.

"He was annoyed that his name was put on as attached without his authorization," says another source with firsthand knowledge of the situation. "He was more than annoyed. He was really pissed off."

Who was responsible for getting ahead of the game? Our source believes the fault lies with Endeavor, the agency that represents Keaton. Her agent did not return our call. Another source says the idea was to nudge Martin along with the announcement. If so, it didn't work.

The tale of the Keaton-Martin reunion was widely disseminated, and at first Martin's "people" were going to demand a retraction. But after Paramount did some fast footwork, everyone concluded that it was only an announcement, after all, and let it go. You know how it is in Hollywood—just one big happy. ([link](#))

April 9, 2008

Cold sweat: Like a bad dream that keeps recurring, [the latest tape to leak to the Huffington Post in the Pellicano affair](#) reminds us ever so vividly of what it was like to deal with Michael Ovitz. The recording is an April 2002 talk between Ovitz and the now-imprisoned private detective. It was played in court today, with Ovitz on the stand.

When he placed the call, Ovitz had identified himself as "Michael" to Pellicano's assistant and said the call was about one of Pellicano's kids. The detective—obviously shaken—tries to explain his reaction to hearing that the caller is really Ovitz by saying that he actually is having a problem with one of his children. What's revealing is that Ovitz, who has complained publicly and bitterly and sometimes falsely that journalists were writing inappropriately about his kids, felt perfectly free to use one of Pellicano's kids for his own obscure purposes. "I knew you'd get on the phone," Ovitz explains. "Am I right or am I wrong?" To which Pellicano replies, "You should have just said, 'It's Michael Ovitz' and I would have gotten on the phone." (Duh.)

Ovitz then claims that his real reason for lying was that he wanted to keep his identity from Pellicano's assistant. As the tape rolled. Oh, the irony.

When Pellicano mentions that one of his children has a "problem," Ovitz swings into a trademark move: "You can always call me if you need medical help." That's a classic Hollywood favor that big donors to hospitals can confer, and it can certainly create lasting gratitude. "Do you need any help at UCLA?" Ovitz continues. The previous year, Ovitz had pledged \$25 million to UCLA's medical school. That offer was to be eclipsed a mere month after this conversation with Pellicano by a \$200 million gift from Ovitz foe David Geffen. The announcement came just as Ovitz's management company, AMG, went kaput. When it comes to vengeance, Geffen is truly an artist.

Having called Pellicano, Ovitz—ever the agent—tries to make it sound like he's doing Pellicano a favor. He wants to meet, he says, because "I think it would be beneficial to you and probably beneficial to me." Of course, Pellicano is only too happy to help. And not that Ovitz is self-dramatizing. He simply needs to see Pellicano about "the single most complex situation imaginable."

Apparently, that is having a couple of journalists writing negative stories about his troubled business. Thank God that doesn't happen to people every day.

As for the Ovitz testimony today, he expressed gratitude to Pellicano for getting him good information. How that information benefited him, however, remains unclear. ([link](#))

[Editor's note: *Slate* posted the contract in this space earlier today, but subsequently removed it.]

Send ideas for Hot Document to documents@slate.com. Please advise whether you wish to remain anonymous.

hot document

So You Want To Be a Scientologist

All you have to do is sign this contract.

By Bonnie Goldstein

Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 1:36 PM ET

From: Bonnie Goldstein

Posted Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 1:36 PM ET

Q: How is becoming a Scientologist like buying a house?

A: You have to sign a contract!

Founded in 1952 by science-fiction novelist [L. Ron Hubbard](#), the [Church of Scientology](#) espouses that a follower's "unlimited capabilities" can be realized by applying Scientology's [principles](#) of self-awareness and in celebrating the "spirit of the human condition." The church [agreement](#) explains that Scientology is "unalterably opposed" to the "practice of psychiatry" and as an alternative offers potential participants a [free personality test](#) and "in-depth analysis" from an "expert evaluator."

On April 24, ABC's [Nightline](#) aired interviews in which disillusioned former Scientologists (including [a niece](#) of current worldwide church leader [David Miscavige](#)) complained that the church limited their contact with family and forced them to work 15-hour days. (In a statement to ABC, the church refused to [engage in such a debate](#).) The broadcast was one in a series of publicity hits the church has suffered in recent months. January brought not only the unauthorized release of a [video](#) starring celebrity Scientologist Tom Cruise but also a series of Internet attacks and demonstrations by a group of critics called [Anonymous](#) that pledges to "dismantle the Church of Scientology in its present form." The church enjoys [tax-exempt](#) status and [claims](#) more than 3.5 million members in the United States, but its [secretive](#) organization has remained [controversial](#) since its inception, and the Scientologists have repeatedly been [sued](#) by defectors or their family members. The signed agreement is an attempt to limit Scientology's legal exposure. Church members are required to "forever give up my right to sue the church ... for any injury or damage suffered in any way connected with Scientology religious services." In order to participate in services, one must further acknowledge that "no Scientology church is under any duty or obligation whatsoever to return any portion of any religious [donation](#)." In other words, all sales are final.

Thanks to wikileaks.org for posting the contract. To read it, click [here](#).

hot document

Canada's Baby-Bottle Decree

Ottawa is worried about bisphenol A. Why aren't we?

By Bonnie Goldstein

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 3:20 PM ET

From: Bonnie Goldstein

Posted Monday, April 28, 2008, at 3:20 PM ET

On April 18, Canada said it may soon ban the "importation, sale and advertising of polycarbonate [baby bottles](#)" (see below and on following page). [Tony Clement](#), Canada's minister of health, [announced](#) that his country would be the first in the world to limit exposure to [bisphenol A](#), a [synthetic chemical that mimics estrogen](#). For [decades](#), BPA has been used widely in the manufacture of clear plastic bottles and in the lining of [metal cans](#), including the cans that [infant formula](#) comes in. A growing body of evidence indicates that BPA may threaten the safety of [infants in early development](#), particularly when their food containers have been exposed to [heat](#) (through bottle sterilization or the pouring of boiling water into a can of [dry](#) formula). The Canadian government is [warning citizens](#) that BPA could "affect reproduction" and influence "neural development and behaviour" in those who are exposed to it. In response to such complaints, manufacturers of infant bottles have started developing and [introducing products without BPA](#).

[Risks](#) stemming from exposure to BPA have been known for years, and in 2007 the U.S. Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment officially documented the "[developmental and reproductive toxicity](#)" of BPA. But the Food and Drug Administration, which relies on [industry studies](#) to determine product safety, has yet to take similar precautions, despite repeated demands from [Congress](#).

Send ideas for Hot Document to documents@slate.com. Please indicate whether you wish to remain anonymous.

Correction, April 28, 2008: Due to an editing error, a headline on Slate's home page for this article misspelled Ottawa.

Posted Monday, April 28, 2008, at 3:20 PM ET

human nature Don't TNT Me, Bro

The moral logic of suicide bombing.

By William Saletan

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 8:38 AM ET

[Human Nature Home](#) | [News](#) | [Hot Topics](#) | [Blog](#) | [Essays](#) | [Discussions](#) | [Links](#)

Are suicide bombings increasing around the world? If so, why? What can we do about it?

The latest warning sign comes from data [reported](#) a week ago by Robin Wright of the *Washington Post*:

Suicide bombers conducted 658 attacks around the world last year ... more than double the number in any of the past 25 years ... More than four-fifths of the suicide bombings over that period have occurred in the past seven years, the data show. The bombings have spread to dozens of countries on five continents, killed more than 21,350 people and injured about 50,000 since 1983 ... [S]ince 1983, bombers in more than 50 groups from Argentina to Algeria, Croatia to China and India to Indonesia have adapted car bombs to make explosive belts, vests, toys, motorcycles, bikes, boats, backpacks and false-pregnancy stomachs. Of 1,840 incidents in the past 25 years, more than 86 percent have occurred since 2001, and the highest annual numbers have occurred in the past four years.

To make sense of these numbers, we need to understand how they connect to recent developments in military technology. If you follow the daily Human Nature [News updates](#), you've seen several such developments over the past month. Here's a short list:

1. U.S. commanders are seeking authority to launch [drone attacks on Pakistani militants](#).
2. A Georgian drone was shot down by Russia, but not before relaying video that [identified the aircraft](#) that had fired on it.
3. The U.S. military has launched an initiative to [regenerate lost body parts](#).
4. The United States is developing [walking military robots](#).
5. Scientists are learning how to [remotely detect explosives](#) using chemicals.
6. We're developing a way to detect bombs by tethering [animals to robots](#).

How do these developments fit together? What do they mean? They fit into a framework I sketched [two years ago](#) and updated [last fall](#). Here are some of its key concepts:

1. Morality is expensive. It's easier to destroy things than to preserve or build them. It's even easier when you don't care whom you kill. In Iraq, a major purpose of suicide bombings and "improvised explosive devices" has been to kill enough Americans with enough regularity to make the public demand that our troops come home. The bombers have the edge because they care less about death than we do.

2. Machines are crucial to defeating terrorism. The main advantage of machines isn't that they're brilliant. It's that they don't bleed. We can't stand death, so we replace our soldiers with lifeless proxies. Nobody demands a pullout because some bomb-defusing gizmo got blown up in Baghdad today. And in general, the ideal mode of warfare is hunting our enemies in their own territory at little or no risk to ourselves.

3. Machines are still primitive. The process of engineering machines to see and move the way we do is moving along slowly. In the case of IEDs, the United States has found that humans, particularly those who have hunting experience, are more agile and discerning.

4. Machines can be combined with animals. Animals have the agility and sensory precision that machines lack. Animals have hunting experience. Animals, like machines, are regarded as morally expendable. That's why the military has explored remote

control of IED-sniffing dogs through radio receivers attached to their collars.

Here's how this framework makes sense of the current news reports. First, the United States wants to use drones against Pakistani militants because it's too politically dangerous at home and in Pakistan to have our troops doing the dirty work on the ground. We need to operate from a safe distance.

Second, as the Georgian case illustrates, there are going to be a lot of drone shoot-downs in the years ahead. Shoot down a plane with a live pilot in it, and you risk war. Shoot down a drone piloted by some guy in a remote booth, and the worst you risk, probably, is condemnation. But don't expect to get away with it completely: Video-equipped drones, unlike people, can incriminate you even as you kill them.

Third, the United States is trying to reduce its fatalities and casualties in every possible way. Military medicine is already saving the lives of soldiers who would have died in previous conflicts. Yesterday's death is today's wound. Now, with [tissue regeneration](#), we're raising the ante: Today's "permanent" wound will be tomorrow's bad memory.

Fourth, we're trying to insulate American soldiers altogether by developing robots to absorb risks previously shouldered by troops. Likewise, we're mechanizing bomb detection.

Fifth, we're trying to upgrade the agility and decision-making of our military devices by entrusting them to living creatures we regard as expendable: animals.

Now let's see how suicide bombings fit into the picture. The logic of these bombings is that they exploit the moral and technical dynamics we just discussed. If you're not particular about which people you kill, or how many, IEDs and suicide bombs give you the biggest bang for the buck. The more people you kill, the more you demoralize the infidel because the infidel is too weak to tolerate the shedding of blood.

But not you. You're strong. You're willing to guarantee, not just risk, the deaths of your followers to deliver the bombs. And they're willing to die. You don't have to tether your mechanism to a dog or mongoose and hope the dumb beast does its job. You've got much smarter animals at your disposal: human beings.

This is scariest thing about the proliferation of suicide bombings: It's perfectly rational. Furthermore, the disadvantage it exploits—and thereby pressures us to reduce—is our valuation of human life.

That's the bad news. Here's the good news: The equation includes an additional variable that can complicate the logic of

bombing. The United States vs. al-Qaida isn't a two-player game. It's a multiplayer game, with lots of Muslims watching and weighing. And many of them don't like what they're seeing from al-Qaida because they care about the murder of innocents, even if Osama Bin Laden doesn't.

Four days ago, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a front-page story by Josh Meyer about al-Qaida [losing Muslim support](#) over civilian casualties caused by its suicide attacks. A former al-Qaida theologian, a senior Saudi cleric, and many other Muslims have confronted the group with messages of dismay. "How many innocents among children, elderly, the weak and women have been killed and made homeless in the name of al-Qaida?" asked one critic. In the last two months, Bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has issued an audio and a Web book attempting to quell the complaints.

This is our most plausible hope of deterring suicide bombings: not some high-tech gizmo, but the real-world costs of sheer moral intolerance.

And there's some basis to believe it may be working. Using the National Counterterrorism Center's [Worldwide Incidents Tracking System](#), *Slate* editorial assistants Tony Romm and Alex Joseph crunched the country-by-country [data](#) for suicide bombings during the four complete years on record: 2004 to 2007. If you take the U.S. war zones out of the picture—Iraq and Afghanistan—the data show a significant increase only from 2006 to 2007. If you discount Pakistan as an annex of the Afghan war, the increase disappears. The only notable increases elsewhere are in Algeria and Sri Lanka, and the combined 2007 total for those two countries was 10 attacks—less than 2 percent of the worldwide total. In other countries, the numbers have actually declined. I'm not saying the surge of bombings in the war zones is no big deal. But at least the cancer hasn't spread.

Bottom line: Over the past four years, suicide bombings have not, in fact, increased around the world. Whether that's due to law enforcement or moral deterrence, I can't say. But let's hope it's the latter because the most reliable safeguard you can ask for in this unreliable world is one grounded in human nature.

(Note to readers: If you're accustomed to getting Human Nature articles and items by RSS feed, you'll need to subscribe separately to the feeds for the new Human Nature [Blog](#), [News](#), and [Hot Topics](#). Or you can simply bookmark the new Human Nature [home page](#), which links daily to all the new content. The shorthand URL is [humannature.us.com](#).)

jurisprudence
Gaming Indiana

The quirky state voting law that could affect Tuesday's primary.

By Richard L. Hasen

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 4:47 PM ET

Set aside, for a moment, the Supreme Court's [decision](#) Monday upholding Indiana's voter-identification law. It's another little-noticed election law in the state that could come into play during next week's Clinton-Obama contest for the Democratic presidential nomination. Republicans and independents can vote in Indiana's Democratic primary. But this quirky state law gives voters the right to challenge other voters at the polls for not being sufficiently loyal to the political party in whose primary they are voting.

According to polls, the contest between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama is [close in Indiana](#), much closer than the other primary that day in [North Carolina](#). Meanwhile, Rush Limbaugh has been [urging](#) his Republican listeners to cross over and vote for Hillary Clinton, in order to muddle the Democratic field and tilt the race toward a candidate who Limbaugh thinks would lose to John McCain. The Obama and Clinton campaigns have also been courting these Republicans and independents. It's not clear they'll want to turn around and challenge some of them on the day of the primary. But that calculation could change based on late polling. If Republicans lean to Obama despite Limbaugh's urging, for example, wouldn't it be in Clinton's interest to use this law to discourage Republican voting? In any case, Indiana Democratic Party officials have threatened on their own to challenge some of these voters, and that itself could affect the outcome of the Clinton-Obama contest.

Here's Indiana's odd rule for primary voting: [The state code](#) allows a voter to cast a ballot in a primary election "if the voter, at the last general election, voted for a majority of the regular nominees of the political party holding the primary election"—apparently meaning, in this context, that the voter voted for more Democrats than Republicans in the last general election. The law also lets voters into the primary if they did not vote the last time around but intend to vote for a majority of Democrats in the next general election. The law specifically provides that a voter can challenge another voter at the polling place for not meeting these requirements. The challenger gets to demand that the voter sign an affidavit stating that she meets one of the two requirements above. If the voter signs the affidavit under penalty of perjury, she can vote.

Given the way it's constructed, prosecuting someone under this law looks quite difficult—unless someone is [dumb enough](#) to blog about lying on an affidavit, how would prosecutors *prove* how the voter voted last time or that he lacks the intention to vote for a majority of Democrats at the next general election? And there are questions about the constitutionality of this provision. Still, Indiana Democrats are talking about using it because they're concerned that Republicans will cross over not just to monkey with the presidential primary, but other races as

well. Democrats hold a 51-49 majority in the Indiana House of Representatives and [think some manipulation of lower ballot races](#) could occur. There is also an important primary in the [close gubernatorial contest](#). The head of the state Democratic Party has [threatened a crackdown](#) on Republican crossover voters by challenging them at the polls and making them go through the rigmarole of signing affidavits. Perhaps this talk could deter some Republicans from crossing over and voting. And even if that's unlikely, voters in heavily Republican districts could be put off by long lines if lots of challenges take place.

Will Clinton or Obama supporters want to challenge alleged Republican voters? The calculation here depends on how prevalent the Limbaugh effect in fact is—and in whose favor it is really deemed to cut. Some Republican voters will cross over because they sincerely want to influence the choice of the Democratic nominee. Either they favor McCain but want to ensure that their favored Democrat wins if McCain loses, or they're seriously considering a vote for a Democratic candidate. At least early in the race, Obama had more support from independent and Republican voters, meaning that Clinton could have more incentive to challenge. But maybe Limbaugh has changed that.

More nefariously, some Republican voters could be trying to create the chaos that Limbaugh has called for. But it's hard to say how that plays out, too. In the end, the uncertainty may well persuade the Clinton and Obama camps to hold off on challenging primary voters. But in this high-stakes race, both campaigns are probably trying to think it all through. Perhaps we'll see challenges in some counties or polling places but not others. Where in Indiana does Rush get his highest ratings?

jurisprudence

Getting Away With Torture

The failures of the legal system for both the torturers and the tortured.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 10:41 AM ET

It's pretty much a given that our "terror trials" aren't working. The long-awaited prosecutions of a fistful of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay—proceedings just getting under way after more than six years of tinkering—are barely moving forward, for reasons now having more to do with politics than law. Evidence is flimsy and stale, and prisoners claiming to have been [aggressively interrogated](#) and subject to involuntary [use of drugs](#) are now [refusing to participate](#) in their trials. There may yet be verdicts at Guantanamo. But following years of abuse, neglect, and extreme secrecy, there won't be justice.

The other place we won't see legal accountability is at the upper levels of the Bush administration, where evidence of lawbreaking is largely dismissed or ignored. I want to be clear that there is no moral equivalence between the actions of members of the Bush administration and those of alleged "enemy combatants" at Guantanamo. But both the tribunals at Guantanamo and the wrongdoing in the Bush administration reflect how legal processes can fail under extreme political pressure.

Outside of the Bush administration, there is near-universal bipartisan agreement that [Guantanamo should be shut down](#) and the military commissions scrapped. Certainly a compelling case could have been made for Nuremberg-style trials for some of the prisoners held there—such as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, alleged mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. But the CIA has admitted that Mohammed was water-boarded, rendering his [confession unreliable](#) and any possible [subsequent conviction a sham](#). And even if we do press forward with this clutch of trials for terrorists at Guantanamo, there still remain almost 300 detainees at the base who've been jailed there for years without charges. At least [some of them](#) were turned in by Afghan captors for [bounties](#), averaging \$5,000 per head. Others are held based on the coerced testimony of their confederates. Some have been subjected to [multiple preliminary status hearings](#) (known as [Combatant Status Review Tribunals](#)) when they weren't found to be "enemy combatants" the first time around.

Full and fair trials might have happened for enemy combatants swept up after 9/11, but political missteps too numerous to detail have resulted in a process that now exists solely to prove to the world that these detentions were justified; that the captives are—as former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously called them—"the worst of the worst." That's a political conclusion, not a legal one. And it's why Col. Morris Davis, former chief prosecutor for the military commissions at Guantanamo, [resigned last fall](#), claiming political interference in the trials had created the perception of a "rigged process stacked against the accused." Davis later told *The Nation* that in a conversation with then-Pentagon general counsel William Haynes in 2005, Haynes told him flatly, "We can't have acquittals. If we've been holding these guys for so long, how can we explain letting them get off? We can't have acquittals. We've got to have convictions." Haynes resigned shortly after that conversation was reported.

Bad evidence, tortured testimony, delay, error, the guilty prisoners jumbled up with merely [unlucky ones](#), and the necessity of politically motivated convictions over truth-seeking. But politics won't keep just the Gitmo prisoners from getting a fair trial. Politics will also keep those responsible for any alleged lawbreaking at Guantanamo from ever having to defend their actions in a court of law.

The legal question should have been a straightforward one: If prisoners were illegally tortured at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib,

who was responsible? On April 1, an 81-page "torture" memo produced by John Yoo, second in command at the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel from 2002 to 2003, was declassified. Along with its assertions of nearly unchecked presidential power, Yoo's [2003 memo](#) argued that military interrogators could subject suspected terrorists to harsh treatment so long as it didn't cause "death, organ failure or permanent damage." (Yoo's memo was rescinded in December 2003.)

While it's arguable that Yoo was merely producing a theoretical, lawyerly opinion regarding the line between aggressive interrogation and abuse, the possibility is arising that—as Columbia Law School's [Scott Horton suggested](#) last week—"the Bush interrogation program was already being used before Yoo was asked to write an opinion. He may therefore have provided after-the-fact legal cover."

Yoo's bloodless legal analysis—he calls it "[boilerplate](#)"—may well have [opened the floodgates](#) to multiple instances of prisoner torture and even death. Yet virtually nobody suggests he should be subject to legal consequences. Indeed, even the notion that he be relieved of his teaching post at University of California-Berkeley's Boalt Hall has been dismissed as a threat to "academic freedom."

Yoo's possible contributions to the normalization of torture at Guantanamo and beyond almost pale in comparison with another story that was all but ignored this month, when [ABC News revealed](#) that top Bush administration officials, including Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, John Ashcroft, George Tenet, Colin Powell, and Donald Rumsfeld met several times in the White House to discuss specific torture techniques to be used against al-Qaida suspects in U.S. custody. This group together signed off on sleep deprivation, slapping, pushing, and water-boarding, in a manner "so detailed ... some of the interrogation sessions were almost choreographed, down to the number of times CIA agents could use a specific tactic." Days later, President George W. Bush confirmed to ABC that he'd "[approved](#)" of these tactics.

According to a forthcoming [book](#) by [Phillippe Sands](#), it's just not very hard to connect the dots here: "The fingerprints of the most senior lawyers in the administration were all over the design and implementation of the abusive interrogation policies. [David] Addington, [Jay] Bybee, [Alberto] Gonzales, [Jim] Haynes, and [John] Yoo became, in effect, a torture team of lawyers, freeing the administration from the constraints of all international rules prohibiting abuse." Yet, despite the fact that senior members of the Bush administration may well have violated the War Crimes Act of 1996, the Geneva Conventions, and the Uniform Code of Military Justice, there is [scant](#) serious talk of any accountability there, much less future legal [prosecution](#). Yes, the Justice Department's Office of Professional Responsibility is investigating whether agency attorneys provided the White House and the CIA with faulty legal advice on interrogation. But

as my colleague [Emily Bazelon has observed](#), that's a little bit like setting the local meter maid at them.

Barack Obama recently [pledged](#) that if elected, he'd have his Justice Department immediately review whether crimes had been committed in the Bush White House. But virtually nobody truly believes that high-level architects of the American torture policy will face domestic criminal prosecution, even if domestic laws were broken. As Yale Law School's [Jack Balkin pointed out](#), the political costs are too high: "One can imagine the screaming of countless pundits arguing that the Democrats were trying to criminalize political disagreements about foreign policy."

High-ranking administration officials and enemy combatants have little in common, and their respective acts of lawbreaking are not morally comparable. Still, their legal situations are weirdly parallel and show how the rule of law can fracture under the strain of politics. Those alleged lawbreakers at Guantanamo will never be acquitted for purely political—as opposed to legal—reasons. The alleged lawbreakers in the Bush administration will never be held to account on precisely the same grounds.

A version of this piece appears in this week's Newsweek.

jurisprudence

How Dumb Are We?

How long will women shoulder the blame for the pay gap?

By Dahlia Lithwick

Saturday, April 26, 2008, at 7:33 AM ET

On Wednesday, [Senate Republicans blocked a bill](#) that would have [overturned a Supreme Court ruling](#) (PDF) that sharply limited pay-discrimination suits based on gender under Title VII. In *Ledbetter v. Goodyear* (2007), the Supreme Court, by a 5-4 margin, held that the clock for the statute of limitations on wage discrimination begins running when the employer first makes the decision to discriminate, and does not run for all the subsequent months—or in this case, years—that the disparate paychecks are mailed. Justice Samuel Alito, writing for the court, found that the plaintiff in this case, [Lilly Ledbetter](#), was time-barred from filing her discrimination suit because it took more than 180 days after she first got stiffed to discover that she was being stiffed on account of her gender. The court agreed her jury verdict should be overturned.

Many of the Republicans who blocked the vote to reinstate the original reading of Title VII claimed they were doing so to protect women—read "stupid women"—from the greedy

clutches of unprincipled plaintiffs' attorneys and from women's own stupid inclination to sit around for years—decades even—while being screwed over financially before they bring suit. That means they were, in effect, just protecting us from the dangerous laws that protect us. Whew.

For the purely Vulcan reading of the case, Justice Alito's opinion offers some good reading. But for those of you who suspect that gender discrimination rarely comes amid the blaring of French horns and accompanied by an engraved announcement that you are being screwed over, it's worth having a gander at Justice [Ruth Bader Ginsburg's dissent](#).

Ledbetter worked for Goodyear Tire in Atlanta for almost 20 years. When she retired, she was, according to Ginsburg, "the only woman working as an area manager and the pay discrepancy between Ledbetter and her 15 male counterparts was stark: Ledbetter was paid \$3,727 per month; the lowest paid male area manager received \$4,286 per month, the highest paid, \$5,236." So she filed a suit under Title VII, and a jury awarded her more than \$3 million in damages. The jury found it "more likely than not that [Goodyear] paid [Ledbetter] a[n] unequal salary because of her sex." You see, Ledbetter hadn't just negotiated herself some lame salary. She was [expressly barred](#) by her employer from discussing her salary with her co-workers who were racking up raises and bonuses she didn't even know about. She found out about the disparity between her pay and her male colleagues' earnings only because someone finally left [her an anonymous tip](#).

There is plenty of evidence that all this had nothing to do with her job performance. Quoting Ginsburg again, "Ledbetter's former supervisor, for example, admitted to the jury that Ledbetter's pay, during a particular one-year period, fell below Goodyear's minimum threshold for her position." The jury also heard evidence that "another supervisor—who evaluated Ledbetter in 1997 and whose evaluation led to her most recent raise denial—was openly biased against women" and that "two women who had previously worked as managers at the plant told the jury they had been subject to pervasive discrimination and were paid less than their male counterparts. One was paid less than the men she supervised." Ledbetter was told directly by the plant manager that the "plant did not need women, that [women] didn't help it, [and] caused problems."

Stop me when you're convinced that maybe her gender was the issue here ...

The [Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act](#), already passed by the House, would have reinstated the law as it was interpreted by most appellate courts and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, i.e., that every single discriminatory paycheck represents a new act of discrimination and that the 180-day period begins anew with every one. Yet [42 members of the Senate](#)—including Majority Leader Harry Reid, but only

procedurally to keep the bill alive—voted to block cloture. How can that be? As [Kia Franklin notes here](#): Women in the United States are paid only 77 cents for every dollar earned by men; African-American women earn only 63 cents, and Latinas earn only 52 cents for every dollar paid to white men. Yet the *Ledbetter* decision tells employers that as long as they can hide their discriminatory behavior for six months, they've got the green light to treat female employees badly forever. Why isn't this problem sufficiently real to be addressed by Congress?

Have a look at some of the reasons proffered:

- The White House [threatened to veto](#) the bill even if Congress passed it. Why? The measure would "impede justice and undermine the important goal of having allegations of discrimination expeditiously resolved." Of course, there is a place for finality in the law, and nobody wants businesses to face prospective lawsuits for conduct from 20 years earlier. But unless an employee is psychic, 180 days is simply not long enough to sniff out an ongoing pattern of often-subtle pay discrimination. The notion that expeditiousness in resolving legal disputes should altogether trump one's ability to prove them is cynical beyond imagining. And the very notion that extending the statute of limitations somehow encourages scads of stupid women to loll around accepting unfair wages for decades in the hopes of hitting the litigation jackpot in their mid-70s is just insulting. "Sorry, kids! SpaghettiOs again tonight, but just you wait till 2037! We'll dine like kings, my babies!"

- Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, did one better in insulting women when he said, "The only ones who will see an increase in pay are some of the trial lawyers who bring the cases." See, now this is the argument that holds that the same women who are too stupid to bring timely discrimination claims are also too stupid to avoid being manipulated by those scheming plaintiffs' attorneys. First off, [some of us still believe](#) that those damn civil rights attorneys do good things. But what really galls me here is the endless, elitist recitation that it's only the really dumb people—you know, the injured, the sick, and the women—who aren't smart enough to avoid being conned by them into filing frivolous lawsuits.

- Here's the other reason proffered to oppose the equal-pay bill: According to the invaluable [Firedoglake](#), it seems that some women themselves are actually to blame for their [inability to negotiate](#). No need to fix Title VII! Just build more aggressive women! Women also are apparently to blame for not chatting with their male colleagues about the differences in their wages, even when that's explicitly forbidden, as it was in *Ledbetter's* case. So remember, ladies, it's better to be fired for [discussing your wages](#) than to be paid less for being a woman.

- All of which brings us to Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who skipped the vote on equal pay altogether because he was out campaigning. (Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama both showed up to support it.) McCain's opposition to the bill was [expressed](#)

[thusly](#): He's familiar with the pay disparity but believes there are better ways to help women find better-paying jobs. "They need the education and training, particularly since more and more women are heads of their households, as much or more than anybody else." As my colleague [Meghan O'Rourke pointed out yesterday](#), all that is code for the obtuse claim that the fact that women earn 77 cents on the dollar *for the same work as men* will somehow be fixed by more training for women as opposed to less discrimination by men. Wow. Hey! We should develop the superpowers of heat vision and flight, as well.

So, 42 members of the U.S. Senate blocked a bill that would allow victims of gender discrimination to learn of and prove discrimination in those rare cases in which their employers don't cheerfully discuss it with them at the office Christmas party. And the reasons for blocking it include the fact that women are not smart enough to file timely lawsuits, not smart enough to avoid being manipulated by vile plaintiffs' lawyers, not smart enough to know when they are being stiffed, and—per John McCain—not well-trained enough in the first place to merit equal pay.

So how dumb are we? Well, if we don't vote some people who actually respect women into Congress soon, we just may be as dumb as those senators think.

map the candidates Five Days Out

Obama and Clinton are in Indiana, while McCain hits the swing states of Iowa and Michigan.

By E.J. Kalafarski and Chadwick Matlin
Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 2:55 PM ET

medical examiner The Doctor Is in Your PC

I was irritable, gloomy, and couldn't afford a therapist. So, I tried FearFighter™ instead.

By Daniel B. Smith

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 12:33 PM ET

"The long-held belief that improvement in psychotherapy requires a relationship with a therapist may be true for some patients."

—Dr. Isaac Marks, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 2007

England is crazy, and so am I.

Because she is older and larger, let's start with England. In June 2006, a policy group at the London School of Economics led by Lord Richard Layard, a Labor peer, economist, and the author of [Happiness: Lessons From a New Science](#), announced that mental illness was incapacitating the country. At the time, 1 million Brits were receiving disability benefits due to depression and anxiety, resulting in untold misery and an annual drain on the GDP of 17 billion pounds. The government already knew how to combat this scourge: A national agency had earlier determined that cognitive-behavior therapy, which teaches people to modify their dysfunctional thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors, was the most cost-efficient, long-lasting treatment for many common psychiatric disorders. The problem was that there were far too few therapists to go around. The nation was facing a craziness backlog.

Now me. Nine months ago, my wife gave birth to our first child, a spirited, wide-eyed girl whose arrival has brought unmitigated joy. Yet, as we almost immediately discovered, with parental joy comes innumerable costs, the first and highest of which is sleeplessness. For nearly four months, in an often futile attempt to soothe our fussy daughter, my wife and I spent several hours each night bouncing up and down on a giant blue exercise ball—the blinds drawn, the lights out, and all communication in whispers, as if we lived in a giant [Skinner box](#). I speak only for myself when I say that, consequently, all natural tendencies toward mental disorder came rushing to the fore. I grew irritable, gloom-ridden, beset by a nagging, directionless worry. These symptoms were hardly unfamiliar—I'd been in therapy for them before, most successfully, in fact, with CBT—but a number of factors, among them inadequate mental-health benefits and the drying-up both of my freelance work and my free time, blocked any access I had to the talking cure. I needed help, but had no way to get it.

It is here that England's needs and my own coincide. Only 10 weeks into parenthood and already depleted, I discovered that the British government had recently embarked on a novel experiment in health care delivery. In order to bridge the gap between psychotherapy demand and supply, it had directed the National Health Service to begin making available therapy conducted not by a psychiatrist, psychologist, or social worker but by a computer program. Computerized cognitive-behavior therapy, delivered either over the Web or by software, was one-quarter as expensive as face-to-face therapy, according to one estimate, and if widely used would save the government as much as 136 million pounds a year. In March of 2007, the Department of Health mandated that cCBT be disseminated to all 153 medical "trusts" in the NHS system. Anxious, increasingly desperate, and intrigued, I considered that there was no good reason why the British government's mandate should not extend to a sensory-deprived, stressed-out citizen of its ally and former colony, and with eager anticipation, I turned to my laptop for help.

According to an editorial published recently in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* by Isaac Marks, a venerable fixture of the Institute of Psychiatry in London, there are currently 97 computerized psychotherapy programs in existence. These programs have been designed to treat a range of disorders and problems, including obsessions and compulsions ([BT Steps](#)), the development of eating disorders in youths ([Student Bodies](#)), sexual dysfunction (Sexpert, now defunct), and, improbably, encopresis, a disorder characterized by defecating in inappropriate places ([UCanPoopToo](#)). So far, the British government has endorsed only the two of these programs for which it has deemed there are good clinical data to support their effectiveness: the muscularly titled [Beating the Blues](#), for mild-to-moderate depression, and [FearFighter](#), for phobia, panic, and anxiety.

Given the nature of my complaint, I opted for the latter and got in touch with CCBT Ltd., the London-based company that licenses the system. The company's management was strangely cagey; they were at first willing only to send me a brochure replete with vague statistics ("FearFighter™ has undergone extensive testing and trials, involving 700 patients. ...") and patient endorsements ("To date I've travelled on the underground train [200 feet below ground] without a twinge of anxiety—I still can't believe it!"). Eventually, however, prodded by my claims of journalistic necessity, they granted me access, though with limitations. Most patients work through the program—a Web-based system you log on to with a username and password—in eight to 12 weeks. I was given only four, and I would not benefit, as local patients do, from "6 calls from a support worker, lasting in 5 to 10 minutes duration." No, there was to be no tech support for the American sufferer! Still, something was better than nothing, and shortly after the company gave me my password, I logged on for the first time.

The first thing I noticed about the program—I suppose it's the first thing I would have noticed about a human therapist as well—was not the treatment's content but its style. FearFighter has the look and feel of one of the computer games my brothers and I used to play as children on our clunky, premodern Commodore 64: the flat interface; the sketchy, clip-art graphics, the if-this-then-that logic.

FearFighter is divided into nine steps, from "Welcome" to "Troubleshooting." My first task was to fill out a series of questionnaires in order to establish a diagnosis and to provide a base-line reading of my emotional state, with which the results of later questionnaires could be compared and progress measured. (Questionnaires are standard in CBT, which prides itself on its empirical cast.) As I've already suggested, my problem is what Freud called "free-floating" anxiety—its particular torture is that it has no object. The program, however, was unable to detect this. It asked specific questions, I gave specific answers, and it drew specific, and incorrect, conclusions. When asked how much I avoid "injections or minor

surgery," I answered that I "definitely avoid it." When asked how much I avoided "being watched or stared at," I answered that I "markedly avoid it." The result of these and other exchanges was that I was diagnosed with agoraphobia, blood/medical phobia, and depression. But not generalized anxiety disorder, the best clinical description of my state of mind.

Once, I had a therapist who fell dead asleep in session. These misdiagnoses corrupted my confidence more than that considerable indignity. On the other hand, the kink was understandable. FearFighter applies a subset of CBT known as exposure therapy; it identifies specific "triggers" of anxiety and encourages patients to face those triggers squarely. For Bill, the presumably fictional elevator phobic used as an example in Step 2 ("How to beat fear"), this is sensible; if Bill rides the elevator a bit at a time, he'll probably recover. But how does one expose oneself to fears about the loss of one's youth, to intimations of imminent catastrophe, to abject terror that one's firstborn will suddenly stop breathing? Actually, there are ways, but they are linguistic and cognitive—in short, outside of the purview of a computer program, at least so far.

Yet, as I knew well, in recovery persistence itself can be salubrious, and I resolved to take from my computer treatment what I could. Over the next few weeks, I marched steadily through Step 3 ("Problem sorting"), in which I perused a list of potential triggers that ranged from "driving/traffic jams" to "vomiting" to "sex"; Step 4 ("How to get a helper"), which urged me to find a supportive partner who would not rush me, mock me, or encourage me to drink; and Step 5 ("Setting goals"), in which I was instructed to devise therapeutic actions that were neither too easy nor too hard, and in which I heard the poignant tale of my namesake, Daniel, who, when anxious for more than 90 minutes, evacuates his bladder. Step 6 ("Managing anxiety"), which suggested approaches for reducing anxiety in real time, was from my perspective measurably more useful. It offered some thin methods, such as reciting the ditty "I feel so embarrassed/ I'm dying of shame/ But it's only a feeling/ And those I can tame!" But it also suggested methods I knew from experience to be rather helpful. For instance, "diaphragmatic breathing," a system of respiration that reduces anxiety by restoring the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the blood, and forcing oneself to imagine the worst possible thing that can occur until the fear grows small.

Following Step 6, I admit that my attention waned, though only for a lack of applicable treatment. Step 7 ("Rehearsing goals") was intended to help me practice coping skills by projecting photographs of things many anxious people fear and avoid but which I don't. (A picture of the exterior of a British council flat, which would send any housebound agoraphobic into a freefall, filled me with little but warmth: I adore London.) Step 8, aptly titled "Carrying on," was essentially the end of the line. I was urged by the program to visit regularly—to inspect graphs

tracking the (hopefully southward) route of my pathology; to add, delete, or revise the focus of my treatment as the need arose; to consult the extensive list of troubleshooting topics in Step 9; and, above all, to continue practicing and practicing until equilibrium was established.

I didn't. It wasn't just that the program was not well-suited to my particular brand of insanity, but that eventually the circumstances that had gotten me into my quavering state dissipated. Slowly, my daughter began sleeping better, the freelance sluices opened back up, and a decent rhythm asserted itself into my young family's life. Before long the anxiety had, if not disappeared—it will probably never do that—tamped down to a level that seemed appropriate in light of the risks of existence. I felt better, and not long after I'd completed my treatment, I expunged the FearFighter Web site from my bookmarks menu and said a quiet prayer that England should feel as well as me.

moneybox

There Will Be Blood Orange Juice

John D. Rockefeller's heirs urge Exxon Mobil to play nicer.

By Daniel Gross

Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 5:31 PM ET

This morning, an unusual breakfast press conference was staged in midtown Manhattan.

The place: The Estrela Room on the penthouse level of the [Parker-Meridien](#) hotel.

The spread: Excellent. Carafes of fruit juices and flaky croissants.

The vibe: Gently throbbing Euro-pop background music.

The speakers: Neva Rockefeller Goodwin and Peter O'Neill, members of the Rockefeller family who are pushing for changes in corporate governance at Exxon Mobil, the descendant of the Standard Oil company created by John D. Rockefeller.

No family in American history has possessed more wealth, or been more conflicted about the obligations and benefits it bestows, than the Rockefellers, who are now enjoying their sixth generation of good fortune. And the mixture of modesty, politesse, and concern for the world that has characterized the Rockefeller brand for more than a century was on full display.

The Rockefeller family members were far less slick and comfortable at the podium than the executive (Stephen Heintz, president of the [Rockefeller Brothers Fund](#)) and politician (Connecticut Treasurer [Denise Nappier](#)) who accompanied them. Neva Rockefeller Goodwin, a daughter of David Rockefeller and

hence great-granddaughter of John D. Rockefeller, is a Tufts University economist who [elides the Rockefeller out of her professional name](#). She sported a blue sweater, glasses, and an unfussy mane of graying hair. Peter O'Neill, a great-great-grandson of the original, had a pen protruding from his shirt pocket. These are people who were bred not to raise their voices too forcefully in public or to brandish the family name as a weapon. Their modest delivery makes self-important pronouncements seem nonthreatening. Sample line: "As the oldest continuous shareholders of the Exxon Mobil corporation, we almost define the long-term investors," said Neva Rockefeller Goodwin. "My great-grandfather revolutionized the oil industry over a century ago."

The Rockefellers made a point of repeatedly complimenting the hired help on jobs well-done. "It's not about [Exxon Mobil CEO] Rex Tillerson," said Peter O'Neill. "He's an amazing oil and gas manager." Management, he continued, is "very good about planning these big projects and implementing them, and they should be applauded for it." But while the Rockefellers very much appreciate the \$40 billion in profits Exxon Mobil earned last year, the family notes that there are "serious disjunctions that we perceive between Exxon's short-term actions and the long-term health of both this company and the economy."

The 66 adult descendants of John D. Rockefeller who signed on to this initiative (84 percent of the total) are worried: Competitors have been more aggressive on renewables and alternative energy; having the same person hold the job of chief executive officer and chairman of the board contributes to an insular culture and a lack of critical and imaginative thinking; the company isn't thinking outside the barrel to deal with climate change or prepare for regulatory changes. And so they have reluctantly decided to call publicly for shareholder votes on a resolution to separate the posts of chairman and chief executive officer, and on a resolution to have Exxon Mobil convene a task force to examine the company's assumptions about growth markets and the consequences of global climate change on poor economies.

The scions of a fortune created in the 19th century want the company to embrace the 21st century. They'd like Exxon Mobil to be an agent of change, not an obstacle to it. In boosting investments in renewables and focusing on climate change, Exxon Mobil wouldn't be succumbing to the sort of mushy, feel-good impulses that emanate from the Rockefeller Foundation, Goodwin and O'Neill argued. Rather, it would be going back to the future. The company needs to "reconnect with the forward-looking and entrepreneurial vision of my great-grandfather." After all, kerosene was the "alternative energy of its day."

Good points all, and well-delivered. But the Rockefellers, of all families, should know that Exxon Mobil is unlikely to have much success ushering in a new energy paradigm that will change the world for the better. Virtually all the good works

conducted by John D. Rockefeller, and by his descendants, have been done by the nonprofit foundations and philanthropic institutions he created, not by the efficiency-seeking, for-profit machine he built. What's more, a company that depends on an established technology rarely has the incentives or ability to lead a shift to the technology that will upend the old way. The oil industry was created by a dry-goods merchant in Cleveland, not by whale-oil harvesters in New England.

In his engaging [memoir](#), David Rockefeller notes that modesty and a relentless focus on behaving appropriately were significant—at times overwhelming—parts of the Rockefeller inheritance. And those were on full display here. When asked how many shares of Exxon Mobil the family held, Neva Rockefeller Goodwin said she had no idea. And I left with the sense that in the Rockefellers' eyes, Exxon Mobil's management is as much guilty of poor manners as it is of poor corporate governance. When Rex Tillerson was tapped as the new CEO, about two-thirds of the adult Rockefeller family members wrote him a letter, which welcomed him and asked for a meeting with him and the board. "He was not responsive to that," Neva Rockefeller Goodwin said. At another point, David Rockefeller brought his daughter to lunch with Tillerson and outgoing CEO Lee Raymond. "But I was told I had to behave myself and not say much," she said. Since then, the board and Tillerson have brushed off family requests to engage on these issues. "The responses were written by representatives of management" rather than by Tillerson himself. Which leads me to think that Exxon Mobil, while it has genius engineers and managers, must have some pretty thickheaded investor-relations staffers. If you're going to kiss off the Rockefellers, don't have a lackey do it.

moneybox

Stop Blaming the Insurers

It's not them. It's us. Exposing three myths about the costs of private health insurance.

By Mark Gimein

Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 4:25 PM ET

Here's what's not in dispute: The United States spends 16 percent of its national income on health care, more than any other country in the world. In return, we get lower life expectancy than most other Western countries, uneven care, and enormous anxiety about how to pay for it.

Who's to blame? Not the hospitals and doctors, or the health care consumers (that is, us) who insist on expensive and questionable elective procedures. It's big health insurers—isn't it? Easy enough: Our interactions with them are impersonal, their political clout is substantial, and their names and logos look and sound like they came out of focus-group hell.

Alas, the slice of our enormous health care costs that can reasonably be laid at the insurers' doorstep is much, much smaller than most people believe. The debate about health care tends to be informed by three notions about health insurance:

- The profits of private insurers are so big that cutting them out would meaningfully lower costs.
- Private insurance clearly costs more than a government-run system such as Medicare.
- Mergers that have created a small number of huge and powerful insurers increase health care costs.

None of these is true.

Myth No. 1: Insurers' profits are responsible for our health care costs.

This is the most pervasive and most crowd-pleasing of the health care myths. The profits of the big health insurance companies are central to the rhetoric of the health care debate, figuring heavily in the Democratic primary campaign. [Barack Obama's platform](#) includes a promise to force insurers to spend enough on care "instead of keeping exorbitant amounts for profits and administration." Michael Moore, the director of *Sicko*, has hammered the point repeatedly, thundering about how insurers maximize profits by "providing as little care as possible."

The problem here is that between them the five biggest health insurers—UnitedHealthCare, Wellpoint, Aetna, Humana, and Cigna—which cover 105 million members, last year had profits between them of \$11.8 billion. This is not a small number; these are very profitable companies. But total U.S. health care costs last year were in the area of \$2.3 trillion.

So, with a membership that included a little more than half of the Americans covered by private insurance, these five insurers' profits came to 0.5 percent of total health care costs. (One interesting point of comparison: In 2006, the income earned by the 50 biggest *nonprofit* hospitals alone came out at [\\$4 billion](#).)

Critics also argue that insurance companies pass along excessive administrative costs to their customers. Wellpoint, for instance, spends 18 percent of the premiums it takes in on sales and administrative costs. That represents a real concern but merely raises the next question: Can a government-run program that cuts out insurers do it for less?

Myth No. 2: Evidence from Medicare shows that a government program can provide the same services for less than the insurers.

A common argument raised in support of a national "single payer" health insurance system is the experience of Medicare Advantage, a program that gives seniors the option of replacing

traditional Medicare with private insurers' HMO or "preferred provider" network plans. Nine million of the 44 million people Medicare covers have signed up. A well-publicized [report by the Commonwealth Fund](#) calculated the cost of these plans at 12 percent more than traditional Medicare. This number was [picked up by the New York Times' Paul Krugman](#) as an illustration of the excessive costs of private insurance. More recently, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal think tank, has [estimated](#) the greater cost of Medicare Advantage as more than \$1,000 a year extra per beneficiary.

These accurate numbers miss the fact that Medicare Advantage's design virtually guarantees that it will be more expensive than traditional Medicare. The reason for this, however, is not the excessive cost of having private insurers administer the plans. It's the cost of inducements that government has offered seniors to join them.

The original idea behind Medicare Advantage was to reduce costs by pushing seniors into HMOs that would be able to rein in health care costs. The big incentive for seniors to join the plans is supplemental coverage similar to what's offered by Medigap plans.

The government pays insurers more than the costs of Medicare, but most of that money is (and must be, by mandate) returned to members in the form of lower deductibles and co-payments. Yes, Medicare Advantage HMO programs do cost the government more than standard Medicare.

But guess what? Take out the cuts in costs that patients pay themselves, and, in fact, the plans cost 3 percent *less*. So in a typical state like Minnesota, where standard Medicare runs the government \$666 a month for each beneficiary, the government may indeed pay about \$725, but the insurer will get only \$650 of that, while the member gets cuts in out-of-pocket costs of \$75 a month, or about \$900 a year.

(You can see a more detailed analysis in this [Congressional Budget Office report](#).)

This isn't the end of the story. It turns out that seniors, like just about everyone else, prefer the ordinary Medicare model—which let them see any participating doctor—to an HMO. So Medicare Advantage added "fee for service" plans, private plans that offer flexibility—and still include the incentives. (Does this undercut the original point of the program? You bet.)

These plans do cost 9 percent more, even after taking into account the lower deductibles and co-payments. But be careful about jumping on this number. Here's why: When you eliminate co-payments and lower deductibles, people go to the doctor a lot more often. According to the Government Accountability Office, seniors with Medigap coverage may cost the government as

much as 25 percent more than those without. When you take that into account, it actually might be surprising that Medicare Advantage isn't still *more* expensive.

None of this means that the Medicare Advantage program is cost-efficient. The bottom line, though, is that its costs come not from insurance company inefficiency or profiteering, but from the extra benefits shoehorned into it.

Myth No. 3: The concentration of power in a few large insurers raises health care costs.

Politicians and doctors' groups blame the mergers of many smaller insurance companies into a few behemoths for rapidly increasing premiums. Big insurance mergers have been vigorously opposed by the politicians in California who fought against the huge Anthem-Wellpoint merger, and in New York. In Nevada, Gov. Jim Gibbons has [said](#) a merger of two big insurers would "take money out of the pockets of consumers and physicians." The American Medical Association has put what it calls "anti-trust reform" among the [top items on its agenda](#).

We should be wary of mergers driving up the premiums that insurers can charge. But that fear is not the real reason why the American Medical Association has vociferously lobbied to put the brakes on mergers. That reason is the other, bigger effect of consolidation: It lowers the reimbursement rates that insurers give to doctors and hospitals. The hospital you go to and the doctor you see face to face might be more sympathetic than the health insurers, but they are a much larger part of the health care cost equation.

How big is this effect? One measure: Reimbursement rates from major insurers in Pennsylvania for some procedures have fallen [to just 85 percent of the already low Medicare rates](#). And what makes it even worse for doctors (and, yes, potentially better for health care costs) is that insurers' contracts often have a "most favored rates" clause. If one huge insurance company can squeeze hospitals for better prices, then others are entitled to the same deal.

Whether, in fact, doctors and hospitals are unfairly pressed by giant insurance companies is a debate that may be worth having. And maybe the insurance companies' power should be reduced. But that would lead to higher, not lower, costs.

Diagnosis

Patient, heal thyself. It's not insurers that push expensive drugs, long-shot end-of-life treatments, and redundant procedures. It's customers who ask for them. And mainly doctors and hospitals who profit. How to deal with those issues is a question that will affect the health care bottom line more than whether it's the

government or private companies that provide insurance. Too bad it's one we have hardly even started to answer.

moneybox

The Agony of the Food Snob

Basque cheese at \$22 per pound! Olive oil at \$43 per liter! What's a gourmand to do?

By Daniel Gross

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 6:08 PM ET

The high cost of food is the [topic du jour](#). Global growth, bad weather, high energy costs, investors flooding into the markets, and the failure of production to keep up with growing demand are creating a food crisis. (Check out the *Washington Post's* fine [series](#).) It's having a serious impact on poor working families, who devote a disproportionate share of their income to food. And it's taking a heavy toll on another class, much less deserving of our sympathy, whose members also devote a disproportionate share of their incomes to food: food snobs.

You surely know some food snobs. You may even be one. (I am.) We food snobs buy dried Italian pasta rather than Mueller macaroni, artisanal fizzy lemonade from France, not Hi-C. And then we prattle on about it ad nauseam. Of course, our organic, imported, steel-cut, Meyer-lemon products taste better than their domestic, industrially processed analogues. But they're also important cultural markers. The foods we buy signal to others that we don't just subscribe to *Gourmet*; we ingest its message of seeking out the finest ingredients. Food snobs know that food isn't simply fuel to get you through the day: It's an expression of taste, refinement, and global consciousness. And thanks to the expansion of trade, the construction of superefficient supply chains, and the Internet, the opportunities for being precious about food have never been greater.

Alas, the cost of being precious about food has also never been greater. Despite the vast advances in American food culture, the finest ingredients frequently must travel a great distance to arrive at your local Whole Foods: wines from Europe, California, and South America; Moroccan harissa and Thai fish sauce; South African guava juice; and pistachios from Turkey and Iran. (*I know a place.* ...) The best smoked salmon—the only one that will e'er darken a bagel in my house—arrives on the banks of the Hudson from distant Scotland, not nearby Nova Scotia.

But with the dollar weakening, commodity prices rising, and energy costs (and hence transportation costs) soaring, the food snob's dollar doesn't fund nearly as many courses today as it did a year ago. At my local cheese shop, the Etorki, a delightful Basque sheep's milk cheese (from France's Basque region, mind you, not Spain's—what, you don't know about France's Basque

cheeses? really?) now tips the scales at \$22 a pound, up from \$18 a pound a year ago. Eli's raisin crisps, perfect for holding the Basque cheese, have risen from \$6.86 to \$8.35. If you want to assemble an authentic Italian appetizer of prosciutto and melon, it'll cost you *uno braccio e una gamba*. At Balducci's this week, prosciutto di parma was \$21.99 a pound, while Tuscan melons ran \$4.49.

For the truly wealthy, the gourmet inflation isn't a big deal. Stephen Schwarzman of the Blackstone Group probably has not cut back on his consumption of [\\$40 stone-crab claws](#). But most food snobs aren't really rich. (I'd wager a pound of truffles that most of the members of the *Forbes 400* don't know the difference between [jamón ibérico](#) and Oscar Mayer. And nowhere are the wine snobs more insufferable than in the comparatively low-income, tweedy precincts of university humanities departments.) For those for whom money remains an object—which is to say, most of us—the rising prices present a series of tough choices.

Some are trading down. Gourmands who swore by New York strip are now singing the praises of the more quotidian hanger steak. Having dinner the other night at an Italian restaurant, I noticed two couples ardently extolling the praises of the bottle of [two-buck-chuck](#) they had brought. Over the weekend, as I sat in the well-appointed kitchen of a double-income family whose annual earnings run deep into the six figures, my host proclaimed, with exasperation, that \$4 for a dozen organic eggs was simply too much. She was switching back to conventional eggs; chemicals be damned.

But for many food snobs, trading down for everything is unacceptable. Any food snob worth his *sel de mer* can tick off a few products that he'd rather do without than switch to a cheaper alternative. Swapping the suddenly insanely expensive Italian buffalo mozzarella (\$9.99 for 7 ounces) for the American stuff (\$8.99 a pound) is like swapping front-row seats at the New York City Ballet for general admission to a community production of *The Nutcracker*. The reduction in quality is so significant that it renders the formerly sublime experience one not worth having at all. Every food snob has a few items for which he will pay any price, bear any burden. For me, it's cans of [Callipo](#) tuna from Italy (now a shocking \$8.99 for two).

Some relief is available. I've noticed, for example, that our local paper now comes with \$5-off coupons from [Balducci's](#). In all my years as a practicing food snob, I've never seen anybody whip out a coupon at a pricey food emporium. Why? It could be because in the chichi neighborhoods in which such stores predominate, coupon-clipping is *déclassé*. It could also be that bringing in a \$5-off coupon takes the fun out of it. When you journey to a food-snob haven—be it the local farmer's market, a wine store, or a Whole Foods—you've already decided that you're going to pay far more for foodstuffs than you would at the Stop & Shop across the street.

Once you start paying close attention, it's very hard to justify, in any economic climate, the prices of many food-snob essentials: \$14.99 for a pound of wild ramps, \$43 for a liter of Italian olive oil, etc. And since most food snobs are also good liberals who savor their expensive bounty while lingering over the Sunday *Times*, the contradiction can be sickening. We're spending obscene amounts on food we don't need at a time when so many others are genuinely struggling to pay for enough basic sustenance to get them through the day.

moneybox

Going, Going, Not Gone

Why does the press seem to be rooting for an art-auction crash?

By Marion Maneker

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 12:28 PM ET

How can you tell that it's nearly auction season in the art market? When the press begins predicting an imminent crash. Right on schedule, the *Wall Street Journal* ran [theirs](#) three weeks before the marquee May sales in New York City. Robert Frank, one of the *Journal's* best writers, quickly went from dollars and cents to scene-setting. "As a new wave of wealthy collectors poured into the market to fill their mansion walls," Frank wrote, "auctions have become competitions of conspicuous consumption, filled with celebrities, hedge-fund managers and mystery billionaire bidders from Russia and China."

It's a great image: the last days of Rome with greedy developers spending our mortgage dollars on frivolous Jeff Koons sculptures, decadent hedgies spending hot money on cool Rothkos and de Koonings, and shady former-Communist billionaires trying to buy respectability with Renoirs. But conspicuous consumption is hardly news in the art market.

Just before the last round of auctions held in New York in November, Carol Vogel [summed up](#) the mood in the *New York Times*: "Beneath all the bling—the glossy catalogs brimming with lavish illustrations, the extravagant parties to lure rich collectors, the impressive exhibitions of the art and the optimistically high estimates—lurks an ominous question. After three years of speculation about a bust, will this be the moment when the art market finally crumbles?"

But it hasn't yet. And that has left some on the art beat looking for other ways to scold buyers. Bloomberg's Linda Sandler recently [pointed to](#) the decorum of selling pricey art while the economy tanks. "The same day that former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan said the U.S. economy is on the verge of its first recession in six years," she reported the evening of the Red charity auction of contemporary art, organized by Bono and

Damien Hirst, "the seven pieces Hirst gave to the charity brought in about \$19 million."

You don't usually see writers who cover, say, the price of wheat rooting for its decline. Are these writers trying to will the art market into failure? Probably not: They're more concerned with competitive pressures. Everyone wants to be the first to identify the next crash. The art world is haunted by the asset-mauling price swoon of 1990, a double-whammy delayed reaction to the 1987 stock market crash and the 1990 recession. According to the [MeiMoses index](#) of art prices, the art market didn't reach parity against its 1989 highs until 2003. That's a bear market lesson that no one should forget, and with the market well into the 10th year of expansion, it's not unreasonable to expect a crash.

Unfortunately, having a foregone conclusion that there will be a crash leaves you seeing signs of it everywhere. Frank built his *Journal* story around the idea that the credit crunch had caused art buyers to fall behind on their auction bills. He noticed in Sotheby's annual report that accounts receivable had doubled at the auction house in 2007, totaling \$835 million. Not a bad tell.

But because Frank was looking for cracks, he discounted the most obvious—and more pedestrian—explanation for the rise: Clients owed Sotheby's more because they had bought more. Sales had shot up 44 percent in 2007. Maybe not enough to explain the \$835 million figure, but, still, no smoking gun.

Portfolio.com's Felix Salmon quickly [jumped in](#) to identify a flaw in Frank's reasoning. The auction house would lose only its commission, not all of the \$835 million. But Salmon added his own worry: "vast" piles of "unsellable" art that the auction houses had guaranteed at high prices.

That's not necessarily fatal, either. Most of the guaranteed paintings do get sold—and quickly. After a sale, a dealer or a collector, sensing, correctly, that the auction house may be in the mood to work out a quick deal, will approach the house with a reasonable offer for one of the guaranteed lots that didn't reach the minimum bid. Those late sales won't cover the entire guarantee, but they do cut the loss substantially.

Of course, Frank could be right. Prices have risen so steeply for so long—the value of all auction sales went from \$4 billion in 2004 to \$9 billion in 2007, and the volume from 121,000 lots to 165,000 lots—that a correction could be what everyone needs. But a correction is different from a crash.

Already sensing this, both Sotheby's and Christie's have reined in their Impressionist and modern art sales scheduled for next week. The estimates remain high—sellers like to see their works well-valued—but the number of lots has been cut back by 10 percent at Sotheby's and 24 percent at Christie's.

Even though the specter of 1990 still haunts the market, there are some good reasons to believe the art world has changed since then. First of all, art did have a correction in 2001-02. The fall was moderate, only 13 percent in value, and the market recovered three years later. But corrections are a sign of a functioning and fluid market, not a frozen one. Second, the entire art world—not just the auction market—has grown. Dealers and art advisers talk about their community having been transformed into an industry. Today there are many more buyers—which creates liquidity—and the buyers are balanced. Hedgies were market leaders in 2006; Asian wealth made some of the biggest buys in 2007; commodity money from Russia and the Gulf States seems to be carrying the ball today.

Finally, remember that art is an asset that holds back inflation. Though it cannot be considered a commodity—it's pretty much the definition of nonfungible—it does behave like gold, another important pseudocommodity. And like gold, which has pulled back from a spectacular run but not crashed, art has room on the downside to consolidate gains. After all, money is always looking for a safe haven, and you can't hang gold ingots on the grand staircase of your house. So art might continue to perform until another sexier asset comes along. In other words, this boom may end not with the bang that everyone expects, but a whimper.

moneybox

The Age of Grand Dilution

Banks unveil their latest desperate strategy for self-preservation.

By Daniel Gross

Saturday, April 26, 2008, at 7:34 AM ET

Watching CNBC can be a little like watching the movie *Groundhog Day*. Every trading day seems to bring a replay of a show we've seen before: A large financial institution, maimed by self-inflicted wounds and in need of capital, raises billions in cash from investors on onerous terms. The trend started last fall when New York-based investment banks such as Citigroup and Merrill Lynch sold hunks of themselves to sovereign-wealth funds and Persian Gulf investors at a steep discount. Now it's moved from Wall Street to Main Street. Last Monday, Cleveland-based National City Corp., America's 10th-largest bank, announced it was raising \$7 billion. In a complicated deal, investors—including the private-equity firm Corsair Capital and existing shareholders—essentially agreed to acquire 1.4 billion shares at \$5 apiece.

Such transactions have typically been hailed by market cheerleaders as votes of confidence. After all, they prove that sophisticated investors are willing to plunge billions of dollars into a foundering sector.

But these life preservers exact a heavy cost: dilution. Most Americans experience dilution at bars, when unscrupulous bartenders cut top-shelf alcohol with excessive amounts of tonic or juice in mixed drinks. In recent months we've been feeling it in our wallets, as inflation (up 4 percent in the year that ended in March) has eroded wages. Now it's Wall Street's turn.

Dilution can be defined as the sudden realization that an asset's market value isn't quite as great as had been advertised. Before the dilutive financing transaction, National City had about 635 million shares of common stock outstanding, which the market valued at \$8.33 a share as of Friday, April 18. With the flood of new shares to be issued—and with the new buyers willing to pay only \$5 per share—the ownership stakes of prior shareholders have been watered down significantly. "We've estimated the dilution of current shareholders at approximately 70 percent," CEO Peter Raskind told me. If you owned shares worth 10 percent of the company last month, they'll be worth only 3 percent of the company next month.

Raskind took the helm of National City last July, just when its world was about to be rocked. In ordinary times, companies seeking to raise funds sell bonds or sell common shares at something close to the market price. But as Raskind noted, "These are not ordinary times. And furthermore, we are not in an ordinary position." Like other banks, National City racked up consecutive quarterly losses thanks to rising amounts of bad debt, and was bracing for further losses. Given that it had to raise capital quickly—to stay in compliance with regulatory requirements and to reassure customers and the markets that it had sufficient cash—selling stock at a huge discount was "the least unattractive" alternative.

The dilution at National City isn't the worst. In March, Thornburg Mortgage raised \$1.35 billion through a transaction that effectively diluted shareholders by 94.5 percent. And it's not the biggest. On April 22, while the market was still digesting National City's deal, the Royal Bank of Scotland (which, these days, is neither royal, nor particularly Scottish, nor, judging by recent results, much of a bank) announced a highly dilutive \$24 billion offering.

Accepting dilution while raising cash is an admission of failure and a mark of embarrassment—like pawning the family silver to pay off gambling debts. "It is not something that we are proud of," said National City's Raskind. But for shareholders, there is something of a silver lining. Investors, employees, and politicians alike were outraged when former CEOs such as Chuck Prince of Citigroup and Stanley O'Neal of Merrill Lynch, who presided over financial train wrecks that required dilutive capital-raising efforts, walked away with mammoth retirement packages. Raskind, who owns 287,617 shares of National City, has suffered the same proportional financial harm as an investor with 50 shares.

Raskind also owns options on more than 1 million shares of National City. Investors value stocks by placing a multiple on a company's earnings per share. Since National City is effectively tripling its number of shares, any future earnings will be distributed across a much broader base. In order to report earnings of \$1 per share, predilution, the company would have had to earn \$635 million. Now it'll have to make \$2 billion. According to National City's proxy filing, Raskind's options, some of which expire in 2010 and 2011, will generally have value only if the company's stock hits \$30. If the stock doesn't quintuple in the next three years, many of Raskind's options won't be worth the pixels they're stored on. In this case, at least, there's no diluting the toll shareholder dilution will take on the CEO's personal finances. "The stock options that I may have been granted in the past are way, way out of the money, and probably will be for a long time," Raskind said. "And that's the way it should be."

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

movies

Iron Man

What if Oscar Wilde were a superhero?

By Dana Stevens

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 6:32 PM ET

Iron Man (Paramount Pictures) may be the first movie about the conflict in the Middle East and Afghanistan to become a box-office blockbuster. But if it does, it won't be because of its Afghan bad guys or somewhat incoherent musings on the immorality of the military-industrial complex. *Iron Man's* secret weapon dwells underneath the high-tech robot suit and the whiz-bang special effects: We can win the war on terror, the movie suggests, with the force of Robert Downey Jr.'s personality alone.

Downey plays Tony Stark—a billionaire playboy industrialist who turns himself into a superhero through pure technical ingenuity—as the Oscar Wilde of superheroes, a dissipated roué who seems weary of his own charisma. Everything we know about the actor's own checkered back story—the countless drug relapses, the stints in jail and rehab, the mysterious ability to hold onto Hollywood's good will through it all—informs our first encounter with Tony, clutching a Scotch on the rocks in the back of an armored Humvee as he's shuttled to a weapons demonstration in Afghanistan. After showing off his latest ultrasophisticated missile, the Jericho, at a U.S. Army base, he's kidnapped by an insurgent group who torture him till he agrees to build them a Jericho of their own. Of course, equipping your genius prisoner with the means to build a superweapon is a plan

with a built-in flaw. Instead, Tony forges a primitive prototype of the Iron Man suit and blasts his way to freedom.

Back at his zillion-dollar compound in Malibu, Tony holds a surprise press conference to announce that Stark Industries will henceforth cease all weapons manufacturing and devote itself to vaguely defined technological do-gooding. Tony's newfound morality doesn't sit too well with his business partner Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges), who has been secretly dealing arms to some dubious types, including Tony's kidnapper Raza (Faran Tahir). Unaware of Stane's treachery, Tony withdraws to his way-cool underground workshop and begins to design the ultimate supersuit, crafted not of iron this time but of gold and red-plated titanium.

This middle section, in which the newly energized Tony tinkers with his emerging superpowers like a kid in shop class, is the movie's finest and funnest hour. But when he starts to actually *use* those powers, zooming to random corners of Afghanistan to save cowering villagers from evil warlords, the movie's sharp intelligence gives way to a dopey wish-fulfillment fantasy. This is what we'd *like* our wars to be: a clearly defined moral crusade against a bald, glowering meanie who proclaims his Genghis Khan-like ambition to "dominate all of Asia." (With an eye on potential box-office buzz kill, the movie cannily stays away from the mere mention of the Taliban, the war in Iraq, or domestic terrorism.) Tony's invulnerable, omnipotent, impossibly expensive armor is an almost touching overcompensation for the moment of extreme vulnerability in which our country finds itself.

The movie's central conflict, which is also Stark's internal one, has to do with the ambiguity inherent in waging war. Once he's devoted his life to the creation of ever-more-sophisticated killing machines, how's a billionaire industrialist-turned-superhero to know who's on whose side, whom to arm and whom to disarm, whom to kill and whom to save? Like those '50s monster movies that played out cultural fears of the atomic bomb, *Iron Man* explores these questions and disavows them at the same time. In one scene, the Iron Man confronts a group of Afghan villagers, unable to distinguish the civilians from the combatants. At once a *Terminator*-style readout appears on the inside of his mask, clearly labeling each civilian, and with surgical precision, he takes out all the bad guys, leaving the grateful good guys standing. It's a clever and viscerally satisfying gag that got a round of applause at the screening I attended—but it left me with a bitter aftertaste that lasted for the rest of the movie. How much collateral damage have we inflicted by trusting just such "smart" weapons to make moral decisions for their users?

Iron Man doesn't want you to dwell on such things for too long, and Jon Favreau's crisp, bouncy direction makes it easy to avoid doing so. Besides Downey's soulful, mercurial, performance, there's Gwyneth Paltrow as his faithful girl Friday, Pepper Potts—not the most inspiring of feminist role models, but

Paltrow plays it straight and smart, and looks sensational in red hair and little black dresses. Jeff Bridges is weirdly but perfectly cast as Obadiah Stane: Laconic and affable to the end, he's The Dude gone over to the dark side. Terrence Howard gets a dull Dudley Do-Right part as Tony's Army liaison, but one scene makes it clear that he's looking forward to suiting up in future installments.

Like Tony Stark, *Iron Man* the movie has a maddening way of hiding its light (Downey) under a bushel—actually bushels and bushels—of special effects. During the action sequences (especially the disappointing final one, a face-off between Stark's Iron Man and Stane's Iron Monger), this movie could be any expensive summer blockbuster, with exploding tanks and bisected city buses and faceless mega-robots duking it out on rooftops. But when it's idling in neutral, and we're watching Stark putter in his workshop or seduce unsuspecting journalists, *Iron Man* abounds in that rarest of superpowers: charm.

music box

Bigger Than Elvis

Why the haters are wrong about Mariah Carey.

By Jody Rosen

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 7:46 AM ET

King, meet Queen. This month, Mariah Carey eclipsed Elvis Presley's record for the most *Billboard* No. 1 hits by a solo artist with her 18th chart-topper "[Touch My Body](#)," the first single from her strong new album, *E=MC²*—whose first-week sales of 463,000 were the highest of Carey's career and the most by any artist so far this year. Now only the Beatles have more No. 1s, and Carey will surely pass them soon—although, to be fair, the Beatles racked up their 20 big hits in a span of just seven years, a batting average likely never to be bested.

The news of Carey's triumph has been greeted in many quarters with hue and cry. The Presley estate [got technical](#), arguing that *Billboard* had fouled up its numbers—that Mariah had merely tied Elvis' record. In a Huffington Post blog entry titled "[Mariah Carey Is Destroying the World](#)," Ken Levine wrote: "For the sake of this country and—oh let's just say it—mankind, Mariah Carey has to retire. ... She can always host a VH-1 reality show or learn a trade at the DeVry Institute." Editorialists [soberly pointed out](#) the obvious: Whatever the hit count, Carey had not matched Presley's and the Beatles' "seismic" cultural influence, a line echoed by Mariah herself. "I'm just feeling really happy and grateful," she told the Associated Press. "I really can never put myself in the category of people who have not only revolutionized music but also changed the world."

Humility doesn't come naturally to Carey, so let's commend her for the gesture. (You can practically hear the table-saw buzz of her grinding teeth as she pushes the words out: *never... put ... myself ... in ... the ... category ...*) But need she be so modest? Sure, Carey is not as important as Elvis or the Beatles, nor are any other musicians of the past 50 years, with the possible exceptions of James Brown and Bob Dylan. She is nonetheless hugely significant, and not just because, as [Elvis once put it](#), 50 million fans—or if we go by Mariah's total album sales, 61.5 million fans—can't be wrong.

Mariah's accomplishment begins, of course, with her voice, or, rather, The Voice—that cyclonic force capable of hurtling unnumbered octaves, shattering crystal ware, and inducing [musicogenic epileptic seizures in Japanese women](#). Carey is the most influential vocal stylist of the last two decades, the person who made rococo melismatic singing—the trick of embroidering syllables with multiple no-o-o-o-o-o-tes—the ubiquitous pop style. Exhibit A is *American Idol*, which has often played out as a clash of melisma-mad [Mariah wannabes](#). And, today, nearly 20 years after Carey's debut, major labels continue to bet the farm on young stars such as the winner of Britain's *X Factor* show*, [Leona Lewis](#), with her Generation Next gloss on Mariah's big voice and big hair.

The rampant use of melisma has generated considerable criticism. (I myself railed against it several years ago in a [New York Times article](#)—whose haughty tone and slighting references to Carey, I now regret.) It's certainly true that overuse of the device, particularly by mediocre vocalists, can be annoying. It is also true that many performers, in the thrall of Carey hits like "[Vision of Love](#)"—which *New Yorker* critic Sasha Frere-Jones rightly called "the Magna Carta of melisma"—have seemed to lose all interest in melody and lyrics and meaning, packing songs with dozens, hundreds, of gratuitous notes.

But it is unfair to damn Carey for the sins of her lesser imitators or to judge her based on a set of musical values that she explicitly rejects. Emotion is not really the point of Carey's songs—not even when she's singing "[Emotions](#)." Her music is first and foremost an expression of power and technical prowess. There is a place in pop for bombast, especially when it's coupled with virtuosity. I have learned to cherish Carey's singing for its brute force, blinding technique, and, yes, showboatiness—to place Mariah's vocal "runs" in the tradition of John Coltrane's "[sheets of sound](#)," the [pummeling drumming](#) of Led Zeppelin's John Bonham, and Eddie Van Halen's "[Eruption](#)" (aka the Magna Carta of shredding 1980s guitar solos). Listen to the piercing final notes Carey sings in [this clip](#) from her 1992 MTV *Unplugged* performance of "Someday." Mariah's poodle head isn't the only thing about her that's heavy metal.

Carey may not have had the "seismic" impact of Presley, but there's a whole lot of zeitgeist up in her big, maudlin ballad hits of the 1990s. A cultural historian might detect the complacent

feel-good vibes of the post-Cold War Clinton era, or maybe a musical gigantism akin to baseball's literal gigantism in those peak steroids years. What I hear most clearly, even in inspirational dreck like "[Hero](#)," is hip-hop: a lite-FM analogue to the feisty egotism of the rappers who conquered '90s pop culture. After all, Carey was engaged in a rivalry nearly as fierce as Biggie and Tupac's: a yearslong cutting contest with Whitney Houston, whom she matched [melisma](#) for [melisma](#), [bromide](#) for [bromide](#).

We all know who won that battle. The truth is that Houston, in her prime, was the more talented singer, but Carey was always a more versatile and interesting recording artist. She co-wrote her own material from the beginning, and when not blasting out ballads, showed a knack for midtempo songs with a classic pop feel: "[Dreamlover](#)" (1993) and "[Always Be My Baby](#)" (1996) could sit comfortably on a mix tape alongside the great mid-'60s Motown hits. With her 1995 album, *Daydream*, Carey made a major shift, indulging her love of hip-hop for the first time. She worked with producer Jermaine Dupri—to this day, her key collaborator—and dueted with rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard on an ebullient remix of the No. 1 single "[Fantasy](#)."

It was a change that risked alienating those millions of Carey's fans who knew her as the reigning sovereign of adult contemporary radio, liked her that way, and couldn't fathom why she was palling around with a shark-toothed rapper who rhymed "Mariah" with "pacifier." But it was a smart, prescient career move. The hybridized mix of pop, R&B, and hip-hop that dominates today's top 40 was an inevitability that Carey saw earlier than others, and she hurried that future along.

Today, Carey is unambiguously a "hip-hop soul" star, in touch with her inner thug, singing over jittery digital beats about her designer luggage and hot tubs and videotaped sexploits. Some critics have complained that Carey's act is ungenueine, but to me it feels far less forced than her erstwhile cooing about [butterflies](#) and [rainbows](#). Indeed, while Carey's musical shift is definitely good for business—she had to keep up with the Beyoncé's and Rihannas or risk irrelevance—it is also manifestly personal. She called her blockbuster 2005 comeback album *The Emancipation of Mimi*, and the emancipation in question was musical; the central drama of Carey's career was her marriage to, and subsequent divorce from, Columbia Records President Tommy Mottola, who reportedly did all he could to tamp down Carey's hip-hop impulses.

A squabble over repertoire isn't exactly the stuff of a sexy tragic-diva back story. Let's face it: Next to her rival pop starlets, Mariah is pretty dull. She can't really dance. Her videos are a snooze. Her offstage life, rumored mental breakdowns and all, fails to excite gossip mongers. Her racial ambiguity is mildly interesting: As the daughter of an Irish-Catholic mother and an Afro-Venezuelan father, Mariah was confounding Americans with her biracial identity back when Barack Obama was still

cramming for his Torts exam at Harvard Law. But Mariah remains far more compelling as a musician than as a pop persona. She's the [muso](#)'s diva.

The most striking thing about Carey's post-*Mimi* transformation is how completely she's switched up her singing, mastering the speedy, syncopated, rap-influenced style pioneered by Beyoncé, R. Kelly, et al. *E=MC²* is a modern R&B album through and through, tilting heavily towards mid- and up-tempo club music, with far fewer ballads than her past releases. Most of the songs swing back and forth between just a couple of chords—a showcase for Carey's rhythm and phrasing, not her famous vocal range.

The album's most shocking track is the opener, "[Migrate](#)." Over a bristling beat by Timbaland protégé Nate "Danja" Hills, Mariah duets with Mr. Robo-voice, T-Pain, and even T-Pains herself—and distorts her Hall of Fame voice with that autotune sci-fi effect, an act of vocal self-sabotage that once would have been unthinkable. Of course, Mariah hasn't totally abandoned her old habits. "Migrate" is nudged along by a sour, flutelike keyboard loop, but the first time you hear the figure, at the very beginning of the song, it's not a keyboard but Mariah herself, trilling, chickadeelike, in that fiendish uppermost part of her range. I suppose she wanted to begin her album with a reminder—to fans, to rivals, to Tommy Mottola, to the ghost of Elvis—that, lo, these many years later, she's still got it. The phrase that springs to mind is queenly prerogative.

[Correction](#), May 1, 2008: *This article originally misstated the name of the British show Leona Lewis won as Pop Idol. ([Return to the corrected sentence](#).)*

other magazines

The Teenybopper Factory

Portfolio on how Disney came to dominate the 'tween market.

By Morgan Smith

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 3:39 PM ET

Portfolio, May 2008

A [piece](#) explains how Disney has become "the greatest teen-star incubator since the N.B.A. stopped drafting high schoolers." "Tweens have become "the last group of consumers who will buy music—or throw a fit until it is purchased for them." Parents give in and buy the *Hannah Montana*/Miley Cyrus CD (at least, before her latest photo scandal) because they don't want their kids on peer-to-peer downloading sites. ... An [article](#) reviews the Department of Defense's chronic difficulties tracking spending. Each branch of the military, "[p]reoccupied with protecting [its] turf," insists on maintaining "separate,

increasingly outdated systems that can't talk to each other, trace disbursements, or detect overbilling by contractors." DoD records are in "such disarray and [are] so lacking in documentation" that they can't even be audited. The new bureaucracy designed to untangle the messy accounting "seems nearly as convoluted as the financial systems that it's supposed to streamline."

The New Yorker, May 5

A lengthy [article](#) investigates human trafficking in Moldova and in Dubai, where many trafficking victims end up. Though slavery can begin violently, like with a kidnapping, "more commonly, it starts with a broken agreement about a job promised, conditions of work, or one's true destination." Many victims end up working in agriculture, construction, and domestic service, with "slightly less than half" landing in the sex industry. Because Moldova is the "poorest country in Europe," its "pipeline of likely trafficking victims ... never runs dry." ... Ryan Lizza's [piece](#) on Bill Clinton notes that for the former president, "[a] dusting to the modern, gaffe-centric media environment has been wrenching. ..." Though media coverage of him "has seemed to reinforce as a sort of ill-tempered coot," Clinton "still connects better with voters than his wife or Obama."

New York, May 5

The [cover story](#) profiles Zoe Cruz, the Morgan Stanley executive who "had become not just one of the most powerful women on Wall Street but also the most loathed" before she was fired. Cruz worked her way up from the trading floor in 1982, when it was "a hurly-burly of aggressive men who marked turf with high-volume arguments, had pinup girls in their cubicles, and socialized on golf courses and in strip clubs." According to one male executive, her firing may have come because "[s]he broke the rules in the boys' club. She got promoted over all the boys. They want to prove she was never up to it when it all crumbles." ... A [piece](#) examines the truthfulness of Augusten Burroughs, "the last of the big-game memoirists," whose apparent ability to recall even the smallest details from the past has made some critics suspicious. Burroughs has also been accused of larger fact fudging—including the charge that the shock-therapy machine he claims to have played with as a child in *Running With Scissors* was "actually an old vacuum cleaner missing a wheel."

Wired, May 2008

An [article](#) in the [cover package](#) on intelligence profiles Piotr Wozniak, a Polish inventor who created "SuperMemo," a software program that uses an algorithm based on the "spacing effect" to help people remember information. Researchers have discovered that the brain forgets learned items along a predictable pattern; if it is reminded of a fact right before it is supposed to forget it, it is more likely to remember it in the

future. SuperMemo "tracks this so-called forgetting curve and reminds you to rehearse your knowledge when your chance of recalling it has dropped to, say, 90 percent"—it's proven especially useful for people learning foreign languages. ... A [piece](#) looks at the innovative techniques of filmmaker Errol Morris. In the Abu Ghraib documentary *Standard Operating Procedure*, Morris uses his trademark slow motion shots to reinterpret "the infamous pictures as a kind of highly sexualized samizdat parody of the bizarre and even more terrifying reality inside and outside the prison's walls." ... A [feature](#) prods Steve Carell for advice on how to "act brilliant." Carell meditates, "After all, what is knowledge, really, but high-resolution regurgitation?"

Newsweek, May 5

The [cover story](#) examines the paradox of Barack Obama's campaign and asks, "[H]ow can it be that a black man running for president is accused of being too elitist?" During the primary campaign season, Obama has lost "something ... ineffable, a hope of changing politics as commonly understood, and disdained, by voters of all classes and races." But he could recover it, if shows he's "not just a rock-star speechifier—or a worn-down pol. ..." ... Karl Rove counsels Obama in an [op-ed](#) and offers this bit of wisdom: "Stop the attacks. They undermine your claim to a post-partisan new politics. You soared when you seemed above politics, lost altitude when you did what you criticize. Attacks are momentarily satisfying but ultimately corrode your appeal." ... A [book review](#) considers the extramarital dalliances of Franklin Roosevelt. In addition to FDR's well-known affair with his wife's social secretary, he was associated with two other secretaries, a cousin, and the Princess of Norway.

Weekly Standard, May 5

The [cover story](#) knocks the newly opened Newseum, the \$572 million project that is "especially impressive from an industry that is, according to its own incessant complaints, going broke." Though "it's pretentious and absurd," the Newseum is "proof of the inextinguishable hope that forever rises in the breast of every journalist, the long-shot bet that if we just keep asking questions ... there will always be an audience that needs us." ... A [piece](#) on Republicans going green declares, "Doing no harm in response to global warming hysteries was one of the great achievements of the Bush administration, but indifference is not a tenable political strategy." It also scoffs that environmentally friendly Republicans like John McCain and Arnold Schwarzenegger support green causes "not because they are mavericks, but because they are wily and successful politicians."

poem **"Abundance"**

By James Longenbach

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 7:41 AM ET

Listen to James Longenbach read .

He wouldn't have left much later than 3:00,
Not with the sun disappearing behind the mountain,
December, shortest days of the year.

At its deepest, the lake is twenty feet.
In summer he rowed, in winter he walked.
That day he started across snow-covered ice on his skis.

If the cracking had started immediately
He would have turned back.
Whether he saw the open water north of the island—who
knows?
By 5:25, when finally he slipped from the edge,
A hundred of us were watching from shore.

Immediately the gossip began.
Why did a man who'd lived on the island all his life,
Who knew enough to unfasten his skis,
Cross ice no more than forty-eight hours old?

If the wind hadn't kicked up,
If anybody could have thrown that far,
If there'd been no ice, if there'd been enough—

All-seeing stars that never sink beneath the northern pole,
Whose orbits embrace heaven, circling the earth,
My friend the poet lived on an island.
He built a cabin, planted beans. More than anything

He liked to visit other islands.
When the ice collapsed he drowned.

Fire shall burn, earth grow,
Water shall wear a covering,
Locking up the sprouts of the earth.

politics **Campaign Junkie**

The election trail starts here.

Friday, May 2, 2008, at 7:04 AM ET

politics

Obama and Orwell

What the master Brit can teach Democrats about elitism.

By Jeff Greenfield

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 6:19 PM ET

Elitism has bedeviled American liberalism for the better part of four decades. It undermined the presidential campaigns of Al Gore and John Kerry, and now it's making mischief in the Obama campaign every bit as much as the omnipresence of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

The charge that liberal candidates don't connect with or understand the values and beliefs of regular Americans is embedded in old epithets like "limousine liberal," which I first heard aimed at New York Mayor John Lindsay in 1969. It was also at the core of "radical chic," the phrase made famous by Tom Wolfe in his savage 1970 account in *New York* magazine of a fund-raising party for the Black Panthers thrown by Leonard Bernstein and his wife in their Park Avenue duplex. (Wolfe didn't invent the term, but he gave it currency.)

There's also an even older and more illuminating antecedent from across the Atlantic: the writings of George Orwell in England in the late 1930s, which describe a version of elitism that echoes powerfully in our current political battle.

Orwell's 1937 book [*The Road to Wigan Pier*](#) is an account of his travels to England's industrial North, to the towns of Barnsley, Sheffield, and Wigan. Orwell—once a scholarship student at Eton—wrote of everything from conditions in the coal mines to the homes, diets, and health of desperately poor miners. He himself was a socialist who could also turn a critical eye on the British left, and in the middle of the book, he devoted a chapter to the failure of socialism to gain a foothold among the very citizens who would have seemed to benefit most from its rise. Substitute *liberal* or *progressive* for *socialist*, and the text often reads as though Orwell were covering American politics today.

"Everyone who uses his brain knows that Socialism, is a way out [of the worldwide depression,]" Orwell writes. "It would at least ensure our getting enough to eat, even if it deprived us of everything else. Indeed, from one point of view, Socialism is such an elementary common sense that I am sometimes amazed that it has not established itself already." And yet, he adds, "the average thinking person nowadays is merely not a Socialist, he is actively hostile to Socialism. ... Socialism ... has about it something inherently distasteful—something that drives away the very people who ought to be flocking to its support."

One key to the movement's lack of popularity, Orwell argues, is its supporters. "As with the Christian religion," he writes, "the

worst advertisement for Socialism is its adherents." Then he wheels out the heavy rhetorical artillery. The typical socialist, according to Orwell, "is either a youthful snob-Bolshevik who in five years time will quite probably have made a wealthy marriage and been converted to Roman Catholicism, or, still more typically, a prim little man with a white-collar job, usually a secret teetotaler, and often with vegetarian leanings ... with a social position he has no intention of forfeiting. ... One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words 'Socialism' and 'Communism' draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, 'Nature Cure' quack, pacifist and feminist in England." (Think "organic food lover," "militant nonsmoker," and "environmentalist with a private jet" for a more contemporary list.)

Orwell also rails against the condescension many on the left display toward those they profess to care most about. Describing a gathering of leftists in London, he says, "every person there, male and female, bore the worst stigmata of sniffish middle-class superiority. If a real working man, a miner dirty from the pit, for instance, had suddenly walked into their midst, they would have been embarrassed, angry and disgusted; some, I should think, would have fled holding their noses."

Real working-class folks, he says, might be drawn toward a socialist future centered around family life, the pub, football, and local politics. But those who speak in its name, he says, have a snobbish condescension toward such quotidian pleasures—even condemning coffee and tea. "Reformers" urged the poor to eat healthier food—less sugar, more brown bread. And their audience balked. "Would it not be better if they spent more money on wholesome things like organs and wholemeal bread, or [raw carrots]?" Orwell asks. "Yes it would, but the point is that no ordinary human being is ever going to do such a thing. The ordinary human being would rather starve than live on brown bread and more carrots ... a millionaire may enjoy breakfasting off orange juice and Ryvita biscuits. An unemployed man doesn't."

And so, Orwell ruefully concluded, the snobbish socialists succeeded in depleting their own ranks. "The ordinary decent person, who is in sympathy with the essential aims of Socialism, is given the impression that there is no room for his kind in any Socialist party that means business."

The perennial struggle of Democratic contenders to appeal to ordinary Americans seems very much of a piece with Orwell's sharp descriptions. Election after election, Democrats argue that once Joe and Jane Sixpack fully grasp the wisdom of the latest six-point college-loan program, or of an 800-page health-care scheme, they will come to wave the Democratic banner. And, sometimes, these voters do just that—*provided* that the candidate in question has demonstrated a sense that he or she is not treating them as the subject of an anthropological study. Bill

Clinton had a full steamer trunk of domestic programs; he also was a product of Georgetown, Oxford, and Yale Law School. But his 18 years in the vineyards of Arkansas politics gave him the tools to compete for support on a more visceral level. Then there were Clinton's obvious tastes for earthly pleasures—from Big Macs to more intimate diversions—which made it very hard to label him as an aloof elitist.

For Democrats at the moment, it is no doubt exasperating to watch working-class voters choose candidates whose economic tastes run to comforting the comfortable. And it may be cold comfort to learn that such impulses are not confined to time and place. But if you want to court these voters in a way that will resonate with them, you could do a lot worse than heeding the cautionary words of George Orwell.

And Barack? Ix-nay on the egg-white omelets.

politics

Hillary for Mother Superior

Why Catholics prefer Clinton to Obama.

By Melinda Henneberger

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 5:33 PM ET

I don't know that I'd go as far as Doug Kmiec, the conservative jurist who proclaimed that except on the "life issues," [Barack Obama is a "Catholic natural."](#) For a lot of Catholic voters, that would be like saying they love pizza except for the crust. Still, there is a lot for Catholics to like in Obama's early opposition to the war, attention to social justice issues, and promise of reconciliation across so many divides. [And his stance](#) on abortion rights is identical to [Hillary Clinton's](#), so you'd think that issue be would off the table in the Democratic primary. Most of my Catholic friends are backing Obama, and two of my colleagues at *Commonweal* are on his [steering committee](#). ("Gosh, I don't know anyone who's supporting Hillary," said Pam Wonnell, a friend since we had Sister Mary Edna in the first grade who is active in her parish in West Virginia now—and was en route to volunteer in Obama's Huntington, W. Va., office when I caught her.)

But apparently my friends are highly unrepresentative because Clinton is killing Obama [among Catholics](#). The *Washington Post* notes that "[w]hite Catholics have been a Clinton mainstay throughout the nomination contest. She has won the group by double-digits in 16 of the 22 states where data were available. In Pennsylvania, Clinton won 70 percent of all Catholics." The fact that more-devout Catholic voters go even more decisively for Clinton—among those who attend Mass at least weekly, she

won 3-to-1—suggests that the correlation goes beyond other demographic factors. So: Why is that?

A priest I know in central Pennsylvania, the Rev. John Chaplin, sees race as an issue. "At my little church, some of what I heard was racial, and some of it was people believing that stuff about Obama being a Muslim," said Chaplin. Parishioners seemed to find video clips of Obama's former preacher, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, particularly shocking in contrast to the formality of the Catholic Mass and our high-church fondness for services so decorous that one really needn't exchange a word with another soul. ("We don't carry on like that in our church" is how one woman in Chaplin's diocese, the 67-year-old wife of a retired cop, described her reaction to Wright to me.)

"You know that Catholic thing about propriety," Chaplin said, "that you penalize people for speaking out and never penalize them for keeping quiet? That's part of it, and the Catholic notion of patriotism, which is heavily nationalistic, hurts him, too. This isn't a group predisposed to voting for Hillary—when she can get the votes away from you, you know people have got it in for you—because this is not a hotbed of feminism. But the racial thing was already there, and he hurt himself badly with the comment" suggesting that economically struggling Americans "cling" to religion out of weakness. By contrast, when Hillary spoke of looking to God [in thanksgiving](#) as well as in tough times, that really resonated with Catholics. As it should: Clinton has for years spoken of the importance of gratitude to God as a daily discipline—a concept she adopted from the Catholic priest and author [Henri Nouwen](#).

Familiarity with Catholic language and sensibilities certainly works in Clinton's favor. When she said a few years ago that every abortion is a tragedy, some of her strongest supporters were outraged—and it was more of a Sister Souljah moment than Obama has ever had. In fact, what he's said on the subject has had the opposite effect. At a campaign rally in Pennsylvania, Obama said that when providing information about sex to his own daughters, "I am going to teach them first of all about values and morals. But if they make a mistake, I don't want them punished with a baby." For even mildly pro-life voters, using the word "punished" in that context was at least as unfortunate as describing believers as "bitter." "He's got more missteps on the life issues than she does," said a lobbyist in Washington, D.C., who took leaves from work to volunteer for Bill Clinton's and Al Gore's presidential campaigns but who wrote in Bob Casey for president in '04 and is drifting away from the Democrats over the abortion issue. "That comment about not wanting to [punish](#) his daughter with a baby was all over the life blogs, so even though their positions are the same," language does matter, as does communicating respect for Democrats with a dissenting view on abortion rights. "If you're a Democrat desperate to come back to the party, you might be more comfortable with her."

Though *Saturday Night Live* wouldn't seem to be in the vanguard of Catholic thought, Tina Fey may have been onto something with her "[Bitch Is the New Black](#)" comparison of Hillary to a cranky but proficient old nun: "Bitches get stuff done; that's why Catholic schools use nuns as teachers and not priests. They're mean ... and they sleep on cots, and they're allowed to hit you. And at the end of the school year, you hated those bitches. But you knew the capitol of Vermont."

The '04 Casey voter says nun-run Catholic schools turned out a lot of good feminists: "Older Catholics with exposure to nuns in school may be more comfortable with women in positions of authority." And my one Catholic friend who does back Hillary thought the opposite experience also worked in Clinton's favor: "Don't you think Catholic women are tired of *not* seeing women in authority positions?" In Pennsylvania, where she has family, "My aunt and all her friends went for Hillary. There was a lot of, 'You go, girl.' " And for her, part of the appeal is the general impression that Clinton seems more devoted to her faith than either Obama or John McCain. "She just seems the most religious of the three—particularly now that Obama's thrown his preacher under the bus."

So Jeremiah Wright hurts Obama coming and going. And yet, somehow, the double whammy of his wiggy pastor has not disabused voters of the paranoid notion that Obama is a secret Muslim only posing as a Christian. (Really, what candidate with half-good sense would pose as Wright's congregant?) A Catholic woman from Clearfield, Pa., said that though the rest of her large extended family unanimously supports Clinton, they rarely mention their preferred candidate but instead talk endlessly about what would seem to be mutually exclusive concerns: Obama's relationship with Wright, and how we're all going to have to buy Muslim prayer rugs if he's elected. "Wright does need to low-key it, but that's all they want to talk about," said the woman, who didn't want to be quoted by name in calling her relatives a bunch of rednecks. "And what makes me heartsick is that's the kind of thing you say so you don't have to say the real reason is you won't vote for a black guy."

politics

Slate's Delegate Calculator

Clinton's net delegate gain from Pennsylvania shrinks.

By Chadwick Matlin and Chris Wilson

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 6:56 AM ET

As the numbers continue to shake out from Pennsylvania, we're downsizing Clinton's margin of victory in Pennsylvania to 12 pledged delegates, an 85-73 split in her favor. [NBC News currently calculates](#) an 83-to-73 split with two delegates

remaining to be allocated, which we predict will go to Clinton based on her share of the total votes in the state.

Obama also [picked up a pledged delegate](#) from the Edwards camp in Iowa, bringing his pre-March 4 figure to 1,208, according to the *Iowa Independent* ([hat tip](#): Ben Smith). Factoring this in, Obama currently leads Clinton by 155 pledged delegates, with 408 still up for grabs in the nine remaining contests. Clinton needs to win the remaining contests by an average of 38 points to tie Obama in pledged delegates.

For those who follow the Delegate Calculator, the sort of revision we see in Pennsylvania may sound familiar. While delegates have generally divided in proportion to the popular vote in the Democratic primary, as the calculator assumes they will prior to an election, the actual count will inevitably vary by a few delegates as district-by-district numbers are tallied. An updated audit of the calculator, based on 29 Democratic primaries, finds that these predictions are off by an average of 2.8 percent for Clinton and 2.5 percent for Obama.

It's worth noting that the revisions tend to favor the loser. Final or nearly final delegate numbers from the primaries in Alabama, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin have all resulted in margins slightly smaller than the margin of the popular vote. The same holds for the caucuses in Alaska, Hawaii, Kansas, and Nevada. Examples of the opposite—where the winning candidate netted even more delegates than the popular vote would predict—are fewer and include states like Illinois and Arkansas where lopsided victories in favor of the native son or daughter make conventional wisdom less relevant.

Methodology

- The current number of pledged delegates comes from [NBC News' tally](#).
- We estimate the number of delegates based on the overall state vote, even though delegates are awarded by congressional district as well. We felt comfortable making this approximation because in the primaries through Mississippi, there was only a 2.9 percent deviation between the percentage of the overall vote and the percentage of delegates awarded in primaries. The proportion of delegates awarded by congressional district, therefore, does not differ greatly from the statewide breakdown.
- The calculator now includes options to enable Florida and Michigan. When you check the boxes next to either or both states, you'll notice that the overall number of delegates needed for the nomination changes. With Florida and/or Michigan involved, there are more total delegates to go around, so the number needed for a majority rises. Our calculator assumes that the DNC will allow both states to retain their entire pledged

delegation, and not punish the states by halving their delegate totals like the RNC did.

- The calculator does not incorporate superdelegates into its calculations. Superdelegates are unpledged and uncommitted and therefore can change their endorsements and convention votes at any time. As a result, we've simply noted at the bottom of the calculator how many superdelegates the leading candidate needs to win the nomination in a given scenario.
- All of the calculator's formulas and data come from Jason Furman, the director of the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution.

politics

That's Hysterical

Attacks on a "hysterical" Hillary Clinton have a long literary pedigree.

By Linda Hirshman

Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 6:04 PM ET

I wonder whether the SAT still includes those questions about which object does not fit into the larger group. Here's mine:

1. Lucia di Lammermoor
2. Lady Macbeth
3. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton
4. Fraulein Bertha Pappenheim ("Anna O.")

Lucia, the heroine of Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor* and, more recently, of Gaetano Donizetti's eponymous opera, is forced to marry her brother's ally rather than her true love, loses her mind, stabs the groom to death on their wedding night, and—after some impressive vocal pyrotechnics in her bloodstained wedding dress (the opera's mad scene)—dies. Lady Macbeth, of Shakespeare's play and, more recently, Giuseppe Verdi's opera, is married to an aristocratic, but not royal, husband; eggs him on to kill the king and various other superdelegates; loses her mind; and—after some impressive vocal pyrotechnics (the opera's sleepwalking scene)—dies. Bertha Pappenheim, the "Anna O." of Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer's studies on hysteria, developed paralysis, lapses of consciousness, and hallucinations, but, after a so-called talking cure with Breuer, recovered sufficiently to die (operatically in form, if not in fact) of tuberculosis.

Then there is Sen. Hillary Clinton, whose husband's antics probably would have driven Mother Theresa to homicidal ideation and who has been repudiated on an almost daily basis by people she has personally and politically supported for years. She travels from rally to rally, delivering boring, but worthy,

addresses to the assembled multitudes and finds herself—against all odds, since the first recorded contest—approaching, if not securing, the nomination to run for the highest office in the United States.

And yet the media keep trying to paint her as a hysteric. Here's the cover of this fortnight's *New Republic*. Category mistake? From all those brilliant young Harvard guys at the *New Republic*?

Clearly, something else is afoot.

By playing the "hysteric" card, Clinton's attackers are following a very old script—a script that taints women with madness every time they, you know, say anything at all that might distinguish them from a doormat. The word *hysterical* does not mean any old homicidal lunacy. It means—and has meant since the birth of Western medicine—symptoms caused by *the uterus* (in Greek, *hyster*): a disease, as Hippocrates, the father of Western medicine, called it, of *women*:

When the uterus has reached the liver and the hypochondrium and causes suffocation, the whites of the eyes roll up, the woman becomes cold, and even sometimes livid. She grinds her teeth; saliva drips from her mouth, and she appears to be having an epileptic fit.

So that's where the *New Republic* got its cover art ...

Ancient doctors speculated that uteri drove women crazy because the thirsty organs didn't get watered enough by having sex with men. Although ordinary anatomy eventually dispensed with that theory, the notion that there was some medical basis for female hysteria just would not stay dead. Famed scholar and literary critic Elaine Showalter wrote in her book *Hystories* that "for over a century the political context of hysteria has been feminism. Hysteria became a hot topic in medical circles in the 1880s and 1890s when feminism, the New Woman, and a crisis in gender were also hot topics. ... [D]octors viewed hysterical women as closet feminists who had to be reprogrammed into traditional roles."

Ever since, you could be certain that whenever the old hysteria talk surfaces, the writer is relying, usually quite consciously, on the old association between uppity women and insanity. Culture critic and *Slate* contributor Stanley Crouch, who recently invoked the H-word when describing Clinton's television persona in his [Daily News column](#) ("Clinton seems by turns icy, contrived, *hysterical*, sentimental, bitter, manipulative and self-righteous [italics mine]"), certainly knows what he is doing. As *Salon* described him in its series [Brilliant Careers](#), the volatile and charismatic Crouch is "[a]rmed with an elephant's memory

and a passionate knowledge of and engagement with art and history." Nor, probably, would anyone contend that *Slate's* own Christopher Hitchens didn't know the queen's English when he [described Clinton's story](#) about Bosnia as "flagrant, hysterical, repetitive, pathological lying." Flagrant, yes; repetitive, yes; and maybe pathological. But "hysterical"?

This charge of insanity—fits, pathology—against any woman who aspires to transcend prior female achievements is the go-to weapon for people who would keep women down. And this move goes way beyond the candidacy of any particular individual. In a [recent *Nation* column](#), Tom Hayden (the '60s guy, now in his 60s) deployed a full arsenal of insults, comparing Clinton to Lady Macbeth and then going on to liken her appearance to a "screech" on the blackboard.

Hayden, apparently fearing some criticism, hid behind the voice of his never-before-heard third wife, Barbara, a "meditative practitioner of everything peaceful and organic," never previously given to offering hostile political pronouncements. But Clinton's appearance on TV apparently makes Tom's wife "scream." Poor Tom Hayden, still looking for a sufficiently submissive female. Everyone remembers Jane Fonda, Hayden's second wife. But probably few *Nation* readers remember the first Mrs. Hayden, one Casey Hayden. In 1965, right around the time she divorced Tom, Casey Hayden wrote the screed that helped launch the women's liberation movement, "[Sex and Caste](#)." Her ex-husband's most recent unleashing of the hysteria rocket shows how little distance we have covered since Casey Hayden picked up her pen.

Can Tom Hayden be suggesting that hysteria is contagious—that even peaceful Barbara becomes somehow unhinged when exposed to the hysterical female presidential candidate? Or maybe it's Tom himself who is the real constant here, seeing women as hysterical wherever they appear.

politics

Obama Tries To Get Back on His Good Foot

Cutting loose Jeremiah Wright to get back in step.

By John Dickerson

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 7:08 PM ET

The Rev. Jeremiah Wright married Barack Obama 15 years ago, and today Obama tried to divorce him. In his strongest remarks to date, Obama said he was outraged and appalled by his former pastor's recent TV tour. "The person that I saw yesterday was not the person that I met 20 years ago," Obama said. "His comments were not only divisive and destructive, but I believe that they end up giving comfort to those who prey on hate, and I believe

that they do not portray accurately the perspective of the black church."

By putting down his foot, hard, Obama certainly reassured his allies and supporters who hoped he would react to Wright's newest flamboyance with passion rather than the cool jazz aspect that Obama has used for so much else in the campaign. He didn't pound the podium—that would have been out of character. But the denunciation could only have been more thorough if Obama had asked Wright to quit talking by appealing to his sense of Christian charity. Wright's three-day speaking tour has distracted and infuriated the Obama campaign, and the candidate let that show.

It's too early to tell if Obama's remarks will dispel the fallout from his former pastor turned wrecking ball, but they were the right first step. Before Obama can put Wright behind him, he had to put himself back at the center of his own campaign. That's what today was about—taking control of his destiny. And that's how his campaign aides and allies talked about Obama's break with Wright. "This was a human reaction from a man who woke up this morning and saw what Reverend Wright had done was put his personal vanity ahead of changing this country and who thought *enough is enough*," said one Obama aide.

Since Obama offered his theories on bitter small-town people at a San Francisco fundraiser a few weeks ago, he has at times seemed to be at the mercy of external forces. He is still ahead in the [delegate counts that matter](#) but he hasn't seemed like a commanding front-runner. You could sense this in the expression on his face in the cutaway shots during the Philadelphia debate two weeks ago. He looked exhausted and irritated that he was being bled to death by paper cuts, on issues from his lapel pin to Wright to his association with former Weather Underground member Bill Ayers. His performance on the stump was mirroring his performance in his [scrimmage today with the Tar Heels](#)—he was struggling to keep pace, and if he did score, it was only when few were watching.

When campaigns get knocked off balance they can overreact. The Obama team did this during the waning days of the Pennsylvania primary by [taking on Hillary about her Bosnia exaggerations](#) (after the candidate suggested he wouldn't). Or by trotting out new slogans every week as Hillary Clinton often has. Now Obama is trying to find his way back to his core message of change, which is why he denounced Wright's remarks not only on their own terms but because they were antithetical to his entire worldview. "My reaction has more to do with what I want this campaign to be about," said Obama. "In some ways, what Reverend Wright said yesterday directly contradicts everything that I've done during my life. It contradicts how I was raised and the setting in which I was raised; it contradicts my decision to pursue a career of public service. It contradicts the issues that I've worked on politically."

Perhaps just as important for Obama's attempt to regain control of his campaign was the fight he picked Tuesday with Clinton and John McCain over lifting the gas tax for the summer driving season. The other candidates have backed this crowd pleaser, but Obama labeled it as a phony Washington solution that wouldn't do much to help real people. "This isn't an idea designed to get you through the summer, it's designed to get them through an election," he said at a town hall meeting Tuesday in Winston Salem, N.C.

Substantively, he's got lots of economists and policy experts on his side. By presenting himself as a speaker of hard truth, Obama sought to return to his presentation as the politician who will tell people what they need to hear (that solutions to gas prices are not easy) rather than what they want to hear (that they're getting a big government giveback).

The fight also allows him to tie Clinton to McCain, a useful if small advantage in this endless primary season. A scrape with Hillary over any policy differences is a relief from the swirl of distractions that have been plaguing the Democratic race. Clinton responded Tuesday with [a new ad](#) on the gas-tax relief plan, saying it showed that Obama failed to act. Hey, a real issue to mine.

Of course, there are still a number of factors out of Obama's control, including the reaction of voters to Wright, the appetite and attitudes of the press, and the extent to which Clinton allies can keep the story alive. Perhaps the most unpredictable variable is Wright himself, who, as Obama ruefully pointed out, is hardly coordinating with the campaign. Extricating himself from the relationship may be more complicated for Obama than the simple: I want a divorce.

press box

Let Murdoch Be Murdoch

Abolish the powerless *Wall Street Journal* Special Committee.

By Jack Shafer

Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 6:19 PM ET

The "Special Committee" assigned to shield the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial independence from the meddling of new owner Rupert Murdoch was reduced to a set of high-paid flunkies last week as the media mogul squeezed *Journal* Managing Editor [Marcus Brauchli](#) out of his job without consulting them.

[The](#) committee—composed of Louis Boccardi, Thomas Bray, Susan M. Phillips, Jack Fuller, and Nicholas Negroponte—was created as a [condition of the sale](#) of the *Journal's* parent

company, Dow Jones & Co., to Murdoch's News Corp.* The Bancroft family, which controlled Dow Jones, feared that having purchased the newspaper, the rotten old bastard would want to exercise the prerogatives of ownership and start making radical changes.

Hence the committee, given explicit "rights of approval" over the hiring and firing of three key Dow Jones positions—the managing editor and the editorial page editor of the *Journal*, and the managing editor of Dow Jones Newswires. But those familiar with Murdoch's legacy knew that he would soon shirk his part of the bargain.

On this point, Murdoch never disappoints. For instance, when he bought the *Times* of London in 1981, he promised new editor Harold Evans editorial independence. He started breaking his promises almost immediately, and when Evans confronted him, Murdoch allegedly said, "They're not worth the paper they're written on." As Evans writes of Murdoch in his 1984 book, *Good Times, Bad Times*, he's like "the philanderer who convinces each new girl that she's the one who'll change him."

Like Brauchli, Evans had a committee "protecting" him. This one, established at government insistence, required a majority vote in the event that Murdoch wanted to sack an editor. But when Murdoch wanted Evans gone, he performed the same end run that just eliminated Brauchli—a big shove and a settlement agreement.

The denuded Dow Jones Special Committee issued its wimpy statement [yesterday](#), vowing that it "intends to exercise fully its role in the approval of a successor managing editor and to take the steps necessary to prevent a repeat of the process it has just been through." What they meant to say was, *We're each paid \$100,000 annually, a lot of money for very little work, so if Rupert wants to drive by and hose us down with a swift, hard piss again, just make sure the checks clear.*

Although the Dow Jones-News Corp. [agreement](#) endows the Special Committee with "perpetual existence," of what use is a perpetual but powerless regulator? Watchdog committees are only as powerful as the watchdogged allow them to be. Murdoch, who knows his [way around a lie](#) and doesn't mind violating any oath he gives, such as the one he gave when he [originally purchased](#) the *New York Post*, telegraphed his genuine feelings about external oversight last summer in *Time* magazine. "They [the Bancrofts] can't sell their company and still control it—that's not how it works. I'm sorry!" as Eric Pooley [quoted](#) him.

I first expressed opposition to Murdoch's purchase of the *Journal* last year ([May 7](#) and [May 8](#)), and while I still hold those views, what's done is done. Even if a way were found to resurrect Marcus Brauchli as managing editor, the *Journal* of old is never coming back. Seeing as 1) the newspaper business is in trouble,

2) Murdoch is investing heavily in the *Journal*, and 3) he'll do what he wants anyway, let's find a way to snuff the committee and let him get on with it. I don't trust Murdoch to do the right thing; I'd rather he ruin the *Journal* on the principle that a newspaper should belong to its owners than continue with his Special Committee charade. A *Journal* editorial observed the importance of letting a newspaper do its own thing on Jan. 20, 1925, stating:

A newspaper is a private enterprise, owing nothing to the public, which grants it no franchise. It is therefore affected with no public interest. It is emphatically the property of its owner, who is selling a manufactured product at his own risk.

I found that quotation in H.L. Mencken's *A New Dictionary of Quotations on Historical Principles From Ancient and Modern Sources* (1942). Ain't it a beaut? Let's pass the hat and send the [genocidal tyrant](#) a copy on his next birthday (March 11). If you've got a better birthday present in mind, send your idea to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate*'s readers' forum, in a future article, or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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

Correction, May 1, 2008: *This article originally included Jennifer Dunn in the Special Committee. Dunn was appointed to the committee but died. She was replaced by Susan M. Phillips. The change has been made in the copy. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)*

sidebar

Return to [article](#)

Rupert Murdoch, Genocidal Tyrant?

To the best of my knowledge, nobody ever called Rupert Murdoch a genocidal tyrant until he introduced the useful image

in a summer 2007 conference call. Here's how the [Washington Post](#) reported it.

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

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

press box

The *Times* Travel Section Plays Hide the Salami

As Austin Powers would say, "Very shagadelic!"

By Jack Shafer

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 2:09 PM ET

Sunday's *New York Times* Travel section pays obvious homage to the *Austin Powers* movies with a photo spread of vacationing nudists cavorting in their absolute uncovered glory—without showing much in the way of private parts.

To refresh your memory of the Powers technique, watch this [YouTube clip](#) from *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*. As newlyweds Austin Powers (Mike Myers) and Vanessa Kensington (Elizabeth Hurley) romp around their hotel suite in the all together, strategically placed objects screen their private parts from the camera's lens. Pineapples and melons are hoisted to Kensington's chest level just in time to mask her breasts. The camera carefully frames Powers and Kensington so that as she huffs and puffs to inflate a pink phallic balloon, it does double-entendre duty as Powers' johnson. You get the idea.

Eschewing fruit and balloons, *Times* photographer Adriana Zehbrauskas relies on well-placed appendages in the [section cover](#) picture. You might want to pull your *Times* out of the recycling bin for examination as the Web reproduction doesn't really do the composition justice. The guy on the left reclining under the awning conveniently places his left foot *just so* to conceal the wedding vegetables.

Elsewhere in the shot, an amply racked water volleyball player lifts her arm to block her left nipple from inspection. A woman on the pool deck hides her chest behind an umbrella pole. A swoosh of water fills the buttocks crack of the leaping volleyball player. In what may be the photo spread's only slip, a female breast—nipple and all—can be seen in the extreme left of the shot. At least, I think I can see her nipple when I strain my eyes.

After the jump, we're treated to a [shadow](#) of a tennis player's nut sack, and, in a Web-only [extra](#), bent legs censor the mossy naughty bits of a sunbathing guy and gal. Her love bags? Veiled from the elements and my pervy eyes by her cowboy hat. And so on.

The *Times*' photo-illustration leaves me with one question about the paper's standards. After going to such extremes to protect readers from the overtly lewd and prurient, why did the paper's editors include this [image](#) of a crouching billiards player lining up a shot as two lusciously nipped maidens in Modigliani knockoffs stare down from canvases behind him? Paging [Clark Hoyt](#)!

For more hide-the-salami action, see the [credit sequence](#) from *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*. Disclosure: *Slate* Deputy Editor David Plotz put me up to this column—I have far higher journalistic standards. Send me your journalistic standards via e-mail: slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate*'s readers' forum, in a future article, or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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

reading list

Better Read Than Red

The best recent books about communism.

By Anne Applebaum

Saturday, April 26, 2008, at 7:31 AM ET

Brush up on your Marx, fish out your tattered [Communist Manifesto](#), and practice singing the "[Internationale](#)," preferably in multiple languages: May Day is just around the corner! For those who've forgotten this milestone, May 1 is the international

proletarian holiday, the day when tanks used to parade down the streets of Moscow, *les syndicalistes* rioted in Paris, and students threw bottles at police in Warsaw. Though the United States celebrates [Labor Day](#) instead—a boring, noncommunist alternative, albeit a useful reminder that it's time to pack the beach towels away—you can still join in the May Day fun. Paradoxically, there has never been a better time to read up on the history of the communist movement: Now that most Communist regimes have collapsed or surrendered, the archives are open, and new books are appearing all the time.

Start out, of course, by ignoring the latter-day Marxists and reading Marx: The first 10 volumes of the complete works of Marx and Engels are now [available and searchable online](#). If you really do just want the *Communist Manifesto* (recommended for those with limited tolerance for turgid prose), it's available [here in the original Progress Publishers translation](#).

Those who want to know how the communist theory worked in practice should then turn to Robert Service's [Comrades](#), one of the best of many recent accounts of how the movement grew, spread, and briefly captivated half the world before collapsing in 1989. If you want more blood and gore, read [The Black Book of Communism](#), compiled by French ex-Trotskyites. Service's book is better on the Comintern, Titoism, and the Sino-Soviet split. *The Black Book's* authors are better on torture, concentration camps, and mass murder. Take your pick or read them both.

Once you've got the surveys under your belt, you can turn to Yale University Press' [Annals of Communism series](#), a unique publishing venture designed to make use of Soviet archives. Whether you want [Andrei Sakharov's personal files](#), [Stalin's correspondence with Molotov](#), or [documents explaining the Katyn massacre](#), they're all available in beautifully edited and annotated translations. Don't miss John Haynes and Harvey Klehr's [history of the American Communist Party](#) (also a Yale book, also based on Soviet archives), either.

And this is just the beginning. If nothing else, the past decade has proved that open archives really do lead to better history books, whether the scholarly kind, like Harvard historian Terry Martin's [Affirmative Action Empire](#), a history of Soviet nationality policy, or the popular kind, like Simon Sebag Montefiore's [Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar](#), a juicy, gossipy account of Stalin's inner circle. Thanks to archives, the history of World War II is also being rewritten—see Antony Beevor's *Stalingrad* and *Berlin: The Downfall*—as are other chunks of 20th-century history, such as the [Spanish Civil War](#).

Still, there's nothing like an eyewitness. So if, having made your way through all of these history books, you still feel something lacking, try to track down an old copy of [Utopias Elsewhere](#), British writer Anthony Daniels' vicious 1991 account of life in some of the weirder Marxist regimes. Daniels makes all of these places sound strange, sad, and funny, all at the same time. Which

they were—or are, in the case of North Korea and Cuba—as we so easily, too easily, forget.

recycled

How Much Do Racehorses Pee?

Horses really do possess great powers of urination.

By David Sessions

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 4:55 PM ET

Twenty racehorses will take the track at this [Saturday's Kentucky Derby](#), providing an occasion to wonder: Does a racehorse actually "pee like a racehorse"? David Sessions [investigated](#) the matter in a 2007 "Explainer." His findings are reprinted below.

The third leg of horse racing's Triple Crown takes place on Saturday, with the running of the [Belmont Stakes](#). Around 60,000 fans will be watching in Elmont, N.Y., as they put down beer and the track's [signature cocktails](#). Needless to say, they'll probably be peeing as much as the racehorses. Wait, how much does a racehorse pee?

A lot. Horses typically produce several quarts of urine every four hours, for a total of about 1.5 to 2 gallons per day. (By contrast, an adult male human pees 1 or 2 quarts per day.) The stream, usually one-third to a half-inch in diameter, can last up to 30 seconds. In general, the larger the animal, the more it pees. A Clydesdale, for example, weighs twice as much as a Thoroughbred and produces urine in greater volume (and with a more pungent smell). An average pasture horse that spends its day grazing might also beat a racehorse in a peeing match: Pasture grass contains a lot more water than the carefully prepared grains and pellets fed to racehorses.

The popular notion of incontinent racehorses seems to have roots in the late 1970s, when trainers began the widespread use of diuretics like Lasix (furosemide). Lasix inhibits the absorption of sodium and draws water into the bladder. This causes the horse to excrete more fluids, which could, in theory, make a horse lighter on its feet and faster on the track. Depending on the dose, a Lasix treatment could cause a horse to move several gallons of urine within an hour, which could translate to a quick drop of 10 pounds from a horse's body weight before a race.

It's not against the rules to dose a racehorse with Lasix, but its use is carefully regulated and abuse will result in a penalty. (In general, you're only allowed to use the drug to prevent internal bleeding during a race. You're not supposed to use it strictly as a diuretic.) Racing officials have run drug tests on competitors since 1903, and today they take blood and urine samples before

every race. At the Kentucky Derby and most other major races, competitors using Lasix are allowed to compete, but they're marked with an *L* on the programs.

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

Explainer thanks Sue McDonnell at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, Hal Schott at Michigan State University's Department of Large Animal Clinical Sciences, and Thomas Tobin at the University of Kentucky's Gluck Equine Research Center.

recycled

Beware of the Blob

A town celebrates the famous horror movie brought to the screen by Kate Phillips.

By Torie Bosch

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 2:20 PM ET

*Kate Phillips, an actress and screenwriter, [died](#) April 18 at the age of 94. Phillips is perhaps best-known for co-writing *The Blob*, a classic 1958 horror movie about a monster that threatens to devour a small town. Parts of the film were shot in Phoenixville, Pa., which holds a yearly event called *Blob Fest* to commemorate the town's starring role. In 2007, Torie Bosch attended *Blob Fest* and talked to Phillips about theories that *The Blob* represented America's battle against communism. "I wasn't thinking about communism when I wrote it. I was thinking about good and evil," Phillips scoffed. The article and accompanying *Slate V* video are reprinted below.*

PHOENIXVILLE, Pa.—He wore a tinfoil hat decorated with ramen noodle flavor packets. According to the manifesto he carried, the frugal meal had inspired the creation of the hat that protected his brain from evil rays.

Was he crazy? Possibly. He was also a participant in the first-ever Tinfoil Hat Contest at [Blob Fest](#), an annual celebration of the iconic low-budget horror flick [The Blob](#) held in Phoenixville, Pa., the Philadelphia suburb where the movie was filmed. Since 2000, people have gathered each year to commemorate *The Blob*, but this year was going to be special: 2007 marks the 50th anniversary of the filming of the movie, which was released in 1958.

I've never actually seen *The Blob*. But I had to go—the campiness and geekiness were too enticing to miss, particularly because, for reasons I'm still fuzzy on, my older brother, Nick, was slated to dance around onstage in a gorilla costume. ("I have an Ivy League education," he reminded me before he crawled

onstage.) I even decided to skip a wedding so I could attend. And thank God I did: The reception had a cash bar.

On Friday the 13th, the Colonial Theatre, an old-timey movie house with a balcony and a single screen, hosted the tinfoil hat and scream contests. What tinfoil hats have to do with the Blob isn't quite clear to me, but the creations were gorgeous—I would happily wear the winning entry if it ever turns out that alien abductees are onto something. As the huge line of hopeful contestants formed for the latter, my ears began to twitch in fear—but luckily, organizers were smart enough to cull a few of the wannabe participants to give us their best shrieks. Earlier in the evening, I chatted with Judy Hennessey, the 2006 scream contest champ. Her advice to the 2007 hopefuls: "You have to be really, really afraid." The winner was a little girl, probably no more than 5, whose screech was so perfect, she must scream often and loudly—or perhaps she was terrified of the drooling albino hunchback character from the New York-based TV show [Ghoul a Go-Go](#) who was shepherding the scream contest hopefuls.

Tinfoil hats and screaming are all well and good, but everyone was antsy for the big event: the running out, a re-creation of the picture's most famous scene, in which hordes of moviegoers run screaming from the Colonial to escape the Blob. People inched toward the aisles, hoping to get a head start. This only served to delay the big event—for safety reasons, the running couldn't start till the balcony aisles were cleared. We couldn't start running, anyway: The champion screamer, who was supposed to signal the start of the running, was nowhere to be found.

Once a substitute screamed, I jumped with everyone else into the aisles—only to get stuck behind the mob. No wonder people got eaten by the Blob in the movie. When the congestion cleared, I ran through the back of the theater, through the lobby, out the doors—and was greeted by people holding air-traffic-control wands. As soon as everyone was out of the building, everyone ran toward a man bearing a bucket labeled "THE BLOB." These were the meager remains of the original Blob, and this time—unlike in the movie—everyone rushed to get a glimpse of the once-menacing monster, now just a few handfuls of red-dyed silicone.

On Saturday, the events began in earnest at noon with the fire extinguisher parade—a nod to the movie's ending, when the intrepid teenager played by Steve McQueen realizes that only a fire extinguisher—specifically, a "CO₂" model, according to McQueen's character—can save the town from destruction. [The](#) parade was a bizarre spectacle: A long line of kids and parents marched in a circle, led by a woman in Gypsy garb and a man holding the parade's lone fire extinguisher, as everyone danced to "[Beware of the Blob](#)," the movie's poppy theme song (written

by Burt Bacharach and Mack David*). Far more inspiring was the costume contest, a testament to what craft supplies, time, and a vivid imagination can produce. My favorite costume was a two-man effort that used giant cardboard cutouts to simulate a woman screaming as she's devoured by the Blob. But the winner was a replica of the Downington Diner, the restaurant the Blob engulfs. Unfortunately, it was so awkward that the wearer couldn't get up and down the steps to accept his prize without assistance.

The vast majority of Blob Fest attendees were Phoenixville-area families, but a small, hard-core group of self-proclaimed Blobologists had come to celebrate all things Blobby—I talked to one couple who drove down from Maine for the occasion. For these people, the highlight was meeting an elderly woman who sat in the lobby of the Colonial signing autographs—Kate Phillips, the screenwriter of *The Blob*, who earned just \$125 for writing one of America's most enduring crappy movies. (At the time, she went by the name [Kay Linaker](#).) I was glad to see her because there was something I wanted to ask. Many Blob Fest attendees suggested the movie was about communism—the giant red mass slowly growing larger and more menacing, swallowing communities. I asked her if that had been on her mind when she was writing, but she scoffed. "I wasn't thinking about communism when I wrote it. I was thinking about good and evil," she said. So much for my attempts to parse hidden meanings from B movies.

Though Phillips might not have intended *The Blob* to have a political message, she did accidentally insert an environmental warning, which was reflected in the Blob Fest's 2007 theme: "An Inconvenient Blob." I thought it was just an attempt to ride the green bandwagon until I finally caught one of the three weekend screenings of the movie. At the end of the film, the Blob is imprisoned in the Arctic, where, as the narrator menacingly intones, it would remain as long as the North Pole stayed cold. Green activists should add the return of the Blob to the long list of global-warming-related dangers.

Unintentional references to communism and environmentalism aside, there's no reason why *The Blob* should still be a cultural icon. (I can only hope that *Snakes on a Plane* isn't being celebrated in this manner 50 years in the future.) But Blob Fest isn't just about a really terrible movie. It's about nostalgia. As almost every local mentioned in our short conversations, in the decades from the filming of *The Blob* to the 1980s, Phoenixville changed from a safe small town to a place with a serious drug and crime problem—a trend that has reversed with recent [gentrification](#), as evidenced by the kilt store, artisanal cheese maker, and [Hipster Home](#) décor shop downtown. Blob Fest celebrates Phoenixville's return to the secure community it once was. Sure, for the horror aficionados, the three screenings of *The Blob* and the chance to hear movie extras talk about the filming

are the big draw. For the rest of the thousands of attendees, it's a chance to take part in hula-hoop contests, listen to a truly awful rockabilly cover band, and bask in the comforting glow of the 1950s. In some ways, it really is what a community fair should be: a celebration of something special about that town. Any place can [deep fry a candy bar](#). Only Phoenixville and the Colonial can do Blob Fest.

Correction, July 24, 2007: This article originally misidentified Burt Bacharach's partner in writing the song "Beware of the Blob." It was Mack David. ([Return to the corrected sentence.](#))

slate v
Interviews 50 Cents: Serious Writer's Block

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 1:09 PM ET

slate v
Did the Rev. Wright Persuade?

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 1:59 PM ET

slate v
Dear Prudence: Quaint Clichés Run Amok

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 5:44 PM ET

sports nut
Why Doesn't Anybody Go to the Horse Races?

It pays to stay home.

By Ted McClelland

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 4:28 PM ET

I was walking into [Hawthorne Race Course](#) outside Chicago when I stopped to bump fists with Dino, the parking lot attendant. Dino sees everyone who goes in and out of the track. He doesn't see many people these days.

"Aw, it's terrible," he said, in the put-upon tone that all horseplayers learn after throwing away a few thousand tickets. "There used to be a guy here, the Greek, he did 25 percent of the

handle. He had two or three runners. Mike the Thief—he used to make a living just by skimming [money off the Greek]."

It's not surprising that a whale like the Greek stopped going to Hawthorne. It's surprising he stayed so long. When I went inside, I did see a few of my racetrack buddies. Snow, the "stooper" who picks up tickets off the floor, looking for a tossed-away winner. Plumber Bob, whose jeans sag like those on the man who comes to fix the sink. Blonde Jimmy, who's so focused he never makes eye contact with anyone but a horse. We're the regulars, but we make \$5 bets with soiled bills from Velcro wallets. Of the \$1.5 million wagered on Hawthorne's races that Saturday, only a tenth came from the track. Weekdays are worse: 4 percent or 5 percent.

Close to 150,000 people will jam into Churchill Downs for the Kentucky Derby, making it one of the best-attended sporting events in America. But the rest of the year, racetracks are emptier than ever—not because the sport is getting less popular but because the track is a terrible place to bet on a horse.

The whales, the big bettors who support the industry, don't show up at the track because they can get a better deal elsewhere—by calling in their wagers to phone-betting hubs in exotic, loosely regulated locales like St. Kitts or North Dakota. Say you want to lay \$1,000 on a horse running at [Aqueduct](#). You call the hub in Fargo, then an operator takes your bet and relays it to New York, where the money is fed into the racetrack's pool. Why not just bet directly at the track? Because you get a better return on your investment by staying away.

The phone hubs take advantage of the economics of simulcasting. Racetracks "sell" their signals to one another in exchange for 3 percent of the handle. If a horseplayer sitting at Santa Anita bets \$100 on a race at Belmont, Belmont gets \$3. The hubs pay a little more for this privilege than the tracks—between 7 percent and 9 percent—but since they don't have to maintain a grandstand or feed horses, they can kick money back to their customers.

The bigger the bettor, the bigger the rebate. The average racetrack's house take is 20 percent. You're subject to that bite whether you bet at the track or over the phone. The difference is that the highest-rolling players—who have the clout to negotiate rates—are refunded 10 percent of their wagers by the phone hubs. That cuts their disadvantage in half. Suppose you've been betting \$5 million a year at the track and only breaking even. If you bet that same amount of money through a hub, you'll get a \$500,000 rebate. Suddenly, instead of spinning your wheels, you're a professional horseplayer earning a fabulous six-figure income.

Since rebates were first offered at Las Vegas sports books in the mid-1990s, they've changed gamblers' habits immensely. Maury Wolff, a professional horseplayer in Virginia, quintupled his

action once he started getting rebates. He also stopped going to the track almost entirely—you'll see him there 10 days a year. "I'm exclusively out-of-the-house now," says Wolff, who was a 200-day-a-year racetrack regular a decade ago. "It's way more efficient."

At the track, Wolff has to wait in line for tickets and copy exact prices off a TV monitor. At home, he can watch the odds on his computer and get a bet down with a mouse click. Plus, he has piles of handicapping records on his desk—take those to the track, and you'll look like Groucho juggling tip books in *A Day at the Races*.

For some guys, rebates mean the difference between feeding bales of cash to the horses and staying at home and watching baseball on Thursday afternoons. Dana Parham, who may be the biggest whale of all, bragged to a University of Arizona symposium that, thanks to rebates: "I am directly responsible for over \$2.4 billion in handle since January of 2000. One hundred percent of this is new money that would otherwise not be in the pools at any level."

What's happened here is a market correction in racetrack takeout. For years, gamblers have complained—and rightly so—that a 20 percent bite made winning nearly impossible. But there was no way to change it. The track and the OTB were the only places to bet, and their rates were set by state racing boards, controlled by politicians who sin-taxed gamblers as hard as drinkers and smokers. Now, phone hubs, whales, and the racing industry have worked out a new arrangement. It leaves out the \$2 patzer, who doesn't bet enough to qualify for rebates, but so what, goes the attitude. The biggest customers get the best deals.

As a result of hubs, the horse-racing network TVG, and online gambling sites like [YouBet](#) and [Xpressbet](#), attendance is down, but wagers are up. According to the [California Horse Racing Board](#), the state's railbird population dropped 26 percent between 1996 and 2006, but wagering on California races increased 17 percent. It's just easier to get a bet down. Last year, I wanted to play a Pick 4 at Arlington Park, but I couldn't get to the track because, tragically, I had a job. Thankfully, I was able to turn my desk into a miniature OTB. I read the program on my laptop. My desktop played streaming video from the track. Just before the first race, I ran outside with my cell and called in my wager to a YouBet operator. (I was reluctant to actually gamble on the company's computer.) I lost the bet, and, eventually, I lost my job—not for playing the horses at work, but for reasons somewhat related to the anti-authoritarian traits that make me a devoted racetrack bum.

Now that I'm unemployed, I have more time to go to Hawthorne and to wonder if, someday, I'll be the only one there. When I started following horse racing, I was 29 years old, and I was the youngest guy in the grandstand. Now I'm 41, and I'm still the youngest guy in the grandstand. When bettors stay home, they

follow the big tracks—Keeneland, Saratoga, Gulfstream. As a result, racing fairs and small-town bullrings are closing. Last year, we [lost Great Lakes Downs](#), the only Thoroughbred track in Michigan. Where will the next generation of pathological gamblers come from? Nobody gets hooked at an OTB or a Web site.

As a writer, I also have to mourn the decline of the racetrack culture. The track and its characters—misfits, losers, and dreamers every one of us—provided the casts for Charles Bukowski's *Longshot Pomes for Broke Players*, Damon Runyon's *Guys and Dolls*, and Jay Cronley's *Good Vibes*, which became the movie *Let It Ride*. A few years ago, I wrote a book called [Horseplayers: Life at the Track](#), the story of a year spent trying to beat the races and all the oddballs I met along the way. That was 2003. Finding those characters is tougher today. Hawthorne is so empty that management has sealed off half the grandstand. The Handicapping and Business Center, where I met so many of my subjects, has been stripped of everything but a few TVs. The Professor, a former b-school dean who taught classes there, now holds court at an OTB. His sidekick, the Stat Man, handicaps for a tout sheet, leaving his apartment only to hit the Wendy's drive-through. He now places bets on his computer. Somehow, I can't see myself writing about a guy leaning toward a laptop screen, squinting through his glasses and shouting, "Come on with that nine!" at a horse the size of a scampering vole. It wouldn't make much of a movie, either.

sports nut

Sheik Mohammed's Billion-Dollar Question

Can you buy a Kentucky Derby title?

By Dan Schar

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 4:26 PM ET

In late March, at Nad Al Sheba racetrack, several of the world's best Thoroughbreds battled for a share of more than \$21 million in the desert heat of Dubai. The centerpiece of the weekend's racing was the [Dubai World Cup](#)—at \$6 million, the world's richest horse race. The equine fete was hosted by the ruler of Dubai, [Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum](#), a man who annually splashes out tens of millions of dollars on yearling prospects, ferrying his new acquisitions around the globe on a custom-built Boeing 747. He is a man whose dreams of Dubai tilt toward artificial islands, indoor skiing, and the world's tallest building. For all his fantastic wealth and ambition, though, he has yet to saddle a winner on the first Saturday in May. With all that money, couldn't the sheik just buy the Kentucky Derby?

He's certainly been trying. Since 1999, Sheik Mohammed has started five horses in the Derby; none of them has finished better than sixth. Most have been expensive acquisitions. His most recent bid, in 2002, was with Essence of Dubai, a colt bought at a yearling sale for \$2.3 million. That horse finished ninth. In 2006, the sheik shelled out \$11.7 million at Keeneland for a slick-looking prospect—the second-highest price ever paid for a yearling—but to this day, the colt hasn't raced.

In 1999, at Churchill Downs, the sheik proclaimed that he would win the Kentucky Derby within four years. Those four years came and went, and what was the sheik to do? If the yearling sales weren't his ticket, perhaps the more prudent approach was to wait for a horse with demonstrated Derby promise. In 2005, he picked up Discreet Cat in a private deal for \$6 million after the colt's maiden win at Saratoga, but the horse skipped the Derby over concerns about being able to go the distance. In 2006, he offered \$17 million for Nobiz Like Shobiz following that colt's impressive maiden win. Nobiz Like Shobiz ran in the Derby last year, finishing 10th, but he wasn't sporting the sheik's racing silks—the offer had been rebuffed. Nine years after the sheik's first start, racing's holy grail remains out of reach. This while horses acquired at the equivalent of Crazy Eddie prices in the bloodstock market have worn the roses in May. Funny Cide, the 2003 Derby and Preakness winner, was purchased for \$75,000. Monarchos, the 2001 winner, went for \$170,000 at a 2-year-old training sale.

A Derby win is not only the most cherished title in horse racing. It may also be the most difficult to achieve. To be sure, it's an elusive prize: In the last 30 years, [Bob and Beverly Lewis](#) are the only owners to have won the Derby more than once.

Each year, more than 37,000 Thoroughbred foals are registered with the Jockey Club, but no more than 20 will run as 3-year-olds under Churchill Downs' twin spires. Most will have had their start in the breeding sheds of Lexington, Ky., or Ocala, Fla., and will be acquired at yearling auctions in the flash of a gavel. With no equivalent of a salary cap in horse racing, it would seem as if securing talent were simply a matter of unrivaled wealth. Yearling auctions regularly feature showdowns among the über-wealthy over horseflesh—in 2006, the sheik spent \$60 million over several days at Keeneland's September yearling sale. But yearlings are immature, gangly, unproven items, and prospecting for a Derby winner among them is more than a little like trying to pick the next Asafa Powell from the members of a sixth-grade track team.

The road to the roses is fraught with more than simply long odds at predicting equine stardom. Power and strength notwithstanding, the Thoroughbred is an exquisitely fragile creature. In the run-up to May, any number of injuries may put a horse out of Derby contention. Big Brown, now the odds-on favorite after his [commanding victory in the Florida Derby](#), was sidelined twice this year with hoof wall separations; the Derby

will be only his fourth career start. The leading graded-stakes earnings winner, War Pass, will sit out the Derby—and perhaps the rest of the year—after radiographs recently turned up a [fracture in his left front ankle](#). And with more tracks switching to synthetic surfaces, an increasing number of Derby entrants—this year, notably Californians Bob Black Jack and Colonel John—will be making their inaugural run on old-fashioned dirt in Louisville, adding more uncertainty to the equation.

The Derby's peculiarities must also be considered. While Derby prep races are traditionally run at 1 1/16 or 1 1/8 miles, most of the 3-year-old crop will not yet have stretched out at the Derby's 1 1/4 miles. Then there is the field of 20 contenders, nearly twice as many as a typical graded stakes race, where fields aren't so swollen with glory-hungry arrivistes. In such heavy traffic, horses are easily hemmed in or boxed out of a clean run. Post-position draws may also play to disadvantage, as horses breaking from far outside posts have historically fared less well at Churchill Downs. Not least, there is the spectacle that is the Derby itself—the event Hunter S. Thompson called "[decadent and depraved](#)"—the grandstand roar of 100,000 julep-wielding fans nostalgia-woozy from having just sung "My Old Kentucky Home." Swinging around the quarter pole and into the bourbon-breathed maw of that frenzied crowd would have been enough to put the fear of creator in the likes of even Thompson, to say nothing of a horse whose total career starts might be counted on one hand.

Having thus far been shut out of the money in five Kentucky Derby starts, Sheik Mohammed has changed tack and taken a page from the playbook of Calumet Farm, the legendary racing dynasty that produced Triple Crown winners Whirlaway and Citation. The breeding arm of the sheik's outfit, Darley Stud, has, like Calumet, gone to a strategy of putting battle-tested winners to use in the breeding shed. The sheik bought breeding rights to last year's Kentucky Derby winner, Street Sense, and runner-up, Hard Spun. The sheik will add those talents to his already-diverse holdings: graded stakes winners now enjoying stud careers across three continents. Thus, the empire is slowly built: Darley. Ballysheehan. Gainsborough. And most recently, Woodlands Stud, his \$500 million acquisition in Australia.

While many see the sheik's investments as a shot in the arm for an ailing industry, others aren't so sure. The *Washington Post's* Andrew Beyer [called](#) (subscription required) the sheik's penchant for limitless spending "checkbook horsemanship." Sheik Mohammed's [response](#): "We do not wait for things to happen, we make them happen."

This Saturday, though, there will be nothing happening for the sheik: His top 3-year-old prospects faded early and have been off the Derby trail for weeks. And so, the Kentucky Derby, in its 134th year, remains a race not easily swiped, money be damned. Those two minutes on the first Saturday in May will stay long adored because it transcends any notion of buying and selling—

because it is fundamentally about the drama of achieving athletic greatness. And because, when the gates fling open at Churchill, anything can happen.

sports nut

Zero Effect

The trouble with Gilbert Arenas.

By Josh Levin

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 2:16 PM ET

WASHINGTON, D.C.—With 10 seconds to go in a tie game, LeBron James took a hard dribble to the free-throw line and found Delonte West wide open in the corner. Pass, swish, Cleveland by three. On the other end, Gilbert Arenas grabbed the inbound pass, leaned in, and bricked a 3-pointer at the buzzer. Wizards lose. Were any of Arenas' teammates open? I didn't even bother looking. Even if all five Cavaliers climbed inside his jersey, there was no way Arenas was passing the ball.

In his book *God Save the Fan*, Deadspin's Will Leitch argues that, for the modern basketball fan, the fun-loving, jersey-tossing, [blog-writing](#) Agent Zero is a more compelling figure than the aloof, product-pitching LeBron. "In 20 years, when we think of LeBron James, we will think of Gatorade," Leitch writes, "and when we think of Gilbert Arenas, we will smile and think of ourselves." Right about now, I don't think Gilbert Arenas' teammates are smiling when they think about Gilbert Arenas. It wasn't just that the injured, mostly ineffective guard took the last shot in Sunday's Game 4, nor that he tied the game on a crazy fallaway banker 30 seconds earlier—a terrible shot that was no less terrible for going in. It was what Arenas said after the game. "I mean, this is not my team," he said, [explaining why he didn't score in the first half](#). "This is Caron and Antawn's team. ... They held this boat together for the last four, five months. What is my [place] to come out here and take 24 shots?"

While Arenas was trying to be deferential, his on-court actions revealed he was being disingenuous. After all, if it's Caron Butler and Antawn Jamison's team, then how come Arenas never looked for either of them at the end of the game? Perhaps Washington coach Eddie Jordan, who chose to put the ball in Arenas' hands, should have figured out from Game 3 that the Wizards were playing better without their one-time best player on the court. And Jordan definitely should have known that Agent Zero wouldn't look to get anyone else involved. Arenas, it seems, was self-aware enough to know that the fate of the season shouldn't rest in his hands, yet too self-absorbed to pass up the spotlight.

There are plenty of reasons to dislike LeBron James. He has the oversized ego of someone who's answered to the name "King James" since he was 16. He wears giant wraparound sunglasses indoors and whines when the refs don't call things his way. His fixation on becoming [the world's first billionaire athlete](#) makes him both a bit hard to relate to and, like Michael Jordan, averse to saying anything that hasn't been approved by a series of focus groups commissioned by Nike.

There are plenty of reasons to love Gilbert Arenas. Unlike James, his fame was not preordained. He is a grass-roots phenomenon, a guy who made his name with deep 3-pointers, pell-mell drives to the basket, and blog posts about Halo 3. He brags openly about the joys of [shooting a crying kid with paintballs](#) and shouts "Hibachi!" when he makes a basket. He has pushed to come back from knee surgery, imperiling his career and his future earnings by joining his team for the playoffs.

Yet when they were on the court Sunday, it was hard to root against LeBron James and hard to root for Gilbert Arenas. A willingness to pass the ball isn't necessarily a sign of high moral character; it is a sign that you're aware of how to beat a trapping defense. It took Michael Jordan four tries to figure out that to beat the Pistons' pressure D (aka the "[Jordan rules](#)"), he needed to rely on his teammates to knock down open looks. LeBron, now in his fifth NBA season, hasn't had such a learning curve. Sure, he's happy to take the last shot himself. But he's also unafraid to swing the ball to his fellow Cavs, even when it's the playoffs, the clock is getting down to zero, and the guy who's open happens to be Damon Jones (who, thanks to a pass from James, closed out a 2006 playoff series with the Wizards) or Donyell Marshall (who [missed a last-second shot](#) off a LeBron feed in last year's Eastern Conference finals).

Cavaliers coach Mike Brown, having been lucky enough to get work as LeBron James' remora, understands what it means to be a star player. "That's why [LeBron] is going to go down as the best player ever in this game," Brown said after the game, "because not only can he score, not only can he rebound, he has the ultimate trust in his teammates." The Wizards' Eddie Jordan has a tougher job. Arenas, who was always a bit selfish on the court—a more likable, slightly less insane version of Stephon Marbury—is returning from an injury that has isolated him from the rest of the team. Earlier this month, for example, Arenas didn't bother to tell Jordan or any of the other Wizards that he planned to make [a dramatic return](#) from the ranks of the injured. After sitting out 66 games, the All-Star guard popped out of the locker room halfway through the first quarter of a game against Milwaukee and ran onto the floor. "He didn't really tell me, but that's Gil," said Jordan after that game. "I found out. Let's say it wasn't normal, proper channels, but I found out."

Arenas deferred to his hot-shooting, nonlimping teammates for most of Sunday's game, then played one on five when it really

counted—an assist man for 47 minutes, a gunner at the end. By putting the ball in Arenas' hands, Jordan signaled that he was betting his season on an individual rather than the team. I'm not usually a believer in the importance of team chemistry, but it shouldn't be surprising that the team whose star doesn't talk to his teammates lost to the team whose star defers to his colleagues even though he might be the best basketball player in the universe.

If Arenas is a bad teammate, why is he such a folk hero? While he has been slow to return to form basketballwise, at least his blogging has remained superb. Before the first round began, he called out the Cavs, [writing](#) that "everybody wants Cleveland in that first round." No doubt inspired by Arenas' penchant for the grand gesture, fellow Wizard DeShawn Stevenson repeatedly called LeBron James "overrated," (possibly quasi-intentionally) raked James across the face in Game 4, came out for Game 3 with a mohawk, and [flew in rapper Soulja Boy](#) to sit courtside, which apparently led Jay-Z to write a (not-very-catchy) [DeShawn Stevenson dis track](#) titled "[Blow the Whistle](#)." ("He's worth about \$500 million, and he's writing songs about me?" Stevenson asked before Sunday's game, self-lovingly. "What does that say about DeShawn Stevenson? Ballin'!")

Perhaps [Charles Barkley](#) is correct that "the Washington Wizards have got to be the dumbest team in the history of civilization." Arenas' and Stevenson's smack talk, and the latter's flagrant foul on Sunday, have seemed to push James into super-LeBron mode. All of the yapping, though, has added a frisson to what would have otherwise been a pedestrian series. The NBA would be a lot less fun to watch without guys like Gilbert Arenas and DeShawn Stevenson. With Arenas at the helm, the Wizards will never come close to winning a title. But remember that LeBron James is just 23 years old—he's going to need cannon fodder for at least the next decade. Let's hope that Agent Zero sticks around that long. It's incredibly fun to watch him lose.

television

Funny Woman

Why Amy Poehler delights.

By Troy Patterson

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 12:22 PM ET

Last Monday, Amy Poehler was on *Today* to promote *Baby Mama*, and Meredith Vieira, asking Poehler a misguided question about her Hillary Clinton act on *Saturday Night Live*, still got a meaningful answer. The transcript, please.

VIEIRA: So how did you like—just to play her, what did you have to do? I mean,

obviously, you studied her. When did you know, "I've got her, I've nailed her"? What is it? Is it the way she talks or smiles?

MS. POEHLER: I don't know, because I'm not a very good impressionist.

This statement, though irrefutably true, could use some qualification. Yes, [Poehler's Clinton impersonation](#) is technically lousy, with a laugh that manically balloons where it ought to slap with willed jocosity, and a speaking cadence that plods when it should march. And, yes, the only thing Poehler gets perfectly right is Clinton's metronome nod of approval and self-approval. And yet it works.

While Poehler was kind enough to go on and credit writer Jim Downey for capturing Clinton with a particular voice, there's also a viewing pleasure that has to do with the tension between the personae of the two women, between the all-id comedian and mightily superego'd politician. Speaking as Clinton, Poehler mostly adheres to the mock gravitas she employs on the "Weekend Update" desk, just notching up the haughtiness. Both of those performances rely on the loose performer playing at being buttoned up. You can contrast Poehler's Hillary with her far more acute *SNL* impersonations of Dennis Kucinich (a twinkling elf) and [Britney Spears](#) (gum-baring, gum-snapping). Those are projections of her core comedic identity, which is puckish, slightly feral, and not in any great rush to be house-trained.

Ten hours before her turn on *Today*, Poehler was at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theater, a basement under a supermarket in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, where her improv group, named ASSSSCAT!, plays two regular Sunday-night shows. Like all good improvisational comedy, ASSSSCAT! combines elements of a jam session, a Quaker meeting, and a Dadaist party trick, and Poehler's most memorable bits of nonsense that evening found her emerging—instinctually, it seemed—into the role of a surly homegirl. At one moment, for instance, she was a Starbucks barista, and a customer asked if his double latte was ready. She snapped, "Does it *look* ready?" and got a big laugh for it, the joke being all in the attitude problem.

This is the energy crucial to making her new film, [Baby Mama](#), somewhat tolerable. Her low-class surrogate mom Angie—who, not incidentally, drinks her Dr. Pepper from the same Big Gulp cup that Britney was sippin' on in her divorce lawyer's office on *SNL*—is like a truant at the academy of Dr. Henry Higgins. I like her truculence (the multiple spit takes that follow when Kate, Tina Fey's infertile career woman, tries to feed her a prenatal vitamin slightly smaller than a hockey puck), and I love her wailing (a scene of Angie cringing against the bathroom wall, more terrified than Janet Leigh, as Kate assaults her with a hand-held shower head, washing out toxic hair dye). You could imagine the very talented Amy Sedaris in the role of Angie, but

she would make it something else, an eccentric bit of grotesquery, where Poehler speaks to—and for—everyone's inner child.

And now, actual children can get in on the fun. On a new animated series titled *The Mighty B!* (Nickelodeon, Saturdays at 10:30 a.m. ET), Poehler gives voice to one Bessie Higgenbottom, a gap-toothed 9-year-old who is somewhat confined to the margins of polite society on account of being monstrously hyper. A member of a Brownies-type outfit called the Honeybees, Bessie sometimes imagines herself as an overmuscled superhero with an insect disguise and always makes herself a nuisance. A coming episode finds Bessie excited that she finally might have grown to a height that would allow her on a good roller coaster. Looking in the mirror, she pumps herself up, "Who's tall enough? Who's tall enough?" Then she grabs a bucket and practices her motion-sickness vomiting technique, just in case. Finally, she turns to her brother (voiced by Andy Richter) and her sad dog (named Happy) and heaves a gangsta-style, "Let's do this!" It's all inordinately charming, and further evidence that Ms. Poehler has had the good grace to never grow up.

the chat room

Kill Joy

Chris Baker takes readers' questions about the treatment of violence and morality in the new Grand Theft Auto video game.

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 2:23 PM ET

Slate contributor Chris Baker was online at [Washingtonpost.com](#) on May 1 to chat about the [narrative richness and moral conundrums of Grand Theft Auto IV](#). An unedited transcript of the chat follows.

Chris Baker: Hi everyone! This is Chris Baker, and I'm a senior editor at *Wired* magazine. I'm here to answer your questions about a [piece I wrote for Slate](#) about Grand Theft Auto IV, as well as whatever you'd like to know about the series or about games in general.

Bethesda, Md.: I own a PlayStation 2, any chance that they eventually release a modified version of Grand Theft Auto IV for the PSP and PS2? Do I have to bite the bullet and get a PlayStation 3?

Chris Baker: Hi there! GTA4 really pushes at the edges of what the Playstation 3 (and the Xbox360, it's available for two game consoles) can do. I don't think there's a chance of it appearing on

the last generation of game consoles like the Playstation 2 or the original Xbox. I'd say you'll probably need to bite the bullet ...

Cleveland, Tenn.: Does it still have that stupid eat/exercise dynamic?

Chris Baker: You're referring to the way that Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas let players customize their appearance by eating a lot to become fatter or by starving themselves to become thinner. There were also in-game gyms where you could log time on an exercycle or doing reps on a weight bench to make your character more buff. This actually figured into the game play—certain female characters preferred guys who were a little big-boned, or who had lots of muscles. You needed to alter your body type if you wanted to woo them.

That's gone from this game. Eating food still replenishes your character's health, though. (Just shot in the face? Stop off and get a hotdog, and you'll be good as new!)

GreenwichJ: This game is evil and should be banned ... that's what my wife said when I bought it. Her opinion was entirely based on a couple of newspaper articles. Which really begs the question—what's more dangerous, "murder simulators" like Grand Theft Auto IV, or sensationalist journalism designed to scare the masses half to death?

Chris Baker: There certainly is a lot of hue and cry in the mainstream media surrounding games, especially GTA. Jack Thompson, a lawyer who's often tapped to appear on TV news and comment on games, had this to say:

"Grand Theft Auto IV is the gravest assault upon children in this country since polio. We now have vaccines for that virus. ... The 'vaccine' that must be administered by the United States government to deal with this virtual virus of violence and sexual depravity is criminal prosecutions of those who have conspired to do this."

Phew!

Grand Theft Auto IV is definitely not for kids. (It's rated M for Mature, the equivalent of an R rating for films, and can't be sold to anyone under 17. I'd seriously caution any parent to learn more about the game before deciding if it's appropriate for their kids.)

But there hasn't been any definitive research showing that virtual violence in video games can spill over into real world behavior.

There's an excellent new book out by David Hajdu called the

Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How It Changed America. It looks back at the hue and cry surrounding comics in the early 1950s. I think to a certain extent, the hysteria surrounding video games nowadays is similar to what Hajdu describes, and lots of new mediums seem to spark this kind of reaction—especially mediums that are very popular with young people.

Manassas, Va.: Well, I am a big fan of Grand Theft Auto, and I love the game. The fact that I like the game does not mean that I go killing people in real life. Would you consider that the game somehow helps relieve stress in teenagers, and that it is better to play a game that is somehow sadistic but doesn't hurt anybody?

Chris Baker: I think playing an action game can be cathartic. Here in the *Wired* office, my fellow editors and I will take breaks a couple of times a day to go kill each other for 5 or 10 minutes in Halo 3, and it's a great stress reliever.

I'm not sure about the appropriateness for teens. But certainly a lot of kids' play involves imaginary good-versus-evil combat—cops and robbers in the park if not cops and robbers on a game console.

Chicago: Have you talked to other people who are morally disturbed by the game's story? Is this a common reaction?

Chris Baker: Yes, I've talked to a few other reviewers who've played through the game. My friend Will Tuttle, an editor at [GameSpy](#), compares the game's story to Doctorow's novel *Ragtime*. But he said that the violence was frequently unnerving, and carried more weight than in past entries in the series.

"They're using the Euphoria engine to create disturbingly realistic ragdoll animations," says Crispin Boyer, a Senior Executive Editor at the IUP Network who gave the game an A+. "Nail a pedestrian with your car and they'll bounce around like Evel Knievel botching a bike jump. It's sickeningly real—kinda makes your stomach lurch sometimes."

Arlington, Va.: Is there anywhere in the new Liberty City where I can get some good coffee?

Chris Baker: You can't get "hot coffee," but there is a mission where you can get some "warm coffee." (Inside joke for GTA players; not sure it's worth explaining to non-geeks.)

Bethesda, Md.: Chris—you commented that the violence is more realistic and disturbing in GTA IV. Suppose you shoot someone and then hide around the street corner ... do passersby start to assist your victim? Do an ambulance and police car show up after a short time?

Chris Baker: The crowd does respond realistically—some people will flee, and others will run up and help or try to fend you off. An ambulance will be called, and some passersby might dial 911. In general, the way pedestrians react to you—and to each other—is amazing. You can actually just stand around watching people, listening to their phone conversations, watching them have fender benders and getting into fights, etc. with no involvement from you.

Washington: My sense is that this game is a bit darker, and challenges one's morals more than previous editions of "Grand Theft Auto." But does it still retain some of the fun irreverence for which the series is known?

Chris Baker: Absolutely. There's some quirkiness in the main storyline, and of course you get a lot of humor through the mass media. I wrote a brief impression on that for *Wired*, it sort of gives you a sense of the dark satirical edge to the GTA games. Click [here](#) to read it.

New York: Okay full disclosure—I am a geezer who is not a gamer, but I am getting more and more interested in it. My IT guy who helps me keep my business going is a major gamer and makes fun of me, as does one of the guys in the office. They are "Halo 3" heads. That's the background. So I am old and inept but wanting to know more. Reading about "Grand Theft Auto IV" is making me very very curious about gaming. How does one go about getting some first-hand knowledge in preparation for becoming a gamer?

Chris Baker: I'd start by renting a game console and a few games from Blockbuster, to see if you really want to sink hundreds of bucks into this hobby. The Wii is very accessible, but GTA4 is only available on the PS3 or Xbox360.

Washington: "Grand Theft Auto IV" is a lot slower and less cartoonish than "Vice City" and "San Andreas." Plus, it seems like there are police everywhere! Do you think by making a senseless crime spree more difficult to execute in "Liberty City," it diminished the cathartic value the series provides nice kids from the suburbs?

Chris Baker: Hi there! The cops certainly are smarter and harder to elude in this latest version. I think the developers are consciously trying to minimize the amount of random killing sprees players go on by making it harder to evade arrest. Some people are sure to be frustrated, but the central story is so much more compelling, I didn't mind.

Besides, the new online multiplayer modes are the perfect outlet if you're craving senseless violence. You can compete in chaotic street races that play out like the chariot sequence from Ben Hur, but with machine guns instead of whips. Or imagine sixteen players running around an ersatz Ellis Island, each armed with a rocket launcher.

Alexandria, Va.: I beat the game Fable playing a relatively "good" person. For replay, I tried to beat it "evil." Couldn't do it—early on, to be evil, you have to steal dolls from kids. Even as a game, I couldn't do it.

Chris Baker: The game Bioshock, which is brilliant, also turns on whether the player can bring themselves to create a really terrible act or not.

That being said, I think non-gamers really don't understand the way that a player might do something terrible just as an experiment, to see what happens, to see how many options the game designers have created for them. It's not necessarily proof that you're a bad person to test the limits of a game's possibility space—though many of us will want to quit and restart the game from a point before we did something wicked.

Washington: I have read that the lead guy now has a conscience. Is this true? How does it work?

Chris Baker: The lead character's conscience is mostly expressed through the game's excellent dialogue, and through morally ambiguous situations he finds himself in.

Seattle: I have played all the Grand Theft Auto 3 games, including "Vice City" and "San Andreas." I was wondering how much time Rockstar took to model the city in Grand Theft Auto IV after New York? Some of the locations (like the virtual Times Square) really look spot-on. Did they have a big staff on the ground?

Chris Baker: It truly is mind-boggling how detailed the recreation of the Big Apple is in the latest game. Rockstar Games is headquartered in NYC, and I know that they went on

fact-finding expeditions to Cali for San Andreas and to Florida for Vice City (bunch of pasty Scottish game designers got terrible sunburns!)

Mt. Lebanon, Pa.: If Wolfenstein 3D, the original DOS-based game released by id Software in 1992, is the benchmark, how far up the evolutionary scale would you place Grand Theft Auto IV? I played the original Wolfenstein on our company's computers (engineering firm) back then. I was impressed at how far gaming had come since the '70s, when Pong arrived on the scene. I assume progress in game development, like much of science and engineering, is exponential. Is game development keeping up with the expectations that hype and younger generations place upon it, or is it entering the region now of flatter returns, where actual results start to dampen desires, to borrow another metaphor? Thanks much from an old engineer.

Chris Baker: I think you'd be amazed at the scope and the depth of the game world in GTA4. Steal a car and it really will take you 15 or 20 minutes of driving to traverse the environment—even longer at rush hour. It's certainly as mind-boggling to me now as Wolf3D was to me in 1992.

Arlington, Va.: I'm an adult gamer, and I generally like open-ended worlds where you can do as you like (like Oblivion, say). I've avoided Grand Theft Auto games like the plague, though, because I honestly feel bad killing people in games. In Bioshock, for example, I can't bring myself to "harvest" the little girls, even if they are monsters. In Mass Effect, I'm the good guy, and only play the bad guy role to see what other options are there. So my question is: Is Grand Theft Auto IV any different? Is there a way to be a "good" guy? Your review appeared to imply there was, but I don't want to play a game for hours if I'll feel guilty. I have real life for that.

Chris Baker: There's no way to be good in GTA4—there are degrees of badness and shades of gray, but it may not be what you're looking for.

If the violence of GTA puts you off, I strongly recommend picking up Bully to get a sense of the cleverness and the richness that Rockstar Games are capable of. (It's available for Wii, Playstation2 and Xbox360.) The developers call upon every cliché of high school from the Breakfast Club to Archie Comics to Enid Blyton to Saved by the Bell, and create this brilliant kid-friendly GTA-at-a-private-school game. It's built around adolescent rebellion and mischief instead of drive-bys and drug trafficking.

Washington: Hey, do you see more video games taking this approach to development, in terms of providing detail and depth in story-based games that give the user a feeling of an interactive "movie-based" environment? Or will Grand Theft Auto be the only series to tread that terrain (aside from Saints Row)? Thanks.

Chris Baker: We've seen a lot of games try and do explorable open world environments in the wake of GTA. Spiderman games let you websling all over gotham, True Crime set you loose in LA and New York, Crackdown was set in a scifi metropolis, Jak 2 was like Mario in a cartoony dystopia ...

We'll probably see even more open world games in the near future. But the design challenges are enormous, and I think some games simply don't benefit from an open world. Let's face it, commuting can be boring.

Washington: I watched my boyfriend play this game for about 20 minutes last night and I, too, was struck by how Niko has a background and a conscience. I remember the past games featured a main character who just didn't care about anything and you didn't care about him. But taking a girl out for bowling and conversation? That made me think running over hookers might not be as fun with this character.

Chris Baker: Yes, the conversation you mention also stood out to me. For people who haven't played the game: The protagonist is a newly arrived immigrant about to go on his first date. He suggests that they go to the "fun fair", the in-game version of Coney Island. His date is bemused and a little put out that he'd want to do something so cheesy, but she feigns a little enthusiasm to be polite. And then they go bowling. It may sound mundane, but the richness and subtleness of the characterizations surprised me.

Alexandria, Va.: Any word on a PC version?

Chris Baker: Not yet! Fingers crossed ...

Falls Church, Va.: "But there hasn't been any definitive research showing that virtual violence in video games can spill over into real world behavior." Fine, but the person I know who works in public elementary schools says that the kids with the worst ADD problems, lack of focus, etc., also tend to play the most video games. I'm headed outside, see ya.

Chris Baker: Hi! There's definitely a question of causation versus correlation. Are kids with short attention spans drawn to

games, or do games give kids short attention spans?

Games aren't simply immediate gratification in some cases. Steven Johnson's book *Everything Bad Is Good for You* points out that many young gamers are learning about delayed gratification from games. You need to save up your in-game money or points for some long-term (eg ten hours later in the game) goal.

Alexandria, Va.: So what is the difference in the violence in games I played as a kid (Cops and Robbers, Cowboys and Indians, Sword fighting (with sticks or wiffleball bats))? Did parents complain when Johnny came home saying he just scalped 20 injuns? Seems to me that parents and society is at an upheaval because video games are something they don't understand.

Chris Baker: I agree wholeheartedly.

I guess the knock against games would be that when you're playing Cops and Robbers, at least you're interacting with other kids and getting some exercise. But many gamers are playing with others, either through online mutliplayer or with friends there in the room. And games like Dance Dance Revolution and the upcoming Wii Fit are great exercise ...

St. Louis: Chris, are the regulators getting any traction on censoring games, Or is it just a flash in the pan that will go nowhere? Personally I'm a lousy gamer but my son, who is now a middle-aged bank vice president, chills out several times a week with GTA or something equally gruesome, as do all his friends. All of them have been playing violent video games since they were in middle school, and they represent a cross-section of law-abiding citizenry. If society is going to crumble, it's more likely to be from the gas prices, in my humble opinion.

Chris Baker: It must be said that the games industry has a ratings board similar to the MPAA called the ESRB. There's a lot of railing against games, but no traction in somehow replacing this independent ratings board with stricter government oversight.

Also, it's important to note that the Entertainment Software Association, a lobbying/PAC outfit for the games industry, just launched. I think games will soon employ the same sort of lobbying muscle that the film industry and the music industry does. We'll see if games continue to be a media bugbear when that happens.

Washington: What do you think of the idea of letting people play different characters within Grand Theft Auto? It would be a lot more interesting if I could be the cops or the ambulance driver ...

Chris Baker: There's actually a player-created mod of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas in which people log on and be taxi drivers or cops.

There's a massively multiplayer cops and robbers game in the works. It's called APB, and it's being headed up by one of the guys who created the GTA games.

Sacramento, Calif.: I have not played the game, but I'm curious about the in-game reality. What is the law enforcement reality in the game? Can the character be arrested and taken to prison? Is so, are there lawyers? Prosecutors?

Chris Baker: Law enforcement is sharper. Some police are suicidally brave, some are shrewd and cautious some will flee at the first sign of danger. Get arrested and you'll pay a huge fine (bribe) and have your weapons confiscated. But then you're back on the street.

Richmond, Va.: I think when "Ambulation" finally hits for Eve Online we'll see the single most immersive game ever made. The technical gameplay, the complexity of how the world works and is driven by player warfare and economics, is already there. But actual characters (aside from portraits glued to the hull of a starship) were completely missing. The new footage and sound design for avatars is stunning. If people want to see where the cutting edge of gaming is, Grand Theft Auto IV is a fine start, but "Eve Online" is the future today.

Chris Baker: Eve is really an astonishing game. I think the experience is sort of at the opposite end of the spectrum from GTA, though. So much of what's so incredibly compelling about Eve is what the players bring to it, whereas GTA is a single-player experience that has been totally planned out and designed before it's release.

Washington: Chris Baker: "Here in the *Wired* office, my fellow editors and I will take breaks a couple of times a day to go kill each other for five or 10 minutes in Halo 3, and it's a great stress reliever." Where is said *Wired* Office and are they hiring?

Chris Baker: Hahah! It's not all fun and games, but that is a nice perk of being on this beat.

Chicago: What about the prostitutes and treatment of women? Which is more uncomfortable for you as a man playing this game: killing civilians and cops or paying for fake sex and then killing the virtual sex worker? Also, do you know anyone who has said that the game is an arena to play out their sexual and/or violent fantasies? (I'm not a gamer. Just trying to understand how this could be appealing!)

Chris Baker: Hi there! I think a lot of people engage in these acts just because of the novelty, because it's something a game never allowed you to do before. I don't know of anyone who finds it erotic. And as I said in my piece, that's something that players CAN do because the game is so open-ended; it's not something that players HAVE to do.

Silver Spring, Md.: Hey Chris—as an avid gamer myself, I actually lost sleep anticipating this GTA. My question to you is, do you think the ultimatums that GTA IV gives you in the game (i.e. the choice to knock someone off or save them) is giving gamers the choice to do the right thing? It also proves to be pivotal in the game when these decisions come about ... what do you think about these interactions in the game?

Chris Baker: I think the deeper writing and characterizations add a richness and a level of nuance to a the game. But it's still sort of like the Sopranos, it's about very bad people who do very bad things, though some characters are comparatively more ethical and honorable than others.

Bethesda, Md.: What about "Insane Stunt Bonuses" from Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas?

Chris Baker: Still there!

Silver Spring, Md.: On a scale from 1-10 how do you rate Grand Theft Auto IV in terms of graphics, presentation, sound, controls and overall experience? And if you don't mind could you briefly justify those scores?

Chris Baker: I don't do the numerical scoring thing, especially without playing through the game at leisure to really absorb it. GTA4 really is excellent though. There's a bit of frame-rate dipping, and the pop-in that plagued previous versions of the game is still there. But all of the other aspects of the game are absolutely excellent.

Chris Baker: Well, that's all the time I have. Thanks for your questions, and thanks to all of you for reading!

the green lantern

Paper Recycling—Is It Worth It?

Landfills, recycling, and incineration.

By Brendan I. Koerner

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 7:42 AM ET

My office generates an embarrassingly large amount of paper waste, so I'm always careful to place my used documents in the recycling bin. But several of my co-workers refuse to do this, arguing that it takes more energy to recycle paper than it does to manufacture it from virgin materials. Who's right?

If you're talking only about energy inputs, then your co-workers are wrong. Making paper out of discarded memos and e-mails definitely requires less energy than using freshly harvested timber. But the eco-benefits of paper recycling may not be quite as grand as you envision—turning post-consumer paper into saleable products is by no means a clean endeavor. And the environmental advantages vary widely between recycling facilities, depending on their technological sophistication.

Environmental contrarians like your officemates have long contended that recycling paper is a mug's game, since it takes so much energy to remove the ink from discarded sheets. But study after study has debunked this assertion, and the Environmental Protection Agency [claims](#) that producing recycled paper requires 40 percent less energy than making paper from virgin wood, or about 10.6 fewer gigajoules per ton of finished product. That may sound dramatic, but it's peanuts compared with the energy savings associated with recycling other common materials. Manufacturing a ton of recycled aluminum cans, for example, requires 218 fewer gigajoules per ton than using virgin ores, while the figure for polyethylene bottles is 55.9 gigajoules.

Skeptics have often countered that the EPA's estimate doesn't account for the fuel used to truck the paper to and from a recycling facility. But the Lantern doesn't see how this could dramatically alter the equation—if we're going to factor in transportation, what about all the oil that's expended to get trees from the Canadian Boreal Forest to the paper mill and then to your friendly neighborhood Staples?

That said, the naysayers have a point when they bring up the fact that paper mills typically use less fossil fuel to operate than waste-paper facilities. That's because the machines used to

produce virgin paper are often powered by timber detritus—the parts of the trees that weren't deemed fit for pulping and can be burned to generate energy. Recyclers, by contrast, rely on their local power grids, which in turn depend on coal-fired power plants. And coal is generally considered dirtier than wood, in terms of carbon dioxide emissions. On the other hand, groups such as the Environmental Defense Fund [argue](#) (PDF) that recycling paper cuts overall greenhouse gas emissions, by decreasing the amount of waste diverted to landfills (where decomposition leads to methane production) and by reducing the need to cultivate forest lands.

It's also worth noting that the recycling process creates an inky sludge that presents a disposal challenge. Many common inks contain metals such as chromium, zinc, and lead, which can seep into water supplies. Producers of recycled paper aver that they've learned to manage their sludge and can even burn it to produce energy in some instances. They also point out, correctly, that making virgin paper also involves a host of dodgy chemicals, particularly the bleach used to whiten the end product.

So though paper recycling may involve some environmental hazards, it's still better than landfilling. But what about incineration—how does recycling compare with burning waste paper to produce energy? According to a [landmark 1996 report](#) (PDF) sponsored by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, it's a tougher call than you might imagine: "Recycling has environmental advantages over landfill, but the comparison with incineration is less clear cut. Much depends on the transport requirements for waste paper, the nature of the manufacturing process and the extent to which fossil fuels are used to generate the electricity needed for production."

Yet the Lantern is wary of incineration, and not only because it seems unwise to burn products that contain bleach and heavy metals. Incinerators are also extremely expensive to build, and they're a difficult political sell—nothing brings out NIMBY-ism quite like the news that an incinerator has been proposed. Perhaps there's a technological workaround that will make paper incineration a more attractive proposition, but all the geeky new stuff seems to be happening in recycling nowadays. For example, some paper recyclers have started using infrared dryers in lieu of steam-heated rollers, which can dramatically reduce their energy consumption. There's also been a move toward reusing wastewater in recycling facilities, as well as eliminating the need for potent de-inking chemicals.

If you're an optimist, you might assume that whoever recycles the waste paper for your company has such technologies in place. But even if they do, don't delude yourself into thinking that tossing your paper into the blue bin makes you some sort of environmental hero. At its best, recycling can only be a small part of the green equation. You might also try to persuade your co-workers to start cutting down on their paper consumption,

and talk to your office manager about switching over to paper with a high post-consumer content.

Is there an environmental quandary that's been keeping you up at night? Send it to ask.the.lantern@gmail.com, and check this space every Tuesday.

today's blogs

Say It Ain't So, Joe

By Michael Weiss

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 6:13 PM ET

Bloggers are analyzing Joe Andrew's superdelegate switcheroo, weighing the polls that show Clinton leading Obama, and wondering if it's a good idea for professors to sue their students.

Say ain't say so, Joe: Superdelegate and former DNC Chairman Joe Andrew has thrown in with Barack Obama. "This has got to come to an end," he [says](#). What makes Andrew's loop-de-loop so significant is that he was appointed to the chairmanship during Bill Clinton's presidency in 1999 and had formerly backed Hillary to the hilt.

Jake Tapper at ABC News' **Political Punch** has [uncovered](#) all sorts of juicy quotes from Andrew from a year ago, including this one: "Hillary Clinton has the strength and experience to compete and win across this country." Tapper concludes: "We live in interesting times." At the **Huffington Post**, Andrew is [singing a different tune](#) (and, conveniently, blaming John McCain): "[A]s much as I respect and admire [the Clintons], it is clear that a vote for Hillary Clinton is a vote to continue this process, and a vote to continue this process is a vote that assists John McCain."

The **Confluence** [suggests](#) panicked Dems calm down and take the remaining primaries into account: "It seems to me like the DNC and the party power brokers have decided to unilaterally disarm Clinton without taking the voters into account. They desperately want the anti-Clinton candidate to win. Does the fact that Obama's campaign cut a deal with the DNC on joint fundraising have anything to do with it?" And Clinton supporter **Taylor Marsh** [mocks](#): "No argument in favor of Obama, just that poor Joe is a-fwaid that if we continue to let the people decide things will get too negative, while making sure it is."

Marc Ambinder was on the conference [call](#) Andrew gave with the Obama team Thursday. He "suggested that he's worried about a smear campaign of sorts as retribution for his bravery, and pointed to an attempt to alter his Wikipedia page this morning. So Andrew said that he did not call either Clinton or Obama to give them a heads up because it's 'old political theater'

to 'make perfunctory calls.' " (*Slate's Trailhead* blog has more on [the Wikipedia editing.](#))

Kyle E. Moore at **Comments From Left Field** [says](#) James Carville has another "Judas" on his hands, and Andrew is worse than Bill Richardson: "[O]ne has to take a look at where the endorsement is slated to take place; Indianapolis. Yup, Andrew's a Hoosier. ... On top of everything else his endorsement brings, he's also planning on lobbying the other uncommitted Super Delegates into lining up behind Barack Obama in an attempt to end this primary before too much more damage has been done." **Daily Kos**, which has been in a protracted civil war over the Obama-Clinton split, [thinks](#) Andrew's defection is devastating: "It's a high-profile, high-level signal to other super delegates that it's okay to switch to Obama in order to finally bring about the inevitable conclusion. ... The dam was holding, but it has now sprung a leak. The whole thing now threatens to collapse."

[Read](#) more about Andrew's defection.

Clinton surges: The latest Gallup poll [indicates that](#) Clinton now leads Obama for the Democratic nomination, 49 percent to 45 percent. Clinton and McCain are tied in a general election matchup at 46-46, while McCain leads Obama by "a statistically significant" 47-43.

Jim Geraghty at the *National Review Online's Campaign Spot* [writes](#): "In this instant-reaction era, it's easy to expect poll numbers to immediately reflect shifts of fortune and a candidate's bad day or bad week on the trail. But the actual results of Pennsylvania and the tracking polls remind us that it sometimes takes a bit of time for developments to be digested by the electorate..."

The **Strata-Sphere** [blames](#) the bookers of Wright's tour for Obama's dwindling poll numbers: "[T]he timing on Rev Wright's 'Revenge Tour' at the National Press Club was perfectly timed to cripple Barack Obama in such a way he has no time to recover from the PR hit before the critical primary in NC." And Eric Kleefeld at **TPM Election Central** [observes](#): "While that's within the margin of error, it's interesting to point out the last time she managed anything more than a one-point lead in Gallup: The previous occasion that Obama had to deal with Wright."

Michael Goldfarb at the *Weekly Standard's Blog* [asks](#): "If Hilary does somehow manage to wrestle the nomination from Obama, would he be willing to join her ticket (I have no doubt she'd offer him the spot), and would his supporters be satisfied with that?"

Litigious prof: Hell hath no fury like a postmodernist scorned. Priya Venkatesan, a professor at Dartmouth College, has [threatened](#) a class-action lawsuit against the school that will name former students who she says harassed her in class. One

student challenged Venkatesan's social constructivist critique of literature, and [was promptly applauded by his cohort](#). She claims her suit falls well within the parameters of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act barring employment discrimination. Read some evaluations [here](#).

Dartblog, the blog of conservative student-run newspaper *the Dartmouth Review*, has been all over the Venkatesan brouhaha. It [sees](#) this as "a collection of students irked at having whiled away three months being hazed by 'social constructedness' and still lacking a solid apprehension of the expository essay. The public course reviews were not flattering. Probably the inter-departmental evaluations, completed by students and read by the professor's superiors, were still more candid."

Roger Kimball at **Pajamas Media** [writes](#): "I used to think higher education could be reformed—you know, a few tweaks here and there, hire some good teachers, insist on a back-to-basics program and, presto, American higher education would once again be an ally instead of an enemy of civilization. The story of Priya Venkatesan reminds me of how utopian that belief was."

The English professor at **University Diaries** [points to a typo-ridden e-mail](#) from the dean of students in response to Venkatesan and notes: "At this point, as a good faith gesture, someone at Dartmouth should issue a reasonably lengthy, grammatically correct, statement to the press about the situation. Not because we need a statement, but because we need evidence that *somewhere* on campus are people who know how to write."

Even **Gawker** [weighs](#) in: "She was horrified! Horrified that an Ivy League undergrad bitched about hearing some academic nonsense about the entrenched power structures that got them where they are today! (No winners in this story, folks.)"

[Read](#) more about Venkatesan.

today's blogs

The Day After

By Alec Mouhibian

Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 6:29 PM ET

Bloggers are still talking about the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, wondering if Rush Limbaugh's "Operation Chaos" is having any effect, and paying their respects to LSD inventor Albert Hofmann.

The Day After: A day after [Barack Obama declared himself](#) "outraged" and "saddened" by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's speech at the National Press Club on Monday, bloggers are still

hashing out what the speech means and what it says about Obama.

Liberal **John Nichols** at *The Nation's* the **Beat** [believes](#) there was no reason for Obama to react as he did. "Wright can be unsettling, thought-provoking, often right and sometimes wrong. But he is neither anti-American nor unpatriotic. In more ways than Republican and now Democratic critics seem prepared to admit, Wright is the embodiment of an American religious and political tradition of challenging the country's sins while calling it to the higher ground that extends from the founding of the republic. No less a figure than Thomas Jefferson ... worried openly about the retribution that would befall a nation that permitted slavery."

At the *Washington Monthly's* **Political Animal**, liberal Kevin Drum [says](#) the Wright issue is getting airtime only because "it lends itself to a simple moral judgment," while over at the *National Review's* **Corner** Mark Steyn [says](#) the fault is Obama's: "Imagine if Colin Powell, the genuinely post-racial man Obama merely claims to be, had run in 1996. Would the campaign have dwindled down to Aids conspiracy theories and the genetic predisposition of clapping rhythms? No. Because that's not where Colin Powell lives." [Adds](#) Jonah Goldberg, "[T]he people who do say [we need a conversation about race] seem to be the same people who want the conversation about Jeremiah Wright and what he represents to go away. That is outrageously dishonest. Unless of course your real aim is to have the same old conversation about race again and again and again, in which the only villain is white America and the only victim is black America, and all of the old cliches get one more fresh coat of Wrightwash."

"What is particularly noteworthy," [writes](#) conservative Jennifer Rubin at *Commentary's* **Contentions**, "is what got Obama angry: Wright's lack of loyalty and concern for him. ... Insulting his country, spouting bizarre conspiracy theories, voicing racism and much more — none of that is what 'particularly' triggered a repudiation. That, as much as the intellectual inconsistency ('I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother'), should provoke concern among people looking for a selfless leader for the new era in American politics."

"Let's keep in mind something I'm sure Wright remembers well," [writes](#) James Antle at the conservative **AmSpecBlog**, "Obama benefited politically from his affiliation with Trinity United Church of Christ. It gave him credibility and clout as a community organizer. It helped him in his quest for racial authenticity. Those benefits do not come cost-free."

But if this controversy doesn't make Jeremiah Wright come out like Thomas Jefferson, the *New Republic's* Marty Peretz, at the **Spine**, [thinks](#) it may cast Barack Obama in the light of another American hero: "[H]e tried once again to show that he did not choose to have American politics be assumed as a battle over

enemy territory. There is some nobility in the effort, a nobility akin to Abraham Lincoln's. It is a disposition that many Republicans used to honor and many Democrats, too: you may disagree, disagree over significant matters, but you try to found common ground."

Limbaugh pauses "Chaos": After the Wright speech on Monday, Rush Limbaugh [called off](#) "Operation Chaos"—which urged Republicans to vote for Hillary Clinton in their state primaries—given the possibility that Obama might now be the weaker Democratic candidate. As of Wednesday, [it's back on](#). "What I've seen today," he said, "is that Obama did not damage himself yesterday."

"If Clinton clips Obama in Indiana by under one-thousand votes and the race goes on," [says Politico's Jonathan Martin](#), who covers the GOP race, "this may actually matter." James Joyner at [Outside the Beltway](#) [says](#) it probably won't: "Aside from moral qualms about interfering in another party's primary, I've believed from the beginning that these sort of things are foolish precisely because there's no way to know months ahead of time how these things will play out. ... It's better to ... worry about getting your own team ready to play."

"Of course the irony," [notes](#) Michael Goldfarb at the *Weekly Standard's Blog*, "is that the netroots started it by asking Democrats to vote for Mitt in Michigan instead of 'undecided.' Kos explained the rationale for the campaign: 'Because we can. Because it'll be fun.' Rush couldn't have said it better."

Trip ends: Albert Hofmann, who created LSD, [died Tuesday](#) at age 102. Bloggers remember him fondly.

At *Reason's Hit & Run*, Nick Gillespie [expresses](#) his deep, deep gratitude: "Hofmann's 'problem child' (as he wryly dubbed his discovery) has been a major and generally positive influence through many aspects of society, from the obvious (such as mind expansion trips of [Timothy Leary](#) and [many others](#)) to the less obvious (including the [personal computer revolution](#)). Blowing peoples' minds is never an easy thing, and not always a good thing, but Hofmann is an inspiring figure, in large part because he never lost his taste for scientific inquiry and rational analysis while expanding the borderlands of human consciousness."

"One of the greatest crimes of the War On Some Drugs is the suppression of LSD as a tool for introspection," [writes](#) musician David Gans at [Cloud Surfing](#). But philosophy professor Steve Gimbel points out that Hofmann thought LSD had potential as prescription drug and writes, "To his dismay, it was a mental health professional, Dr. Timothy Leary, who would lead a movement advocating its use in less formal settings. ... Hoffman expressed deep regret that non-professional use led to the inability to determine whether it could have been fruitfully used in treatment or not and he strongly and explicitly opposed its use as a recreational substance."

today's blogs Wright Stuff

By Michael Weiss

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 5:44 PM ET

Bloggers are weighing in on the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's speech on Monday and the reaction by his former parishoner Barack Obama on Tuesday.

Wright stuff: The Rev. Jeremiah Wright appeared at the National Press Club on Monday and [breathed new life](#) into a fading scandal that has plagued Barack Obama. In a performance [many have described](#) as preening and narcissistic, he [reiterated](#) his belief that the government invented AIDS to kill black people, defended Louis Farrakhan against accusations of anti-Semitism, and stood by his assertion that Sept. 11 represented America's "chickens coming home to roost." In a press conference Tuesday, Obama [responded](#) sharply: "His comments were not only divisive and destructive, but I believe that they end up giving comfort to those who prey on hate."

Andrew Sullivan, a big Obama supporter, [explains](#) what changed his mind about Wright: "[H]is open public embrace of Farrakhan and hostility to Zionism, make any further defense of him impossible. This was a calculated, ugly, repulsive, vile display of arrogance, egotism, and self-regard." Then after Obama's press conference, Sullivan [added](#): "[W]e found that he can fight back, and take a stand, without calculation and in what is clearly a great amount of personal difficulty and political pain. It's what anyone should want in a president. It makes me want to see him succeed more than ever."

Responding to Obama's response, John Cole at **Balloon Juice** isn't [sweating](#) Wright so much: "Maybe it is because I am totally and unrepentantly in the tank for Obama, but I just can't get worked up over what his pastor said. Maybe it is because I am not religious, and I am used to religious people saying things that sound crazy." But history teacher Betsy Newmark at **Betsy's Page** [can't believe](#) Obama wasn't aware of this side of Wright: "I just find it hard to believe that Jeremiah Wright, in his late sixties, suddenly had a total personality change and start spewing forth these beliefs that he'd never before mentioned in Obama's hearing." And Dennis Sanders at the **Moderate Voice** [believes](#) Obama deserves the scrutiny: "[S]ince his campaign began... Obama has made sure that his religion is up front and center. When you do that, you are going to invite questions because you made something about your life public."

At *Time's Swampland*, Joe Klein is [worried](#): "Wright's purpose now seems quite clear: to aggrandize himself--the guy is going to be a go-to mainstream media source for racial extremist spew,

the next iteration of Al Sharpton--and destroy Barack Obama." And **Ross Douthat** [calls](#) Wright the "quintessential Bad Father ... a pure creep straight out of an Augusten Burroughs memoir, who's happy to sabotage a younger, finer man who might just be the first black President of the United States in the hopes of feeding his own ego and becoming ... what? The next Al Sharpton?" But *Commentary's* John Podhoretz, at **Contentions**, [thinks](#) Obama isn't dead yet: "If Wright and Ayers had come to dominate the news in October, that would have spelled the end to Obama's presidential hopes. The fact that they have dominated the news in April will, I suspect, prove to have been something of a lucky break."

Conservative Ed Morrissey at **Hot Air** goes through the editorials denouncing Wright and [notices](#) a curious trend: "Finally, it appears, the audacity of lunacy has come to their attention. ... All of these commentators came to see Wright as a narcissist, egotist, provocateur, and a shameless self-promoter in the last 48 hours. Why? In reading the pieces, their ire and scorn come exclusively because of the damage he does to Barack Obama."

[Read](#) more about Wright.

Gas-tax holiday: John McCain and Hillary Clinton [agree](#) on a plan to stop the federal gas tax for the summer, saving consumers about 18 cents a gallon. Barack Obama opposes the break, citing the need for an overhaul of U.S. energy policy as a cure for record oil prices. Clinton says she would recoup the lost revenue from a new tax on oil company profits, while McCain has suggested diverting it from other sources.

Liberal Kevin Drum of the *Washington Monthly's* **Political Animal** [writes](#): "I'd say there's approximately a zero percent chance that Hillary Clinton or John McCain actually believe this is good policy. It would increase oil company profits, it would make hardly a dent in the price of gasoline, it would encourage more summertime driving, and it would deprive states of money for transit projects."

David Weigel of *Reason's* **Hit & Run** calls it "probably the stupidest issue to surface in this race since the February NAFTA-bash" and [concludes](#): "Clinton and McCain aren't challenging the existence of the tax: They are implicitly saying it's a good tax that we should all relish paying in the non-summer months. Clinton is doing this and arguing that higher taxes on energy companies should be part of the bargain. It's phony populism in the service of a 'tax cut' that would fund one meal for two at Applebees, which may or may not include dessert."

Poli-sci professor **Daniel Drezner** [notes](#) that suspending the tax would save Americans about \$30 this summer and writes: "You have to love an issue that puts George W. Bush and Barack Obama on the same page. As an added bonus, in this case they

happen to be right. This will be an interesting test -- if I were Obama, I'd hit the thirty dollar line very, very hard. This would seem to be a classic example of 'politics as usual' and why it won't really solve long-term problems of energy and the environment."

TAS at **Comments From Left Field** [sides](#) with Obama: "Here in Massachusetts, gas is at \$3.50 a gallon right now — Hillary wants me to pay \$3.30. Wow, don't I feel special?! Of course, two weeks ago the price was \$3.17, so the tax break.. Err, excuse me, the Hillary/McCain bipartisan tax pander, can't even keep up with two weeks worth of friggan inflation."

John Riley at **Spin Cycle** [says](#) a pox on all three houses: "McCain supports one bad idea that won't work. Obama supports a different bad idea that won't work. Clinton, proving her presidential mettle, supports deploying both bad ideas to not work as part of a package."

[Read](#) more about the gas-tax dispute.

today's blogs ID, Please

By Sonia Smith

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 5:28 PM ET

Bloggers weigh the Supreme Court's decision on voter ID laws and gawk at those Miley Cyrus photos in *Vanity Fair*.

ID, please: The Supreme Court [ruled](#) on Monday that Indiana's law requiring voter identification is constitutional. Bloggers debate whether such laws protect against voter fraud or disenfranchise the poor.

At **SCOTUS Blog**, journalist Lyle Denniston [writes](#) that the decision could be "a significant victory for Republicans at election time, since the requirement for proof of identification is likely to fall most heavily on voters long assumed to be identified with the Democrats — particularly, minority and poor voters." Law professor **Ann Althouse** parses all the opinions, [finding](#) that Justice Stephen Breyer "emphasizes that other states with ID requirements are less demanding. Florida, for example, accepts an 'employee badge or ID, a debit or credit card, a student ID, a retirement center ID, a neighborhood association ID, and a public assistance ID.' Quite simply, Breyer sees an unjustified burden." And at **Election Law Blog**, Loyola Law School professor Rick Hasen, who filed an amicus brief on behalf of those challenging the law, [worries](#) many other states will follow suit: "I fear that, despite the Stevens-Kennedy-Roberts' opinion's best intentions, this opinion will be read as a green light for the enactment of more partisan election laws in an

attempt to skew outcomes in close elections." Big Tent Democrat at **Talk Left** [translates](#) the opinions for the nonlawyers among us.

Conservatives are pleased. "Of course all the whining and gnashing of teeth from those in the Democratic party who willfully incite and participate in voter fraud won't be happy, but the rest of us in the real world cannot be disappointed in the decision today," [opines](#) self-described "Reagan Republican" Paul Seale at **Arena of Ideas**. Porter Good at **Pirate's Cove** [has no problem](#) showing an ID. "Seriously, what is the problem with knowing who a person is when they vote, one of the most important things an American citizen can do? You have to show ID when you write a check, when the cop pulls you over, if you want a beer or some smokes (if you look young enough), and so many other things. Why not for voting?" Libertarian law prof Glenn Reynolds [chimes in](#) at **InstaPundit**: "Seems reasonable to me."

Liberals are worried voters without driver's licenses will be disenfranchised. The **Booman Tribune** [calls](#) such laws "transparent efforts to disenfranchise poor people that live in urban environments and that rely exclusively on public transportation." Melissa McEwan at **Shakesville** [explains](#): "If I had the misfortune of losing or having stolen my license, I've got a passport I could use in a pinch. These are all things that diminish as the privilege of wealth and ability diminish, i.e. the poorer and/or more housebound one is, the less likely one is to have a photo ID."

Modern examples of in-person voter fraud are practically nonexistent, Josh Patashnik [writes](#) at the *New Republic's* **Plank**: "The only examples Stevens can cite in the footnotes are a colorful description of Boss Tweed paying people to vote multiple times in the election of 1868, and an instance of one individual committing in-person voter fraud in Washington state in 2004." At the *Washington Monthly's* **Political Animal**, liberal Kevin Drum [adds](#): "Presumably these were the best examples that anyone could come up with. And what do you conclude from them? That's easy: in-person voter fraud is vanishingly rare while absentee voter fraud is, perhaps, a problem genuinely worth addressing." At **Daily Kos**, liberal Adam Bonin [dubs](#) this a "case reflecting a solution truly in search of a problem."

[Read](#) more about the Supreme Court decision on voter IDs. *Slate's* legal blog, **Convictions**, [debates the ruling](#).

Oh, Miley!: *Hannah Montana* star Miley Cyrus is catching [flak](#) for appearing in the June *Vanity Fair* draped only in a sheet. (Check out [behind-the-scene photos](#) from the shoot with Annie Leibovitz.) After Disney, which produces her show, tut-tutted, Miley [said](#) she feels "so embarrassed" by the photos.

"If you smell burning synthetic hair today, it's probably a *Hannah Montana* novelty wig angrily set ablaze following the

news that 15-year-old Miley Cyrus will appear in the June issue of *Vanity Fair* 'topless,' " [cackles](#) Linda Holmes at *New York's* **Vulture**, adding later, "Expect despair and heartache to set in as girls suddenly robbed of their heroine turn in desperation to astronauts, scientists, and even their own parents to find someone they can look up to."

Gawker takes a break from regularly scheduled snark to [scold](#) Leibovitz: "Does anyone—at *Vanity Fair*, among its readers, or even Annie Leibovitz herself—believe that the master photographer didn't give any thought to sexing up the 15 year-old pop star in those photos? That the bedsheet was totally innocuous?" At **Buzz Machine**, media blogger Jeff Jarvis [blames](#) Leibovitz and *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter for running the photos. "She's just a kid with a sweet show that millions more kids — including my daughter — love. She didn't go out on a Lindsay Lohan bender. She did as she was told. ... But Carter and Leibovitz knew damned well that they would cause this fuss. So they used a young girl to get attention."

[Read](#) more reaction to Miley Cyrus' *Vanity Fair* photo spread. *Slate's* XX Factor [weighs in](#) on the photos.

today's papers Size Matters

By Daniel Politi

Friday, May 2, 2008, at 6:06 AM ET

The *Washington Post* leads with word that three federal agencies will announce today a set of new regulations [on the credit card industry](#) that could put an end to some of the sector's most criticized practices. The Federal Reserve, the Office of Thrift Supervision, and the National Credit Union Administration have joined forces to create the new regulations that could be finalized by the end of the year. The *New York Times* leads with the increasing popularity of [smaller cars](#). In April, about 20 percent of vehicles sold were "a compact or subcompact car," which may not sound like much, but industry analysts say the rate is unprecedented.

The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with President Bush's issuing of a proposal yesterday to increase [international food aid](#) by \$770 million to help deal with rocketing food prices around the world. *USA Today* leads with a look at how the Democratic presidential contest is being increasingly funded by [small donations](#) of \$200 or less. Of the total \$194 million that the Democratic contenders collected in the first three months of the year, more than half came from small donations. "Donating to campaigns for so long has been the exclusive domain of an elite few," said a campaign finance expert. "This election seems to be the first one to indicate that's

changing." The [Los Angeles Times](#) leads locally with word that aides to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger are exploring the idea of [new tax hikes](#), but the paper goes high with a look at how lawmakers are feeling pressured to cut farm subsidies now that food prices are on the rise.

The new regulations on the credit card industry would slap the label of "[unfair or deceptive](#)" on certain practices, such as increasing interest rates for seemingly no reason and slapping late fees on consumers who aren't given enough time to pay, among others. The new regulations would be a marked change from the past since federal agencies have usually limited themselves to requiring the industry to do a better job at disclosing the fine print. But several lawmakers and consumer groups have long been critical of the Fed for failing to take action to regulate card issuers, and it seems like they're finally listening. Still, some said that the regulations don't go far enough and want lawmakers themselves to take action. Not surprisingly, the banking industry is not happy about the new regulations and insists they would make credit more scarce.

While the switch to smaller cars might help decrease the nation's oil consumption and increase consumers' pocketbooks, it means [bad news for Detroit automakers](#). Not only do Asian carmakers manufacture more of these smaller cars, but the automakers also make a heftier profit from SUVs, sales of which have decreased more than 25 percent this year. Although bad economic times or high gas prices have translated into bigger sales for smaller cars in the past, industry experts think this change is here to stay as the price of filling up the tank isn't likely to decrease anytime in the near future. "The era of the truck-based large S.U.V.'s is over," said the head of the country's largest auto retailer.

USAT also fronts Bush's proposal for the [extra food aid](#), which would be issued on top of the \$200 million increase that was instituted last month. Overall this increase would bring the total amount of U.S. food aid to about \$5 billion in 2008 and 2009. Democrats welcomed the proposal but many said it was [too little, too late](#) and questioned whether it would do enough to alleviate the current crisis if the extra money isn't available until the next fiscal year. The *WSJ* notes that the spike in food aid is bringing renewed vigor to the debate about how this [assistance should be given](#). While Washington traditionally gives out food aid by handing out food that was grown in the United States, many think it would be more efficient to buy more food directly from developing countries. The administration supports changing the way food aid is handed out, but the shift is opposed by American farmers and the U.S. agriculture industry.

Going against the wishes of farmers, however, may not be the sin it once was, reports the *LAT*. Although politicians have long been wary of upsetting farmers, it seems the [tide is turning](#). President Bush has threatened to veto farm subsidies that help "multimillionaire farmers," and lawmakers are talking about decreasing the incentives for ethanol production, which seemed

like a Washington darling just last year. The backlash seems to have caught lobbyists for the agriculture industry and farm-state lawmakers by surprise, but they're quickly devising a strategy to fight back.

The *NYT* fronts a look at how Wall Street and Main Street are, once again, moving [in different directions](#). It was only a few months ago that Wall Street was doing badly while the overall economy kept chugging along at a decent pace. Now, the situation is reversed as Wall Street seems to see a light at the end of the tunnel and is pushing up the stock market. "There has been a huge change of sentiment in all of the markets," one investment strategist said. Some on Wall Street think there will be a sharp recovery in the second half of the year, but others insist they're just being optimistic and it's only a matter of time before the markets fall again.

In case any more proof was needed of what a strange place Wall Street is, yesterday provided a handy example. Exxon Mobil reported a first-quarter profit of [\\$10.89 billion](#), a 17 percent increase from last year and the second-best in the company's history. But that wasn't enough for Wall Street, which was expecting bigger numbers, and the oil giant's shares fell 3.6 percent. But the numbers were high enough for several lawmakers to push for a tax hike on oil companies' profits.

Many think Clinton's chances of clinching the nomination have improved as Obama has suffered numerous blows in the past few weeks, but the *NYT* takes a look at how the former first lady still faces a [decidedly uphill battle](#). Clinton's campaign suffered "an embarrassing defection" (*LAT*) yesterday when Joe Andrew, a longtime ally of the Clintons, switched his support to Obama. That may be just one vote, but most superdelegates seem to agree with Obama's view that they should back the candidate who has amassed the largest number of pledged delegates. Clinton advisers recognize it won't be easy but think there's a path that could lead to the nomination. In order to have a chance, Clinton must win Indiana, gain respectable numbers in North Carolina, and win a surprise state, such as Oregon or Montana. Then the Democratic National Committee would have to agree to seat at least some of the Michigan and Florida delegates, and the campaign would have to convince superdelegates that the votes in the two states should count toward the overall tally.

The *WP* fronts news that Deborah Palfrey, commonly known as the "D.C. Madam," apparently [hanged herself yesterday](#), two weeks after she was convicted of running a prostitution ring. Palfrey was facing about four to six years in prison and had previously told a journalist she'd rather die than spend time behind bars. "Maybe we feel sad because of the gendered irony," writes the *WP*'s [Monica Hesse](#). "The powerful men whose names surfaced in the scandal ... have all remained unscathed."

Yesterday marked the fifth anniversary of Bush's now-infamous "Mission Accomplished" speech, and [Democrats seized on the](#)

[opportunity](#) to point out how the administration was oh-so-wrong about the challenges the United States would face in Iraq. The White House press secretary appeared to come prepared yesterday to face questions on the topic. "President Bush is well aware that the banner should have been much more specific," Dana Perino said, "and said mission accomplished for these sailors who are on this ship on their mission." The *Post's* [Al Kamen](#) quips, "The problem, sources tell us, is that White House planners couldn't figure out how to get all that on the sign in letters large enough for people to read on television."

today's papers

A Higher Toll

By Daniel Politi

Thursday, May 1, 2008, at 6:19 AM ET

The *Los Angeles Times* leads with news that the [death toll in Iraq](#) in April reached its highest level since late last year. The four U.S. soldiers who were killed yesterday increased the total military deaths in April to 50, a seven-month high. In addition, the Iraqi government reported that 969 civilians died last month, the highest number since August. The *Washington Post* leads with the forced resignation of [Lurita Doan](#), the head of the General Services Administration. Doan had a rocky two-year tenure as head of the government's main contracting agency and was accused of using her position for political purposes as well as helping friends get lucrative contracts. The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with a poll that shows only 27 percent of voters view the Republican Party [in a positive light](#), which amounts to "the lowest level for either party in the survey's nearly two-decade history." The interesting part of this is that despite these negative numbers, and the fact that a majority of voters would rather see a Democrat in the White House, Sen. John McCain remains in a statistical dead heat with the two Democratic contenders.

USA Today leads with a new study that questions whether colleges are really using all that extra [money from tuition](#) to benefit students. While the cost of higher education continues to increase, colleges aren't putting that money into the classroom, and the number of students graduating hasn't kept up with higher enrollment. But critics say it's unfair to simply look at classroom instruction since colleges are spending money on such things as affordability and technology. The *New York Times* leads with a look at how Americans are [decreasing their spending](#) at a time when fears about the country's economic health continue to grow. New Commerce Department figures report that the overall economy grew 0.6 percent in the first three months of the year while consumer spending increased a mere 1 percent, the lowest level since 2001. Many economists predict the economy will now proceed into negative territory. "This is not a fluke or a

technical quirk," said one economist. "It's fundamental. Real disposable income has been squeezed."

The truth is that despite the increased number of deaths in Iraq, the numbers are still smaller than they were [a year ago](#), when 65 U.S. servicemembers were killed in April 2007. But after a 60 percent decrease in attacks across the country in the last half of 2007, it's clear that the casualty numbers are once again on the rise. This increase is leading many to wonder "whether U.S. and Iraqi forces can consolidate last year's security gains" at a time when most of the troops who were part of the "surge" are leaving Iraq. Much of the increased death toll is due to the crackdown of militias loyal to cleric Muqtada Sadr, but U.S. officials also warn that Sunni militias appear to be making a sort of comeback. The "trend will continue, and the relative quiet accomplished by the surge [will] come to an end, if the U.S. does not reach a new understanding with the Sadrists," an expert tells the *LAT*.

In other Iraq news, the *NYT* goes inside with word that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is sending a delegation of Shiite leaders to Tehran to discuss concerns that [Iran is supporting militias in Iraq](#). U.S. officials emphasized that this was the work of the Iraqi government, although they seem pleased that Maliki is taking claims of Iranian involvement seriously. The *NYT* says that the United States has delayed its planned briefing to show new evidence of Iranian involvement in order to give leaders in Baghdad the opportunity to talk to Tehran directly.

Doan was pushed out of her role at the GSA almost a year after her actions came under fire from [top lawmakers of both parties](#). The U.S. Office of Special Counsel conducted an investigation into Doan's conduct and found that she did indeed violate the Hatch Act by using her position as a federal employee to help Republican candidates. The special counsel recommended that Bush discipline Doan "to the fullest extent" last June, but the White House had mostly stayed silent on the matter until this week. And although most in political circles who are pushed aside usually try to play it off as if the resignation was their choice, Doan wasn't shy about telling the truth: "I have been asked by the White House to resign," she said.

As the Commerce Department released low spending figures and the Labor Department reported that [wages were down](#) 0.6 percent in the first three months of 2008 compared with last year, the Federal Reserve cut interest rates for the seventh time in eight months. The Fed decreased a key interest rate by 0.25 percent yesterday but suggested its cutting campaign is over for now unless the [economic situation gets worse](#).

The *WSJ* poll once again shows that voters are really not happy with the way things are going. In total, 73 percent of voters think the country is [on the wrong track](#), and a mere 27 percent approve of President Bush's job performance. "The numbers show an electorate more disenchanted than in the fall of 1992," reports the *WSJ*. But while voters really dislike Republicans, McCain

appears to be benefitting from his personal traits as voters say they can identify with his "values" and "background." The paper warns, though, that "McCain's appeal could fade" as the campaign progresses and he picks up more partisan talking points.

The *NYT* goes inside with its own poll that found Sen. Barack Obama's "aura of inevitability" [has decreased](#). The poll was conducted Friday to Tuesday, which means it might not reflect the full reactions to the latest controversy regarding the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, but it at least does seem to show some reactions to Obama's loss in the Pennsylvania primary. While 69 percent of Democrats expected Obama to get the nomination a month ago, that number is now 51 percent. In addition, 48 percent believe he has the best chance of beating McCain, which marks a decrease from the 56 percent who thought so last month. Regardless, he's still the preferred choice for more Democrats. The poll also reveals that all the intraparty fighting has taken a toll as 56 percent say the Democrats are divided while 60 percent of Republicans think their party is unified.

Meanwhile, the *WP* notes that with the [five endorsements](#) from Washington lawmakers that he picked up this week, Obama now officially has the same number of backers from Capitol Hill as Clinton. "A congressional contest that Clinton once dominated is now knotted at 97," says the *Post*.

The *WP* fronts the story of Pfc. Monica Brown, who was pulled out of her unit in Afghanistan shortly after she became the second woman since World War II to receive the [Silver Star for her heroic acts](#). The reason? Army rules say women can't serve in combat. Experts say these rules are "based on an outmoded concept of wars with clear front lines that rarely exist in today's counterinsurgencies."

The *LAT* and *NYT* both front looks at how members of the House of Representatives can get a taxpayer-funded car. The *LAT* specifically focuses on how, due to an amendment in last year's energy bill, House members now have to [pick a low-emissions ride](#). Some lawmakers are decidedly unhappy about this for reasons that vary from those who say that driving through their districts requires a big vehicle to others who want a car that was made by their constituents. The *NYT* takes a broader look at the issue and notes how some of the 125 (or 130, according to the *LAT*) House members who use the benefit choose expensive cars while others prefer [a more modest alternative](#). Some, such as a Democrat from Queens, N.Y., who leases a Lexus for \$998 a month, tried to pass off their choice of car as an issue of safety and reliability. But others, such as Rep. Charles Rangel, who leases a Cadillac for \$778 a month, admit they enjoy the luxury. Rangel says he wants his constituents "to feel that they are somebody and their congressman is somebody. ... And when they say, 'This is nice,' it feels good."

today's papers

Breaking Up Is Hard To Do

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at 6:24 AM ET

The [New York Times](#) and the *Wall Street Journal's* world-wide newsbox lead with, while everyone else fronts, Sen. Barack Obama's denouncing the Rev. Jeremiah Wright and angrily breaking off relations with [his former pastor](#). Obama said Wright's appearance at the National Press Club on Monday, where he reiterated some of his most controversial views and spoke well of Louis Farrakhan, amounted to "a show of disrespect to me" and "an insult to what we've been trying to do in this campaign." The [Los Angeles Times](#) leads with a look at how rising concerns about the country's economic health are leading politicians to [scramble for a response](#). So far, at least, the proposals being put forward are not new and would do little to help the average consumer. But Washington politicians are doing a good job of pointing fingers at the other side for failing to do anything.

[USA Today](#) leads with news that governments at all levels are increasing the number of workers on their payrolls faster than at anytime in the [past six years](#). In the first three months of the year, federal, state, and local governments added 76,800 jobs, while private companies got rid of 286,000 workers. Economists say the government can help a tightening economy by increasing jobs but warn that this strategy can also lead to future financial problems. The [Washington Post](#) leads locally but goes [across the top with](#) the fourth installment of its "Global Food Crisis" series, which takes a look at how "ethanol plants are swallowing more and more of the nation's corn crop" at a time when food prices are rising around the world. "The price of grain is now directly tied to the price of oil," the president of the Earth Policy Institute said. "We used to have a grain economy and a fuel economy. But now they're beginning to fuse."

In his speech on race in Philadelphia last month, Obama said Wright was "like family" and that he could "no more disown" him than he could his white grandmother or the black community [as a whole](#). But yesterday it was clear Obama had heard enough from his minister of 20 years, who married him and baptized his daughters. "Appearing pained and irritated" (*LAT*), the senator from Illinois officially "tried to divorce him," as [Slate's John Dickerson puts it](#). And like any divorcing couple there was a version of the traditional "I don't know who you are anymore." Obama emphasized that the Wright who has been appearing before [the media lately is](#) "not the person that I met 20 years ago" and characterized the pastor's comments as "outrageous" and "destructive." And in what might be the most insulting thing that could be said to a minister, Obama called Wright's words "a bunch of rants."

There's plenty of anger at Wright to go around from Obama supporters who worry that the pastor's appearances could threaten the senator's bid for the White House. The *LAT* talks to some African-American [church leaders](#) who are also angry at Wright for making it sound like he's somehow the spokesman for all the black churches in the country. For its part, the *NYT* [talks to several members](#) of "the most important constituency in politics now: the uncommitted superdelegates." At the very least, Wright's media blitz has raised more concerns in their ranks about Obama's electability, though it seems many are simply choosing the usual wait-and-see attitude to figure out how this latest episode plays with voters before making any decisions.

The *NYT* says that [Bush provided](#) "an unusually dark assessment of the economy" yesterday. Although Bush clearly wanted to emphasize that he understands Americans are facing a hard time, he also said that "there is no magic wand to wave right now." Politicians, both in Washington and on the campaign trail, are most nervous about the price of gas, which has increased \$1.40 a gallon in 18 months, as more voters are expressing their dissatisfaction to anyone who will listen. Of course, the fact that several big oil companies are reporting record profits is also helping [fuel the anger](#).

Instead of proposing something new and innovative, Bush went back in time "to the earliest days of his administration" (*WP*) and called on lawmakers to approve drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and expand nuclear power, among other measures that include reducing restrictions on oil companies so they can (theoretically) increase production. Meanwhile, lawmakers want to push Bush into [suspending purchases](#) for the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, a move the administration insists would have a negligible effect on prices since it amounts to only a fraction of a percent of total demand.

In a blunt news analysis, the *NYT*'s Carl Hulse writes that as more crises keep piling up, "official Washington" is [doing what it does best](#): nothing. (Well, that's not entirely true. The House did vote to designate National Watermelon Month yesterday.) Although there were high hopes that lawmakers would get together after an initial show of bipartisanship with the tax rebates, that never happened, and now Congress is spiraling once again into an endless loop of partisan bickering. Although everyone says they're looking for a solution, there's a vexing sense that politicians "are not approaching the most pressing problems with an appropriate sense of urgency."

The *WP* fronts the latest from Iraq, where U.S. soldiers continue to get more involved in intense battles [inside Baghdad's Sadr City](#). At least 28 Iraqis were killed yesterday in a four-hour battle that was one of the deadliest since the latest conflict flared up after Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki launched an offensive against Shiite militias last month. The *WP* says American troops "are now engaged in the kind of urban battle ... reminiscent of the first years of war." The U.S. military said the 28 dead were

militants, but residents of Sadr City said the real death toll was at least 50, including many civilians (an Associated Press photograph shows a [2-year-old victim](#), and the *LAT* says a brother-in-law of one of its Iraqi journalists was [also killed](#)). Meanwhile, there are increasing fears that followers of cleric Muqtada Sadr will simply declare "an all-out war to defend themselves."

The *LAT* goes inside with a piece that takes a look at how the [recent Supreme Court decisions](#) about voter ID requirements and lethal injections illustrate "a subtle but profoundly important shift in how the justices decide constitutional questions." In the past, the court would regularly declare that certain laws were unconstitutional if they simply had the potential to violate someone's rights. Now, the justices want actual proof that rights have been violated.

The *WSJ* reports that the peace talks between the Pakistani government and Islamic militants [have collapsed](#). It seems the talks broke down after the government refused to remove troops from the volatile border regions. A spokesman for the militants warned the fighting and attacks would resume unless the government reversed its decision.

While troubles in the economy are causing headaches around the country, the movie industry is preparing for what many predict will be a "wonderful summer in Hollywood," reports the *LAT*. As a general rule, bad economic times mean [good news for the movie business](#) (attendance increased in three of the last four recessions). The movies that do the best in tough economic times are the big-budget "event" films. In fact, "some of the most celebrated blockbusters," such as *E.T.*, *Jaws*, and *The Lord of the Rings*, "premiered in the midst or on the heels of a recession." The *LAT* explains it this way: "If you're struggling to pay the bills, why not let Angelina Jolie take your worries away?"

today's papers

With Friends Like These

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, April 29, 2008, at 6:23 AM ET

The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*'s world-wide newsbox lead with the Supreme Court ruling that laws requiring citizens to show [photo identification](#) before voting are constitutional. The *Los Angeles Times* devotes its top nonlocal spot to the 6-3 decision, in which the justices upheld an Indiana law, generally considered to have the strictest voter-identification requirements in the country, mainly because opponents failed to prove that anyone had been blocked from casting a ballot [because of the law](#). Everyone says the decision is likely to encourage [other states](#) to pass voter-identification laws

although few think it will have a significant effect on this year's presidential election.

[USA Today](#) fronts the Supreme Court decision but leads with word that there has been a record number of airstrikes by [unmanned airplanes](#) in Iraq this past month. Commanders ordered 11 attacks by Predators in April, which is almost double the previous monthly high. The Pentagon has been pushing for more drones to be used in the war zone and military leaders are "expected to rely more on unmanned systems as they begin to withdraw 30,000 U.S. troops sent last year," says [USAT](#).

The debate over voter-identification requirements has been highly partisan with Republicans consistently favoring the laws, while Democrats stridently oppose them. In the main opinion, written by the usually liberal Justice John Paul Stevens, the Supreme Court ruled that requiring voters to [prove their identity](#) is "amply justified by the valid interest in protecting the integrity and reliability of the electoral process." The justices left open the possibility that voters who could prove they were affected by these laws could file future challenges "but made it clear that it would be difficult for them to prevail," [says the WP](#). The [WSJ](#) highlights that "[the evidence is far from clear](#)" on either side of the debate, since no one knows how many people fail to vote because of ID laws, and at the same time there's no proof that voter fraud is a significant problem.

Everyone goes inside with the latest from Iraq, where militants unleashed what [the LAT calls](#) "some of the fiercest attacks in weeks" that killed four American soldiers. The [WP](#) points out that 44 U.S. troops have died in Iraq in April, which is the largest monthly total [since September](#). Meanwhile, as U.S. officials are increasing their criticism of Iran's involvement in Iraq, the [WSJ](#) reveals that Americans received "[back-channel messages](#)" from Tehran that condemned the recent fighting in Basra. The Iranian messages apparently expressed concern that the fighting would get out of control and said that Tehran had no control over the Shiite militants. It's not clear why Iran would choose to communicate with Americans this way, and U.S. officials really don't know how much to believe, but they do recognize that Tehran played a pivotal role in brokering the cease-fire "that eventually ended the fighting in Basra." The [LAT](#) details on Page One how the Iraqi government is in a [difficult situation](#). While Iraqi officials seem to agree Iran is helping arm the militants, they're also pressuring the Bush administration to allow Baghdad to "pursue diplomatic solutions more quietly with Tehran."

In an analysis piece inside, the [NYT](#) says that yesterday's [Supreme Court ruling](#) "is likely to lead to more laws and litigation." As more states, particularly those with Republican governments, pass new voter ID laws, Democrats and civil rights groups will probably file lawsuits specifying groups of voters that should be exempted. "The court's opinion is likely to perform the same function for the photo ID debate as the

Pennsylvania primary did for the Democratic presidential nomination—hardening positions while doing little if anything to illuminate a path to resolving the conflict," said one expert. Some expressed concern that the decision will lead to lots of confusion on Election Day because people might think the Supreme Court approved a national ID requirement for voters.

The [NYT](#) fronts a look at how Sen. Hillary Clinton has opened up a new line of attack against Sen. Barack Obama for his unwillingness to support a "gas tax holiday" [this summer](#). Obama insists the tax holiday wouldn't actually help drivers all that much and is a short-term fix for a wider problem. But Clinton says it's an example of how Obama doesn't understand how middle-class Americans are struggling to make ends meet and is running ads emphasizing their different views. Sen. John McCain has also come out in favor of the "holiday," and a spokesman for the presumptive Republican nominee emphasized the fact that Obama supported just such a tax break when he was a state lawmaker in 2000 to characterize him as a flip-flopper. For what it's worth, in a fact-check feature, the [WP](#) explains that Obama voted for a six-month moratorium of his state's sales tax on gas, and while the move was "politically popular" it was also "economically questionable." Ultimately, and this should hardly be surprising, "the advocates of a 'gas tax holiday' are exaggerating the benefits to consumers from their proposal."

The [LAT](#) and [WP](#) front a look at how Obama is once again emphasizing that his [former pastor](#), the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, "does not speak for me." At a time when Obama is trying to win over primary voters and convince Democrats that he's electable, Wright has injected himself right in the middle of the national conversation with a media blitz that no one thinks is doing the senator from Illinois any favors. In what was his [third nationally televised appearance since Friday](#), Wright delivered a speech at the National Press Club yesterday where he defended some of his most controversial remarks. Wright also said that the criticism against him amounted to "an attack on the black church." In addition, Wright seemed to suggest that Obama's speech in Philadelphia last month where he criticized some of his former pastor's remarks was disingenuous. "He had to distance himself, because he's a politician," Wright said.

There's plenty of criticism of Wright in the papers, but none more prominent than in the [NYT](#), where a Page One piece by [Alessandra Stanley](#) basically mocks him for being another American obsessed with appearing on television. "Now it turns out that Mr. Wright doesn't hate America, he loves the sound of his own voice," Stanley writes. "He grabbed his 30-second spots of infamy and turned them into 15 minutes of fame." Overall though, Wright's recent appearances may have supported Obama's assertion that his former pastor was like a member of his family. More specifically, Wright is like "the compelling but slightly wacky uncle who unsettles strangers but really just craves attention."

The WP's [Eugene Robinson](#) says that he's "through with Wright not because he responded ... but because his response was so egocentric." By choosing to make such public appearances, Wright "was throwing Barack Obama under the bus," writes Robinson. "It's time for Obama to return the favor." The NYT's [Bob Herbert](#) emphasizes that Wright is anything but naive about politics and characterizes the recent media onslaught as "Wright's 'I'll show you!' tour" in which he demonstrates how he's upset at his "ungrateful congregant." All this hurts Obama, and it's not just because of what Wright says. By giving the impression that there's nothing Obama can say or do about Wright's outbursts, it "contributes to the growing perception of the candidate as weak, as someone who is unwilling or unable to fight aggressively on his own behalf."

today's papers

Lenders' Remorse

By Ryan Grim

Monday, April 28, 2008, at 7:32 AM ET

The [New York Times leads with](#) pushback from the mortgage industry against tighter lending regulations. The [Wall Street Journal tops its worldwide news box](#) with a flurry of rockets and bullets aimed at Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who survived the assassination attempt. The [Washington Post](#) leads with the story of the consequences of Prince William County's ongoing crackdown on illegal immigration. The [Los Angeles Time goes with](#) economic woe facing TV crew members, already reeling from the writers' strike, as studios cut down on the number of pilots and production time. [USA Today](#) leads with the possibility of less scrutiny for some airline passengers if they can "prove" they don't belong on a terrorist watch list. (If they can't, what does that mean?)

The plan unfurled by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff seeks to combat "the Ted Kennedy problem"—named for the unfortunate Massachusetts senator who has repeatedly undergone extra scrutiny because his name is apparently "similar" to that of someone linked to a suspected terrorist. Or suspected to be linked to a terrorist. Or suspected to be linked to a suspected terrorist.

Either way, Sen. Kennedy would need only provide each airline he flies with his name and birthdate and from then on will be treated like a regular, nonterrorist customer.

WSJ has four [columns above the fold](#) announcing that Mars Inc. and Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway are near a \$22 billion pact to buy Wm. Wrigley Jr. Co. that "would remake the global confectionery landscape."

Continental rejected [United Airlines merger overtures](#), *WSJ* reports.

[The Post finds that](#), since September, 759 fewer kids are enrolled in Prince William classes that teach English to speakers of other languages (ESOL). Meanwhile, 623 students from the county have enrolled in nearby Fairfax schools. Proponents of the crackdown say that their policy is working, squeezing illegal immigrants out of the community. Opponents say a climate of fear is driving legal immigrants out, as well.

[The L.A. Times fronts a deeper look](#) into a [recent drug-war shootout](#) in Tijuana that left 15 dead. The story asks what return the Mexican government is getting on its increased investment in the war against the so-called drug cartels. Reporter Héctor Tobar finds some officials who see the violence as a good sign. It's the result, they say, of government success, as truces established by the cartels wilt under the government heat.

Speaking of unpopular organizations, the American mortgage industry is [pushing back hard](#) against proposed rules that would tighten regulations around the loan process, the *NYT* reports, to "the chagrin of consumer groups." The banks say too much paperwork would increase the cost of a loan. The proposed rules target the easy loans that had been given out to customers with bad credit.

The *Times* [has reports of ongoing political](#) violence perpetrated by Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe as he clings to power.

The *Post* goes above the fold with a [four-click must-read](#) by Eli Saslow, who sketches the scene at a North Carolina voter registration office. He profiles an ex-felon (drug charge) who learned he could register as long as he'd completed parole, a high-school senior registering for the first time, and an ex-Marine switching from the GOP so he can cast a vote not so much for Hillary Clinton but rather against the newcomer he calls "Embowa."

"From what I can tell, if he becomes president he will refuse to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance and we will leave Iraq unprepared," he says. "I'm not going to sit at home and let that happen."

Democrats have seen a surge of a million or so new registrations in the last seven primaries, while Republicans have stayed roughly flat, Saslow finds. "In 20 years," says the North Carolina official registering voters, "I've never seen anything quite like it."

The [San Francisco Giants stink this year](#), but what really has fans down, the *Journal* reports, is the absence of Barry Bonds. Sales of tickets, rubber chickens, and kayaks are all down significantly.

[The Times fronts](#) a look at Obama's evolving campaign style; the candidate is getting more specific and holding more town hall-style events as opposed to large rallies in an effort to connect with working-class voters. The story includes this nugget:

In interviews with several associates and aides, Mr. Obama was described as bored with the campaign against Mrs. Clinton and eager to move into the general election against Senator John McCain of Arizona, the presumptive Republican nominee.

Obama's advisers, the piece says, are no longer fully confident that the campaign will end before June 3.

[USA Today grades NFL teams'](#) performance on draft day. As always, it's got all the details you'll need, such as this scouting report on a cornerback drafted by the Philadelphia Eagles: "Jack Ikegwuono has knee problems and may be facing burglary charges."

today's papers Hunger Artists

Conor Clarke

Sunday, April 27, 2008, at 5:48 AM ET

The [New York Times](#) leads with news that the Justice Department continues to claim American intelligence operatives can use [interrogation methods](#) that might be illegal under international law. The [Los Angeles Times](#) gives its top news spot to an [investigative piece](#) on Barack Obama's financial relationship with longtime political supporter Robert Blackwell. Seven years ago, Obama received a \$1,000 donation from Blackwell one day after writing a letter urging Illinois officials to provide one of Blackwell's companies with a state grant. The [Washington Post](#) leads with a [feature](#) on what it calls the world's "worst food crisis in a generation."

Driven by rising demand and stagnant supply, [world grain prices](#) are skyrocketing to levels not seen since the 1970s. Since 2005, food prices have climbed 80 percent, an ascent produced by an unhappy coincidence of events: a weak harvest in the United States and Europe, soaring oil prices in Argentina and Ukraine, and a fiscal crisis that has led investors to move funds out of mortgages and into grain futures. The dietary deficit has sparked "food-related violence" in at least 14 nations, including riots in Haiti that led to the resignation of the country's Prime Minister.

The [Times](#) reports that, in a March 5 letter to Congress, the Justice Department made no specific determination of which CIA [interrogation tactics](#) violate the Geneva Conventions'

prohibition on "outrages against human dignity." The administration instead suggested that a flexible, case-by-case standard would be appropriate. "The fact that an act is undertaken to prevent a threatened terrorist attack, rather than for the purpose of humiliation or abuse, would be relevant to a reasonable observer in measuring the outrageousness of the act," wrote one of the Department's lawyers. The letter had not previously been made public, and the CIA's rules for interrogation remain secret.

Obama's [financial relationship](#) with Blackwell started after the Senator's failed 2000 congressional campaign, when Blackwell began providing Obama with an \$8,000 monthly retainer for providing legal advice to his technology company. A few months after the payments ended, Obama sent a letter to state officials suggesting that they give a \$50,000 tourism grant to a different Blackwell company, this one specializing in table tennis. The Obama campaign denies that there was any connection between the payments and the grant request.

The [NYT](#) says rising food and gas prices are producing thrifty and creative [new consumption habits](#). Tighter budgets are leading to tighter belts, and Americans are trading in their Lucky Charms and Tide for less costly store-brand alternatives. (In the case of Lucky Charms, that appears to be something called "Millville Marshmallows.") Says one retail consultant: "It hasn't gotten to human food mixed with pet food yet, but it is certainly headed in that direction."

In other domestic economic news, the [Post](#) reports that a rise in housing foreclosures and a tumbling real estate market have made [vacant properties](#) "havens for squatters, vandals, thieves, partying teenagers and worse."

The [Post](#) fronts a feature on the U.S. government's spotty regulation of the potentially [dangerous chemicals](#) used by plastics manufacturers. In one case, the Food and Drug Administration deemed a compound safe based on two industry-funded reports, despite hundreds of studies to the contrary.

The [Times](#) goes above the fold with an analysis of the three presidential candidates [fiscal plans](#), and concludes that they have one thing in common: "[E]ach could significantly swell the budget deficit and increase the national debt by trillions of dollars." Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama's proposals would create additional shortfall through new government programs, while John McCain's plan would do the same by enacting new tax cuts. Analysts say McCain's plan would lead to the biggest increase in the national debt, which already stands at \$9.1 trillion, about \$3.5 trillion higher than in 2001.

The [Times](#) has a first-person story from a staff reporter who was [jailed in Zimbabwe](#) for "committing journalism." The journalist, Barry Bearak, had come to the repressive country to report on the presidential election and was arrested for working without

the appropriate papers. He and another reporter were released after more than a week in a crowded and wretched Harare prison.

The *Los Angeles Times* files a [progress report](#) on the United Nation's and African Union's joint effort to establish a 26,000-troop peacekeeping force in Darfur. The effort is off to a slow and stumbling start. The paper says it is "a tale of good intentions and loftier ambitions, mixed with some of the same issues that dogged" previous efforts. "Among the problems are the slow deployment of troops, a lack of adequate equipment and a shabby network of military bases."

The *Post* goes below the fold with a report on the [fatigue](#) afflicting employees of the (apparently endless) Clinton and Obama campaigns. One Obama aide spent so little time at her apartment that she decided to put her belongings into storage and let her lease lapse, making her, in the paper's words, "officially homeless."

today's papers

Can We All Get Along?

By Joshua Kucera

Saturday, April 26, 2008, at 4:46 AM ET

The *Washington Post* leads with [worry among Democrats](#) that the long and increasingly nasty nomination battle is hurting the party. The *New York Times* leads locally, with the [acquittal](#) of three New York police officers who killed an unarmed man with 50 bullets two years ago. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with U.S. officials [accusing Iran](#) of increasing its violent activities in Iraq. The *Wall Street Journal* tops its world-wide newsbox with China's offer to [meet with a representative](#) of the Dalai Lama.

The *Post* says "African Americans and wealthy liberals" are becoming concerned about the fallout of the negative turn of the Obama-Clinton battle. The former group is represented by James Clyburn, a high-ranking Democratic congressman who is uncommitted. "If this party is perceived by people as having gone into a back room somewhere and brokered a nominee, that would not be good for our party," he told the paper, in remarks that echoed what he told the *NYT* [a day earlier](#). The "wealthy donors" angle, though, is an intriguing one: According to campaign finance records released this week, 73 top Clinton donors wrote their first checks to Obama in March. None of Obama's deep-pocketed supporters, by contrast, defected to Clinton.

The *LAT* adds that one of Clinton's top fundraisers is [switching sides](#), and a *WSJ* piece on the role of Bill Clinton in the campaign suggests a reason why his wife [has not yet stepped](#)

[aside](#) despite the increasing calls to do so: "Known as a bad loser, Mr. Clinton privately buttresses his wife's drive to push on, telling her, according to aides: 'We're not quitters.'"

The shooting of Sean Bell in New York (a story also [fronted](#) by the *Post*) did not spark the same level of outrage as previous police shootings have, the *Times* notes. "This was due in part to the race of the officers—two of the three on trial were black—and to the response of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, who reached out to the victim's family in a stark contrast to the response of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani after Mr. Diallo was killed," the paper writes.

Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said at a Pentagon news conference yesterday that Iran was increasing its shipments of arms to militants in Iraq, and pointedly warned Tehran. "I have reserve capability, particularly in our Navy and our Air Force," Mullen said. "So it would be a mistake to think that we are out of combat capability."

The *Post* and *NYT* stuff the story, and the *NYT* has a [detailed analysis](#) of the U.S. administration's claims against Iran. (Were they preparing a story and put it out early based on Mullen's comments?) It finds, unsurprisingly, that there is much more nuance to the situation than President Bush and other top officials claim, and that Iranian involvement is not necessarily getting larger but instead more refined. Iran has developed "a formal and sophisticated training program" for Shiites in Iraq "that included five courses on tactics, leadership, training, commando operations and weapons and explosives. Graduates of the training program are expected to return to Iraq and train other Iraqis, the officials said," according to the *Times*.

The *Journal* notes that, even if Chinese officials and representatives of the Dalai Lama were to meet, it wouldn't necessarily bear fruit. The two sides talked six times between 2002 and 2007. "Envoys of the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama made little progress on Tibet's links to China—such as agreeing when it was, and wasn't, historically part of the country, for example—or steps to broaden Tibet's autonomy under Chinese rule," the paper writes.

The *NYT* also puts the story on the front page, and quotes a Chinese analyst on Beijing's possible intentions. "They want the Dalai Lama to help them relieve pressure before the Olympics. But is it a sincere move, or just a public relations move?" he asks.

Also in the papers... In China, there is [no reprieve](#) from bulldozers making way for Olympic facilities, the *Post* finds. And its pilots are [badly overworked](#), says the *LAT*. Texas officials trying to take care of the 462 children seized at a renegade Mormon ranch are trying hard not to expose them to [too much culture shock](#), the *NYT* finds. The makers of a new documentary film on Abu Ghraib [paid some interviewees](#) and

that has provoked controversy, the *NYT* reports. New discoveries in Afghanistan show that [oil painting](#) developed in Asia 800 years before it did in Europe, the *LAT* reports. The *NYT* has a feature on [upscale nudist vacations](#), remarkable especially for the [photo slide show](#) which entertainingly depicts all sorts of naked people without running askance of the values of a family newspaper. People with contact lenses, Lasik surgery, or perfectly fine vision are increasingly wearing non-prescription eyeglasses [because they're cool](#), the *Journal* reports. And the *LAT* has a front-page feature on the [father of a soldier killed in Iraq](#), who "knows his son's story sounds like one you've heard before. He knows you probably don't care to read about another dead soldier. He wants you to pay attention anyway." And you should—it's a heartbreaking read.

Copyright 2008 Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive Co. LLC

87/87