CULTURE JUSTLY SCRUTINIZED

A TAKE ON SIX YEARS OF VIRTUE AND VENALITY

HERB SCHULTZ

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By
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INTRODUCTION

IN a spurt of creativity – or more likely, suffering from a bad case of diarrhea of the pen – I published three novels and collection of short stories between 2009 and 2011. I suppose I could have spaced out the delivery of the books, but I was at that time in a zone. Over several years, I had accumulated dozens of ideas for short stories, novellas, period pieces, satirical takedowns, political hit-jobs, and nasty screeds. Strangely, I found no impulse to conjure up a recipe book.

Although employed fulltime in the corporate world, I wrote whenever I could scavenge a sufficient block of time to devote to the effort. Any locale that offered free WIFI became a reason for me to pull out the laptop and start tapping out plot. I wrote in bars, in restaurants, in hotels and in book stores; by the river and near the ocean; on the golf course and aboard planes traversing the longitudes and latitudes of the United States and beyond. Did I mention I wrote in bars? (If really desperate, I would write within the confines of my feudal estate; the WIFI was fine, but the bar service was spotty.)

By 2012 I was worn out. As a diversion at first, then more wholeheartedly later, I started adapting some of my stories into screenplays. This proved to be great fun – and quite productive – yet the urge to write new, original material persisted. As a life-long cynic, the kind of person who sees a glass one-quarter full and complains that it's only one-quarter full AND three-quarters empty, I became intrigued with the idea of writing a regular blog that would cover primarily stuff going on in the creative world of

movies, books, plays, art – and to satiate my morbid underpinning, obituaries. To my way of thinking, the blog would provide at a minimum a motivation to continue to write, thus keeping my muscle-memory reasonably intact. And if the blog became popular enough, it could serve as a platform to promote my books and screenplays, and even help me pull down a little scratch. The blog did not become wildly popular, and let's just say, the earnings from it did not threaten to drive me up into the next tax bracket. Still, I pressed on with the blogging for six years.

The short missives I posted into the ether became a form of therapeutic. Rather than laugh in lonely derisiveness at some foolishness I read while sitting on the toilet, or yell like an addled fool at a pundit prevaricating on TV, I turned to the blog to call out stupidity and hurl opprobrium. That's not to say the blogs were exclusively mean-spirited. Plenty addressed accomplishments, lauded excellence, and raised awareness of little-known achievements. In my assessment, the upbeat blogs constitute about a quarter of the material you'll read here, and three-quarters will justly scrutinize culture – you know, only one-quarter this AND three-quarters that.

The funny thing is that my intention from the start was to stick to non-political topics, as those command more than enough coverage by bloggers more broadly-read and dedicated to the space than I could ever be… or would want to be. And yet, I couldn't help myself. The quantity of idiocy, incompetence, mendacity, thievery and venality bound up in American politics was just too much to ignore. If you decide to read on, you'll notice the blog entries making a subtle evolution into politics, followed by turnabout akin to falling off a precipice near the end. Obviously, the entrance of a certain orange-tinged creature into the body politic didn't help. As Frank Sinatra once warbled, "the pickin's have been

lush." I think most would agree that the unconventional (OK, abnormal) stunts we all observed from the time Trump descended the escalator that is golden, showered by the mist from the nearby faux waterfall in his eponymous tower that makes the atrium smell faintly like a lagoon, until his unlikely election made for good commentary. What can I say? I went for it. Then as quickly as the infection addled my brain, the fever subsided and I eventually tired of the whole scene. By the end of 2018, it became nigh impossible to keep up a blog dealing effectively with the onslaught of risible material emanating from "Trumpworld" and all its aberrant satellites.

I suppose I could have tacked back to my original vision for the blog and refocused on justly scrutinizing culture, but by that time I was worn out. 2012 redux.

Still, I hope you find this collection of observations catalogued over six years to be a compelling reminder of the colorful people and the sclerotic institutions, and the events associated with them, that you have loved, despised, ridiculed and admired. Or have forgotten. Or perhaps never even knew about. That would be cool.

Cattle Rustlers on a Torpedo Boat

October 20, 2012

I don't watch much TV. My decidedly ancient LCD television delivers a blurry mess compared to the technology available today that magnifies every pimple and pore of the personalities that inhabit the other side of the camera. Still, I will make a point to watch TV if a decent movie is scheduled for broadcast. And that's a big "if." A recent scan of the TV schedule in *The New York Times* offered these terse and snarky reviews:

- "Haunted house foolishness" – Dream House
- "Curiously retrograde" – Our Idiot Brother
- "Giant Leap Backward" – Apollo 18
- "Slick facile entertainment" – Valkyrie
- "Wish it were funnier" – Maid in Manhattan
- "Ridiculously derivative" – The Astronaut's Wife
- "Juiceless and nearly bloodless" – Twilight Saga: New Moon
- "Superficial silliness" – Under the Tuscan Sun
- "Not quite coherent" – Drumline
- "Couple end their relationship but neither wants to move out. You will." – The Break-up

And that's the indictment of movies showing on just a single evening. Jesus. Some of these stinkers had big-time actors attached, including Tom Cruise, Vince Vaughan, Charlize Theron, Daniel Craig, Ralph Fiennes, Naomi Watts, and Johnny Depp. Which has me wondering. As an unproduced screenwriter all I ever hear is how exceedingly competitive the market is for original screenplays. How there are 50,000 scripts dumped upon Hollywood readers every year from which a few hundred are chosen for production. Obviously with such imbalance in supply and demand, it's a buyer's market. Read "Your Screenplay Sucks" by William Akers, and you'll be repeatedly bludgeoned with demoralizing evidence of why you have zero chance of advancing in the industry. He says right up front, "If I can convince you to quit, and only for the price of this book, you should name your next son after me." Nice. The argument is compelling – lots of writers competing for the attention of a tiny sliver of opportunity. OK, so why then does Hollywood produce so much garbage if they have an army of experienced readers and supremely talented producers to separate

wheat from chaff? Is the quality of the 50,000 scripts submitted annually so goddamned bad that not even 50 great ones (or a tenth of 1 percent) can be identified? Seems unlikely. No, I tend to side with the argument posed in "Screenwriting Tricks for Authors" by Alexandra Sokoloff that the rewrite process in Hollywood is a serious culprit. To make a script fit more in line with a current fad, or sell to a different demographic, writers are brought in to rewrite. Sometimes many writers, one after the other. Perhaps the assignment is to relocate the action, or to change the genders of the main characters, or to upend the entire plot. Billy Wilder captured it perfectly when he has his screenwriter character Joe Gillis in "Sunset Boulevard" recap the fate of one of his scripts. "The last one I wrote was about cattle rustlers. Before they were through with it, the whole thing played on a torpedo boat."

Story Lessons from "Gilligan's Island"

October 27, 2012

I was an avid fan of "Gilligan's Island" in the black-and-white '60s, and although I was still too young at the time to have developed fantasies of Lesbian love between Ginger and MaryAnn, I was savvy enough to question how the Professor could fashion a Geiger counter out of a coconut and yet be thoroughly incapable of repairing a hole in the Minnow. Seemed like a clear flaw of logic… but so what? Like all of Sherwood Schwartz's moronic drivel, "Gilligan's Island" offered pure, satisfying entertainment. Logic was a mere intrusion to be stepped upon like a crunchy roach and kicked 'neath the icebox.

Think about the many big Hollywood productions that contain huge logic flaws that, if corrected, would completely change the movie, perhaps rendering it moot. Consider "No Country for Old Men," a tight, tense suspense movie with solid acting by Josh

Brolin, Tommy Lee Jones and Javier Bardem who won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. After Josh Brolin stumbles upon the aftermath of a drug deal gone bad, he absconds scot-free with a sack of money, leaving behind a bunch of corpses and one barely-alive low-level drug dealer in the pitiless desert. Does he live happily ever after? No, he makes the totally illogical decision to return to the scene to salve the sole survivor with a jug of water. What? Of course, as anyone would expect, when Josh the Good Samaritan shows up with the water, he encounters inquisitive bad guys and the chase is on. And so is the movie, which would have wrapped in 10 minutes had Josh not made such an illogical move.

How about "The Next Three Days" starring Russell Crowe and directed by Paul Haggis? This is a story of a man who plots to break his wife out of prison after she is (falsely) incarcerated for murder. The movie is full of action that seems implausible, but not necessarily illogical – until a point that kicks off the third act. Pursued by angry drug dealers whom he has just ripped off, Crowe bangs his car into a trash can leaving behind a broken tail light lens. Although detectives identify the getaway vehicle as a type owned by thousands of people, they quickly narrow down to a single suspect by cross-referencing the list with people in prison. The only problem – a convicted murderer in prison for years would not be a registered owner of any vehicle. Absent this flaw the tense final act in which Crowe executes his plan while simultaneously avoiding capture by the newly-energized police falls apart.

In the comedy genre consider "Back to the Future II" in which Biff Tannen of the future steals the DeLorean time machine, travels back to the past to enable his younger self to prosper financially through an ill-gotten sports almanac, then travels back to the time and place in which he stole the DeLorean. It's critical to the story that he return the DeLorean, otherwise Marty and Doc

Brown can't proceed to resolve the crisis. Seems OK until the Doc himself explains in detail on a blackboard how this is impossible. You see, once Biff changed the past he could not have returned to the same future, thus denying Marty and the Doc the means by which to set everything straight. The movie makes a case of "logic snag" against itself, yet the audience accepts.

And what about the classics? Does it make logical sense that Rick Blaine of "Casablanca" fame could kill a senior Nazi commander in German-occupied territory and get away with it on the strength alone of a corrupt local official's declaration "round up the usual suspects"? Not one diligent, ass-kissing Nazi grunt investigates for all of ten minutes to discover the whole thing is bullshit? The Nazis routinely executed thousands of poor fuckers for nothing more than pilfering a maggot-infested heel of bread; you think they'll overlook the assassination of their top SS commander and settle for "round up the usual suspects"? Not likely, but so what? The ending of "Casablanca" is among the top ten of all time. A more realistic ending would have Rick and Capt. Renault twitching face down in a trench with a bullet hole in the backs of their heads. But then 'Casablanca" would descend from top 5 status to notch below "Predator." Speaking of "Predator," is it logical that a half-dozen guys can carry twelve tons of armaments into the jungle?

Keanu Reeves: Four down and 46 to go

November 2, 2012

Keanu Reeves has appeared in three movies with a state in its name: "The Prince of Pennsylvania" (1988), "My Own Private Idaho" (1991), and "Feeling Minnesota" (1996). And in 1991's "Point Break" he plays an undercover FBI agent with the unlikely

name of Johnny Utah. That's four states. Only 46 more to go for the slacker-method actor to fill out the entire Union.

To help him progress toward this dubious goal I recommend a few projects to consider.

"North by North Dakota" – In this sequel to "North by Northwest" Keanu takes over Cary Grant's role as ad-man Roger Thornhill who, in a case of mistaken identity, is pursued into Fargo by two mis-matched kidnappers-for-hire. In a nod to the original movie's famous crop-duster chase scene, Keanu must outrun a menacing woodchipper.

"Indiana Jones and the Hospice of Doom" – Keanu is the nephew of octogenarian Indiana Jones played once again by an addled Harrison Ford who is now confined to a wheel chair and spends his days in a hospice whipping the nurses with his shoelace and slurping soup. After Indiana rolls away unnoticed by hospice staff, Keanu must divine the soup's three mystery ingredients to lure Indy back before the Nazis invade Boca Raton.

"Gimme Tax Shelter" – In this gritty thriller centering on rogue tax lawyers bending incorporation statutes, Keanu plays Dickie Delaware, undercover CPA. Dickie must delay the tax lawyers' ringleader just long enough so that he misses a key filing deadline.

"The Joe Montana Story" – On the strength of his role as quarterback Shane Falco in "The Replacements" Keanu is a natural to play Joe Montana in this compelling biopic. The ups and other ups of Montana's career provide plenty of feel-good moments as well as acting challenges as Keanu repeatedly makes love to his ego.

"Who's afraid of Virginia Wolfe" – In a twisty remake of the original adaptation of Edward Albee's vitriolic play, Keanu takes on the role of Martha, the alcoholic shrew wife of George, tentatively to be played by Whoopie Goldberg.

"Shutter Rhode Island" – In this creepy tale in the vein of "The Devil's Advocate," Keanu undergoes significant cosmetic make-over to portray Lincoln Chafee, a vindictive liberal governor who forces one town after another into bankruptcy after residents refuse to raise taxes to offset skyrocketing public sector employee pensions.

"The Story of O-hio" – Buffed Keanu gets naked in this story of a sexually liberated fashion photographer who grows up in uptight Cincinnati. A true slut, he submits to having his penis branded with the initials of his lover, poses for Robert Mapplethorpe with a hamster in his anus, and finally, finding true happiness, moves to metropolitan Akron to open a tantric massage parlor above the local Red Lobster.

"New Mexico" – In a nutshell: "New" meets "Mexico".

"Oklahoma!" – Keanu sings and dances… ah, never mind.

Cuts Tell the Story

November 12, 2012

I'm sitting in seat 17D on a Delta flight to Salt Lake City next to a man who in sleep looks remarkably like the mummified body of King Tut, head thrown back and toothless mouth agape. And truthfully, Tut's skin looks better, even after 3,000 years wrapped in cloth. Anyway, I had been working yet again on the old screenplay-polish routine when I glanced up at the in-flight movie playing on a screen smaller than an iPad. I recall the flight

attendant announcing the title which I now forget, and deciding to pass on the $2 headset that would have enabled me to listen in on all the scintillating dialog.

Every so often I'd glance up, watch a snippet of action, note the look on the faces of the actors, and return to writing my own movie-to-be. And by the time the credits rolled, based on these occasional glimpses, I had a pretty good idea of what the movie was about. I credit this to a few factors. First, I've seen thousands of movies and like an experienced mechanic who can diagnose a car's problem by smelling its treacly fluids, I can quickly call upon past viewings and make connections. Second, virtually every Hollywood movie (certainly one qualified to play on a commercial airline) follows a set formula for its genre, reducing the dependence upon the viewer to hear dialog. And third, movies are fundamentally a visual medium. If made correctly, reliance on dialog is minimal.

Although many casual movie patrons would disagree, some of the finest films are silent. Topping most cinephiles' lists is "Battleship Potemkin" by Sergei Eisenstein. The cinematography shimmers, but it is the careful, well-engineered editing that makes the movie compelling. You know the crew of the Potemkin is anxious about looming battle, not because some seaman calls out "I'm anxious about the looming battle!" but because you're watching a frenetic intercutting of engine pistons cranking, a prow cutting through the foamy waters, a frightened look on a sailor's face, another sailor clanging a bell, smoke billowing from a stack. The story is better told through the cuts than through expositive speeches. David Mamet covers this well in his book "On Directing Film."

I wasn't the least bit shocked when "The Artist" won the Oscar for best movie of 2011. I watched that movie in a sold-out

Angelika theater when it first came out, and after it was over the entire audience applauded. I knew it could win best picture – despite the musings of many people who ridiculed the notion of the very existence of a black and white silent movie in an era of 3D digital animatronic green-screen blockbusters like "Transformers". Unfortunately, the trend in Hollywood is to apply more and more of the production budgets to the big, comic book-type films, leaving less to fund thoughtful, well-crafted, adult-minded product. For more on that, read David Denby's excellent article in *The New Republic* – "Has Hollywood Murdered the Movies?"

Evariste Galois Deserves a Movie

November 29, 2012

Pursuing a degree in mathematics many years ago, I believe I was the rare student who was truly interested in the lives, and not just in the scribblings of the long-dead mathematicians who advanced axioms, contemplated corollaries, locked up lemmas, and proved the theorems that kept us math majors up well past bed-time surrounded by crumpled loose leaf and pencil shavings. If I was to be tortured into unraveling dozens of partial differentials every night, I needed to understand the lives and times of these dungeon-masters who had created such well-honed implements of pain.

I'm sure most people with a high-school diploma have heard of Pythagoras and his theorem of the sums of squares; of Euclid and his orthogonal geometry; and of Newton and his three laws of motion. Perhaps some even know that Cartesian coordinates refer to René Descartes, and may be vaguely familiar with his adage "I think therefore I am (Cogito ergo sum)." But that's about it. And if a titan like Descartes is today a mostly-obscure figure from a time when leeches and cupping were bona-fide medicinal

therapies, what amount of glory could one expect to be bestowed upon such exemplary players as Poisson, Euler, Hilbert, Fermat, Leibniz, Gauss, Von Neumann, Ramanujan, and Cauchy.

When it comes to movies and mathematicians, it seems they rarely intersect unless the mathematician in question suffers from psychosis or borders on the deviant. Consider "A Beautiful Mind," the 2001 Academy award winning film about the troubles and triumphs of mathematician and Nobel laureate John Nash. Nash makes a great character, mostly because he's a paranoid delusional who detects elaborate communist plots to bring down America, and sees non-existent tormentors. His mathematical prowess is presented to some degree, but the movie prefers to dwell on his oddball behavior and subsequent quasi-triumph over wackiness.

In just the past month, TODpix, in conjunction with Story Center Productions and Furnace launched the U.S. theatrical distribution of "Codebreaker,' the story of Alan Turing – the mathematical genius whose work was instrumental in decrypting Nazi codes and in doing so aided the Allies success in World War II. Turing was also a homosexual fully 50 years before "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" – and as such, he might as well have been a two-headed satyr deserving of chemical castration and ouster from dignified society. Ironically in the end, Turing committed suicide thanks to the Gestapo-like tactics foisted upon him by the very countrymen who benefitted from his efforts to vanquish Gestapo tactics.

We need a good movie about a leading-man mathematician, and I think Evariste Galois fits the bill. The man was admitted to university at age 10, but his well-educated mother preferred to school him at home. He had serious and constant run-ins with academic authority figures; in one account Evariste refused to participate in an entrance exam to École Polytechnique, finding

the test too trivial, and in protest threw a rag for cleaning the blackboard in the face of the test proctor. Such rebellion plays well on screen. And while his mathematical research was bearing significant fruit, Evariste encountered roadblocks to professional progress: his papers were rejected for publication, he was expelled from university; his father committed suicide when Evariste was 18. Great conflict material. The best part is Galois' radical political activism at a time in French history that saw great turmoil and treachery. Of course, there are arrests, and romantic affairs, but Evariste Galois' untimely demise in a duel at age 21 seals the deal for me.

"Stuck in the Middle with You" Makes Me Think of Torture

December 15, 2012

I'm working my way through a third or fourth Glenlivet, struggling to unravel puns and spoonerisms that pass for clues in *The New York Times* Sunday crossword puzzle, when I hear the opening lyrics of "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You," Frankie Valli's 1967 single that vaulted all the way to #2 on Billboard that tumultuous year. And the first image that comes to mind is Robert DeNiro and Christopher Walken playing pool in a Clairton, PA workingman's bar in "The Deer Hunter." When Valli stretches his famous falsetto to belt out "I love you Baaaay-bee, and if it's quite alright, I need you Baaaay-bee to warm the lonely nights," I can't help envisioning the two actors miming the tune in proper histrionic fashion. "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You" is that strange pop tune that having enjoyed a long life suddenly comes to be associated later, after appearing in a film, with something completely different. In 1967 the song evoked the consummate optimism of the Four Seasons founder and "Jersey Boys" inspiration. Now,

following the 1978 release of the harrowing tale of friendship and obligation in wartime Vietnam, it's difficult to hear the tune without thinking about Russian Roulette. Dozens – perhaps hundreds – of songs that were originally commissioned for films went on to top the charts: "Eye of the Tiger" ("Rocky III"), "Footloose" ("Footloose"), "Power of Love" ("Back to the Future"), "Danger Zone" ("Top Gun"), "Moon River" ("Breakfast at Tiffany's").

Now consider "Stuck in the Middle with You" by Stealers Wheel that reached #6 in 1973. Can anyone listen to that one-hit wonder and not conjure visions of a psycho in a black suit slicing the ear off of a cop bound to a chair? The scene in question, Mr. Blonde strutting about as he toys with his captured prey in "Reservoir Dogs," is vicious and disturbing. The song playing in the background, a Dylanesque, pop, bubble-gum favorite, winds up consigned forever to an association with violence and depravity. Regardless, if it hadn't been for Quentin Tarantino's inclusion of the throw-away song in his gritty, scene-scrambled masterpiece, the extent of Stealers Wheel's legacy might be their appearance on the occasional oldies album featured on the QVC channel.

Flatline, Meet God, Publish a Bestseller

February 18, 2013

Every few years I make a visit to the gastroenterologist for a routine colonoscopy – and I look forward to it, but not because I believe I'm taking a positive step toward avoiding a hideous cancer by submitting to a procedure that scopes my intestines for shiny polyps which are then extricated most efficiently by a cauterizing needle on the tip of a roto-rooter. No, I look forward to colonoscopies for the Propofol – the intravenous, milky anesthesia that delivers immediate serenity that no soporific can match. No

wonder Michael Jackson loved the stuff, although his demand for injections several times a day was probably unwise.

I write of this because I noted with some dismay that the number one best-selling non-fiction book last week in *The New York Times* was "Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife" by Eben Alexander. Alexander describes his near-death experience (helpfully turned into an acronym: NDE) after falling into a coma from bacterial meningitis. Although as a neurosurgeon used to refuting his patients' wild tales of wandering about the afterlife, Alexander is now prepared to confirm the scenes of God that the jumbled electrons in his own brain ginned up constitute irrefutable "proof of heaven." Such books have a tendency to attract armies of desperate book-buyers who require "evidence" that their shitty lives are not being lived in vain; that a reward for dutiful perseverance awaits them in the end.

This must explain the phenomenon of "Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back" by Todd Burpo along with Lynn Vincent, a book that has resided for 104 consecutive weeks on the best-seller list, including at least 44 of them in number one position. In this installment, Burpo's four-year old son Colton has undergone surgery, and during his convalescence replies to his mother upon her query about his experience in the hospital, "Yes, Mommy, I remember. That's where the angels sang to me." Another proof of heaven? Note: the boy is four years old; his father is a pastor; they live in Nebraska. Of course, the eight million people who bought the book believe the story – why not? Who cares? I only wish my triennial ingestion of Propofol would produce some form of hallucination that I could interpret as a visit to the pearly gates, translate into an uplifting multi-million-dollar book and movie contract, and live happily

ever after with enough money to engineer my own regimen of Propofol ingestion.

Just so you don't think the movement has no legs: "Heaven Is for Real for Kids" also has hit the top spot on *The New York Times* Best Seller List in the "print children's picture books" category, and the Burpo family's follow-up book "Heaven Changes Everything" made *The New York Times* list in October 2012. I predict the financially successful publication of a few more offerings in the genre of "I almost died, met God, and dictated a book about it" until God himself gets fed up and demands royalties equal to the GDP of the universe.

New Literary Genre: "Killing XYZ"

February 21, 2013

Bill O'Reilly has made a killing on "Killing." Rectifying a massive void in the documentation of our country's colorful history, O'Reilly has penned (with help, of course) two best-selling books about the heretofore obscure assassinations of Presidents Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy. So obscure in fact that O'Reilly is compelled to inform the reader of "Killing Lincoln" that "the story you are about to read is true and truly shocking." Thanks to O'Reilly's diligent efforts and dogged commitment, we now know how, and even more importantly, by whose hand each lesser-known president met his untimely fate.

Given O'Reilly's massive TV following of sycophants, it's no wonder that publisher Henry Holt & Co. would bankroll the right-twing pundit to author "Killing Lincoln" and "Killing Kennedy." Both books have spent lengthy periods atop *The New York Times* bestseller list earning millions for both author and publisher. Forget the fact that the books contain numerous factual errors – so many so that for a while the National Park Service (which

runs a rarely-visited site called Ford's Theater where O'Reilly discovered Lincoln was shot) refused to sell the book there. It seems O'Reilly claimed Lincoln met another obscure character of the time, a Ulysses Grant, in the Oval Office even though there was no such office until 1909, well after the killing of Lincoln is thought to have occurred.

Anyway, I saw an ad in the paper this morning announcing the September 2013 release of another O'Reilly genre book: "Killing Jesus." Again, the pundit (along with sub-author Martin Dugard) takes on the challenge to shed light on a poorly-understood and little-documented event in history. I sincerely hope Bill doesn't report any more faulty scenes like one where this Jesus fellow breaks matzo with an apostle in the Oval Office.

Knowing that the appetite for more "Killing XYZ" books will persist unabated for years, I have some suggestions that should last until the end of the decade.

"Killing Abel" – O'Reilly travels throughout modern-day Iraq in search of the site of the Garden of Eden looking for clues to the world's first killing. When he finds a cache of WMDs instead, he puts the book on hold and goes on TV to call for another impeachment of Bill Clinton.

"Killing Paul McCartney" – Mining for details on an obscure rock band called "The Beatles," of which McCartney was possibly a founding member, O'Reilly reports on who killed Paul, and the assassin's motiva– Wait, what? Paul isn't dead?

"Killing John Lennon" – That's better.

"Killing Old Yeller" – In this weepy recollection of a folk tale based loosely on the true story of the assassination

of a rabid deer named "Bambi's Mom," O'Reilly dives deep into the details of what drove a boy to kill the family's beloved yellow dog, and in the process discovers what really happened between Chuck Connors and Dorothy McGuire while Fess Parker was away for a month hunting with the guys.

"Killing Pope John Paul" – Now that his co-author Martin Dugard is beginning to whine about getting paid minimum wage for turning O'Reilly's hallucinations into best-selling books, Bill brings in a new co-author – Francis Ford Coppola – and the two tell the story of a clueless pope who mistakes Lysol for Pinot Grigio and succumbs while his randy cardinals on the floor below exchange their red capes for black hoods to rehearse a scene from Stanley Kubrick's soon-to-be produced film, "Eyes Wide Shut."

"Killing Christmas" – O'Reilly departs from his usual format of writing about obscure figures that no historian deems worthy to cover, and pens a book about a topic that is near and dear to every Christian around the world who shits his pants whenever a Krispy Kreme employee says "Happy Holidays." A fatal victim of an insidious war upon itself by un-Godly forces, Christmas finally succumbs to the twin forces of Hanukah and Kwanza which connive together in the Oval Office to devise their lethal plot.

The MVP who Plays for the Losing Team

February 26, 2013

This past Sunday, the Academy Award for Best Director went to a man who did not direct the Best Picture – a scenario I find

difficult to reconcile. It's like giving the MVP award to a member of the losing team. Does it really make sense, given that the director is responsible for the final product, that the best director could be someone other than the person who turned out the best picture? What is a Best Director being recognized for if not directing the Best Movie?

Nevertheless, this scenario happens on occasion, although less so in the recent past. Ten times in the first two decades of the Academy Awards the Best Director Oscar was bestowed upon a man who did not direct the winner of the Best Picture. It happened another twelve times in the next five-plus decades. People who don't slavishly follow Oscar history might be surprised to know that:

"The Godfather" won Best Picture of 1972, but Francis Ford Coppola lost out to Bob Fosse who directed Liza Minnelli in "Cabaret." Warren Beatty captured Best Director laurels for his epic "Reds," but it was "Chariots of Fire" that took Best Picture accolades in 1981. The master Alfred Hitchcock never took home a Best Director Oscar even though his film "Rebecca" won Best Picture in 1940. Hitch lost out that year to John Ford whose dusty-bowl adaptation of Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" took the director's statue. And the seminal "The Graduate" did quite well in 1967, especially for director Mike Nichols who beat out Norman Jewison, director of the searing best-picture, "In the Heat of the Night."

Still, last Sunday was especially historical (and bizarre, really) in that the winner of Best Picture, "Argo" was directed by a guy (Ben Affleck) who wasn't even nominated for Best Director. That's happened only twice in Academy Awards history: in 1989 when "Driving Miss Daisy" took the Best Picture honors after director Bruce Beresford was snubbed altogether, and all the way back in

1931 when Edmund Goulding's classic "Grand Hotel" took Best Picture accolades, yet poor Ed received no love. In that year Frank Borzage took the Best Director Oscar (although that nickname wasn't officially adopted until 1939) for "Bad Girl," an obscure, dated and never-watched melodrama.

I suspect the disconnect is an artifact of Academy Award voting rules – only members of the Director's Guild vote for Best Director (with some exceptions), while all members of the Academy get to vote for Best Picture. Still, it seems irrational.

"Find the Fossil" – My One-Time Favorite Game

March 2, 2013

I used to play a parlor game I invented called "Find the Fossil." It was based on content in the Sunday *New York Times*. As soon as I got home with the newspaper, I would immediately pluck the "Styles" section out from the thick block of newsprint and begin my search. Before I go on, however, some background. A weekly feature in "Styles" is "Evening Hours," an egotistical mélange of photographs documenting the festivities at exclusive NYC society parties. It might be something like a black-tie fund-raiser for sub-Saharan orphans sponsored by "The John D. & Catherine T MacArthur Foundation," or an anachronistic debutante ball arranged for stuck-up Dalton School girls outfitted in $20,000 Vera Wang gowns. Truly a compendium of the preposterousness of the gilded age – rich swells living it up to benefit the downtrodden, wretched refuse with the hope they will teem someone else's shores.

You never knew who might appear in these self-serving documentary photos: mayors, musicians, super-models, business tycoons accompanied by 6-foot-two arm candy. You just never

knew… except for Brooke Astor. She seemed to pop up all the time. Brooke Astor: wealthy doyenne of New York Society; wife of Vincent Astor, the long-dead chairman of *Newsweek* magazine and son of the man who went down with the Titanic; ancient, desiccated woman who favored enormous brimmed hats that made her look like a thumbtack; and the "fossil" in the game of "Find the Fossil." I marveled at how often Mrs. Astor appeared in the Styles section, so I invented a game around it which involved hunting for her image each week. Sometimes Mrs. Astor appeared in photos taken at more than one event. I came to enjoy the game so much that started turning straight for the Styles section ahead of the headline stories on page one. There'd she be, gripping David Rockefeller by the crook of the arm looking confused in the gloaming of the onset of Alzheimer's, on their way into Cipriani's for a fund-raiser in support of the Fresh Air Fund.

Alas, with the demise of Brook Astor a few years ago I needed a new game that would satisfy my sense of righteousness, something that would allow me to feel superior to those who would pose as my betters. And I finally invented it: "Pinpoint the Pan." In this game, the player peruses the TV section of the *NYT*, crawling through the movie listings seeking pithy, three- or four-word slams of stinky films that Hollywood deemed worthy of production and distribution. If you play, you'll find on any given day a half-dozen or more terse, negative reviews of films, many of which starred big-deal actors led by expensive directors. A sampling of some pans I pinpointed in just a couple recent listings illustrates the situation:

- "Disappointing" – Dreamgirls
- "Like shooting tofu in a barrel" – Wanderlust

- "Less than elementary" – Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows
- "Franchise running on fumes" – Transporter 3
- "Tumbles into ugliness" – Jack and Jill
- "Staggeringly bad with genuine spirit of cruelty" – The Butterfly Effect
- "Honey-glazed hokum" – The Help
- "Rock-bottom horror" – The Cave
- "Close-up gore, bloody bore" – Underworld
- "Dumb and sloppy" – Old School
- "Muscle-bound, grunting self-seriousness" – 300
- "Weak cat-and-mouse story" – Heat
- "Will sink your childhood memories" – Battleship
- "Loud, pretentious, flat" – Days of Thunder
- "Funny until you think about it" – The Hangover
- "Self-conscious kitsch" – Clash of the Titans

The Pointless Memoir

March 6, 2013

There are two kinds of memoirs: insightful and pointless. With the barriers to publication all but fallen away with the advent and standardization of technologies to enable self-publishing, I estimate that the pointless memoir now makes up 95 percent of the category. In fact, self-publishing and memoirs were practically made for each other. Everyone has at least one story in them – their own; and in most cases that's all they have. One maudlin tale that all readers outside the author's immediate circle of friends and family would find stultifying. Clearly, an author incapable of penning more than one book is not someone a traditional publisher would waste a moment on. For this reason, companies such as AuthorHouse, Xlibris and iUniverse have flourished,

serving the "one-book wonder" and taking profits from these deluded scribblers who spend a fortune on cover design, layout, editing, marketing and the purchase of boxes of books that end up lining the walls of the garage.

Among the thousands of memoirs self-published every month, do any approach the quality and insightfulness of say "The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant," Winston Churchill's "Memoirs of the Second World War," or even something self-serving like "Decision Points," George W. Bush's recollections from the White House? No chance.

Why? Because none of these pointless memoirists actually accomplished anything of historical value, either valiant or vainglorious. The pointless memoir has become the 21st century version of the carousel of Ektachrome slides documenting far-flung trips taken by boorish types and flashed one after the other before the glazed eyes of their captive guests. Just reading the blurbs for these exercises in futility is convincing enough:

"107 Main Street" by Ross Davidson. "The author was the son of a poor immigrant woman and a wealthy American who abandoned them. Denied help by his father and living in privation, this is his story about haves and have-nots." Sounds like a churlish hatchet job on bad-old-dad to me.

"Farm Boy's Dream" by John Jacobs. "Recounts his life on the farm and his dreams of flying. The advent of World War 2 made his fantasy become reality, when he joined the military, became a bomber pilot, and lived the Farm Boy's Dream." This "military grunt" subcategory of the memoir seems to be one of the fastest-growing as soft-bellied boomers belatedly seek to immerse themselves in

the real war action they protested against as teen-agers, but now feel gypped out of participating in.

"Day-Day's Dream" by Doris Tanner Ross. "As the owner of Doris Tanner's Flowers, Inc., at the age of eighty-eight years old, Doris Tanner Ross decided to fulfill the request of her many friends and family over the past years to tell her story. The story begins in 1924 in Sullivan's Hollow. She had many struggles during the depression era as a war widow with a baby to raise. With God as her guide—" I can't continue – too treacly. Right in the first sentence, the motivation is clear: write a book for my family (of course, AuthorHouse also gets to extract a nice four-figure fee, presumably from Granny Doris's network of rapt descendants.)

"My Untold Torment" by Pippa Sloane. "I have experienced the dark underside of how many Portuguese behave and treat their fellow human beings as opposed to what their smiling, double-kiss greeting portrays… This memoir is based on my personal knowledge, experiences, and feelings… Some of the incidents are embellished for comic effect." Wow – I can't wait to devote a couple hours reading Sloane's psychopathic drivel. By the way, if you tell all the horrific details of how the Portuguese mistreat the non-Portuguese, how is it a torment "untold"?

"Lazy" Meets "Trite"

March 13, 2013

"Under Siege," the 1992 action movie starring Steven Seagal has often been described succinctly as "Die Hard on a battleship." The mash-up two movies was once a fairly-common method to

communicate an instantly understandable movie idea. Anyone familiar with the escapades of Bruce Willis inside the plaster-dusty, unfinished floors and drafty elevator shafts of the Nakatomi Plaza can easily imagine a cartoon character like Seagal romping around the claustrophobic confines of a battleship, traversing expertly, fore to aft, like the Navy Seal he once was. Using the movie mash-up is now mostly frowned upon for being a lazy, trite, overused technique, although I recall "The Screenwriter's Bible" extolling its virtues in an early 1990s edition.

Anyway, I recently saw a full-page ad for a new book by Brad Thor called "The Andalucian Friend" in which the headline screamed "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo meets The Sopranos." That's an intriguing mash-up, but what can you infer from it? Does a character like Lisbeth Salander – the girl with the tattoo – join Tony Soprano's mob to commit cyber-crimes under the tutelage of Pauly Walnuts? Does she strive to take down organized crime, perhaps outwitting the clumsy FBI agents Harris and Grasso with her computer hacking elan? Who knows? The weakness of resorting to a mash-up is clear in this instance.

So, what about these proposed mash-ups? Can you figure out what's going on?

"On the Road" meets "Running with Scissors." Answer: Two men compelled by wanderlust and afflicted with OCD drive night and day, up and down a parking ramp searching for just the right space in which to stash a 1949 Hudson.

"The Grapes of Wrath" meets "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" Answer: When a bunch of addled Okie's exhaust their psychotropic meds, they form a caravan and head out for the far side of the asylum. Tension arises after they ask a very tall Indian holding a broom for directions and are forced to wait for weeks until he finally answers "Mmmmmm, Juicy Fruit."

"To Kill a Mockingbird" in Viet Nam. Answer: After Scout and Jem discover a canister of napalm hidden in the knothole of their neighbor's tree, Boo runs out from the bushes and declares his love for its aroma, especially in the morning.

"Lolita" meets "50 Shades of Grey." Answer: Frustrated by young Dolores's inexperience, Humbert Humbert drags his little friend off to Christian Grey's summer camp to tone up on the monkey bar manacles and an upholstered swing set.

The Soulless Lepers of the Iraq War

March 21, 2013

Ten years ago, on my birthday – March 19, 2003 – America invaded Iraq. Much has happened in the ensuing decade, much of it bad, but I was struck by how little was written and discussed on the big anniversary of our trillion-dollar adventure. I recall more drivel being spewed forth on the tenth anniversary of the death of Princess Diana than serious reflection on a war that claimed thousands of lives. It is not my desire to add to the millions of musings deriding the incompetence associated with the Iraq War, but rather to vilify some of the most arrogant of miscreants who pressed for the prosecution of the war.

Doug Feith, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. Right out of central casting, Feith is the typical chicken hawk beating the drums of war without the benefit of actually experiencing warfare. He created the Office of Strategic Influence which was designed essentially to influence policymakers by submitting biased news stories into the foreign media. I can't think of a better endorsement of Feith than that of Gen. Tommy Franks, retired Commander of the United States Central Command,

who called him, "the fucking stupidest guy on the face of the earth." And Franks knew George W. Bush as well, so that's saying something.

Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Defense Secretary. In addition to grooming his hair with spittle, this rodent had the temerity to suggest that Iraq's postwar reconstruction would pay for itself through increased oil revenues. Unless we confiscate a couple trillion-dollars-worth of heavy crude, it ain't happening. I love the candid shots of Wolfowitz in Michael Moore's scathing "Fahrenheit 9/11" in which he is seen moistening a cheap plastic comb with a gob of spit and running the rancid saliva through his wiry grey hair.

Paul (Jerry) Bremmer, Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority of Iraq. A prodigious title but basically Bremmer was a simple-minded hatchet-man who dismantled the very infrastructure needed to keep Iraq from imploding after the fall of Saddam. General Jay Garner, who eventually inherited Bremmer's turd pile, advised him, "Jerry, you can get rid of an army in a day, but it takes years to build one." In other words, "Jerry – you ignorant slut… "

Ahmed Chalabi, Iraqi Minister and Lying Sack of Shit. Perhaps the worthiest of vilification, Chalabi ginned up fantastic tales of WMDs and internecine Al Qaeda plots – all of which were bullshit, and he knew it. This scumbag introduced the CIA to the unreliable source nicknamed "Curveball" who provided reams of bogus information, including fanciful descriptions of mobile biological weapons factories – more likely trucks selling

falafels in the shape of ballistic missiles (or Chalabi's nose).

Judith Miller, *New York Times* reporter. Miller swallowed Chalabi's disinformation with more aplomb than Linda Lovelace, and then like the excellent stenographer she was, regurgitated the entire charade on the front pages of the once-great *New York Times*. Not only did she shill for the Bush Administration, but she devastated the reputation of the paper she worked for. When Miller indicated after a hiatus from writing front-page fiction that she wanted to come back to the *Times*, the public editor wrote, "The problems facing her inside and outside the newsroom will make it difficult for her to return to the paper as a reporter." Maybe a stint on Fox should have been the logical next move for Joshing Judy.

Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense. I'm sure this bastard fancied himself a Republican version of JFK's "best and brightest," even though his corporate prowess was rooted more in political connections than business acumen. When Iraq ran amok following Bremmer's dismantling of the country's security infrastructure, Rumsfeld declared, "Freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things… Stuff happens." Didn't even have the stones to say the word "shit."

Dick Cheney, Vice President. The man is amazing. Survives a baker's dozen worth of heart attacks, shoots a fellow in the face while quail hunting and receives (!) an apology from the poor slob for getting in Dick's way, collects deferred salary without shame from Halliburton while occupying a position of power that allows him to bestow

lucrative favors upon his former employer. My greatest enjoyment of Oliver Stone's entertaining "W" was when Colin Powell snipes at the Dick Cheney character (played with appropriate darkness by Richard Dreyfus), "Don't patronize me, Mr. Five Deferments." Maybe that never happened (it was an Oliver Stone movie after all) but it's still juicy.

The Art of Taking Offense

March 30, 2013

New York City deputy mayor Joseph Lhota wants to run for real mayor when Michael Bloomberg finally gives up the reins after twelve years (the last four which served by browbeating and bribing City Council to override voter-approved term limits.) But *The New York Times* thinks Republican Lhota may encounter some difficulty appealing to the largely Democratic city; you see, Lhota in 1999 denounced a painting as "offensive," though he hadn't actually seen it. On the sole strength of a lurid description Lhota condemned the painting, the artist, the exhibiting museum, and the man who invented canvas which made the entire kerfuffle possible. That kind of closed-mindedness doesn't set too well with a lot of Gotham City voters who imagine themselves the most enlightened people in the universe. Going further, Lhota, along with law-n-order tyrant Rudy Giuliani began a campaign to bully the Brooklyn Museum into closing down the Sensation exhibit of which the "offensive" painting, Chris Ofili's "The Holy Virgin Mary" was a part. The pair threatened to withhold millions in city support for the museum and brought a lawsuit to have the museum evicted from their stately Beaux-Arts building which they had occupied since 1895.

The complaint centered on Ofili's degradation of a holy icon of the Catholic Church by using elephant dung as a medium and applying cutouts shaped like tiny angels that were upon closer inspection photos of vaginas clipped from porn magazines. As this all took place in the 20th century, I had no easy way to call up a photo of the painting on the nascent web allowing me to form an opinion. I decided to take the 2 train to Brooklyn to observe the outrage for myself.

Because the painting is titled "The Holy Virgin Mary," I had an image of the classic rendition of Mary the mother of Jesus – porcelain complexion, blue eyes, WASP-y nose, long, shimmering poker-straight hair out of a Clairol commercial – defiled by shit and pix of pussies. (Never mind that the real Mary undoubtedly wore her black, kinky hair in braids to frame her dark skin and Mediterranean features.) So, imagine my surprise when I finally laid eyes on the evil painting that nearly brought down the Brooklyn Museum: a luminescent, cartoon-like woman of African descent that bears absolutely no resemblance to the classic Mary oeuvre. Elephant dung had not been smeared or splattered as the media screamed. Instead, Ofili applied hardened clumps to give the painting a three-dimensional effect. He could easily have used clay, but according to the artist, "elephant dung in itself is quite a beautiful object."

It struck me that had Ofili simply titled the painting something else – "Sturdy Black Woman," for example – no one would have given it a second thought. It was a totally manufactured crisis; another phony "war" on Catholicism that victims like Giuliani and Catholic League head Bill Donohue constantly drum up. To stress the phoniness of it all, consider this: I doubt one in a thousand people today know who Chris Ofili is, yet as recently as 2005,

hyperbolic ranter Bernie Goldberg named him one of the "100 People Who Are Screwing Up America." Really?

In the end people were essentially offended by the name of a painting, not the painting itself – and that's not how professional offense-takers should behave.

A Whiff of Gross Air

April 2, 2013

This past Monday evening as I seared some yellowfin tuna and curated a saffron risotto, I listened to Terry Gross, host of NPR's "Fresh Air" interview Mary Roach, the author of "Gulp." It seems author Roach has "tackled the human digestive system, from the mouth on down… and along the way, gets a sedation-free colonoscopy and goes on location for a fecal transplant." As if I needed it, Terry warned those in her audience eating or preparing food to be ready for some disgusting conversation. This from a master of the probing, in-depth interview with such notables as Frank Langella, Maurice Sendak, Nora Ephron and Quentin Tarantino. By the time the conversation meandered to the subject of noxious flatus, I shook my head in amazement at the notion that medical researchers might be turning their backs on curing the likes of retinitis pigmentosa and spina bifida, focusing instead on developing a wonder drug that would nullify the stink of a fart. And for what purpose? To stifle the joy of silently cutting tangy, aromatic cheese within the confines of an elevator full of strangers held captive for the duration of an ascent of 45 floors? As I methodically stirred my slowly coagulating risotto I thought, "what is going on with Terry Gross… where is her devotion to cultural excellence?"

After dinner I scanned a Styles magazine from the Sunday *New York Times* – one of those occasional inserts that serves as a bulk advertisement disguised as slick cultural journalism – and

came across a multi-page ad for Florida. "Living La Dolce Vita" exclaimed the preamble. Right away the "article" extolled the virtues of visiting the Palm Beaches. Now, I had just recently returned from a week in West Palm Beach where the weather is tasty and the living is easy, but in no way can I attest to witnessing a Vita that is Dolce. The place, like most of Florida, is a culture-free zone, a morass of fast-food franchises, a flat land splotched with insipid architecture. So, I took particular enjoyment in the unintentional irony of the following boast about the art scene in Delray Beach: "for a highbrow experience, you should walk the cool halls of the Norton Museum of Art with… worthy exhibitions such as "Annie Leibovitz" and "The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League 1936-1951." Annie Leibovitz? New York Photo League? I guess as it is with income taxes, the South also depends on the North for a redistribution of culture.

Finally, to cap a long day of assault on culture – or simply good taste – I was bombarded by a number of entreaties to witness a shin bone poking out of the leg of a college basketball player named Kevin Ware who fell awkwardly to the hardwood floor. No thanks. I'd rather contemplate the waning days of freedom to blast a silent but deadly waft of gas into the nostrils of unsuspecting tourists plodding the halls of the Norton Museum, their fanny packs stuffed Reese's Pieces and Splenda lifted from the local Hardees.

A Pyramid of Books Falls Down

April 12, 2013

A Ponzi scheme is the financial industry's equivalent of the Perpetual Motion Machine. Every physicist and engineer know that creating a perpetual motion machine is impossible; the laws of thermodynamics preclude any device from operating indefinitely

without an external source of energy. Any physicist who ever tried to sell a perpetual motion machine would do so knowing full well, in advance, that his offer was fraudulent. In many ways such an offer is a bigger scam than trading three beans for the family cow – at least Jack got a beanstalk out of the fraudulent transaction.

Unwitting participants who join in late to a Ponzi scheme – also known as a pyramid scheme for the shape of the investment structure – are subject to the same outcome as the perpetual motion scam: completely wiped out. Because the perpetuation of the Ponzi scheme requires an ever- increasing entry of investors to sustain itself, the pyramid always collapses, leaving a trail of financial destruction in its wake. Anyone starting a Ponzi scheme knows he is embarking on fraud; there are no mitigating circumstances that might exonerate such a miscreant. Yet, a constant parade of people posing as financial geniuses initiate Ponzi schemes all the time, collecting obscene fees along the way. Just ask Bernie Madoff.

Today I heard on the radio that a cretin named Peter Campbell-Copp was sentenced to six months and ordered to disgorge a big fine after being found guilty of defrauding dozens of authors out of $200,000. That's right – a Ponzi scheme aimed at gullible writers anxious to have their memoirs and travelogues turned into Pulitzer Prize-worthy books. Campbell-Copp has also been barred for life from the publishing business, which is like barring Mike Tyson from ever being a jockey – neither man had ever participated in the profession from which he would be banished. Campbell-Copp took sizable sums of up to $10K from authors seeking his services. He used some of the money from later marks to complete projects for earlier participants, pocketing most for his own personal gain. Like all such schemes, this one collapsed when the number of new authors needed to prop up the pyramid exceeded the population of Vermont where Campbell-Copp plied

his trade. In a financial Ponzi scheme, investors who lose money often are often assigned a portion of the blame; if not for their greed and willful failure to question outlandish returns, they would have avoided suffering. Could the same be said of the authors who hired Campbell-Copp?

I would have to give a qualified "yes." Today, so many hacks and amateurs have been taken in by the apparent gold-rush of successful authors who have self-published, it's no surprise a vanity-press operation would pop up to take their money for nothing in return – not even three beans.

Clevver: The Best Little Whorehouse in Hollywood

April 15, 2013

By the time a movie franchise reaches "part 5," the jig is up. You know the producers have made back their initial speculative investment and are now relaxing on a sugar-sand beach somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere drinking Cachaça cocktails. You also know that "Franchise Part Five" will be a complete dog – an 85-minute-long mess phoned in on a lunchtime conference call. To insulate the franchise from total denunciation by the long-invested, dim-witted audience, the producers will pepper the movie with cameos of B- and C-List celebs in the hopes that the appearance for 15 seconds by a train-wreck like Charlie Sheen, Mike Tyson or Lindsey Lohan will compel a sufficient number of hesitant fans to separate themselves from their last $10.

Consider "Scary Movie 5," the latest parody in a long line that first screened more than a decade ago. The original version scored 53% on *Rotten Tomatoes*. Part 5 garnered 5% – quite a precipitous drop. Here is a sampling of reviews:

"Scary Movie 5 must be some kind of psychological experiment. Perhaps the filmmakers sat in a lab, rubbing their temples while wondering aloud how awful they could make a movie and still score at the box office." *The Washington Post*

"It's supposed to be funny, but you'd have an easier time reading a zombie's pulse than you would finding a single good laugh." *Toronto Star*

"This vapid, vulgar insult to the intelligence couldn't possibly have been tested on any focus groups. Can we all now agree that we've reached the cinematic saturation point with the rapidly-expiring, Scary Movie franchise?" *AALBC.com*

Ouch. With such universal reviewer disgust, you'd think the marketing department would have access to no positive blurbs to adorn their advertising – but there's always at least one media whore willing to gush over any piece of garbage. For "Scary Movie 5" a stooge was identified who was willing to spout this ass-licking testimonial.

"LAUGH-OUT-LOUD FUNNY! A great film that will leave you laughing the entire way through." When I read this unlikely encomium, I wondered what fool would take credit for it, but didn't see an attribution. Then I noticed a tiny asterisk after the quote which led to a footnote in extremely small type at the bottom citing Deidre Behar of some outlet called Clevver.com. They call themselves "the best youth-focused website and resource to find the hottest young Hollywood and teen celebrity interviews, entertainment news, movie news, film reviews, music news, latest breaking music artist information, information on the most popular TV shows, television episode reviews, style and fashion updates and runway reviews."

Just one more reason to wring your hands about the future of America.

Would They Call Him "Lumpy" Today?

April 20, 2013

Clarence "Lumpy" Rutherford died the other day at age 71, and given the man had by his own account (according to his autobiography "Call Me Lumpy") banged more than 1,000 women, pounding a bit hard on the beaver so to speak, it's a wonder he lived as long as he did. For those under the age of 40, Frank Bank played an oafish bully nicknamed Lumpy on the 50's era, white-bread comedy series "Leave it to Beaver." My recollection at the time was that Bank deserved the moniker "Lumpy" because compared to the athletic, boy-next-door Wally Cleaver (Tony Dow) and the anorexic, hyperactive Eddie Haskell (Ken Osmond), Bank was an overweight blob of cellulite, a pure dough-boy. As a first-grader in 1963, I personally knew of no adolescents rivaling the plumpness of Lumpy, and it wasn't until the eighth grade that I first encountered a fellow student who surpassed Lumpy's enormity.

That said, were the Lumpy Rutherford of the late 50s magically transported to any American high-school across the fruited plain, he'd be among the fitter of today's bunch of fried-cheese and McNugget-eating youngsters who would equate walking up an escalator with running a half-marathon.

It's remarkable in light of today's juvenile obesity epidemic that Lumpy was considered a corpulent cretin in his time. I would even go so far as to assert that Jackie Gleason's Ralph Kramden – who was the heaviest load in the early days of television – would not deviate from the norm in modern America, his girth no greater than that of many sedentary, middle-school fast-food chompers. Imagine if the local high-school drama club decided to put on an episode of "The Honeymooners" today. No doubt the biggest casting challenge would be to find someone rail-thin enough to play Ed Norton.

The Lost Week-ending

April 23, 2013

Blake Bailey has just written "Farther and Wilder," a biography of Charles Jackson who is most famous for his first novel, "The Lost Weekend" which was made into an Academy Award-winning film (1946) of the same name, directed by Billy Wilder and starring Ray Milland, both of whom also won Oscars for their work. Milland – who to me bears a remarkable resemblance to Bryan Ferry of Roxy Music – plays Don Birnam, an alcoholic would-be novelist who can't write a single word because he's either drunk or trying to get drunk. He treats everyone around him like shit including his brother, his girlfriend, the bartender at Nat's Bar, random strangers. According to Bailey, Jackson was quite a bit like the fictitious Don Birnam with the exception that Jackson actually wrote a best-selling book.

I saw the movie many years ago and remembered being extremely let down at the end when Don the conniving, boorish, suicidal drunk has a sudden epiphany literally in the final two pages of the script, and resolves to quit alcohol forever and start writing that long-neglected novel to be titled "The Bottle." I realize the movie was made in the mid-Forties when the concept of portraying disgusting alcoholism was a risky move for Hollywood, but still it's ludicrous to believe a man thoroughly addicted could so easily set his life on the right track. "Leaving Las Vegas" with Nicholas Cage and Elizabeth Shue captured reality much more accurately, and in some ways could be viewed as a long-awaited sequel to "The Lost Weekend" in which Don Birnam falls off the wagon for good and dies in a pool of his own urine. Tough but satisfying, in contrast to Billy Wilder's unlikely uplifting denouement.

A Season with Hell

May 4, 2013

I recently finished Richard Hell's oddly-titled memoir "I Dreamed I Was a Very Clean Tramp" and came away with the impression that the author by all accounts never should have lived to celebrate his 25th birthday. A Hollywood stereotype of the misunderstood yet brilliant risk-taking youth who becomes a hard-living, drug-addled rock-n-roller. Bass player Richard Hell was a founding member along with Tom (Miller) Verlaine of the influential punk band Television. After parting acrimoniously from Verlaine, Hell moved on to join with self-destructive guitarist Johnny Thunders to form the Heartbreakers (nothing to do with Tom Petty), and finally assembled one of my favorite punk bands, the ephemeral Void-Oids. It was Richard Hell's spiky haircut and torn suits that I shamelessly copied as a bass player for a noisy band called The Chemicals in the late 1970s.

"I Dreamed I Was a Very Clean Tramp" refers to the author's adolescent compulsion (when he went by the pedestrian name Richard Meyer) to run-away from home and live the romantic life of a drifting troubadour. Young Richard was impelled by a powerful case of wanderlust and frequently left home in the dark of night, only to be repatriated by authorities to his patient parents, often following a spate of destruction: crashing stolen cars, setting property on fire, sucking down vast quantities of alcohol and pharmaceuticals. As the memoir progresses to Hell's life as a provocateur on New York's Lower East Side (long before it became a gentrified playground of *haut* restaurants and Euro-flash, boutique lodging like The Hotel on Rivington aka. THOR) the reader gets a nice first-person taste of the action associated with the emergence of the punk scene centered around CBGBs

and other, less-notorious venues. Hell drops lots of names, not just those of fellow musicians, but also of unlikely acquaintances such as Willem DeKooning, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, and Jasper Johns.

It's not my intention to write a book review, but I feel obligated to note Hell's preoccupation with describing the interiors of various New York apartments. At times you'd think you were reading an issue of *Architectural Digest*. One particularly egregious example:

"The loft was spectacular, stretching an entire block in length, from 14th Street back to another entrance on 13th Street, and the whole width of an old factory building, about as wide as a tenement building. The living space, half a block deep (about 45 yards) on the 14th Street end, was separated into four white-painted rooms lit by big windows. The industrial entrance door from the fifth-floor landing led into the dining room, which was empty except for a rope hammock and a little glass cabinet of some drippily painted life-size plaster cakes and hamburgers. The main room, beyond the dining room, fronted onto 14th Street and was more than twice the size of the dining room. A double bed was parked along the wall, but that area was also the living room, with a couch and some chairs and a glass coffee table. Against the wall past the bed were bookshelves of art books and New York poetry. Down in the far reaches towards 14th Street was a life-sized biplane framework, a giant hardwood replica of the balsa skeleton of a model plane, hung with Christmas tree lights. The kitchen, with its long shiny wooden table was on the other side of the dining room. Past the kitchen was a smaller room with another bed. That second section of the loft was divided lengthwise to include, alongside the bedroom, a very large bathroom that had a gigantic tub in the middle of it. There was recent New York art on

all the walls – Andy Warhol silkscreen paintings, plenty of Claes, Lucas Samaras, Oyvind Fahlstrom, Jime Dine. This was half the loft, the 14th Street side. The 13th Street side…"

Yes, he goes on for another few paragraph describing the other half. I began to wonder whether Hell was contracted – ala Charles Dickens – by the word. Unlike Patti Smith's superior memoir "Just Kids" which brings the reader up to current times, Hell ends his story shortly after kicking drugs in the 1980s. Although he's done some writing in the ensuing decades, Richard Hell largely fell into obscurity – not that he was ever really famous to begin with. (That may account for his occasional snarky attacks on Patti Smith peppered about the book. You can tell Richard Hell foolishly believes himself the more influential of the two.)

SEC: The FEMA of Finance

May 9, 2013

Right after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and surrounding towns in 2005, as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) serially fumbled every aspect of their responsibilities, and as it was revealed that FEMA administrator Michael D. "Brownie" Brown possessed no qualifications to warrant his position of authority (unless being a Commissioner for the International Arabian Horse Association counts for something,) I surmised that most US government agencies charged with oversight and regulation were likely equally lame as FEMA – we just would never know it until they faced a crisis that would reveal their incompetence.

At the time the example I most often cited in conversations was the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), the regulator of Wall Street's shenanigans. Based solely on my instinct that government agencies were incompetent by design (after all,

Reagan and his political heirs never missed an opportunity to excoriate government as the problem, and then bent over backwards to make sure that remained the status quo by installing into leadership positions idiots and agents hostile to the institution they would run,) I was quite confident that SEC flunkies were blindly pushing papers while the far smarter quantitative analysts and traders duped them. Then when the Bernie Madoff scandal blew up in 2008 it proved my instincts correct. Although the SEC had been repeatedly warned over the course of ten years, the somnambulant regulators ignored the compelling evidence, allowing thousands of investors to lose more than $50 billion, and indirectly costing the life of at least one fund manager, Thierry de la Villehuchet who slit his wrists after investing and losing hundreds of millions of Old Europe money including $55 million of his personal fortune.

I doubt a better case has been made against the SEC than Harry Markopolos's recounting of the sordid Bernie Madoff scandal, "No One Would Listen: A True Financial Thriller." I decided to read the book after running into Markopolos' parents at a Kentucky Derby party at the Erie Yacht Club, and recalling that their son had become famous for "blowing the whistle on Madoff." That is somewhat misleading because it implies that Markopolos was responsible for bringing down Madoff, when in fact Madoff collapsed all by himself under the weight of his long-running Ponzi scheme, which like all such pyramid scams must eventually fail publicly – and painfully for those who hung along for the ride. But as he states in the title, "no one would listen." That's also a bit misleading, for Markopolos recounts how he informed any number of regulators and fellow travelers in the world of complex financial instruments of Madoff's alleged fraud, and that many listened and agreed something seemed amiss, but

as long as money was being made no one cared. That might have been the more accurate title: "No One Cared."

Regardless, the book is a devastating tale of arrogance, entitlement, incompetence, petulance – and that's just the part about the SEC. For a decade starting in the late 1990s after fairly easily determining Madoff was perpetrating some kind of fraud (front-running most likely, but perhaps even running a Ponzi scheme which seemed impossible to anyone who would listen given the man's impeccable pedigree on the Street and in the Synagogue), Markopolos and a small team of fellow Wall Streeters continued to build out an incontrovertible case, only to be rebuffed by everyone they encountered. Not just the SEC, but hedge fund managers, feeder fund managers, even *The Wall Street Journal*, which, had they jumped on the story, could have clinched a Pulitzer Prize out of it.

It's clear that Markopolos's motivation for continuing to investigate and evangelize year after disappointing year slowly morphed from bringing down Bernie Madoff to embarrassing the SEC. He wanted the SEC to repent for their sins and change the way they did "business," but the reader may also get the sense that Harry wanted revenge. The SEC blew him off and treated him like they would a lowly, disgruntled employee greedy for a payout. But after reading the tale, I couldn't blame him. As a taxpayer, I too wanted revenge. Today it seems that you can't turn over a rock without finding yet another obscure government agency charged with important duties that is unfortunately staffed by people unqualified to work in the industries they regulate, led by incompetent cronies and political donors. I'm talking about you FBI (9/11), NASA (Challenger), Army Corp of Engineers (New Orleans), ATF (Fast and Furious), ICE (Boston Bomber). Do you doubt that right now in Federal offices nestled inside bucolic Washington, D.C., and around the country, no one is listening?

An interesting side story: Harry Markopolos and I went to the same high school in Erie, PA – Cathedral Preparatory School. He graduated a year before me, although I didn't know him. Early in the book he describes a stunt he pulled at Cathedral Prep: donating two bars of dog soap to a communal inventory destined to be used by students after gym class – and the subsequent punishment. Markopolos writes, referring to his unnamed teacher, "'Come here, Meathead,' he commanded. He grabbed a thick textbook and beat me with it until I went down." I can confirm the veracity of this account, for I too was the recipient of the same treatment. I bet the perpetrator Markopolos declined to name was Mr. Pikiewicz – a diminutive Napoleonic tyrant who "taught" Driver Ed and, what else, Health.

A Boy Named… Dick Trickle?

May 17. 2013

In Johnny Cash's classic "A Boy Named Sue" the balladeer sings the tale of the woes he was forced to endure growing up with a girl's name (something harder to appreciate in the 21st century where members of either gender may be a Taylor, Tyler, Morgan, Cameron or some other moniker previously serving as a surname). After a bloody fight with the father who abandoned him at age three, the old man explains his rationale: "I knew you'd have to get tough or die. And it's the name that helped to make you strong."

I wonder if that was the motivation of the parents of Dick Trickle, the former NASCAR driver who killed himself yesterday while parked in a cemetery which held the grave of his grand-daughter. With a silly surname like "Trickle" you'd think caring parents would try mightily not to compound the grief by bestowing upon their bonnie blue babe the universally-ridiculed "Dick." You could argue that the adult Trickle had the option of

going by Rick or Rich, or by his middle name, or even by a self-imposed substitute like "Killer." After all, the super-cool hero of "Mad Men" started out as Dick Whitman, son of a prostitute who before dying in childbirth made an obscene comment about some guy's dick. Dick Whitman was savvy enough to claim the title of Don Draper.

Based on things Trickle said to sports reporters, you'd get the idea he rather embraced the ludicrousness of his nom de risible. He took ongoing (but lighthearted) grief from Keith Olbermann when that ex-MSNBC curmudgeon was a sportscaster for ESPN. After Trickle's death was announced, Olbermann said, "In a time in which athletes were really getting overly sensitive to what we and everyone was starting to do, his attitude was, 'Hey, you guys made me money, all I've got to do is put up with a little giggling and I have to put up with the giggling anyway." Although Trickle was not a super-star on the NASCAR circuit, he commanded enough track-cred such that the lead character in "Days of Thunder" – played by Tom Cruise – was called Cole Trickle.

Trickle's laissez-faire attitude about his name matches that of a salesman for Shaklee (a poor man's Amway) I met in the 1980s: a thin man in a cheap suit named Dick Bagg. That's right: Dick Bagg. Mr. Scrotum himself. Again, this man had every opportunity to go by Rick or Rich or something whimsical and self-imposed like "Knuckles," but he stuck with Dick –which when juxtaposed with Bagg leaves no way out to avoid smirking upon first introductions: "Dick, uh, did you say, uh, what, um, nice to meet you." He happily passed out business cards with his laughable name embossed in big letters.

As Johnny Cash's "Sue" ruminates in the song, "I came away with a different point of view. And I think about him, now and then, every time I try and every time I win." The moral: Being

saddled with a ludicrous name makes a man stronger. Perhaps that was the opinion of Dick Trickle. Maybe even of Dick Bagg. But somehow, I have to believe Harry Johnson, Peter Puffer and Sal Monella are in psychotherapy three times a week.

Gupta's Zeros, Moffat's Little Head

May 22, 2013

Rajat Gupta, the one-time CEO of the venerated consulting firm McKinsey who is now out on bail while he appeals his conviction in 2012 for insider trading, had "a lust for zeros" – that is to say, according to Sunday's *New York Times* Magazine, he was singularly driven to build his measly net worth of $100 million up to more than $1 billion. It seems that in the rarefied world into which Gupta sought entry, $100 million is not rich – not by a long-shot. In that world occupied by titans such as Bill Gates ($66B), Michael Bloomberg ($25B), Sandy Weill ($1.5B) and Stephen Schwarzman ($6.5B), $100 million might represent nothing more than a donation to a worthy cause, like Schwarzman's 2008 gift to the New York Public Library. Some people donate used books to the library; others bestow sums equivalent to what an average American shlub might make in 2,000 years.

In any event, as the *Times* article points out, Raj Gupta wanted to compete with the big boys, so after leaving McKinsey he hooked up with fellow Indian Raj Rajaratnam, a silver-spooned elite who attended top schools and founded a hedge fund, Galleon Group that was once managing north of $5 billion. By now the story is familiar: rather than make money the old-fashioned way (i.e. earning it), Rajaratnam enlisted a network of corporate insiders to shuttle in non-public information on which he invested heavily (and illegally). Gupta was one of those greedy insiders on Rajaratnam's payroll – a member of the board of directors

of Goldman Sachs privy to a mother lode of potentially market-moving dope. Like Bud Fox in "Wall Street" and Faust before him, Gupta sold his soul – all for a bunch of zeros. Unsatisfied with $100 million, he entered into a collusion that cost him his fortune as well as membership in the "Decent Human Being" club, caused losses for thousands of regular investors, and damaged the financial markets which can't function properly if investor confidence goes down the toilet.

But while Raj Gupta's motivations for getting seduced into the Raj Rajaratnam web of corruption were easy to comprehend, those of Bob Moffat were more of a headscratcher. Moffat, the number two man at IBM who was on the short list to become CEO after the planned retirement of Sam Palmisano, was a lesser-known conspirator with Rajaratnam, but his story would make the better movie-of-the-week. Rajaratnam trolled for market-moving insider information, and the sector that drives some of the biggest action on Wall Street is high-tech. Ensnaring a top dog from a tech behemoth like IBM could deliver Rajaratnam the inside skinny on valuable, secret plots of companies like Intel, AMD and Lenovo.

Unlike Gupta who lusted for zeros, Moffat broke the law and cratered his career for mere sexual favors from a fund trader and long-ago, aging beauty queen, Daniele Chiesi. Apparently, he whispered sweet nothings about semiconductor clock speeds and computer memory yields in his lover's ear while *en flagrante delicto* – an image that seems more comic than tragic. Chiesi strikes me as a blatant "Mata Hari" stereotype that Moffat should have been savvy enough to sniff out immediately. She was caught on tape divulging insider information from an executive at Akamai, boasting she "played him like a finely tuned piano."

But the power of the little head is unmistakable; as Robin Williams once quipped, "God gave men a brain and a penis, and

only enough blood to run one at a time." Moffat claimed afterwards that he never profited personally from his insider scoops to Chiesi, which I can believe, but when you read this quote from *Bloomberg*, you have to question the man's sanity: "The stress of the case has exacerbated his wife's multiple sclerosis. He said he has been ostracized by former friends and colleagues at IBM and lost $65 million in benefits he probably would have received had he stayed at the company." $65 million and six months in jail in exchange for some decidedly droopy middle-aged nooky? Better to donate it all to the Public Zoo – you might get your name on the Pachyderm Wing in perpetuity.

Candelabra in the Behind

May 31, 2013

Prompted by a garish poster touting HBO's imminent release of the Steven Soderburgh-directed movie "Behind the Candelabra" featuring Michael Douglas, Matt Damon and a Bichon Frisé, each decked out in cosmetics and white fur, I read Scott Thorson's tell-all tale of the same name detailing the seduction, delusion and ultimate rejection engineered upon him by Liberace – Mr. Showmanship. Such material is not normally my cup of absinthe, but I decided to dive into the dumpster after recalling the many times in the 1960s, accompanied by my grandmother, that I watched Liberace perform on TV. At the time, it never occurred to me as a ten-year-old that Liberace might prefer boys to girls, and I'm quite certain my blue-haired grandmother, like most of Liberace's ardent fans, harbored no such suspicions that the man was gay. In retrospect that seems incredible, but I suppose the state of homosexuality in the 1960s was so closeted and paranoid that most straight people at the time considered it less common than Albinism.

I read "Behind the Candelabra" mainly to understand how Liberace managed to maintain the illusion among his socially-conservative fan-base that he was a virile heterosexual when twice nightly he swished across the stage looking like the Queen of England, dressed in a fur cape with a sixteen-foot train, sporting diamond rings on each finger and a hairpiece of wavy hair fit for Elizabeth I. To kick off each act, Scott Thorson and other pretty boys before and after him would chauffeur Liberace on stage in a jewel-encrusted Roll-Royce, and after Lee pranced around for a while, would arrive in a different tricked-out automobile to chauffeur the fur coat off-stage.

Liberace would exclaim that his custom-made fox fur was the only coat in the world that had its own limousine. The audience would go wild for the whole fey affair. Although Gays at that time – who probably outnumbered Albinos 1000 to one – had developed protective networks in which to consort with one another under the radar, I believe the real explanation of how Liberace was mostly able to hide in plain sight was his audience's inability or unwillingness to grasp the notion that this talented, wealthy man who could have anything he wanted would choose a life loving other men. Truly a head-exploding concept for most senior citizens coming in from Kansas to visit mid-Century Las Vegas. Certainly, my admiring grandmother would have needed a tongue depressor and a hit of Thorazine had someone convinced her Liberace played for the other team.

Back to the book: Thorson relays just a little in the way of lascivious behavior with his doting benefactor Lee (who comes across as a monogamous, eccentric and somewhat jealous father-figure), preferring to focus more on the quantity and quality of the material items Lee bestowed upon his lover whom he addressed

as "Boober." (If that isn't bad enough, Thorson's pet name for Liberace was "BooberLoober.") Given Thorson's penurious upbringing it's no wonder the constant flow of fancy gifts from Liberace would dominate his narrative.

When you pick up a book like this you expect a hatchet job, and although the first 80 percent covers mostly happy times between the lovers and happily drops lots of A-list names, sure enough after Liberace takes up with younger beefcake and instructs his legal entourage to boot Thorson from his master's penthouse in Vegas, out come Scotty's claws. The book descends into a one-sided pity-party for poor Thorson who instead of accepting a decent settlement to walk away, defies his own lawyer's advice and takes after Liberace – a man who is making $150K a week, and has 50 years' experience in spending lavishly to get what he wants. Needless to say, Thorson gets the shit end of the candelabra, but not until after Liberace succumbs to AIDS at a time when many people believed the insidious disease was sent by God to punish the abominable sodomists.

The amazing thing is that early in the tale Thorson encounters the man he will soon replace in Lee's life – a man to whom he assigns the alias "Jerry O'Rourke" – and watches as Lee treats Jerry like yesterday's Moo Goo Gai Pan. While Jerry is out of the house Liberace has his servants neatly pack up the man's belongings and stack them ignominiously outside the entrance to the estate. Thorson witnesses this callous behavior, yet seems oblivious to the near-certainty that he will someday suffer the same demise. So, after receiving gifts from Lee of several cars, fur coats, diamond rings, a house and show dogs, Thorson chose to give Liberace a candelabra in the behind instead of a hale and hearty handshake.

The Selfishness of OIMBY

June 5, 2013

The child-like, bouncy-sounding acronym NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) represents a type of collective selfishness whereby a community uniquely affected somewhat negatively by an otherwise broadly positive initiative strives to derail said initiative on the grounds that although it benefits the masses it must be rejected because it impacts the quality of life for the few who must not be called upon to bear a burden. Consider the proposal to site numerous wind turbines off Cape Cod miles from the shore – a superb location given the constant, predictable breezes that are necessary to make wind power financially justifiable, and its proximity to densely populated regions in oil-dependent New England. Despite the benefits, liberal, eco-minded Ted Kennedy fought vigorously against the project because he claimed the infinitesimal profile of the turbines in the distance would spoil the sunsets viewed from his family's tony Hyannisport estate. A pure case of NIMBY – great idea, just don't do it in my back yard.

Still, however obstructionist the NIMBY crowd has become, I submit that a more evil case of selfishness has taken root across certain parts of America, a mindset that demands special treatment for a privileged few that must be denied others. It's sort of the opposite of NIMBY – something I've dubbed OIMBY: Only in My Back Yard. Proponents of OIMBY vigorously oppose projects that would benefit others, usually basing their recalcitrance on unaffordability, but behind the scenes these same budget hawks actively pursue similar projects for themselves.

Such is common behavior inside the cloistered United States Senate where the words "shame," "hypocrisy," "mendacity," and "cravenness" have no meaning. Consider these galling cases of OIMBY:

Rick Scott (Governor of Florida). Scott, the former CEO of Columbia/HCA, the world's largest private-sector health care provider captured the governorship of the Sunshine State after extolling his business acumen as an executive qualification. A Tea Party candidate and hospital network executive, Scott naturally railed against Obamacare as a big government intervention into the finely-tuned US healthcare market. Scott said, "The free market does everything better than the government does it. Every time the government gets involved, costs go up, access goes down," which although absolutist in tone cannot be denied categorically. So, imagine my surprise when I read this story about the decimation of the oyster habitat off the Florida panhandle. The response to a potential total collapse of the oyster population in Apalachicola Bay: "Economically, the situation has become so desperate that Gov. Rick Scott, a conservative Republican who is not inclined to ask for federal help, wrote to the United States Commerce Department last year and asked it to declare the oyster harvesting areas a fishing disaster." My question: why is Scott asking the federal government – bastion of incompetence – to interfere in the comings and goings of freedom-loving, God-fearing oysters?

James Inhofe (Senator from Oklahoma). Rabid climate-change denier Inhofe is the ranking member of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works and was its chairman from 2003 to 2007, which is like placing the president of the Flat Earth Society in charge of NASA. Inhofe is another member of the Senate who

is a strident opponent of government spending, going so far as to vote against a bill to provide relief to victims of Hurricane Sandy – people predominantly residing in the Northeast, far from Inhofe's home state of Oklahoma. But given that Oklahoma is ground-zero within the treacherous Tornado Alley, it was bound to happen that many of Inhofe's constituents would eventually suffer just like the victims of Sandy to whom Inhofe gave the finger. And guess what: Inhofe wants federal aid to flow his way. Imagine that. Getting some grief from people who called him a hypocrite, Inhofe claimed the two disaster relief programs were "totally different," which means one program benefits him, and the other doesn't.

Lindsey Graham (Senator from South Carolina). A one-time centrist Republican, Graham was forced to tack hard to the right after facing a primary challenge in 2008. To build credibility among the primary voters, Graham put on his Halloween Tea Party costume and held onto his seat. Although not as dogmatic of many of his colleagues, Graham pushed for the simple-minded "Cap-Cut-and-Balance" pledge, and refused to support raising the debt limit which merely represents authorization to pay for things Congress already bought. Graham is also a major advocate for federal funding to dredge Charleston harbor so that huge, modern-era ships can dock in the too-shallow waters. According to Graham's website, "U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) today said a new provision placed in the Senate Energy & Water Appropriations bill could be a breakthrough for next year's funding of the Charleston Harbor Post-45 Deepening effort. Graham is a member

of the Appropriations Committee and worked to include the language which passed through committee." Graham even got the Senate to add $10.5 million just to study the project – the exact type of expenditure that the Tea Party would normally categorize as "waste and fraud" if it weren't happening in their own back yard. By the way, how does stuffing an additional $10.5 million into the budget square with "Cap-Cut-and-Balance"?

Stephen Fincher (Representative from Tennessee). In a blatant example of OIMBY, Fincher has made it his mission to take a $20 billion weed-whacker to the budget for Food Stamps which is one of many government subsidies inside the humungous Agriculture bill that also helps put food on the table for multi-billion dollar ag firms like Archer-Daniels-Midland – and, as it turns out, Stephen Fincher himself, who, when not vilifying food stamp recipients, takes handouts from the same agency that coddles the poor. It seems the Finch-meister collected nearly $3.5 million in subsidies from 1999 to 2012, and last year he received about $70,000 in direct payments, money that is given to farmers and farmland owners, even if they do not grow crops. Ag subsidies? Only in my back yard!

Mitch McConnell (Senator from Kentucky). Senate Minority Leader McConnell made it abundantly clear that his mission starting in 2009 was to deny Obama a second term. Short of engaging in criminal activity, the only way Mitch could accomplish this task was to obstruct every Obama administration initiative regardless of merit. His strategy was to scuttle whatever initiatives were offered by lining up the opposition of 41

percent – or as it's known in the Senate, a "majority." Like the colleagues on his side of the aisle, McConnell takes a dim view of budget deficits. To demonstrate his commitment to stanching the flow of red ink, he railed hard against stimulus bills designed to pump money into the economy via investments and tax breaks. But some tax breaks qualify as OIMBY – and McConnell valiantly defends one that helps out the poor, struggling owners of racehorses that hang out in Mitch's beloved Kentucky. Sometimes referred to as "The Sport of Kings," horseracing is big business in the Bluegrass State, but who knew it was so vital to the "farm economy" that McConnell was compelled to include a $126 million tax break for it in the 2008 Food, Conservation and Energy Act.

Charles E. Shumer (Senator from New York). Known to some as Chuck E. "Cheese" Shumer, the Senator from New York, home of Wall Street, is a strident protector of a poor, neglected outcast from society: the hedge fund manager. While bounding about denouncing Republican tax cuts for the rich and benefit slashes for the lower and middle classes, Chuck E. Cheese has been the biggest defender of the fantasy that "carried interest" – that is, money made by hedge fund managers for investing other peoples' money – should be taxed at a far lower rate than income made by doing real work, like running a restaurant or conducting cancer research. Consider Steve Cohen, the billionaire manager of SAC Capital. In 2005 his gross income was north of $1B. To put that in perspective, that is equivalent to the combined annual salaries of 20,000 average Americans. But when

Chuck Shumer makes a visit to the Statue of Liberty and reads the famous quotation – "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" – he thinks of poor Steve Cohen and redoubles his efforts to protect the man's right to a tax rate lower than that of the guy who piloted the ferry to Liberty Island.

50 Great Movie Lines not on the AFI 100

June 13, 2013

The American Film Institute (AFI) accumulates several "best of" lists, one of which is the 100 Best Movie Quotes. Compilation of such a list is a natural given the propensity of movie screenwriters to secure their immortality by delivering a devastating or memorable line in a script, especially when uttered by a Hollywood icon. Checking out the current list, I have no complaints. These are truly great lines – most are well-known by movie aficionados and lightweights alike. Like most lists, they tend to be a multiple of ten, often a collection of 100. Given the enormous body of work from the emergence of talkies to the present, it seems an injustice to cap the list at 100.

When you're slapped, you'll take it and like it. ("The Maltese Falcon"): When the foppish Joel Cairo gets under the skin of hard-boiled private eye Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) in this film-noir classic, Spade bitch-slaps him down into the sofa. Cairo's ineffective attempts to thwart the blows elicits this great line which establishes the relationship the two will have for the rest of the movie.

Look mister, we serve hard drinks in here for men who want to get drunk fast. ("It's a Wonderful Life"): After George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) gets his wish and enters an alternate universe into which he had not been born, he encounters bartender Martini's evil twin

who snarls this stinging retort to Clarence the Angel who had just ordered a glass of milk. This is the kind of line that you would never hear spoken in real life which is what makes it so nice to hear.

When the world slips you a Jeffrey, stroke the furry wall. ("Get Him to the Greek"): Taken out of context, this sentence makes no sense, but watching Sean "P. Diddy" Combs soporifically stroke an actual furry wall after smoking a powerful joint, the line resonates. It comes to light that the powerful joint – a combo of opiates and psychotropic drugs – is dubbed "Jeffrey" so as to make it seem less threatening.

It takes brass balls to sell real estate. ("Glengarry Glen Ross"): Screenwriter David Mamet is known for his fast-paced, barbed dialog heavily sprinkled with profanity. Probably his best effort was "Glengarry Glen Ross" about a handful of slightly dishonest real estate salesmen. With quota in jeopardy, the owners bring in Mr. Blake (Alec Baldwin) to give a pep talk – which is actually a thorough dressing down. After challenging their manhood, Blake takes from his briefcase a pair of brass balls tethered together by string, dangles them in front of his trousers and utters this pithy observation.

Heineken? Fuck that shit! Pabst Blue Ribbon! ("Blue Velvet"): In a major revival of his career, Dennis Hopper plays the sadistic Frank in David Lynch's study of the pitfalls of walking on the wild side. In a fashion demonstrated throughout the movie, Frank forcefully exposits his opinion on beer to the snoopy, white-bread teenager Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle McLaughlin).

Who's Dick Hertz? ("Fast Times at Ridgemont High"): Ridgemont High School teacher Mr. Hand (Ray Walston – aka My Favorite Martian) calls out for Richard Hertz and receives no response. He repeats, "Richard Hertz?" A student tells him that

the kid goes by Dick, leading to the classic juvenile inquiry played so well by Bart Simpson on Moe the bartender.

I ain't got time to bleed. ("Predator"): Starring two future governors, "Predator" is a clever twist on the otherwise stale genre of muscle-bound special forces running around the jungle with enough armaments to overthrow Guatemala. Told that his massive bicep has taken a flesh wound, Jesse Ventura utters this over-the-top line which he reused as the title of his book about politics.

Where should I stick this? ("It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World"): In this star-studded comedy of a slapdash crowd of people competing to be the first to dig up stolen treasure, Ethel Merman plays the loudmouth mother-in-law Mrs. Marcus to milquetoast J. Russell Finch (Milton Berle.) When Ethel picks up a potted cactus and unassumingly asks "where should I stick this," the look on Berle's face is priceless.

Stingo, you look… you look very nice, you're wearing your cocksucker. ("Sophie's Choice"): Meryl Streep plays the Eastern European title character with tremendous aplomb, and for her efforts won the Academy Award for Best Actress. In a heavy Polish accent, Sophie compliments Stingo (Peter MacNicol) on his seersucker suit, subbing in a funny, unexpected synonym.

No Ace – just you. ("Stand By Me"): Kiefer Sutherland plays tough teen rebel Ace in this adaptation of Steven King's short story "The Body" directed by Rob Reiner. Ace and his friends meet up with adolescent Gordie Lachance (Wil Weaton) and his buddies at the site where lies the dead body of a boy hit by a train. Looking down the barrel of a pistol that Gordie is holding tightly with both hands, Ace tries intimidation. "What are you gonna do – shoot all of us?" Gordie's confident reply serves notice that the meeting is over.

I want you to hold it between your knees. ("Five Easy Pieces"): I can't believe that lines from the classic diner scene in "Five Easy Pieces" are not on the AFI top 100 list. After making no headway on placing an order of toast with the snippy waitress, Jack Nicholson tells her to hold the chicken on a chicken salad sandwich. When he clarifies exactly how he'd like her to hold it, she responds with indignation. With one arm, Jack swiftly clears the table.

I'd buy that for a dollar. ("Robocop"): Funny satire "Robocop" takes place in dystopian Detroit where crime is out of control, yet everyone on TV seems oblivious to the social decay. At the end of every skit, a goof-ball TV personality sums up by saying "I'd buy that for a dollar" which became a double entendre used for a time in conversation after the movie left the Cineplex.

These go to eleven. ("Spinal Tap"): Another great line that should contend for top 100 status. Clearly confused about the volume settings on his guitar amp, Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest) tries to explain that his equipment is louder because the top number is 11 instead of the standard 10. When questioned about the meaninglessness of it, all the fumbling Nigel can say is "These go to eleven."

Check out the big brain on Brett! ("Pulp Fiction"): Samuel Jackson plays Jules, a gangster in the employ of Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames), a man whose briefcase containing something quite rare (his soul?) has been stolen. After busting in on the thieves who look more like frat boys than big time criminals, Jules interrogates one of them (Brett, played by Frank Whaley) as to why the French refer to a Quarter Pounder as a Royale with Cheese. Brett's supposition that the metric system has something to do with it prompts an outburst of sweet sarcasm.

Lunch is for wimps. ("Wall Street"): Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) sums up the mentality of the 1980s Street nicely.

Help me! Help me! ("The Fly"): After scientist Andre Delambre (David Hedison) muffs his experiment by entering a transporter accompanied by an unseen house fly, he pops out the other side sporting the fly's head and other body parts. Although trailers for the 1958 movie present the reveal to his wife of his hairy fly-head as the audience shocker, I personally found the scene where the fly with the scientist's white head entangled in a spider web to be creepier. As well as the high-pitch squeal "help me, help me" which has since found its way into popular culture.

Everything that guy just said is bullshit. ("My Cousin Vinny"): Although completely implausible, "My Cousin Vinny" works in large part due to the stellar performances of Joe Pecci and Marisa Tomei, who won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress. Pecci plays bumbling quasi-lawyer Vinny Gambini hired to defend two guys indicted for murder and facing capital punishment (yeah, right.) But who couldn't love Vinny's single sentence opening argument in response to the DA's carefully laid out preamble?

Run that baby. ("All the President's Men"): *Washington Post* investigative reporters Woodward (Robert Redford) and Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman) have just nailed a late-night Q&A with Nixon Attorney General John Mitchell in which the AG reveals some potential knowledge of Watergate nefariousness. Editor in Chief Ben Bradlee (Jason Robards) mulls over the consequences of publishing the hot-potato story, and concludes that it should run in the next day's edition. The glee with which Bradlee green-lights the publication captures the sense of the rising role newspapers would play at the time in reining in rogue government.

Coffee is for closers. ("Glengarry Glen Ross"): Once again, Mamet delivers. Mr. Blake (Alec Baldwin) lays out the severity of life for those salesmen who can't cut the mustard. The look of incredulity on Shelly Levene's (Jack Lemmon) face as he pours

himself a cup of Java is executed perfectly. Shelly soon learns that second prize in the sales contest is a set of steak knives – and third place is "you're fired."

Money is something you need in case you don't die tomorrow. ("Wall Street"): Sage advice from airline machinist and union boss Carl Fox (Martin Sheen) to his avaricious bond-trader son Bud (Charlie Sheen). So true when you think about it.

God damn you to hell! ("Planet of the Apes"): Hack actor Charleton Heston on his knees pounding the sand in anger at the discovery that Earth is finished is something to behold. If you didn't know better, you'd swear he's reading the lines off a teleprompter. I saw this movie at a drive-in theater when it first came out and unlike clueless Charleton who thinks he's landed on a planet in a galaxy far, far away, I knew right away that he was wandering about an Earth overrun by primates. So obvious.

Have you ever tried to pick up your teeth with broken fingers? ("The Crying Game"): Great line. Defending the honor of his trans-sexual "girlfriend" Dil (Jaye Davidson), Fergus (Stephen Rea) spouts this challenging query to his cheeky boss. Needless to say, boss-man backs off.

Me so horny. ("Full Metal Jacket"): Spoken like a true Americanized Vietnamese prostitute. Not grammatically correct, but in some ways more provocative than the King's English.

Fred, what's with your fuckin' hair? ("Mr. Saturday Night"): Buddy Young, Jr. (Billy Crystal) is an over-the-hill Borsht Belt comedian with a life-time's worth of one-liners that no one under 65 finds funny anymore. With the help of a female talent agent half his age (Helen Hunt), Buddy gets a job warming up the audience before the start of a game show. Fred, the host of the game show, sports a mullet-like hairdo, which gives Buddy some nasty ideas.

The cat's in the bag and the bag's in the river. ("The Sweet Smell of Success"): How this Billy Wilder line is not on AFI's top 100 is beyond me. Does anyone think it's inferior to "Listen to them. Children of the night. What music they make." ("Dracula" – #83), or "I feel the need – the need for speed!" ("Top Gun" – #94) or even top 20 entry "Made it, Ma! Top of the world!" ("White Heat" – #18)? Spoken by small-time press agent Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) to big-time gossip columnist J. J. Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster) to indicate the former's success in solving a problem for the latter, the line is pure noir, like Wilder's shimmering B&W masterpiece.

It's Showtime! ("All That Jazz"): Dexedrine-addicted Joe Gideon (Roy Scheider in his best role as a thinly-veiled Bob Fosse) likes to burn the candle at both ends. Simultaneously editing a film he directed, choreographing a Broadway musical, relentlessly chasing long-legged women, and smoking and drinking to excess while tempting a heart-attack, Joe starts each day with a gentle reminder to himself why he gets up each morning. The show must go on, and so must Joe Gideon.

I am not an animal! I am a human being! ("The Elephant Man"): This beautiful black and white telling of the life and times of John Merrick (aka. The Elephant Man for his grotesque deformities) produced by Mel Brooks of all people and directed by David Lynch is a masterpiece examination of degradation, humiliation, exploitation (low-brow and high) and finally dignity in death. After Merrick's dogging tormentors pull off the shroud hiding his misshapen head, the Elephant Man calls out this memorable line, and you want to cry.

What knockers! ("Young Frankenstein"): Silly, but the way Mel Brooks constructs the scene in which Dr. Frankenstein (Gene Wilder) hoists Inga (Teri Garr at the peak of hotness) from the

horse-drawn carriage, her ample bosom inches from Gene's face, just as Igor (wall-eyed nut-ball Marty Feldman) bangs on the castle doors is priceless.

The last one I wrote was about cattle rustlers. Before they were through with it, the whole thing played on a torpedo boat. ("Sunset Boulevard"): William Holden plays Joe Gillis, a disillusioned screenwriter in 1950s Hollywood taken under the wing of over-the-hill actress Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson). Explaining his disdain for the so-called creative process in Tinseltown, Joe sums up what happened to one of his scripts after the studio got through with it. No doubt a process that continues to this day judging by some of the trash that makes it to the Cineplex these days.

Nobody's perfect. ("Some Like it Hot"): Also, the title of the definitive Wilder biography, "Nobody's perfect" was the reaction from a smitten bachelor of a certain age (Joe E. Brown) to his love interest, a homely guy in drag (Jack Lemmon) upon learning she/he is actually a man. Before this movie-ending send-off, Lemmon and Tony Curtis have struggled to avoid execution by mobsters by dressing up as women and hanging around ditsy-blonde Marilyn Monroe who plays ukulele in an all-girl traveling band. The possibilities with such a set up are endless, and Billy Wilder's script packs in as much wackiness that will fit in 90 minutes.

The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist. ("The Usual Suspects"): "The Usual Suspects" is a complicated film. Dim-bulb Verbal Kint (Kevin Spacey) is in police custody pending release on bail, and in the interim receives a bit of interrogation about a drug-bust-gone-bad-on-a-boat by hard-boiled cop Dave Kujan (Chazz Palminteri). In the course of his investigation, Kujan learns of a mysterious outlaw named Keyser Soze – a criminal of such depraved indifference to life that he could be the Devil himself. Verbal tells Kujan about the Devil's

greatest trick, and then goes on to prove it. Little known fact: it was 19th Century French poet Charles Baudelaire who originally wrote this pithy assertion.

He'd strangle on his own spit if I weren't here to swab out his throat for him. ("From Here to Eternity"): Sgt. Milton Warden (Burt Lancaster) essentially runs Company "G" at Schofield Barracks while his superior officer Captain Dana Holmes (Philip Ober) goes AWOL chasing skirt and getting wasted (after all – this takes place on placid Oahu before the War). In what is one of his top two or three performances across a monumental career, Lancaster plays the kind of hands-on zoo-keeper who, recognizing the incompetence which surrounds him, could properly deliver such a great line. The movie also starred Frank Sinatra, who as Maggio won a Best Supporting Actor Oscar, just like Johnny Fontaine in "The Godfather."

There goes a thousand dollars. – Your shoes cost a thousand dollars? – That one did. ("The Game"): What better way to capture the essence of a man's obscene wealth than this clever bit of banter. As Nicholas (Michael Douglas) and Christine (Deborah Unger) scramble up a fire-escape ladder to evade fast-gaining dogs, Nicholas drops a shoe which is promptly shredded by a Doberman. The ennui with which Douglas delivers the lines is sardonic.

The Durango '95 purred away a real horrowshow – a nice, warm vibraty feeling all through your guttiwuts. ("A Clockwork Orange"): "A Clockwork Orange," based on Anthony Burgess's seminal dystopian novel, must be watched several times, if for no other reason than to hone one's understanding of the dialog of Alex and his Droogs spoken in what Burgess dubbed "Nadsat," a combo of Russian, Cockney and English slang. This line, done as voice-over by Alex (Malcolm McDowell), comes as he and his Droogs race down country lanes in pitch midnight darkness – a shot done with

an obvious phony background of receding pavement and trees, and the occasional car run off the road. I wish there was such a vehicle as the Durango '95 so I too could get a vibraty feeling in my guttiwats.

I smell spare ribs. Somebody's been eatin' spare ribs. How come I ain't got none? ("The Grapes of Wrath"): A powerful tale of one Okie family's fraught emigration from the mid-west dust bowl after eviction from their homestead to California, "The Grapes of Wrath" presents a broad set of deeply developed characters, including fiery Tom Joad (Henry Fonda), loquacious ex-preacher Jim Casy (John Carradine), and strong-willed Ma Joad (Jane Darwell who won Best Supporting Actress). One of my favorite lesser players is Grandpa Joad played by Charley Grapewin who does a marvelous job of capturing the old man's mental decline into senility hastened by the family's traumatic upheaval. Camped out in a squalid transient park, Grandpa rants like a child when he catches a whiff of elusive spare ribs – it captures his character's arc perfectly.

Find one in every car. You'll see. ("Repo Man"): "Repo Man" is chock-full of eccentrics, none more so than Miller (Tracey Walter) who comes off as a menial labor simpleton, but who also spouts a cryptic line once in a while that might just contain mystic wisdom. In this case, the thing you'll find in every car is one of those smelly pine-tree shaped "air fresheners" that hang from the rear-view mirror. Is it a metaphor for the orderliness of the universe? Unlikely. I suspect that after repossessing a million cars the man has simply spotted a trend.

Say, that's a nice bike. ("Terminator 2"): When the liquid-metal T1000 robot of the future pays this fey compliment to a motorcycle cop, the audience tallies another soon-to-be casualty of sharp knives and "stabbing weapons," as Arnold Schwarzenegger calls

them. No blood & guts required – in fact, the line elicits chuckles for its aplomb.

Release the Kraken! ("Clash of the Titans"): Actually, this non-descript, trailer-made line (delivered with uber-serious conviction by Liam Neeson as Zeus) will be better when some character in a future film screams it out in the midst of grunting out a stubborn bowel movement.

She doesn't quite chop his head off. She makes a Pez dispenser out of him. ("Sin City"): The movie version of Frank Miller's graphic novels is to my way of thinking the best adaptation of a comic book. More visually thrilling than the "Superman" oeuvre, grittier than "Spiderman," darker than "Batman" (with the possible exception of Tim Burton's efforts.) "Sin City," a sadistic black-and-white film shot mostly in front of a green-screen is remarkable for its faithful depiction of Miller's revenge-obsessed "The Hard Goodbye." After a heavily made-up Benicio del Toro (playing corrupt detective Jackie Boy Rafferty) gets a bit fresh with some feisty prostitutes, one of them takes a Samurai sword to his throat, leaving Benny the Bull hanging. His decapitated head (can a head be decapitated, or just a body?) continues to carry on conversation, though – it is a comic book, after all.

Leave the gun. Take the cannoli. ("The Godfather"): Strangely, "The Godfather" franchise boasts but two quotes on AFI's list. Given that nearly nine hours of action and dialog comprise the trilogy, you might think a couple other lines would appear among the top 100. Most every casual movie-goer is familiar with this juicy line from the first "Godfather" in which fat Clemenza gives these instructions following the whacking of a Corleone family turncoat. I've seen several cheeky versions of this line posted in more than one Italian bakery. It didn't make AFI's list, but I it should have.

Of all the people who have been born… and have died… while the trees went on living. ("Vertigo"): Every ten years, *Sight & Sound* compiles a list of the best 100 films of all time after polling several hundred film experts, and in 2012 Alfred Hitchcock's dream-like "Vertigo" pushed aside perennial favorite "Citizen Kane" from the top perch. I don't agree that "Vertigo" is number one, but I do love the film for its complex character construction, experimental visual techniques, twisty plot and lovely mid-Century San Francisco locations. My favorite exchange comes when Scotty (Jimmy Stewart) and Madeleine (Kim Novak in one of two roles) stroll Muir Woods – a forest of towering Sequoias – in eerie silence. Madeleine's response to a casual question captures so well her despondency over the seeming insignificance of life, and presages the strange relationship that develops between the two.

Attica! Attica! Attica! ("Dog Day Afternoon"): Sonny Wortzik (Al Pacino) starts off as a bumbling bank robber, becomes a working-class hero (and an irritant to clueless law enforcement), and winds up captured by the FBI just steps away from a Boeing jumbo-jet ride out of the country. As you might expect the middle section of the movie is the most compelling. That's where during his "fifteen minutes of fame" Sonny commands the attention of the rapt denizens of counter-culture cheering him on from behind the blue NYPD barriers. When Sonny struts about the sidewalk outside the bank yelling "Attica! Attica! Attica!" to conflate the police activity facing him to the notorious riots in an upstate prison, you can't help but to connect with his charisma. Just like the hostages inside the bank. But you know he's going down in the end.

Deserve's got nothin' to do with it. ("Unforgiven"): As a revenge-filled Western with no heroes, no stock characters that traverse through the mandatory "story arc," "Unforgiven" would seem to

have virtually no chance of getting a Hollywood green-light had not Clint Eastwood (10 time Academy Award nominee, 4 wins including for "Unforgiven"), Gene Hackman (5 and 2 including for "Unforgiven"), Morgan Freeman (a win for "Million Dollar Baby"), and Richard Harris (2 time nominee) been attached. And thank God. Who knows how many potentially great films like "Unforgiven" get the stamp of rejection because they refuse to adhere to the formula and have no talent attached? Anyway, this line sneered by William Munny (Eastwood) as he points a 12-gauge into the face of a defeated, supine Bill Daggett (Hackman) sums up the ethos of the movie quite nicely.

Well, ma'am, if I see him, I'll sure give him the message. ("Blood Simple"): Director Joel Coen's first movie, "Blood Simple" is an under-seen gem of modern noir (his brother Ethan was producer). It's a twisty tale of lies, deceit, revenge, and mistaken identity – just my cup of tea. A hired hit-man named Visser (Emmet Walsh) does some double-crossing and winds up shot through a wall by a woman who mistakenly thinks she just popped her vindictive husband Marty. Unable to see her victim, she calls out "I'm not afraid of you, Marty," to which the bleeding hit-man Visser chuckles this funny line before buying the farm.

Sometimes nothing can be a real cool hand. ("Cool Hand Luke"): "Cool Hand Luke" opens with a scene in which an inebriated Luke Jackson (Paul Newman) severs parking meters from their steel posts – nothing more than rank vandalism – and ends with his death following a daring escape from a prison in the stagnant deep South where he once served his sentence on a chain-gang cutting down weeds with a scythe and shoveling gravel onto fresh, hot tar. Once acquainted with the other miscreants in prison, you begin to feel that Luke really doesn't belong there. And Luke agrees, for he makes a couple escape attempts which cost him penalty time in

"the box" – a tiny dog-house enclosure brought to hellish conditions in the sweltering, mid-day sun. In one of the many scenes inside the prison barracks, after Luke has bluffed a fellow prisoner out of a big poker pot with nothing but shit cards, he makes this pithy observation. And he takes on the nickname from which the movie takes title.

A census taker once tried to test me. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti. ("Silence of the Lambs"): How do you respond to that? You're carefully interviewing a dangerous, sociopathic disbarred psychiatrist inside a dank prison, and this is what he lays on you? Hannibal Lechter (Anthony Hopkins) delivers the line with delicious intensity, following up with a sinister flutter of the tongue that is seriously creepy – so over the top that it has been immortalized in numerous parodies, including "Dumb and Dumber."

Hey, careful, man, there's a beverage here! ("The Big Lebowski"): The Dude (Jeff Bridges) becomes a tad indignant when a couple guys strong-arm him into a waiting vehicle for some benign interrogation – not so much because of the denial of his civil rights and the whole due-process thing, but because he's holding a freshly-mixed, vulnerable White Russian, his signature drink, and under no circumstances is it cool to spill the beverage of The Dude.

I got brown sandwiches and green sandwiches. – What's the green? – It's either very new cheese or very old meat. ("The Odd Couple"): At a poker game with his middle-aged divorced friends, and those on the cusp of divorce, slovenly Oscar Madison (Walter Matthau) offers his guests some hastily arranged sandwiches, some brown and some green. Just to describe the sandwiches that way says something about the manner in which Oscar lives as an aging, single sports-writer in New York. It's humorous to watch the decades-old movie now and compare the main characters to the Metrosexuals of

Manhattan today. You just know Oscar and his buddies don't do Pilates, or have their backs waxed, or eat vegan, or subscribe to Esquire. They're just regular guys who sometimes throw spaghetti against the wall.

A man's got to know his limitations. ("Magnum Force"): Sound advice offered often by Inspector Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood) to just about everybody he encounters in this film about vigilante cops hunted to extinction by the patron saint of vigilante cops, none other than Harry Callahan. The final utterance of this instructional line is delivered to Lt. Briggs (Hal Holbrook) posthumously after the corrupt police official is blown to smithereens by a bomb surreptitiously dropped into the back seat of the lieutenant's squad car – by the Dirt-man himself. Fade to whatever resembles the color of burning flesh and smoldering mid-70's automotive upholstery.

I am married to an American agent. ("Notorious"): Bad news for Alexander Sebastian (Claude Rains) who is a member of a cabal of post-WW II Nazi fanatics seeking a path back to glory by cornering the market for enriched uranium. Things are moving along nicely until Claude screws up and falls for fake female adoration heaped upon him by Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman), a Teutonic beauty half his age. She's also an operative of a U.S. spy agency under the supervision of Mr. Devlin (Cary Grant). When Claude figures out the ruse, and utters these words of resigned doom, his deliciously devious mother (Leopoldine Konstantin) conjures up the slow demise of Alicia the gold-digger – or should I say, uranium-digger?

OK – One more makes 51.

Mother, they're still not sure it is a baby! ("Eraserhead"): A strange line that more than piques the curiosity of the audience, and one that sets everyone in the theater on edge. By now, anyone who

watches "Eraserhead" has either seen it 100 times, or is a newbie who's heard disturbing things about the cult classic and waits nervously for the visual assault. For the latter group – yes, the baby is shocking, and disgusting, and sometimes risible, and in a weird way, bears some resemblance to E.T.

Above the Fold Obit: The Height of Recognition

June 17, 2013

The New York Times is the gold standard of obituaries, employing a robust staff of writers and researchers to develop informative pieces on the lives and times of the famous, infamous and influential (both well-known and obscure.) Unlike the obits you read about beloved aunts and uncles in your local newspaper, the Times strives to tell all the dirt that's fit to print, including the pratfalls and failures of the dearly departed. Criminals, cheaters, the goats of sport – if worthy of an obituary in the Times, all will have their stories presented largely unvarnished. Recognizing that more than 99 percent of the people who bite the big one receives no treatment from *The New York Times*, it should be considered an honor to receive even a couple column inches in the Grey Lady. Devoted readers of the Times will note the editors have established an obituary hierarchy by which the recently deceased are ranked in importance. I can't say I have the secret decoder ring for where in the hierarchy any particular individual might fit (although I'm pretty good at guessing where the paper will slot an obit in the next day's issue), but I'm sure it is an unscientific combination of accomplishments, notoriety, recentness of glory, quirkiness of the story, level of tragedy involved, and Q-factor.

Consider Michael Jackson, the King of Pop (aka. "Wacko Jacko" by some hard-hearted headline writers over at the *NY Post*)

who tragically OD'd on Propofol shortly before he was to undertake a 50+ come-back performance schedule in the UK. Like all people on Earth not hermetically sealed in a mayonnaise jar on Funk and Wagnall's porch, I heard the breaking news of Jackson's death the afternoon of June 24, 2009. I had no doubt whatsoever that his obit would appear the next day on the front page, with a picture, above the fold. Sure enough, there on the front page of the paper at the very top, date-line June 25, 2009, was a four-column photo and headline announcing the shocking death. Including the photos, the obit (which jumped inside for many more column-inches) took up almost half the front page of the paper of record. Contrast that with the death notice on the same day of iconic pinup girl and TV and movie star Farrah Fawcett. Her popularity and notoriety didn't rival Jackson's but she was still world-famous. The NYT placed a tiny photo and a few words announcing her demise along with the page number in the back where readers could learn more.

This is the hierarchy as far as I can tell, from highest to lowest:

1. Front page, above the fold, banner headline, photograph (usually reserved for major heads of state such as a US President, Royalty of major countries, Popes)
2. Front page, above the fold, photograph (Major politicians, entertainers, writers)
3. Front page, below the fold, photograph (Important politicians, entertainers, business people, writers, key NYT employees)
4. Front page, below the fold, no photo (Politicians, entertainers, business people, scientists, quirky people)
5. Front page, notice at the bottom, photograph, obit inside

6. Front page, notice as the bottom, no photograph, obit inside
7. Inside page (Of course, there is a hierarchy inside that consists of width of headline, number of column-inches, etc., that I won't bother to further break down)
8. No obituary (99+ percent of humanity. In fact, I've actually read obits for famous animals that rate higher than humans, e.g. Koko the gorilla who communicated using sign language.)

Now, to satisfy your curiosity, a sampling in no particular order of the "above-the-fold" crowd: (dates are when the obit appeared; * = banner headline)

- Steve Jobs (Oct 6, 2011)
- Frank Sinatra (May 16, 1998)
- George Harrison (Dec 1, 2001)
- Leonard Bernstein (Oct 15, 1990)
- John Lennon (Dec 9, 1980)
- Richard Nixon (April 23, 1994)
- Pope John Paul II (April 3, 2005)*
- Albert Einstein (April 19, 1955)
- Josef Stalin (March 6, 1953)*
- Marilyn Monroe (August 6, 1962)
- Franklin Roosevelt (April 13, 1945)*
- Adolph S. Ochs (April 9, 1935)
- Robert F. Kennedy (June 6, 1968)*
- Bob Hope (July 29, 2003)
- Bing Crosby (October 15, 1977)
- Henry Ford (April 8, 1947)
- Thomas Edison (October 18, 1931)

- Elizabeth Taylor (March 24, 2001)
- Martin Luther King, Jr. (April 4, 1968)*
- Ernest Hemingway (July 3, 1961)

A truly amazing line-up of 20th and 21st Century icons. Many hundreds more luminaries have had their obituaries appear on the front page of *The New York Times*, but "above the fold" is where the real movers and shakers are separated from the rest of the world. (Update: Ruth Bader Ginsberg received the full treatment upon her death: banner headline above the fold with photo.)

Insidious Consequences Indeed

June 26, 2013

A famous man once said, "While it does not, for constitutional purposes, matter whether University's racial discrimination is benign, I note that racial engineering does in fact have insidious consequences." Insidious consequences, indeed. That man was Clarence Thomas, and one of the more insidious consequences of "racial engineering" is that this mediocre judicial hack now sits on the Supreme Court of the United States until he dies, lazing about mutely while voting consistently to send America back to its formative days in the late 1700s when white men of means held public office and enacted laws for the benefit of their electors (i.e. white men of means.)

The Clarence Thomas trope is well-known by now – growing up dirt-poor in Pin Point, Georgia; attending a seminary as one of only a few blacks in the class; getting into Yale via affirmative action which Thomas supposedly loathed; taking an assignment with Senator John Danforth which led to a position in the Reagan administration; and finally, an appointment by President George H. W. Bush to the Supreme Court of the United States. Of course,

this final pinnacle didn't come easy for poor old Clarence who has made a career out of publicizing his ill-begotten life of getting the shit end of the stick, even when he's snagging the brass ring out of reach of virtually all of humanity. After the death of Thurgood Marshall, the first black to be elevated to the Supreme Court, Bush was faced with a dilemma: how to fill the seat vacated by Marshall – a seat that had become known as the "Black Seat" on SCOTUS – while packing the court with another conservative-leaning judge. I'm sure the Bush staffers ran amok looking for a conservative black juror who possessed the *haut* qualifications and resume to justify a seat on the most important court in the world – and came up stone-cold empty.

At a different period in history, the administration might have simply stepped outside the confines of race and compiled a list of worthy candidates regardless of background; but we're talking about filling the "Black Seat." So, after an exhaustive search that presumably involved a decremental lowering of standards, the Bush staff landed finally upon Clarence Thomas, a man who "had never tried a case or argued an appeal in any federal court and had never produced any scholarly work when he made the D.C. appeals court," according to Jeffrey Toobin. As I recall at the time, Thomas's nomination drew a flurry of condemnation and a lot of groans about tokenism, which surely advanced Clarence's perception that this SCOTUS gig was just another shit-end-of-the-stick deal. Since then, the record shows that Thomas is a lock-step butt-boy follower of radical originalist Antonin Scalia; his votes act as a force-multiplier for Scalia's antediluvian hallucinations.

OK, so a third-stringer like Clarence Thomas makes it to the big leagues – what's the problem? Happens all the time in corporate America, local and national politics, certainly in the music industry. To me the difference is that Clarence Thomas is that

unique breed of ingrate who gets to the top through a maze of special treatment, and once there decides not to abide the situation quietly but rather shreds the maps and burns the bridges that led him to his lofty destination – all in the name of keeping some other poor soul from getting the shit end of the stick that millionaire Clarence was forced to accept.

Consider this: Thomas received a surprise job offer to join the Reagan Administration as assistant secretary for civil rights in the Department of Education. According to Thomas's own biography, he said he felt he had been "singled out solely because I was black, which I found degrading." Nevertheless, Thomas took the job and, a year later, he received a promotion to lead the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. If the offer was so degrading, why accept it? The answer must be that the allure of getting the shit end of the stick is powerfully strong in Clarence's case. Surely there must be a name for this type of destructive behavior. Fecal Stick Acceptance Syndrome perhaps? Thomas was one of five Justices who struck down a key provision of the Voting Rights Act the other day which will probably have a negative effect on people who look like Clarence and grew up like Pinpoint Clarence. But thanks to Justice Thomas these poor souls will never have to accept the shit end of the stick of getting an unfair advantage that Clarence had to endure.

As an aside, Clarence Thomas was among four Justices who dissented the ruling today that the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) is unconstitutional (which was plain to see from the day it was enacted in the 1990s). For the record, Clarence Thomas married Kathy Grace Ambush in 1971. They had one child, Jamal Adeen. In 1981 they separated and in 1984 divorced. In 1987, Thomas married Virginia Lamp, a lobbyist and aide to Republican Congressman Dick Armey. I'm OK with the concept of divorce

(tried it myself), but anyone who gets divorced has no right to warble on about defending marriage. Memo to Clarence – concentrate on grabbing the new shitty-ended stick that will catapult you to the next big thing outside of SCOTUS, and stop fucking up peoples' lives, you hypocrite.

Which Came First: The Title or the Plot?

June 4, 2013

The marketing blitz has started for the new summer movie "R.I.P.D" starring Jeff Bridges, Ryan Reynolds and Kevin Bacon (whose appearance will likely extend the "six degrees" parlor game to another 10,000 actors.) With the possible exception of some residents of Rhode Island, anyone who reads the movie title and sees the first three seconds of the trailer knows the show is about deceased cops fighting crime in the after-life. What else could the Rest in Peace Department be up to other than fighting evil spirits bent on committing crimes against the living? In Gestalt-like fashion, people can picture the whole plot from just a shred of information embedded in the title.

In fact, the title is so clever that I suspect it became the inspiration for the movie, rather than an appellation affixed well after the script was written and rewritten. I can imagine someone mindlessly riffing on the initials for various police departments, stumbling upon R.I.P.D. and in a Eureka! moment scribbling down a log-line for a movie. Movie plots have often been "torn from the headlines;" why couldn't an entire movie emanate from nothing more than a clever title? ("R.I.P.D." is actually based on a comic book by Peter Lenkov, but perhaps the title inspired the comic book first.)

Would it be far-fetched that some movies could have originated from nothing more than their titles? Could a simple play on words be the seed for a full-length feature film? Seems plausible.

How about these?

"The Santa Clause" – A stupid pun leads to an idea that Santa Claus has a clause in his contract. As a crass, commercialized holiday, it makes sense that the icon of Christmas would have a labor contract. Stretch it further – what is the clause in the contract? How about a stipulation over what must happen should Ole Saint Nick croak on the job? Makes sense given that Santa is an obese senior citizen (pipe-smoker, too?) who climbs atop snow-capped roofs and shimmies down chimneys while lugging a heavy bag for a living. All we need is for Santa to take a header off the roof of the home of some simpleton like Tim Allen who, according to the "clause" in Santa's contract, must now take over the Jolly One's duties. Laughter ensues, and with some Christmas cynicism vanquished in the end by the joy of being Santa, the movie wraps on a high note (and is guaranteed a couple of sequels.)

"G.I. Jane" – Change "Joe" to "Jane" and you have a new twist on the age-old military grunt story. This being the 1990s when the number of women in the Senate spiked, and challenges to the exclusion of women in combat positions increased, the plot line concerned the initiation of a solitary woman (Demi Moore) into an elite Naval force modeled on the SEALs who gets the backing of a female Senator from Texas (Anne Bancroft). Of course, the training is grueling and the males despise her, and although she takes a licking from her superior officer (Viggo Mortenson), she gives as good as she gets, and keeps on ticking. And like all movie arcs, just when things are looking good for soon-to-graduate Demi,

some nasty rumors surface which force her to quit. But alas when all seems lost, Demi turns the tables on the secret rumor-monger who turns out to be none other than her benefactor Senator. The movie ends exactly like "Top Gun" when the newly minted elite Navy team is called in to squelch some hostility coming out of Libya. In a stunning surprise, the Americans are victorious over the scrubby Libyans, and Demi gets some hard-won praise from ball-buster Viggo.

"Cowboys and Aliens" – Too good. The plot is immediately understood: a twist on the venerable movie theme of cowboys and Indians in which grizzled actors Daniel Craig, Harrison Ford and Keith Carradine engage in the usual Western business of bar-fights and posse round-ups until aliens invade and exercise hegemony over the town-folk. Real Indians get involved in the action too, but the main plot line entails the struggle against the mean aliens who are stealing gold and abducting humans for experiments. Not unlike the endings of "Independence Day" and "War of the Worlds," the seemingly invincible aliens collapse under the ingenuity and spunk of the beleaguered humans.

I can envision the following conversation between two writer-blocked screenwriters:

> "Did you see that lame cowboys and Indians movie on AMC last night?"
>
> "Cowboys and aliens?"
>
> "No, cowboys and — damn, I think I have a killer idea for a movie."

"Sorcerer": A Transformational Film Gets a Restoration

July 25, 2013

I read that William Friedkin, director of such influential 1970s films as "The French Connection" and "The Exorcist" is to receive a lifetime achievement award at the upcoming Venice International Film Festival, an honor well-deserved (he was nominated for Best Director by the Academy for both movies, winning the Oscar for the former.) Friedkin was also the director of one of my favorite movies, a nail-biting thriller called "Sorcerer" which will debut in restored condition at the same Venice festival. Given that Friedkin claimed this particular film was his "most personal" and "the most difficult to achieve" it would be a real treat to take in a completely restored version shown on a shimmering screen near the canals of one of the world's oldest and greatest cities. Roy Scheider's performance is powerful; the soundtrack by Tangerine Dream is haunting.

The movie grabs the viewer right away by breaking the shop-worn rules of modern Hollywood plot-construction and revealing in quick succession four unrelated vignettes involving violence committed on the part of four seemingly incompatible characters: a small-time thief, an Arab terrorist, a cold-hearted assassin, and a well-to-do French banker. The vignettes end badly for the four men, compelling each to abandon their existing lives and take up new ones in a corner of the world where people go to lose their identities – in this case, an oil-rich swath of remote jungle in Central America. The foursome suffers serious indignity at the hands of the colonialist oil company that employs them to conduct decidedly dangerous work, and the corrupt police who maintain control of the rag-tag town of ex-pats through extortion and punishment. Each man dreams of escaping the hellhole and

starting a new, anonymous life, but the cost is prohibitive, especially on the paltry wages they receive digging trenches and laying pipe. Then one day some anarchists blow up an oil well which creates a fountain of uncontrollable fire; according to the experts the only way to extinguish the blaze is to produce an explosion huge enough to snuff it out. Suddenly an opportunity for egress presents itself. The oil company knows of the existence of some really old nitroglycerin stashed in a far-away mountain armory that might do the trick – the problem is that the nitro is so god-damned old and volatile that merely shaking it too vigorously could cause an explosion. Moving it a mere 100 feet let alone all the way down the mountain would seem suicidal, but for the four desperate souls looking to get out of the jungle the risk is worth the reward.

And so the action begins. And what action. You'll have to view the film for yourself to get the full effect, but suffice to say that the four men paired up into two teams are plenty resourceful. The most amazing scene in the movie comes when the two teams, each driving a huge, crazy-looking customized truck, must cross a feeble rope-bridge designed for pedestrian traffic (barely). Unbelievable stuff.

To make the crossing seem tensely realistic, Friedkin hired set-designer John Box to create a hydraulically operated bridge at a cost of $1 million. Another $3 million was invested in the scene after the river ran dry during a drought just as filming was to proceed, requiring the specially-designed bridge to be disassembled and moved to another shooting location. All-in-all, the 12-minute scene took several months to complete and consumed a big portion of the budget – yet every second of screen time was worth it. Or was it?

"Sorcerer" came out just a month after the premier of "Star Wars," and while Friedkin had been overseeing the construction

of a real rope bridge over a real raging river to be crossed by real multi-ton trucks (which sometimes toppled from the bridge and had to be pulled from the river for take 2), George Lucas had been filming exterior action on a tiny plastic model spaceship using miniature cameras in the quiet of a studio in sunny Southern California. And while "Sorcerer" delved into the depths a man must descend in order to extricate himself from his personally-inflicted hell-on-Earth, "Star Wars" presented nothing more than a Western in a galaxy far, far from Earth. Still, "Star Wars" completely obliterated "Sorcerer" at the box office. And I mean completely. "Sorcerer" opened at the box office to the tune of $5.9 million; "Star Wars" did $36 million on 2,000+ screens. It went on to do north of $4 billion in all its fugly sequellian incarnations.

It's possible that the financial success of "Star Wars" juxtapositioned with the flopping of "Sorcerer" marked the dividing line between the end of the New Hollywood cinema movement and the beginning of the insipid Blockbuster era that we now regularly suffer through (2013 being a banner year.) But such is life. "Sorcerer" is a great flick, period.

What's with All the Upset Stomachs?

September 13, 2013

In 1960, while running for President, John F. Kennedy spoke to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, making among other points, the importance of separation of church and state – understandable at the time as Kennedy was trying to convince voters that, although a Catholic, he wouldn't be taking any orders from the Vatican. More than 50 years later former Senator and holy scold, Rick Santorum, in an address to the College of Saint Mary Magdalen told the crowd, "Earlier in my political career, I had the opportunity to read the speech, and I almost threw up. You should read the speech."

You know, I might throw up if I witnessed a car crush a person's skull, squishing out bloody brains all over the pavement, or watched a medieval disembowelment in all its fetid glory – but poring over a speech about separation of church and state doesn't strike me as vomit-worthy material.

And just a few days ago Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey, after reading an Op-Ed in *The New York Times* by Russian Prez Vladimir Putin in which the Cossack trashed America's claims of exceptionalism, said, "I have to be honest with you, I was at dinner, and I almost wanted to vomit." First of all, did he mean to say "I almost vomited" or that he sincerely almost "wanted" to launch his dinner? Was the person sitting next to him that despicable? But really… a Russian pokes a verbal stick in our eye and you feel like puking? Dude, you hail from New Jersey for God's sake, where the ubiquitous chemical odors, wafting garbage smells and insidious amusement park rides should have toughened your guts by now.

Then, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, commenting on the tragic fires that ravaged the boardwalks and businesses of Seaside Heights and Seaside Park, said "I told my staff, 'I feel like I want to throw up.'" Coming from the portly Christie, that might qualify as a superfund site.

Why has the image of a politician throwing up suddenly permeated the discourse? Knock it off before one of you decides to go literal and blow chunk live on C-SPAN.

Ghastly Casting

September 21, 2013

If the "Howard the Duck Award for Biggest Flop" existed, the odds-on favorite for 2013 would be "The Lone Ranger," an overly-long, too-violent, ill-conceived tale based on the television

show that ran from 1949 to 1957. When I first heard that Walt Disney Pictures was planning to produce the film, I concluded Hollywood was about to develop yet another lazy franchise built on familiar characters in an established story-line. Then it occurred to me that the only people who might relate to The Lone Ranger and his subservient sidekick Tonto would be septuagenarians who watched the show more than half a century ago, i.e. a generation of viewers that tends to avoid the Cineplex. Apparently, Walt Disney was expecting teenagers to get excited about a pair of largely unknown Western heroes, a delusion that probably explains the floppiness of the project.

In addition to the movie's flaws I found the casting of Johnny Depp as the Comanche Tonto both curious and somewhat insulting. I recognize that (up to now) attaching Depp to any project was seen as a sure-fire way to attract audience, but why pass over talented Native American actors who would bring greater credibility to the role –and who undoubtedly would appreciate the work. Hollywood's heritage is replete with Caucasian actors playing non-white characters, and the result is usually laughable.

Below is a sampling of some of the best ghastly casting.

Mickey Rooney turning Japanese (I really think so):

> "Breakfast at Tiffany's" centers on the hijinks of the free-living and unpredictable call-girl Holly Golightly (Audrey Hepburn) as she hosts wild parties in her Manhattan walk-up. An expendable character in the film is Holly's upstairs neighbor, Mr. Yonioshi who takes frequent umbrage at her all-night antics. Wearing preposterous prosthetic buck-teeth while he stumbles about screaming "Miss-a Go-right-ree!" is Mickey Rooney who played countless white-bread characters starting at the

age of 17 months old. Although anti-Japanese sentiment continued into the 1960s following Pearl Harbor, the portrayal is over-the-top. Director Blake Edwards later said, "Looking back, I wish I had never done it… and I would give anything to be able to recast it."

The Duke goes Gook: Over 50 years in the business John Wayne starred in more than 170 films, and given the sheer volume of his work it's understandable that The Duke would play some clunker roles. But his portrayal of Genghis Khan in "The Conqueror" – deservedly cited as one of the 50 worst films of all time by Michael Medved – set the low bar for hack acting. Wearing a stringy moustache and slanty eye makeup, Wayne pushes around the women and blusters out ridiculous lines such as "While I live, while my blood burns hot, your daughter is not safe in her tent." Sidebar: "The Conqueror" was filmed in Utah downwind from a major nuclear bomb test, and many of the actors and crew, including Wayne, later contracted various forms of cancer. That back-story is 100 times more interesting than the movie itself.

Charlton Heston – aka. Carlos Hestoña: Overshadowed by "Citizen Kane" and "The Magnificent Ambersons," Orson Welles's "Touch of Evil" is a marvelous representative of the American film-noir crime thriller. Shot in shimmering black and white, it stars Marlene Dietrich, Janet Leigh, Welles himself, and Charlton Heston as Ramon Miguel Vargas (huh?), a drug enforcement official in the Mexican government. Heston performs well, but again, like the situation in "The Lone Ranger" what would have been so awful about casting a Mexican in the role? The ludicrousness of the casting is recalled in the

movie "Get Shorty" when Chili Palmer (John Travolta) asks Karen Flores (Renee Russo), "Listen, 'Touch of Evil's' playing near my hotel. You wanna go check it out? Watch Charlton Heston play a Mexican?"

The Chan Dynasty: Charlie Chan was a Chinese detective character introduced by Earl Biggers in novels he started writing in the 1920s. Immensely popular at the time, Charlie Chan stories were an obvious subject for the movies, and between 1926 and 1955 more than 40 films were produced. The first couple of movies featured Japanese actors playing Chinaman Chan, but they were flops. It wasn't until Swedish actor Warner Oland took over the role that the movies took off. The franchise was so successful that when Oland died, he was replaced by another white actor, Sidney Toler; and when Toler kicked the bucket, the role was filled by yet another whitey, Roland Winters. I suspect that when the series began, mostly white America was distrustful of all things Oriental – thus the failure of the franchise until a white guy took over. And once the secret to success was discovered, no future producer dared to cast an actual Chinese actor. Easier to apply slanty makeup and the cheesy facial hair than to wean the audience from ghastly casting.

As Iago once said, "I am not what I am.": As one of the greatest film and stage actors of all time, Laurence Olivier gets to play whatever the hell role he wants, including Othello, Shakespeare's jealous Moorish general. Although the play doesn't specifically state Othello's race, it has become standard to view him as dark-skinned and probably a native of North Africa. Although his

performance is mesmerizing, it's distracting in the beginning to watch Olivier in the 1965 film with his face slathered in a tarry substance. (The same can be said for Orson Welles who played the Moor in the 1952 version he directed). Thankfully, in 1995, "Othello" was produced with a black actor, Laurence Fishburne in the lead.

Read this Book, for Christ Sake

October 14, 2013

I recently finished Reza Aslan's thoroughly fascinating and well-researched "Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth," a study not of Jesus Christ the "Son of God," but an analysis of the life and times of an obscure man who was a run-of-the-mill religious rabble-rouser who, through the works of others who wrote long after he died, came to be the foundation of one of the world's largest faiths. Aslan approaches his subject from the point of view of an historian, not a theologian – yet he's not out to trash debunkable biblical claims, but to explain Jesus in context of his times in a period of apocalyptic mania.

As many people know, the Romans in the century before and after the birth of Jesus had their hands full trying to maintain hegemony over the Jews of the Middle East, and often turned to a common method of subjugation: co-opting a leader of the subjugated to rule as a puppet over them. Such puppets were rewarded for their fealty, but inevitably came to be despised as much if not more than the Romans themselves. Members of various Jewish sects took a hard-line (and invariably futile) approach against both Romans and their puppets, arguing that neither had a right to lord over the faithful. Such recalcitrants were known as "zealots," such was their zeal to seek purity in religious practice. Jesus of Nazareth was one such zealot.

Again, the common perception of Jesus today is that of a gentle man – a shepherd? – who cured lepers, conjured up loaves and fishes, and reattached the severed ear of a Roman soldier. A man of peace. But Aslan opens his book with an appropriate quote from the Gospel of Matthew (10:34): "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but the sword." Jesus was a sincerely provocative character who challenged the rule of the Romans and held even greater contempt for the Jewish puppet-leaders (Caiaphas and his minions) who abrogated the commandments of the Torah for personal gain. The evidence indicates that Jesus sought to build a following that would rise up and demolish the vain occupiers of the Temple; he did not pretend to be the messiah. He certainly did not suggest he was God, or the Son of God – no observant Jew would ever make such a blasphemous claim. Aslan points to many instances of revisionism after the death of Jesus designed to make a case that he was the prophesized messiah (Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem for a census which never took place, Jesus wandering in Egypt – these stories are invented to help fulfill prior prophecies), and dives deeply into the doings of Paul (formerly Saul of Tarsus) who underwent a conversion and became the chief proponent that Jesus is in fact the Son of God. The story of how Christianity sprung forth with tenets in such opposition of what Jesus practiced is astonishing. In short, Paul preached at a time when Judaism was essentially a pariah religion with no standing in the Roman empire, so he had to appeal to Jews willing to abandon Jewish tenets, and to Gentiles looking for a palatable faith.

Although I slogged through many years in Catholic schools, reading Gospels, reciting Beatitudes, memorizing Scripture, I learned more about Jesus of Nazareth in the few hours reading "Zealot." Highly suggested.

And speaking of Lesus – I mean, Jesus… From the October 11, 2013 issue of *The New York Times*: "Coins Celebrating Pope Misspell Name Above All Names"

> ROME — It seems absurd that any official Vatican memorabilia would misspell the name Jesus. Or that the Italian institute that mints coins, passports and postage stamps would make such an error. And yet the fact remains: a new series of special commemorative coins honoring Pope Francis got it wrong. They call him Lesus. "Everybody makes mistakes," said the Rev. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, on Friday. "Even people who make coins." The Vatican confirmed on Friday that it had withdrawn 6,000 coins commemorating Pope Francis' first year in the papacy. The coins had already been distributed to retailers when it was discovered that "Jesus" had been rendered as "Lesus" on a Latin phrase engraved around the edge of the coin.

The Vatican has not decided whether to mint new coins, but if it does, the value of the flawed versions could skyrocket for collectors, experts said. The bronze medals were briefly sold for 80 euros each, or $108; the silver ones for about $135; and the gold for $203. "Regardless of what the Vatican decides to do now, it's an interesting purchase for a collector," Francesco Santarossa, owner of a numismatic and philatelic shop near St. Peter's Square in Rome, said in a phone interview. "I don't think they ever made such a mistake in the 600-year-long history of papal medals."

Let Us Now Praise Famous Plutocrats

October 21, 2013

Every two years the people who run the vast Andrew Carnegie trust fund bestow the "Medal of Philanthropy" upon a handful of worthies, most recently last week at a hifalutin

ceremony in Scotland. According to the website "The Andrew Carnegie Medal of Philanthropy was inaugurated on December 10, 2001, by more than 20 of the institutions Mr. Carnegie established all over the world during his lifetime. This award, created at the centennial observance of Andrew Carnegie's official career as a philanthropist, is given every two years to one or more individuals who, like Andrew Carnegie, have dedicated their private wealth to public good, and who have sustained impressive careers as philanthropists."

The 2013 winners are

Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Chairperson of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science Community Development and one of Forbes' 100 Most Powerful Women

Sir Tom Hunter, the British entrepreneur whom the Sunday Times called Scotland's first home-grown billionaire

Dr. James Harris Simons – along with his wife, economist Dr Marilyn Simons – the American mathematician who founded one of the world's most successful hedge fund companies

Dr. Dmitry Zimin, the co-founder of the second-largest telecom business in Russia

Dame Janet Frances Wolfson de Botton CBE on behalf of the Wolfson family, founders of the Wolfson Foundation.

Royalty, hedge funds, billionaires, corporate behemoths. Regular people – regardless of their devotion of sacrifice – need not apply. Clearly, winning the Medal of Philanthropy depends on the size of one's wallet. Not that there's anything wrong with disgorging millions of dollars to help the less-fortunate, but I would say that the tax benefits should suffice as the reward for

philanthropy. Accepting a prize for sloughing off a chunk of money that constitutes an accountant's rounding error seems a bit gauche.

Consider Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, the second of the three wives of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, former Emir of Qatar. After marrying into a royal family that lords over a spit of land that sits atop an ocean of crude oil, the Sheikha became an instant steward over a petro-fortune. A survey of her work indicates many worthy causes like UNESCO, but let's face it – having access to a few spare billions to throw around smooths the path to the Medal of Philanthropy. In addition to being lauded by *Forbes*, the Sheikha is fawned over by the editors at *Vogue* for her good taste in haut couture (you know, designer outfits that cost upwards of $20,000 – also known as the equivalent of a combined year's salary of five average Qataris.)

What about His Highness the Aga Khan who received the Medal in 2005 for simply continuing the philanthropic work started by his ancestors in the 19th Century? The philanthropy's mission is to improve living conditions and opportunities in poor regions of the developing world, specifically in sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central Asia and the Middle East – very admirable. What is left unsaid is that the philanthropy is funded by His Highness's followers who pay a tithe to the foundation. According to a *New York Times* interview, "Part of the Aga Khan's personal wealth used by him and his family, which his advisers say exceeds $1 billion, comes from a dizzyingly complex system of tithes that some of the world's 15 million Ismaili Muslims pay him each year." I wonder if any of those 15 million generous souls were invited to the festive Medal ceremony. By the way, the busy Aga Khan owns hundreds of racehorses, valuable stud farms, an exclusive yacht club on Sardinia, a private island in the Bahamas, two Bombardier jets, a high-speed yacht, and several estates around the

world, including a beauty in the north of Paris. (Makes me wonder if self-Philanthropy should become a new category of medal. The Kahn-man would be a shoe-in.)

OK, one more. Sandy Weill, another 2013 recipient of the Medal. The name isn't exactly household, but anyone who follows finance a little bit knows that Sanford Weill engineered the merger of Citicorp, Travelers Insurance, and Smith-Barney in 1998 after Congress blew apart the Glass-Steagall Act which was put in place during the Depression to address foundational issues that contributed to bank failures – mainly, it ended unholy alliances between staid commercial banks and randy investment firms. With Glass-Steagall shattered thanks to intensive lobbying and campaign contributing by people like Weill, the rich got richer and the shlubs took it in the ass when the economy collapsed because banks got "too big to fail." So, Weill helped dismantle a financial safety switch and got rich enough to win the Medal of Philanthropy. And then had the gall years later, after cashing in, to denounce the whole movement. He told CNBC, "What we should probably do is go and split up investment banking from banking, have banks be deposit takers, have banks make commercial loans and real estate loans, have banks do something that's not going to risk the taxpayer dollars, that's not too big to fail."

Sandy Weill winner of the Medal of Philanthropy, and on the short-list for the Halo of Hypocrites award.

Cards and Movies

January 21, 2014

Of all the forms of magic, I find sleight of hand to be the most entertaining and elegant. Cris Angel performs some very elaborate and mindboggling illusions as does David Blaine, but I can't help thinking that many of the big visual stunts – walking on water, levitating, slamming someone's cell phone inside a beer

bottle, separating a woman into two halves – come off with the participation of shills. Nothing against the illusion, but involving actors who feign awe at the magic while playing an intimate role in its execution necessarily diminishes the experience.

That is never a concern with real sleight of hand. Manipulation of ordinary objects such as playing cards, coins and balls in the close proximity of uninvolved onlookers is a true art form that demands the highest levels of dexterity and confidence, an ability to deceive, and gift for narrative. And a lot of practice. I mean a lot. To get a sense of the art form and its history, check out the revealing if slightly uneven documentary, "Deceptive Practice: The Mysteries and Mentors of Ricky Jay." Ricky Jay is probably the foremost living practitioner of sleight of hand, and his demonstrations and history-telling in the movie are truly fascinating.

I first came across a long-haired Ricky Jay in the late 1970s on HBO specials when a good deal of his repertoire involved throwing cards. I lost track of him until he showed up as a poker-playing con-man in David Mamet's 1987 psychological thriller "House of Games." In addition to being a marvel with card manipulation, Ricky – now paunchier and less-hirsute – showed he was also a passable actor (at least under the direction of Mamet and armed with the staccato dialog of the tight screenplay.) One of my favorite scenes in "House of Games" is when the gang of con-men baits a trap in the form of a high-stakes poker game for uptight female psychiatrist Margaret Ford (Lindsay Crouse). After a long night of poker, the action comes to a showdown between a hard-boiled Ricky Jay and a well-dressed bookie named Mike (Joe Mantegna). Margaret doesn't realize that Mike and Ricky are on the same team, so when Ricky's club flush beats Mike's trip aces, she finds herself in a pickle of the gang's design.

But nothing is as it seems – watch the movie to find out what happens next.

Anyway, card games have been used often in the movies as an entertaining device to establish the essence of the characters – are they venal, manipulative, foolish, idealistic, vengeful, greedy, desperate? – as well as the relationships between characters. High-stakes confrontations across the felt? A natural for the movies.

Here are a few of those that left a memory for me:

"The Sting": Henry Gondorff (Paul Newman) is just aching to take down evil gangster Doyle Lonegan – or was it Liniman? – in a brace game of five card draw. The whole plot of the movie depends on it. And Gondorff delivers. After running roughshod all night over the hifalutin gamblers on the 20th Century Limited out of New York City, Gondorff finds himself in a final showdown with Lonegan (Robert Shaw) for maximum stakes. Just the situation he's been waiting for; but Lonegan has stacked the deck against him. No matter. Gondorff anticipates Lonegan's parry and somehow turns four threes into four jacks. The look of incredulity and then panic on the face of Lonegan's henchman – the guy who stacked the deck – is marvelous.

"Honeymoon in Vegas": This rather contrived and moronic movie centers around a dickhead named Jack Singer (Nicolas Cage) who gets in over his head in a high-stakes poker game with a smarmy wax-museum piece called Tommy Korman (James Caan). Everyone in the audience can see that Jack is being conned – even as he sits on a straight flush. Tommy is betting hard into

Jack's "unbeatable" hand, but Jack lacks money to call. So, he offers an unusual wager: a weekend with his new wife Betsy (Sarah Jessica Parker) and all her deliciousness. Tommy accepts. Jack lays downs a straight flush to the jack. And (non)surprise – Tommy lays one down straight flush to the queen. Later on, back at the hotel room, Jack and his wife have a difficult conversation. "Do you know what a straight flush is? It's like… unbeatable." says Jackie boy. Betsy remarks, "'Like unbeatable' is not unbeatable."

"Cool Hand Luke": After severing a bunch parking meters, a drunken Luke is expeditiously incarcerated for vandalism in a southern-fried prison where he and his fellow convicts are assembled regularly into a chain-gang that whacks weeds and slings gravel along dusty roads amid the sopping-wet humidity of the Mississippi afternoons. As the log-line for the movie aptly says, "A man refuses to conform to life in a rural prison." Whether it involves eating 50 hard-boiled eggs, tricking an escape, or playing poker – Luke is always cool. In a game of five card stud where a dollar is a huge bet, Luke continually kicks a buck against another con who has a pair of sevens showing. Although Luke has nothing more than a king on the table, he successfully bluffs out a guy with an ace, and after some back and forth, he bluffs out the man with "the Savannahs." Dragline, a lifer played by George Kennedy who won an Oscar for his portrayal, flips over Luke's hand to reveal… nothing. As Luke says drolly, "Sometimes, nothin' can be a real cool hand."

"Choose Me": This quirky movie boasts a cast of misfits and curious characters, the biggest being Mickey (Keith

Carradine). He is introduced as a possible psychiatric patient who seems to have a host of credentials: poetry professor, professional photographer, spy, truck mechanic in East Germany. But are they real or just a figment of Mickey's active imagination? He's also quite the ladies' man. He makes a move on saucy Pearl (Rae Dawn Chong) who helps him get into a high stakes poker game – where her jealous husband Zach happens to be among the players. Mickey raises big against Zach who consults his astrologer for advice on calling the bet. Upon glimpsing Zach's hand, the astrologer exclaims, "No! Not with the moon in Pluto." Zach folds, Mickey rakes, and an adversarial relationship between the men is established.

"Cincinnati Kid:" The Cincinnati Kid (Steve McQueen) is a young poker savant who captures the attention and interest of an older card shark named Lancey Howard (Edward G. Robinson). There's the expected machismo and philandering, and the ending is rather contrived. But my favorite scene is a poker game dealt by a brassy dame called Lady Fingers (60-year-old Joan Blondell). This is a high-stakes game yet as Lady Fingers deals, the audience can see the faces of the cards as they fly off the deck several inches above the table. Comical. Hard to imagine a pro like director Norman Jewison let that slide.

"Casino": Like a one-trick pony, Joe Pesci clones his "Goodfellas" character to become Nicky Santoro in Martin Scorcese's blockbuster "Casino." The performance he gave in "Goodfellas" when he beat the shit out of a wise-ass Mafia made-man is revived in "Casino" in the famous pen-stabbing scene. Almost identical. That

same sarcastic fury comes later in the movie when Nicky can't catch a card at the blackjack table. The abuse he heaps upon the weary dealer who continues to give him face cards (aka. "paints") is withering – and it's especially hilarious when Nicky angrily throws a card at the dealer and it sticks to his shirt.

"21": I read Ben Mezrich's book, "Bringing Down the House," the true story about a crew of MIT students under the tutelage of a math professor who implement a combination of meticulous card value assessment and costume chicanery to win big at Vegas blackjack. The movie based on "Bringing Down the House" – "21" – bears virtually no resemblance to the story in the book. It's a contrived mess that makes virtually no sense. Still, the allure of high-stakes card games helps keep the audience quasi-interested. The part I find most fascinating though is the egregious continuity error in the beginning of the film where Professor Micky Rosa (Kevin Spacey) demonstrates the gist of counting cards. First some of the cards are face up. Then the same cards are face down. Then some go missing. Jesus. I guess that was a metaphor for the entire mess called "21."

RIP PSH

February 4, 2014

Philip Seymour Hoffman died the other day at the age of 46. I remember first seeing him perform in the 1996 movie "Hard Eight" along with noted character actor Philip Baker Hall, and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson. With so many players using their full three names, I often confused the bunch. The two Philips – Hoffman and Hall – also appeared together in "The Talented

Mr. Ripley," "Boogie Nights," and "Magnolia" further exacerbating the confusion. Soon enough though, Hoffman would distinguish himself such that no one would ever mistake him for another actor.

Although more famous for his work in film, including a Best Actor Oscar for his role in "Capote," Hoffman was also an accomplished stage actor. I saw him in 2000's revival of Sam Shepard's "True West" at the Circle in the Square Theater in New York. The spare stage was set in the middle of the floor surrounded by the seats like a boxing arena. Which seemed appropriate for this two-man play. The play centers on estranged brothers – one a screenwriter (Austin), the other a drifter (Lee) – who meet up after two years of no contact. The characters are basically complete opposites. The night I saw the play, Hoffman was in the role of Austin, a docile man who tends toward subservience to his older brother, played by John C. Reilly. The director of the play arranged it so Hoffman and Reilly exchanged roles every other performance – a novel concept which undoubtedly challenged both actors.

Both received Tony nominations that year.

The last time I saw Hoffman performing was just the other day on a Turner Classic Movies special "And the Oscar Goes To…" He commented on the great honor of snagging an Oscar for "Capote" – and he looked like shit. Someone who didn't know better would have peg his age north of 60. The transformation from a pudgy kid to a haggard-looking geezer over just 15 years is on a par with that of Orson Welles. Dedicated actors often tear themselves physically and mentally to get into a character – few more thoroughly than Hoffman. He paid for it, and so did his fans ultimately.

Where Have All the Odd Times Gone?

February 6, 2014

My great-aunt – born at the turn of the 20th century, a woman who might have been dubbed a "spinster" when that term still had currency – was a world-traveler and voracious reader and collector of books. After she died, her last will and testament afforded a local convent the first right of refusal of her vast library. The nuns picked out the best of the lot, no doubt intent on selling the booty and turning the proceeds over to the leadership of the diocese who knew best how to spend the loot. What remained after the spheniscidine vultures had snapped up their allotment was a mostly tattered assortment of odd volumes packed up in a few dozen liquor boxes that my father grudgingly lugged home. Luckily, the nuns were unschooled in literature and arcana because those liquor boxes contained a few real treasures. A beautiful set of three mid-19th century volumes of birds, reptiles and mammals complete with stunning colored etchings, several bound volumes of *National Geographic* magazines from the 1920s and '30s, the complete Stoddard's Lectures, and a Gutenberg Bible. Ok, no bible – but better still, a signed, first edition of Robert Ripley's "Big Book of Believe it or Not." Of all the leftover books we retrieved from my great-aunt's musty flat, Ripley's "Big Book" was my favorite, the one I read cover to cover over and over, the book I reached for first before visiting the bathroom. I memorized all the tales – mostly observations of mutant humans and bizarre behavior centered about the Far East – and the mind-twisting number puzzles, peculiar word origins and historical trivia. Did you know a butterfly was once called a flutter-by? That the oldest man in the bible – Methuselah – died before his father? That a cryptic letter containing just this series of letters – OPQRST – led

to the successful recovery of a prisoner of war? That Pennsylvania was not named after William Penn?

As much as I reveled in these odd pieces of trivia, the stuff of "Big Book" that riveted me most of all were the voyeuristic drawings of the poor, hideously deformed people Ripley stumbled across in his many years journeying to more than 150 countries (at a time when most American's stayed within 50 miles of their birthplace.) The Chinaman with four pupils in his eyes, the construction worker who survived a crowbar pierced through his skull, the blind man who read Braille with his tongue, the woman with two-foot long feet, the drunk who ate a sack of Portland cement, the acetic who every day stared at the sun long after his eyes were seared into glassy marbles – these were the stories I ate up.

How Ripley came to be a world traveler, author of several adventure books, and founder of a still-operating "freak" show exhibit called the Odditorium is meticulously documented in the recent biography "A Curious Man: The Strange and Brilliant Life of Robert 'Believe It or Not!' Ripley" by Neal Thompson (Crown Archetype, 2013).

As a boy Ripley was a talented sketch artist who eventually snagged a job as a cartoonist for a local newspaper. At a time before the technology of photography was solid enough to faithfully capture high-speed athletics, Ripley was employed to draw the action to accompany stories covering the games. Such were the quality and liveliness of his drawings that Ripley parlayed his stint into becoming a syndicated cartoonist. He distinguished himself from others of his ilk by searching out and sketching amazing tales of off-the-wall athleticism: a man who hopped the 100-yard dash in 11 seconds, another who skipped rope 11,810 times, an armless golfer who broke 100 on an 18-hole course. It was these stories of unusual and "unbelievable" human prowess that

brought in the readers – and this was in the days when newspapers were king. No competition from radio or TV for the attention of the public, Movietone newsreels being the only visual outlet for goings-on around the world. A man who could attract loyal readership to a newspaper syndicate was highly regarded – and highly compensated. At his peak Ripley commanded salaries during the Depression that would satisfy most people today – before adjusting for inflation.

Like all media outlets competing for eyeballs, Ripley's employers at Hearst needed him to continue the production of cartoons depicting strange and exotic escapades – stupid athletic tricks weren't enough. So, they sent him out to the four corners and across the seven seas to seek out the weird and wonderful. To wander the world – especially China – was Ripley's most cherished avocation.

You don't need to read Thompson's book to recognize that Ripley possessed a kind-of macabre interest in the human "freak." (In fact, you only should read the book if you want to dive extremely deep into Ripley's whole life from start to finish). Just check out his numerous volumes of drawings and the legacy of his early 20th century Odditoriums. Often, he seemed more interested in shocking viewers with ever more grotesque discoveries than in educating them on the curiosities of far-flung cultures.

Still, if you imagine yourself isolated in rural Nebraska or Utah or Iowa in the 1930s wary of driving more than a few dozen miles in your un-roadworthy Model T with tyres made from rubber trees, reading one of Ripley's reports complete with first-hand sketches from Siam or Transjordan or Ceylon would have been exhilarating.

Today, in a world of YouTube videos and always-on cameras, virtually nothing comes as a shock anymore – which I find

saddening. The inability to be astounded has ruined it for me. A man with a forked tongue covered completely in green tattoos so that he resembles an iguana? Run of the mill. A guy eats 413 biscuits in one sitting at Red Lobster and it barely makes news (even when he flops into a coma afterwards). Ripley writes of an Indian swami who could lift a 40 lb. bag of snakes with his eyeballs. What about a guy who hoists more than 100lbs with his nutsack? Boring, right?

Ripley's time of wide-eyed wonder has disappeared, and all we're left with is jaded ennui.

(Speaker of the) House Rules

February 14, 2014

A couple days ago the 535-member Vaudeville troupe known as "Congress" voted to raise the debt ceiling of the United States – a ridiculous process not endured by any other nation in the world except Denmark which has an almost unreachable limit. Not that huge U.S. debt is such a great thing, but raising the debt limit merely authorizes the Treasury to pay for things Congress *already* appropriated. If the U.S. must play charades with a debt limit, then it should be raised *before* Congress spends money, not after. This arcane, useless law provides a platform for a lot of grandstanding, and every time the limit comes close to being breached, the economy gets fucked. The whole thing is a goddamned embarrassment.

Anyway, prior to the most recent vote to increase the limit, there was a thing called the "Boehner Rule" (pronounced BOH-ner for fun), named after Speaker of the House John Boehner of Ohio. In short, the rule states that there must be dollar-for-dollar spending cuts for every dollar raised in the debt ceiling. That didn't happen this time, which calls into question the wisdom of naming a rule after yourself, then breaking it. Boehner also broke the "Hastert

Rule," another Speaker of the House declaration named after Dennis Hastert. It states that all legislation must garner a majority of the majority to be passed. That didn't happen either. The vote to raise the ceiling was 221 to 201 in favor, but only 12 percent of the voting Republicans (the majority party) went for it.

Maybe it's time to ditch these pompous rules which are promoted as though they are on the same plane as a mathematical formulation like l'Hôpital's Rule, Cramer's Conjecture, Euler's Formula, or the Pareto Principle. The concepts embodied by "The Boehner Rule," "The Hastert Rule" and "The Bush Doctrine" are too simple-minded to be dignified with a lofty title.

Still, given the venality of politicians, I can only imagine more, not fewer, rules are in the offing.

The Rangel Rule (Named after NY Congressman Charlie Rangel.): Forgetting to pay property taxes on Caribbean condos may not disqualify members of Congress from re-election by an adoring constituency.

Corollary to the Rangel Rule: Same shit goes for forgetting about illegally occupying too many rent-controlled apartments in Manhattan.

Lemma to the Corollary to the Rangel Rule: Illegally using the House of Representatives parking garage as free storage space? Fuck you. See the original Rule.

The Vitter Conjecture (Named after LA Senator David Vitter.): All legislation must comport with "Family Values," and "Madam" must be considered a member of the Family.

The Waxman Rule (Named after CA Congressman Henry Waxman.): Neither domestic nor military spending may exceed the size of Waxman's nostrils.

The Romney Doctrine (Named after former governor of MA, Mitt Romney.): But first be a corporation who needs corporations…

The Pelosi Principal (Named after CA Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi.): Any decrease in the debt ceiling must be offset by an increase of equal value of Botox.

The Ayn Rand Paul Law (Named jointly after Author Ayn Rand and KY Senator Rand Paul.): Three laws must be repealed for every one repealed.

The Cruz Conjecture (Named after filibuster cretin TX Senator Ted Cruz.): 41 > 59.

50 Years a Slave to Vietnam

February 21, 2014

Fiftieth anniversaries of historic events tend to revive memories of those old enough to recall them, as well as stoking interest in those who may have no inkling of their importance. Last year's anniversary of JFK's assassination was met by the mass publication of several books and novels, including Steven King's massive "11/22/63" and Bill O'Reilly's derivative "Killing Kennedy," and an untold number of television retrospectives. The 50th anniversary of D-Day in June of 1994 brought similar attention to that historic invasion that helped turn the tide of World War II.

2014 brings us the 50th anniversary of Lyndon B. Johnson's crusade to enact a Civil Rights bill while running for election against sunbelt conservative Barry Goldwater and, for a while, Southern-fried race-baiter George Wallace. And with this milestone, the popular interest in LBJ has piqued once again. *The New York Times* ran a lengthy article recently titled "Rescuing a Vietnam Casualty: Johnson's Legacy" in which Johnson's daughter Luci bemoans the Vietnam War's shadow across LBJ's other achievements. And

the LBJ Presidential Library in Austin will run a big Civil Rights Summit in April to commemorate the bill's passage. Meanwhile, new biographies and historical treatises are pouring out.

This past week I saw "All the Way," the new Broadway play written by Robert Schenkkan currently in previews at the Neil Simon Theatre, and starring Bryan Cranston as LBJ. The two-act play opens in the immediate aftermath of JFK's assassination and proceeds quickly to Johnson's most pressing concern – getting elected for real in the coming 12 months. He decides the time is right to enact a comprehensive Civil Rights bill (good for capturing black votes, not so good for Democrats trying to keep a lock on the South) and enlists the support of numerous influential members of Congress as well as the Negro constituency that has grown impatient (and concerned about losing their idol JFK to a Southern good ole boy). The adroitness with which LBJ plays the Machiavellian master is mesmerizing, and funny. (Sidebar: LBJ needs 25(!) Republicans to break a filibuster – and gets it! Imagine such a thing happening today.)

Cranston is masterful in the role of the 36th president, towering bully one moment, insecure former poor boy from the Texas Hill Country the next. LBJ is the central character of course, but right next to him in completing the story are Martin Luther King (Brandon Dirden) and J. Edgar Hoover (Michael McKean), both of whom manipulate and are manipulated by Johnson.

I haven't seen a play this good, this completely compelling in many years. The story is multi-layered and intricate, building up LBJ's political prowess while revealing his inherent insecurity over the possibility of losing. Cranston's performance is a triumph; within just a few minutes you forget you're watching Walter White. Cranston's transformation into LBJ is immediate and sustained. The rest of the cast is highly polished as well – in fact most of the

players take on multiple roles. In addition to portraying Hoover, for example, McKean also plays Sen. Robert Byrd and a gravedigger. Betsy Aidem plays Lady Bird Johnson, *Washington Post* publisher Katherine Graham and Rep. Katherine St. George.

In addition to bringing many one-time household names to life (Robert McNamara, Stokely Carmichael, Hubert Humphrey, Ralph Abernathy), "All the Way" develops the character of Walter Jenkins, LBJ's faithful personal assistant. At a time of despair over the seeming demise of the Civil Rights bill, at a point when LBJ considers dropping out, Jenkins comforts LBJ with kind words. LBJ, a man with two daughters, tells Jenkins he is the son he never had. Later, just weeks before the 1964 election, Jenkins is arrested for "disorderly conduct" with another man in a public restroom. This was an incident I had never heard of, and its inclusion is critical: the speed and callousness with which LBJ discards the man is devastating. And audience sympathy for LBJ is subsequently diminished, as it came to be in real life after the details of the Gulf of Tonkin affair and the LBJ-directed bugging of King came to light – two elements foreshadowed in the play.

As the play wraps with the election-night celebration of Johnson's victory in a landslide over Goldwater, all you can think about is the tragedy of Vietnam and King's assassination that loom in the coming years. Expect the 50th anniversary of those milestones to capture attention when the time is right.

My Way or the Arizona Highway

February 23, 2014

A couple of gay dudes wanted to get married in the sovereign state of Washington about a year ago, a process that is legal there. In between lining up a caterer, hiring a limo and picking out invitation stationery, the men got shot-down from their preferred

florist, Arlene's Flowers of Richmond. The reason: her "relationship with Jesus Christ" prevented her from serving sinners. How do we know this? The couple, Robert Ingersoll and Curt Freed, filed a lawsuit. The lawyer for the flower shop, Justin Bristol, said forcing his client to sell flowers for a gay wedding violated her constitutional rights of freedom of speech, association and religious exercise. "She is one of the few people left today willing to stand by her convictions rather than compromise her beliefs," Bristol said. "She's a very nice lady and doesn't have a discriminatory bone in her body." (She must be an invertebrate.)

Just a few months ago a Lesbian couple in New Mexico went through a similar episode, this time from a photographer, Elaine Huguenin. The photog claimed that shooting the wedding would "make her celebrate something her religion tells her is wrong (and) would hijack her right to free speech." The couple went elsewhere for their photo services, but not before filing a lawsuit.

Which brings me to the latest craziness out of Arizona, a bastion of paranoia that could financially screw itself out of a successful Super Bowl next year if the homophobia continues apace. The legislature there has passed a bill that would allow business owners to cite religious beliefs as a legal justification for denying service to same-sex couples. Gentlemen – start your litigation.

To me it seems a lead-pipe cinch that a challenge to the law, should Governor Jan Brewer sign the bill (not a lock given her veto of a religious freedom bill last year) would cut a favorable path through the courts. After all, the bill unequivocally legalizes discrimination. And yet, I believe the aggrieved parties of such a law should stand down, forget litigation, and turn to Yelp, Angie's List, Travel & Leisure and all the other outlets that praise and denounce purveyors of matrimonial services. Fuck 'em. If they

won't make a wedding cake for you, go somewhere else, and tell your friends and colleagues that you heard the small-minded baker has been cited for an e-coli violation (or three.) XYZ Florist won't come through with the arrangement of your dreams? Go down three blocks to an FTD, and while you're traveling tell your aging aunt that you heard XYZ secretly steals back flowers from funerals and reuses them on prom night.

From what I've read, there is a robust body of thinking that concludes the right of some people to deny services is sacrosanct. "Photographers, writers, singers, actors, painters and others who create First Amendment-protected speech must have the right to decide which commissions to take and which to reject," the libertarian Cato Institute and two law professors — Eugene Volokh of the University of California, Los Angeles, and Dale Carpenter of the University of Minnesota — told the New Mexico Supreme Court in the aftermath of the big "Florist Denial Assault of 2013."

It makes sense. You don't want to serve queers and Lesbos? You don't need a law. The baker can claim his oven is on the fritz. Or he ran out of yeast. The photographer can say she has a prior engagement, or expects to have pink-eye on the wedding day. Bigots who want to deny services don't need a law to prevent them from practicing bigotry.

To the inconvenienced, forget litigation – it only draws undeserved attention to a bereft cause. Take your valued business elsewhere and stick a dagger wherever you can along the way.

As a follow-up: In Arizona the passing of legislation of bald-faced discrimination in the name of religious freedom awaits a signature or veto from Gov. Jan Brewer. Now that the issue has gained national attention, as well as concern from big businesses like American Airlines and Apple that are worried about customer backlash, the anti-gay bill has started to shudder. The juiciest part

of the whole sordid saga is the urgency with which some of the bill's staunch supporters are running from their mess. Companies have called upon Brewer to reject the bill, and according to *The New York Times*, "their calls were echoed by three Republican state senators — Adam Driggs, Steve Pierce and Bob Worsley, all members of the party's conservative camp — who had helped pass the legislation in the first place." Say what?

Blaming the ignorance of those around them for not comprehending the wisdom of their bill, the Three Stooges wrote to their governor, "While our sincere intent in voting for this bill was to create a shield for all citizens' religious liberties, the bill has instead been mischaracterized by its opponents as a sword of religious intolerance, causing our state immeasurable harm."

I call upon every Arizona business to deny service to these three on the grounds that to serve such patently flaming assholes directly violates their constitutional right to freely exercise their right to deny service to assholes. Driggs, Pierce, Worsley – conduct your future business in Russia or North Korea where your views are more in line with the mainstream there.

Sh*t My Phony Goldman Sachs Trader Says

February 28, 2014

In 2009, a small-time comedian named Justin Halpern started a Twitter feed called @shitmydadsays featuring verbatim posts of his father's coarse observations, crude advice and utterances of suburban wisdom. For every quasi-clever quote ("That woman was sexy… Out of your league? Son, let women figure out why they won't screw you. Don't do it for them.") there are probably ten moronic, mostly-unfunny blasts ("You're like a tornado of bullshit right now. We'll talk again when your bullshit dies out over someone else's house;" "Listen, I don't want to stifle your

creativity, but that thing you built there, it looks a pile of shit;" "You're ten years old now, you have to take a shower every day… I don't give a shit if you hate it. People hate smelly fuckers. I will not have a smelly fucker for a son.")

Nevertheless, a mere two months after launching the account Halpern parlayed his highly re-tweeted feed into a book deal with Harper-Collins. In May 2010, "Sh*t My Dad Says" opened at #8 on *The New York Times* Best Seller list for hardcover nonfiction, eventually reaching all the way to #1. The same week the book came out, CBS launched a sitcom based on it, starring William Shatner. Not bad for a guy who simply thought posting his father's vulgarities would be passingly amusing.

Which brings me to another book deal based on a popular Twitter feed – this one called @GSElevator that serves as an outlet for (supposedly) overheard snarky commentary spouted by privileged Goldman-Sachs traders ("I just want to be rich enough not to be motivated by money;" "Some chick asked me what I would do with 10 million bucks. I told her I'd wonder where the rest of my money went;" "I never give money to homeless people. I can't reward failure in good conscience.") The content on @GSElevator had been posted anonymously by a fellow Goldman insider – or so was the conceit until recently. Shortly after the secret Goldman insider inked a deal with Simon & Schuster to develop a book out of his Twitter feeds, the man's identity was revealed: John Lefevre – former Citigroup employee, Texan resident, trader never-employed-by-Goldman. Uh oh.

Many Wall Street books have done very well in the aftermaths of the post-1980s gluttony-fest and the post-2008 Great Recession debacle (see below for some of my favorites) and no doubt Simon & Schuster believed lightning would strike again with the guts of @GSElevator rendered into book form. And the

novelty of deriving a book from a social media outlet probably struck the publisher as a cool way to upend the wags who have long predicted the death of the former by the sword of the latter.

But what do you do when you discover your newly-signed author is a liar and a fraud? Usually publishers pulp the books of authors who have been unmasked as plagiarizers and prevaricators, and you might expect Simon & Schuster to reconsider doing the deal with Lefevre. But in this case Simon & Schuster is sticking by its man. The book, targeted for an October release is to be titled "Straight to Hell: True Tales of Deviance and Excess in the World of Investment Banking," although they may reconsider the use of the word "true." According to the book's editor, Simon & Schuster was not misled. "He's been pretty straight with us the entire time, so this is not a surprise. That you're writing about him speaks to the interest he's generated. We always expected his identity to be revealed at some point."

My take is that Simon & Schuster is spinning like crazy, hoping to salvage their original sales forecast. With so many people conflating Wall Street and dishonesty, it seems ironic that the publication would go forward. But that's indicative of today's publishing world: book deals get made with people who have a big base of established followers. Forget sweating out the 800-page manuscript – make a splash one-hundred and forty characters at a time instead.

Some recommended Wall Street books:

- "Liar's Poker: Rising through the Wreckage on Wall Street" by Michael Lewis
- "Den of Thieves" by James B. Stewart
- "No One Would Listen: A True Financial Thriller" by Harry Markopolos
- "Griftopia: Bubble Machines, Vampire Squids, and the Long Con That Is Breaking America" by Matt Taibbi
- "Bailout: How Washington Abandoned Main Street While Rescuing Wall Street" by Neil Barofsky
- "The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine" by Michael Lewis
- "Too Big to Fail: The Inside Story of How Wall Street and Washington Fought to Save the Financial System–and Themselves" by Andrew Ross Sorkin
- "The Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron" by Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind
- "Wall Street & the Financial Crisis – Anatomy of a Financial Collapse" by The Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations

Is Obsession a Pre-existing Condition?

March 4, 2014

Every weekend the President of the United States delivers a radio address ostensibly to inform the nation, although I suspect the majority of those tuning in are Beltway insiders and policy wonks. The practice, which was popularized by Franklin Roosevelt in the times before television existed, was resurrected decades later by Ronald Reagan – no doubt influenced by nostalgia and engineered by a staff that wished to parlay his former radio-announcer days into a means of burnishing his folksy image. The weekly radio address continues to this day; Reagan's institution of the address essentially doomed all subsequent presidents to continue the process lest they be compared unfavorably to the eternally popular, avuncular 40th president.

As the weekly forum gives the President a nice, safe platform to pontificate and spin public opinion, the "loyal opposition" quickly demanded equal time. Thus was born the weekly Democratic/Republican Response – an opportunity for a representative of the out-of-office party to comment on the President's point of view, or to raise a completely different, presumably pertinent, subject.

This past weekend I turned on the radio just in time to catch the middle of Obama's soothing banter. After Obama blathered on a bit about job creation, the Republicans countered with a horror story about Obamacare. It included yet another profile of a small business owner whose world faces imminent collapse because of enormous hikes in premiums looming around the corner. At first, I thought the station was broadcasting a rerun of a previous show in which the evils of the President's signature legislation had been vilified by his opponents. But, no, the Republicans had spent consecutive radio addresses to do a hit-job on the Affordable Care Act.

I got to thinking – what were the topics of the President's radio addresses over the past twelve months, and what were the Republican's responses? Did they track one another? Did the Republicans respond to Obama's topic of choice, or did they take the opportunity to raise a separate, pressing issue?

The tally for the GOP is just a tad disturbing in its single-mindedness. Of 53 radio addresses over the past year, the Republicans harped about Obamacare 22 times. That's 41 percent. They could have spoken about any one of dozens of issues facing the country, but they chose to use their plum spot to pummel Obamacare over and over. Consider this: in the ten weeks from October 19 to December 21, the Republicans bashed Obamacare nine fucking times – resting just once to commemorate Thanksgiving. By the way, in pursuit of documenting the tally I listened to several of the opposition sermons and found nothing in the way of alternatives to Obamacare other than to repeal it.

Yes, the law has flaws – but what's the plan? No matter what happens, it won't be repealed until at least January 2017 – assuming a Republican is president and the Senate is in Republican hands and a Democratic filibuster can be overcome. By that time the law will probably be inextricably entangled in the economy. Children under 26 will have coverage under their parent's plans, people with pre-existing conditions won't get rejected by insurance companies, lifetime caps on payouts will be eliminated, hospitals that have crappy records on care will get less money from Medicare. Which of these items will people want to give up three years from now once they've become used to enjoying them?

But forget Obamacare. Why the obsession on any single topic, regardless of what it is? Can't Republicans devote even a couple radio addresses to something else, like flag burning and prayer in schools?

Radio Shack Set to Shrink

March 8, 2014

I read with dismay that Radio Shack, following a devastating $400 million loss in 2013, is planning to shutter 1,100 stores. Now what am I going to do the next time I need a fuse for my Marantz Vacuum Tube Model 9-70-R power amplifier? Or a head-cleaner for my 8-track? I wonder if I'll still be able to get service on my TRS-80 PC… Jesus! Will the government please come in and bail out Radio Shack? Please!?

Radio Shack started in 1921 with a mission to supply parts for the fast-growing ham radio community. Obviously, the name of the company made sense at its founding, but came to sound old fashioned and out-of-touch by the late 20th Century. (It was called Tandy for a while.) I suspect people associated the stores with nerdish kit builders and creepy loner inventors like Ted Kaczynski.

But I suppose Radio Shack isn't the only victim of ill-conceived or funny-sounding names. Just walk the halls of any mega-mall. I remember a shoe store named the Athlete's Foot, which I believe was around the corner from Painful Rectal Itch. And of course, every mall has a Crabtree & Evelyn, which I've been told was originally going to be called Crotchrot & Enema. And what about Häagen-Dazs, the ubiquitous ice-cream store founded in the Bronx and bestowed a Danish-sounding name that is actually untranslatable meaningless. The owners just wanted an exotic-sounding name. I believe their first choice, Skräachen-Zsnif, was already trademarked.

And how about Stuckey's restaurant? Not a staple of malls, but definitely an eyesore along the highways and byways of the interior US. Evoking the image of an uncomfortable mess, what name could be worse for a restaurant chain – especially one whose showcase delicacy is called "The Log"?

19 Screenwriters for Every Screenwriter

March 11, 2014

You often hear people complain about the sorry state of movies from Hollywood, an industry that is ever more dependent on revenue from a collection of bloated action blockbusters, reliable if not imaginative sequels to previously successful films, and derivative offerings based on concepts with established bases such as comic books and TV shows. With the exception of a handful of quality movies meant to compete for Oscars released near the end of the year, it seems much of the Hollywood output – despite a concerted, corporate-mentality effort to appeal to a desired target audience – misses the mark more often than not.

For insight into why this might be, take a look at the "winners" of the annual Razzies awards for worst movie, director, screenplay, sequel/rip-off, etc. A common thread among the winners and nominees is the over-abundance of screenwriters and directors who played a role in the development and fashioning of the final product. And I believe such uber-collaboration is a main cause of why so many movies are convoluted, unbelievable, unfunny and generally horrid.

Consider the 2013 "winner" of worst picture, "Movie 43" – tag-lined "The Most Outrageous Comedy Ever Made." Perhaps that's true. It may also be one of the most reviled films of all time, capturing an abysmal 4% rating on Rotten Tomatoes. How about this sampling of reviews?

> "As a film critic, I've seen nearly 4,000 movies over the last fifteen years. Right now, I can't think of one worse than Movie 43." – *New York Daily News*.

"Despite all the gross-out humor, the most offensive thing about this is the lazy filmmaking; every shot feels like a first take, and the haphazard editing precludes any comic timing." – *Chicago Reader.*

"Absolutely disgusting, nauseating, misogynistic, racist, cruel, void of any common sense." – *Cinema Crazed.*

"How many directors does it take to screw in a star-studded piece of aggressive stupidity and call it a movie? An even dozen, and there is no punch line." – *Los Angeles Times.*

Say what? Twelve directors? Yes, and upwards of 20 screenwriters. As Brian Gibson of Vue Weekly properly put it, "It's death-of-laughter by committee." Not surprisingly, most nominees for the 2013 Razzies have this "death-by-committee" phenomenon in common.

"After Earth" – Screenplay by Gary Whitta and M. Night Shyamalan, story by Will Smith.

"Grown Ups 2" – Written by Fred Wolfe & Adam Sandler & Tim Herlihy. (It took three people to pen a sequel to the moronic "Grown Ups," but bear in mind, one of them was Adam Sandler.)

"The Lone Ranger" – Screen Story & Screenplay by Ted Elliott, Justin Haythe & Terry Rosso. (Well at least these three Shakespeares wrote a screenplay AND a screen story.)

"Smurfs 2" – Screenplay by J. David Stem and David Weiss from a story they wrote with Jay Scherick and David Ronn.

(Four guys for a fucking Smurf movie? This had to be on a par with scripting porn.)

What happened to the days when killer scripts came from the manual typewriters of talented individuals like Billy Wilder, Preston Sturges, Paddy Chayefsky, Francis Coppola and Woody Allen? I suspect risk-averse studios and production companies meddle too much in the course of film-making, interfering along the way to tweak the movie to comport with the latest poll figures and viewer-sentiment metrics just in from the marketing department. Writers receive "help" then they get replaced altogether. And directors who stray a tad too close to or over budget ceilings are summarily sacked.

If other industries reassigned and divided project leadership as much as Hollywood does, you'd probably encounter aircraft made of lead, vitamins that explode on contact with water, and refrigerators with built-in ovens. And maybe even banks selling mortgages to unqualified borrowers which quickly balloon beyond the poor bastards' abilities to pay them back. Good thing the banks never let that happen.

The Legacy of Peter Callander

March 22, 2014

By some calculations the total number of unique five-minute songs is 1.7 trillion, of which perhaps five million have been recorded. Given this vast universe of musical combinatorics, it's understandable that thousands of horrible songs would have been pressed into vinyl, laser-cut into plastic and rendered into bitful MPEG files. Less intuitive is how so many crappy ditties have come to top the pop charts since such tracking began decades ago. Perhaps a song captured widespread attention by its sheer

cacophonic ineptitude, like a crowd forming around a car wreck – think "They're Coming to Take Me Away" by Napoleon XIV, and "Hooked on a Feeling" (i.e. the ooga-chucka version) ruined by Blue Swede. Maybe it's the lemming factor – I have to like the song because everyone else likes it. That's probably how a piece of shit like "Achy Breaky Heart" reached number 4 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1992, and got a Grammy nomination to boot. But the most probable reason bad songs fare well is that people have no taste.

Thinking back to a time well before iTunes, Pandora and Spotify – when all new music was consumed via the radio – I vividly recall three irritating songs that were the equivalent of poison ivy on my eardrums: "Billy Don't Be a Hero" for some reason performed around the same time by both Paper Lace and Bo Donaldson & the Heywoods, "The Night Chicago Died" again by Paper Lace, and "Daddy Don't You Walk So Fast" by numerous lounge lizards, the most famous being Wayne Newton.

"Billy Don't Be a Hero" tells the tale of a guy who joins the army against the wishes of his fiancée, goes to battle, and of course gets killed. Was he a hero? According to the song, "The soldier-blues were trapped on a hillside – The battle raging all around – The sergeant cried, We've got to hang on, boys, We got to hold this piece a'ground – I need a volunteer to ride up, And bring us back some extra men." Billy volunteers…to ride into the fracas looking for extra men to bring back? Where the hell from? Rent-a-Soldier? Sounds more like a suicide mission than an act of heroism

This song was not only a cheap tearjerker, but a nonsensical one as well. It made Rolling Stone magazine's top ten worst songs of the 1970s.

"The Night Chicago Died" with its grating chorus of nah-nah-NAH-nah-nah-NAH's recounts a Capone-era gangland battle

between hoodlums and cops in Chicago (located "Back in the USA" in case there was some confusion about which Chicago was being referred to). The one-night fight raged on "'Til the last of the hoodlum gang had surrendered up or died," which subsequently spelled the death of Chicago. Apparently, the city ceased to exist from that point forward. A song devoid of suspense, lacking historic foundation, and chock-full of sophomoric lyrics. Still, it made number 1 in 1974.

And then comes "Daddy Don't You Walk So Fast," a million-selling record that reached number 4 on Billboard, and a perennial member of the various incarnations of the "100 worst songs of all time." Pure corn-pone. A man is fed up with his wife – so much so that he resolves to leave for good. As he's walking down the highway (apparently too poor or stupid to take a cab), he gets the sense he's being followed. Sure enough his bawling "little daughter" has caught up with him. Apparently, 1) contrary to the song's title, daddy walks real slow, 2) daddy didn't have the courtesy to tell his daughter he was leaving her for the rest of her life, and 3) mommy doesn't give a shit if the crying tot ambles down Interstate 15 in her jammies. Anyway, daddy tells the little girl that he has to catch a train. Presumably he presses on in the hope she got the message – but nooooo! "I turned around and there she was again." Jesus, what an asshole.

By now the listeners of this maudlin three-hankie abortion have fallen into two camps: the weepy-eyed sentimentalists and the rank, concrete-heart set. After daddy proclaims, "I just had to turn back home right there and then, and try to start a new life with the mother of my child," you want to believe the first camp has come to its senses, renounced its charter and joined the concrete-hearters. Start a new life? Just like that? Shit, in real life,

daddy walks all the way home just in time to catch his wife doing the nasty with the pool boy.

Okay, three pretty awful songs that managed to hoist themselves high on the pop charts – and get this: all written by the same man, Peter Callander who died the other day at age 74. According to the obituary after "The Night Chicago Died" became a hit, the manager for Paper Lace "wrote to Chicago's mayor at the time, Richard J. Daley, asking if the city might be interested in promoting it in some way." Daley's response came in a rude, terse letter: "Are you nuts?"

Perhaps one of the mayor's aides cried out, "Daley, Don't Be a Zero."

Death of a Hate Salesman

March 25, 2014

The 2007 documentary "The Most Hated Family in America" presented by Louis Theroux is not about the Kardashians, the Koch Brothers, the Clintons or Bushes, but rather a sociopathic clan of homophobes established by recently deceased Fred Phelps. Phelps, making a cameo appearance in the film as a somewhat addled, cantankerous human hemorrhoid was the patriarch of the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) whose parishioners consist mainly of his hillbilly family members who are infamous for picketing the funerals of American soldiers and politicians in the name of God's hatred for – in their words – "fags."

The WBC are also stewards of the charming websites GodHatesFags.com and GodHatesAmerica.com – and given God's well-documented infallibility, the WBC must have been pleasantly surprised the Almighty hadn't already registered the domain names for Himself. "The Most Hated Family in America" is a less-than-satisfactory documentary in that Theroux mostly

plays the bemused observer of all things crazy with the Phelps's; it reminded me of the skits on "The Daily Show" in which a Comedy Central shill pretends to be doing straight docu while quietly punking the subject. Nonetheless, the raw content of "The Most Hated Family in America" is devastating, and for that I highly recommend viewing. Even though Theroux flubs opportunities to call the WBC cretins to account for their actions, they are more than capable of self-damnation in front of the camera. If you've ever wondered how young Muslims came to embrace suicidal jihad, you'll find signs of similarly toxic inculcation in this film.

Young family members (some as young as 6 or 7) bastardize songs like "America the Beautiful" ("God spread his shame on thee") and hold up signs that illustrate military members engaging in anal sex, announcing "No Tears for Queers." The logic is that "soldiers fight for a depraved and doomed nation" and hence they and their families deserve scorn.

To be fair, the WBC also hates Roman Catholics, Muslims, Jews and Sweden. In one sequence, a WBC fanatic rails against the "Jew Church," and when confronted about the logic of his loathing for a race of people that included Jesus Christ, informs the audience that "Jews worship the rectum." Wow.

As for the Swedes, the animus apparently stems from that country's tolerance of Gays – and in retaliation the WBC members employ a scorched-earth strategy and picket an appliance store in the US that sells Swedish-made vacuum cleaners. (The connection is tenuous – unless perhaps the WBC sees a conspiracy between "fags" and Swedish sucking machines?)

Because Fred Phelps makes virtually no air time in the documentary, it is left up to his deranged daughter Shirley to carry the water for the insane. When confronted about the rationale for the

abject hatred of Gays, she relies on the commandment against adultery, never stopping to consider picketing the likes of Newt Gingrich and Rudy Giuliani. Perhaps she steered clear of the usual shopworn Biblical citation in Leviticus (18:22) about the abomination of homosexuality because the passage is located too close to another sin (Leviticus 19:19) which would seem to trivialize it: a prohibition of wearing a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material. It's hard to imagine the WBC picketing The Gap proclaiming "God Hates Polyester Blends."

Seriously, the tactics employed by the WBC are disgusting and demented, and seem to me to be a calculated ploy to provoke a violent reaction from the people they torment so as to gin up greater coverage for their bizarre beliefs. As Theroux notes, "Being hated was proof they were doing the right thing." To their great credit, the victimized families of dead soldiers who were confronted by placards declaring "Pray for More Dead Soldiers" never took the bait. And even after Phelps kicked the bucket, the widespread reaction of his chosen adversaries was not one of glee, but rather more like a shoulder shrug. For just about everyone except the remainders of the WBC, the loss of Phelps seemed no more consequential than popping a zit – you're glad it's gone, but the result is hardly life-altering.

Unfortunately, the documentary ends just when things seem to be getting juicy. One of Phelps's granddaughters, a 21-year-old placard-carrying hate-monger, has just been admonished by her mother Shirley for considering going to a diner with a school chum for coffee. Theroux probes: why does a 21-year old adult need the permission of a parent to have a cup of coffee – and why does said 21-year old toe the line so readily? The girl almost cracks to reveal her inner conflict over hating the whole world

while wishing to participate in it, but quickly reverts to her Bible-thumping Nazi façade.

I bet a bit more probing would have yielded a truly fascinating documentary about the manifestations of child abuse masquerading as religious fundamentalism.

RIP Rock Action

March 25, 2014

Scott Asheton, original drummer for The Stooges died March 22 at the age of 64 – which is about 40 years longer than any actuary would have predicted given his association with some of the craziest people to walk on stage in possession of rock 'n roll instruments (and little of their faculties).

Nicknamed "Rock Action" for his pounding beat and passion for the business, Asheton, along with guitarist-brother Ron, bassist Dave Alexander, and seemingly-immortal front-man Iggy Pop together formed seminal band The Stooges in 1967. They quickly banged out two albums, the first being the most influential in my mind (Producer John Cale also performed on a couple songs), but #2 "Funhouse" also rises to the top of the hard-core punk compendium – both nearly a decade before The Ramones, The VoidOids and The Sex Pistols stumbled upon the scene. Number three "Raw Power," mixed by David Bowie, came out in 1973 with a slightly different line-up, and again was a stunning piece of rock – although the commercial success was non-existent. My favorite tune: "Penetration."

Still, to be a contributor to a venture that is now understood to be foundational is something Rock Action could be proud of. After decades in the wilderness, Scott Asheton came back to play on the superb 2013 Stooges "reunion" album "Ready to Die". Prophetic, indeed.

A Million Bucks Says I'm Against Gambling

March 31, 2014

First, we had the righteous clerics, then came the blustery Donald Trump, and now making noises is the addled Sheldon Adelson. What do they have in common? They all hate gambling – at least the kind that interferes with their own pursuit of the wagered dollar.

The hypocrisy of the church, which runs weekly Bingo events and "Las Vegas Style" casino nights inside their dingy parish halls, is well-documented. Although stopping short of calling gambling a sin – that would be a tough proclamation unsupported by Scripture – the church never misses an opportunity to weigh in on the latent evils lurking about the games of chance despite their reliance on the proceeds from chuck-a-luck. A few years ago, the Catholic Church in Massachusetts was strident in its opposition to casino gambling in that state, circulating bulletins and ranting from the pulpit, but found their influence wanting. Ironically, according to Ray Flynn, Boston's mayor at the time, "It was really the clergy sexual abuse scandal that really brought the church to a position where they weren't very effective in lobbying in the Massachusetts Legislature. I think they lost a lot of their moral and political influence and clout up at the State House." I guess like Frank Sinatra, the legislature didn't appreciate the church blowing on some other guy's dice.

Back in 1993 when Donald Trump owned three Atlantic City casinos (Trump Castle, Trump Plaza and Trump Taj Mahal), a group of uppity American Indians – referred to as "a very limited class of citizens" by Donald – was making headway in their goal of operating their own casinos. Sensing a looming incursion of an un-American practice known as "competition," Trump filed a lawsuit against the Federal Government.

The Mashantucket Pequots had already established the lucrative Foxwoods Casino in nearby Connecticut (building a case on the basis that the Catholic Church was already running games of chance there), and now the Ramapough Indians of New Jersey were getting into the act. Trump's suit maintained that allowing Indian tribes to open casinos discriminated against him. I suspect a blowhard of Trump's magnitude would have had a hard time self-labeling as a discriminated victim – but money is money, and competition has no place in the pursuit of it. Incidentally, the three Atlantic City casinos once run by Trump filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2009 – for the third time. As Donald once said, "I do play with the bankruptcy laws—they're very good for me." Obviously better than the laws of chance.

Crepuscular Sheldon Adelson is the billionaire owner, chairman and chief executive officer of the Las Vegas Sands Corporation, which also owns gaming properties in Macao. Adelson and some partners bought the old Vegas Sands Hotel in 1988 and a few years later constructed the fabulous Venetian on top of its razed carcass. He also built a casino complex in Pennsylvania that opened in 2009. So, the man clearly is up to his tuchas in casino gambling action. And I have no problem with that.

Yet like so many of his ilk, once he established his dominant position in his chosen industry, Adelson went on the offensive against allowing others to partake of the well. Recently, Adelson, who said "I am willing to spend whatever it takes," has hired an army of lobbyists to build Congressional animus toward online gambling – you know, playing games of chance on that fad called the "internet." Disguised as a public service against the rampant corruption of youth that online gambling would advance, Adelson and his minions (aka. pliant, money-grubbing Congressmen) are actually planning to eliminate competition against brick-and-mortar

casinos. And screw the conservative dogma about supporting "states' rights;" Adelson seeks to have the (dare I say it?) Federal Government nullify laws already passed in New Jersey, and those poised to pass in a couple other states. Pussies like the flimsy Lindsay Graham of South Carolina are ready and gaping to take Adelson's money in return for introducing appropriately punitive legislation.

Adelson claims "This is not a competitive issue," adding piously, "my moral standard compels me to speak out on this issue because I am the largest company by far in the industry and I am willing to speak out. I don't see any compelling reason for the government to allow people to gamble on the Internet." Strange – usually conservatives don't see compelling reasons for the government to *deny* people things they want to do.

The Long Life of a Short Man

April 9, 2014

Mickey Rooney, who died the other day at age 93, spent nearly all of his life in show business, having begun performing in his parents' Vaudeville act at the precocious age of 17 months. Mickey Rooney had more lifetime experience in movies, TV and the stage than the immortal Mickey Mouse. In contrast to the on-screen persona of the lovable diminutive boy-next-door character he played often in his early and most memorable part of his career, Rooney was in real life often angry and frustrated. Rooney bemoaned his short stature – and the limits it put on the roles he was offered – noting once that he would happily sacrifice 10 years off his life for another six inches in height. He blew massive sums of money in the gambling establishments of Las Vegas. And he was a serial matrimonialist – tying and untying the knot several times, seemingly unable to find any durability.

Until I read his obituary, I did not appreciate the extent of Rooney's popularity in his youthful prime. "In 1939, America's theater owners voted Mr. Rooney the No. 1 box office star, over Tyrone Power. That same year he sang and danced his way to an Oscar nomination for best actor in 'Babes in Arms.' He was box-office king again in 1940, over Spencer Tracy, and in 1941, with Clark Gable taking second place."

That passage reminded me of 2003 Academy Award host Steve Martin's monologue in which he pointed out Mickey Rooney's presence in the audience – way in the back of the theater. Martin noted drolly, "Mickey, I'm sorry we couldn't get you a better seat, but Vin Diesel is here," pointing to the jar-head action hero sitting in the front row. A telling example of the fickleness of the public. I wouldn't be surprised if you asked someone under the age of 25 to say something about "Mickey Rooney," they'd respond, "I like it with melted cheese."

Anyway, I've conjured up a few tests to challenge your knowledge of the Mick.

What was Mickey Rooney's real name?

Mickey McGuire – Bernie Schwarz – Marion Morris – Joseph Yule – Rubin Manischewitz – Michael Rooney – Andy Hardon.

Let's put on a show!

In the early days of the Hollywood studio system, companies often cloned successful movies to build a franchise of money-making productions. One of the most lucrative and derivative plot lines was the use of the "let's put on a show" to solve a problem and wrap the movie on a happy note. Match the movie with the problem solved.

1) "Babes in Arms"
2) "Strike up the Band"
3) "Babes on Broadway"
4) "Girl Crazy"

a) Make money to save the college
b) Fund the high school band contest
c) Make money for out of work parents
d) Pay for orphans to go to the country

Marriages

Mickey was married eight times. Starting with his first marriage in 1942, there was never more than a few months between a divorce and the next wedding – an indicator of his neediness for companionship. Put Mickey's marriages in order from shortest to longest.

1) Ava Gardner
2) Betty Jane Rase
3) Martha Vickers
4) Elaine Devry
5) Barbara Ann Thomason
6) Marge Lane
7) Carolyn Hockett
8) Jan Chamberlain

Answers:

Mickey Rooney's real name: Joseph Yule

"Let's Put on a Show!": 1c – 2b – 3d – 4a

Marriages:

1) Marge Lane – 1966-1967 (100 days)
2) Ava Gardner – 1942-1943
3) Martha Vickers – 1949-1951
4) Betty Jane Rase – 1944-1949
5) Elaine Devry – 1952-1958
6) Carolyn Hockett – 1969-1975
7) Barbara Ann Thomason – 1958-1966
8) Jan Chamberlain – 1978-2014 (more than all previous marriages combined)

Drag Queens, Rent Boys, Pick Pockets, Junkies, Rockstars and Punks

April 15, 2014

Leee Black Childers, along with Bob Gruen, Roberta Bayley and Mick Rock was one of pre-eminent photographers capturing the NYC rock n roll underground – although Childers was just as likely to appear in a photo as to snap it. Childers came to New York in the late sixties from San Francisco via Kentucky where he was born in 1945 – not such a great time or place for a gay man. Shortly after arriving in New York Childers met up with Andy Warhol for whom he later performed managerial duties – a skill that he parlayed into gigs as tour manager for the likes of Bowie and Iggy Pop.

His close association with 1970s purveyors of glam rock afforded Childers special access to pursue his interest in photography. Childers consulted Warhol about the skills and talents required to be a good photographer, and in typical blasé' Andy Warhol fashion, the pop artist advised "say you're a photographer, and you're a photographer." That makes eminent sense to me.

Childers died the other day which brought renewed if temporary focus on the heady times of glitter, glam and punk that I thoroughly enjoyed in the 1970s. These were pioneering days for alternative music that addressed not flowers and peace and Rocky Mountain highs, but transsexuality, drugs, loneliness, violence and other urban delights.

Some of Childers' best work was exhibited in 2012 under the title, "Drag Queens, Rent Boys, Pick Pockets, Junkies, Rockstars and Punks." The show was revived in LA at the Lethal Amounts Gallery just a few weeks before Childers died.

Duck and Cover

April 15, 2014

In Muslim cultures, the "thumbs-up" sign is an offensive gesture, and eating and drinking with one's left hand is considered gauche. One of the more insulting gestures in Muslim culture is to show the bottom of a shoe, such as might happen when crossing one's legs while sitting, as the sole of the shoe is where disgusting detritus can collect (especially in a country where camels wander freely.) Therefore, to throw a shoe at another person might well be the ultimate Islamic insult. Just ask George W. Bush who dodged a pair thrown at him by a reporter during a press conference.

Now, for some reason, the shoe-throwing gig seems to have crossed-over into the general secular arena as evidenced by the recent assault in Las Vegas upon Hillary Clinton who was giving a speech on solid waste management. (She dodged the sneaker; can she dodge the expected smears that will redouble as she gets closer to running for president?) As Clinton moves forward toward the 2016 Democratic nomination, you can expect an ever-increasing attack offensive on the former FLOTUS, Senator, and Secretary of State.

I don't anticipate lots of shoe-tossing (the Secret Service takes that shit rather seriously), but I do expect a heavy-duty, coordinated attempt to resurrect dormant memories of the decades-old Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal. I'm not sure how well the tactics will work, but the goal is certainly to make a dent in Clinton's natural advantage with women.

Before the onslaught begins, it's worth remembering some of the Republican hypocrisy of those late-90s crazy times – and to prepare for a lot more of it.

Newt Gingrich. Former Speaker of the House and serial adulterer Gingrich can be counted on to participate in the smear campaign, but he carries a ton of marital baggage. He was a relentless detractor of Bill Clinton's affair while conducting one of his own. Gingrich's belated self-assessment is telling. "There were times when I was praying and when I felt I was doing things that were wrong. But I was still doing them. I look back on those as periods of weakness and periods that I'm not only not proud of, but I would deeply urge my children and grandchildren not to follow in my footsteps." That assumes anyone alive will admit to being a child or grandchild of pompous Newt.

Robert Livingston. In the middle of Monica-gate, patrician Bob Livingston was in line to become Speaker of the House. Instead he resigned from Congress. Livingston said he "strayed from my marriage" after learning that Hustler magazine was preparing an article reporting that he had had several extramarital relationships. Larry Flynt: The Edward Snowden of infidelity.

Henry Hyde. This blob of cellulite who went on to head

the inquiry into impeaching President Clinton was faced with revelations his own extra-marital escapades. Tom Delay of Texas, upon hearing of the allegations called them "the most despicable, most disgraceful, most disgusting piece of rumormongering that I have ever seen." Unfortunately for Tom the future prison inmate, Hyde copped to it (kind of): "The statute of limitations has long since passed on my youthful indiscretions." Side note – his "youthful indiscretions" occurred when he was in his 40s.

Mark Sanford. Before becoming governor of South Carolina and avid hiker of the Appalachian Trail, Sanford was a member of Congress who voted to impeach Clinton. Sanford-the-pious opined, "I think it would be much better for the country and for him personally (to resign)… I come from the business side. If you had a chairman or president in the business world facing these allegations, he'd be gone." Explaining his decision to back impeachment articles against Clinton, he added, "I think what he did in this matter was reprehensible… I feel very comfortable with my vote." Years later, Sanford found himself in precisely the same situation as the evil Clinton. Did Sanford follow his own counsel from the business side, and resign his governorship? Shit, you know the answer to that one.

David Vitter. Holy man Vitter had harsh words for Clinton and voted to throw him out of office. He said of Clinton: "his leadership will only further drain any sense of values left to our political culture." Perhaps, but what of Vitter whose name was later found in the Rolodex of the so-called "DC Madam"? A mea culpa, some bogus

therapy maybe, but no resignation for our hypocrite from Loozy-Ana.

Mark Foley. Before being run out of Congress for engaging in under-aged sex with male pages, M.F. said of Clinton's Oral Office behavior: "It's vile. It's sadder than anything else, to see someone with such potential throw it all down the drain because of a sexual addiction." Perhaps he thought it was vile because it involved a man and a woman?

Larry Craig. This spud from Idaho voted to impeach before assuming a "wide stance" in an airport men's room, flashing come-hither signals to an undercover cop. With his wife by his side on TV, Craig denied being a "homo-sexual" – but it only reinforced the claim.

John McCain. When our hero was running for president against Obama, we occasionally saw his bottle-blonde wife Cindy tagging along – the wealthy heiress of Hensley & Co., one of the largest Anheuser-Busch beer distributors in the United States. But where did she come from? Well before voting to impeach Clinton, John McCain was enjoying some extra-marital action with young Cindy whom he met in Hawaii in 1979. McCain ditched his wife of 14 years and married the heiress – and yet he still had no sense of empathy for a man whose little head sometimes overrode the big head.

Strom Thurmond. Damn – what can you say about a guy who voted against Civil Rights and voted to kick out a sitting president for extramarital infidelity, who then was revealed in death to have fathered an out-of-wedlock child with a black woman? What is in that South Carolina water?

The 5 Stages of "Global Warming" Doubt

April 18, 2014

There's a "movie-inside-a-movie" scene in Bob Fosse's "All That Jazz" where a stand-up comic riffs on Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of death. He notes that Kubler-Ross came up with the five stages – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – having not had the benefit of dying herself. I suppose there's a silly logic to that observation – not unlike that surrounding climate change, often referred to inappropriately as "global warming." After all, no one on earth has had the benefit of living through an ice age, so what do we know?

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a report a couple weeks ago claiming that atmospheric carbon dioxide levels rose almost twice as fast in the first decade of this century as they did in the last decades of the 20th century. But that shouldn't shock anyone, given the regular news reports about wanton coal and wood burning going on in India and China. The report also found a certainty of 95+ percent that humans are the main cause of climate change – a statistic believed by most rational people, but not by the noisiest deniers who seem to have out-sized influence.

Which brings us to the five stages of climate change denial.

1. There is no "global warming" problem. Based on detailed analysis derived from sticking their heads out the window, deniers conclude there is no problem. After all, one time it snowed so much in Washington DC, that family members of Senator James Inhofe (noted denier) constructed an igloo and cheekily labeled it "Al Gore's New Home." How could the globe be warming when it's snowing in DC? QED.

2. OK, there's a "global warming" problem, but it's not caused by humans. After facing the results of some strange and vicious weather, some people are having trouble ignoring what seems to be a change in climate. But hell, the climate's been changing since the Earth was created 4,000 years ago. Even before man invented coal. No way could little old humans be the cause. In fact, Ronald Reagan had it right when he said, "Trees cause more pollution than automobiles do." Yeah – trees are the real culprit.
3. OK, there's a human-caused "global warming" problem, but fixing it will kill the economy. Everything runs on coal and oil – so fixing global warming means going back to the horse-and-buggy. And no more lights in your house either. How would you like that? No TV and no refrigerator! There are just no alternatives to fossil fuels because stuff like wind and solar can't compete without subsidies – and after subsidizing oil and gas to the tune of $4 billion a year, there's no money left.
4. OK, there's a human-caused "global warming" problem that would cost more to ignore than to fix, but look at the bright side. Maybe spending billions now would seem better than spending trillions later, but don't forget the benefits of "global warming." Do we really want to pass up all the good stuff that comes with it? New York City will enjoy Miami-like weather, farmers will be able to harvest corn all year long and make more ethanol, Royal Caribbean will spin-off Royal Arctic Ocean and begin cruises to the North Pole.
5. OK, "global warming" bright sides are outnumbered by the down sides, but it's too late to do anything anyway,

so when you think about it, there is no "global warming" problem. Well, maybe the tundra will melt and leak methane into the atmosphere. Invasive bugs will migrate north and kill off forests. Half of Florida will be under water. World War III will start over a fight for water. But hey – what're ya gonna do? You should have warned me earlier.

The 10 Things I Hate About "The Ten Commandments"

April 24, 2014

OK, not the holy tablets – the movie. As with "It's a Wonderful Life" around Christmas and "Planes, Trains and Automobiles" around Thanksgiving, Cecil B. DeMille's bloated epic "The Ten Commandments" appears perennially like a bitter root every Passover season (although most viewers being Christians likely associate it with Easter). And each time it arrives (as it did this past weekend) I find myself watching an hour or so of its four-hour-plus lifespan, marveling at its leaden pace and wooden dialog, agreeing with *Time Magazine's* assessment that the film is "in some respects the most vulgar movie ever made." DeMille first produced and directed "The Ten Commandments" in 1923 as a silent film rendered in two parts: the Exodus story and God's delivery of the two tablets to Moses. He returned to the same old story told essentially the same way in 1956 with the version everyone knows: Charlton Heston as Moses, Yul Brynner as Ramses, Anne Baxter as Nefretiri, and Yvonne DeCarlo (aka. Lily Munster) as Sephora. At 73 years old, DeMille spared no expense on his remake, taking years to complete the film, and in one famous sequence, featuring 15,000 extras and 12,000 animals. And although the film was nominated for seven Oscars including Best Picture, it snagged only one

– the second-tier award for Best Special Effects. Still, "The Ten Commandments" made serious money and ranks in the top ten all-time grossing films. Yet Cecil was disappointed – the expected accolades for his 70th, and ultimately last movie, came up short.

Today, it seems almost comical that the film was at the time reasonably well-reviewed, and that the phony-looking effects were Oscar-worthy. In fact, the more I watch it the more I hate it. Here's why:

1. **Every Voice-Over starts with "And."** "The Ten Commandments" feels like two movies glued together with the second part rushed to get to the finish line. Hence the overuse of voice-overs to explain actions rather than the use of shots and cuts. VO's are a sure sign of laziness and inferior movie-making – and "The Ten Commandments" is chock-full of them. Furthermore, it seems every time the baritone narrator opens his mouth, the first word out is "And." "And God smote this… And God sayeth that… And Moses didst perform the nasty…" Over-done and poorly at that.
2. **Stilted dialog.** DeMille worked with writers on the script starting in 1954, a full two years before the film was released, and yet the dialog doth sucketh. I presume that in an attempt to render English into Biblical-sounding cadence, the writers felt it necessary to make the lines over-wrought with gravity. So much so that it hurts the ears. For example:
   Nefretiri: "I could never love you."
   Rameses: "Does that matter? You will be my wife. You will come to me whenever I call you, and I will enjoy

that very much. Whether you enjoy it or not is your own affair. But I think you will…"

And one of my favorites. After a young boy marvels at the sight of the parted Red Sea, a grizzly old blind man utters: "God opens the sea with a blast of his nostrils." Luckily for the fleeing Jews, God doesn't have the flu, else they might have crossed the sea knee-deep in mucus.

3. **Edward G Robinson as Dathan.** Although Robinson was born Emanuel Goldenberg into a Yiddish-speaking Jewish family, he seems oddly miscast as Dathan in "The Ten Commandments." Yes, Dathan was a Jew who opposed Moses, but Robinson plays him the same way he'd play a Prohibition-era tough-guy. He doesn't call Moses a dirty rat, but his demeanor is closer to that of Johnny Rocco in "Key Largo" than that of a desert-backwater Israelite tramping the sands of 2,000 BC. (As an aside: Leading up to "The Ten Commandments," Robinson had been unable to get good parts. After being cast for the movie, Robinson wrote, "Cecil B. DeMille returned me to films. Cecil B. DeMille restored my self-respect.")
4. **Moses turns his staff into a snake – and so do Pharaoh's magicians.** Moses demands that Pharaoh let his people go, lest he suffer the wrath of God. Unpersuaded by idle threats, Pharaoh declines. In an attempt to demonstrate the power of the Almighty, Moses throws down his staff which morphs into a scary cobra. The courtesans find this stunt quite alarming, but when Pharaoh's magicians duplicate the trick, Moses' stature seems disappointingly diminished. OK, Moses' cobra kills the magician's snakes – but so what. The

scene basically devolves to a couple magicians duking it out on cable TV. No wonder Pharaoh told Moses to hit the road.

5. **The column of fire as *Deus ex Machina*.** God leads Moses and the Jews out of Egyptian bondage – straight to the shrouded banks of the Red Sea with no way to get out. The fleeing souls are poised to become fodder for Pharaoh's gaining troops. Panic (and the first of much irritating bitching aimed at Moses) ensues. Just as Pharaoh's troops prepare for the slaughter, God ignites a huge pillar of fire to block their advance. That the actual "God" himself pulled this lame stunt, the pillar of fire scene could be considered the biggest, most obvious *Deus ex Machina* of all time.
6. **God closes the water after Egyptians enter Red Sea.** Man, that's just mean. Unless God ran out of fuel to keep the pillar of fire going, he should have closed the sea after the last Jew crossed instead of waiting like a sadistic mad-scientist for the Egyptians to plod into the muck. Unless He really hated the Egyptians – which begs the question: why let them reign over the "Chosen People" for thousands of years. Unless He really hated the Jews, too. Jeez.
7. **Vincent Price as Baka.** Baka is Pharaoh's master builder, and as such oversees the development of some fairly challenging structures. Under tremendous pressure to meet tight schedules, Baka can't worry about workplace safety. He needs thousands of slaves to make bricks by hand and transport multi-ton blocks of stone. And if he loses a few hundred in the course of standing up an obelisk, so be it. In short, Baka is a prick. But

casting horror-show veteran Vincent Price turns Baka into a creep as well. I can't help thinking about a man with the head of a fly whenever Price is on screen.

8. **Those ungrateful slaves.** Reluctant Moses takes on the challenge of leading his people to freedom – and after siccing some insidious plagues upon the Egyptians, he succeeds. But is that good enough? Nooo! Every stumble on the path to the Promised Land is met with whining and moaning. For forty effing years! I have to believe Moses once or twice wished he'd stayed a Prince bedding Nefretiri instead of becoming the unappreciated leader of a bunch of ragged, ungrateful complainers. Best of all – Moses never gets to the Promised Land. He gets a tantalizing glimpse of it in the distance, then croaks.
9. **His followers his break balls, so Moses breaks the tablets.** Apparently, the slaves just wanted to get out of Dodge. They had no interest in hanging around for Moses to lay some new laws on them – especially ones that dictate all the things they *can't* do. Holding two stone tablets, Moses comes down the mountain into a 1950's Hollywood version of an orgy. He scorns his fickle followers only to be mocked by Dathan and the pulsing crowd. Dathan challenges Moses – "Did you carve those tablets to become a prince over us?" – pushing Moses over the edge. But you have to admit – it's a valid question. Moses flings the tablets at a huge golden calf which explodes in a fireball. The tablets are destroyed, and yes, Moses carves a new set – which seems to confirm Dathan's suspicions. (By the way: where does a pack of dirty, shekel-less slaves conjure up enough gold to make a scale-model of a calf?)

10. **Central casting has no ethnic people.** Other than the exotic-looking Yul Brynner (actually Russian), no one in the cast resembles someone who might have lived in ancient Egypt (with the exception of albinos.)

This Week in Jerkville

April 25, 2014

Mr. Affirmative Action. The Supreme Court voted 6 to 2 to uphold a ban on using affirmative action (AA) to make college admission decisions in Michigan. The ruling sets in motion the likely spread of AA bans in other states. Whether that is good or bad will be debated forever. But one element is undeniably smelly: Clarence Thomas and his vote to expunge AA. Here's a mediocre jurist crapping on affirmative action after personally benefiting from it throughout his career beyond all reasonable expectations. In his middling memoir, Justice Clarence bemoans the evils of affirmative action as a stain on one's career – yet he never turned down the opportunities that came along with it.

Perhaps a movie could be made that involves a time-traveling DeLorean that transports mild-mannered & mute Justice Clarence back to 1955 where he nips AA in the bud, thereby eliminating his chances of getting into Yale, and by extension his appointment to the Supreme Court, which means he's not really Justice Clarence anymore, thereby creating a paradox that confuses the audience like every other time-travel movie.

Selective Phrases. Every so often I receive an email ranting about the insidiousness of the Affordable Care Act, one that cites actual passages from the law to demonstrate not only its foolishness, but how it will inevitably bring about the decline and fall of the United States. Again, like Affirmative Action, ACA will be debated forever. But emails such as these do more to spread

ignorance than enlightenment. Because the email author attempts to build credibility by citing chapter and page of the law, the reader can easily verify veracity. I found one claim to be particularly amusing for its blatant and sophomoric deception. The emailer points out this statement in the law – "The tax imposed under this section will not be treated as a tax," adding indignantly, "How could anybody in their right mind come up with that?"

Here's the full passage from the law: "The tax imposed under this section shall not be treated as tax imposed by this chapter for purposes of determining the amount of any credit under this chapter or for purposes of section 55." Section 55 deals with the Alternative Minimum Tax.

Truncating the sentence – a jerky, shop-worn, bush-league tactic.

Cliven Bundy supporters run for the hills. Cliven Bundy may be a jerk for grazing cattle on federal lands without paying the fee – which happens to be a fraction of the cost he would have to pay if he grazed on private land – but the asshole politicians and pundits who elevated him to hero status are the true jerks in this stupid episode. Such luminaries as Rand Paul, Ted Cruz and Sean Hannity defended Bundy's "right" to graze on federal land for free, finding no irony that the situation boiled down to someone ripping off the government. Are Bundy's actions any different than those of a person who would cut down a fir tree in Central Park and decorate it back home for Christmas? Still, because Bundy was taking on the Bureau of Land Management, part of the big, bad Federal government, he was likened to the Patriots at the revolution.

Then Bundy was taped giving his enlightened position on the fate of "Negroes." "I want to tell you one more thing I know

about the negro. When I go, went, go to Las Vegas, North Las Vegas; and I would see these little government houses, and in front of that government house the door was usually open and the older people and the kids… and there was always at least a half a dozen people sitting on the porch. They didn't have nothing to do. They didn't have nothing for the kids to do. They didn't have nothing for the young girls to do. And because they were basically on government subsidy – so now what do they do? They abort their young children, they put their young men in jail, because they never, they never learned how to pick cotton. And I've often wondered are they were better off as slaves, picking cotton and having a family life and doing things? Or are they better off under government subsidy?"

Are they better off under government subsidy? Cliven, you of all people should know the answer to that, as a man who has benefited from government subsidy for a decade or more.

Suddenly the supporters – the real jerks of the week – ran for the hills. Here's a sampling of some of the post-Negro-speech "outrage" that was issued by the formerly-enamored hero worshippers:

Sean Hannity – Pundit who devoted hours of air time to Bundy's cause celeb cried, "His comments are beyond repugnant to me. They are beyond despicable to me. They are beyond ignorant to me."

Rand Paul – Bundy's "remarks on race are offensive and I wholeheartedly disagree with him."

Dean Heller – The Nevada Senator, who had called Bundy a patriot, "completely disagrees with Mr. Bundy's appalling and racist statements, and condemns them in the most strenuous way."

Michele Fiore – The Nevada Assemblywoman who came to Bundy's defense said, "I strongly disagree with Cliven Bundy's comments about slavery."

It looks like all these politicians use the same PR firm, given the similarity of responses and the degree to which they "disagree".

Because it's there

"It is a bitter, bitter disappointment. I'm probably worse off than most in some ways." That was the sentiment of British investment banker James Brooman after realizing that in the wake of a huge avalanche on the Khumbu ice-fall on Mt. Everest, he'd not be summiting the world's highest (and perhaps most crowded) peak. I hope for Brooman's sake, he didn't whine too much in the presence of the families of the 16 Sherpas who died in the avalanche. They might consider their lost climbers to be just a hair worse off than the frustrated banker. And if self-pity wasn't jerky enough, Brooman quit his job, sold his apartment and used up most of his savings to pay for the trip.

Don Sterling Joins the Neanderthals of Sports Bigots

April 28, 2014

LA Clippers owner Don Sterling is in a jam for recently revealed remarks that to the untrained ear might be considered racist – although his history of such indiscretion goes back a long time. In addition to his ownership of a big-league basketball team, Sterling also makes coin by being a slum-lord. Some time ago, in an exchange with a property supervisor of a building he had just purchased, Sterling remarked on the "odor" of the place. "That's because of all the blacks in this building, they smell, they're not clean," he said, according to the supervisor. "And it's because of

all of the Mexicans that just sit around and smoke and drink all day." He added: "So we have to get them out of here."

His opinion of the race of most people who play for his Clippers and the NBA overall is consistent with his views of his smelly tenants. Classy shit. Definitely worthy to be cast among these sports clowns of yore:

Marge Shott – Cincinnati Reds owner in the 1990s. Elegant Marge bestows wisdom accrued from many years of managerial experience: "Never hire another nigger. I'd rather have a trained monkey working for me than a nigger." And a favorite of many: "Everybody knows Hitler was good at the beginning, but he just went too far."

Jimmy "the Greek" Snyder – Sportscaster. Half-wasted, quoted in a restaurant in 1988 while opining on the demise of the poor, discriminated white man in sports: "The black is a better athlete to begin with because he's been bred to be that way, because of his high thighs and big thighs that goes up into his back, and they can jump higher and run faster because of their bigger thighs and he's bred to be the better athlete because this goes back all the way to the Civil War when during the slave trade…the slave owner would breed his big black to his big woman so that he could have a big black kid." Thighs that go up his back? Seems Jimmy needs an anatomy lesson in-between sensitivity training.

Al Campanis – Baseball executive. Uncle Al the Kiddie's pal explains black inferiority to everyone on Ted Koppel's show: Blacks "may not have some of the necessities to be, let's say, a field manager, or, perhaps, a general

manager." Later on he notes that blacks are often poor swimmers "because they don't have the buoyancy." Eureka!

Rush Limbaugh – Radio personality. Regarding Donovan McNabb, QB for the Eagles: "I'm sorry to say this, I don't think he's been that good from the get-go. I think what we've had here is a little social concern. I think the media has been very desirous that a black quarterback do well." But as McNabb proved for El Rushbo – QB is the white man's burden.

Fuzzy Zoeller – Pro golfer. On Tiger Woods's victory at the 1997 Masters, in front of a TV camera, for which its properties to record audio and video (I presume) the Fuzz-boy was familiar: "You pat him on the back and say congratulations and enjoy it and tell him not to serve fried chicken next year. Got it?" Then Fuzzy walks away from the camera but can't resist throwing one more line out. "Or collard greens or whatever the hell they serve." Whatever the hell they serve? What an ass. Zoeller lost a lucrative endorsement from Kmart, as well as his reputation for being a nice guy.

Cruel, but Lately Less Unusual

May 5, 2014

For the first time in more than 80 years, Oklahoma would execute two criminals on the same night: the dark and dreary evening of April 29. Due to some appalling incompetence, however, the state executioners only managed to get through one – and that was by accident. Bad-guy Clayton Lockett was prepped to receive a triple dose of nasty chemicals injected one by one into his groin, as the usual spot on the arm would not yield a worthy

vein. The first (midazolam) was meant to sedate him, the second (vecuronium bromide) was designed to paralyze him, and the third (potassium chloride) stops the heart.

As lethal drug #2 was coursing its way into Lockett's bloodstream, he unexpectedly tried to sit up and mumbled some words that suggested he wasn't feeling no pain. Seems the person who set up the needle in Lockett's groin didn't do a quality job and as a result, not enough sedation made it into the condemned's body. No matter. Lethal drug #3 did the trick, but not in a manner suitable for public viewing, as the executioners quickly lowered the blinds on the gruesome display. They also wisely postponed the second execution – after all, where were they gonna find a better phlebotomist on such short notice?

Consider this. Oklahoma went to the mat to stage this spectacle, and most likely scheduled two on the same day as a thumb in the eye of those bleeding-heart, anti-capital punishment wimps who had made so much noise about the unseemliness of using untested drugs and dosages to kill someone. And after being handed a victory by the State Supreme Court which green-lighted the use of the mystery cocktail of drugs over the objections of the death-row men's lawyers, Oklahoma went ahead full steam – only to blow the whole thing, thereby handing over a huge club to their adversaries with which to beat them silly. As David Dow, a death penalty appellate lawyer in Texas, put it, "For a state that executes people, they are awfully bad at it."

I've been an opponent of capital punishment mainly on the grounds that irreversible mistakes can get made, but also because its application around the country is uneven, and because it serves no purpose other than to satisfy the desire for revenge. But even pro-capital punishment people have to be shaking their heads at the sheer costs involved: expensive trials and mandatory appeals

(which are necessary given the history of prosecutorial corruption, negligent defense and investigative errors), developing execution methods and training the "hangman," PR issues, and sometimes, remunerating convicts following exoneration.

Oklahoma's blown two-for-one special might have inadvertently become the incident that brings the death penalty to the beginning of its end in the US.

Geniuses of the Obvious

May 5, 2014

This past Saturday, Greg Mankiw writing in *The New York Times* reported on a study out of the University of Chicago that sought to discover the forces that drive political slant in the media. After a few years of research, the results are in! According to Mankiw, "The bottom line is simple: Media owners generally do not try to mold the population to their own brand of politics. Instead, like other business owners, they maximize profit by giving customers what they want."

That's it. After conducting extensive surveys, searching through newspaper articles using tailored algorithms, and correlating observations, they concluded that media give their customers what they want. You only have to listen once to Sean Hannity, Rachel Maddow, or Ed Schultz, or read a couple editorials by *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* to understand intuitively that this is the nature of the news business – one that produces annual reports for hedge fund managers, and is beholden to stockholders who want to see returns. Shocker.

Maybe He'd Have Better Luck Picking His Nose

May 5, 2014

Required reading for fans of horse-racing from *The Wall Street Journal* writer Jim Chairusmi: "Why California Chrome Won't Win the Kentucky Derby." In his April 29 article, "Carnac" Chairusmi offers "Six Reasons to Look Beyond the Likely Favorite in the Run for the Roses." The best reason? The favorite rarely wins. Lot's of solid logic in this article, yet Chairusmi forgot the most significant reason of all: No horse named California Chrome has ever won in the entire 139-year history of the Kentucky Derby. QED.

For those fans looking forward to the Preakness and Belmont Stakes: read his article and do the opposite.

A Wonderful Word

May 5, 2014

Caparison - an ornamental covering for a horse.

RIP Bob Hoskins

May 5, 2014

Francis Coppola's film "The Cotton Club" starring Richard Gere and Gregory Hines received mixed reviews when it screened 30 years ago, but it remains one of my favorite gangster movies. The story is a mixture of real-life players and actual incidents blended with fictional characters – and the music and dancing are top-notch. (Side note: The Broadway hit "After Midnight" captures much of the same Harlem vibe and Duke Ellington swing that Coppola sprinkled so thoroughly throughout the movie.)

Although Richard Gere did a passable job playing Dixie Dwyer, a jazz musician who gets taken under the wing of Dutch Schultz (Gere did his own cornet playing), and Gregory Hines and

his brother Maurice deliver some awesome tap-dancing, the most compelling characters are the second-stringers: Fred Gwynne (aka. Herman Munster), Julian Beck and, best of all, Bob Hoskins.

Hoskins, who died the other day at age 71 played the role of Owney Madden with appropriate flair and primal viciousness, just like the man he portrayed: an immigrant from England (Leeds) who worked his way up from petty crimes to ownership of the real Cotton Club. Although Hoskins himself is a limey from West Suffolk and has a thick Cockney accent, he manages to speak in the film with an Americanized tongue. Just as he did when playing Eddie Valiant in what I consider a brilliant film, "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" According to his obit, Hoskins discovered the role as a human amongst cartoon characters to be more than a bit daunting. In a 2009 interview with *The Telegraph* of London, he recalled how his doctor advised him to take five months off after finishing the film. "I think I went a bit mad while working on that," he said. "Lost my mind. The voice of the rabbit was there just behind the camera all the time. You had to know where the rabbit would be at every angle. Then there was Jessica Rabbit and all these weasels. The trouble was, I had learnt how to hallucinate."

Hoskins's highest achievement came a couple years later following his portrayal of driver for a high-priced "escort" in the film "Mona Lisa" in 1986, snagging a Golden Globe and an Oscar nomination for Best Actor – which might be enough to get him into next year's "In Memoriam" segment on the Academy Awards.

When Charlie Met Meathead

May 10, 2014

Rob Reiner may best be known either as the son of comic icon Carl Reiner, or as the tormented, droopy-'stached "Meathead" Michael Stivic on the seminal "All in the Family" TV show of

the 1970s. In fact, Reiner's greatest accomplishments may actually be his directorial efforts on such films as "Stand by Me," "The Princess Bride," "When Harry Met Sally," and "This is Spinal Tap." Casual movie-goers tend to be oblivious as to who directed the film they're about to watch unless it's the product of Steven Spielberg, George Lucas or Martin Scorsese – and I suspect people are largely unaware of Reiner's body of work.

No doubt with the help of his famous father, Reiner got started acting on TV early, playing a kid on "77 Sunset Strip" in 1959. Before landing the plum assignment as a major character on "All in the Family," he did bit parts in no less than 16 series, many of them TV "classics": "The Partridge Family," "Batman," "Gomer Pyle," "That Girl," "The Beverly Hillbillies," and "Room 222." By the time he completed his stint as "Meathead," Reiner was ready for movies – pursuing a path much the same as his fellow TV personality Ron Howard.

A couple weeks ago on April 28, Reiner was feted by the Film Society of Lincoln Center as the 41st Chaplin Award recipient – an honor that seems well-deserved to me.

Again, most people probably identify Reiner with "Meathead," but keep these stats in mind: he has 24 director credits, 26 producer credits, 22 writer credits, 10 soundtrack credits, and 65 acting credits (TV & film).

"Stand by Me" is a heartfelt coming of age movie based on a novella by Stephen King that introduced a number of actors who went on to take on starring roles (River Phoenix, Kiefer Sutherland, Wil Wheaton, Corey Feldman). "Misery" from another King novel about a writer rescued from certain death only to become a prisoner of his biggest fan is chilling and disturbing (even if you closed your eyes during the "hobbling" scene.) "The Princess Bride" is a clever and amusing tale (some may even say

"inconceivable") that showcases some interesting casting (Andre the Giant, Wallace Shawn) and a couple cameos (Billy Crystal and Carol Kane). And of course, the most hilarious mockumentary of all time, "This is Spinal Tap," a movie that set the standard that was followed by such funny stuff as "Best in Show."

Paradoxically, I find that Reiner's most successful movie – "A Few Good Men" – to be one of his weakest. The movie garnered four Academy Award nominations including Best Supporting Actor (Jack Nicholson) and Best Picture (although once again, the Academy found it unnecessary to nominate Reiner who directed the picture.)

The plot is totally predictable, and the character development is formulaic. And some of the acting by lesser players is particularly wooden. True, "You can't handle the truth!" is a memorable line, but what about "I eat breakfast 300 yards from 4000 Cubans who are trained to kill me"? Who really talks like that? Furthermore, in 1992, after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the year the movie came out, the likelihood of Cuba attacking Americans on Guantanamo was ludicrous.

But my biggest complaint is with the courtroom drama segment in which cocky Navy lawyer Lt. Kaffee (Tom Cruise) goads Guantanamo commander Col. Jessup (Nicholson) into admitting he ordered an illegal code red, thereby bringing about his own arrest and downfall. Strictly convenient B-Grade Perry Mason bullshit. It gives Jessup a chance to go ballistic while Kaffee stands there in perfect smugness for out-lawyering the tough commander – only in Hollywood. As Roger Ebert wrote in a pan, "A Few Good Men is one of those movies that tells you what it's going to do, does it, and then tells you what it did."

Still in all, congrats to Reiner for his Chaplin Award.

The Customer is Always ~~a Pain in the Asset~~ Right

May 20, 2014

General Motors just received a financial penalty of $35 million (the highest allowable) meted out by the US Transportation Department for their "criminal" behavior surrounding the flawed ignition switches installed in Chevy Cobalts whose failures led to at least 13 deaths. As GM marches inexorably from this PR nightmare into a full-scale litigation shit-storm, it's worth recalling a time when corporate America valued customers – and even its employees (horrors!) – over shareholders.

This was a time, dating back to perhaps Marshall Fields's famous declaration that "the customer is always right," when companies directly correlated their own financial successes with the happiness of customers. Dig out pre-1980s corporate literature, or read management text books from that era and you'll see paeans to "customer satisfaction," "respect for the individual," "it's all about the customer," and "commitment to quality." Hell, you couldn't swing a dead cat in 1985 without hitting a "quality circle" or someone yammering on about ISO9000. This was an era of growing global trade when the names Edwards Deming and Malcolm Baldridge meant something, and the arcane phrase "six sigma" was bandied about by secretaries and statisticians alike.

It was "all about the customer" because as anyone with a spot of real-world experience knows, customers have mobility, and they can take their spending elsewhere whenever they feel underappreciated. But is that still true? Merger and acquisition activity has soared in the past decade, leaving fewer choices for customers – especially in the financial, airline, media and national retail industries. Although the Federal Trade Commission approves just

about every M&A proposal, presumably following due diligence, it seems the undesired outcomes always unfold anyway: reduced competition, employee layoffs, higher prices for crappier service. And big paydays for the shareholders – some of the heftiest being the executive architects of M&A to begin with.

It used to be a business foundation: good customer service meant greater revenue, market share and profit. Corollary to that was the notion that happy employees produced better goods and services, which led to satisfied and loyal customers. In other words, shareholder value was a by-product of attention to customers, not something that needed artificial engineering. There was little need to buy back shares, conduct wholesale layoffs, slice R&D spending, and move jobs off-shore. These tactics have only proliferated in the past couple of decades, with an acceleration in the last few years. Perhaps it's an artifact of the internet and the formation cheap, online trading capability that has created legions of greedy day-trading, stock-watching Warren Buffet wannabees. It may also derive from the unconscionable tax breaks given to hedge funds that bestow superannuated powers upon them to influence corporate behavior.

Rather than show a modicum of concern about the drivers and passengers of its compact Cobalt, GM chose instead to cover-up and obfuscate information that could have saved lives. Undoubtedly, engineers, lawyers, actuaries and tax experts inside the company made a cost-benefit analysis that was geared toward holding the shareholders harmless. And now, with a heaping dollop of gall, GM is working a legal strategy to avoid paying claims in the billions by virtue of their government-forced bankruptcy in 2009. At that time, I was on the side of letting GM liquidate. They had thumbed their noses at the government's calls to field a more energy-efficient fleet, and when the economy tanked and buyers

of multi-ton trucks disappeared, there was good old GM, French-cuffed arm extended for a nice fat handout. If they succeed with the "we wuz bankrupt" defense, auto buyers should look elsewhere for their future forms of ground transportation.

Penalties for Financial Fraud Compared

May 25, 2014

Accused: Stanley O'Neal; **Occupation**: CEO, Merrill-Lynch

Crime: As the sub-prime crisis swept through the global financial market while clueless Stanley checked his Blackberry, Merrill Lynch announced losses of $8 billion.

Penalty: Severance package included Merrill stock and options worth $161.5 million on top of the $91.4 million in total compensation he earned in 2006.

Accused: John Thain; **Occupation**: CEO, Merrill-Lynch.

Crime: Misrepresented the assets and liabilities of Merrill-Lynch to acquire Bank of America while renovating his office to the tune of $1.2 million. US Government must come in to prop up the weakened merger at taxpayer expense.

Penalty: Total compensation of $83,785,021, which included a base salary of $750,000, a cash bonus of $15,000,000, stock grant of $33,013,151, and options grant of $35,017,421.

Accused: Robert Nardelli; **Occupation**: CEO, The Home Depot

Crime: Oversaw flat growth at Home Depot while rival Lowes doubled revenues. Treated employees like shit. Shareholders felt like said shit-upon employees.

Penalty: Severance package was estimated at $210 million.

Accused: Carly Fiorina; **Occupation**: CEO, HP

Crime: Steward of limp performance in a growing market; in the face of massive resistance, drove the ill-conceived acquisition of Compaq, a major seller of PCs just as the PC era was about to go into the history books alongside the Pony Express.

Penalty: Paid slightly more than $20 million in severance.

Accused: Mahafarid Amir Khosravil; **Occupation**: Billionaire Iranian investor

Crime: Forging letters of credit with the help of high-level bank managers in order to get loans from Saderat, one of Iran's largest banks.

Penalty: Death by hanging.

A Movie About a Nice Jewish Boy

June 13, 2014

"Supermensch: The Legend of Shep Gordon," produced and directed by Mike Myers is one of the most fascinating and entertaining documentaries made in the past ten years, and for people over 50 years old will bring back some delightful memories of rock n roll in the 1970s and the contemporaneous life-style.

Given the breadth of what the man was involved with and the extended cadre of celebrities that he knew and managed, I feel somewhat ashamed that I had never heard of Shep Gordon before. His story starts in the 1960s with a road trip to LA after failing as a probation officer at a juvenile prison in California. Shep stops at a motel outside LA where he meets Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix. The movie is filled with serendipitous encounters such as this that seem too unreal to be true.

For no other reason than Shep is Jewish, Hendrix thinks he should become a manager. He further suggests Shep take on a

scraggly, misfit band called Alice Cooper. The tales of how Shep Gordon manipulated public opinion about the degenerate Alice Cooper and merchandized the band to number 1, multi-millionaire, private jet status are mind-blowing. Whoever said "there's no such thing as bad publicity" must have been thinking of Alice Cooper.

A significant thread through the movie is the life-long friendship that Shep and Alice have nurtured and enjoyed to this day, and it serves as a springboard by which Myers reinforces Shep's status as a "supermensch" – a man of integrity and honor who would do anything for a friend. The movie recollects countless examples of Shep's generosity, the most poignant being his enduring support of five orphans he barely knew – the connection being simply that he had had a brief fling with their grandmother.

Although Shep managed Alice Cooper and as such got close with rock royalty like Mick Jagger, John Lennon, Steven Tyler and Iggy Pop, he was not an enthusiastic fan of the genre, preferring Motown and Folk. Confounding his peers, Shep took on management of Anne Murray, a Canadian singer with a crystal voice and a strait-laced image to match. Music industry insiders thought it a fool's errand to try to promote the likes of Anne Murray, who sang about snowbirds and "honey, wheat and laughter" at a time when booze, drugs, androgyny and general unwholesomeness dominated rock n roll. In 1973 Shep booked Anne at the Troubadour in LA, a small, intimate club, and arranged for several rock stars to attend the set. His mission was to have Anne Murray photographed surrounded by top talent, surmising correctly that anyone who saw the picture would demand to know more about the unknown chick in the middle. Soon afterwards, Anne Murray was featured in numerous trade rags and performed on "The

Midnight Special" – the top rock n roll show on TV (back when being on TV meant something.)

In the second half of the film, Shep observes that fame and unhappiness seem inevitably intertwined. He notes the early deaths of Joplin, Morrison, Hendrix, the alcoholism of Alice Cooper, the paralysis of Teddy Pendergrass (another of Shep's clients) following a car crash. Then one day while having dinner during the Cannes Film Festival (by this time Shep had moved into film production: "The Duellists," "Choose Me," "Kiss of the Spider Woman") he meets Roger Vergé, one of the greatest chefs of all time – but virtually unknown outside the world of gourmands. Vergé is the first person Shep encounters who is both famous (within his chosen field) and happy. He resolves to become an accomplished chef himself. Later, when Shep learns that Vergé and his fellow chefs actually reap little financial reward for their efforts, he embarks on an effort to change the dynamic, and in the process creates what we now know as the "celebrity chef." Emeril Lagasse was Shep's first client and the rest is history.

The unlikely tales go on and on. I highly recommend the film, for as the tag-line says, "Discover the man who saw everything and went looking for more." Watch "Supermensch" and find out how this regular schmo from the suburbs of New York City came to be best buddies with the likes of Michael Douglas, Groucho Marx, Ron Wood, the Dalai Lama, Tom Arnold, Sylvester Stallone, and dozens more.

Little Jimmy Scott

June 18, 2014

David Mamet's "Glengarry Glen Ross" is a tale of unscrupulous real estate salesmen, one of which makes a Faustian bargain that brings about his unceremonious doom. The stage play is tight:

rapid-fire dialog, spare set, a mere 90 minutes in length with a single intermission. Turning it into a movie required special attention: casting all-star talent (Al Pacino, Jack Lemon, Alec Baldwin, Kevin Spacey, Jonathan Pryce, Ed Harris, Alan Arkin), adding some scenes that weren't in the stage play (most notable: Alec Baldwin's luscious rant), and tacking on a soundtrack evocative of the action both desperate and triumphant.

After watching the movie, I hustled over to the Virgin Record store and copped the soundtrack album. The motivation was the closing track as the credits rolled: a snappy version of Irving Berlin's "Blue Skies" by Al Jarreau. I discovered that many of the songs on the album never played in the movie – I guess the producers needed extra material to fill out an album. One number in particular was a haunting, sultry song called "Street of Dreams" sung in a longing, trembling contralto. A voice that Madonna claimed was the only one that could make her cry. The voice of Little Jimmy Scott who died the other day at age 88.

When I first heard "Street of Dreams" I thought the singer was a woman. In fact, Jimmy Scott was born with Kallman's Syndrome, a disease that essentially froze his maturation right around puberty time, leaving him with the singing voice of a choirboy. He eschewed hormone treatments that might have spurred growth (he was only 4'10") out of fear that his signature singing voice would be altered.

Scott had what might be called a two-tailed career – success in youth and in old-age, but lengthy obscurity in what should have been his prime years. He sang with Lionel Hampton in the 1940s and 50s, and produced popularly successful recordings. In 1963 it looked like Jimmy Scott was about to break out, but after cutting the album a manager from the past emerged from the shadows claiming Scott was still under contract to him. The album was

shelved, and so was Jimmy Scott's career – for thirty years. Not until the 1990s did he finally get the respect he deserved, garnering a Grammy nomination for his album "All the Way."

Around 2002, I attended a free concert headlined by Jimmy Scott in a park somewhere near City Hall in Manhattan, and afterwards stood online for a CD-signing. When it was my turn to get the autograph, I mentioned my admiration for his work on the Glengarry soundtrack. He seemed caught off guard, and perhaps mistook me for a lifelong fan, because he graciously engaged in a longer-than-usual conversation (for a signing event) about his outlook and plans for the future. He was accompanied by a much younger woman whom I assumed was an agent or publicist, but after reading in his obituary that Scott was married five times, it was probably another future Mrs. Jimmy Scott.

You gotta love show-biz – looks, age and stature mean nothing when you've got talent, fame and money. More power to him wherever he is now – RIP.

Shirts and Skins?

June 22, 2014

The Washington Redskins lost trademark protection from the U.S. Government the other day on the basis that the term "redskins" is considered disparaging to Native Americans. Apparently, this is not the first time the Patent and Trademark Office nixed a name for protection. Others that have fallen short include a rock band called the Slants (disparaging to Asians) and *Heeb Magazine* (disparaging to Heebs, I guess). But when you consider the sheer volume of trademark requests (>300,000 in 2012), the USPTO denies very few on the basis that they are disparaging.

The assumption is that the owners of the Redskins will finally capitulate and change the team's name. To what, who knows. Some

ideas floating around include Warriors, Redhawks, Renegades, Pigskins, and just plain Skins. (If they go with Skins, I sure as hell hope a new franchise is formed called the Shirts.)

But what about all the other offensive names adorning professional sports teams? Can we expect forthcoming rescission of trademark protection for them? Next on the chopping block?

Minnesota Vikings. The original Vikings of Scandinavia practiced a method of execution called the "blood eagle" that involved cutting the ribs of the victim by the spine, breaking the ribs so they resembled blood-stained wings, and pulling the lungs out through the wounds in the victim's back. Disparaging to anyone whose ancestors suffered this torturous procedure.

San Francisco 49ers. Named for the gold-addled maniacs who rushed to California to pan streams for the shiny metal, the 49ers bear the stain of a period in our country's history that resulted in attacks on Native Americans, who were forcibly removed from their lands. An estimated 100,000 California Indians died between 1848 and 1868, and some 4,500 of them were murdered. Now that's what I call disparaging.

New Orleans Saints. Sainthood is bestowed on dead people whom the Catholic Church deems worthy of significant recognition. The whole process can take centuries, and requires documentation that the candidate has performed at least two miracles (walking on water, then changing it into wine while still walking on it might qualify.) Disparaging to all those non-Catholics out there whose chances of sitting in Heaven's skybox next to the Big Guy are nil.

New York Yankees. Disparaging to Confederates.
Cincinnati Reds. Disparaging to Communists
Chicago White Sox. Disparaging to nerds.

Kansas City Chiefs, Cleveland Indians, Atlanta Braves, Chicago Blackhawks. Why stop with the Redskins when plenty more teams have shamelessly co-opted the Native American for profit? Bad shit happened to the Indians in Kansas in the 1800s. Cleveland uses a cartoonish "Chief Wahoo" image, Atlanta fans chant a phony Indian war-call while making chopping tomahawk motions, and the Blackhawks logo is at least as bad as the Redskins'.

Fun with Dick and Liz (Not Them, the Other Boring Ones)

June 22, 2014

Soon after Dick and Liz Cheney co-wrote an Op-Ed column recently for *The Wall Street Journal* excoriating Obama and his administration for lackluster foreign policy performance, opining that "rarely has a U.S. president been so wrong about so much at the expense of so many," countermeasures came swiftly. Even Megyn Kelly of *Fox News* took Mr. Five Deferments and his dimwit daughter to task, stating the obvious: "Time and time again, history has proven that you got it wrong in Iraq as well, sir. You said Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. You said we would be greeted as liberators. You said the insurgency was in the last throes, back in 2005. And you said after our intervention that extremists would have to 'rethink their strategy of jihad.' Now with almost $1 trillion spent there, with 4,500 American lives

lost there, what do you say to those who say, 'You were so wrong about so much at the expense of so many'?" Ouch. Coming from a Foxette… double ouch.

But in my opinion the best, drollest response to Cheney's overwrought declaration came from White House Press Secretary Jay Carney: "Which president was he talking about?" A tart and succinct parting shot from the soon-to-be-retired Carney.

The Softer Side of "In Your Face"

June 28, 2014

Yesterday the Supreme Court shut down a Massachusetts law that imposed a no-protest buffer zone around abortion clinics there. The goal of the law was to establish a safe distance between patients and crazy bastards bent on harassing them with in-your-face polemics and lurid photos. Not everyone outside the clinics is a psycho, but all it takes is one to mess up your day. Nonetheless, the Court unanimously struck it down. The logic was articulated by Antonin Scalia who barked, "Protecting people from speech they do not want to hear is not a function that the First Amendment allows the government to undertake in the public streets and sidewalks." I guess Scalia never heard of libel.

In any event, it seems fair then to ask when a 250-foot no-protest buffer zone around the Supreme Court Building will be dismantled. Can we expect to see that barrier fall like those around abortion clinics in Massachusetts and elsewhere? Unlikely. This Roberts court has seen fit to upend dozens of well-established laws and conventions that affect multitudes of ordinary American citizens, but like the man behind the curtain to whom no one should pay attention, they eschew any attempt at transparency in their deliberations, and scurry from situations that might require engagement with regular people.

Suspect Decisions – What Happens Next?

July 7, 2014

News reports abound with stories of decisions made by governments, businesses, sports franchises, religions and many others that on the face seem remarkably suspect. Decisions that lead inexorably to pain, suffering, disenfranchisement, disillusionment, ennui, and any number of unproductive reactions. It disturbs me that so often the question "what happens next?" rarely accompanies the story. I understand this line of thinking is not the purview of the neutral reporter – but where are the editorialists? Or the psychics?

Run it up the flagpole, let's see who salutes

The Senate passed the "All American Flag Act" the other day, and assuming Obama signs it (what choice does he have lest he hand a club to his enemies with which to beat him silly), the act will become law of the land. It calls for all government-purchased American flags to be made 100 percent from materials "grown, produced, or manufactured in the United States." No more importation of flags from such anti-American entities like China. The law's sponsor, Sherrod Brown said, "It is the right way to honor our veterans and it is the right way to support American workers and businesses."

What happens next?

Most American companies in the flag manufacturing business suffer when they can't easily procure all the necessary flag-making components (cloth, ink, thread, dyes, packing materials, et.al.) from approved American vendors. Those that can have to jump through regulatory hoops to prove they're "Flag Act" compliant. Prices

for flags sold to the U.S. Government soar as fewer companies can supply them, and those that do must pay 10 times the wages as their Chinese counterparts who are now no longer allowed to compete. American companies that make flags for foreign countries are boycotted or socked with high tariffs in retaliation.

Hobby Lobby lobbyists lobby for hobbyists. Workers? Not so much

The Supreme Court allowed Hobby Lobby, a privately-owned purveyor of cheap framing supplies and other sundries, to refuse to provide health insurance coverage of their female employees' contraceptive needs, as to do so would violate the religious sensibilities of owners of the company. Consequently, Hobby Lobby and their ilk have been freed to cherry-pick the things they don't support in Federal laws and disobey them.

What happens next?

Private companies like Hobby Lobby are acquired by large corporations that are motivated to take advantage of the special Supreme Court dispensation to ignore laws. The acquiring companies, which may possibly be run by atheists or those who don't share the beliefs of the original acquired company's owners, nevertheless get to deny employees benefits and pass those savings onto… themselves. Companies operated by Jehovah's Witnesses decide to halt coverage of blood transfusions for their employees as such procedures violate admonitions set down in the wacky parts of the Bible. Other religions follow suit. On the chopping block: vaccinations, vasectomies, sex-reassignment operations, psychotherapy, and anything related to stem-cells. New fringe "religions" crop up to exploit the religious-objection loophole formed by the Supreme Court. The IRS attempts to call them out as shams, but is vilified

and emasculated by the right-wing for intruding upon the First Amendment. The new "religions" attract many new "worshippers" seeking self-actualization and tax breaks.

Facebook's future revealed: Zuckerberg registers Assbook.com

Unbeknownst to about 700,000 Facebook users, the social media behemoth ran a psychology experiment on them – the type of activity considered unethical by the APA. Facebook skewed the feeds of these users toward overly positive or negative sentiments for the purpose of evaluating the tenor of their subsequent posts. Guess what! People who receive positive feeds post positive stuff! Negative guys post negative stuff! Everyone hopes this cures cancer.

What happens next?

Facebook apologizes for the hundredth time for punking its user base, promising never again to… oh, never mind. Sitting atop so much "big data," Facebook devises ever more sinister experiments to peer into the minds and hearts of its users, tailoring its products and acquisition strategy accordingly. That is to say, to monetizing every aspect of social media. In five years, weary of the whole social media drudge, Facebook users start to bolt and Congress starts looking into the rancid internals of the company.

North Carolina whistles past the graveyard

Prodded by tourism-based businesses, the NC Republican legislature decided to bury a long-range climate study that predicted a 3-foot rise in ocean levels by 2100 in favor of a whitewashed report that shortened the horizon to 30 years and the estimated

rise to a mere 8 inches (or the length of an erection the legislature aspires to.)

What happens next?

North Carolina takes no meaningful steps to prepare for the onslaught of ever-rising ocean levels, and increasingly devastating hurricane surges. Tourism-based businesses benefit from lax taxes and regulations – for a while. A Category 5 storm wipes out the Outer Banks. Cape Hatteras becomes Isle de Hatteras. North Carolina legislature (still dominated by climate-denying Republicans) calls for a Federal bailout, which they get on a silver platter. How do they spend it? Can you say "tax cut"?

The next chapter for A-Roid?

Unknown until now, the doctor in charge of overseeing drug use for Major League Baseball decided to allow now-disgraced Yankee Alex Rodriguez to use the performance-enhancing drug testosterone in 2007, the year he hit 54 home runs, had 156 RBIs, and was named MVP for the third time. Later on, this same transgression would earn A-Rod a lengthy suspension and forfeit his mega-salary.

What happens next?

Reinvigorated by the news of hypocrisy, Rodriguez's people launch a PR campaign to get Major League Baseball to back off the suspension – an effort doomed to failure. Undaunted, the lawyers sue hard, and sometime on or before 2020, MLB settles without admitting guilt. To demonstrate their softer side as they're called out for perfidy, MLB forgives Pete Rose and admits him back into baseball from which he has been banned since 1989. A

long shot, but maybe Bud Selig plays Pope before his retirement next year and absolves sinner Rose.

Take Back Your Huddled Masses Yearning to Breathe Free

July 13, 2014

Do you remember where you were when the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 was enacted? Neither do I, but thanks to meticulous records kept by the U.S. Congress, we know that George W. Bush signed the act into law on December 23, 2008 – just a month before he left office. The gist of the law is to prevent children who arrive unaccompanied to the borders of the U.S. from being immediately deported back to the widespread evil conditions prevailing in the countries from whence they came. (It doesn't apply to children from Mexico or Canada.)

It would appear Bush was pro on the law as he made sure to get it done in the remaining month before he left office. Prior to the signing, White House Deputy Press Secretary Tony Fratto, said that the bill "has been a priority issue for the administration in preventing the trafficking of persons around the world. So, this is a piece of legislation we're very proud to sign." Based on its stated purpose that seems to be a reasonable sentiment.

Six years later the Republicans in Congress are bemoaning an unintended consequence of the law: families suffering deplorable and lawless conditions in Central America (Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala in particular) are sending their unaccompanied kids to border crossings in the mistaken belief they will be granted absolute asylum. As it is the children's families who are initiating the movement, the activity does not meet the stated goal in Wilberforce of curtailing human trafficking – but should we care?

The Republicans cry "hell yes," and furthermore lay complete blame for this recent onslaught of the wretched refuse squarely at the feet of Obama. Such an accusation from the GOP would be specious had Obama not been caught red-handed in Shushufindi dressed as the Pied Piper of Hamelin, tooting his flute and leading a line of destitute Ecuadorean children north to the Rio Grande. (It's on YouTube somewhere– check it out.)

As Texas is often the terminus of mass immigration, let's hear from their Congressional delegation: Representative John Carter of Texas: "The president caused this self-inflicted crisis on the border by refusing to enforce the law."

Senator Ted Cruz of Texas: "It is a disaster of the president's own making. It is a disaster that is a direct result of President Obama's lawlessness."

Senator John Cornyn of Texas: "The president's administrative policies have played a huge role in encouraging tens of thousands of children to risk their lives by traveling across Mexico."

The Texan's concerns have some validity, but what did "Barack the Impaler" have to do with it? If anything, Obama's administration is a bigger deporter of illegals than any of his predecessors.

In reality, the incursion of unaccompanied children is nothing more than a simple case of a special-interest group (Central American families living in fear) exploiting a loophole in a U.S. law – that by itself should qualify the interlopers for immediate citizenship. After all, exploiting loopholes in loosely-written laws is a time-honored American tradition.

The better focus of attention should be not on a rough-hewn "solution" to the problem – billions to secure the border (whatever that means), massive deportation of otherwise law-abiding workers, expensive incarceration – but on diluting the underlying motivations of the sorry souls who choose to risk life and property

to come to the U.S. in the first place. (I always get a kick out of proposals to encourage illegal alien "self-deportation" – how bad must we make life in the U.S. to compel the illegals to leave en masse? Can't vote! – Who cares? Can't get a driver's license! – I'll drive anyway. Can't get Obamacare! – Wait, you're threatening to withhold Obamacare that you say is vile? Put your ass in jail! – Who's gonna mow your lawn?)

Few Americans want to understand the actual dynamics driving mass immigration to the borders of what's been called the most exceptional country in the world. That might take thought and introspection. In short, we bring the plague upon ourselves. For example:

- Families in Central America urgently need to escape the virulent violence in their countries and neighborhoods – violence multiplied by guns sourced legally from the U.S. and shipped to gangs south of the border. Translation: The U.S. economy supplies the weapons that devastate Central American society which in turn drives the populace to our insecure, porous borders.
- Farmers in Central America have difficulty competing against heavily-subsidized Americans who benefit unfairly from ethanol mandates and super-cheap crop insurance subsidies. Mexico (the land that domesticated corn in the first place) simply can't match up against indefensible American corn subsidies. Translation: America fucks up the agricultural economy of Mexico and Central America then wonders why the disenfranchised farmers bolt north to mow lawns and clean pools in the land of plenty.
- Americans like drugs, especially certain narcotics

> produced in places like Columbia, Mexico and Panama. Americans fund the drug economy so as to ensure they get access to the stuff they want most. Should a few dozen "brown" locals get wasted in the process, so be it. As long as they don't storm the Bastille.

The bottom line: Americans hate illegal immigration even as their own behavior encourages it. They want swift solutions that cost nothing and don't interfere with their cross-border travel. And they like to distill a complex problem down to a cheap soundbite: "Obama invited the illegals to here."

A Wonderful Word

July 13, 2014

Shushufindi – a canton of Ecuador, located in the Sucumbíos Province.

Third Prize is: You're Fired!

July 13, 2014

I was born too early to appreciate the artistry and technique of soccer, a sport that garnered virtually no attention in America when I was a kid. Soccer fanaticism was left to the next generation who played the low-impact, highly-aerobic game after grade schools across the nation favored it. Now with the World Cup underway, and soccer- mania pimped on every mainstream media outlet, coupled with an avid base of fans who grew up playing the game and understanding its intricacies, Baby Boomers are finding it necessary to learn some basics lest they appear even more out of step with the times.

Situations that call for a penalty kick, or reasons why additional playing time is tacked on after the game appears to be over,

are just a couple of the mysteries that have been revealed to older soccer neophytes. And then just the other day I learned that the losers of the semi-final World Cup rounds play each other for third place. Third place! I somehow suspect that after taking a 7-1 drubbing at the hands (feet?) of Germany, that the last thing the Brazilian team wanted to do was play once more for the bragging rights of third place.

The two semi-final losers should just play rock-paper-scissors – the winner gets to forfeit the soccer match and go to the beach instead.

A Picture's Worth a Thousand Outrages

July 16, 2014

A couple years ago in the tiny village of Borja, Spain, an elderly woman named Cecilia Giménez tried her hand at restoring a flaking, century-old fresco of Jesus Christ. She failed. Obviously underqualified to do a paint-by-numbers donkey, Giménez turned the delicate fresco of the thorn-crowned Christ into what became known as "Monkey Jesus." Shocked parishioners of the Santuario de la Misericordia church where the fresco resides initially assumed they were the victims of vandalism. Only later did Giménez come forward and take credit for the simian transformation. And in a strange twist, she became a quasi-celebrity. She has sold her artwork on eBay and in a gallery show in Borja, and "Monkey Jesus" merchandise is available online. Furthermore, the church started charging people to leer at the defaced fresco, raising close to $100,000 from more than 75,000 voyeurs.

Now, in a somewhat related story, a stolen Matisse painting titled "Odalisque in Red Pants" was recently returned to the Contemporary Art Museum of Caracas where thieves had replaced the original with a fake. Astoundingly, no one noticed for

at least two years that a fake has been placed on the hook where "Odalisque" had once hung. After the chicanery was discovered, art experts huffed that the fake was poorly executed – a claim that seems overplayed given the length of time the forgery occupied prime wall space unchallenged.

RIP Archie

July 16, 2014

I used to read Archie comics as a pre-teen, and honestly don't know whether I enjoyed it or not. I can't remember any plot in detail, although I recall Reggie was a prick, Jughead was a needle-nosed idiot, Mr. Weatherbee was a blob, Mrs. Grundy was the stereotypical spinster, and Archie was the all-American boy with the curious tic-tac-toe board on the side of his head.

My vaguest recollection is that I preferred Betty to Veronica, even though both were drawn such that they could have been identical twins. It was Betty's desire to please Archie that trumped Veronica's wealth and sophistication. Later on, my allegiance to Betty waned, and today I would say I'm more of a Veronica-man. Her blue-black hair, sexy smile and outsized portfolio are hard to resist. In any event, I sincerely hoped Archie would persuade the two lovelies into a *ménage à trois*, as I'm quite sure Reggie had already accomplished.

Now we may never know, as Archie was recently killed taking a bullet meant for a politician. The politician, Kevin Keller, is a gay gun-control advocate who is targeted for assassination by a man harboring hard-felt disagreements with Keller's positions. Archie steps in to break up the shot, and takes lead to the chest – a mortal wound. According to Archie Comics publisher Jon Goldwater, "Archie Andrews is a very iconic all-American hero. To have him

literally take a bullet for the ideas of diversity and equality in a comic book is a very powerful statement."

You may think that killing off the lead character would end the series, but the publishers intend to continue the saga of the Riverdale denizens, telling the story of how they manage with the loss of the red-haired hero. RIP Archie, even though you are just a drawing.

People. Passion. Possibilities. Plutocracy

July 20, 2014

Is it unpatriotic not to pay taxes? A number of corporate leaders and their apologists in Congress would seem to hold a strong negative sentiment, taking umbrage at the notion that shimmying gracelessly through a tax loophole they bought and paid for from the politicians is in any way un-American. Saving on taxes in their view just makes good, ole-fashioned business sense, doncha know?

Take the case of AbbVie, a spin-off of Abbott Labs in the pharmaceutical industry which just agreed to buy its European rival Shire for a tidy $54 billion. The big story in most business news articles was not about the extended R&D the combined company might produce, or the cost savings that might be passed onto consumers, but of the generous tax benefits bestowed upon the combined entities: an effective rate that will fall from 22 percent to 13 (a number enjoyed by precious few middle-class jerks who commute 90 minutes every day for a living.) In fact, CEO Richard A. Gonzalez made it clear to analysts: "It will be domiciled in the U.K. for tax purposes." Less emphatically stated was that AbbVie would still be run out of Chicago and listed on the New York Stock Exchange, as if nothing had happened other than the millions in tax savings.

And what about those savings? It's a zero-sum game, and someone has to lose if AbbVie and the multitude of other US corporations gain by taking advantage of generous "inversion" laws, including Walgreens, Pfizer, Omnicom, Eaton Corp, Aon and Medtronic. Those losers are the rank and file taxpayers who have to make it up in higher taxes, or by suffering future deleterious effects of deficit spending. Every U.S. company that does an inversion and "domiciles" in a candy-cane tax haven like Ireland or the Netherlands gets to freeload off the significant benefits of the American business environment: access to a rich consumer base, an orderly legal system, ironclad patent and copyright protection, a decent infrastructure, the strongest military defense in the world, financial stability, and a vaunted university system producing quality talent.

Don't expect Congress to remediate the situation – too many are signatories of the "Grover Norquist" pledge never to raise a tax, which in their narrow minds includes closing an egregious loophole.

Consider this:

- Where would Amazon, eBay, Facebook and Twitter be without the internet which came into being as a descendant of the Department of Defense's DARPA network?
- How much did Pratt & Whitney and GE benefit from government-funded R&D on jet propulsion? Same goes for Boeing and Lockheed which benefited enormously after the U.S. government pioneered wartime aviation.
- Could United Van Lines and Schneider Trucking exist without the interstate highway system? Could Walmart have grown as large without it?
- What would American Airlines, Delta, Southwest and

all the other carriers do without an FAA and air traffic control? Or the NTSB which investigates accidents and provides a fig leaf for the carriers to use when communicating with rattled fliers?

- Perversely, the tobacco industry is as healthy as it is today in part because the Surgeon General's office decades ago mandated warning labels which the industry first despised then later used as a shield against paying out billions in lawsuit judgements.
- We know GM would not exist had the U.S. government told them to shove it. Same for Morgan Stanley, Merrill-Lynch, Bank of America and possibly Goldman-Sachs. Taxpayer-backed bailouts kept them alive.
- And, Life Sciences/Pharmaceutical industry players like Mylan and AbbVie that are the biggest inversion-loophole pursuers have benefited tremendously from generous U.S. goodies like patent protection, world-class R&D (e.g. human genome sequencing) that is put into the public domain, and hundreds of billions in purchases of drugs, at full retail prices no less, by Medicare and Medicaid.

So, yes: dodging American taxes while enjoying all the benefits of being an American company in every respect except your "domicile" is unpatriotic. You're like the boorish guest who comes to a party without a gift for the host, and then bolts just as it's time to clean up the mess. You don't deserve to be awarded a government contract. And stay off our roads and stop using our water! If you don't like it, call in the Irish Marines.

RIP Johnny Winter

July 20, 2014

I was surprised to read of the recent death of bluesman Johnny Winter – surprised that he hadn't died five years ago. Three or four years ago I attended an intimate concert featuring Winter and his band at the Bearsville Theater in Woodstock, and like many in the audience, was shocked when two stagehands escorted a visibly-weak Johnny by the elbows like a doddering hospice denizen to a folding chair in center stage. Johnny Winter played some damned-loud, badass stuff that evening, seated the entire time as though waiting patiently for the next order of all-you-can eat wings at Crapplebee's. His feeble eyes, no doubt impaired by albinism, darted about; most likely he was unable even to see the audience given the glaring lights. Half way through the show, a middle-aged, Woodstock groupie climbed onto the stage and gave Johnny a big hug. The bouncers pounced, but I don't think Johnny knew what hit him. He never missed a note; probably used to being accosted on stage by crazy women over the course of his memorable 40-year career in rock n roll.

Johnny Winter's influence on music is undeniable. To wit: the opening band that evening at the Bearsville Theater was the Jonny Monster Band – a killer blues trio no doubt inspired by the white-haired man who sat hunched like a codger under the hot lights picking out pure delta blues.

Just Another Political Hack After All

July 25, 2014

Andrew Cuomo, governor of New York and son of the insufferable Mario Cuomo who also held the high office from 1983 to 1994, just stepped in a pile of do-do that might have enough odor to derail his obvious presidential aspirations. Much like his

father, Andrew knows he's smarter than everyone else in the state, and he takes every opportunity to drill it into the minds of the lesser mortals under his tutelage. But Andrew is much shrewder than Mario the Magnificent; he is a cold-hearted calculator of the zeitgeist and molds his policies and persona to match. Although a Democrat in a heavily "blue" state, Andrew Cuomo has fashioned himself closer to the center, if not center-right, by capping property tax increases, setting up special tax enclaves for companies, pushing for casinos, busting teachers' union balls, and talking tough on crime. Clearly the man is angling toward a shot in 2020 or 2024.

Noting that New York State is among the more egregious in the nation when it comes to political corruption (at least 26 state politicians have been indicted or run out of office for bad behavior since 1999), Andrew Cuomo set up an august commission to investigate and ferret out corruption. Named the Moreland Commission after Sherman Moreland, a legislator who in 1907 backed a law giving special investigative powers to the governor, Cuomo set up a body about a year ago that would be "totally independent" and could "look at me, the lieutenant governor, the attorney general, the comptroller, any senator, any assemblyman." About 6 months later, Andrew closed down the commission, making the dubious and lame observation that they no longer needed to investigate because they had successfully put the fear of god in New York's politicians, rendering them all incapable of ever being corrupt from this time forward. Mission accomplished.

Now we know the real reason for the abrupt de-commissioning of the Morelanders – they we're getting too close to Andrew and his charlatans. The Moreland Commission had issued a subpoena for some company records as part of an investigation into legislative shenanigans, unaware that the company, Buying

Time, was also in the employ of Prince Andrew. When Cuomo's top aide, Larry Schwartz heard about the subpoena he ordered the commission to back off. Sadly, they cowered like compliant doggies, instead of standing firm like an empowered group such as they should have done.

Faced with this untidy mess, Cuomo is now tap-dancing, declaring that the Moreland Commission was never chartered to look beyond the despised legislature to begin with. "It's my commission. I can't 'interfere' with it, because it is mine. It is controlled by me," claimed Cuomo, sounding a bit like the guy who oft repeated, "I am not a crook."

Although Andrew Cuomo is a better governor than George Pataki was, which is not saying much, he is a dangerous fellow who lets his ambition get ahead of his appointed mission. Not unusual for a politician you might say, but it's way past time that changed. For starters, strike Andrew Cuomo from the short list of "will-they won't-they" characters fawned over for their presidential timber.

Senator Walsh's Secret Speech Revealed

July 26, 2014

Much has been written and reported lately on the charges of plagiarism by Montana Senator John Walsh. Will the Army War College strip him of his Master's degree? Is his political career, once considered formidable, poised to come crashing down? Walsh isn't saying much. But thanks to my stealthy investigation, I've come into possession of a secret copy of a speech Walsh will deliver in the coming days on nationwide television, presumably "Tosh.0." Here it is in its florid entirety:

Good evening ladies and gentlemen (ref: Hitchcock, Alfred. Universal Television, 1955.) Two score and seven times two years

ago my father brought forth upon this continent a new son (me), conceived in haste and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal… some more equal than others. Kinda like a rising tide that lifts all boats – yachts more so than dinghies, to be sure.

Call me Ishmael if you want, but my given name is John Walsh (no, not the guy from "America's Most Wanted"). I'm the junior Senator from the great state of Montana, and I'm here to tell you about a date which will live in infamy: April 5, 2007. I was pursuing a Master's Degree from the U.S. Army War College. Why? Because I have a dream. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Baghdad sons of former Baathists and sons of former Baathist-haters will be able to sit down together at the table and share a falafel, or some hummus, or whatever the hell they eat there. Yes, I had other motivations as well, but believe me, nabbing the War College degree was one small step for Walsh, a giant leap for Walsh-kind.

Before I proudly accepted my coveted War College diploma and the political perks it would bestow upon me, I texted my good friend and colleague Joe Biden, "Why am I the first Walsh in a thousand generations to be able to get to university? Why is my wife the first woman in her family in a thousand generations to be able to get to university? Was it because all our predecessors were thick?" Biden chuckled and told me to be sure to credit him if I ever wrote it down. Wise counsel that I wish I had followed before turning in my Master's thesis on that infamous date of April 5, 2007.

I began the Master's program having nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat, and after plagiarizing about 20 percent of my thesis, I can say now that never was so much owed by John Walsh to so few scholars. As I once said, a mind is a terrible thing to waste.

I'm so sorry. Plagiarism is an unacceptable breach of trust. But I blame my momentary, fleeting mistake on post-traumatic stress disorder – and a dependency on madeleines that I acquired during my tour of duty in Iraq. Late one night while typing frantically to meet the thesis deadline I popped a Madeleine into my mouth. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory, the thesis unimportant.

Now with my career hanging in the balance, I call upon my supporters and opponents to stick with me. Can't we all just get along? Forgive me for I can see clearly now. I can see all obstacles in my way. Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind. But if you can't find it in your hearts to forgive me, I will understand. Don't cry for me Montana. The truth is I never left you. I kept my promise. Don't keep your distance.

In the coming days I will assess the situation and make my decision whether to continue as your Senator. The world will little note, nor long remember what I say here, yet I offer this in closing: God bless you and God bless the United States of America. I am the Walrus.

I Ain't Got Time to Be a Human Being

July 31, 2014

Jesse Ventura possesses an unusual and varied resume. Born James Janos, Ventura was a member of a U.S. Navy underwater demolition team who went on to the World Wrestling Federation portraying a flamboyant, sexually-ambiguous professional wrestler

nicknamed "The Body." Despite his participation in the garish WWF circus – a role that might have disqualified him for elected office until you think about Ronald Reagan, Clint Eastwood, Fred Thompson and Sonny Bono – Ventura succeeded in becoming the governor of Minnesota. Ventura had a radio show, was the host of the television shows "Conspiracy Theory" and "Off the Grid," and did some movies, most memorably playing a beefy commando-type named Blain in 1987's "Predator" who declares after taking some shrapnel, "I ain't got time to bleed." Ventura used that instant cult line as the title of his book. Damn, the dude is an author too.

Now you can add douche-bag litigant to Jesse Ventura's resume.

Just the other day, a jury in St. Paul, MN awarded Jesse a $1.8 million judgment against the estate of Chris Kyle, a former Navy SEAL member, for defaming "The Body" in his book "American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History." Kyle claimed in his book that he encountered an unnamed former SEAL he called "scruff face" in a bar, and punched him out when "scruffy" made a disparaging remark to the effect that as the SEALs were conducting themselves poorly overseas, they "deserved to lose a few." Although Kyle never mentioned the real name of the asshole in the bar, he later confirmed the person he wrote of was none other than super action hero, Jesse Ventura.

Ventura denies any of this took place and sued Kyle for defamation, but even as Kyle was murdered a while back and is therefore unavailable to defend himself, Ventura found it necessary to continue the litigation against his estate anyway. It therefore became the burden of Kyle's widow and executrix of the estate, Taya, to defend against the charges.

Considering all the factors, it seems astounding that Ventura prevailed in court. First of all, the burden of proof in cases of libel and defamation against famous people is nigh unsurmountable. Once a person becomes a public figure, First Amendment protections for a tormentor kick in hard. Hell, Larry Flynt ran a cartoon in his *Hustler* magazine years ago portraying religious wing-nut Jerry Falwell having sex with his mother in an outhouse. Falwell sued… and lost!

Secondly, Kyle says it happened, Ventura says no. Without any witnesses you might think the jury would lean toward finding for Kyle, given that he's supposedly innocent until proven guilty, and this was a case of one man's word against another. But there was a witness – and he backed up Kyle. At the trial, another SEAL veteran, Jeremiah Dinnell, testified he saw Kyle punch Ventura after the former governor said that "what we are doing overseas, we deserve to lose guys." Dinnell stated he watched Ventura fall and get up again. Ok – two against one. Even better for Kyle's estate.

Thirdly, Ventura has a long history of being outspoken on issues of government over-reach, so it should not come out of left field that he might take a dim view of America's mis-adventures overseas. Examples of his positions include the beliefs that crime statistics are distorted to encourage racism, that 2008 financial bailouts were a conspiracy to keep fat cats in business, that banks and privately run prisons gets rich on the drug war, that the Bush administration knew 9/11 was coming, and that the TSA's full-body scanners are unconstitutional. Regarding the scanners, Ventura sued the U.S. government, and after a judge threw him out, Jesse went on a rant, saying he would henceforth refer to the country as the Fascist States of America. "I will never stand for a national anthem again. I will turn my back and raise a fist the

same way Tommy Smith and John Carlos did in the '68 Olympics." Does it stretch the imagination to believe he might later make the alleged caustic remarks about Navy SEALs?

In the end, Ventura prevailed in court and won a huge judgment that will essentially be paid for by the widow of Jesse's harsh critic. To me, that seems unseemly. The amount of the judgment was determined in part to compensate Ventura for lost business; he claimed that offers from producers and promoters dried up after Kyle conflated him with "scruff face." More likely, the Ventura cultural phenomenon petered out on its own, as is so often the case with over-the-top loudmouths whose shtick devolves from being funny to just plain irritating (think Morton Downey, Jr.) Jesse should accept his win like a man, and renounce the judgment. Give the widow a break.

Holy Toledo!

August 9, 2014

Call it the stoplight syndrome. Only after a pedestrian is crushed to death at a notoriously dangerous intersection do the authorities decide to install a stoplight. Prior to death, handwringing in the form of traffic studies and cost-benefit analyses serve as the substitute for resolute action. Last week the city of Toledo, Ohio – a place of 400,000 inhabitants – shut down the water supply. Yeah, you can wash your car or flush your toilet, but don't drink it, give it to pets, or let your thirsty children bathe in it. And for god's sake, don't boil it – the toxicity will only redouble with the release of every molecule of gaseous H_2O. How did such a plight befall the hapless denizens of Ohio's number 4 city? Time for a new stoplight.

Toledo, like many cities and towns along the shores of Lake Erie draws drinking water from the shallowest of the five Great

Lakes which together are the source of 21 percent of the world's surface fresh water and 54 percent of the world's liquid fresh water by volume. Soon these precious lakes could also become the reason why so many people who blithely abandoned the "Rust Belt" for the low-tax, business-friendly, provider of cheap housing (but ultimately parched) "Sun Belt" will return tail-between-legs to the once-forsaken land that now offers something Texas, Arizona and increasingly, California can't – reliable access to potable water.

But not so fast. While 11 million U.S. citizens who live near the shores of Lake Erie depend on it for drinking water, recreation and commerce, a tiny fraction of rural folk far from the water's edge who are supported legislatively by a sympathetic yet clueless Congress which in turn is backed financially by special interest groups with deep pockets like the Fertilizer Institute are pouring tons of chemicals into the watershed that eventually drains into the vulnerable lake. For the benefit of some farmers tilling in the Ohio interior – most likely growing soybeans or corn, much of which will be refined into unnecessary ethanol – a vast society along the water's edge must suffer the poisons and stench of the downstream effects. What happened in and around Toledo was the formation of an algae bloom covering dozens of square miles of Lake Erie surface that produced sufficient levels of toxins to force the city to shut down its water system. Hundreds of thousands of residents, no longer able to rely on the convenience of indoor plumbing, were forced to seek bottled water wherever they could find any. Naturally, the government had to pick up the slack at taxpayer expense which presumably did not offend Tea Party activists in Ohio this particular time.

Nearly a half-century ago I recall the slow but inexorable demise of Lake Erie at the hands of industrialists like paper producer Hammermill and coal-sucking energy producer PenElec.

These and other rapists of the land used Lake Erie as a dumping ground for toxic waste, oxygen-snuffing chemicals, and hot effluence that drew fish to their deaths. Through the mid-1960s my family's cottage on the shore of Lake Erie in Millcreek Township was a bucolic, summertime oasis where we enjoyed water-skiing, built Teutonic bonfires, shot off fireworks, and swam, and swam, and swam. That is until the death-blooms of bloated, silvery fish corpses polluted the surf, and thick, smelly ropes of seaweed overtook the shoreline.

My grandmother dumped the property in the late 60s for a song, and died 20 years later just as Lake Erie started to come back and the value of the cottage soared to a figure 10x what she sold for. Hammermill went out of business, PenElec moved on to cleaner fuels, laws went into effect limiting the use of phosphate-based products.

As the shallowest of the Great Lakes, Erie quickly washed away the detritus and revived. Now the Lake faces another challenge – this time from farmers who use cost-efficient fertilizers that easily wash away, but because they cost so little to implement the surface loss does not concern the farmers. Will the forces of agriculture prevail? I would bet against it – water is thicker than beef – but the special interests will fight hard to retain their hegemony over the downstream victims.

Perhaps it's time to pull out the old photos of the fire that raged years ago on the Cuyahoga River. Truly a demonstration of how bad things can get, and a warning not to venture further down the road to irreversible devastation.

La Commedia è Finita!

August 14, 2014

Immediately following the report that Robin Williams killed himself, the news and entertainment media launched into the predictable frenzy of non-stop coverage that by law must include speculation from psychologists, staid reports bereft of content from law enforcement officials, interviews with "shocked" colleagues, loops and clips of the actor's antics, and reminiscences from "friends," most of whom bear tenuous relationships with the deceased. The most common theme was the incongruity of a frenetic, eternally child-like comic who seemed to find joy in making people laugh, and suicide. News people placed heavy emphasis on Williams's role as TV alien "Mork" and his histrionics alongside fellow comedians Billy Crystal and Whoopie Goldberg.

Whenever Williams's screen acting career was discussed it was largely to recall such comedies as "The Birdcage" and "Mrs. Doubtfire," as well as his vocal work on "Aladdin" and "Happy Feet." Although reports mentioned his Best Supporting Actor Oscar in the serious drama "Good Will Hunting," most of the coverage served to highlight Williams's career as a comic. Perhaps in doing so the networks were amplifying their preferred story of the sad clown Pagliaccio.

As the reports progressed, I wondered if anyone would mention Williams's treacly performance in the stomach-wrenching "Patch Adams," or his take on Peter Pan in Spielberg's "Hook," which one critic called "weirdly creepy when it's not being bombastically boring." The more I thought about it, the more I discovered that Robin Williams was much more effective (on screen at least) not in comedies but in serious dramas and thrillers. The movies in which he acted that garnered the best *Rotten Tomatoes* scores were not comedies, but rather more-serious stuff: "Insomnia," "Good

Will Hunting," "One Hour Photo," "Dead Poet's Society," "The Fisher King" and "Awakenings."

Undoubtedly a comic genius, more sober news coverage has clarified the extent to which Robin Williams was also a tortured soul. By hanging himself in his closet, perhaps Robin Williams was exclaiming like Pagliaccio in Leoncavallo's famous opera – "La commedia è finita!"

RIP Lauren Bacall

August 14, 2014

Lauren Bacall died the other day at age 89. Her obituary in *The New York Times* started on the front page with a classic photo of her with husband Humphrey Bogart, and continued inside with a full-page treatment. A well-deserved tribute to a stunning actress who harkened back to a Hollywood era that long ago ceased to exist. My only complaint was that the obituary didn't mention one of her last roles – as herself – in an episode of "The Sopranos." Mobster Chris Moltisanti wants to get into the movie business and heads to Hollywood in search of a name actor to attach to his splatter movie. He and another Mafioso snag a brief meeting with Ben Kingsley who is clearly confused and a bit annoyed to be in the company of cheese. Lauren Bacall walks by and Ben jumps up to pay homage – as well as to escape the meeting. Later, frustrated by the Kingsley blow-off and disillusioned with the clubby, insider nature of Hollywood that treats him like the amateur he is, Chris seeks revenge. He stakes out Lauren Bacall as she leaves a party with a huge bag of swag. He makes a grab for the swag, but Lauren resists as you would expect her to – until Chris socks her in the jaw and makes off with the loot.

Distressed and sitting on the pavement, attended to by her assistant and a limo driver, Lauren wails, "Jesus, my fucking arm!" Perfect.

Puritans Get Their Panties in a Bunch

August 15, 2014

"For an erection lasting more than four hours." Every day on TV, in day-time and prime-time, on weekdays and weekends, this once-titillating phrase is uttered quite casually by an off-screen narrator in advertisements for Cialis, a "daily use" medication to assist men with "erectile disfunction" to get it up on a moment's notice. (They should have called it *Boing!*)

In 2014, it is not only common, but impossible not to hear and see a tumult of references to sex, sexy people, sexual activity and sex, and more sex. What would have appalled uptight parents, teachers and clergy in 1950s, and perhaps drawn censorious condemnation from government officials, is now commonly displayed on billboards, the sides of buses, in movies, and yes, even magazine covers. In a world in which the Discovery Channel airs a survivor-like reality show where intrepid contestants are dropped naked into a jungle and followed around by a camera crew; where cartoon kids from a place called "South Park" frequently spout "goddam it" and call each other "assholes;" where grocery stores offer *Cosmopolitan* magazine at child-eye-level at the check-out counter with its cover advice on "75 sex moves men crave" – is it possible that modern mothers can still get outraged over a picture of a scantily-clad woman?

Apparently so. Recently *Land's End*, the purveyor of white, middle-class preppy clothing, luggage, and home furnishings, offered its customers a complimentary copy of the July issue of *GQ* magazine – and from the immediate outrage it stirred up, you'd have thought *Land's End* sent out DVDs of "Deep Throat." In fact, the cover of *GQ* features nothing more than actress Emily Ratajkowski wearing a Hawaiian lei over otherwise (shame!) bare breasts.

Here are some of the complaints registered with *Land's End*, whose CEO Edgar Huber quickly kowtowed by admitting "a mistake" and announcing the delivery of a replacement magazine – Conde Nast Traveler (let's hope they're not doing a cover feature on Bali this month.)

"My 14-year-old son brought in the mail today & was quite disturbed & fascinated by a 'gift' Lands' End sent us — a copy of *GQ* magazine with an absolutely OBSCENE cover!!!"

"I am appalled that Lands' End — which I have always thought of as a 'wholesome,' family- oriented company — would be the one to expose my son to pornography!"

"We received your 'Lands' End Bonus' of *GQ* magazine this weekend, and we are absolutely horrified. How can buying something as family friendly as school uniforms lead to soft porn in the mailbox? I'm thankful my son did not bring in the mail."

"I ordered Christian private school children's uniforms from your company and you sold my home address to a magazine company that peddles in soft porn for men???"

(Although I didn't read all the complaints, I noticed that none of the outraged mothers were concerned for their daughters. Only adolescent sons appeared to be in mortal danger of spying the cover.)

Do these mothers not realize their sons have already been masturbating to internet porn for three or four years? And that they've been sexting with friends since they received their first smart phone? And that they're probably close to surpassing their Puritan parents in the number of times they have sex each week? Memo to *Land's End*: given the nature of your customer base, consider adding chastity belts to this year's school uniform collection.

The Lesson of Prime Numbers

August 20, 2014

Prime numbers – those divisible by none other than themselves and 1 – have fascinated mathematicians going back millennia. For thousands of years mathematicians have labored – ciphering tedious, error-prone calculations deep into the oil-lamp-illuminated night for months on end prior to the invention of the electronic computer – to discover the next largest prime, and to produce methods for automatically generating them. Early on, many believed that the number of primes might be finite – after all, as numbers get bigger it would seem less and less likely that no smaller number could be found to divide them. Simply enumerating the primes illustrates that they quickly get farther and farther apart as they get bigger (of the 100 integers between 1 and 100, 25 are primes, but of the 100 integers between 10,000,001 and 10,000,100, just 2 are prime), so intuitively one might conclude that at some point there are no more to be found. That some number would represent the Mt. Everest of primes.

But as is so often the case with mathematics, intuition turns out to be wrong. Euclid is credited with the first proof of the infinity of prime numbers; later on, others including Euler and Paul Erdős developed alternate methods. Whenever a new largest prime is discovered, necessarily accomplished today with computers, the hunt is on for the next one. And good luck with that – the largest prime currently known is a 17-million-digit monster: $2^{57,885,161}-1$.

The concept of infinity has long challenged rational thought. The notion that there is always one more "thing" – bigger and better – to be discovered can be hard to comprehend, at least until that "thing" arrives. After all, didn't Charles Duell, Patent Office commissioner at the turn of the last century, and a man faced with

a deluge of invention proposals, famously say, "Everything that can be invented has been invented"? (No, that's an urban legend – but the statement captures the sentiment well.)

Getting back to mathematics, it might seem that after thousands of years of development and discovery in the field that humans could have logged everything that could be known about numbers. From simple arithmetic to algebra and trigonometry to calculus to group theory to topology and multidimensional spaces – the covered ground is expansive. Yet every four years brilliant mathematicians under the age of 40 receive the coveted Fields Medal for Outstanding Discoveries in Mathematics. Often considered the equivalent of the Nobel Prize, the Fields Medal has recognized some truly ingenious and far-out work, all of which has stretched the boundaries beyond what had been thought impossible.

I write about this because just last week, Maryam Mirzakhani became the first woman to capture the Fields Medal which was first bestowed in 1936. Mirzakhani, a native-born Iranian who teaches at Stanford specializes in the theory of moduli spaces of Riemann surfaces which she parlayed into an asymptotic formula to express the growth of the number of simple closed geodesics on a compact hyperbolic surface. In honoring Mirzakhani, the International Mathematical Union said of her findings, "It is astounding to find that the rigidity in homogeneous spaces has an echo in the inhomogeneous world of moduli space."

OK, Mirzakhani's work may seem a bit more esoteric than Aristotle's fundamental pronouncement that "A is A," and Pythagoras's indispensable proof that $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. But that's how it works. The world today is dense with derivative ideas and plagued by a dearth of new ideas – not because people are necessarily lazy and stupid, but because so much fundamental work has

already been established. Why do you think so many movies suck? Yet, it's comforting to know that like the prime numbers there are always bigger ideas waiting to be discovered with a bit of dedication and imagination

The Savage Wiener on Ebola

August 22, 2014

A couple weeks ago on a drive out of New York City, knowing that the fast-moving but densely packed traffic could well be leading soon into a stopped-up jam, I flipped on the AM radio for a status on road conditions. Tuned to WABC 770, the radio at this time of day began to spew forth the annoying voice of Michael Wiener aka. "Savage," the right-wing personality who replaced the nearly-as-vile Sean Hannity in the 3-6:00 PM slot. The topic of Savage's contempt this day? That a couple American health workers serving in West Africa were being transported back to the U.S. to receive treatment for Ebola.

Relying on his credentials in the field of nutritional ethnomedicine, Dr. Savage railed against the madness of importing the dangerous and often fatal Ebola disease into the United States. Savage argued that the preferred approach would have been to treat the two patients, Kent Brantley and Nancy Writebol, in Africa – he mentioned Nigeria as a place of advanced medical capability – where facilities to manage the disease were more than adequate to handle it. I understand the visceral fear of allowing the virus entry into the U.S., even though the precautions taken in transporting the victims involved complete isolation of their infected bodies in protective gear out of "Gravity," but the notion that African options for treatment were satisfactory seemed ill-conceived. Health workers in West Africa have been abandoning hospitals in droves leaving behind leaking corpses on the floors.

That's a far cry from the state of facilities at the Center for Disease Control (CDC) where Brantly and Writebol were sent. And even though Nigeria is not inundated (yet) by Ebola and the accompanying angst, might not the intrusion of Ebola patients there be met with fierce obstruction as well?

Also, since when did conservatives like Savage start getting bent out of shape over an exercise that demonstrates American "exceptionalism"? Or start seeking to interfere in an individual's taking "personal responsibility" for his or her health? And don't you think that if the U.S. government blocked the return of citizens – even (or especially) sick ones – that ranters like Savage would have a conniption fit over an "imperial" presidency?

Anyway, I listened to Savage's arguments (and his constant reference to an article he wrote a day earlier titled "America's Ebola response is 'madness'" that appeared on the website WND Commentary) until he seamlessly connected the situation to a conspiracy fostered by Obama, the man who personally invited terrorists to cross into the American Southwest and who caused safety failures at the CDC. By the time Savage conflated the Ebola outbreak to Obamacare – regardless the merits of his argument that bringing the illness to America was madness – he lost my interest. I flipped to WCBS 880 just in time to catch "Traffic and Weather on the Eights."

I waited to write about the Savage Wiener to see what came of the two Ebola sufferers who had been likened to a more virulent Typhoid Mary. Did the disease jump the hospital walls? Did any doctors, nurses or other hospital personnel succumb? Did Al Qaeda breach the perimeter, lick the sick, and abscond with the killer virus? Well, now that the results are in, we can say without fear of contradiction that Michael Savage is an asshole.

Both patients have recovered from the insidious disease,

which was far from guaranteed had they stayed on the African continent as called for by Savage. And the opportunity to study Ebola up close in one of the world's best hospital facilities – Emory University Hospital – no doubt provided researchers valuable insight that may lead to a vaccine or cure. Dr. Bruce S. Ribner, the Emory infectious diseases specialist who coordinated the treatment of Brantly and Writebol said it was "the right decision" to bring the patients back to the U.S. to receive the superior care offered here, and because the lessons learned might lead to guidance in assisting doctors treating Ebola patients in the field – thereby one day obviating the need to bring sick people to the U.S. (and satisfying Savage in a roundabout way.) Ribner added, "We cannot let our fears dictate our actions. We must all care."

At that moment, trying to conceive the inconceivable notion of caring, the savage head of Michael Wiener exploded.

It's Titanic in the Sky – Oh, the Humanity!

September 2, 2014

Werner Franz, the last surviving crew member of the ill-fated German dirigible Hindenberg died a couple weeks ago. Franz was a 14-year-old cabin boy working in a lower deck of the dirigible who managed to kick open a hatch Indiana-Jones style and jump a few meters to the ground just before the flaming aircraft touched down. Dead at 92, Franz was not quite as old as the fictional Rose Bukater, star of the movie "Titanic" when she was introduced to the world on a thousand silver screens. Like Werner, Rose was a disaster survivor. Her story of the sinking of the Titanic was told in real time (by actress Gloria Stuart) and in flashback (by Kate Winslet). It was a story of forbidden love no doubt inspired like countless others by "Romeo and Juliet," set upon the stage of the most famous nautical disaster of all time, presented by a

director-technician, James Cameron, who sought to ground his movie with scientifically-based facts culled from his personal under-water investigations of RMS Titanic's final resting spot. The movie went on to win 11 Oscars including Best Picture and amass three-quarters of a billion dollars at the box office.

In some ways the fate of the Hindenberg mirrors that of the much more deadly disaster that befell the Titanic, an elite ocean liner that sank to an icy grave on its maiden voyage in 1912. Each vessel was a form of transport built for the upper classes who demanded a civilized way to cross the Atlantic from old Europe to the modern, future-facing United States.

Decades ago, in early May of 1937, the Hindenberg – pride of Germany and of the upwardly mobile Nazi party – disintegrated in Lakehurst, NJ in a famously-photographed hydrogen-fueled conflagration. The huge, phallic-shaped floating Zeppelin, which at 800 feet long was more than three times the length of a Boeing 747, collapsed slowly like an empty gift box tossed into the fire-place on Christmas morning. Thirty-five of the 97 passengers on board died, as well as one unlucky bastard on the ground. (Although it might seem inevitable that a huge tube filled with flammable hydrogen would succumb to an errant spark or inconvenient lightning bolt, in fact the Hindenberg flew 62 uneventful trips before exploding ignominiously near its earthbound tether.) Unlike the Titanic however which was feted in an Oscar-scarfing movie driven by the lusty narrative recalled by nonagenarian Rose, the Hindenberg was the subject a mediocre thriller film that hit the screens in 1975. It's received a grade of 40 percent on *Rotten Tomatoes*.

Given the dramatic opportunity to develop a romantic plot between a lowly occupant of the doomed Hindenberg and a famous passenger, their desire to fall in love thwarted by evil

fascist antagonists, the producers of "The Hindenberg" settled instead on a run-of-the-mill story of intrigue that blames the explosion on sabotage perpetrated by a disgruntled Nazi. The cast is actually quite impressive: George C. Scott, Anne Bancroft, Burgess Meredith, Charles Durning and Gig Young. But the movie proceeds like an obvious game of Clue, introducing several characters designed to be suspects who are transparently not suspects, and ending with an unlikely twist in which the agent charged with protecting the Hindenberg decides to abet the perpetrator. Too bad.

With the passing of Werner Franz, perhaps some renewed interest in making a more fitting film with the doomed Hindenberg as the backdrop will kindle among Hollywood's writers and producers. The pitch? It's Titanic in the sky – oh, the humanity. Look for it in 2017 on the 80th anniversary. (A TV docudrama that came out in 2007 is called "Hindenberg: Titanic of the Skies." As one reviewer noted: "An overlong rather bland production with no surprises except one fine performance.")

Execution Before Exoneration

September 5, 2014

A grade-school riddle went like this: Where does seven come before six? Answer: In the dictionary. The same riddle could be altered to ask when execution comes before exoneration, but the real answer to that unfunny joke is the United States of America. OK – That may be an overstatement, but the continual discovery of men on death row who did not commit the crimes for which they were sentenced suggests that many innocent people have or will be snuffed out by order of the state. With more than 3,100 people on death row in the U.S., it is not hard to imagine several dozen innocents (a couple percent) rotting away at enormous financial

cost. The only things working in favor of innocent inmates are the sluggish nature of executions in the U.S. (California, which leads the nation with 726 death row members has executed a whopping 13 people since capital punishment was reinstated in 1978), and the indefatigable exoneration efforts by various "Innocent Projects" established at universities and within non-profit organizations in states where capital punishment remains on the books.

September 3rd brought to an end some more unjustified death row imprisonments when two black guys in North Carolina – Henry Lee McCollum and his half-brother Leon Brown, both of whom spent the last 30 years awaiting a stroll down the green mile from the time they were teenagers – were released after it was confirmed by DNA evidence that they had not committed the heinous crime for which they were incarcerated. The evidence incriminated another man who lived near the scene of the crime: Roscoe Artis who is now serving a life sentence for committing a similar crime to the one ascribed to McCollum and Brown. How Artis escaped while McCollum and Brown got snagged is a sordid tale of police coercion, crappy investigation and slipshod representation. The fact that the two suspects initially "confessed" obviously didn't help their case, but as is becoming clearer, many bogus confessions are proffered under duress. It would not surprise me if dozens of death-row (and regular-row) inmates are sitting in cells today because they mumbled "yes" after being deprived of sleep, food, water and a lawyer for hours or days on end.

In February 1994, then-Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun, apparently uncomfortable with capital punishment in the U.S. wrote an opinion stating that the death penalty as currently administered is contrary to the Constitution of the United States. Not one to sit back and stare at heresy, Justice Antonin Scalia responded with a stern defense of the status quo.

Returning to McCollum and Brown: the pair were accused of murdering 11-year-old Sabrina Buie who's raped and beaten body was found in a soybean field. This was a crime so heinous that Scalia cited it in his contrarian blast at Blackmun, the liberal pussy. Scalia wrote, "The death by injection which Justice Blackmun describes looks pretty desirable… It looks even better next to some of the other cases currently before us which Justice Blackmun did not select as the vehicle for his announcement that the death penalty is always unconstitutional – for example, the case of the 11-year old girl raped by four men and then killed by stuffing her panties down her throat."

I wonder what Scalia would say today had the two falsely-convicted men gotten the needle before their exoneration of rape-panty-stuffing became official. My guess: not a fucking thing. Instead he probably has his clerks off right now combing the files for a new death row case to substitute in for the now-debunked illustration of depravity. No doubt there are hundreds – let's hope for his sake that he doesn't land on another embarrassing example of U.S. jurisprudence gone off the rails.

For more hilarity on this light-hearted subject, check out this recent article in *Business Insider* titled "Justice Scalia Says Executing the Innocent Doesn't Violate the Constitution." Even if by Scalia's tortured logic this is technically true, shame on someone.

Speaking of shame – or rather, shamelessness – consider the bizarre "last words" of condemned killer Thomas Grasso who, for his last meal ordered two dozen steamed mussels, two dozen steamed clams, a double Burger King cheeseburger, a half-dozen barbecued spare ribs, two strawberry milkshakes, half of a pumpkin pie with whipped cream, diced strawberries, oh, and a can of SpaghettiOs with meatballs. Who knows how much of this cornucopia of junk food Grasso consumed before getting the

needle for strangling an 87-year-old woman with her Christmas lights so he could abscond with her fortune (actually $12 and a TV set.) One thing's for certain – Grasso was pissed, as his last words attest: "I did not get my SpaghettiOs, I got spaghetti. I want the press to know this."

RIP Joan Rivers

September 5, 2014

Joan Rivers died the other day at age 81 of complications during a "routine" throat procedure. To her credit, she didn't look a day over 30 – for a cat, which after several facial procedures she began to resemble. I think one of her more edgy, acerbic remarks captures much of the snark you'd expect to read in the obits and "in memoriams" to come: just days after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Joan supposedly called an acquaintance and suggested meeting for lunch at Windows on the Ground. Ouch.

It brings a wry smile today, but at the time it bordered on bad taste. But that's humor. After all, didn't at least a dozen famous people claim credit for saying "Comedy is tragedy plus time?" Joan had a lot of time and tragedy to work with. Shortly after her husband Edgar Rosenberg killed himself, Joan had dinner at Spago, an LA hot spot, with her daughter Melissa. Presumably offended by the exorbitant prices on the menu, Joan reportedly said to Melissa, "If Daddy were here and saw these prices, he'd kill himself all over again." Tasteless and funny? Hell yeah.

Countless female comedians (far removed from the time they were called "comediennes") owe their careers to Joan Rivers – Roseanne Barr, Margaret Cho, Kathie Griffin, Lisa Lampanelli. And thanks to Joan they all may now say "cunt" without fear of retribution. RIP.

Lesson from Vietnam: 105 Degrees in the Caliphate and Rising

September 11, 2014

Rory Kennedy's "Last Days in Vietnam," like so many excellent historical documentaries (think "The Fog of War" and "Harlan County, USA") clarifies context and reveals critical details that often elude the cursory treatment offered in high-school and college curricula from which most people learn whatever it is they know. Focused specifically on the actions (and inactions) following the March 1975 "Spring Offensive" invasion of South Vietnam by their enemies in the North, "Last Days in Vietnam" lays out the riveting story of how the United States hesitantly and slowly prepared for and eventually executed under pressure an evacuation of U.S. personnel and South Vietnamese contractors from Saigon.

By this time, the Paris Peace Accords had established a type of armistice that had been put in place between the North and South Koreans in the 1950s, setting up a mutual ceasing of hostilities but not a lasting peace. In order to get the South to go along, Richard Nixon promised to reenter the fracas should the North violate the Accords – but after he resigned in 1974, the North believed correctly that a worn-out U.S. would balk (or renege), no longer led by a president "insane" enough to drop the big one.

The story is told mostly by servicemen, CIA station agents, State Department officials and South Vietnamese citizens involved in the evacuation. And the continuing thread throughout most of the movie is the ever-growing frustration of the military men assigned to the U.S. Embassy with the Ambassador to South Vietnam, Graham Martin, who steadfastly refused to accept the inevitability of a North Vietnamese blitzkrieg. Even the mere

development of an evacuation plan was anathema to Martin, a man who was perhaps too invested in staying the course after having lost his only son in the Vietnam War conflict.

With the South looking vulnerable, President Gerald Ford appealed to Congress to approve $722 million in military aid for the one-time allies, but it was a futile effort. Virtually no member of Congress wanted to expend (waste?) more treasure and American lives on a war that had dragged on for a decade. That rejection no doubt further emboldened the North.

Given the rapid progress the North was making (within a month they had sacked Hue, Da Nang, and Cam Ranh Bay,) it is surprising that wholesale evacuation of Saigon was never fully considered until it was almost too late. But then again, maybe not so surprising given the long history of fatal U.S. hubris and ineptitude in Southeast Asia since the 1950s. Low-level military and State Department officials independently drew up four options for personnel evacuation, the preferred one being C40 airlifts from Tan Son Nhut airport. But after the North bombed the runways rendering them useless, Martin was forced to capitulate; by that time, the only viable option remaining was number four, the least practical: helicopter airlifts of 50 people at a time from the embassy grounds. They would go on to move close to 5,000 out of danger.

Most surreally, the secret clue to the military personnel that evacuation had been initiated was a radio broadcast stating that "It's 105 degrees in Saigon and rising" followed by the playing of Bing Crosby's rendition of "White Christmas." Bizarre.

It is this part of the movie that is probably most familiar to people. We see footage of South Vietnamese civilians scaling the embassy compound fences, and evacuees clamoring on the rooftop awaiting the next Chinook helicopter to arrive. And of

course, the famous shots of sailors pushing helicopters off the deck of the ship into the South China Sea to make room for more landings. The chaos is palpable. So is the sense of futility.

For me, the meticulous detail of the evacuation of Saigon portrayed in the movie filled in numerous blank spots in my recollection of the incidents which occurred when I was 18 and about to graduate from high school. By that time, the U.S. had suspended the much-hated draft, and guys my age were looking beyond the fears of going to the other side of the world to fight a pointless war. And the fact that the Congress had thoroughly rejected the idea of handing $722 million more to the South Vietnamese government proved that it wasn't just me who wanted to move on.

As we know, a day after the last U.S. soldier departed the Embassy, the Communists from the North rolled into Saigon and hence began years of turmoil and despair for many in the South who were sent to "re-education" camps or summarily executed. In some ways, the methods by which the victorious North ran their country parallel those that cretins like Al Qaeda and ISIS would come to inflict upon the defenseless populace in their neck of the woods.

But think about this. Despite the depravity and incompetence of the Communists who took over all of Vietnam, the U.S. refused to go back in and try to save the day. We left the mess behind, allowing the Communists to prove their mettle – and by 1986, they had failed miserably. Things were going so poorly for the country that the ruling and wobbling Communist government changed direction and encouraged private ownership of farms and factories, and pushed for economic deregulation and foreign investment. Today unified Vietnam is an economic engine of growth and a destination location.

Is there a lesson for would-be interlopers into the miasma that

is the Middle East? Would it be better in the long run to let ISIS have a go at running the lives of 50 million people who disagree with them, and fail miserably? If ISIS went ahead with their brutal oppression unimpeded by a foreign nation upon which they could lay the blame for all the world's ills, would the masses rise up and vanquish them on their own? I'm inclined to believe it to be so.

Standing on Line Behind the Human Hemorrhoid

September 15, 2014

On occasion I'll stop at a local inconvenience store in the morning to pick up a newspaper and a cup of tea – a transaction that, once I get to the register, takes all of 20 seconds. But because this particular store sits less than 50 yards from a senior citizen residence, I must invariably endure a lengthy intercourse involving a sullen cashier and a four-foot-three blue-hair seeking to purchase half a Social Security check's worth of scratch-off lottery tickets. It's worse than standing behind a person buying two dozen donuts, each one a different kind.

Here's the order for the scratch-offs (dialog almost verbatim): "I'll take a Double Triple Cash-word, a 777 Jackpot, a $2,500 A Week For Life, no, forget that, give me a, uh, hmm, let me see, a Break the Bank, a Big Bucks Multiplier, no, make that two Big Bucks Multipliers, and a 777 Jackpot – oh, I already asked for that… ok, then, I'll take a $2,500 A Week For Life." The cashier tears cards from the dispenser and places them on the counter – and only then does the blue-hair begin the process of delivering the money to purchase this pile of certain-losers. By that time, I've finished the national news, the business section, and half the cross-word puzzle.

Everyone gets on line behind a human hemorrhoid now and again, but because I am an innately impatient person, I am keenly aware of the irritation – not unlike a person who detects a foul odor that no one else can smell. As a service to those who may not realize their lives are frittering away, seconds turning into minutes, minutes into hours, until years of wasted time have accumulated, I offer my take on the 15 most annoying situations interfering with efficient commerce.

1. **The person ahead of you who is not ready to pay.** They've stood on line, placed the goods on the conveyor belt, studiously observed the register for a mispriced item, and watched the cashier bag up the entire order. Somehow in all the excitement they forgot they too have a role to play to complete the transaction. Like paying for the goddamn stuff.
2. **The person who insists on paying the exact total.** The cashier rings up the goods while the customer waits patiently holding a $20 bill. The total comes to $17.87. Does the customer hand over the double sawbuck? No. She says helpfully, "I think I have 87 cents in here somewhere," proceeding to dig out one by one the pennies, nickels and dimes wedged deep in the corners of her purse, proudly producing the exact change when she should be in her car driving out of the parking lot.
3. **The person who checks out and then wants to buy one more thing.** Not willing to go back to the end of the line or to forego the forgotten item altogether, this selfish bastard assumes the ten people behind him don't mind if he runs back to pick up that oh-so-necessary can of chunk-light tuna in oil.

4. **The person who splits the goods into two orders because they're also buying some stuff for a friend.** Rather than reconcile the bill back at the ranch, this ninny requires the cashier to double the transactions, and pack the goods separately. It's like an invisible person cut in front of you.
5. **The cashier who is just about to hand over the change but turns away to answer another customer's/worker's question.** You've spent half an hour shopping, and another fifteen minutes on line. All the goods have been tallied and you've paid the bill. Mere seconds remain to completion. You think that you're 99.5 percent done – until someone steps up and asks where they might find cocktail onions. The change sits in the cashier's hand just waiting to be turned over to you, but instead she embarks on the grocery store version of "The Hunt for Red October."
6. **The person without enough money to pay who picks out the stuff they want to leave behind.** The bill comes to $145. The customer only has $125. And soon you're the rapt observer of a desperate soul trying to decide whether cottage cheese is more or less important than a package of hot dogs.
7. **The cashier who insists on getting a price check on an item known to cost less than a quarter.** You come to the counter with a power drill, ten sheets of plywood, a five gallon can of paint, and a nail. Everything but the nail has a barcode. Guess who's gonna have to wait ten minutes while a dimwit in a blue apron runs around the store before coming back with "it's four cents."
8. **The person who buys scratch-off lottery tickets**

and then proceeds to scratch them at the counter. This offensive behavior is thankfully almost extinct, but you still on occasion end up behind a slovenly derelict, scratching like a dog with mange, who can't wait ten seconds to find out whether he's a newly minted millionaire. And if the guy happens to hit it big and wins five whole dollars, he'll immediately cash in the card for another card.

9. **The cashier who struggles to crack open a new roll of pennies so as to be able to give back $4.01 in change.** You'd gladly take $4 and get out, but I suppose corporate headquarters fears an audit if their quarterly report is mysteriously off by one cent.
10. **The cashier who knows you well, because you shop there daily, but still asks every time you come in whether you have a loyalty card.** And when you say no for the thousandth time, she asks politely if you'd like to apply for one.
11. **The cashier who when handing you change drops a coin on the floor, and instead of taking another one from the drawer, begins crawling around looking for it.** You were so close to getting out of there. That nickel was mere inches from your palm. Now you have two choices: forget the nickel and walk out like an ungrateful douchebag, or stand there pretending to be patient.
12. **Stores that require a manager to intervene when a customer buys a six -ack.** Some stores post an alcohol sale policy: "If you look under 30, we'll card you" – even though the legal age is 21. But others take a more fascist approach and card every damned person who wants to buy some beer – even those who use their AARP card to

prove their age. Silly. But when you're in your fifties, and you must wait for a 22-year-old manager to come from the office to validate your right to purchase beer, you're shopping in a store run by lawyers.

13. **The person in the express check-out lane who insists on writing a check for $4.75.** "Express" is a two-way street, but some people fail to understand that. Checkwriters in the express lane deserve a shock of 20 volts; 40 if they don't start writing the check until the order is rung up.
14. **The person who goes nuts over the scanned price of an item that is five cents higher than the price posted on the shelf.** I don't have a problem if a customer takes issue over a big price differential and they are right – but time is money. And it ain't worth holding up the people behind you to investigate the case of the missing nickel.
15. **The customer at the specialty counter who makes the worker cut and weigh the product five times until it weighs exactly 1/2 pound.** You've seen it. "How much does that piece of tilapia weigh? 10 ounces? Can you give me half a pound?" The fishmonger slices off an infinitesimal piece. "Just a bit over 8 ounces." Not good enough. Now the fishmonger is doing arthroscopic surgery on the tilapia to get it to exactly 8.000 ounces. "Gee, that doesn't look like very much. Can you give me another piece the same size, please?"

This Week in Ingrates

September 25, 2014

Clare Booth Luce (or was it Oscar Wilde?) famously warned, "No good deed goes unpunished." These days that seems like a tautology. Is there anyone of privilege left willing to accept the best and final offer without throwing a hissy-fit because they believe they somehow deserve better?

You're invited to vote from three corpuscular cretins for this week's most despicable ingrate. The candidates: outgoing Afghan president Hamid Karzai, former AIG chief Hank Greenberg, and one-time asshole-buddy of Bin Laden, Sulaiman Abu Ghaith. Consider their stories and vote your heart (or perhaps another organ closer to your alimentary canal.)

Pointy-hat-wearing Karzai rose to the top spot in Afghanistan after the United States ran the much-reviled Taliban out of the perennially-failed state, and installed his worthless ass into the office of the presidency. This incompetent fool has "run" the country since 2001 when the U.S. embarked on the worthy goal of extricating Afghanistan from the clutches of some medieval tyrants. He and his people owe whatever semblance of normality they enjoy to the Americans. Earlier this year, after a dozen years, the U.S. wanted to call it quits in this god-forsaken country and urged Karzai to sign a transition plan – which he naturally spit upon. Karzai pushed out the date for agreement so far that the U.S. had no choice but to leave lock, stock and barrel. That outcome was completely the result of Karzai's mind-boggling intransigence.

The other day, Karzai made a farewell speech in which he thanked India, China and Iran (?!) for their help while snubbing the U.S. which since 2001 has been Afghanistan's biggest donor and most strident protector. This ungrateful cocksucker said in

his speech, "America pursued its own interests and did not want peace in Afghanistan." What were our interests? Cornering the market on gravel? As *The Wall Street Journal* reminded its readers, "The war against the Taliban has claimed the lives of more than 2,360 U.S. service members, and Washington has so far spent more than $104 billion to fund Afghanistan's government, its security forces and development projects across the country." U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan James Cunningham got it right when he commented, "I think his remarks, which were uncalled for, do a disservice to the American people, and dishonor the sacrifices Americans have made here. Not recognizing the many contributions that Americans have made and that our partners have made working with us, that's the part that is ungracious and ungrateful." Translation from diplomatese: "Karzai is an ungrateful fuck."

Eighty-nine-year-old Hank Greenberg once ran the insurance giant American International Group, better known as AIG. AIG grew into a behemoth by creating and selling credit default swaps which were essentially insurance for bonds – a lucrative endeavor when the bonds in question are issued by top-notch blue-chip firms. After all, what are the chances a bond issuer like GE or Boeing will default? The problem: AIG insured a lot of bonds and related instruments that appeared to be blue-chip on the surface but whose core was total brown-cow-chip. Furthermore, although CDSs were essentially insurance, regulators treated them as an esoteric financial invention exempt from the normal rules governing insurance – like having enough capital on hand in case lots of companies come in with claims all at the same time. That's what happened in 2008. As the financial system imploded and dogshit bonds fell apart, lots of CDS holders (firms that had paid their "premiums") came forward demanding payout. But because

AIG was so poorly run, they didn't have the capital to comply. Enter the U.S. taxpayer.

Unable to pay rightful claims, AIG floundered around until the Treasury Department came in with $182 billion to back-stop the claims. Had that not happened, hundreds of institutions holding worthless (but insured) bonds would have collapsed. In other words, Hank Greenberg's AIG was perhaps the biggest infection in the economy. Yes, the terms of the bail-out were harsh (high interest payments, government intrusion in company governance), but shit – the alternative was for AIG to go bankrupt, most of its top brass open to civil and criminal penalties, and epidemic market pandemonium. The fact that the Treasury eventually made back $22 billion is irrelevant – AIG survived thanks to the humungous generosity of Joe Average American, the type of person Hank Greenberg wouldn't piss on if poor Joe Average was on fire. Hank the Skank should have crossed himself every day after the bailout, thankful his remaining years would be spent outside a prison cell. But noooo. Hank and some backers have been allowed to proceed this week with a lawsuit against the very government that bailed out his bony ass. No good deed, they say. While acknowledging that the $182 billion bailout was the right thing to do, Greenberg is suing for $40 billion on the grounds that the government was just too tough on little ole AIG. Ungrateful Greenberg, who resigned from AIG in 2005 amid some dicey accounting behavior, simply cannot let go. His lawsuit against the government that ensured the ongoing existence of AIG is world-class chutzpah.

Right after 9/11, Osama bin Laden and a bunch of his sycophantic dirtbags holed up in a cave to chit-chat about the towers that fell in Manhattan that day. Among the dirtbags was a cretin named Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, a son-in-law to bin Laden (but given the rampant polygamy, half the population of Tora Bora

was probably an in-law to Uncle Osama.) Although an illiterate, Ghaith became the spokesman for bin Laden, calling on Muslims (but not himself) to join up as suicide bombers in the fight against infidels.

Fortunately, this evil zealot was captured, put on trial and found guilty. He received a sentence of life imprisonment this week. During the trial he showed no remorse as he blathered on about the righteousness of jihad. But ultimately, Ghaith is an ingrate. For all his bullshit, he only got a sentence of life in prison. No one would bury him up to his neck and hurl stones at his head. No one would push him to his knees and saw off his head. No one would bury him alive, as he claimed the court was planning to do.

Now it's time to vote for "Ingrate of the Week." Which cretin nauseates you the most?

The Wormholes Behind the Wainscoting

October 1, 2014

Everyone who has ever bought an older house has probably been shocked at one time or another by the discovery of vermin and rotted wood so well-hidden behind burled paneling, or beneath lacquered flooring. Until that point of discovery – usually following what was anticipated to be routine maintenance – the homeowner lived in a state of blissful ignorance, confident that his or her house was in good order.

The other day a disturbed Iraq War veteran hopped the fence surrounding the White House – a place long-believed to be one of the most secure buildings in the world – and managed to run all the way to the East Room one floor below the Presidential residence. The vaunted Secret Service was revealed to be inept stewards of the safety of the Commander in Chief. And once again Americans were stunned witnesses to the wormholes behind

the wainscoting. As is often the case with such failures, the Secret Service started out by downplaying the entire event. The intruder was unarmed they said, and quickly apprehended. Neither of these claims was true. Early doubters questioned why attack dogs were not unleashed, given that their presence on the grounds is maintained just for such intrusions. Soon enough the façade had completely fallen down, and the rotting smell of the Secret Service began wafting across Washington, even overpowering the stink that emanates daily from Congress.

As with an old home, evidence of rot might be detected if someone actively looked for it. Remember the Secret Service detail caught servicing prostitutes in Cartagena, Columbia? Or how they took four days to discover that the White House had been hit by seven bullets? Despite the assurances of the Director of the Secret Service, Julia Pierson, during her Congressional inquisition yesterday, I have to believe any political figure currently receiving SS protection has to be thinking about hiring some personal bodyguards as an extra precaution.

The Secret Service incident reminds me of the myriad failures of once-trusted government agencies that came on suddenly and significantly, calling into question whether there exists a single government agency or department that is competent.

Were it not for Hurricane Katrina, would we yet know how hollow the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was? Would it have become common knowledge that the head of FEMA, Michael "Brownie" Brown was a totally unqualified stooge? Clearly, sooner or later FEMA would have been exposed, if not by a hurricane then perhaps by a collapsed dam built in the 1800s and known to be weak, but whose condition had been ignored. Which raises the question: "Who's gonna fuck up next?"

We already know that the following agencies were hiding structural rot behind a pretty wall:

Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) – Exposed as clueless, lazy and unimaginative in the Bernie Madoff scandal.

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) – Revealed to be flat-footed and unprepared on 9/11 as they lost plane after plane, and who just the other day watched Chicago's two airports go dark because of lightly-supervised contractor sabotage.

National Institutes of Health (NIH) – Had to be quarantined after old stocks of pathogens including smallpox and ricin were discovered sitting unsecured in a shoebox in some lab.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) – Destruction of the Challenger shuttle revealed callousness and decidedly unscientific decision-making. And that's after they blew it on Apollo 1 which burst into an inferno on the launching pad.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) – Although GM kept a low-profile on info regarding faulty and deadly ignition switches in some of their vehicles, NHTSA wandered incuriously about in the dark for years.

Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) – Shown to be more helpful than hurtful to criminals in the ill-fated and stupidly-named "Fast and Furious" sting operation.

Veterans' Administration (VA) – Mired in scandal by

failing in their mission to aid sick and injured vets, while falsifying wait-list records.

Government Accountability Office (GAO) – Instead of being accountable to taxpayers, this lame-o organization blew hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars on boondoggles for their hard-working employees.

National Security Agency (NSA) – Nothing bad here to report. Doing a fine job. (they're probably watching me).

Federal Election Commission (FEC) – This poorly thought-out regulatory agency is evenly split between Democrats and Republicans and does absolutely nothing.

The alphabet-soup of agencies, departments and regulators in the U.S. government overflows with political cronies and deadbeat lifers. Which of these supposedly valuable organizations is actually a scenic lake hiding abandoned cars and junked appliances just below its glassy surface? CDC? CIA? OSHA? FDA? NTSB? CPA?

My guess – all of them. And although I acknowledge that numerous governments around the world suffer from the same disease as the U.S., none spend anywhere near the kind of coin Americans do in return for such rank incompetence. Who's to blame? Democrats have a long history of churning out department after department from the acronym factory going back to our first acronym president, FDR. Republicans claim government can't do anything right, then ensure that outcome by slashing budgets and installing assholes in positions of leadership.

I think we're doomed. Time to create the DPA – Doomsday Preparation Agency.

Saint Derek of Jeter

October 5, 2014

Now that Derek Jeter, New York Yankees long-time shortstop and team captain, has retired from Major League Baseball, it seems a near certainty that he will achieve sainthood well ahead of Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II. For a sense of the headiness surrounding Jeter's exit, digest some of the encomiums that have appeared in the press in the last several weeks leading up to Jeter's final game in which his bloopy single saved the day once again.

NY Post – "More than anything Jeter seems like a nice guy who is unimpressed and uninterested in the accoutrements of his celebrity status."

Fox Sports – "Derek Jeter is the most universally respected player of the modern era in baseball, and perhaps in all of sports."

NPR – "If Jeter's career has shown anything, it's that utter reliability has a strangeness about it, and it has beauty. And among those who witness it, it can breed devotion. When Jeter retires, that's what they'll miss."

NY Times – In a particularly fawning article: "Jeter is (to be) assumed into the baseball heavens, to be greeted at the Players Entrance by the Yankee Clipper, the Mick and the Sultan of Swat."

Former teammate, Nick Swisher – "The man is an absolute god. The way that he went out will never ever be replicated."

Perhaps professional sports figures have become so universally abject, with expectations of royal treatment, that a player who simply acts like a normal, dedicated person is elevated to

Gandhi-like status. Given Jeter's illustrious record (five World Series rings, 14 All-Star games, all-time MLB leader in hits by a shortstop, Yankees' all-time career leader in hits (3,465), doubles (544), games played (2,747), stolen bases (358)) and his steady, non-offensive professional lifestyle, pure as the driven snow for a multi-million dollar sports figure, no way will he have to wait around for beatification and canonization – next stop: straight to sainthood.

Clearly, Jeter has performed the requisite two miracles necessary for sainthood. The first came in game 3 of the 2001 American League Division Series against the Oakland A's when Jeter miraculously appeared in the middle of a relay play out of right field to home (despite his position being on the other side of second base), flipping the over-thrown ball to Jorge Posada a nanosecond before Jeremy Giambi touched the plate. The second miracle occurred in the top of the 12th inning against the Boston Red Sox on July 1, 2004 when Derek the Jeter levitated into the stands after snagging a ball hit by Trot Nixon. Jeter stumbled out of the church of reverent fans with a bloodied face and the Yankees went on to win 2-1 after scoring two runs in the bottom of the 13th inning. Rumor has it that a female fan dabbed Derek with a cloth that later came to bear an imprint of his face.

There is even talk within the Vatican that God may call up Saint Derek (posthumously, of course) to replace the Holy Ghost on Team Trinity. It seems H.G. (as he is known around heaven) has been a little too obtuse over the past millennium or so, granting just two interviews since the Inquisition and spending way too much time playing Baccarat at the Bellagio. (Memo to Jesus: If Jeter joins the Holy Trinity, watch your back. God didn't assign him #2 for nothing.)

Barack Hussein Ebola

October 13, 2014

ISIS is a crisis and Ebola is spreading faster than the virulent Macarena craze of 1995. According to the xenophobes who fear for the future of America, the only thing we can do now is… seal the borders!

TownHall.com rants, "Any day, any minute, illegal immigrants sick with Ebola could be walking across our border. Worse, how easy is it for our radical Muslim enemies to send Ebola infected terrorists across the border?" NC State House Speaker Thom Tillis notes, "Ladies and gentlemen we have an Ebola outbreak, we have bad actors who can come across the border. We need to seal the border and secure it." One-time and wannabee-again senator, Scott Brown advises, "One of the reasons why I've been so adamant about closing our border because if people are coming through normal channels, can you imagine what they can do through a porous border." Marine Corps Gen. John Kelly, commander of the U.S. Southern Command predicted "If it (Ebola) breaks out, it's literally, 'Katie bar the door,' and there will be mass migration into the United States." And then there's right-wing skank Phyllis Schlafly who said Obama allowed Ebola to enter the United States so the country would be more like Africa. "Obama doesn't want America to believe that we're exceptional. He wants us to be just like everybody else, and if Africa is suffering from Ebola, we ought to join the group and be suffering from it, too."

Goddamned porous borders! The scourge is at our door, but the solution is simple (like all slogans): "Seal the border." What does it mean, though? What would it entail? Those are questions that the ranters fail perennially to explain. I presume the concept is that no one gets in or out of the U.S. without proper

documentation, but given the vastness of the frontiers (thousands of miles of Mexican and Canadian borders, plus the hundreds of ports of entry like Hartsfield, O'Hare and JFK airports), travel and commerce would have to grind to a halt to ensure this. You think it takes an eternity to fly places now – imagine a truly sealed border.

And for those who like to eat fresh fruit and vegetables in the winter: start acquiring a taste for Bird's Eye frozen waxed beans, because most of that supple produce comes in from south of the border which would be sealed to such an extent that food would rot in the truck before it could pass legitimately into the United States. (Of course, while bona fide foods were idling at the sealed border, somehow I suspect illegal drugs would continue to pass through unfettered, illustrating the power of the law of supply and demand over fences and wigwags.)

Consider these stats:

More than $1 billion worth of goods crosses the U.S.-Mexican border every day – 85 percent of it by truck. Even if that were easy to cut to zero, expect xenophobes like Texas governor Rick Perry and trigger-happy John McCain of Arizona to shit a brick once their business constituents feel profit pain. Border fencing, which is arguably not up to the task of truly sealing the border, cost on average $4 million per mile in 2009 – and in some areas of tough terrain goes higher than $15 million a mile. Quite a costly burden for an over-taxed populace. Furthermore, building impermeable fences means taking peoples' land, building massive, unsightly infrastructure, and putting up a barricade that impedes the natural movement of flood waters which would likely damage the U.S. side. Of the many illegal immigrants coming into the U.S., about 40 percent arrive legally through airports on temporary visas – then simply overstay. No wall is going to curtail that influx. How

do you seal it? Deny visas across the board? Empower a Gestapo-like entity to monitor every visa holder like something out of a bad John Grisham novel?

Best stat of all: $28 billion per year. That's the estimated price-tag to "seal the border" according to *Bloomberg Government*. I suspect the element of the population that clamors for a sealed border has no clue.

Bad Toe Cheese

October 13, 2014

Dick "Toesucker" Morris has a new book out titled "Power Grab." Although you may be inclined to think it's about an experience Dick had in a prison shower, it's actually an expose of how Obama is secretly executing a plan to turn the U.S. into a single-party (i.e. liberal Democratic) nation. Per the advertising, "In this blockbuster book, Morris exposes Obama's true agenda — to turn America into a banana republic ruled by one party." One heinous example? "Obama is secretly pushing legislation in different states that would effectively abolish the Electoral College — allowing liberal states to bind all their electoral votes together for the Democratic candidate." Of course, this same legislation would allow conservative states to bind all their votes together for Republican candidates – but that doesn't help Dick's case.

Here's Obama's plan, per Dick Toesucker:

- Pushing radical immigration plans that will tip the delicate political balance in favor of the Democrats in crucial states and in national elections.
- How this new "health" law helps create a permanent government recipient class who will vote Democratic time and again.

- Gaining more control over private business by granting the EPA global governance in the name of climate change, affecting every aspect of our lives.
- Blocking energy independence, thereby slowing economic growth and breeding more dependency.
- Gutting welfare reform and keeping millions on the dole.
- Turning over regulation of the Internet to the United Nations.

Never mind that Obama has presided over the biggest exodus of illegal immigrants ever, and that domestic oil production is at a 25-year high while foreign oil imports are at a 17-year low such that production exceeded net imports in 2013 for the first time since 1995, and that the biggest moochers of the government tit reside in Red states, not in Obama's treasured base. Morris rails full-speed against Obama's fiendish attempts to alter the status quo in which:

- Republicans own the House of Representatives (234 to 201) with no near-term chance of a change due to gerrymandering and voting restrictions.
- Republican governors run 29 of the 50 states.
- Republicans completely own the legislatures of 27 states versus 18 for the Democrats. The rest are split.
- The Supreme Court is made up of 5 Republican-nominated Justices. The Court has had a majority of Republicans since 1995.

In other words, Obama wants to set up single-party hegemony where one already exists. Damn him!

Fear of Flying

October 19, 2014

With another case of Ebola recently confirmed in the United States, the number of infected people on American soil jumped 50 percent to three victims, thus advancing the deadly disease into a full-blown pandemic. And coupled with the surprising (well, maybe not) ineptitude of the CDC, it's no wonder calls to ban flights into the U.S. from countries known to harbor the virulent virus (Liberia, Senegal, Sierra Leone) have grown apace. A petition on WhiteHouse.gov titled "Immediately stop all incoming flights from Liberia and other West African countries where the Ebola virus is present" calls on the Obama Administration to "wise up and immediately stop all flights to and from the United States and Liberia and any other West African country where Ebola has been found until this epidemic is over."

That's right: "Stop the Flights" is the new slogan of the panicky princes on the political tightrope. But consider this: The first person not under quarantine to arrive in the U.S. carrying Ebola – Thomas Eric Duncan – flew from Monrovia, Liberia to Dallas, Texas by way of Brussels, Belgium. No doubt travelers from all over Europe connected in Brussels along with Duncan. Should we "wise up" and stop all flights from West Africa, even those that connect through other cities? If the U.S. did bar all direct flights in from the Ebola zone (possibly a violation of international treaties covering transportation, but so what – desperate times call for desperate measures), people will simply board connecting flights of which there are many. Suppose you're hanging around in Dakar, Senegal with a desire to travel to the New York region to visit relatives, attend a conference, or just come home. Here are just some of the flight options:

- Turkish Airlines (stops in Istanbul)
- Iberia Airlines (stops in Madrid)
- Brussels Airlines (yeah, stops in Brussels)
- Air France (stops in Paris)
- Delta (stops in Paris, then in Amsterdam)
- TAP Portugal (stops in Lisbon)
- Royal Air Moroc (stops in Casablanca, but you might need to see Rick to procure letters of transit signed by Charles de Gaulle.)

Given that Air France alone runs about 50 flights a week from Charles De Gaulle Airport to JFK, a complete moratorium on allowing entry to travelers who may have comingled with the sick and dying in Africa would be a monumentally difficult and disruptive exercise with little likelihood of solving the problem. Calling for a travel ban, as such political luminaries as John Boehner have done, and as was done in the 1980s during the AIDS crisis, will likely get stronger as elections approach, but the cooler heads say it won't amount to much. Better to focus on containing the outbreak in West Africa, developing cures and vaccines, and improving hospital procedures here.

Still, I expect greater not lesser agitation to "stop the flights." But if the number of stricken Americans breaks into the hundreds, don't be surprised if other countries ban flights that originate here. And expect John McCain and Lindsay Graham to demand airstrikes in retaliation.

What Mitzi Saidel Wrought

October 19, 2014

As the proprietor of The Comedy Store in 1972 in West Hollywood, Mitzi Saidel was an instrumental force in the success of numerous stand-up comedians who performed there early in their careers, including Robin Williams, Jay Leno, David Letterman, Sam Kinison, Richard Belzer and Jim Carrey. She also had an outsized hand in the inexplicable rise of a complete buffoon who should never have gone further than assistant manager at White Castle: Pauly Shore.

Pauly Shore is perhaps most notable for the moronic movies in which he's appeared, many of late where Shore was cast as himself – presumably so as not to stretch him too much artistically. One particularly crappy movie was 1992's "Encino Man" in which Pauly plays the role he always plays – the annoying, laid-back, stoner-skater-dude. "Encino Man" scored a lowly 16 percent on Rotten Tomatoes, certifying it as junk. The consensus of critics of the film: "Whether or not it works for you will largely be determined by your tolerance for Pauly Shore."

Pauly Shore was in nearby Woodstock, NY this week for the annual Woodstock Film Festival to shill for his latest project, a documentary called "Pauly Shore Stands Alone." Once again, a movie in which he "plays" himself. According to the WFF press release, "The film is a true-life road documentary that follows him as he performs in obscure towns throughout Wisconsin while dealing with his personal life back home." Sounds to me like a bad reality TV show that should run at 3 AM somewhere around channel 600.

So how was it that Mitzi Saidel came to advance the career of a patently untalented clown? She married comedian Sammy Shore and gave birth to one Paul Montgomery Shore. Nepotism – can't beat it with a stick.

Have You or a Loved One Been Injured?

October 22, 2014

A staple of cable television advertising is the legal profession's call to action for viewers suffering from the side-effects of popular drugs and common surgical procedures to rise up and get litigious. Mesothelioma has long been a stalwart malady for ambulance-chasing law firms to bloviate over. So have problems associated with AndroGel, Risperdal, Stryker Hip Replacements, Vaginal Meshes, and NuvaRings. Even Skechers toning shoes haven't escaped the wrath of the personal injury lawyers.

And then just the other day I caught yet another TV ad denouncing the evils of a commonly used product: "Just for Men" hair dye – a product that's been on the market *since 1987*. Apparently, some vain dudes applied the hair coloring concoction and wound up with rashes, blisters, chemical burns and cordovan-colored sideburns. It should be noted that the warning label on "Just For Men" says that some users may experience "rapidly spreading skin rash, dizziness, faintness, difficulty breathing, shortness of breath, tightness of chest, hives or swelling to eyes/face, blistering of skin or scalp weeping, seek immediate medical attention." (Shit – did they plagiarize this from a pack of Lucky Strikes?)

Yet despite the dire warnings some guys chose to slather the goo on their heads and faces just so they could acquire that virile Keith Hernandez/Walt Frazier look.

Anyway, immediately following the recruitment ad for "Just for Men" sufferers came an ad extolling the virtues of a new drug called "Osphena" which is targeted at menopausal women who find sex painful (no, it's not a pill the husband takes to improve his technique.) According to the ad, Osphena enables a number

of wonderful things, including promoting the growth of vaginal tissue. How could anything go wrong with that?

Needless to say, the side effects include some scary shit: stroke, blood clots, and cancer of the lining of the uterus. Within five years expect to see one long string of advertisements from the personal injury law industry calling for Osphena sufferers to line up and have their cases assessed. Millions of dollars of compensation will be at stake, and that's just covering the men who will accidentally take Osphena and become hermaphrodites.

Just Obeying Orders in Armonk

October 22, 2014

IBM's stock just tumbled $20 per share to $163 in the two days since poor third quarter results were announced, shaving billions off the company's market capitalization. Much has since been written about weaknesses in the company's product line, delays in getting into new markets, and of course, the troubles behind IBM's long-stated goal of achieving $20 earnings per share by the end of next year – a plan dubbed "Roadmap 2015" (internally known by some disgruntled IBMers as "Roadkill 2015.")

Now, IBM CEO Ginni Rometty has formally abandoned the Roadmap which most observers considered a distraction from the fundamentals. Many reporters and analysts exclaimed, "it's about time," as most sentient beings recognized long ago that IBM was performing some questionable stunts of financial engineering (as opposed to growing the business) to make the goal. But one thing that caught my attention in the reporting was the way the writers seemed to give a pass to Rometty for the ill-conceived Roadmap.

Andrew Ross Sorkin, *New York Times*: "To be fair, Ms. Rometty has been following a goal set by her predecessor, Samuel J. Palmisano, to return $20 a share to stockholders by 2015."

Julie Bort, *Business Insider*. "As part of IBM's disappointing quarterly earnings, she (Rometty) said the company is not going to hit $20 earnings per share in 2015, as IBM has been promising for years. This wasn't a promise made by Rometty, but by her predecessor, Sam Palmisano, a couple of years before Rometty took the helm in 2012.

ReCode. "The promise of 2015 — one that Rometty inherited from her predecessor Sam Palmisano — is looking more difficult and unlikely every quarter."

David Grossman, **Stifel Nicolaus**, "I don't think it's fair to put it all on her. She inherited the roadmap and a business that takes a long time to turn around."

Jessica Menton *International Business Times* "Rometty is clearly in the hot seat, but is working hard with the hand she was dealt."

The hand she was dealt?? Do these "industry experts" not recall that when previous CEO Sam Palmisano introduced "Roadmap 2015" five years ago, the senior leadership team – the people certainly placed into conclave by Palmisano to help develop the Roadmap – included Ginni Rometty who held the title of Senior Vice President and Group Executive Sales, Marketing and Strategy?

Strategist Ginni Rometty may eventually work things out at IBM, but no one should see her as an innocent bystander who was unfairly shafted by her predecessor. She was a co-architect of the Roadmap that she has now, thankfully, disowned. As an aside, I wonder if the decision to drop the plan was motivated by an acknowledgement that it was counter-productive for the company, or found to be mathematically impossible to achieve.

Pablo Picasso Never Got Called an Asshole

October 27, 2014

"He was only five foot three but girls could not resist his stare – Pablo Picasso never got called an asshole." This declaration by Jonathan Richman on the seminal 1972 album "The Modern Lovers" could not be truer today as seemingly dozens of museums and galleries trip over one another to display and (ultimately) auction off the Cubist master's works, both famous and obscure. Consider this sampling of current and near-future Picassorgasms:

- From October 31 to January 10 the Pace Gallery will show "Picasso & Jacqueline: The Evolution of Style," a presentation of Picasso's devotion to his muse and (later) wife Jacqueline Roque, and his homage to Henri Matisse. According to Pace, "The exhibition begins in 1954 when the 73-year old Picasso started living with the 27-year old Jacqueline. That year also marked the death of Matisse, an early rival and later friend of Picasso, who had been the only living artist that Picasso considered his equal. In an unprecedented burst of creativity, Picasso put forth scores of paintings and drawings."
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art through February 16 will be showing "Cubism: The Leonard A. Lauder Collection" which represents a rich assortment of pieces by the essential Cubists: Georges Braque, Juan Gris, Fernand Léger, and, of course, Pablo Picasso whose works make up more than 40 percent of the exhibition. Lauder, a son of make-up magnate Estée Lauder, amassed a formidable collection which he donated to the Met in 2013.

- "Picasso and the Camera," curated by John Richardson and running from October 28 through January 3 at the Gagosian Gallery "explores how Picasso used photography not only as a source of inspiration, but as an integral part of his studio practice. Spanning sixty years, this show will provide an unprecedented survey of his unique relationship with the camera." Imagine had he lived long enough to buy a GoPro.
- Employing the somewhat tedious device of putting works of art from different artists "side-by-side," the Dali Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida will exhibit a collection of works by Picasso and Salvador Dali from November 8 to February 16 (which then moves to Barcelona.) Consisting of over 80 pieces, the exhibit, "Picasso/Dali Dali/Picasso" "shows how these artists were shaped by the currents of their time." The juxtaposition of these two strikes me as somewhat odd. Dali considered Picasso's works *adefesios esperpentos* (monstrosities), arguing that "Picasso, who is afraid of everything, went in for the ugly because he was afraid of" being conventional. Maybe the curator of "Picasso/Dali Dali/Picasso" wanted to get edgy, but more than likely, packaged the two together to maximize ticket sales.
- On November 3, Sotheby's will be running an auction in their New York offices titled "Picasso Through the Eyes of a Connoisseur." Available for bidding are drawings, linoleum cuts, painted plates and vases, terra cottas and gold medallions – 119 lots in all – ranging from low estimates of a few thousand to upper bounds of several hundred thousand dollars. Given that Picasso's "La

Rêve" ($155 million), "Nude, Green Leaves and Bust" ($106 million) and "Garçon à la pipe" ($104 million) are among the most expensive paintings ever purchased, one can only imagine that the Sotheby's gig represents some pretty trifle works in Pablo's oeuvre.

- Finally, I noticed that on October 28 the Phillips Gallery is auctioning off among other works, Haring's "Untitled 1-5 (The Fertility Suite,)" a set of five colorful screen-prints signed, dated `83` and numbered 7/100 in pencil. The estimate for the set is $120,000-$180,000. In a Haring bull market, I have a feeling the winner is going to pay a lot more.

By the way, going on the block at Phillips alongside the five Haring works are 33 Picasso pieces. Damn, you just can't swing a dead cat without hitting something fashioned by the man who never got called an asshole.

The New Senate (Minority) Majority

November 6, 2014

Once again, in the immortal words of Homer Simpson, "When are people going to learn… democracy doesn't work."

In an American biennial tradition this week, a fraction of eligible voters trudged to the polls to cast votes to select candidates for all type and flavor of political office, and to give thumbs up or down on dozens of ballot initiatives (my favorite was question #2 in New York which asked whether the state should amend its constitution to allow the legislature to bypass printing millions of pages of documents on paper and use instead some new-fangled thing-a-ma-jig called "digital technology.")

Anyway, the big, big, big news was that the Republicans took

back control of the U.S. Senate, grabbing enough seats from timid Democrats to build a 53-seat majority. Every committee seat will be chaired by a Republican, and the Majority Leader will undoubtedly become Mitch "The Turtle" McConnell. Republicans cheered; Democrats moaned. The American public had spoken!

But in all the excitement no one seemed to notice one salient fact. The 53 Republicans (many from states with small populations) represent 140.8 million Americans, out of a total population of 308.7 million (using 2010 Census data).

In other words, the 53 percent of the Senate that is Republican represents 45.6 percent of the people. Only in America (and maybe Myanmar) does such "democracy" compute.

This Week in Big Numbers

November 13, 2014

Art and the Insider Trader

The works of Twentieth-Century sculptor Alberto Giacometti are certified collectables hovering about in the same rarefied strata as Wassily Kandinsky, Egon Schiele and Willem De Kooning. Born in 1901 in Switzerland, Giacometti moved to Paris to study sculpture with an associate of Rodin in 1922, a period when the art world was undergoing radical transformation. Over time his style evolved toward depictions of the human body in super-elongated form, among the most famous being "Walking Man I," a life-sized bronze of a man seemingly determined to press ahead. This trophy sculpture was sold at auction in 2010 for $104 million – by far a record for the artist who died in 1966.

Now, this week in big numbers, another Giacometti has just sold for nine figures at auction – this time it's Chariot depicting a woman in signature elongated style standing atop a simple

two-wheeled vehicle resembling a garden cart. The buyer: none other than billionaire hedge-fund manager Steven A. Cohen whose company, SAC Capital Advisors has been a bit under the weather lately. A steady stream of damning evidence has emerged over several years that suggests the fantastic returns delivered by SAC Capital to its highfalutin clients were just a tiny bit assisted by some illegal insider trading. One of Cohen's star portfolio managers, Mathew Martoma began a nine year sentence a couple days ago for insider trading on positions with two pharmaceutical companies. His request for bail was denied. Other SAC employees have also been indicted, and the firm has coughed up $1.2 billion in penalties so far to atone for its rude behavior. Prosecutors called SAC Capital "a breeding ground for inside trading activity" and "a veritable magnet for market cheaters."

Luckily however, thanks to cleverly insulating himself from the rampant wrong-doing buzzing all around him, Steve-O is out and about, free to throw money around buying famous art, and running Point72 Asset Management, the remnants of SAC Capital which is currently devoted to managing the wealth of just one client: billionaire Steve Cohen.

Given that Martoma's in prison while his former boss Steve enjoys unalloyed freedom, one cannot blame him for wanting to shove the pointy sculpture up Cohen's ass.

Hamm Sandwiched in Divorce Court

A billion-dollar divorce settlement – now that's a big number. A couple days ago Oklahoma County District Judge Howard R. Haralson awarded the ex-wife of oilman Harold Hamm a tidy sum of $995 million, some of which will be transferred shortly, the rest coming in monthly installments of $7 million until she

gets the outstanding (in more ways than one) balance of $650 million. Hamm and his wife Sue Anne (who is 10 years his junior) were married for 26 years during which time he went from a net worth of only multi-millions to $14 billion after fortuitous investments in North Dakota shale, vaulting him into #24 on the Forbes plutocracy list. (Sue Anne has suddenly and coincidentally made the Forbes list of richest women.)

Two camps have emerged: those who argue Sue Ann is simply getting her fair share (and maybe not even that, as a billion is only 7 percent of Harold's holdings), and those who see patent unfairness in awarding an obscene sum to a person who probably never set foot on an oil-field and couldn't tell the difference between bitumen and isoparaffinic solvents. Harold himself called the settlement "fair" and I would agree. Look at the man. He's a bloated, corpuscular blob with the body-fat index of head cheese. Anyone who had to spend a quarter-century with such a specimen deserves whatever she can vacuum out.

All You Can Excrete Buffett

Warren Buffett – the investor once known as the "Oracle of Omaha" and who may soon become the "Numbskull of Nebraska" – has lost scads of money investing in old-world companies like Coca Cola and IBM. In the matter of a week or so, Buffett lost about a bil on Coke when the sugary drink maker's stock dropped 6 percent in one day and another 1.3 bil on IBM after the 100+ year old tech company swooned on a tumult of bad news.

Eighty-four-year-old Buffett, who prides himself on never putting money into businesses he doesn't understand, may be wishing he had joined the ranks of 21st Century investors who use modern tools like cellular telephones and pagers, and considered some companies younger than himself.

Still, at #2 on Forbes list with a net worth of $67 billion, Buffett losing a couple billion is like a bad day at the track for lesser mortals. I'm sure he still gets the best room at the Comfort Inn whenever he stops by Omaha.

A Wonderful Word

November 16, 2014

Solastalgia - the distress caused by environmental change.

When's it Gonna Happen?

November 20, 2014

Rev. Al Charlatan: Time to apologize

The New York Times did a front-page piece recently on the unpaid tax woes of Rev. Al Sharpton which he kind of rejected in an article the next day. But given Al's prevarications of the past it's hard not to believe that the holy man has long shirked his civic duties when it comes to paying his fair share. Although the article focused primarily on the unpaid tax burden – more than $4.5 million in current state and federal tax liens against him and his for-profit businesses according to records reviewed by the paper – the writer only briefly mentioned the judgment against him for his role in besmirching the reputation of Steven Pagones. I suspect most people have no idea who Pagones is, but if they're older than 40, they probably know the name Tawana Brawley.

Pagones was an innocent bystander in the path of Sharpton and his ambulance-chasing cohort of lawyers Vernon Mason and Alton Maddox. The threesome ginned up outrage over Brawley's claim that she had been sexually assaulted by several white men, including Pagones who was at the time an assistant DA for Duchess County, NY. Although the claims were horrifying, Brawley's story

quickly unraveled and it was soon dismissed as a sordid alibi for having left her house without permission to visit a friend. Nevertheless, Sharpton continued to support the fabrication well past its expiration date, making Pagones' life a misery. Pagones won his defamation suit, but the good Reverend never paid the $65 grand judgment against him (ultimately some Sharpton associates quietly settled the bill.)

And in the nearly thirty years since the case came to light, Sharpton has never admitted that he knew the Brawley story was a scam. In the 1989 book "Unholy Alliances: Working the Tawana Brawley Story" by Matt Taibbi and Anna Sims Phillips, the authors report on evidence that Sharpton nervously conceded privately that Tawana was lying, but felt that the frenzy was too hot to let it go.

So, when's it gonna happen? When is Rev. Al gonna publicly apologize to Pagones?

Muslims: Exhibit some proper outrage

Whenever you think things can't get more debased in the Middle East, leave it to some crazy Arabs to lower the bar another notch. This time the story is about two radical Palestinians who stormed a Synagogue in Jerusalem and killed four worshipers with knives, meat cleavers and a gun. They also killed a police officer in the struggle that ensued afterwards. Clearly the work of vicious, deluded psychopaths. Then after learning of the attack residents of the Gaza Strip broke out in celebration. Truly bizarre and not particularly helpful to the Muslim brand.

I read that a man named Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the first Muslim to be named a United Nations high commissioner for human rights pushed the UN Security Council to back efforts to

overturn what he termed ISIS's "ideology of violence." Al Hussein also said something important: "It is also disturbing how few to nonexistent have been the public demonstrations of anger in the Arab and Muslims worlds over the crimes being perpetrated." I couldn't agree more.

Muslims hate it when people stereotype them as terrorists, but when Islamic terror occurs you rarely hear broad condemnations from the moderates in the community.

When's it gonna happen? When will the millions of sane Muslims take the lead, throttle this scourge of radical religious craziness, and enable the "infidel" Westerners to withdraw from their space as they constantly demand?

Japan: Admit the "research" is bullshit

Being residents of a rocky collection of islands with little arable land, it's no surprise the Japanese people love to consume products of the sea. And that includes whale meat. The problem is, virtually every country in the world views the hunting and killing of the magnificent and endangered creatures a violation of humanitarian fundamentals. As such, the International Whaling Commission has banned the practice of hunting and killing whales – but like with most laws there are loopholes. The Commission makes exceptions for peoples such as Inuits who have a long heritage of hunting whales, and for government institutions conducting scientific research.

Japan has exploited the research loophole for years, and although the government there recently announced they would reduce their target kills, they still plan to waste about 4,000 whales over the next dozen years. That's better than the original plan to take nearly a thousand a year, but 4,000 is still a lot of whales that

need to die for the sake of "scientific research." When you think about it, why do any whales have to die in the pursuit of science? What scholarly findings have the Japanese uncovered over the many decades in which tens of thousands of whales and other sea mammals have been slaughtered? Where are the research papers?!

Not often mentioned is that after data have been collected from the kills, the leftover whale meat remarkably makes it into restaurants all across Japan. Which is after all the whole point of the high-seas expeditions. Clearly, Japan should stop hunting whales. But I also wish they would just come out and admit what everyone knows – the "scientific research" argument is pure bullshit.

When's it gonna happen?

Enforce the Law? How About Paying for It First.

November 22, 2014

As expected, the media are expending a great deal of ink, both real and virtual, on the appropriateness of Obama's executive order to halt the deportation of millions of immigrants who reside in the U.S. illegally. Obama's argument is that the "do-nothing" Congress has sat on a bill for 500+ days and, as their nickname suggests, did nothing. He says he had to act because no one else would, and although he acknowledges that only Congress can truly address the whole issue, his order has thoroughly pissed off the Republican opposition.

There is some merit to the Republican's argument which goes like this: Read the effing Constitution – Congress passes bills and they get signed into law (sometimes), and the President enforces them (always). They see the dynamic as equivalent to the cop on the beat – he's not there to question the wisdom of the laws, just

to enforce them. Of course, life in a country of 300 million people can inject a bit of nuance into the equation, but still – the general thesis stands.

One needs only to tune into one of the talking-head cable brands to hear what he or she wants to hear: Obama overstepped and should be sued/impeached/tarred & feathered; Obama is acting properly in the face of partisan obstruction; borders need to be secured before anything else can happen; people who mow our lawns and clean our hotel rooms should be treated with kindness; Obama is being pragmatics; Obama is a monarch.

I have no interest in debating issues that currently receive 24×7 coverage by such journalistic luminaries as Brian Kilmeade and Ed Schultz. But I do want to offer a thought that hasn't been addressed to any depth that I've observed.

Let's agree for the moment that a figure of authority (the President) is required by the Constitution to uphold the laws passed by Congress – and if he or she were to purposely refuse, it would constitute a breach of office. I would argue congruently that if another agent of authority (Congress) passed a law but refused to appropriate the funds to execute it completely, they too would be in breach of their obligations.

Imagine you work for a landscaping company. You are dispatched to a client's estate to mow the lawn, trim the hedges and weed-whack around the tennis court fence. Your boss sends you there with half the gas you need to do the job. Should you do nothing when you arrive, or would it be better to pick a job that can be done properly with the amount of gas you have available (e.g. mow the lawn but forego the weed-whacking)? In other words, should you use your cognitive abilities and optimize the job with the inadequate resources you've been assigned, or operate like a brainless nitwit and do nothing?

Laws here on the books basically call for the deportation of anyone caught in the country illegally – after appropriate due process of course, which involves legal hearings and other procedures. Now, the 2015 budget for Enforcement and Removal Operation within Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is $2.6 billion, or about $250 per illegal immigrant. Clearly this isn't anywhere near enough to enforce the law. The actual cost to completely deport a person is estimated to be closer to $12,500. So, I say to the Republicans: appropriate enough money to implement the law ($137.5 billion), or shut the fuck up about enforcing it.

Buffalo Thanks Professor Cuomo

November 22, 2014

Residents of Buffalo and the surrounding suburbs should be thankful they are governed by such a wise man in the form of Andrew Cuomo. As the beleaguered Buffalonians shoveled their roofs (!) and flirted with cardiac arrest, Professor Cuomo was there to explain it all to them. As reported in today's *New York Times*, he shared this wisdom to the ignorant masses before him. "There will be warming over the next couple of days. The warming will bring melting, the melting will bring water, the water will bring floods." Although he didn't reveal what the floods will bring (perhaps Buffalonians aren't yet advanced enough to handle the answer), Professor Cuomo provided insight that few had ever imagined.

Ralph Strunck of nearby Orchard Park, leaning on a snow-shovel beside a ten-foot high drift remarked, "Shit, I thought melting would bring radioactive lava, but now I'm relieved it's just water." Betty Tamponic of hard-hit Hamburg asked, "Melting? Isn't that something that happens in June? I don't understand."

Professor Cuomo's next stop is said to be Mount Sinai Hospital where he will identify that which is connected to the knee bone.

Cubism Uber Alles

November 28, 2014

A 1916 watercolor by Adolf Hitler titled "Altes Rathaus" went for $161,000 at auction last week. The 8 1/2 by 11-inch rendition of an old town hall in the colors of sands and slates, was accompanied by a bill of sale which certainly elevated the price. Too bad Hitler was painting standard streetscapes at a time when the artists in Europe were experimenting with Cubism and Dadaism. Had he applied his talents in a more daring direction, who knows what the world would look like today. Worst case scenario, Hitler the artist struggles (a different kind of Mein Kampf) and in a fit of frustration slices off his ear – which beats slicing up most of Europe.

You Must Remember This

November 28, 2014

The big news in the fine art world a couple weeks ago centered on the drubbing Sotheby's took at the hands of midtown auction house rival Christie's when the latter sold $853 million in contemporary art on November 12, after Sotheby's pulled down a mere $344 million the night before. As you might expect, top dollar went to works by must-have artists such as Andy Warhol, Cy Twombly, Mark Rothko, Jasper Johns, Gerhard Richter and Francis Bacon. At this point it has almost become wearisome to read about the eight- and nine-figure sums disgorged by hedge fund managers and secretive Arab sheiks for the works of a handful of anointed 20th century saints.

Which is why I found the recent auction of the piano featured in "Casablanca" more interesting than the sale of yet another

one of Warhol's Brillo boxes. Everyone who's seen "Casablanca" knows that the center of the universe is the piano that Sam plays every night in Rick's Café Americain. It's where Rick encounters his former lover Ilsa once again years after being dumped on a rainy train platform. It's where he hides the infamous letters of transit. It's the instrument that tinkles the painful notes as a drunken Rick observes "of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine."

And it's the cinematic trophy that some anonymous buyer picked up the other day for $3.4 million at Bonham's on New York's Madison Avenue. Not to be confused with a second piano that appeared momentarily in a flashback scene and which sold for $602,500 in 2012, this one is the real deal. This particular night of bidding was called "TCM Presents… There's No Place Like Hollywood" and featured nearly 400 artifacts from movies popular with millions.

Unlike auctions involving seminal works of art, a shindig like "TCM Presents… There's No Place Like Hollywood" can serve to excavate pleasant memories and rekindle interest in bygone eras by putting once-mundane but now totemic objects on the block for all to drool over.

Here are just a few of the lots that sold last Monday. Can you guess how much each went for? Place each lot into one of the following price ranges, and test your knowledge of the value of cinematic memorabilia: A) less than $1000, B) $1001 to $10,000, C) $10,001 to $100,000, and D) more than $100,000. Bonus question: which of these items went for more than $3 million? Answers at bottom.

1. A Dorothy "test" dress and pinafore from "The Wizard of Oz"
2. Moe Howard screenplay "Cactus Makes Perfect"
3. "The African Queen" poster
4. Script supervisor Meta Rebner's copy of the screenplay of "To Kill a Mockingbird"
5. The main entrance doors to Rick's Café Américain in "Casablanca"
6. Cowardly Lion costume from "The Wizard of Oz"
7. A Munchkin fiddler's jacket from "The Wizard of Oz"
8. A final shooting script to "Gone With the Wind," presented by David O. Selznick to the widow of screenwriter Sidney Howard
9. A Clark Gable riding jacket from "Gone With the Wind"
10. A Faye Dunaway dress from "The Towering Inferno"
11. Producer Albert Zugsmith's copy of the screenplay for "Touch of Evil"
12. A Spanish galleon miniature from the estate of Douglas Fairbanks
13. A fertility idol from "Raiders of the Lost Ark"
14. An early screenplay of "Mean Streets" signed by Martin Scorsese
15. Radio Raheem's boombox from "Do the Right Thing"
16. A pair of Charlton Heston pants from "Planet of the Apes" on a custom form
17. Aragorn's sword Andúril, made for Viggo Mortensen, from "Lord of the Rings: The Return of The King"
18. "Dr. No" (Japanese Poster)
19. A "robot squid" alien from "Men in Black II"
20. A final screenplay of "Private Benjamin"

Answers:

1) D – $245,000 2) B – $1,250 3) B – $3,750 4) C- $43,750 5) D – $115,000 6) **D – $3.07 million** 7) B – $10,000 8) C- $62,500 9) C- $50,000 10) B – $10,000 11) C – $10,625 12) C – $18,750 113) C – $16,250 14) B- $8,750 15) B – $9375 16) C – $12,500 17) D – $437,000 18) A – $875 19) C – $13,125 20) A – $687

Toasted Rice on the Side

December 2, 2014

Former Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice won a pyrrhic victory this week when a judge ruled that NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell improperly punished him twice for the same crime of violence against his fiancée (now wife) Janay. The judge got it right – the only reason Goodell punished Rice harshly with indefinite suspension was to mollify the outcry of the masses against the initial two-game suspension they perceived a mere slap on the wrist. It was almost certainly not because Goodell discovered some previously hidden film clip from inside an elevator of Rice clocking Janay, as the Commish lamely claimed.

As the assault happened inside a casino where cameras are installed every four feet everywhere, there is no chance the really incriminating footage could have evaded the NFL brass. (Besides – what more evidence do you need after you see a woman walk unaided into an elevator only to be dragged out unconscious 30 seconds later? Do you really need to witness the action inside the elevator before you can render a theory?)

In any event, it makes no difference for Rice. He's toast. After a lackluster 2013 season and an abandoned 2014, his desirability is limited. But even if a team could get him at the league minimum,

they'd pass. I have to believe that the NFL owners leaned on Goodell in the first place to suspend Rice indefinitely – as the highly lucrative but suddenly vulnerable sport business had been taking a beating at the time in the press over inaction on concussions, player misbehavior against women, and other damaging news that was hurting the brand. They have no appetite now to re-raise the ugly specter of coddling an abuser all over again.

Laying down an indefinite suspension was the NFL's way of announcing to the women of the world: "we get it." No way will the other owners allow any team to bring new slime upon the NFL franchise by reinstating Rice. And I don't care about the precedents set by felons-turned-cherubs like Michael Vick and Donté Stallworth. Rice's situation is different – he smacked a woman exactly at a time when the NFL needed desperately regain the approval of women. Rice upset the narrative. He ain't never coming back.

Americans Confuse the CIA with the Boy Scouts

December 10, 2014

It's easy to understand the public outrage directed at the CIA now that the summary Senate report has come out debunking claims the agency made about their "enhanced interrogation techniques," but is there really anyone who considers the findings new news? Regardless of whether or not you think the CIA was justified in using techniques that amounted to or were damn close to torture, does it surprise you that the agency would implement them, try to hide evidence of the behavior, and seek to excoriate anyone who called them out on it? Why all the sudden hand wringing?

During the period of the mid-2000s after 9/11 when the first clues of torture began to surface, the administration at the time bent over backwards to assure people that the U.S. didn't resort to such illegal tactics. It really was Sophism at its finest: the U.S. doesn't perform torture because whatever it is we do that looks like torture isn't posted on our recognized list of torturous activities. Just like purple isn't a color because it's not on our list of recognized colors. Anyone alive at the time who was paying attention knew the U.S. had been engaging in torture. After all, why would so many detainees languish for years in Guantanamo prison without charges if solid cases could be made to prosecute them? Obviously, prosecutors know their cases are losers because guilt is based on evidence extracted from torture – evidence that would be deemed inadmissible in court. And to those who claim water-boarding, mock execution, "rectal feeding" and going without sleep for 59 consecutive hours doesn't cross the line – man up and give one of them a try. Sean Hannity famously offered himself up to be water-boarded for charity on April 2, 2009; the world still awaits this coward's moment under the bucket.

Furthermore, it was not a stretch of imagination at the time to suspect that many if not most of the detainees knew little or nothing of value to share about secret terrorist plots, or the whereabouts of key insurgent leaders. Many of these miscreants were rounded up in the fog of war, indiscriminately netted like a stray dolphin in a tuna hunt; some had no business being in custody as they didn't know a goddamned thing of value. Nonetheless, these insurgents were forced to disgorge volumes of worthless "intelligence." I wouldn't be surprised if the CIA chased after a pistachio vendor in Dallas because a water-boarded Gitmo detainee ratted him out for shooting Kennedy from the grassy knoll in 1963. Sad, really. Billions spent for such shit.

I've read no reports identifying what I believe is the underlying cause of all this: revenge. Immediately after 9/11 – after the shock had partially subsided – there was widespread agitation for some sort of retaliation. I bet if a poll had been taken on 9/12, half the nation would have approved a nuclear attack on Afghanistan. Unlike Pearl Harbor though, in which a sovereign nation was the clear perpetrator, the stateless Al Qaeda attacks defied simple counter-attack. The fact that the world's most vaunted military took a whole fucking month to respond led Americans to feel short-changed. We wanted revenge.

So, I figure the CIA and the military (think Abu Ghraib) – absent the ability to deliver a swift, fatal blow to Al Qaeda – took on an unstated obligation to at least offer a salve of sorts. Imagine having the architect of 9/11 whimpering like a child in a cold, brightly-lit cell. Easy to see how that situation could spin off the rails. And so it began. Totally predictable in my view – which is why I think the "I'm shocked, shocked!" response to the Senate report is bogus.

Now consider how, in the 2000s, art imitated life in the form of the TV show "24" in which season after season the hero, Jack Bauer moved the plot forward by treating an evil-doer to "enhanced interrogation techniques." And luckily for Jack, his perpetrators met a very high-bar.

1. There was an irrefutable, imminent threat of mass-destruction
2. The perpetrator in custody knew intimate details of said threat
3. And the perp had special knowledge that could stop the threat

4. Jack somehow knew for certain that the perp in custody possessed the special knowledge
5. And somehow the perp knew that Jack knew that he possessed the special knowledge
6. Finally, the perp understood that Jack had been granted unimpeded permission to shove his nuts down his throat, after first roasting them on a Weber grill.

As anyone with half a brain understands, these scenarios simply do not exist in real life. Yet the public still expects its intelligence community to save the day just like Jack Bauer (preferably inside of 24 hours.) Considering some of Jack's best torture performances, it's easy to see why this is so. Just a few samples:

- Jack confronts former CTU agent Nina Myers who conveniently knows exactly how to stop a nuclear bomb from detonating.
- Jack interrogates his own brother while his father watches. Gruesome.
- In the "Day 5" season, Jack interrogates a husband and wife as they sit terrified on the sofa. The husband, Henderson, is dirty, but he won't talk – even faced with Jack's threats. Jack suddenly shoots the wife above the kneecap. She screams in pain, and when Henderson refuses to cooperate Jack informs him that the next shot will put his wife in a wheelchair for the rest of her life.
- Jack Bauer also staged the mock execution of a terrorist's family, cut open the stomach of a bad guy to retrieve a smart card with secret data, and in the "Day 1" season threatened to shove a long, twisted towel down the throat of a man suspected of financing Serbian

> terrorism. Hell, in the "Day 2" season, the President of the United States himself authorizes the Secret Service to torture answers out of his own head of the NSA. Watching the black president interrogate the suffering old white guy was truly surreal.

Any wonder why torture and its tacit acceptance flourished in the greatest democracy in history?

Foxcatcher in the Rye

December 13, 2014

One day in late January 1996 my mother called to tell me anxiously that she had just seen a TV news report on the murder of a Coach Dave Schultz somewhere in southeast Pennsylvania. As my brother, Dave Schultz, was a coach on the road at a swim meet in Pennsylvania at the time, you can understand my mother's emotional roller-coaster ride. It turns out the deceased was not my brother but a 1984 Olympic Wrestling Gold Medalist of the same name who had been subsequently hired by the extremely wealthy and creepy John E. DuPont to help coach the U.S. wrestling team (dubbed "Team Foxcatcher" after the name of DuPont's estate) that would compete in the 1988 Olympics and other world class events. The star of the team for a few years until he wearied of DuPont's overbearing demeanor was Dave's younger brother Mark who had also won 1984 Olympic gold in a different weight class.

Because of the name-confusion angle, I took a passing interest in the crime: John Éleuthère DuPont, an heir to the E. I. DuPont de Nemours and Company (aka. DuPont) fortune that had been built up from a small firm supplying gun powder during the American Revolution to a global conglomerate running the largest chemical company in the world, had casually shot Schultz point

blank thrice killing him. Perhaps drug-addled at the time, DuPont seemed to have been motivated to do evil by the perception that Schultz hadn't been properly appreciative of the millionaire's largesse. John DuPont went to jail and died there in 2010.

I saw the new movie "Foxcatcher" the other day and was duly impressed by the acting, directing and cinematography; and although the story as told has some jagged edges, I fully expect Oscar nominations in multiple categories. Directed by Bennett Miller, the film immediately establishes the beauty and grace of free-style wrestling as a kind of kinetic dance, a paso doble maybe. Channing Tatum and Mark Ruffalo who play Mark and Dave Schultz obviously underwent intensive training to pull off the wrestling scenes. And the brotherly interaction between them comes off as genuine.

Tension between the brothers begins when DuPont reaches out first to Mark to join his team, then quickly leans on Mark to convince Dave to join as well – a request he cannot fulfill. Used to buying whatever he wants, DuPont is flummoxed when he learns Dave isn't interested. Mark wants badly to measure up to DuPont's high bar, and feels he let his benefactor down when Dave the family man declines to join his brother.

As played by TV and film comedian Steve Carell, John DuPont is a tortured middle-aged man, uncomfortable in his own skin, who despite his enormous wealth desires desperately to prove to his aged mother that he can accomplish great things on his own. Carell's hesitant elocution and awkward physical mannerisms are mesmerizing to watch.

When I first saw ads for the movie, I had no idea that the actor playing DuPont was Carell, given the prosthetic nose he wears, and the serious nature of the film itself – but his performance is powerful and convincing. Commenting on the casting of TV's

bumbling Michael Scott of "The Office" as the villain, Miller said, "I think all comedians are dark."

Given the movie is based on the tragic Schultz story, the looming murder comes at an obvious time in the film and consumes very little screen time, which is fine. The more important element is the treatment of the complex relationships: between the brothers, between DuPont and his mother, and between Mark and DuPont.

As I mentioned, there are some jagged edges in the plot. Mark Schultz leaves the Foxcatcher compound shortly after the 1988 Olympics; Dave is murdered in 1996. The movie makes it seem as though mere months elapse between the two events. Where did Mark go? What did he do? The movie closes with Mark entering a cage to fight bare-knuckle against a burly Russian. How did he come to be a side-show attraction? Is this scene even relevant?

There has been debate as to who is the main character of "Foxcatcher." It would seem to be Mark Schultz, as he is the one who goes through the usual movie arc; but the director compels the audience to pay more attention to DuPont. The movie studio, in pushing for a Best Actor nomination for Carell, implicitly sees DuPont as the main character, but the story really seems to be more about Mark Schultz. Which is why it seems odd that he drives off the compound and out of the movie. Anyway, I read that the original cut of the movie exceeded four hours – so undoubtedly in the effort to shrink it to a length tolerable to antsy viewers context was lost. Nevertheless, "Foxcatcher" is highly recommended.

Flying the Fiendish Skies

December 17, 2014

In a recent story almost too juicy to be true, the pampered daughter of the chairman of Korean Air Lines – herself a vice-president of the company and the executive in charge of in-flight

hospitality – threw a hissy fit onboard a jet en route from New York to Incheon over a mis-handled bag of macadamia nuts. Sunk comfortably into a cushy seat in first class, Cho Hyun-ah (aka. Heather Cho) was presented with an unopened bag of the macadamias instead of receiving them arranged on a plate per airline guidelines. It seems Queen Heather forced the chief flight attendant to kneel before her and apologize, and then ordered the pilot to return to the jetway (!) so that the offending attendant could be kicked off the flight. (Who gives a shit about delaying for an hour or so the 300+ paying customers, most of whom have to endure the 14-hour flight stuffed into a child's booster seat; justice must be meted out swiftly in the house of Cho.)

For behaving like the spoiled kid she is, Cho lost the high-level job she no doubt acquired through rank nepotism that is common in Korean industry. Adding insult to injury, her father, Chairman Cho Yang-ho noted, "I failed to raise her properly."

Oceans of real and virtual ink were spilled in the aftermath ridiculing the entire affair – some of it bemoaning the episode as another example of a continuing decline of civility aboard the world's leading airlines.

Which reminded me of perhaps the most notorious (and noxious) non-lethal in-flight disruption of all time – the strange and wondrous case of one Gerald Finneran, an executive traveling back to the U.S. on a United Airlines flight from Argentina in October of 1995. Rather than explain the circumstances, I refer you to the contemporary AP report:

> NEW YORK (AP) — An investment banker is accused of assaulting a flight attendant and defecating on a food-service cart during a drunken rampage on a United Airlines flight. Gerard B. Finneran, 58, managing director of the Trust Company

> of the West, pleaded innocent Monday to federal charges of assaulting and intimidating an attendant and interfering with a flight crew. He was freed on $100,000 bail. Federal authorities said the Greenwich, Conn., executive started pouring drinks on himself during a Buenos Aires-to-New York flight that began Friday. When flight attendants tried to cut him off, he told one attendant he would "bust (his) …," according to court papers. He allegedly shoved an attendant into a seat. Later, Finneran was spotted with his pants down, defecating on the food cart, authorities said. He used linen napkins as toilet paper. John Finnegan, Finneran's lawyer, said his client "vigorously denies the allegations." One passenger on the plane was President Mario Alberto Soares of Portugal, who was on his way to the United Nation's 50th anniversary celebration.

My favorite part – the dude "vigorously denies the allegations." Talk about delusion. Is his defense based on every passenger and flight attendant on board collectively dreaming up this mile-high assault-by-cagadota? But at least Finneran didn't bitch about getting his nuts in a bag. Gerald Finneran died at age 67 almost exactly 10 years ago – December 29, 2004 – of Alzheimer's disease. Or was it terminal embarrassment? Curiously, his obituary left out the "dump on the food cart" portion of his legacy.

A Boy and His Toy

December 22, 2014

Marco Rubio, the junior senator from Florida who has held the august office for almost four whole years, is perhaps the leading American authority on Cuba. Hell, he may even be the greatest living expert on the planet. For one thing, Rubio has a "worldview" – just ask the reporters at *The New York Times* who noted in a recent article, "Mr. Rubio has long been a hawk when

it comes to dealing with countries like China, Iran and Venezuela — a worldview shaped by his experiences as the child of Cuban immigrants."

That's right. Marco Rubio who was soiling his diapers when men were debating Cuban foreign policy on the tenth anniversary of the Bay of Pigs fiasco has somehow become the leading expert in the field – simply by virtue of having Cuban-born parents. His parents, by the way, emigrated to the U.S. in 1956. That would be *before* Fidel Castro overthrew the corrupt Batista government and instituted a Marxist regime whose evil tendencies formed the animus of so many Cubans now living in America (actually, just Florida). Presumably, sensing that his "worldview" might be insufficiently breathtaking with such ancestral heritage, Rubio reported in 2011 that his parents actually bolted Cuba in 1959 after Castro took over – falsely portraying them as heroic anti-Communist refugees instead of ordinary people just looking to reap economic advantages offered in America.

Several news outlets quickly outed Rubio for his embellishment, including *The Washington Post* which reported as follows: "Rubio said his accounts have been based on family lore. 'I'm going off the oral history of my family,' he said. 'All of these documents and passports are not things that I carried around with me.'"

In other words, we're expected to believe that one of the greatest living historians either didn't know when Castro took over Cuba, or was unable (absent documents) to remember the year his parents left the motherland. This is preposterous, of course – no doubt a liberal media plot to undermine Professor Rubio's credentials and stifle his aspirations to be the next president.

Obama announced the other day that the U.S., after enforcing more than 50 futile years' worth of devastating embargoes against its neighbor 90 miles to the south, would begin a shift toward

normalizing relations. That would include freer movement of money, less-restricted travel, and increased trade. Almost everyone paying attention said, "About effing time." But not Marco Rubio. He came out blasting. "This president is the single worst negotiator we have had in the White House in my lifetime," Rubio said. In his lifetime! I suppose Rubio was too young to remember a president named Reagan (after all, Marco wasn't old enough to drive then) who once negotiated a sweet deal with our enemy Iran to illegally fund a bunch of cutthroat "Contras" in Nicaragua.

Still, I think we all can agree that a politician with the "worldview" and mini-decades of experience of a Marco Rubio must be included in the pantheon of influential historians with Herodotus, Boccaccio and Samuel Eliot Morrison. (Now if he would only get a decent haircut.)

Politician : Asshole :: E : Mc^2

December 31, 2014

Grimm's Fairy Tale

All year long New York Republican representative Michael Grimm has defended himself vigorously against corruption charges. So vigorously in fact that the statesman from Staten Island threatened on live TV to throw a reporter off a balcony when said reporter had the temerity to ask a question about ongoing investigations into Grimm's dealings. Grimm's stridency increased markedly after April 28 when he was charged with a 20-count indictment by federal authorities for fraud, federal tax evasion, and perjury. He pressed on with his reelection campaign and kept his seat in November – only to plead guilty after all in December to tax evasion. More than likely, Grimm was guilty of a plethora of bad acts including paying workers under the table,

faking revenues to underpay taxes, and hiring illegal immigrants to work in his chain restaurant named Healthalicious.

After initially fantasizing that he might be able to hang around the Capitol until sentencing, tough-guy Grimm decided in the end to resign his seat. Now thanks to Grimm's avarice, Staten Islanders get to experience yet another election cycle just months after they thought the nightmare was over.

New Year's White Sale – Steve Scalise Shops for Sheets

When Congress reconvenes next month, the Republican Whip – the third highest ranking position behind Speaker of the House (John Boner of Ohio) and Majority Leader (Kevin McCarthy of California) – will be Steve Scalise of Louisiana. Scalise was chosen for this plum assignment in part because the GOP wanted a representative from the deep South in the top three.

Knowing the kinds of miscreants who lope about in this part of the country, it should have come as no surprise to the leadership that Scalise might have a few unsavory skeletons in his closet. And sure enough, just days before the GOP is to stride triumphantly into Washington to save the nation, it has come to light that Steve Scalise made a rousing speech in 2002 to the European-American Unity and Rights Organization (EURO) – a white supremacist group affiliated with noted Klansman and fellow Louisianan David Duke.

Like all good politicians, Scalise quickly cast himself as the victim once the news of his ill-advised speech surfaced. "For anyone to suggest that I was involved with a group like that is insulting and ludicrous." Poor Steve – insulted by ludicrous suggestions. Given that David Duke has been a racist publicity hound since he ran for local office in 1975, there's no way Scalise

would be unfamiliar with him and EURO. Both Scalise and Duke served in Louisiana's House of Representatives, although not at the same time.

And no sooner had Scalise's PR team insisted this meeting with EURO was a one-off event, none other than David Duke himself came out to make it clear he has met with ramblin' Steve on several occasions. Luckily Scalise has Steve King of Iowa on his side. King harkened to the Bible to clarify things, saying, "Jesus dined with tax collectors and sinners," thereby adding "Son of God" to Scalise's duties as Majority Whip.

Silver Lining (His Pockets)

Assembly Leader Sheldon Silver is the embodiment of everything that's wrong with New York State government which is undoubtedly the least cost-effective in the nation. Some other state may, however unlikely, suffer a more incompetent and corrupt group, but for certain no state comes close to spending the sums New Yorkers are forced to for such unabashedly crappy service. And the patriarch of perfidy, mendacity and outright sleaze in the NY legislature is Shelly Silver.

New York State is essentially an oligarchy run by just three people: the governor, the state senate leader and the assembly leader – derisively dubbed the "three men in a room." By using a combination of numerous threats and perks available to them, the latter two browbeat the other 211 members of the legislature to vote the way "leadership" edicts. Silver is a master of this technique, and it's why he's been the head of dysfunction for 20 years. Theoretically any assemblyman can seek out the leadership position, but for anyone who even hints of it, punishment from Silver comes swiftly: loss of committee memberships, reduction

in "bonus" pay, slashed staff. (Consider this: The NY Assembly consists of 37 standing committees, 27 subcommittees, 13 legislative commissions and 17 task forces; a total of 94 places for the 150 assemblymen to go hide and collect extra salary.)

Perhaps it is this invulnerability that has protected Silver over the decades from serious investigation whenever seemingly nefarious behavior has been detected. Perhaps it has even emboldened him. Here are just a few of the scandals that have ensnared friends and colleagues but have left Smelly Shelly untouched: Silver's buddy William Rapfogel (who is also married to Silver's chief of staff, Judy Rapfogel), was arrested and charged with stealing $1 million from the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty. Rapfogel denied it but then quieted down after investigators found $400K in cash stashed in his house.

Fellow assemblyman and serial groper Vito Lopez was accused by many women of inappropriate touching and other grotesque behavior. To make the problem go away, Silver approved a secret $103,080 payout of hush money to two sexual-harassment victims. But the scheme was leaked, further tarnishing the Smelly one, if such a thing was possible. Now, finally, Silver may be in a kind of trouble he can't weasel his way out of. New York State legislators are officially part-time employees pulling down six figures (plus decent per diem) for obeying the orders of their fearless leaders. This part-time status allows the august solons to engage in second jobs that no doubt pay even more – and yet they are not required to reveal the exact amounts of compensation, or even cite what they do to earn the money. This obfuscation lends to the reasonable impression that outside income is being paid to influence politicians' decisions.

Silver has for years listed additional income in excess of half-a-mil a year as a law partner at the powerful firm of Weitz &

Luxembourg. There is little or no record in the public domain of what Shelly has done for such lavish pay. Still, given the lameness of laws governing those who govern in New York, such opaqueness is not illegal. But the other day, Federal Prosecutor Preet Bharara served notice that evidence points to additional salary that Shelly has not disclosed – and that is a serious problem. It seems another law firm, Goldberg & Iryami P.C., has been paying Shelly for a decade. Given that Silver has no experience in the type of work Goldberg & Iryami do, it makes one wonder why the firm would retain him – other than to buy influence.

Isn't it long past time that someone else got a chance to ruin New York? Shelly has proven he has the superior aptitude for it. Let's hope Bharara entices Shelly to retire to a comfortable cell so someone else can give "Assembly Leadership" a try.

Alibaba's Minister of Propaganda

January 2, 2015

Chinese internet company Alibaba is a certified giant whose September IPO raised $25 billion, valuing the firm in the neighborhood of $250 billion. Chairman and founder of Alibaba, Jack Ma, has a modest vision for his company: "to build an e-commerce ecosystem that allows consumers and businesses to do all aspects of business online. I want to create one million jobs, change China's social and economic environment and make it the largest Internet market in the world."

Jack Ma talks a lot about respect and integrity. As part of the IPO application, Ma wrote of his priorities, "Customers first, employees second, and shareholders third" – which is precisely the opposite of what most American firms consider important. Business reporters have fallen all over themselves to lionize Ma as a transformational leader who wants to make the world

a better place. So, it strikes me as profoundly odd that Alibaba would hire Jim Wilkinson to be head of international corporate communications.

Not familiar with Jim Wilkinson? How about Private Jessica Lynch and Corporal Pat Tillman – two unfortunate pawns in Wilkinson's attempts to white-wash bad news coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan when he was a PR flak in the George W. Bush administration. Holding the title of White House deputy director of communications, a more apt description would have been Minister of Propaganda.

Wilkinson started out working for Republican congressman Dick Armey and acting as spokesman for the National Republican Congressional Committee. It seems Wilkinson's career path has wended its way through slime ever since. He helped promote the bogus story that Al Gore had said he invented the internet. He worked on the Florida recount after the 2000 election. He was a comms person for the likes of Donald Rumsfeld, Condocheeza Rice and Hank Paulson. A protégé of noted mudslingers Ed Gillespie and Karl Rove, it's no wonder Wilkinson turned out the way he did. The sad tales surrounding Jessica Lynch's phony fire-fight and subsequent "rescue" from an Iraqi prison, and Tillman's heroic engagement with the "enemy" which left him dead of gunshot wounds to the head fired by a fellow Army Ranger are well known (I truly hope). In both cases (and probably other lesser-known instances) Wilkinson was there to stage-manage the press and purposefully spread misinformation and outright fabrications. In the case of Lynch, Wilkinson had a hand in delaying her "rescue" a day so that a film crew could be assembled to record the daring mission. This was shortly after the start of the Iraq War which was supposed to be a "cakewalk" where U.S. soldiers would be "greeted as liberators." But instead of flowers thrown

their way, they encountered fierce resistance. The Bush administration needed to change the subject, divert attention. Enter Jim Wilkinson. Apparently eager to be duped, *The Washington Post* took the exclusive scoop directly from Wilkinson lock-stock-n-barrel and ran it on the front page, reporting how Private Lynch had bravely shot at the enemy until her gun ran out of ammo. (In fact, she never fired a shot as her poorly maintained rifle jammed.) TV news followed the lead, happy to have live footage of the "rescue" provided by Wilkinson's crack video team. (In fact, Lynch was not a POW but rather a patient being cared for in an Iraqi hospital; the Iraqi medical team tried to drive her back to the Americans, but abandoned the effort when U.S. troops fired on their ambulance.)

All in all – Diversion Accomplished!

Of course, Wilkinson knew it was impossible to keep the real story from coming out eventually, but as Minister of Propaganda he also knew that by the time reality was restored forgetful Americans would have moved on to something else.

That Alibaba would hire such a miscreant to be a comms executive speaks volumes about their actual intentions on the world's commercial stage. Bigger than Walmart, Alibaba will wield enormous power. Be very afraid.

Where are the Great Golf Movies?

January 5, 2015

New York Times's columnist Richard Sandomir yesterday published his list of his top ten favorite sports-oriented movies. Heading the list: Martin Scorsese's "Raging Bull" – the visceral story of boxer Jake LaMotta, starring Robert DeNiro in the title role. I have no serious issue with any of the choices Sandomir made which include three boxing films, five baseball films, and one each representing basketball and billiards ("The Hustler").

It's a bit strange perhaps that no movie about America's current national pastime, football, made Sandomir's list ("Any Given Sunday," "Brian's Song," "The Longest Yard"), or horseracing ("Seabiscuit"), or dodgeball ("Dodge Ball: A True Underdog Story" – just kidding.) But it is entirely understandable why no movie about golf would make the list; although a great deal of heritage, legend, personality, drama, courage, gripping victory and painful defeat have been associated with the sport that rose up from the pastures of Scotland centuries ago, nearly every Hollywood attempt has been sullied by lame humor and preposterous plots.

Given the extraordinary potential material to work with, Hollywood prefers to use golf as a vehicle to highlight the exploits of retards, sociopaths and consummate losers. Knowing that most Hollywood moguls undoubtedly cut deals on the golf course and at least modestly revere the legacy of the game, why hasn't a movie come forward built upon the painful near-wins of Greg Norman, or the tragedy of Tiger Woods, or the struggles of Native American Notah Begay, or the charmed life and untimely death of Payne Stewart?

Ask yourself: Do any of these movies strike you as top contenders for best sports movie?

"Happy Gilmore" - Professional idiot Adam Sandler plays a mediocre hockey player who parlays his one skill – a wicked slapshot – into a viable career on the professional golf tour. This makes sense since the game of golf is all about long tee shots; the short game, putting, sand shots – none of this comes into play in real life. Furthermore, the movie compels Gilmore to make it big in golf only because his poor old granny needs financial help following a blitzkrieg on her meager wealth from the evil IRS. Happy enters some penny-ante local golf tournament, and by

virtue of winning this walk-on event, becomes eligible to join the PGA pro tour. If this were a movie about baseball, Happy would throw a ball 100 feet into a garbage can and thereby sign with the NY Yankees as their new short stop. Not to spoil things, but do you think Happy Gilmore vanquishes the arrogant pro, wins the big tournament, saves his granny's house and gets the girl?

"Tin Cup" - Kevin Costner loves to make sports flicks: "Bull Durham," "Field of Dreams," "McFarland, USA," "Draft Day," "For the Love of the Game." It comes as no surprise then that Costner would take the lead in a golf movie about an underdog driving-range manager named Roy McAvoy who magically makes it into the U.S. Open – and goes all the way to play in the final grouping on Sunday. Again, the plot line is absurd – analogous to a stall-mucker parlaying his shit-shoveling skills into becoming the winning jockey in the Kentucky Derby. In a classic case of *deus-ex-machina*, Roy is sought out by a female psychiatrist named Molly Griswold (Renee Russo) for golfing lessons. She also happens to be the main squeeze of an asshole pro golfer who enjoys fucking with Roy's innate inability to avoid stupid dares.

A born loser, Roy decides to get psychiatric help, swapping roles to become Molly's patient seeking counseling. Needless to say, once he qualifies for the Open, Roy makes good – even after shooting an 83 on the first day of the tournament – a score that is all but impossible to recover from. (Golf Digest estimates the chances of a person qualifying for the U.S. Open at .8% – and that's after the field has been culled to about 10,000 scratch players.) Anyway, on the second day of the tournament, Roy cards a 62, which in real life would be a U.S. Open record going back a mere 100 years. Of course, in the end, Roy's gotta be Roy – a douchbag driving range manager who'd rather stay true to himself than win a golf major. So, when faced with a challenging shot on

the 72nd and final hole of the tournament with the victory in the balance, Roy continues to hit shot after futile shot into a creek crossing the fairway, instead of laying up close to the green as is his option– just to show he's a… Purist? Fighter? Authentic Guy? Fucking Asshole?

Although he steals the girl from his nemesis (a foregone conclusion in Hollywood), it is nonsensical that coming so close to victory (and therefore rewarded subsequently with huge money and the right to compete for more on the tour), Roy would kick it all to the curb. But that's what passes for plot in Hollywood.

"Caddyshack" - Many golfers for some reason revere "Caddyshack" for its humorous spot-on portrayal of the caste systems that pervades the hoity-toity country club scene: snobby members versus the blue-collars that keep the system running for their betters. Most fans point out the buffoonery of Rodney Dangerfield and the oddball behavior of greenskeeper Bill Murray as the best performances. Someone I knew had actually memorized a particularly long line from the movie recited by Murray – the kind of thing people do when they've decided a movie has reached cult status. (The line involves Murray telling of the time he caddied for the Dalai Lama in Tibet: "So, I'm on the first tee with him. I give him the driver. He hauls off and whacks one – big hitter, the Lama – long, into a ten-thousand-foot crevasse, right at the base of this glacier. Do you know what the Lama says? Gunga galunga… gunga, gunga-lagunga. So, we finish the eighteenth and he's gonna stiff me. And I say, "Hey, Lama, hey, how about a little something, you know, for the effort, you know." And he says, 'Oh, uh, there won't be any money, but when you die, on your deathbed, you will receive total consciousness.' So, I got that goin' for me, which is nice.")

Anyway, Dangerfield and Murray aside, the movie is really not that funny. Ted Knight does a passable job, but Chevy Chase, as always, is boring. The caddies' antics are moronic. Lots of the so-called humor derives from poop, puke and an animated gopher. And the romance subplot is trite and predictable. And as expected, the caddy who would suck Ted's kneecaps for a scholarship decides in the end to stick to his principles and compete against him in a round of golf on his own terms. Uninspired at best.

"Caddyshack II" - A "Caddyshack" clone with a different cast of B-list players. Same basic plot absent any of the characters that gave the original a semblance of humor. Earning an abysmal four percent on Rotten Tomatoes, "Caddyshack II" received some blistering reviews:

Los Angeles Times - "On and on they come — Chevy Chase, Dan Aykroyd, Jackie Mason, Dyan Cannon, Randy Quaid — all trying to crack us up, all failing miserably."

People Magazine - "Chevy Chase, as a socialite who sells the club to Mason, and Dan Aykroyd, as a psycho ex-Marine hired by Stack to dispatch his enemy, are pitifully awful."

Mountain Xpress - "The original was no great shakes, but this is beyond bad."

"The Legend of Bagger Vance" - Finally, a serious movie about golf. Directed by Robert Redford and starring Matt Damon, Will Smith and Charlize Theron, "Bagger Vance" is the Depression-era story of a charismatic caddy and the broken-down golfer to whom he imparts the secret of the perfect golf swing. (Any guess as to who plays the caddy?) Damon the golfer, a shell-shocked veteran of World War I who has lost his swing, gets to play in a tournament against none other than Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen – two of the best golfers of the time (and perhaps ever). If done deftly, the circumstances leading to the opportunity

as well as the competition with the pros itself could have been good.

Unfortunately, Redford feels compelled to turn a contest of golf into a heavy-laden metaphor for life itself, just as he did to baseball in his better movie "The Natural." You see, Vance (Will Smith) is no ordinary bagger – he's an other-worldly clairvoyant who is more of a swami than a caddy. In fact, the name "Bagger Vance" is said to have been derived from the Hindu god Krishna who appears as the mentor Bhagavan in a story that was supposedly the basis for the movie. *New Yorker Magazine* called the film, "Another lusciously produced, emotionally clammy Redford enterprise — forced, phony mythmaking filled with tinged sunsets and full moons." If you watch "The Legend of Bagger Vance," you'll likely find the end of the match contrived and the conclusion of the movie a treacly mess.

"The Caddy" - Jerry Lewis. Need I say more?

Every Silver Lining has a Cloud

January 8, 2015

A generation ago, citizens of the United States first learned about a group called "OPEC" and they didn't like what they saw. Although it had lurched around unnoticed for a decade, by 1973 the oil cartel made up mostly of Middle East countries awash in crude decided to punish America for its support of Israel in their war against Arab neighbors. Who knows what OPEC had in mind at the time, but the embargo they set in place must have awakened the sheiks to recognize the extent of the power they could wield. Quality of life in America took a hit after gasoline prices spiked in 1973, and again in 1979 following the Iranian hostage outrage. It became Gospel: high gas prices were the root of all economic evil.

Just a few years ago high oil prices continued to be the bête noire of financial analysts. In a *Washington Post* article published in March 2011 and titled "Higher oil prices threaten global economy" the reporters stated the obvious: "Higher oil prices are slowing global economic growth, and the impact is likely to spread in coming months. Oil is now trading at more than $100 a barrel, suggesting the gap will widen in coming months." They went on to quote an expert: "Jay Bryson, global economist at Wells Fargo Securities, said he has cut his U.S. growth estimate for the January-March period to 2.9 percent, down from about 3.3 percent last month. Much of that reduction is due to the impact of higher oil and gas prices."

A fairly lucid analysis in a January 2013 report titled "Ten Reasons Why High Oil Prices are a Problem" lays out how expensive oil intrudes negatively upon the price of consumer goods, housing prices, business expenses, trade deficits, etc.

Okay – So we've been inculcated for 40 years that high oil prices are baaaaad. Now we've finally entered a period of marked and sustained reduction in oil prices. Bring on the good news!

Wait, what? Apparently, we live in a world that must find the cloud behind every silver lining. In an interesting twist, the same outlet that published "Ten Reasons Why High Oil Prices are a Problem" in 2013 just put out an article titled "Ten Reasons Why a Severe Drop in Oil Prices is a Problem." Bastards!

Orange You Glad?

January 8, 2014

This past Tuesday, the state of Florida became the 36th in the nation to legalize same-sex marriage. It was only six years ago that 62 percent of the population there voted to amend their constitution to ban the practice. And further back in 1977, Florida

unwittingly became a national battle-ground over gay rights when a former Miss Oklahoma and Florida Citrus Commission shill named Anita Bryant started a crusade against the homosexual lifestyle, croaking, "If gays are granted rights, next we'll have to give rights to prostitutes and to people who sleep with St. Bernards and to nail biters." (Nail biters? Please tell me the ban on nail-biter marriage is still in the law of the land!)

Like many ill-conceived campaigns, Bryant's served mostly to rally more people to the cause and provide comedians with oceans of material. Boycotts of oranges became popular, and many gay bars shit-canned screwdrivers in favor of an eponymous drink called the "Anita Bryant" – vodka and apple juice, which must have taken real sacrifice on the part of the imbibers of the cocktail. Soon the Florida Citrus Commission and Anita parted ways. When she divorced in 1980, her fundamentalist buddies headed for the hills. Bankruptcy followed.

I remember reading an article in college in which Anita explained why God hates gay men. It's because "the male homosexual eats another man's sperm. Sperm is the most concentrated form of blood. The homosexual is eating life." Now, as I have heard, there may be more than a few women who do likewise, yet I've never heard Anita rail against the sisterhood of freethinking givers of fellatio.

Breaking Balls

January 24, 2015

Patriots' quarterback Tom Brady on the subject of his balls. (All quotes guaranteed verbatim.)

"Our equipment guys do a great job of **breaking the balls** in. they have a process that they go through. When I pick those **balls out**, at that point to me they're perfect. I don't want anyone

touching the balls after that. I don't want anyone **rubbing them**, putting any air in them, taking any air out. To me **those balls are perfect** and that's what I expect when I show up on the field."

"You go through that process of **breaking the balls** in and getting comfortable with them. Of course, I **choose the balls** that I want to use for the game and that's what I expect to go out on the playing field with."

"I'm not **squeezing the balls**. That's not part of my process. I grab it, I feel the lace, I feel the leather."

"Everybody has a preference. **Some guys like them round and some guys like them thin**. Some guys **like them tacky**. Some guys like them brand new. **Some guys like old balls**. They're all different. And it's leather."

RIP Kim Fowley

January 24, 2015

I first discovered the skanky works of Kim Fowley in the mid-1970s through my nascent interest in the seminal chick punk band, The Runaways. A local band I hung around with at that time occasionally opened for The Runaways. I went to a couple shows before the band became (in)famous in places like Fredonia, NY, and bought the eponymous first album – an energetic disk produced by Fowley. Hearing about Fowley and his off-the-wall antics compelled me to seek out and collect his earlier obscure albums – which in a pre-internet, pre-eBay world was not an easy task.

I managed to acquire several Fowley albums over the years, none of which were particularly endearing. But I loved to pull them out once in a while just to ogle the covers. My favorite was 1968's "Outrageous" featuring a chained and leathered Fowley lying in cesspool about to be whipped by a naked woman standing

calf-deep in murky effluence. If you've never heard of Kim Fowley, you may still know of such acts as Paul Revere and the Raiders, Gene Vincent, Blue Cheer, The Seeds, Alice Cooper, and (yes) Helen Reddy. Fowley produced works for these and many others, dating from 1959 to 2014. In 2012 he wrote a memoir/poetry collection titled "Lord of Garbage" which sums things up nicely. Here is an excerpt describing what happened after his grandmother decided to send him back to his mother alone on a train at the age of three.

"I rode from Oregon, alone, to Los Angeles, roped into a seat, pissing and shitting the whole way. On the way to the train station I saw a truck full of turkeys on their way to being slaughtered. It was raining and the turkeys knew they were about to get murdered, and they were crying and whimpering in this open truck. And they all looked at me, and I looked at them, and I knew I was doomed for life. I was deformed. I was being sent back alone, a thousand miles away, alone in the middle of a fucking war. And it was at that moment as the age of three, that I formulated the idea for a song I would one day write, a song that Jimi Hendrix recorded in 1967 called Fluffy Turkeys."

Is any of that true? Who really knows? Kim Fowley passed away January 15 leaving behind a legacy of debauchery and, perhaps, genius. Such assessments are in the eye and ear of the beholder. But it's for certain he exercised an influence on rock n roll that is under-appreciated.

New York: The Vampire State

January 29, 2015

Last week's arrest of New York State Assembly Speaker Sheldon ("Smelly Shelly") Silver served as yet another reminder that the "Vampire State" harbors the worst state legislature in the

United States. Using a metric involving level of corruption times cost to maintain the whole population of cretinous politicians, and their staffs and perks divided by the value of the output of their "work product", the New York State legislature is by far the most useless and least cost-effective body in America. And maybe the Third World for that matter.

New Yorkers from the skyscraper canyons of Manhattan, to the mountains of snow in Buffalo, to the empty badlands of the Southern Tier, to the tony beaches of the Hamptons – all can attest to the ill effects of incompetence upon their lives: nation's highest taxes, largest income inequality, most punitive property taxes, highest incarceration costs per inmate (2X the US mean), highest public school spending per pupil , and some pretty shitty infrastructure (27% of bridges are functionally obsolete, 23% of major roads are in poor condition, 399 dams are rated high hazard.)

Silver's long-running stint as one of Albany's "Three Men in a Room" – derided rightly as the epitome of undemocratic colloquy and decision-making – demonstrated how much the system in New York had atrophied. The head of the Dems was able for 20 years to wield outsized power to buttress his leadership position and in the process inflate his worth to miscreants (lawyers, mainly) looking to game the system with monetary stipends and referral fees.

But let's not allow the travails of Smelly Shelly to make us forget the full depth of the New York State government bench when it comes to corruption and cronyism. The compendium of flagrant violators of the public trust is legion. And I'm not even talking about the assholes who now or once embarrassed New York in Washington, D.C. – sub-humans like Anthony Weiner (sexting addict,) Eric Massa (digs "snorkeling",) Charlie Rangel (censured, but never gone) and Michael Grimm (hothead felon.)

Rather than present a depressing list of the best of the worst, let me make the process more fun by challenging your knowledge of the state of New York State governmental despair that plagues every citizen. Let's play a game: match the New York State politician/criminal with the crime (all incidents occurred only since 2000).

The Criminals

1. State Assemblyman William Boyland, Jr. (D)
2. State Senator and Majority Leader Joseph Bruno (R)
3. State Senator Efrain Gonzalez (D)
4. State Representative Diane Gordon (D)
5. State Senator Carl Kruger (D)
6. State Senator Vincent Leibell (R)
7. State Representative Brian McLaughlin (D)
8. State Senator Hiram Monserrate (D)
9. State Health Commissioner Antonia Novello (R)
10. State Senator Kevin S. Parker (D)
11. State Supreme Court Justice Gerald Phillip (D)
12. State Assemblyman William Scarborough (D)
13. State Supreme Court Justice Thomas J. Spargo (R)
14. Governor Eliot "The Shitz" Spitzer (D)
15. State Comptroller Alan Hevesi (D)

The Crimes

A. Pled guilty to costing the taxpayers $48,000 in overtime by making staff carry out personal chores, such as picking up dry cleaning.
B. Resigned and pled guilty to charges of corruption and bribery.

C. Arrested for soliciting bribes.
D. Expelled in connection with a misdemeanor assault conviction against his girlfriend.
E. Sentenced to 7 years in prison, followed by two years supervised release, after pleading guilty to two conspiracy counts and two wire fraud counts.
F. Charged with corruption.
G. Pled guilty to felony bribery, tax evasion, and obstruction of justice charges related to $43,000 in cash kickbacks taken.
H. Convicted of attempted extortion and soliciting a bribe. Sentenced to 27 months in prison.
I. Arrested for criminal mischief and assault after chasing a photographer.
J. Indicted on eight counts of corruption, including mail and wire fraud. Convicted on two counts of wire fraud.
K. Sentenced to ten years in prison for racketeering.
L. Convicted of accepting bribes to manipulate the outcomes of divorce proceedings.
M. Indicted on charges for helping a contractor obtain a $2 million parcel of land from the city if he would build a house in return.
N. Pled guilty to corruption charges surrounding a "pay to play" scheme regarding the New York State Pension Fund, and was sentenced to 1–4 years.
O. aka. Client 9, resigned amid threats of impeachment by state lawmakers.

Answers

1-C; 2-J; 3-E; 4-M; 5-B; 6-G; 7-K; 8-D; 9-A; 10-I; 11-L; 12-F; 13-H; 14-O; 15-N

Who Said it?

February 13, 2015

In the course of reading a lengthy article about a famous dead American leader, I came to learn he wrote the following observations about Jews. Can you guess who he was? (Hint: It wasn't Henry Ford who was also a big-time anti-Semite.)

- "The greatest stinking bunch of humanity I have ever seen."
- "These people do not understand toilets and refuse to use them except as repositories for tin cans, garbage, and refuse."
- "Lost to all decency."
- "Lower than animals."

The Mystery anti-Semite is… General George Patton.

The Art of Destroying Art

March 2, 2015

"Without art, the crudeness of reality would make the world unbearable." George Bernard Shaw.

Undeterred by opposition and strident in their belief that God wants them to commit wanton and mindless mass murder, the lunatics who comprise ISIS have used their unfettered access to the lawless region in Syria and Iraq to run roughshod over a populace they presumably seek to govern in a would-be Caliphate. ISIS has shown they are competent in sawing off heads and immolating live human beings, but they possess no capability to deliver services and protect their "citizens" – and never will. Even the Taliban in Afghanistan ran a number of valuable civil programs, but ISIS is so far off the reservation they have no

future. If their actions were not so ugly and heinous, the concept of ISIS running Mayberry let alone an enclave of millions would be hilarious. Unable to produce necessary commodities, engage in global commerce, and sign treaties, the only way ISIS could accomplish anything but mayhem is if the entire world set the way-back machine to 700 AD and re-entered the Dark Ages – which is what I suspect is the quixotic goal of ISIS.

I'm confident that ISIS will eventually cross a line that will draw in an overwhelming obliterating force made up of most regional countries as well as Western forces, but in the meantime, ISIS continues to demonstrate their complete disregard for humanity.

Since taking over Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, ISIS has ensured that life there resembles a season in hell. And just the other day they posted a video of their apelike rank and file pounding and smashing rare and important artworks stored and exhibited in the Mosul Museum and the Nirgal Gate. Showing complete disregard for their own history and heritage, ISIS has destroyed ancient relics that go back 2,800 years in some cases. As usual, the reasoning is that the artifacts on display pre-date the Prophet and are therefore un-Islamic, and that the figures are nothing more than idols that infidels once worshipped.

I recall when the Taliban in May 2001 – in a harbinger of more destruction to come a few months later on September 11 – blew up monumental ancient statues of Buddha under the logic that objects of living beings were forbidden by the Koran. The Buddhas of Bamiyan were unfortunately situated on Afghanistan soil under the thumb of fanatics, and despite efforts to dissuade the Taliban to reconsider they proceeded to inflict mortal damage. Museums from around the world had offered to spend millions to move the huge statues, but the Taliban leaders refused. In

fact, they castigated the West for willingness to spend money on preserving statues but not to help poor Afghans, as if the pitiful conditions of the country were the fault of anyone but the Taliban. The mentality is clear – destruction and demolition are the path to purity (plus it's easier to break stuff than to build stuff.)

The amazing thing is that these ancient artifacts that ISIS and their ilk have destroyed in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere survived centuries of warfare and turmoil – largely because even the most evil of marauding invaders recognized their importance. And therein lies a fundamental difference between oppressive regimes of the past that found it possible to rule for centuries, and the visionless ISIS that must peter out by the end of the decade.

I said earlier that I was confident ISIS would be obliterated. They offer no sustainable proposition to the people they subjugate, so to stay relevant and sustain the ability to continue terror by recruiting soft-headed jihadists, ISIS must ratchet up the perversion. And although the countermeasures from the better equipped opponents hasn't succeeded as yet, ISIS will make a step that truly threatens the region (and maybe the world) at which point existential instinct will force a conclusion once and for all. Cut off from access to ransom money, oil, food, weapons, and recruits, ISIS will crumble. And because they created nothing to be left behind, ISIS will cease to exist – even as a memory.

RIP Leonard Nimoy

March 2, 2015

Forever to be known as Mr. Spock for his three-year stint portraying the half-Human/half-Vulcan Science Officer on TV's Star Trek (and his reprisals of the role in a half-dozen motion pictures in the film franchise), Leonard Nimoy succumbed to lung disease the other day at age 83. Despite the title of his 1975

autobiography – "I Am Not Spock" – Nimoy actually acknowledged the positive impact the role had on his life, and after many people who probably didn't read the book took offense to what they perceived as Nimoy's ungratefulness at having risen to stardom thanks to being Mr. Spock, Nimoy's next autobiography was titled, "I Am Spock."

No doubt much will be written and broadcast in the coming days about the exotic-looking Nimoy, so there is little to compel me to dive deeper. But at least one instance of Nimoy cheese must be highlighted as a service to readers who never had the opportunity to view it and cringe: "The Ballad of Bilbo Baggins." Check it out, if you dare.

People Do the Darnedest Things

March 8, 2015

Some people strive so hard to establish and maintain a certain persona for themselves or the countries they lead, only to do the darnedest things that nullify it all.

Hillary Clinton has yearned to be the President of the United States for at least as long as her husband occupied the office. She meticulously crafted a plan for her journey to the top spot by expanding her scope as First Lady, moving to New York to become a U.S. Senator, running and losing against Obama, taking as a consolation prize a significant cabinet position as Secretary of State, and finally bailing back into private life to make some speeches and put the arm on would-be donors. Clearly, she is gearing up for 2016.

Her experiences dating from the 1980s in Arkansas and the 1990s in cold Washington illustrated the depths that some cohort will descend to express their hatred of all things Clinton:

Whitewater pseudo-scandal, Vince Foster suicide (or did Bill have him murdered?), Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky bullshit, Benghazi mania, et.al. As a result, many people (and not just the Clinton-haters) are uneasy about Hillary Clinton. All it would take to shake up her inevitability is the appearance (real or inflated) of some sleazy dealings. But in 2015, Hillary is fully aware of that.

So, what does Hillary do? Hands a mallet to her detractors with which to beat her silly in the form of an off-the-books email server set-up by which her correspondence as Secretary of State was not archived as the law requires. Just what the opposition ordered.

North Korea. Predictable in their unpredictability, North Korea's leaders do the darnedest things. While running a backward feudal empire that also wields nuclear weapons, the North's Kim dynasty pontificates often about the wonders all will enjoy once the Korean peninsula is reunified. Although it's difficult to imagine how that would work out, reunification of the rich South and the deprived North could theoretically bring about benefits like those derived after East and West Germany reunited. A statement from the North last summer read, "The north and the south should specify the reunification proposals by way of federation and confederation and make efforts to realize them and thus actively promote co-existence, co-prosperity and common interests."

Last week in Seoul, as U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, Mark Lippert dined at a large breakfast gathering before delivering a speech at the Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation, a known psychopath emerged from the crowd and sliced the Ambassador's face and arm with a ten-inch knife. While being subdued, the attacker, Kim Ki-jong denounced the U.S. for interfering with reconciliation efforts. Maybe that's true, but making

the point at a meeting where achieving reconciliation is the topic of the day seems off-key. The world was outraged at the blatant violence.

So, what does North Korea do? Applauds the act as "the knife attack of justice." That's right, Kim Jong-un – reinforce for the rest of the world that your country should be reunited with the Pacific Ocean instead.

Mitch "The Turtle" McConnell. For years, the Senate Minority Leader has wanted to be the Senate Majority Leader, and thanks to a Republican blowout in 2014 he got his wish. No longer consigned to the back of the bus, able only to gin up filibusters all day long, The Turtle finally got to be the adult in the chamber. Republicans under his leadership would restore order and impel progress, and in doing so, cement a long period of GOP domination in Congress.

So, what does The Turtle do? Calls on all state governors to defy the Environmental Protection Agency's proposed rules limiting greenhouse gas emissions from power plants, appearing to be less of a leader and more of a shill for the shrinking coal industry in his home state of Kentucky. Mitch McConnell Senate Majority Leader or Boonville town councilman?

Saudi Arabia. Remember when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, and fearing the Iraqis would soon roll into Saudi Arabia, King Fahd came running, undies soiled, to America for protection? Operation Desert Shield was the result and thanks to the commitment of military leadership from the U.S. worth billions, the rich and coddled Saudis lived another day to sell us oil at inflated prices. Then came September 11, 2001 when 19 fanatic hijackers – 15 of whom were Saudi citizen – crashed four

commercial planes and murdered thousands. Even during this period of immense tragedy following the world's worst terrorist conspiracy, the Saudis were able to call upon the strange friendship of the Bush Administration to allow a couple dozen members of Bin Laden's family to fly out of the U.S. at a time when every American citizen was grounded.

And today, the Saudis continue to rely on the U.S. for protection against perceived enemies in places like Iran and Yemen. For decades, Americans have been good friends to Saudi Arabia.

So, what does Saudi Arabia do? Bestows one of their highest awards – the King Faisal International Prize – on a despicable anti-American lecturer, Zakir Naik, who says that "the Jews" control America, apostates can be killed, the United States is the world's "biggest terrorist" and that the 9/11 attacks were an "inside job" by President George W. Bush. (The same President seen holding hands with his best bud Saudi Prince Abdullah.) Memo to Saudis: calm down and take a long hot shower in some light crude. And you'd better get used to it… before you know it, that's all it'll be good for.

Chris Christie. Former Federal Prosecutor and current Governor of New Jersey Chris Christie likes to portray himself as a tough cookie (except when he's fawning over Bruce Springsteen like a pre-pubescent girl infatuated with Leif Garrett). He's fought against "pork-barrel projects" like the tunnel under the Hudson River that would have brought interstate rail commuting into the 21st century. He's played a brilliant bait-and-switch on the public unions in which he got them to pay more in return for increased government contribution into the pension fund – a promise he brazenly broke. And just the other day on March 5 Christie proposed a $44 million cut in the snow removal budget for the

state, which happened to coincide with a major winter storm causing NJ Transit to suspend service on the western end of its busiest rail line. Hell, Christie is a waddling, talking icon of fiscal fortitude when it comes to getting the best deal for New Jerseyans – and for burnishing his image on the national stage.

So, what does Chris do? He shoves aside his attorney general who is negotiating a multi-billion-dollar payment from Exxon to atone for contaminating more than 1,500 acres of NJ public land, and instead personally settles with Exxon for a mere $250 million (less than 3 days of profit for the oil behemoth.) Would he have been so generous had the settlement been transacted in donuts?

RIP Ernie Hemmings

March 12, 2015

What red-blooded, all-American adolescent boy in the 1970s didn't lust after an automobile that could simultaneously secure the attention of the most desired girl in high-school, distinguish its owner from his loser peers, and cure acne? If the young man was a fan of Golden Earring ("Radar Love") or Blue Oyster Cult ("Dominance and Submission") he might then desire a sky-blue GTO with an elegantly broad spoiler wing and a 455 HO engine. If he fancied himself a future prince of the world, then maybe a Maserati Mistral or a Lotus Esprit would salve the urge. An artsy fellow? Perhaps an early 1960s Avanti would do the trick.

Unfortunately, around that time, most of the world's automobile makers were spewing out dreck in the form of Chrysler K-cars and Dodge Omni's. Although little inspiration could be found motoring about the highways and by-ways of America, there was always Hemming's Motor News to stir the imagination. Hemming's, a thick monthly magazine full of classified ads for any and every car ever conceived was the collector's bible. Out of my

price range when I was a teenager, I used to thumb through each edition to ogle some of the most voluptuous and exotic cars on the market, thinking to myself, "One day, after I write that best-selling novel, I'm gonna own that XKE."

The founder of *Hemming's Motor News*, Ernie Hemmings died the other day at age 88, Sixty-one years after first publishing the hefty catalog. The heir to his father's auto parts store, Ernie started the magazine to broker parts between hobbyists. It eventually became in Ernie's words, "the world's largest antique, classic, vintage, muscle, street rod and special interest auto marketplace."

This Week in Insanity

March 27, 2015

Craziness presents itself in manifest ways every day, so for most people the parade of insanity marching by blends quietly into the background noise of life's routines. Then again, sometimes the extent of sheer shock and folly rises to a level that cannot be ignored. This week has seen its share of true insanity.

Crash and Burn. A pilot for Lufthansa subsidiary Germanwings apparently suffering from some undisclosed illness locked the cabin door of his Airbus 320 while the captain stepped out to relieve himself. The pilot, Andreas Lubitz, then proceeded to program in a landing sequence that would take the jet from cruising altitude to 96 feet, setting it on a collision course for the French Alps. Post 9/11, after Al Qaeda terrorists gained easy access to the cockpit, all commercial airlines installed more rigorous locking systems on the doors leading to the controls. One such locking setting makes it impossible for anyone outside the cockpit to enter – even with the secret access code. I suppose this is designed to thwart terrorists from forcing someone under threat of decapitation outside the cockpit who may know the code from

opening the door. But like all systems designed by humans, unintended consequences are inevitably built in.

Maybe a ground-based system could be devised to overtake a plane in distress, much the way drone pilots maneuver pilot-less planes. But again, unintended consequences abound – most prominently in the form of hackers. Although frightening, any time a person climbs aboard a transportation vehicle – plane, train, taxi, cruise ship, amusement park ride – they commit their lives to the operator. The same can be said for most any service: restaurants where a sociopath could introduce a poison, doctors who could purposely botch an operation. Damn – what to do?

John Bolton: Desk-bound Warrior. Put simply, John Bolton is an asshole. Has been for a long time. Now he's certifiably insane. In an op-ed piece in yesterday's *New York Times* Bolton expresses his views on how to deal with Iran's nuclear program. As expected, he starts out blaming Obama for all the ills in the region, then goes on to explain the basics: Iran is making a bomb; Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt will be forced to do so as well; Israel's possession of nukes is OK because they won't use them.

After the history lesson, Professor Bolton gets to the heart of the solution: Bomb Iran. He points out the successful whack-job Israel did on the nuclear facilities in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007) – two regimes with weak air defenses – and concludes that a raid on Iran's well-protected sites in Natanz, Fordow, Arak and Isfahan would be fundamentally easy. He says, "The United States could do a thorough job of destruction, but Israel alone can do what's necessary." Once again, we must suffer a pompous chicken-hawk who dodged serving his country militarily when he had the chance calling for the U.S. to engage in a very dangerous campaign. Unlike Syria, Iran is well-prepared to take defensive and offensive action in the face of a hostile air raid – just as the U.S. and Israel would

do if so attacked. On the upside, there's only perhaps one or two thousand ways things could go wrong. And adding proof of his insanity, Bolton foolishly asserts about the bombing campaign, "Such action should be combined with vigorous American support for Iran's opposition, aimed at regime change in Tehran." Yeah, I can already see the Iranians throwing flowers and greeting the Americans as liberators.

Influenced by ISIS, or psychosis? Earlier this week in Ohio a mother killed her three-month old daughter in what has been blamed on postpartum psychosis. That the woman, Deasia Watkins, decapitated the child with a 10-inch kitchen knife makes the whole thing more horrifying. According to reports, doctors declared the mother unsafe around the baby unless she took prescribed medication – which I would have interpreted as "keep the mother far away from the baby at all costs." Clearly, the overwhelming number of post-partum depression cases do not result in the mother harming her child, so blanket measures to separate the children make no sense. But as it would appear in this case, drastic measures were called for but not taken.

The Newest "Right to Discriminate" Law. If I strolled into a bakery, or a tailor, or a hardware store and the proprietor told me he wouldn't serve me because of my height or weight or even the color of my skin, I'd tell him to go fuck himself as I walked out the door. I wouldn't feel it necessary to file a lawsuit or agitate to make such behavior illegal. Withholding my patronage plus a bit of internet-based scorn would be satisfying enough. Others feel differently – particularly these days betrothed Gays and Lesbians seeking wedding services such as cakes and photography who have been refused by store owners for whom the concept of same-sex marriage is revolting or as they would say, contrary to their religious beliefs. Some of those denied services have turned

to litigation. Again, that wouldn't be my strategy – why exert the effort to force ignorant people to do your bidding? Furthermore, store proprietors have innumerable ways to make you wish you had gone somewhere else. Do you really want to eat a cake from someone who, forced against his will to bake it, substituted rat poison for baking powder? Do you really think those precious wedding photos will be sharp and well-composed? Or that the photographer won't be taking a dump during that critical moment when the bride and groom shove cake in each other's faces?

Nonetheless, because the possibility of litigation looms, some states have enacted legislation to hold the service-deniers harmless for their narrow-minded actions. And as is so often the case, the backlash is strident. Arizona took a shot at passing such laws, but when the NFL threatened to move the Superbowl out of Phoenix, the Governor vetoed the bill. The vast majority of businesses (and probably not a few who like to deny service to sodomites) breathed a sigh of relief that bigtime boycotts would not materialize.

Not one to learn anything is Governor Mike Pence who signed such a "right to discriminate" law in Indiana. The reaction from businesses was swift. Salesforce.com led the way, stating "Today we are canceling all programs that require our customers/employees to travel to Indiana to face discrimination." Yelp and the NCAA also made veiled threats to avoid the Hoosier State. I suspect some of these companies are coming out against the law because it's better for business than to turn a blind eye. Still, Pence and his fellow bigots in the Legislature had to see this coming, but went insane anyway. How long before bystander businesses in Indiana getting creamed by boycotts call for repeal? And will that only harden the crazies? And how long before we hear of some wacko refusing a serious service like first aid or medical care using the "religious freedom" law as the basis?

Dumb & Gabbana. The fashion company Dolce & Gabbana counts numerous celebrities as clients: Madonna, Lady Gaga, Johnny Depp, Channing Tatum and Scarlett Johansson among others. D&G trolls among the Hollywood and music-scene crowds, most of whom can be counted on to be left of Nancy Pelosi. So what the hell were these two gabagools thinking when they weighed in on the provenance of Elton John's kids who were born through in-vitro fertilization?

"I call children of chemistry, synthetic children. Rented uterus, semen chosen from a catalog," opined Dr. Dolce.

In a word: insane.

When Elton John (no slouch when it comes to the heft of one's fan base) pushed back, Gabbana called him a "fascist." Talk about boycott. If the swells who give the fashion industry its cache decide en masse to stop wearing your shit, where do you go? Will we have to shop for D&G in the A&P?

The Reassuring Voice of the Savage Wiener

April 5, 2015

Michael "Savage" Wiener can be found bloviating daily on a number of AM radio stations, the exclusive bastion of right-wing conservative "thought." Although he reaches an audience of respectable size, Savage is a second-stringer; he isn't syndicated to the extent that Rush Limbaugh is, he doesn't have a TV show like Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly, he doesn't even appear as guest wacko on Fox. And this is for a good reason: Savage is out of his mind.

The sole purpose that Savage and his ilk (including Mark Levin, Michelle Malkin, Mike Gallagher, Laura Ingraham, John Batchelor) serve is to reassure each and every day their paranoid, narrow-minded audience that they are not alone in their world-view. The

foundational principle is that all the problems faced by humanity are the fault of Obama (he hates America, y'know.) If Obama cured cancer Savage and the rest would vilify him as a job-killer for putting oncologists out of business.

Every so often, when searching AM radio for an update on the traffic in the New York metropolitan area I stumble upon the Savage Weiner and suffer the momentary displeasure of hearing Savage's ignorant hatred ooze from my car's speakers. Last summer, when the issue of the minute was the arrival of children from Central and South America at the U.S. border whose parents believed incorrectly that they would be granted asylum, I caught a Savage rant in which he excoriated Obama for creating the situation (never mind that the law that was the basis for the crisis – the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 – was signed by Bush.) Savage also took a mean swipe at El Salvador and Guatemala for having so broken a society that families would rather transport their kids hundreds or thousands of miles to a foreign land than to risk losing them to violence. Not one to look at problems from more than one side, it never apparently occurred to Savage that much of the violence driving the children to America is fomented by gangs seeking to dominate an illegal drug trade made viable by the habits of American narcotics consumers.

Anyway, earlier this week I once again inadvertently encountered the musings of Mr. Weiner; his virulent animus toward El Salvador and Guatemala appears unabated. After extolling the genius of J.S. Bach, here is what he said (note: the "garbage" he mentions refers to the immigrants to our South): "I start to shudder at the greatness of the human mind. And to think of the garbage that Obama's flooding America with. I just shudder to think about what this country is going to look like in 50 years.

Don't tell me there's another little Bach hidden in the group he's bringing in. Don't tell me there's another little Einstein. Please don't give me that rubbish and foolishness. They don't come from the same tradition. Just look at history and you'll see I'm right. Show me the literature of Guatemala. Show me the literature of El Salvador. Show me the musical tradition of El Salvador and Guatemala and tell me it's going to produce the same results as that which Europe gave this nation."

The dissertation is shopworn and tedious: that the culture and arts from regions of the world other than Europe don't measure up – and as such serve as proof that peoples not from Europe (and by extension, America) are inferior. It's sad this sort of shit remains popular on the airwaves.

But does the Savage Weiner have a point? Is there nothing of literary or musical value that has come out of the tiny countries of El Salvador and Guatemala (two of several nations I might add that were overrun and destroyed culturally by avaricious European conquistadors centuries ago?) Perhaps if Miguel Ángel Asturias were still alive he could offer an enlightened response to Savage. Well before Michael "Savage" Weiner picked up a crayon to write such drivel as "Stop the Coming Civil War" and "Liberalism is a Mental Disorder," Asturias, a Guatemalan author, playwright, poet and journalist had published numerous influential works, the body of which earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1967.

The Financial Folly of the Death Penalty

April 10, 2015

The trial of the Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev should serve as Exhibit A in the venture to eliminate the death penalty from the books – not because Tsarnaev might possibly be innocent or that he's somehow the victim of racially-based

impropriety – but because the whole sordid affair is a massive waste of time and money. Although Tsarnaev pleaded not guilty, his court appointed lawyer, Judy Clarke in her opening statement affirmed the opposite. "We take no issue with the facts from the ground that week," adding decisively like an old iron filing cabinet slamming shut, "It was him." And like any good lawyer she anticipates the next question and poses it herself, "So why are we here?"

Good question. Over the course of the next 30 days or so, the prosecution was compelled to put on an exhaustive case to convince the jury that the defendant did what his lawyer had conceded in the first couple of hours, and that his heinous and callous actions deserved the death penalty. It was the death penalty element – which the prosecution sought – that dragged a slam-dunk case on for the better part of a month.

Meanwhile, Attorney Clark and her colleagues on the defense team worked diligently at tax-payer expense to develop a narrative that Dzhokhar was under the spell of his evil (and conveniently dead) older brother Tamerlan, and therefore should be spared capital punishment. It's an interesting approach but given the facts, seems futile.

Dzhokhar Tsarnaev may not be as evil as his asshole brother, but there's no way he was the clueless moron that the defense wants everyone to believe. Given that the court-appointed counsel each receives in the neighborhood of $150 an hour, the cost to the taxpayer to simultaneously fight for and against the death penalty for little Dzhokhar has to run into the millions. Add to that the mandatory appeals that would follow a decision to apply capital punishment, and the expense multiplies all out of proportion. But you can't blame the prosecution for pursuing the death penalty. As long as capital punishment remains on the books, horrific cases like the Boston Marathon Bombing call for it to be meted out.

Which raises an interesting question: why among all the crimes and all the punishments on the books is capital punishment the only one that 1) prosecutors get to decide whether to pursue, and 2) juries must decide whether or not to apply? If a defendant is charged with armed robbery, the prosecution doesn't declare ahead of time that they plan to go for the maximum penalty or something more benign. And if that defendant is found guilty, the jury doesn't decide the punishment, the judge does.

Consider the O.J. Simpson trial in which the disgraced former pro-football player and Hertz shill was charged with a heinous double murder. That charge certainly seemed severe enough to justify the death penalty as it was understood in California, yet the prosecution declared right up front that they would not pursue it. Clearly the strategy was to avoid the possibility of losing the case to a squeamish jury uncomfortable with killing the Juice. But allowing the prosecution to pick and choose, and saddling the jury with the heavy burden of deciding whether to put a person to death taints the whole process.

Better to shitcan the death penalty altogether. Life alone in a cramped cinderblock cell with a four-inch-wide window overlooking more cinderblocks should be sufficient for the likes of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

Exodus: Movement of the Water

April 16, 2015

News from California and the American Southwest tells of rapidly increasing angst there over the apparent long-term absence of water since serious drought visited the region four years ago. Snow cover in the Sierra Mountains, the source for much of the potable and irrigation water for tens of millions of people and thousands of farms growing more than $50 billion worth of

produce, sits at about 6% of normal. Scores of climate scientists agree that the situation is becoming chronic and dire, and for good reason. Most climate models reveal a movement of water away from the American Southwest to the Northeast where mountains of snow have fallen, and rainfall has increased dramatically. Alterations in the flow of the jet stream forced by powerful high-pressure systems, themselves amped up by general warming have caused water to skirt around the Southwest and travel further into the interior United States.

Acknowledging the reality on the ground – despite cranky noise from climate change deniers – leaders in California are turning to more forceful (but not really drastic) measures like enforced conservation, water usage pricing and desalination. The latter approach is fraught with peril because it is extraordinarily expensive – both to build and operate – and requires enormous energy (mostly generated by carbon-based fuels) which is part of the reason why California is suffering to begin with.

My guess is that the efforts will have marginal effect. First, powerful forces will work successfully to shirk calls for conservation: big agriculture, celebrated golf courses, rich bastards living in gated communities in Palm Desert surrounded by acres of lush lawns more at home in Kentucky. Second, desalination sufficient to meet the needs of the multiple millions of thirsty souls would overtake a great deal of prime real estate and defile precious Pacific Ocean habitat (after all, when you're done desalinating sea water, where do you deposit your millions of gallons of briny poison?)

Knowing that the United States is not going to let such metro areas as Los Angeles, Phoenix, Tucson, San Diego and Las Vegas go back to being whistle stops, might we see calls for a movement of the water back to where it should have been in the first place? Might the hefty numbers of Congressional representatives

of California and Texas stake a claim on the Great Lakes, for example, home of the largest fresh-water repository on planet Earth? If millions of barrels of oil can be routinely transported via fat pipes from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, might it not be possible to construct some type of aqueduct that would bring copious amounts of fresh agua across the once-fruited plain?

Governors and Congressmen of the states bordering the Great Lakes, as well as the Canadian government would unite against such a ploy. There are existing laws on the books preventing diversion of Great Lakes water, but so what? If the alternative is widespread humanitarian disaster inside our borders, do you think a water-grab couldn't happen? (Canada would object, so America would have to annex it.)

I truly think the population on the West Coast and Texas are whistling past the graveyard, hoping that the drought ends next year – but the smart money is on widespread devastation. And the whole country will be expected to pitch in.

GM Slimes out of its Obligation

April 16, 2015

Sadly, "New" General Motors has managed to manipulate bankruptcy laws to nullify a vast swath of lawsuits stemming from injuries and deaths caused by faulty ignition switches designed and manufactured by "Old" GM. Switches that "Old" GM engineers and surely some executives knew were faulty and could cause moving vehicles to suddenly and without warning shut down completely, rendering airbags inoperable.

I understand that U.S. bankruptcy laws exist because, in general, society benefits more when companies are allowed to restructure and survive than when they cease to exist – either way, creditors get fucked, but when allowed to restructure, jobs are

saved, communities are less-devastated and the economy moves on. Still, it is patently unfair when companies can abuse the laws to abrogate contracts, lay off workers, shaft suppliers, and walk away unscathed to re-enter competitive arena with no baggage.

Even though GM's audacious behavior is the proximate cause of at least 84 deaths, a federal judge the other day in Manhattan absolved "New" GM of the sins of "Old" GM. Given that the offending behavior occurred before the cleansing nature of bankruptcy, "New" GM could not be held accountable for any damages caused by their evil "Old" twin. Experts say the amount of the claims swept off the table by this ruling hover between $7 and $10 billion. Not only did GM suck money from taxpayers to help them weather tough times completely of their own making, and in doing so gain an unfair advantage against Ford who took no money and had to continue to pay its debts, but this arrogant "New" GM has just thumbed its nose at thousands who suffered death, injury and property damage.

There were many things Mitt Romney espoused that I disagreed with, but denying a bailout to GM was not one of them. Unlike the financial firms whose demise could have damaged the country and the world for decades, the loss of GM was not that serious. Making up 18 percent of the auto market, the loss of production from GM would have easily been shored up by Ford, Toyota, Honda, Nissan, and the dozens of other car companies around the globe. Most suppliers and workers would have found opportunities in the industry. It was not that important to save GM.

But now that we have, the repayment from GM to the people it injured is not one of remorse and recompense for dastardly deeds, but a rank manipulation of the very laws that allowed them to live another day. Shame on "New" GM.

Just Enough Rope

April 16, 2015

There was a time once when members of certain lofty professions received unalloyed respect from the people they served: surgeons, police officers, clergy, airline pilots. The common element among these leaders was their role in protecting peoples' lives (or souls) thus generating in them an extreme level of trust. Ill patients rarely questioned the advice and counsel of their physicians, abiding by the adage to "follow doctor's orders." Malpractice lawsuits were virtually unheard of, even when a patient succumbed under the knife. Children were admonished to obey cops; Catholic kids were made to revere priests and, in some cases, pushed to enter the priesthood themselves.

Today, skepticism about incompetence, avarice and toadyism has changed the conversation. Now people demand second and third opinions about their maladies, as doctors tuck into a defensive crouch while figuring out how to pay six-figure malpractice insurance premiums. The reputation of police officers as protectors and defenders of the law has been seriously tattered. And I can't imagine parents today allowing their young children to spend even five unsupervised minutes with Father Feely, let alone to become altar boys.

A lot has changed, but not so much when it comes to airline pilots. For certain in an age of deregulation and profit-maximization, airline passengers no longer perceive pilots as steely-eyed missile-men capable of pulling a 747 out of a dead-fall spin 10 seconds before cratering (Denzel Washington aside), but the system continues to offer wide latitude to pilots as though they possess supernatural powers. Why?

Pilots on commercial flights are given almost complete carte

blanche to fly the plane the way they see fit, and to override virtually every automated safety feature. They are empowered to shut off engines, dump fuel, neuter the auto-pilot, lock and unlock doors, and turn off every communication system. One of the first actions the 9/11 hijackers took after slitting the throats of crew members was to shut off tracking beacons, rendering the planes nearly invisible to air traffic controllers. The pilot of Malaysia Airlines 370 decided to go off course and fly until the fuel ran out, and no one could stop him – and that plane is a ghost a year later. A depressed co-pilot on Germanwings locked the pilot out of the cockpit and exploited a post-9/11 "safety" feature to keep his colleague out despite his having the secret code to reenter. The pilot of Asiana Airlines 214 chose an inappropriate autopilot mode which disengaged an auto-throttle mechanism that controlled airspeed, causing the plane to land well short of the runway at San Francisco Airport, and killing three people. And in a dramatically captured dash-cam video, TransAsia Airlines 235 plunged sideways across a highway and into Taiwan's Keelung River, killing 43. During the investigation the crew reported an engine flameout but the flight data recorder showed that one of the engines had in fact been moved into idle mode accidentally by one of the pilots.

In each case, a pilot was free to use discretion (or make a blunder) and precipitated actions which caused death and destruction. It seems that every new airline safety feature advancement that relies on computer-driven analysis and split-second execution is installed with a kill-switch in deference to the pilot.

And then the other day it was reported that an official Serbian jet carrying the country's president and several aides to a meeting in Rome plummeted more than 5,000 feet in a minute until the pilot wrestled back control of the aircraft. Apparently one of the three engines abruptly stopped working. Only a few days later

was the coverage expanded to include how such a breakdown occurred: "An investigation into the sudden plunge of the Serbian president's plane has shown that it was because the co-pilot spilled coffee on the instruments panel, aviation authorities said Tuesday. The investigation results show that the co-pilot accidentally activated the emergency slat extension when trying to clean the coffee from the panel. That reportedly caused the plane to dive and the brief shutdown of one of the engines."

Amazing. It's well past the time the industry stopped treating airline pilots like infallible beings from another dimension, and reined in their abilities to fuck with sound technology.

Big Ticket Redux

May 7, 2015

A column runs every Sunday in *The New York Times* real estate section called "Big Ticket" which highlights the previous week's highest price residential real estate transaction. More often than not, it seems the most expensive properties moving lately are condos in One57 – a 90 story building designed by Pritzker-Prize winning architect Christian De Portzamparc situated at 157 West 57th Street in Manhattan, which according to the website "redefines luxury living in New York City, rising above it all."

In reality, it's a place where billionaires, foreign and domestic, can anonymously park millions at low tax rates granted by New York City to the developers, Extell Development Company. In fact, according to *The Real Deal*, an outlet covering the NY real estate scene, the residents of One57 are getting a whopping 94 percent discount off the normally-applied taxes for such properties. Rising above it all, indeed.

Anyway, the point is not to harp on income inequality, or berate indefensible favoritism toward minorities (i.e. billionaires),

but rather to express pity for poor Vivian Marino who has to bang out insipid copy each week for "Big Ticket." Seriously, how do you write exciting, scintillating and original copy describing every week the sale of the same damn thing (albeit obscenely expensive)? Give "Big Ticket" writer Marino credit for mining Roget's Thesaurus for new adjectives: the building is "sky-piercing," "vitreous," "blue-glass," glassy blue," and a "glass-sheathed Midtown statement-maker"; the vistas are "nonpareil," "panoramic," and "unparalleled"; the buyers are "demigods."

This exercise in repetition is destined to go on for several more months until all the condos are sold, and then for a few years after when the demigods are through flipping their tax-payer subsidized investments. Feast your eyes on a sampling from the past six months.

May 3 – A *sprawling aerie* on the 53rd floor of One57, the *sky-piercing* condominium that has attracted *demigods* of international business and finance, sold to a mystery buyer, one seemingly versed in the teachings of a much higher power, for $30,683,372.50 and was the most expensive closed sale of the week, according to city records.

April 17 – The "Winter Garden" duplex penthouse at One57, Extell Development's *vitreous* skyscraper, which has attracted a bevy of billionaire buyers since sales began in 2011, sold for $91,541,053 to a group led by the hedge fund mogul William A. Ackman. It was the second highest price ever paid for a single residence in New York City and the most expensive closed sale of the week, according to city records.

April 10– A full-floor *aerie* near the apex of the Extell Development Company's *blue-glass* bastion of billionaires, One57, which offers *nonpareil* park, water and cityscape vistas, sold for

$47,367,491.39 and was the most expensive sale of the week, according to city records.

March 6 – A three-bedroom three-and-a-half-bath apartment on the 65th floor of One57, the *glassy-blue* skyscraper where the priciest transaction for a single residence in New York City recently took place, sold for $29,329,100 and was the most expensive closed sale of the week, according to city records.

February 13 – A floor-through *aerie* near the pinnacle of One57, the *blue-glass* 90-story skyscraper designed by Atelier Christian de Portzamparc, with stunning park, water and *cityscape vistas*, sold for $47,366,989.64 to a buyer used to being "very high above the clouds" and was the most expensive sale of the week, according to city records.

January 23 – A duplex penthouse at the *pinnacle* of One57, the *vitreous* skyscraper with *nonpareil vistas* of Central Park, the Hudson and East Rivers and almost every landmark on the horizon, sold for $100,471,452.77 to a mystery buyer, shattering the record for the highest price ever paid for a single residence in New York City, and was the most expensive sale of the week, according to city records.

January 2 – A full-floor apartment on the 84th floor of the *glass-sheathed* One57 tower, with *panoramic* water, park and city vistas, sold for $52,952,500 and was the most expensive sale of the week, according to city records.

November 28 – The allure of an entire floor with *bird's-eye views* near the top of One57, the Extell Development Company's *glass-sheathed* Midtown statement-maker at 157 West 57th Street, continued to persuade buyers to invest upward of $50 million in personal *aeries* there, as No. 80 traded for $52,952,500 and was the most expensive sale of the week, according to city records.

October 17 – A *glass-sheathed* three-bedroom condominium with *vistas* in four directions, including 60 feet of direct views of Central Park, One57, the Extell Development Company's 90-story Midtown tower at 157 West 57th Street, sold for $34 million and was the most expensive sale of the week, according to city records.

The Craven Politics Killing Amtrak

May 7, 2015

In a display of extremely bad timing, the House Appropriations Committee voted to cut funding to the Federal Railroad Administration the day after a fatal Amtrak crash took the lives of seven passengers just north of Philadelphia's stately 30th Street Station. As was the case in an accident last year involving a New York Metro North commuter train, the Amtrak engineer was speeding excessively prior to entering a sharp curve. Both times the trains derailed with catastrophic consequences. And both incidents prompted debate about the spotty use of proven technology that can automatically slow down trains high-balling above the speed limit as they approach curves and crossings. The stretch of track out of Philly – the site of an even deadlier derailment decades ago – still lacks the technology.

The Appropriations Committee – made up of 30 Republicans and 21 Democrats – authorized funding of $1.365 billion: $850 million for capital grants, $226 million for rail safety and research (flat from 2015), and $289 million for operations to allow "continuing service for all current routes." The vote which sliced $262 million out of the FRA's 2015 budget of about $1.7 billion (down 15 percent) came on a party-line vote of 30 to 21.

Looking at the profit/loss figures for Amtrak's 46 routes, it's easy to see why so many Congressmen who think government should run like a business loathe the system: in 2014 all but four

lost money. The two lines on the Northeast Corridor (Acela and Northeast Regional) combine for a profit of about $485 million, which is nowhere near enough to offset the big losers, most of which consist of so-called "long distance" trains. These include the Empire Builder (-$53M), California Zephyr (-$62M), Southwest Chief (-$61M), Sunset Limited (-$37M) and the Texas Eagle (-$31M). By and large long distance routes transport passengers through the Western and so-called "Heartland" states – several of which are represented by many of the Republicans on the Appropriations Committee who harbor obvious disdain for passenger rail: Kay Granger, Texas; Michael K. Simpson, Idaho; John Abney Culberson, Texas; John R. Carter, Texas; Tom Cole, Oklahoma; Kevin Yoder, Kansas; Steve Womack, Arkansas; Jeff Fortenberry, Nebraska; Mark Amodei, Nevada; Chris Stewart, Utah; David Young, Iowa.

I am a proponent of passenger rail in the places where is makes the most sense: in between large metropolitan regions where passenger volumes are high and alternative transportation options (auto, air) are inadequate, inconvenient or overcrowded. The success of the Northeast Corridor proves that the demand at profitable prices is achievable and sustainable in this country dominated by cars and jets. (I also support high-speed rail in principle, but am resigned to the reality that due to historic density and structural impediments around the big, old cities of the Northeast, it can never happen there.)

Similar thinking leads to the conclusion that loser routes that snake thousands of miles through desolate areas such as North Dakota, Idaho and Montana should be shitcanned altogether, taking financial stress out of the national system. Losses per passenger-mile on these routes are astronomical. On the Auto-Train which runs 1,710 miles between Washington, DC and

Orlando, Florida, Amtrak loses about $240 on each passenger. For certain a good case could be made to eliminate this anachronism.

Which brings me back to the Appropriations Committee. While chopping big dollars out of next year's Amtrak budget, they committed to "continuing service for all current routes." Why? It's painfully obvious that the Amtrak system is woefully out of balance with a couple routes subsidizing the remainder of the line-up. If the Congressmen who oversee budgets for Amtrak think it's a fiscal rathole, why not cut the services that make no sense? Could it be that the bulk of the loss comes from routes running through their own states? Could it be that should they take the logical and proper step by banishing the Heartland Flyer for example, that a bunch of voters in the Heartland would raise holy hell? After all, can we really expect the likes of Jeff Fortenberry of Nebraska to summon the courage to tell Farmer McGee that he'll have to take Greyhound the next time he wants to visit cousins in Holdredge? Be serious.

Better to delay deployment of railroad safety features that only benefit millions in the Northeast than to cut the lifeline to county fairs and cattle auctions for hundreds.

Newly Discovered Mixology Tips from *The New York Times*

May 22, 2015

In a daring and riveting article published this week in *The New York Times* titled "Tonic Makes New Friends," Robert Simonson plumbs the depths to bring readers details on previously undiscovered cocktails. Apparently, drinkers have been using tonic almost exclusively as a mixer with gin, when in fact it seemingly goes with lots of other spirits. As with all intrepid reporting, Simonson reaches out far and wide to locate elusive experts and manages to

compel them to reveal their long-guarded secrets. The result is investigative journalism worthy of Woodward & Bernstein that reveals the tricky and non-intuitive processes by which four previously unimaginable cocktails may be concocted. Prepare to be shocked and amazed.

Tequila and Tonic

Ingredients

- Lime wedge (one sixth of a lime)
- 2 ounces tequila, preferably Partida reposado
- 4 ounces tonic water, preferably Canada Dry or Schweppes

Preparation

Fill a highball glass with ice. Squeeze the lime over the ice and drop into glass. Add tequila and top with tonic. Stir briefly.

Rum and Tonic

Ingredients

- Lime wedge (one sixth of a lime)
- 2 ounces rum
- 4 ounces tonic water

Preparation

Fill a highball glass with ice. Squeeze the lime over the ice and drop in. Add rum and top with tonic. Stir briefly.

White Port and Tonic

Ingredients

- 1 ½ ounces white port
- 3 ounces tonic water
- Wedge of lime or lemon

Preparation

Fill a tumbler with ice. Add white port and top with tonic. Stir briefly. Depending on your taste, squeeze a wedge of either lime or lemon over the drink and drop into the glass.

Calvados and Tonic

Ingredients

- 2 ounces Calvados
- 4 ounces chilled tonic water

Preparation

Pour Calvados into a chilled highball glass. Top with tonic water. Do not garnish.

Startling stuff indeed. The only question: where are the preparation steps for a Tonic and Tonic?

Mathematicians on Film

May 27, 2015

John Forbes Nash died the other day along with his wife in a tragic traffic accident in New Jersey after returning to the U.S. from Norway where he accepted the Abel Prize for outstanding scientific work in the field of mathematics. Nash added the Abel Prize to the prestigious Nobel Prize in Economics awarded to him in 1994.

A bona fide prodigy, Nash earned his PhD by the age of 22, and made his mark in the subject of non-cooperative game theory which represents the real world more accurately than zero-sum game theory. His work was instrumental in advancing models in economics, biology, sociology and logistics. Nash also took on and conquered some truly vexing pure math problems including

Hilbert's 19th Problem on elliptical partial differential equations, and developing breakthroughs in real algebraic manifolds and singularity theory. Hell, he even proved that every abstract Riemannian manifold can be isometrically realized as a sub-manifold of Euclidean space. Who knew?

But it's not for these reasons that John Nash became a somewhat familiar name and merited a front-page obituary in the *New York Times*. Rather it was his tortured life following the manifestations of schizophrenia in the late 1950s that gave his story color and depth. After Sylvia Nasar's biography "A Beautiful Mind" was turned into an Oscar-winning movie directed by Ron Howard and starring A-lister Russell Crowe that John Nash rose out of obscurity. That's how it often works: influential people in the arts and sciences live and die in obscurity unless and until they are resurrected in a feature-length film. That's not to say Hollywood product accurately represents the subjects they take on, but popular films undoubtedly have the power to undo obscurity. For instance, how widely recognizable would Antonio Salieri, Charlie Wilson, Billy Beane, Jim Lovell, Erin Brockovich, Charles Van Doren and Alan Turing be if not for "Amadeus," "Charlie Wilson's War," "Moneyball," "Apollo 13," "Erin Brockovich," "Quiz Show" and "The Imitation Game"?

And speaking of "The Imitation Game," here is further proof that mathematicians can make compelling subjects when their lives contain suitable virtuosity, tragedy and redemption. I previously suggested a movie featuring Evariste Galois, a rebellious child prodigy who was accepted to university at the ripe old age of 10, and went on to advance the study of group theory before dying in a duel at the age of 21. I also saw that a film featuring Srinivasa Ramanujan is in the works from a script adapted from Robert Kanigel's book "The Man Who Knew Infinity." Filming

began last summer at Trinity College in Cambridge. Ramanujan was in many ways the Indian "Will Hunting" – a young man with virtually no training in pure math who developed in relative isolation a remarkable body of work that served to advance the areas of math analysis and number theory. And of course the story wouldn't be movie-worthy had it not been for the introduction into Ramanujan's life of the British mathematician G. H. Hardy who "discovered" the young genius and cultivated a long-running relationship. (Jeremy Irons is set to play Hardy, which could risk turning the film into the story of Hardy-the-hero and his "white man's burden.")

What other mathematicians might make the grade to be featured in a film? My nomination: Lady Ada Lovelace, daughter of Lord Byron, collaborator with the influential inventor Charles Babbage, and perhaps the coder of the very first machine program. She's an unlikely hero whose life story subsequent to her abandonment by Byron was turbulent and fruitful, and in the hands of the right screenwriter could drag her from obscurity to appropriate recognition.

Uber Uber Alles

July 24, 2015

Ridesharing company Uber has been prominent in the news lately, duking it out with taxi drivers and their political allies most visibly in Paris and New York City. The city governments despise Uber for competing on a non-level playing field where they avoid arcane rules that medallion taxi companies and their drivers must adhere to. And New York has taken issue with Uber's strong-arm efforts to deploy tens of thousands of additional vehicles onto already clogged streets. Unlike most large companies that strive to maintain a respected brand image by avoiding flat-out rude

behavior, Uber's leaders act like undisciplined children. (At $50 billion, Uber is valued at twice the market cap of Hilton and seven times that of Hertz, but acts more like an auto body shop.) To poke a stick in the eye of the mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio, Uber added a cheeky "de Blasio" button to its ubiquitous ride-hailing app which tells the user how shitty the wait time would be if Mayor Bill got his way and capped the number of Uber cars allowed on the streets. Of course, there are legions of happy, satisfied Uber riders and drivers who extol the virtues of the service, noting that such pairing services in the so-called "gig economy" are the way of the future – and to fight it is to shovel sand against the tide.

But for all the back and forth about the pitfalls and the promises of Uber, very little is discussed about what might be the biggest issue with them: their rampant collection of data that will be used in ways that many riders and drivers might find alarming. Uber knows where you are when you hail a ride and where you go. By extension they may come to how often you go to a doctor's office, or a cancer treatment center, or a bar, or an apartment that might house your mistress. And when. And maybe for how long. And where you go after that. Drivers can also rate the riders and make note of unsavory behavior.

Now Uber would say that they use ride data to continually improve the experience, and that's likely true. But they clearly intend to make real revenue from pitching ads and selling rider profile information (either bulk or individual). After all, there really isn't a path to hyper-growth in revenue by simply skimming a few bucks from every ride arranged through the app.

For example, if Uber knows you often hail a ride to the Standard Hotel a few hours after hailing a ride to Dirty French, they may channel an offer for a discount off your first Bellini. And

you might appreciate the gesture. But how will you feel receiving ads for adult diapers because you hailed a few rides to a urologist? Or when your boss approaches you about your "problem" after a hacker has stolen Uber data that shows you hail a ride to AA three times a week? And I can only imagine the uproar when lawyers and law enforcement officials start demanding Uber data on defendants' whereabouts at such-and-such a date and time.

Will Uber's valuation remain a stratospheric $50 billion after that? Will their cocksure executives still bully their detractors when the business model shits the bed?

Amy

July 24, 2015

I saw the recently released documentary "Amy" about the life and death of Amy Winehouse, and I came out melancholy even though the sad story and its tragic ending are fairly well-known. With favorable access to people close to Amy (her father and mother, childhood girlfriends, fellow musicians and music industry players, and her loser boyfriend, as well as footage from home movies) the documentarian Asif Kapadia has woven a comprehensive take on Winehouse's musical rise and tragic fall to drugs and alcohol, sprinkled with snapshots of her formative years. In the telling of the story, Kapadia presents unflattering portrayals of Mitch Winehouse, Amy's avaricious and self-absorbed father, Blake Fielder, her vain and destructive boyfriend, the relentless, hounding Paparazzi who assault the celebrity with flashing strobe lights wherever she appears, and the comedians who traffic in insensitive jokes about her drug addiction. Jay Leno in particular comes off as a douche-bag; after fawning over her performance on his TV show he's later seen riffing in his monologue about her "cooking crack and black tar heroin."

Maybe because the movie is about a fast-rising, highly-talented singer, the musicians who mentor and support Amy Winehouse are universally sympathetic characters. Yasiin Bey in particular evokes his appreciation of her talent, admitting that he allowed Amy, during a bleak period of addiction, to stay with him in his Miami apartment simply because her work "moves me." Musical personalities Mark Ronson, Tony Bennett and Sam Beste are all set in relief against the friends and family who largely want to leech off her success.

Perhaps as painful as the footage of the authorities carrying Amy out of her flat in a body bag, is the footage of her concert in Belgrade when she stepped onto the stage in a drunken stupor and received the boos and catcalls of ten thousand patrons. It's a huge letdown from the film's opening segment when Amy, who is about 14 years old, is shown on a home movie singing "Happy Birthday" to her friend in a style that would make Ella Fitzgerald envious. Right from the start Kapadia establishes the premise that Amy Winehouse had a special talent – one that peaked with five Grammy awards in 2008, including "Record of the Year" announced by her hero Tony Bennett. The look of shock on Amy Winehouse's face is captivating – too bad the movie couldn't have ended there.

The same day I caught "Amy" at the Sunshine Cinema in the Lower East Side, I managed to fit in a screening of Billy Wilder's Oscar-winning film "Double Indemnity" starring Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck and Edward G. Robinson. Nothing like watching a classic, shimmering black and white film noir on the big screen. One great line in a movie full of them: "I killed him for money – and a woman – and I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman."

RIP: Alex Rocco

July 24, 2015

Despite the participation of some of the biggest names in Hollywood (Al Pacino, James Caan, Marlon Brando, Robert Duval, Diane Keaton), many of the memorable performances in "The Godfather" were delivered by actors who barely made a dent elsewhere in cinema. Outside of "The Godfather," where else have you seen John Marley (Jack Woltz, who woke up with a severed horse's head in his bed), Richard Conte (Emilio Barzini, mob boss and Corleone nemesis), Al Lettieri (Virgil Sollazo in a brief but delicious performance), Gianni Russo (Carlo Rizzi, wife-beating turncoat), and Alex Rocco (Moe Greene, Las Vegas casino mogul.)

Rocco died the other day at age 79 in Studio City. Although he had an acting career that paid the bills playing heavies and clueless fathers, he will always and forever be Moe Greene. As we learn from a lecture that Hyman Roth gives Michael Corleone in "The Godfather Part II" Moe Greene was an icon – and it's evident that Francis Coppola and Mario Puzo fashioned him after real-life Jewish mobster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel. "There was this kid I grew up with; he was younger than me. Sorta looked up to me, you know. We did our first work together, worked our way out of the street. Things were good, we made the most of it. During Prohibition, we ran molasses into Canada… made a fortune, your father, too. As much as anyone, I loved him and trusted him. Later on, he had an idea to build a city out of a desert stop-over for GI's on the way to the West Coast. That kid's name was Moe Greene, and the city he invented was Las Vegas."

When Rocco was under consideration for the part of Moe Greene, he appealed to director Coppola about his concerns over incompatible ethnicity with his character. "I'm Italian. I wouldn't know how to play a Jew." Coppola showed Rocco some hand

gestures that could differentiate the two ethnic groups. Rocco called it the "greatest piece of direction I ever got." And you can see it right there on the screen the way Moe puts his hands together as he repudiates Michael Corleone's moves to buy him out: "You goddamn guineas. You really make me laugh. I do you a favor and take Freddie in when you're having a bad time, and now you're gonna try and push me out!" Great stuff.

M&A (Mergers and Avarice) in the Airline Industry

July 29, 2015

Upon Federal Trade Commission approval of the merger of American Airlines and USAir in November 2013, the new company along with just three others – Delta, United and Southwest – accounted for about 80 percent of all domestic US travel. Not surprisingly, the oligopoly that has emerged in the past several years has been very bad for travelers who are routinely treated like chattel. The shabby tactics deployed by the airlines that are well-known and executed with total insouciance include crazy-high fees for routine schedule changes, bait-and-switches on seat upgrades that don't deliver what's promised, baggage fees that increase exponentially with each additional checked item, and continuation of fuel surcharge levies despite plummeting oil prices.

It's hard to think of another industry that treats its customers so poorly – and yet attracts no competitor to break out against the crowd to gain share by providing a better experience, as economics 101 would predict.

But this is nothing new. Business and pleasure travelers of all stripes have long bemoaned this airline industry-wide bullshit, and the press has made a sport of beating up on the major airlines. Last month *The New York Times* wrote an article about how the

airlines have "wink-wink" colluded to keep prices high and to stifle customers' capability to compare fares. A study by the Travel Technology Association reported that despite a decline in jet fuel prices of 24 percent and a drop in nonfuel operating costs of just under 3 percent in 2014, the average fare per mile increased 0.5 percent during that period.

Yes, the airlines' oligopoly has spawned all sorts of documented annoyance, but one irritating aspect has gone largely unreported: the merger which really isn't.

More than two years ago in February 2013 the boards of both American Airlines and USAir voted unanimously to merge in a deal valued at $11 billion. Despite initial revulsion for the deal from the FTC, the commission, under pressure ultimately approved the deal in November of that same year. And in the 20 months since, outside of the legally-mandated financial paperwork there exists goddamned little evidence that these companies actually merged. According to *The Washington Post* "The two airlines continue to operate separately, with their own crews, their own rules and their own Web sites. In fact, this corporate combination won't be fully complete until 2016." It seems clear, given the low-priority placed on completing the merger in a timely manner, that the two companies got together not to form a better airline, but to cut costs and eliminate competition.

From the point of view of the customer, American and USAir might as well be wholly independent entities. In fact, it's actually worse because flyers are forced to endure various "integrated" processes, but when it comes time to resolve issues the airlines are unable to cooperate with each other, making every problem one of disentanglement.

I recently had to cancel a non-refundable ticket that I booked on USAir and upgraded using American mileage points. Why did

I use American points? Because the two companies, in their effort to merge, comingled all the points and essentially eliminated the USAir program. As the ticket was issued by USAir, I called the number on the itinerary to restore my mileage points back into my account. The USAir people could not accommodate my request, and told me to contact AA, acting as though AA is a separate company – because it might as well be! Twenty minutes into a call with AA led to the conclusion of the agent that USAir personnel would have to complete the transaction after all. AA handed me off to USAir – even though the two entities have had nearly three fucking years to plan their merger – and after 40 minutes on hold, some USAir flunky came on and asked me the reason for my call. Like Sisyphus, I began the whole process again the following day and again spent nearly an hour to get 30,000 miles restored to my account.

Epilog: I got it done (I think) after forking over a $300 fee (penny a point) to put the miles back into my account. Yes, another shabby airline tactic – presumably required to cover the tremendous costs incurred to have an agent press the "enter" key. Fuck you, AA. And by broad extension, you too USAir.

This Week in Hall of Shame

July 29, 2015

Walt Palmer – Big Game Poacher. Minnesota dentist Walt Palmer paid 54 grand for the privilege of shooting and killing an adult male lion named Cecil, a beloved denizen of Hwange National Park in western Zimbabwe. Walt and his illustrious guide slapped some dead meat on their off-road vehicle to lure Cecil out from his protected zone. Sure-shot Palmer nailed Cecil with a crossbow – because he's a purist, don't you know – only to wound the creature. It took big game poacher Palmer another two days to

track the wounded animal and finish him off with a gun. Palmer and crew then chopped off Cecil's head for the trophy. Thankfully, this subhuman asshole has seen his dental business crater and is the target of a criminal investigation. Sad sidebar: Cecil was the father of several cubs who will likely be killed by other male lions as they step up to replace him as the king of the jungle.

Owners of the AZG Mall in China. Gruesome footage emerged of a Chinese shopper and her two-year-old son ascending an escalator in an "upscale" mall in Jingzhou, stepping onto the floor and falling through a loose panel. The woman manages to push her son to safety before being gobbled up by the mechanism that runs the escalator. The outrage from the Chinese populace was strident. But when it was revealed that the mall staff knew there was a problem and didn't do a goddamned thing about it, the revulsion justifiably spiked.

The Eloquent Mike Huckabee. Grits and gravy addict Mike Huckabee has a way with words. Regarding the Iran nuclear deal, Sir Fuckabee exclaimed, "This president's foreign policy is the most feckless in American history. It is so naive that he would trust the Iranians. By doing so, he will take the Israelis and march them to the door of the oven." Given the provocative speaker is the corpulent Huckabee, one might be forgiven if they thought he was referring to a wood-fired pizza oven packed with calzones. Sadly, though, Mike made a shameful connection between an honest attempt to curtail the nuclear ambitions of a dodgy regime and the annihilation of the Jews during the Holocaust.

New Independence. A new TV ad for Chevrolet dubbed "A New Journey" by the car company's agency depicts 30 seconds of split screen comparisons of real life and its equivalents in the virtual world before stating rather sanctimoniously that "Chevrolet is merging the physical freedom of the car with the virtual freedom

of wi-fi." Chevy passengers are shown messing around on tablets. The spot ends with a voice-over of the tag line, "It's the new independence."

But wait. Just before the concluding voice-over, the ad shows a teenage boy sitting on a log in a pastoral setting, sun just about to dip below the distant mountains, massive Chevy truck parked nearby – and the kid is Skyping with… his mother! "Hi Mom," he says eagerly, even waving like a geek to her image on the laptop. Now, when I was a teenager out cruising into the woods – case of malt liquor in the trunk, Pink Floyd on the 8-track, the pungency of Patchouli redolent, with the sultry night poised to pounce upon the languid summer heat – the last thing I needed was a fast, reliable, high-speed tether to my mother. (And as I write this, I suspect the feeling was mutual.)

In fact, outfitting a vehicle with 4G LTE wi-fi as Chevy has done with its newest line-up of cars, trucks and cross-overs will certainly serve to accelerate the downward spiral away from freedom toward an abyss of "always-on-connectivity" that has come to engulf our homes, workspaces and idylls of recreation. A teenage boy on the cusp of manhood Skyping with Mommy? The anti-thesis of "new independence." Yeesh.

$55 Million Impression of a Chalkboard. I'm not a big Cy Twombly fan, but someone out there is. On November 12, Christie's will be auctioning off Twombly's "Untitled, a 5×6-foot canvas done in grey house paint to look like a chalkboard upon which four rows of loops done with a wax crayon sweep across from left to right. It resembles something you very likely saw in grade school. Christie's has placed a gavel-down estimate of $35 to $55 million for the piece. (Coincidentally, the high-end estimate is about the same as the price of the most expensive residential property sold in New York City last week – a $59 million spread at the

exclusive and desirable new high-rise One57 on 57th Street overlooking Central Park and the lesser mortals who are not worthy to gaze upon the building.) $55 million is approximately what the average American would earn had he or she started working in 914 AD. I wonder what it works out to in dollars-per-inch of loop?

Jeb Bush Falls into the Rabbit Hole

August 13, 2015

In a foreign policy speech delivered at the Reagan Presidential Library the other day, former governor and current political hack Jeb Bush sought to blame Islamic-driven violence in Iraq and Syria on none other than Hillary Clinton. By virtue of her being the Secretary of State under Obama during a period of troop drawdown in Iraq, she is now the primary cause of anarchy in the region.

Before moving on, recall that Jeb Bush went through pendulum swings of opinions when asked about the disastrous war that his brother started in 2003. He first said, knowing what we know now, he would still have gone to war – which seems ridiculous. Clearly, he answered this way so as not to shit upon his brother's ill-conceived adventure. Then when his statement kicked up a bunch of incredulous dust, he claimed to have misheard the question, interpreting it as "would you have gone in knowing what we knew *then*." Of course, this only caused people to re-ask the question with emphasis on the word "now." In response, he called it a hypothetical question unworthy of an answer, which helped not at all. Later, he claimed that to answer the question would be an insult to the American troops who fought in the war (?). He continued to hide behind the notion that he would not answer hypotheticals, until finally caving in and saying he wouldn't have gone in knowing what we know today. As is often the case, Jon

Stewart summarized better than any real news source the lunacy of it all.

Anyway, Jeb is clearly planting seeds of ideas that the morass in Iraq and Syria caused by U.S. troop withdrawal is somehow the fault of Hillary Clinton. He said, "Rushing away from danger can be every bit as unwise as rushing into danger, and the costs have been grievous." And who could disagree with that? But did the Bushies conveniently forget that it was Brother W who initiated the whole drawdown to begin with? George W. Bush in 2008 as president signed the "Agreement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq On the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities during Their Temporary Presence in Iraq" which called for U.S. combat forces to withdraw from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009, (5 months into Obama's first term) and for all U.S. combat forces to be completely out of Iraq by December 31, 2011.

Still, as most Americans have the inquisitiveness and attention span of an earthworm, I'm sure the bulk of the population thinks Obama pulled all the troops out of Iraq and sent them to Kenya for radical socialist brainwashing.

You Don't Bring me Flowers Anymore

August 13, 2015

Everyone in the world knows that the Russians or their proxies in Eastern Ukraine shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 a little more than a year ago. The Boeing 777 was bound for Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian capital, from Amsterdam with 283 passengers, including three infants, and 15 crew members. At the time, Russia's president Vladimir Poontang blamed the Ukrainian government for creating the conditions for insurgency in eastern Ukraine, as if that was supposed to exonerate the annihilation of hundreds of innocent people.

As Flight 17 began in the Netherlands and carried mostly Dutch citizens aboard, the Dutch government took the lead on the investigation. And just the other day it was reported that pieces of a Russian-made missile were intermixed with wreckage from the plane. The fact that Russian separatists holing up in Ukraine had shot down at least a dozen military aircraft in the same airspace in the time leading up to the downing of the commercial jet liner only adds to the ironclad case.

Still, Russia is taking umbrage, and just this past Monday announced that agricultural officials would start inspecting with great rigor imports of Dutch tulips and other flowers into Russia. Talk about petty assholes. Presumably the inspectors will find Dutch foo-foo dust, thus ordering all shipments to be distilled into some form of alcoholic beverage. And if that doesn't stop the people from the land of windmills, will the Ruskie's boycott wooden shoes?

Hooking Up with Tinder… But What About ISIS?

August 16, 2015

In a recent *Vanity Fair* article titled "Tinder and the Dawn of the 'Dating Apocalypse,'" reporter Nancy Jo Sales quotes a scientist at Indiana University's Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction thus: "There have been two major transitions" in heterosexual mating "in the last four million years. The first was around 10,000 to 15,000 years ago, in the agricultural revolution, when we became less migratory and more settled," leading to the establishment of marriage as a cultural contract. "And the second major transition is with the rise of the Internet." Sales goes on to lay out a fairly dim view of the state of dating today in which the sweet spot of virility and fecundity (20-somethings) seeks out

their mates not via direct face-to-face interaction the way it was done in the good ole days of, say 10 long years ago, but rather through the popular if not impersonal app Tinder.

Essentially, people who rely on Tinder post some basic stuff about themselves – the profile photo being by far the most important element in the decision-making process – and itemize the characteristics of those whom they seek. Because the app knows where its users are, Tinder can supply photos of potential mates who are currently within the required striking range of the hunters (500 feet… 2 miles… all depends on the level of desperation.)

Tinder users can decide quite quickly based on the profile photo whether they have interest in pursuing something further – if yes, they swipe the picture to the right; if not, it's a swift swipe to the left. The person being vetted knows nothing unless they also swipe right on the picture of a person who swiped right on them as well. No humiliation and bad feelings. And that's a good thing. But as the article progresses it becomes clear that there is a sad hollowness about the whole thing. Sales chats up some Wall Street douchebags who explain the Tinder phenomenon this way: "It's instant gratification and a validation of your own attractiveness by just, like, swiping your thumb on an app. You see some pretty girl and you swipe and it's, like, oh, she thinks you're attractive too, so it's really addicting, and you just find yourself mindlessly doing it. Sex has become so easy. I can go on my phone right now and no doubt I can find someone I can have sex with this evening, probably before midnight."

Overall, the *Vanity Fair* piece is unfavorable in its assessment of the ways and means of hooking up in the 21st Century, and Tinder, as the most widely-used method for it, takes a hit in the process. Curiously, Tinder went on a rampage in response to the story, going out to Twitter of all places to denounce the story.

Maybe the barrage of Tweets was the result of a Tinder social media team gone bonkers, or a pre-planned counter-strike by "savvy" marketing dweebs, but most of the outside world's reaction to the Twitter overload from Tinder was expectedly negative. *Vox* captured the zeitgeist as well as anyone. *Vox* said the article, "portrayed Tinder users as often shallow, sex-obsessed jerks," and that's an easy call.

But forget about Tinder. What about ISIS? Hell, imagine you're in charge of helping thousands of smelly, unwashed, ignorant, hirsute, poverty-stricken bastards to get laid. Do you think a greasy, strung-out terrorist can find a mate through an app like Tinder which places nearly 100 percent emphasis on looks? No chance. Hence the inevitable creation of an alternate app: ISIS Matchmaking Service and Beheading Solutions.

Calling all repressed Muslim men around the world who can't get laid like normal ugly dudes!!

A scathing *New York Times* expose details the utter depravity of the ISIS clan. These wasted fuckers are beyond repair and deserving of annihilation; losers who are taught that raping an "infidel" is not a sin, and in fact brings them closer to God. Feast your eyes on this sadistic bullshit: "In the moments before he raped the 12-year-old girl, the Islamic State fighter took the time to explain that what he was about to do was not a sin. Because the preteen girl practiced a religion other than Islam, the Quran not only gave him the right to rape her — it condoned and encouraged it, he insisted. He bound her hands and gagged her. Then he knelt beside the bed and prostrated himself in prayer before getting on top of her. When it was over, he knelt to pray again, bookending the rape with acts of religious devotion. 'I kept telling him it hurts — please stop,' said the girl, whose body is so small an adult could circle her waist with two hands. 'He told me that according to

Islam he is allowed to rape an unbeliever. He said that by raping me, he is drawing closer to God.'"

Amazingly, these criminals extract permission for their depravity from the Koran. "There is a great deal of scripture that sanctions slavery," said Cole Bunzel, a scholar of Islamic theology at Princeton University and the author of a research paper published by the Brookings Institution on the ideology of the Islamic State. "You can argue that it is no longer relevant and has fallen into abeyance. ISIS would argue that these institutions need to be revived, because that is what the Prophet and his companions did." Returning to the Kinsey guy: "There have been two major transitions" in heterosexual mating "in the last four million years." Apparently, ISIS would like to reset the bar to 5 million years ago.

No doubt in my mind the vast majority of Islamists from around the globe rushing to the Middle East to join the jihad are really nothing more than perverted, sexually frustrated wimps looking to achieve sexual release they could not attain under normal, modern-era standards. And for that, they all must go to hell.

De Blasio and Bratton: Defenders of the Faith

August 24, 2015

More insidious than ISIS! More disgusting than cockroaches! More destructive than Godzilla! More dangerous than the third rail! Mayor Bill de Blasio and his Police Commissioner Bill Bratton have trained their steely eyes on vanquishing the biggest threat to New York City's Times Square to emerge since Anderson Cooper took over for rockin' Dick Clark on New Year's Eve: Los Desnudas de Tiempo Cuadrado!

As if buskers dressed like Elmo and Betty Boop weren't bad enough, hyperactive and venerated Times Square (the Crossroads of the World, for god's sake!) has been overrun by nude women (well, sporting G-strings and painted boobs, but still…) posing and panhandling. What's next for Times Square? Giant billboards of buff men and svelte girls wearing slinky underwear in sexually suggestive poses? Oh, wait…

De Blasio and Bratton have no other pressing issue than to stop the madness, recently revealing their master plan: tear up the pedestrian promenade of Times Square and return Broadway to its rightful owners: taxi cabs and massive double-decker tour buses. But the Puritans had better watch out. Because when the editorial pages of two diametrically opposed newspaper editorial pages make the same argument against you – slow down.

The Wall Street Journal wrote over the weekend, "If there are no pedestrians, there will be no one to harass. By Mr. de Blasio's logic, he could end homelessness by removing parks, benches, subway grates, doorways and the sidewalks where transients build their encampments." Likewise, *The New York Times* observed, "On Thursday, Mr. de Blasio suggested one solution: eliminating some of Times Square's pedestrian plazas, apparently on the theory that if you can get tourists to go away, you reduce the topless-woman threat."

Bratton and de Blasio should give up the crusade and instead head to Coney Island to take up with the likes of the freaks they are: A pair of boobs with two dicks.

Kentucky Fried Brains

September 2, 2015

In a front-page story in today's *New York Times* that baffles me, it's reported that some narrow-minded clerk in Rowan

County, Kentucky is refusing to issue marriage licenses to gay couples. This kind of shit has popped up sporadically around the country – mostly in Bible Belt states – since the Supreme Court in June decided that the Constitution guarantees a right to same-sex marriage. In many cases, the clerks refuse to issue licenses to anyone – gay or straight – so as to inoculate themselves against charges of bias.

In today's story we learn that county clerk Kim Davis just can't seem to perform her duties when it comes to marriage licenses. She says her denials are legitimate "under God's authority" and that to do otherwise would violate her Christian beliefs. Of course, being a Christian, she feels obligated to say, "I have no animosity toward anyone and harbor no ill will," adding incongruously, "to me this has never been about a gay or lesbian issue." (Davis demonstrates her belief in the sanctity of marriage by having done it herself four times so far.)

After the Governor of Kentucky directed all county clerks in the state to issue the licenses across the board, Davis did what any decent civil servant would do – sue in federal court, arguing that she should be excused from, essentially, doing her goddamned job. If you drove into a Jiffy Lube and the grease monkey in the pit beneath your car refused to change your oil because he spotted a Planned Parenthood sticker on your bumper, I can say with confidence that he'd get the boot. But hey, that's the private sector.

It should be kept in mind that these government people aren't called "clerks" for nothing. Following the definition of the word, they undertake routine administrative duties. Routine! Anybody can do this stuff. But because they are elected, apparently they can't be touched for gross insubordination. And that's what's so baffling about the whole stupid affair. Why must citizens put up with people, paid for with tax dollars, who refuse to do their jobs?

Davis's lawyer said that if his client were to be fined or jailed for not doing her job, "it could be one of the most disgraceful things that ever happened in this country" – thus demonstrating his complete ignorance of American history. But he also said he was confident Davis would prevail in the end. And then what?

Denali Denial

September 2, 2015

Representative John Boehner and fellow Ohioans are pissed that Obama's Interior Department gave the go-ahead to change the name of Mt. McKinley in Alaska back to what it had been long before America existed: Denali. William McKinley, 25th president and native of Ohio, got the honor of having his name on North America's tallest mountain after some gold prospector suggested doing so as an honorific following McKinley's nomination. Although McKinley never stepped foot in Alaska, and his connection to the mountain was tenuous (OK, non-existent), the people from the state that's "round on the ends and high in the middle" took umbrage at the apparent slight against a native son.

Here's what Boehner had to say: "There is a reason President McKinley's name has served atop the highest peak in North America for more than 100 years, and that is because it is a testament to his great legacy. McKinley served our country with distinction during the Civil War as a member of the Army. He made a difference for his constituents and his state as a member of the House of Representatives and as Governor of the great state of Ohio. And he led this nation to prosperity and victory in the Spanish-American War as the 25th President of the United States. I'm deeply disappointed in this decision." All good stuff, but nothing mentioned constitutes a reason as to why the continent's highest peak should get the great man's name.

Still, perhaps a bipartisan compromise is in the works. Some possible changes the Interior Department could look into:

- Rename California's San Andreas Fault after the 37th president and senator from California: Nixon's Fault.
- Rename Alaska's second-highest peak and a Denali neighbor, Mount Foraker (and create a great visual concept in the process) after the one-time sexpot governor of the country's 49th state: Mount Sarah Palin.
- And not to ignore notable Democrats, rename Meteor Crater in Arizona to the anagrammed Carter's Crater after Jimmy the illustrious 39th president.

RIP Irving Harper

September 19, 2015

In the world of well-designed furniture, the term "Mid-Century" always means a period from about 1935 to 1965, with a special emphasis on items produced after World War II. No ambiguity. Mid-Century refers to the 20th.

A little-known player in the world of Mid-Century design died the other day at 99 – Irving Harper, the force behind the now-famous "Marshmallow" sofa. Although it sold lightly in its first production run (only 150 were purchased in the first four years), the sofa became an iconic, and quirky, addition to the types of stylish furniture that appeared on "Mad Men" and are sold by authorized reproduction vendors like Design Within Reach. (By the way, your reach needs to exceed $5,000 if you want one for yourself.) As it so often happens, Harper worked diligently in obscurity – in his case, for George Nelson – until he stumbled upon an unexpected opportunity to break out. Nelson had been investigating the possible uses for molded plastic circles, finding none.

Just messing around, Harper mounted 18 upholstered circles on a steel frame, and voila – the Marshmallow sofa was born. Although not as famous or recognizable as furniture designed by Charles Eames and Le Corbusier, the Marshmallow sofa has influenced the development of numerous whimsical constructions.

The next time you enter a chichi boutique hotel lobby or a stop in for a drink at a trendy roof-top bar, note the furniture and pay some homage to Irving Harper.

It Doesn't Go Without Saying

September 22, 2015

Political discourse in America is atrophied, not only by ultra-partisan, tribal behavior, but also by the need for those partisans to conveniently elide key factual elements when making their chest-thumping arguments. This dishonesty is allowed to pass because much of the audience to whom the arguments are aimed is too busy mastering Cookie Jam to conduct some research of their own. In the end, an outraged cohort of like-minded yet misinformed agitators is built into an influential voting bloc.

Consider a few controversial topics currently coursing through the national chatterbox.

Planned Parenthood. Although Planned Parenthood is the recipient of about .015 percent of the Federal budget largely in the form of Medicaid reimbursements, many Republicans in Congress are frothing at the mouth to defund it completely. Despite the positive value the organization provides to people in poor corners of the country in the form of breast cancer screening and HIV testing, the rabid solons would rather shut down the government than allow inclusion of an inaudible noise in the budget. The outrage stems from the performance of abortions at some of the Planned Parenthood facilities, and their supposed profiteering in the selling of fetal body parts. (Planned Parenthood denies this.)

But what is left out is the fact that it is already against the law for the U.S. Government to fund Planned Parenthood to pay for abortions – and has been since 1976. Known colloquially as the Hyde Amendment, the law expressly forbids any Federal dollars to pay for abortion unless the pregnancy arises from incest, rape, or to save the life of the mother. General hatred for Planned Parenthood is obviously the underlying emotion, but those wishing the organization would go away can't seem to make an honest argument against shuttering a group that provides so many other valuable, non-abortion services.

Carried Interest Loophole. Under current tax law, income derived from making investments is taxed at a lower, capital gains rate than income earned through just plain working for a living. Favorable treatment for investors has long been a point of disagreement among economists, and the topic that stokes the income inequality discussion. Bluntly speaking, the capital gains tax exists because its supporters believe investing is more important to the economy than working. That if capital gains were taxed like ordinary income, the vaunted investor would curtail his "job-creating" activities, and everyone would suffer.

The subject earned new currency when Donald Trump began to rail against the tax benefits bestowed upon a small but fabulously wealthy clique: hedge fund managers. Although the annual take-home pay of the top managers exceeds a half billion-with-a-B dollars (a quarter million dollars an hour), these geniuses pay tax rates that middle-class shlubs would envy. The top 25 highest compensated hedge fund managers in 2014 pulled down $11.6 billion… and half those on the list generated mere single-digit returns for their clients in a year when the S&P 500 posted 13.7 percent gains. Still, the anti-tax gurus make the case that the hedge fund managers deserve the incentive-based rate as a reward for the risks they take.

But what is so often left out of the argument is the fact that the hedge fund managers invest and take risks with *other peoples' money*. They invest the funds of their clients, not their own, yet when the investments pay off, hedge fund managers reap rewards for which they pay a tax rate that is about 40 percent less than if the carried interest loophole did not exist. Presumably, noting that distinction would make the loophole even more galling to Joe Average, and that would not bode well for the anti-tax crowd.

Sources of Illegal Immigration. Illegal immigration is a red-meat topic these days, with presidential wannabees falling over one another to see who can be the greatest xenophobe on the planet. So-called solutions run the gamut: building walls, electrifying fences, repealing the citizenship clause 14th amendment, fining Mexico, and deporting millions (including children of illegals who themselves are U.S. citizens.)

No doubt illegal immigration is a problem, but what is rarely mentioned is that anywhere from 25 to 40 percent of the illegal immigrants in the U.S. start out as legal visitors who subsequently overstay their visas – two thirds of whom came into the country through an airport.

Funny, you never hear a candidate call for a 20-foot-tall wall to be built around LaGuardia Airport. And what about Chris Christie who acknowledged the issue by saying, "You go on online and at any moment, FedEx can tell you where that package is… yet we let people come into this country with visas, and the minute they come in, we lose track of them." Presumably, the portly Christie is calling for every foreign visitor to be tattooed with a bar-code. Brilliant.

Volkswagen's Latest Bug

September 22, 2015

The Environmental Protection Agency discovered recently that the Volkswagen corporation installed software on a number of their auto models that could tell when the cars were undergoing emissions test – so that when they weren't being tested, the emissions systems could be turned off. Disabling the emissions systems yields increased performance, of course, but it also allows the release of huge volumes of pollution into the atmosphere. The footprints in the software make clear that this was a purposeful plot and not a programmer's error. And for that, Volkswagen will recall half a million vehicles. They'll also get hit with massive fines and, hopefully, criminal indictments.

One thought: how many drivers of affected Volkswagens and Audis will ignore the recalls so as to retain the increased performance. Already some are downplaying the impacts because they deem the damage as negligible, unlike with GM's faulty ignition switches that caused the deaths of 174 people. In an editorial in today's *Investor's Business Daily*, the crackpots on staff there opined, "No one has been killed, as far as we know, by these rampaging Volkswagens. But that matters not to the EPA, which has become the most crusading and burdensome of all government agencies."

A "burdensome agency?" I'd prefer to see the focus trained on Volkswagen, a "criminal enterprise."

This Week in Irresponsible Gun Ownership

October 7, 2015

Gun ownership in the United States has long ago morphed into a religion, impervious to facts and statistics. No sense trying to fight it anymore. The NRA has become akin to such outliers as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientology crowd: a collection of

zealots who defy logical extinction by grasping to a pole of certitude in their righteousness, turning to the Constitution, like all religions must, for cover.

Those who seek to thwart the NRA – gun control advocates who want to impose restrictions – are fooling themselves. If after the slaughter of 20 preschoolers, nothing changed; if after the shooting of a member of Congress, nothing changed; and hypothetically, if the mass murder by a crazed gunman of the top leadership of the NRA were to occur – and nothing changed ... Then it's time to move on to another strategy.

We know that even the strongest of organized religions must sometimes succumb to the misdeeds of its flock. The Catholic Church, for example, is a powerful entity, yet in the face of sexual abuse by clergy, they've had to pony up more than a few Lira to atone for the evils of a few miscreants in their hierarchy.

Ownership and purchase restrictions on guns have been only marginally effective, and are essentially limited in scope due to court decisions favoring loose oversight. Still, guns are inherently dangerous tools. And should the owner of such tools mismanage them, it makes sense that they pay a hefty price for the consequences of their mismanagement. No trespassing on the Second Amendment required – just a little personal responsibility for one's actions. What self-respecting conservative gun owner could be against that?

And now, this week in irresponsible gun ownership.

Ohio: Boy, 11, Picks Up Gun and Kills His Brother, 12 – October 6

An 11-year-old boy killed his 12-year-old brother in eastern Ohio, where the man they were with had gone target shooting with

a friend, Sheriff Dale Williams of Carroll County said Tuesday. The shooting occurred while the boys, from Moore, S.C., were visiting rural Lee Township, about 50 miles west of Pittsburgh. The sheriff said three loaded weapons were on a picnic table Friday afternoon when the younger boy picked one up and it fired. The older boy was struck in the head and died at the scene. Sheriff Williams said no one was charged. *What about the gun owner?*

Boy, 11, Accused of Killing 8-Year-Old Neighbor with Shotgun – October 5

An 11-year-old boy has been charged with murder after he killed his 8-year-old neighbor, police said, and witnesses say it was because the girl wouldn't let him see her puppy. Deputies were called to the neighborhood in White Pine, about 40 miles east of Knoxville, on Saturday night. The boy shot the girl from inside his home with his father's 12-gauge shotgun, said Jefferson County Sheriff Bud McCoig. Latasha Dyer told WATE-TV her daughter was playing outside when the next-door neighbor asked to see the puppy. McKayla told the boy "no," and he shot her, Dyer said.

The two children went to the same school, where McKayla was in second grade and the boy in fifth grade. Dyer said the boy had bullied her daughter before, when they first moved to the neighborhood. "He was making fun of her, calling her names, just being mean to her," she said. "I had to go the principal about him and he quit for a while, and then all of a sudden yesterday he shot her." The boy was scheduled to appear in court on Monday on a charge of first-degree murder. *What about the gun owner?*

Oregon Shooting at Umpqua College Kills 10, Sheriff Says – October 1

A 26-year-old man opened fire on a community college campus here in a rampage that left 10 people dead and seven wounded and turned this rural stretch of southern Oregon into the latest American locale ravaged by a mass shooting. Students described scenes of carnage concentrated in a public speaking class that was underway in a college humanities building, and people fleeing in panic from classrooms as they heard shots nearby. The college, Umpqua Community College, went into lockdown, and the gunman died in an exchange of gunfire with police officers who responded. Law enforcement officials have said they recovered 14 firearms and spare ammunition magazines that were purchased legally either by Mr. Harper-Mercer, 26, or an unnamed relative. Mr. Harper-Mercer had six guns with him when he entered a classroom building on Thursday and started firing on a writing class in which he was enrolled; the rest were found in the second-floor apartment he shared with his mother. *The relative is the killer's mother – will she take any legal heat?*

Hunter Packing Away Gun Accidentally Shoots, Kills Friend – October 5

Authorities in Nevada say a hunter accidentally killed his friend when a gun he was packing into a car fired. Elko County Undersheriff Clair Morris says 48-year-old Stephen James Foley of Carson City died Friday at the scene about 20 miles south of Jackpot. Four friends on an elk hunting excursion were putting their gear in a vehicle to head back to camp. Morris says a 49-year-old friend of Foley's was putting away a rifle when it discharged and a round went through a door, hitting Foley in the chest.

Morris says the hunting party tried to give Foley first aid after calling for help, but he succumbed to his injuries. Authorities say

deputies arrived about 20 minutes after the 911 call. Detectives have ruled the shooting an accident.

3rd-grader playing with gun shoots child at Georgia school – August 25

Officials in Georgia say an elementary school student suffered minor injuries after being accidentally shot by a third-grade classmate playing with a gun. The shooting happened Tuesday morning at Hornsby Elementary School in Augusta. Richmond County School Board spokesman Kaden Jacobs says a student brought the weapon to school and was "playing with the gun inside a desk." She says it discharged accidentally.

School officials said at a news conference the bullet grazed a girl in the third-grade class. Superintendent Angela Pringle said the girl was home resting after being treated at a hospital. Police said the boy who brought the .380-caliber handgun to school was questioned and released to his parents. No decisions on charges had been made. *What about the… oh, fuck it.*

The NIMBY De-Funders of the Freedom Caucus

October 15, 2015

The so-called Freedom Caucus – a group made up of about 40 Republican congressmen – has of late wielded power all out of proportion with its numbers in the House of Representatives. With fewer than ten percent of the chamber, these 40 men (and a couple women) have forced the resignation of the Speaker, John Boehner, put the fear of god in their Majority Leader, Kevin McCarthy, and tarred the once-beatified conservative standard bearer Paul Ryan as being too far left to be Boehner's replacement.

In addition to playing spoiler in the odyssey to find someone to take over the Speaker's gavel, the Freedom Caucus has demanded radical budgetary surgery, and in anticipation of not getting it, has gleefully agitated for a government shutdown and default on the national debt. And the stridency doesn't stop with financial issues. They also call for abrogation of treaties, mass deportations, eliminating regulations, and lots of anti-government actions in the spirit of seeing government as the problem, not the solution.

Fair enough. Until you peer behind the curtain and see what these anti-government politicians do when few people are watching. It seems defunding only applies to other people's programs. When it comes to goring a local sacred cow, the Freedom Caucusers cry out "Not in My Backyard!"

Take **Mark Sanford** of South Carolina – the guy who called for Bill Clinton to resign over a sex scandal, but could not do the same when his affair with an Argentinian woman was revealed. Now that he's back in Congress after sullying the Governor's office, Sanford talks tough on cutting spending and waste. But following the recent flooding of biblical proportions in his home state, Sanford urged his constituents to go seek out relief offered by none other than FEMA and the Small Business Administration – two "big government" entities that you'd think a purist like Sanford would be trying to shut down, or at least defund into uselessness. Also, Sanford has come out strongly against offshore drilling , which seems an unlikely position for a pro-business guy who bows at the feet of capitalism. But we're talking about drilling off the coast of South Carolina, so it's different.

Gary Palmer of Alabama is a Freedom Caucus member. He's mad about Planned Parenthood, the EPA, Iran, Obama, and just about everything on the far-right side of the menu. Defunding things is his call to action – both to nullify shit he doesn't agree

with, as well as to cut spending. Funny though, when it comes to spending in his district, Gary-boy is a regular Santa Claus. Thanks to his help, Verbena Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department will receive a grant for $69,715; Indian Ford Fire District gets $70,858; Straight Mountain Volunteer Fire and Rescue gets $60,567; and the list goes on and on. And where does the money come from? The Department of Homeland Security, another "big government" tit that would seem to be a Palmer bête noir.

New Jersey's **Scott Garrett** holds the lofty title of Chairman of the Financial Services Subcommittee on Capital Markets and Government-Sponsored Enterprises, and as such has taken a keen interest in the Federal Reserve Board. He doesn't like the way they do bid-ness. Scott also is not fond of Dodd-Frank which came about in response to a near-meltdown of the financial system in 2008 (but that was like 100 years ago, so who needs it now?) According to his website, "As a senior member of the House Budget Committee, Congressman Garrett is on the frontline of House Republican efforts to rein in runaway government spending and shrink our country's ballooning national debt." Coincidentally, Garrett introduced an amendment to a 2016 bill that would add nearly $17 million to the Federal Railroad Administration's (FRA) Safety and Operations Account to protect the safety of passenger and freight railroads. Sounds OK, especially given the volume of rail traffic in NJ – but what about our country's ballooning national debt? I guess Scott Garrett repealed addition in the Garden State.

Rod Blum said this recently about a Highway Trust Fund bill that would cost $8 billion: "This is typical of our federal government: spend the money now and pay for it 20 years from now. We need to make the tough decisions today and stop using accounting tricks to pass on the credit card bill to our children and grandchildren instead." Tough talk, but not unexpected from a Freedom

Caucus guy who is also a member of the Budget and Oversight & Government Reform Committees. But Blum also represents the people of the 1st district of Iowa, which includes Cedar Rapids – a place that has seen its share of flooding. I suppose then that it comes as no surprise that Blum puts aside his animus toward spending when it funnels to his voting public. Bragging a bit, Rod the Blum says, "I have been fighting since the Floods of 2008 to get these protection measures approved by Congress and signed into law by the President, as well as delivering more than $4 billion in disaster assistance to help Iowa rebuild." Stated another way: Highways –bad; Flood protection – good.

Because he represents West Virginia, **Alex Mooney** is obligated to hate the EPA and must take extreme umbrage against the "war on coal." Mooney said, "As a freshman member of the House Budget Committee, I worked to deliver on West Virginia priorities, balance the federal budget and reduce the size and scope of an overreaching federal government." Pretty bold claims coming from a dude who's been in office for less than two years. Anyway, his actual contribution to the House budget: three amendments calling for de-funding new stream buffer regulations, de-funding new Environmental Protection Agency ozone standard regulations and de-funding the Legal Services Corporation. (This "accomplishment" is cited about a dozen times on his website.)

The man is a de-funder! Except, of course, when the needs of his constituents come a-callin'. In a press release, "Congressman Alex X. Mooney applauded the announcement that the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) will increase funding for High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) by $13.4 million as part of a new Heroin Response Strategy." And why might he applaud what would appear to meet his definition of "overreaching federal government"? West Virginia has a heroin problem, you

see. Yeah, sure, other states have problems too, but this is West Virginia and de-funding stops at the border. It should be noted that the items called for by these Freedom Caucus wieners are not bad things. They are legitimate attempts to deal with and solve real problems. But how irritating to witness the hypocritical posture these and others with them assume when the cameras are rolling, and the pitchfork-wielding public gathers to chomp on red meat.

A Wonderful Word

October 15, 2015

Vergangenheitsbewältigung – It means coming to terms with the past.

Hollywood's Age Gap Trope

October 20, 2015

When I read *The New York Times* obituary for Joan Leslie, screen actress from the good old days who died the other day at 90, I couldn't help recalling the long-time Hollywood trope of romantically pairing young women with older men. Here's a caption on a photo accompanying the obit: "Joan Leslie, at 18, dancing with Fred Astaire in 'The Sky's the Limit,' in 1943." Unmentioned was that Fred at the time was 44 years old. The obit goes on to note, "Before she was out of her teens she had become known for film roles including Velma, the young disabled woman with whom Humphrey Bogart falls in love in "High Sierra" (1941); Gracie, the love interest of Gary Cooper in "Sergeant York" (1941), a role she landed on her 16th birthday; and Mary, the bride of George M. Cohan (played by James Cagney) in "Yankee Doodle Dandy," released in 1942." At the time when Leslie was cast as the romantic partner at the age of just 16, Bogart was 42, Gary Cooper was 40, and Cagney was 43. And before she was 20, Leslie starred as the love interest of Henry Fonda (38) and Ronald Reagan (32).

Other films of the era that paired romantic leads with a wide age gap include "North by Northwest" (Cary Grant (55) and Eva Marie Saint (35)), "Rear Window" (James Stewart (46) and Grace Kelly (25)), "To Have and Have Not" (Humphrey Bogart (45) and Lauren Bacall (20)), "Gone With the Wind" (Clark Gable (38) and Vivien Leigh (26)), and "Casablanca" (Humphrey Bogart (43) and Ingrid Bergman (27)).

That was decades ago and yet the conceit continues to this day. Hollywood prefers to mismatch the romantic leads age-wise, I believe, so as to enhance the perception of male star's virility, and to stoke envy in the hearts of the audience.

More recent examples include:

"Six Days and Seven Nights" (1998), a comedy in which a young Anne Heche (29) suffers the company of grizzly Harrison Ford (56), a pilot of a small plane that crash lands on an uninhabited island, but comes around to digging his craggy ass.

"A Perfect Murder" (1998), a thriller in which Michael Douglas (54) concocts an elaborate plot to kill his unfaithful wife, Gwyneth Paltrow (36).

"In the Line of Fire" (1993), in which secret service agents Clint Eastwood (63) and Renee Russo (39) team up to find a would-be assassin, and hook up while on the presidential trail.

"The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo" (2011), the Scandinavian psycho-sexual thriller in which reporter Daniel Craig (43) investigates a murder (and some kinky maneuvers) with the help of punky computer hacker Rooney Mara (26).

I'm sure you can conjure up dozens more, as such casting is so common.

And now consider "Sunset Blvd," Billy Wilder's 1950 classic about an over-the-hill actress from the silent era who seeks to resurrect her career with the help of a young screenwriter. Gloria Swanson (51 at the time) plays Norma Desmond who is in her 50s; William Holden (32) plays the struggling Joe Gillis who is supposed to be in his 20s. The movie depicts the ruthlessness of a Hollywood that discards actors who have aged beyond a certain sweet-spot – probably 29 years old, when it comes to women.

Gloria Swanson, who actually made her bones in silent films starting in 1914, is excellent as the forgotten star holed up like a hermit in her decrepit mansion. Unlike most films that use the age gap to manipulate the audience, "Sunset Blvd" takes the dilemma faced by middle-aged actresses head-on. And it doesn't end well for anyone.

Although it's no longer the case that actresses in their 50s and beyond can't get good parts (e.g. Meryl Streep, Diane Keaton, Julianne Moore, Jodie Foster, Sigourney Weaver, Helen Mirren), I believe the quantity of scripts written with a strong, middle-aged leading female character in mind is fundamentally limited. Russell Crowe disagrees, blaming middle-aged actresses who won't acknowledge they are no longer spring chickens. But as the article notes, Crowe "makes no mention of the endless parade of films with creaking, ageing leading men playing opposite fresh-faced love-interests."

The Weills: Petty Plutocrats Practice Penury

October 23, 2015

Joan Weill has a soft spot in her heart for tiny Paul Smith's College nestled in the Adirondack Mountains where she and her

billionaire husband Sanford often go for R&R. Although Paul Smith's College is the only private institute of higher learning in the Adirondack Park that grants four-year degrees, it has suffered financially of late, hampered by a lackluster endowment fund. Tuition is high, financial aid is limited, and, let's face it – the place is pretty damn remote. Still, the college offers a quality education, and is considered a valuable asset for upstate New York.

Apparently, Joan Weill believes the college deserves to prosper, and as lack of money is the only thing standing between success and looming mediocrity, Joan is in a good position to intercede. And she has. Thanks to the enormous wealth that oozes from the pockets of Sanford, who is said by Forbes to be worth $1.01 billion, the couple has donated $10 million to the college and raised nearly $30 million from other donors. (Sidebar: Sanford Weill engineered the agglomeration of Citigroup and Travelers Insurance, and successfully agitated for the repeal of the Glass-Steagall law which freed banks to go bat-shit insane with other peoples' money. In honor of his toxic legacy, *Time* named him one of the "25 People to Blame for the Financial Crisis.")

Those who administer Paul Smith's College have been extremely grateful for the Weill largesse which was used to build a new library (known as Joan Weill Adirondack Library) and a student center (yeah, it's called the Joan Weill Student Center.) Joan Weill is so smitten with Paul Smith's College that she recently offered to pony up another $20 million – money that could seriously change the game for the institution. One itsy-bitsy catch: change the name to Joan Weill-Paul Smith's College. (Clearly the woman has a fairly virulent strain of narcissism going on.) The College administrators were so hot for the cash infusion, they were practically running to Staples to print up new business cards; that is, until some party-pooper reminded them that when the college

was created in 1937 with a bequest from Phelps Smith, the benefactor required that it "be forever known" as Paul Smith's College of Arts and Sciences, in honor of his father. Uh oh.

The issue went to court and on October 7 Judge John Ellis denied the request to skirt the covenant so as to change the name. NY State law allows the rules attached to a charitable contribution to be tossed aside only when complying with them has become impossible. Judge Ellis concluded the College was not in imminent danger of folding up, so it was not impossible to comply. Hence, no name change allowed.

Okay, sounds pretty cut and dried. Maybe instead the school could do a ribbon-cutting on the Joan Weill Parking Garage, and the Joan Weill Theater of the Absurd. But today we learned that "philanthropists" Joan and Sanford Weill were more concerned about fishing for adoration and proliferating their names all over the bucolic campus than they were about building a lasting institution. Following the court ruling, the couple decided to donate no money after all.

But with $20 million burning a hole in her Hermes purse, don't be shocked to find the name "Joan Weill" plastered on some other revered institution. Say the Adirondack Park itself?

Debate Exposes Over-Rehearsed Circus Seals

October 29, 2015

As I dressed for a night of drinking and gambling at the MGM Grand Casino, anticipating an exciting evening of currency depletion, I caught the beginning of the Republican Presidential debate on CNBC. No fan of these spectacles, I was about to switch the channel when I heard the opening question which was lobbed at each of the candidates by moderator Carl Quintanilla: "What's your biggest weakness?" Anticipating equivocation and bloviation,

the moderator added, "So in 30 seconds, without telling us that you try too hard or that you're a perfectionist, what is your biggest weakness and what are you doing to address it?" (Now, it's anyone's guess how such an inane question made it onto the line-up when just two hours had been allotted for the entire "debate" in which no fewer than 10 people participated. But these shows have long been nothing more than mere entertainment where serious topics must not be raised lest the viewing audience switch to the channel that broadcasts burning logs in a fireplace.)

The serial responses from the suited candidates standing behind the podia offered irrefutable proof that each is an over-rehearsed automaton morphed by consultants and handlers from presumably sentient humans into trained seals who know when to bark for fish snacks.

Kicking it off was **John Kasich** who clearly did not hear and/or understand the question. Or maybe he just didn't give a shit. Remember – the question was "what's your biggest weakness?" Here's how the man from Ohio replied: "Good question, but I want to tell you, my great concern is that we are on the verge, perhaps, of picking someone who cannot do this job." He blabbed on, calling out unnamed competitors who "talk about deporting 10 or 11 people here from this country out of this country, splitting families." Shit. Deporting 10 or 11 people? And here I thought it was millions. I guess Kasich's weakness is an inability to comprehend really big numbers.

Next up was the pious **Mike Huckabee**, who immediately defied the admonition of the moderator not to cite a strength disguised as a weakness. "If I have a weakness, it's that I try to live by the rules. I try to live by the rules, no matter what they are, and I was brought up that way as a kid. Play by the rules." I love his opening: "If" – IF!? I have a weakness." What a pompous blob

of cellulite. What rules is he fucking talking about? And how is living by the rules a weakness, unless he's talking about the rules set down by his shemale dominatrix who withholds dog biscuits when Huck won't woof on command.

Silver-spooner **Jeb Bush**: "I can't fake anger." As the moderator in the beginning also asked the candidates to explain what they're doing to address their weakness, presumably Jeb is working on doing a better job of faking anger.

Marco Rubio has been accused of being the anodyne candidate, and he didn't disappoint. The young Cuban-American said, "I would begin by saying that I'm not sure it's a weakness, but I do believe that I share a sense of optimism for America's future." Sharing a sense of optimism? No, Little Marco, that's not a weakness. You jerking off to scat porn is a weakness. Patronizing the guy who gives you such bad haircuts is a weakness. Sharing a sense of optimism doesn't rise to the level of weakness. Did you not understand the question?

Unpersuasively, **Donald Trump** called himself out as follows: "I think maybe my greatest weakness is that I trust people too much. I'm too trusting." Maybe that's true; who knows. Trump inadvertently revealed another weakness, though, which seems much more believable. "If they let me down, I never forgive." Easy to visualize such vindictive behavior from Trump. Perhaps sensing he gave away too much info, he quickly added, "I don't know if you would call that a weakness." So why bring it up? Or is candor his real weakness?

Carly Fiorina, the well-practiced public speaker charmed the audience when she said, "Well, gee, after the last debate, I was told that I didn't smile enough." But no sooner had she behaved like a human, she reverted to full-on circus-seal wonk mode. "75 percent of the American people think the federal government is corrupt.

And this big powerful, corrupt bureaucracy works now only for the big, the powerful, the wealthy and the well-connected." And who would know better about how the wealthy and the well-connected benefit than multi-millionaire Carly Fiorina.

Smarmy **Ted Cruz** (who reminds me of Joseph McCarthy with his greasy hair and dark eyes) followed Fiorina, and he also tried the self-deprecating approach. "I'm too agreeable, easy going." But no longer a human being, the over-rehearsed Cruz felt obligated to restate: "You know, I think my biggest weakness is exactly the opposite. I'm a fighter. I am passionate about what I believe. I've been passionate my whole life about the Constitution." Being passionate is a weakness? Only on planet Cruz.

Wearing invisible blinkers, portly **Chris Christie** exclaimed, "I don't see a lot of weakness on this stage, quite frankly. Where I see the weakness is in those three people that are left on the Democratic stage." Clearly his handlers have counseled Christie to seem more statesmanlike, and refrain from attacking fellow Reps. "You know, I see a socialist, an isolationist and a pessimist. And for the sake of me, I can't figure out which one is which." A few seconds later, he says emphatically, "I know who the pessimist is. It's Hillary Clinton." And given Bernie Sanders is a self-proclaimed socialist, what's Christie's problem? Is his weakness the inability to comprehend the process of elimination?

And finally, nutcase **Rand Paul** got his chance to cite a weakness – but it was couched in an enigma. He started off by pontificating, "You know, I left my medical practice and ran for office because I was concerned about an $18 trillion debt. We borrow a million dollars a minute. Now, on the floor of the Congress, the Washington establishment from both parties puts forward a bill that will explode the deficit." The audience breathlessly awaited a Rand Paul weakness, and he finally delivered.

Referring to the bill, he pronounced, "I will spend every ounce of energy to stop it. I will begin tomorrow to filibuster it." And if throwing sand into the gears of government on a Quixotic adventure isn't a weakness, I don't know what is.

Ahmad Chalabi Dies; Takes New Job as Concierge in Hell

November 5, 2015

No one can take greater credit for conning the United States into invading Iraq than Ahmad Chalabi, the scoundrel who twisted data, recruited expert liars and made up horror stories tailored to fit the prejudices of a cabal of influential neo-conservatives bent on toppling Saddam Hussein by whatever means and for whatever rationale. And after America made a hash of the Middle East at the cost of thousands of lives and a trillion dollars, Chalabi tried to become the leader of the riven country by shamelessly capitalizing on the chaos.

Chalabi died the other day at 71, and although this is welcome news, it's too bad he croaked from heart failure instead of stepping on an IED. Chalabi's mischief goes back at least a couple decades when he was instrumental in marshalling a bunch of chicken-hawk douche-bags (Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Dick Cheney, Douglas Feith aka. "the stupidest fucking guy on the face of the planet" according to General Tommy Franks) into escorting the Iraq Liberation Act through Congress in 1998. That act made it the declared policy of the U.S. to topple Saddam; no wonder the Bush Administration gleefully jumped on the 9/11 attacks to go after him. Bush's cabinet and his close advisors had already laid the groundwork well in advance, just waiting for a whiff of a reason to go into the Iraq cauldron.

After conflating 9/11 and Saddam Hussein, those who wanted to exact revenge for the dictator's bad behavior in the early 1990s needed some rationale for a full-scale invasion and regime-change coup. Enter the smarmy Chalabi. He offered what the neo-cons badly wanted: "evidence" that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction developed from a vast network of nuclear, chemical and biological programs. Forget that the testimony from Chalabi's "expert" Iraqi National Congress witnesses were completely non-credible, and worse, on the CIA payroll – the fanciful tales they wove salved the pliable minds of the neo-cons like an opioid.

Most memorable from that sordid affair was the spectacle of Secretary of State Colin Powell at the United Nations presenting the evidence for going to war – all of it based on bullshit stories gleaned from Chalabi's stable of prevaricators. The most famous of them all was Rafid Ahmed Alwan al-Janabil, the brother of a Chalabi aide, and a guy who earned the codename "Curveball" from the CIA. Despite a moniker that would suggest untrustworthiness, the leadership of the most powerful country in the world took his story to the bank. Powell held up a vial of baby powder and showed a picture of a falafel truck – and the U.S. invaded Iraq. According to *The New York Times*, "In 2010, after a disputed parliamentary election that threatened to end the reign of Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, Mr. Chalabi led an effort to purge Sunni politicians from positions of authority. By doing so, he helped Mr. Maliki consolidate power and alienated Sunnis — two factors that set the stage for the renaissance of the Sunni insurgency that later metastasized into the Islamic State." So, again, thank you Ahmad Chalabi. Enjoy Hell, you fucker.

Lest you think the men who advised George W. Bush are receiving overly harsh treatment here, consider the observations of his father, George H. W. Bush. In a forthcoming biography of

the 41st president, "Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush" by Jon Meacham, the elder Bush has some tart words for Cheney and his evil mentor, Donald Rumsfeld. On Rumsfeld: "I think he served the president badly. I don't like what he did, and I think it hurt the president having his iron-ass view of everything. I've never been that close to him anyway. There's a lack of humility, a lack of seeing what the other guy thinks. He's more kick ass and take names, take numbers. I think he paid a price for that. Rumsfeld was an arrogant fellow and self-assured, swagger." As for Mr. Five Deferments Dick Cheney, G.H.W Bush says he built "his own empire" and asserted too much "hard-line" influence within GWB's White House in pushing for the use of force around the world.

A couple weeks ago, a strange thread trended on Twitter: "If you could go back and kill Hitler as a baby, would you do it?" I wonder if a similar meme would get traction if "Hitler" were substituted with "Chalabi"? Maybe so, if enough mothers and brothers and friends of dead and maimed Iraqi War veterans knew Chalabi was directly responsible for their devastation.

Analysts: The Captain Hindsights of Wall Street

November 11, 2015

Could there be anything more irritating while you're hemorrhaging money than to be lectured *ex post facto* on the "obvious-to-everyone-but-you" trends and directions of stock prices by hyper-insulated, highly-compensated financial experts? Like Captain Hindsight of "South Park" fame who zooms in to tell victims of tragedy about all the things that could have been done to save them, the analysts from esteemed houses of finance like Merrill Lynch, Morgan Stanley, Deutsche Bank and Cantor

Fitzgerald have the rare quality of predicting the future mere moments after it's already happened.

Time and again, analysts who cover publicly traded companies critique strategies, question decisions, scold or exalt executive leaders, dissect competitive threats and – finally – issue forecasts for a variety of valuable statistics like revenues, earnings, free cash flow, and, most-importantly, the long-range future price of a share of stock. That they can do this separates them from the mere mortals who slave away in pedestrian jobs at those same companies they cover. How they do this is the basis for their enormous compensation, and for the cloying deference they receive from investors.

Why they aren't vilified more for their rank charlatanism is beyond me.

After grinding through a company's quarterly reports, SEC filings, and public pronouncements (and maybe some insider poop), these analysts conjure up all sorts of rationale for establishing a stock price forecast and a recommendation on whether to buy, hold or sell. Tough stuff… the funny thing, though, is that fairly often the analyst will adjust a share price forecast just moments after the stock has already made a significant move – that is, after investors have observed the move for themselves, and cannot take advantage of the analyst's "foresight."

Consider these two analysts: Wamsi Mohan of Merrill Lynch, and Sherri Scribner of Deutsche Bank. Each covers IBM and writes regularly about the company's financials. Mohan is ranked #1310 and Scribner is ranked #2,483 out of 3,858 analysts by *TipRanks* – which raises the question: does the world really need 3,858 analysts?

Anyway, IBM stock recently slipped yet again from about $150 to $140 a share in a single day, and the analysts' sharp knives were

out for blood (the stock is now at $135). *Marketwatch* published a story on October 20 – the same day the stock lost 6 percent overnight – titled "IBM is shrinking, and the future looks ugly" in which the prescient Sherri Scribner announced new, lowered stock price futures. According to *Marketwatch*, Scribner "lowered her price on IBM's stock to $150 from $160 and reiterated a hold rating, citing currency headwinds that she expects will pressure IBM's growth in fiscal-year 2016." Wow – the stock tanked to $140, dribbled further to $135, and "Carnak" Scribner readied everyone to hold on for a wild ride down to $150.

And here's a summary of Mohan's visionary skills. He had set a target price of $200 while the stock hovered for a while at $185. After the stock dropped more than $20 to $163, Mohan relented and cut his target to… $185(?) With no northward movement after several weeks during which time the stock held steady around $160, Mohan finally publishes his new target: $160. Not too long after he set $160 as the new target, the stock rallied to $170. Guess what? After the stock hung around at $170 for six weeks, Mohan sets a new target: $170. Finally, the same day IBM stock plummeted to $140, our hero, affectionately known as "Wamsi the Wonder" lowers his target to $160.

I suspect these guys would fuck up the forecast for yesterday's weather.

RIP Gunnar Hansen

November 11, 2015

The man who played the sinister Leatherface with such grace and aplomb in Tobe Hooper's seminal "Texas Chain Saw Massacre" died the other day at 68. Gunnar Hansen got the job because he fit the director's vision of a big, imposing figure who could effortlessly wield a chain saw and hoist a panicked girl onto a meat-hook with authority.

More interested in screenwriting than acting, and concerned about being typecast as the maniac killer in horror movies, Hansen nonetheless took additional roles in the same genre as Leatherface – perhaps an indication of the difficulty of making a career out of writing movie scripts.

It's been told that the Leatherface character was inspired by real-life psycho Ed Gein who murdered women and robbed graves in rural Wisconsin, collected female body parts, and fashioned wearable items from human skin. The banner headline in the *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern* after Gein had been arrested read, "10 Skulls Found in House of Horrors." But whereas Gein was a wisp of a man who operated quietly out of sight, Hansen's Leatherface was a hulking monster who brandished a noisy chain saw – perhaps one of the most feared weapons for its power to sever limbs without pity.

I re-watched the movie in the past year and was struck by how tame it seems now compared to the highly-convincing special effects of today's horror film industry, where graphic decapitation and disembowelments are nauseatingly faithful to the real deal. And in this light, it's more evident that most of the shock and fear imposed on the audience was due to Hansen's relentless and pitiless pursuit of the teenagers who stumbled upon his lair. Truly a classic character who ranks right up there with Freddie Kruger, "Halloween's" Michael Myers, Pinhead, and Jason Voorhees of the "Friday the 13th" franchise.

NYS Vampires Go After Daily Fantasy Sports

November 13, 2015

The Attorney General of New York, Eric Schneiderman has come out strong against DraftKings and FanDuel, two operators of internet-based daily fantasy sports (DFS) games. In a letter

to Nigel Eccles, CEO of FanDuel, the NYS AG called out the company for running an illegal gambling enterprise – "gambling" defined as when a person "stakes or risks something of value upon the outcome of a contest of chance or a future contingent event not under his control or influence." Damn, that sounds like it should include the buying and selling of stock options and commodity futures – an industry that practically props up New York State.

Without a hint of irony, the letter continues by claiming FanDuel's contests are not victimless because "daily fantasy sports create the same public health and economic concerns as other forms of gambling, like addiction." This from a state that runs daily lotteries, peddles scratch-off games to fixed-income seniors, produces non-stop Keno games every five minutes, participates in nationwide Powerball and Mega Millions games, operates several racetracks, and greenlighted a bunch of new casinos.

Perhaps the most galling part of the letter chastises FanDuel for representing the game as an easy path to riches, taking them to task for running ads that say, "anyone can play, anyone can succeed." Is this any more egregious than NYS hawking lottery tickets with slogans like "All you need is a dollar and a dream"?

Oddly, the AG tries to draw a serious distinction between daily fantasy sports and traditional fantasy sports, holding up the latter as a totally acceptable form of entertainment because the participants compete over a long season and play for "bragging rights." That seems to me like a distinction without a difference. I suspect "traditional" fantasy sports get a pass from the AG because New York can't figure a way to tax the shit out of it, so the State must default to a position of benign neglect.

The New York Times published an anti-DFS editorial this week that accidentally made a case against itself. First, the *Times* says

"fantasy sports games are forms of gambling, not games of skill," then they note a few sentences later that "the top 1 percent of DraftKings' winning bettors receive the vast majority of the winnings." If DFS is truly a game of chance and not skill, why aren't the winnings spread more evenly across all players, like payouts from slot machines?

The real story is that New York State is irritated that it was caught flat-footed and hadn't anticipated the success of DFS providers, thus delaying the State's infiltration of the industry to take a big cut of their revenues. That will happen soon enough, though, and all will be forgiven. Let's face it, internet-based fantasy gaming – like the oft-vilified Uber, Lyft, and AirBnB – is here to stay. Fans like it; hell, the National Football League and the NFL Players Association are in bed with DraftKings and FanDuel. And in July it was reported that DraftKings raised $300 million in funding, much of that from Fox Sports.

No, too much is at stake to allow these companies to disappear. Besides, New York State doesn't want DraftKings, FanDuel and their ilk to go away. Like an organized crime syndicate, the State just wants the companies to get a license, agree to some regulation, and start disgorging money. Will it all work out in the end? Well, as New York State is wont to remind viewers every day: "Hey, You Never Know."

RIP Carol Doda

November 13, 2015

Immortalized in Tom Wolfe's novel, "The Pump House Gang," Carol Doda was perhaps the first superstar topless dancer who paved the way starting in 1964 for innumerable buxom acolytes who through their mastery of tittie-tassel-twirling and thigh-gripping-pole-vaulting animated the low-slung, windowless

strip clubs of rural and exurban America into must-go havens for randy college freshmen, doomed grooms, and repressed masturbatory perverts.

Ms. Doda, who sported a silly-putty-injected 44DD bosom which was said to have been insured for $1.5 million, died the other day at 78. The way Wolfe told it, Carol Doda was dancing topless at the Condor Club in San Francisco at the same time the Republican National Convention was going on; Conservative Republican delegates barnstorming for Barry Goldwater in the afternoon couldn't wait to hightail it to the Condor Club in North Beach in the evening to watch those 44DD's heave and sway. No way could the Communist Red Menace of the time compete with that.

Trump: The Art of the Eel

November 29, 2015

That Donald Trump is one slippery dude. Perfecting "the art of the eel," Trump is the only presidential candidate who, as a matter of policy, wantonly deflects controversy by ginning up new, replacement controversy. No sooner are the pundits and talking heads debating one Trump outrage when the candidate offers up a new outrage – and like kittens chasing shiny objects, the pundits move on.

A few weeks ago, as the world was waking up to the years-long Syrian refugee crisis, Trump declared, "Our President wants to take in 250,000 from Syria. Think of it, 250,000 people. And we all have heart, and we all want people taken care of and all of that, but with the problems our country has, to take in 250,000 people — some of whom are going to have problems, big problems — is just insane." I'm sure many Americans would agree that importing a quarter-million refugees is insane, but the reality is that Obama

is actually calling for the ingestion of about 10,000. Now, there are those who think any number of refugees larger than zero is insane, but Trump's claim struck many as a hyperbolic lie.

Having established a doomsday scenario in the minds of his followers, even as fact-checkers were gearing up to debunk the claim, Trump moved on to tell George Stephanopoulos, "I watched when the World Trade Center came tumbling down. And I watched in Jersey City, New Jersey, where thousands and thousands of people were cheering as that building was coming down. Thousands of people were cheering." News watchers on September 11, 2001 were treated to clips of a few scummy Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip celebrating the calamity, but never was there a report of mass celebration in New Jersey, or anywhere else in America.

Numerous political leaders and news reporters pounced on Trump for blatantly lying – or at best, misremembering events on a grand scale. Still, a few Trump supporters called attention to a *Washington Post* article written by Serge Kovaleski a week after the 9/11 attacks which reported, "In Jersey City, within hours of two jetliners' plowing into the World Trade Center, law enforcement authorities detained and questioned a number of people who were allegedly seen celebrating the attacks and holding tailgate-style parties on rooftops while they watched the devastation on the other side of the river." Now, the activity described is sordid, but it's also far from the "thousands" personally seen celebrating by Trump. But the *Washington Post* story did provide a fig-leaf of cover for slippery Donald.

Then Kovaleski came out with his own statement which threw cold water on Trump. "I certainly do not remember anyone saying that thousands or even hundreds of people were celebrating. That was not the case, as best as I can remember." Uh oh. Time to deploy "the art of the eel." Trump made a widely-watched speech

in which he took Kovaleski to task for having a suspect memory. "Now the poor guy — you ought to see the guy: 'Uhh I don't know what I said. I don't remember.' He's going, 'I don't remember. Maybe that's what I said.'" As Trump impeached Kovaleski's memory he also flailed around in an apparent derogatory imitation of the reporter's physical disability called arthrogryposis which can cause jerky motions.

Of course, this mockery served to steer conversation away from Trump's spurious claims of thousands of Muslims dancing in the streets of New Jersey on September 11.

All of a sudden, like clockwork, the punditry was debating whether Trump should apologize for the flailing, having completely forgotten the prior controversy. For his part, Trump has already laid down the foundation of the next controversy. In addition to denying any mockery had taken place – hey, Trump never even laid eyes on the disabled reporter! (despite having said "you ought to see the guy") – the master of "the art of the eel" demanded an apology from *The New York Times* for coming to Kovaleski's defense (he now works for the Grey Lady). Turning lemons into lemonade, Trump magnanimously stated, "I have tremendous respect for people who are physically challenged and have spent tens of millions of dollars throughout buildings all over the world on making them handicapped accessible and ADA (Americans Disability Act) compliant."

Oh, so wonderfully slippery, that damn eel.

Pfuck Pfizer

December 2, 2015

Pfizer, the $207 billion pharmaceutical firm responsible for everything from Advil to Viagra to Zoloft with hundreds of wonder drugs in between, announced its intention to merge

with Allergan, another behemoth in the industry. Allergan, which started in 1948 in Los Angeles as a supplier of eye care products and came to own the multi-billion-dollar Botox business in 1991 when it acquired Oculinum, is today based in Dublin, Ireland. Pfizer's drug-induced hard-on for merging with Allergan has less to do with the luck of the Irish, and everything to do with bagging a nice, low corporate income tax rate. Last year, Pfizer posted revenues of $49.6 billion and paid an effective tax rate of 25.5%. The top rate in Ireland is 12.5%.

In order to reap the tax benefit, Pfizer must do a tax inversion and turn Irish. To do that, the smaller Allergan will, as a formality, acquire giant Pfizer in what is called a reverse merger. Once that happens, the combined company will rename itself… Pfizer. Nothing else much will change – except the amount of tax it pays to the U.S. Government. It will keep its stock symbol on the NYSE where it is a component of the Dow Jones Industrial Average, and maintain its headquarters building in New York City. Best of all, Pfizer will continue to enjoy all the benefits of doing business in America while stiffing the government that protects its interest here and abroad. The whole thing stinks of a greedy scam, but as observers note, it's perfectly legal. Why shouldn't Pfizer take advantage of a loophole in the law that lets it reduce its tax burden by billions? Why should CEO Ian Read be satisfied with his paltry $23 million pay package when he could be pocketing 30 mil plus? Why should Pfizer shareholders accept almost $7 billion in dividends when that number could easily jump by billions funded from tax savings?

Valid questions all. But not as valid as this one: Why should Pfizer continue to benefit from American protections? If the Pfizer/Allergan deal goes through it's only fair that they forgo things they no longer have to pay for. Some recommendations:

No more U.S. patent protection for Pfizer. The U.S. Government is the world's leader when it comes to protecting the inventions of companies for up to 17 years from being copied and sold in competition with the originator. The Patent Office and the U.S. courts that take legal challenges run on taxpayer money. Pfizer wants to be Irish? Let them appeal to the Irish government for redress when someone mixes up a generic version of Eliquis, or Lyrica, or Celebrex, or Chantix.

Quit allowing Pfizer to advertise on TV. Other than New Zealand, the U.S. is the only country that allows pharmaceutical companies to directly advertise their products to consumers. That's why the names Eliquis, Lyrica, Celebrex and Chantix sound so familiar – they're ceaselessly hawked on TV. Because the government bends over backward to accommodate the pharma lobby, Pfizer is allowed to deploy the sinister tactic of hypnotizing people into asking their doctors "if Eliquis is right for you." No better time than the present to clamp down on Pfizer's televised assaults.

Unshackle Medicare to negotiate lower drug prices from Pfizer. Today, by law, the U.S. Government cannot negotiate lower prices for drugs from the pharmaceutical companies. Clearly a sop to the drug makers, this provision means the taxpayers spend about $16 billion more for drugs than they would otherwise have to. With Pfizer looking to shirk its tax duty, there's really no point in keeping this ridiculous provision in place. Time to play hardball with Pfizer and squeeze some savings out of their fat asses.

Stop Federal agencies from endorsing Pfizer's products. Last year, under relentless pressure from Pfizer, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommended the use of Pfizer's Prevnar by people older than 65. (You know Prevnar – it's a pneumonia vaccine that appears in TV ads every 15 minutes.) But given Pfizer's disdain for support of the U.S. Government, it's unseemly that an august body like the CDC should loan their name to a traitorous company.

Delist Pfizer from the NYSE. Being listed on the New York Stock Exchange brings companies enormous power and cache'. Pfizer deserves to derive neither. Let them take up residence on the Irish Stock Exchange with noted companies Glanbia, Fyffes, Smurfit Kappa Group, and Paddy Power.

WARNING: Call your doctor if the thought of Pfizer shamelessly avoiding taxes causes unexpected bleeding or bleeding that lasts a long time, such as unusual bleeding from the gums, nosebleeds that happen often, or menstrual or vaginal bleeding that is heavier than normal; bleeding that is severe or you cannot control; red, pink, or brown urine; red or black stools (looks like tar); coughing up or vomiting blood or vomit that looks like coffee grounds; unexpected pain, swelling, or joint pain; headaches, or feeling dizzy or weak or just extremely pissed off.

Martin Shkreli: Smug Face of Wanton Greed

December 7, 2015

To label Martin Shkreli a douche-bag would be an affront to douche-bags. Shkreli is the supposed wunderkind who founded the drug company Turing Pharmaceuticals earlier this year with a business model for buying up rights to older, specialty medicines and jacking up the prices.

Instead of focusing on developing new drugs to tackle challenging health issues, Shkreli would rather behave like a lowlife patent troll, acquiring rights to mature, narrow use, obscure pharmaceuticals and exploiting the tiny population of sufferers who depend on the drugs. Despite what their website claims ("We are dedicated to helping patients, who often have no effective treatment options, by developing and commercializing innovative treatments"), Turing is on the hunt to scoop up niche drugs and exploit the sick and dying who depend on them. It's more about "commercializing" than "developing." As an aside, I wonder if mathematician Alan Turing is flipping in his grave for having his name attached to a near-criminal enterprise?

In one outrageous move, after paying for the rights to Daraprim (a drug for treating toxoplasmosis that's been on the market since 1953) Shkreli increased the price to $750 per pill from $13.50 – because he can. The number of people dependent on Daraprim is so small that no other company has ever come forward to develop a generic. Shkreli claims he raised the price to generate revenue with which to fund new research, essentially extorting R&D from a small portion of the population unlucky enough to suffer from a rare disease.

Justifiably, Shkreli took hits from a multitude of patient advocates, politicians and pharma execs. After mumbling a bit about dialing back a bit on the avarice, Shkreli came back more defiant than ever, musing that he should have raised the price even more. Claiming it's his duty to maximize the flow of money into the pockets of shareholders, Shkreli gave the world a lesson in economics: "No one wants to say it, no one's proud of it, but this is a capitalist society, capitalist system and capitalist rules." This, of course, is bullshit. $750 per pill is way more than the market can bear, and therefore the only way for Turing to sell the inflated

product is for taxpayer funded (socialist) programs like Medicaid and Medicare to step in and subsidize the sale.

If, god forbid, Martin Shkreli is ever hit by a bus, I sincerely hope the capitalistic ambulance company charges him a million dollars to drive him to the hospital – in advance.

What the L?

December 7, 2015

Almost 50 years ago, the Green Bay Packers of the NFL vanquished the Kansas City Chiefs of the less-prestigious AFL in what became known as the Super Bowl. In 1971, the NFL chose to mark the fifth championship event with a Roman numeral V – placing the biggest football game of the year in the same exclusive club as cornerstones, movie copyrights, and Cartier watches. I remember learning in grade school how to render Arabic numerals into Romans and vice versa, but doing even simple arithmetic with the clunky assembly of I's, V's, X's, L's, C's, D's and M's was nigh impossible, hence their isolation for use as a pompous stand-in for numbers the whole world has come to embrace.

I wonder if children today still have to learn Roman numerals. I suspect not, because after 49 Super Bowls adorned with such lofty appellations as XIV, XXVII, and XLIV, the NFL is ditching the Roman numeral fad this year and going back to Arabic. They must know that the bulk of today's football fans might scratch their collective heads in confusion at advertisements for a Super Bowl L. Furthermore, appending just a single character seems to diminish the whole affair – it's certainly not a powerful way to celebrate the golden anniversary of that first match-up in 1966. I suppose the NFL could have bent the Roman rules and called it Super Bowl XXXXX – but then they might have been mistaken for a porno production. So, for now, get ready for near-nonstop

promotion of Super Bowl 50 and enjoy the clarity until 2017 when the NFL returns with Super Bowl LI (still weird, though).

On Broadway: China Dull

December 17, 2015

After suffering through 100 minutes of David Mamet's latest bomb, "China Doll" starring Al Pacino through January 31st (if it makes it that far), I've concluded Mamet is washed up as a playwright. Maybe he was born a hack writer who rented his soul to the Devil thirty years ago to be able to pen such gems as "American Buffalo," "Speed the Plow," and "Glengarry Glen Ross," and the lease has now run out and he's doomed to produce confusing and stultifying material for the rest of his life.

Not that it makes any difference to the audience who has filled the Gerald Schoenfeld Theater since the delayed opening of "China Doll" in November. Broadway has long recognized the gravitational attraction to high-priced tickets when a known celebrity is cast in a play or musical. It's common to see morbidly worn-out productions kept alive by shuffling in new leads every 3 to 6 months. At 75, Al Pacino is a legend, and there are no doubt millions of fans of "The Godfather" and "Scent of a Woman" who would love to see the Oscar-winning actor live and in person on stage. And Mamet is one of the heavyweights in American playwriting. So, I'm certain the producers of "China Doll" had no hesitations when Al signed on. Not even after he couldn't learn his lines and needs a teleprompter. Or after they realized Mamet's script was a boring, meandering mess that he refused to change until the end.

I saw Mamet's last play, "The Anarchist" in 2012 which starred Broadway superstar Patti Lupone and movie great Debra Winger, and I came away disappointed – shaking my head at the stilted

dialog, confusing plot establishment, and unsatisfying ending. Moreover, I was let down by a writer whose work on stage and screen I admired and enjoyed. Still, when I saw that Mamet had written a new play starring Pacino, I fell for it like thousands of other fans. As it got closer to the opening of previews, I began to sense trouble from news reports of issues between Pacino and director Pam MacKinnon. Then there was the ominous postponement – rarely a good sign. I refused to read any reviews at that point, not wanting to spoil the anticipation.

The curtain opened, Al got a rousing applause just for being on the stage, and then Act I began in which Al explains to his young man-servant for a good 20 minutes the finer points of private aircraft tax law. Over and over we hear about the revised tail numbers and the strategy of keeping a private jet out of the U.S. for six months to avoid taxes. I could feel the audience squirm – like me, they wanted to adore the show, but it was already off to a rocky start.

Pacino plays Mickey Ross, a super-wealthy player in business and politics who is engaged to a saucy woman less than half his age – or at least we assume she's saucy, since we never see or hear from her. It's a two man play where only Mickey and his servant, Carson occupy the stage. In a most annoying and lazy theatrical device, Mamet has poor Pacino speak to a host of unseen characters over his cell phone. The fucker is constantly on the phone, repeating what the other side says so the audience can follow. "The stove is on? Why is the stove on? You want me to bake a cake? Ok, I'll bake a cake? It's for mom? Great. She's coming over at 6? OK, I'll be ready." Brutal. (I read numerous reports later that Pacino speaks to the other characters over a blue-tooth earpiece which is also used to feed him lines when he forgets them!)

As the play meanders along, we come to understand that

there's some bad blood between Mickey and the governor of some unnamed state. Somehow, the governor pulls a bunch of unlikely strings to fuck over Mickey, including getting his plane to touch down in the U.S. on its way to Canada, thus causing Mickey to incur a $5 million tax bill. Act I ends with Mickey planning revenge.

But when Act II starts, Mickey has already decided to be nice and let things go; after all, he's an old dude in the winter of life. I had been expecting classic Mamet rage and fury, but it didn't come. Instead, like God to Job, Mamet dumps a bunch of problems on Mickey. In the course of just 40 more minutes, Mickey faces felony charges for bribery, loses his passport, sees his fiancé deported, and watches the docile and taciturn Carson turn evil. I heard several in the audience mutter various versions of "what the fuck" when Carson made a threat that comes out of left field and is completely unsupported by the narrative of the play to that point.

I read that many patrons regularly walk out of the show at intermission; some even demanding their money back. In fact, the evening I saw the show, three people next to me never returned – which was good for me. The seats in the mezzanine at Schoenfeld Theater make coach on Delta feel like NetJets.

I finally perused the notices after the show, and to no surprise, "China Doll" was savaged.

The New York Times: "it creeps, hunched and sluggish, instead of rushing forward."

Hollywood Reporter: "A smug but pointless exercise stretched over two hours."

New York Daily News: "David Mamet said his new play would be 'better than oral sex.' "China Doll" is not even better than oral surgery."

LA Times: "If eavesdropping on a switchboard is your idea of drama, then "China Doll" is the play of your dreams."

All in all, I place the blame for this turkey squarely on Mamet. Pacino gives it a good show day after day, week after week. He is ultimately not the problem. The failure stems from Mamet's broken deal with the Devil which returned him to rank mediocrity. Too bad.

Hollywood 2015: Franchises and Dreck

December 29, 2015

December is the month that Hollywood releases its best material in the hopes you'll forget all about the dogshit they foisted on you the other eleven months of the year. Winners like "The Big Short," "Carol," and "The Room" showed up late in the year where the studios like to stack the best for last. Prior to the holiday season – and especially in the summer – the movie choices devolve predominantly into two categories: derivative franchise movies (sequels upon sequels to one-time decent fare), and the embarrassingly awful.

In the franchise category for 2016, Hollywood mined the vein deeply:

- "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" (number seven in a series that first appeared in 1977)
- "Creed" (The start of "Rocky" all over again)
- "Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation" (Descended from 1960s TV and now in its fifth installment)
- "Spectre" (24th James Bond movie in the franchise that began 53 bloody years ago)

The material that filled the embarrassingly awful category included much doggie do-do:

- "Mortdecai" (A misfire of a spoof that wastes the talent of Johnny Depp and Gwyneth Paltrow)
- "Point Break" (Unmoored remake of the Keanu Reeves/ Patrick Swayze action film of 1991)
- "Ted 2" (Stretching the shtick one too many times, as the novelty of a vulgar toy bear has worn off)
- "Pan" (A lumbering, soulless prequel to the oft-retold Peter Pan saga – aptly named as a suggestion to the critics)
- "Paul Blart: Mall Cop 2" (Lame sequel that garnered 8% on Rotten Tomatoes. As one critic noted, "all the humor involves his bumping into things and falling over because he's fat.")

By the way, there's nothing to preclude a movie from being in both categories:

- "Terminator Genesis" (feeble heir to the Schwarzenegger oeuvre started in 1984)
- "Fantastic Four" (10% on Rotten Tomatoes – "Dull and downbeat")

Of course, no year would be complete without a piece of radioactive dogshit from Adam Sandler, and 2016 did not disappoint. Not one but two Sandler movies made a number of "worst movie" lists: "Pixels" and "The Ridiculous Six." I simply cannot fathom how Hollywood continues to justify producing toxic waste with this untalented hack. Does he possess pictures of Columbia

studio execs blowing a donkey? How many worthy films are sitting on the shelf today so that Hollywood can make room for Adam Sandler's ongoing experiments in retardation?

"Pixels" is the story of aliens who attack the planet after misinterpreting 1980s video games as a bona fide threat from Earth. Sandler plays some asshole who was a video game whiz as a kid and is therefore duly called upon by the president (who also happens to be Sandler's childhood friend) to launch a counter-assault on the aliens. It garnished a stinky 17% on Rotten Tomatoes. And of course, we can't forget Sandler's first project in collaboration with Netflix: 2015's "The Ridiculous Six." When filming was underway for "The Ridiculous Six," a brouhaha broke out among the several Native American extras after they caught a glimpse (and a whiff) of Sandler's racist script. A dozen extras walked off the set – let's call them "The Offended Twelve."

Here's a sample from Sandler's brilliant screenplay that illustrates the level of sophistication:

> BEAVER BREATH: "I have big idea for your wedding. We decorate trees with toilet paper."
>
> SMOKING FOX: "What is this 'toilet paper'?"
>
> BEAVER BREATH: "Paper used to clean your chi-wat after taking a chungo."
>
> NEVER WEARS BRA: "That what dead squirrel for."

Sandler's next project with Netflix is called "The Do Over" and will unfortunately come out in 2016. The premise: two down-on-their-luck guys decide to fake their own deaths and start over

with new identities, only to find the people they're pretending to be are in even deeper trouble. Can't you see it already? Sandler ranting like an angry lunatic in the hopes of seeming funny, telling half-wit jokes and releasing intestinal gas? Stop this man before he can destroy any more celluloid!

Clowns and Nazis, Anyone?

December 29, 2015

I read the other day that one of the worst movies ever made will continue to be locked in a box, never having been publicly screened – a 1972 opus starring and directed by Jerry Lewis called "The Day the Clown Cried." The gist of the story is that a circus clown in Nazi Germany is imprisoned for mocking Der Fuhrer, winds up in Auschwitz where he is employed to entertain the kids and keep them calm before they meet their untimely deaths. Kind of like the pied piper of Hamelin, the clown leads them into the gas chamber. Eventually feeling tremendous remorse, and no hope for himself, the clown decides to stay in the chamber with the children and cheers the kids until the gas descends upon them all. And they all lived happily ever – oh, wait.

Apparently, Jerry Lewis believed the film would stretch him artistically and that the subject matter would be impossible for the Academy to ignore. Production money ran out early and Jerry had to step in with his own cash to complete the project. In the end, Jerry said, "You will never see it. No one will ever see it, because I am embarrassed at the poor work."

Still, sometimes bad movies can be "good" in a sense, perhaps exhibiting a technique that with time comes to be appreciated rather than vilified. I read the script and it really blows, but perhaps Jerry pulled it together on the set – remember, the man was a natural born clown.

In August, the Library of Congress acquired the only known print of the movie, but is going to sit on it for at least 10 years. After more than 40 years, I call for the release of "The Day the Clown Cried." Stop denying the millions of Jerry Lewis fans (and all of France) the opportunity to judge for themselves.

George Lucas: Jedi Master Baiter

January 2, 2016

Director George Lucas ignited a minor kerfuffle the other day during an interview with Charlie Rose, implying that the Disney suits who bought out his Lucasfilm company for $4 billion in 2012 – thereby securing the rights to the "Star Wars" properties – had proven to be poor stewards of the movie franchise's legacy. Calling the movies "my kids," Lucas made the provocative claim that he "sold them to the white slavers that take these things," apparently mistaking the company to whom he voluntarily sold his business for Barbary pirates.

Lucas had a treatment for the next installment of the franchise and was working with a screenwriter, but Disney had other ideas. "They wanted to do a retro movie. I don't like that," Lucas whined. "They weren't that keen to have me involved anyway, but if I get in there, I'm just going to cause trouble, because they're not going to do what I want them to do. And I don't have the control to do that anymore."

Memo to George: you sold the company. What did you expect – that they would defer to you to ruin three more episodes? Besides, Lucas is deluded. In the interview he boldly claimed, "Every movie, I work very hard to make them completely different, with different planets, with different spaceships, make it new."

But nothing could be further from the truth. For example, in the first "Star Wars" movie (aka. Episode IV aka. "A New Hope"),

the heroes must destroy a gargantuan "death star" by miraculously firing a missile down a hole to exploit an overlooked design flaw. Two episodes later ("Return of the Jedi"), the heroes must destroy a gargantuan "death star" by miraculously firing a missile down a hole to exploit another overlooked design flaw. Now that's different!

And doesn't every Lucas-run episode except "The Empire Strikes Back" take place at some point on the same planet, Tatooine? C'mon, George. Why no action on UrAnus?

But the most galling piece of Lucas's Jedi Master Baiting is his insinuation that the three prequel episodes that followed in the wake of "Return of the Jedi" were works of art when in fact they were phenomenally awful. The stories (especially "The Phantom Menace") were convoluted and uninteresting, the "acting" was wooden, newly introduced characters such as the microcephalic Jar Jar Binks were grating, and the action relied too heavily on CGI chicanery. If Disney had left the franchise in Lucas's hands post-buyout, no doubt the result would have been a mishmash of forgettable dueling computer generated action figures destined to become toys on the shelves just in time for Christmas.

Presumably, Lucas and/or his handlers decided his tantrum on TV made him look like an ungrateful douchebag (or maybe there's an anti-defamation clause in the bill of sale to Disney) for he promptly issued a clarification. "I rarely go out with statements to clarify my feelings but I feel it is important to make it clear that I am thrilled that Disney has the franchise and is moving it in such exciting directions in film, television and the parks." Wow, even the parks, George?

As Yoda hath said, "Fear is the path to the dark side… fear leads to anger… anger leads to hate… hate leads to whining… whining leads to treacly apologies." And that's a fucking dark side.

Curious Non-Lethal Job Killing

January 9, 2016

Whether it's the EPA, taxes, worker pay or (horrors!) Obamacare, the adjective associated with the looming disaster is always the same: Job-Killing (or technically – jobicide.) The unanimity of anti-Obama politicians in the use of "job killing" may have originated with John McCain in 2008 as he was preparing to contest Obama for the presidency. In a leaked McCain campaign memo, the team urged McCain and his acolytes to portray Obama as a "job killing machine." Clearly, the idea took root.

Mitch McConnell (June 2012): "The biggest threat to farmers in Kentucky and across America are this administration's job-killing regulations"

John Boehner (July 2010): "I hope President Obama will reconsider his support for these job-killing tax hikes."

Richard Hudson (October 2015): Congressman from NC on ozone regulations, "Shame on President Obama for trying to put folks in our community out of work with this job-killing regulation."

Mike Huckabee (August 2015): "Obama's job-killing EPA rule is a handout to Chinese businesses, Arab oil sheiks, Russian energy despots, and Washington insiders completely detached from reality."

Newt Gingrich (November 2009): "We now have proof that the Obama administration's job-killing policies are hurting America.

Marco Rubio: On Obamacare, "It is a job-killing disaster filled with new spending, taxes and mandates that are increasing the cost of care, stifling innovation, and busting the budget."

Twinkle Cavanaugh (December 2015): President of Alabama Public Service Commission, "We will continue to fight Obama and his out of control, job killing EPA."

Sarah Palin (November 2010): "43 days til job-killing tax hikes slam 70% of job-creators.

Jeb Bush (June 2015): On Obamacare, "This fatally-flawed law imposes job-killing mandate."

James Inhofe (January 2014): "The President likes to proclaim he supports an all-of-the-above energy strategy when he tours the country, yet when he returns to Washington, he hides behind his Environmental Protection Agency that is implementing costly, job-killing regulations."

Rick Perry (June 2015): "President Obama's overtime-pay mandate is filled with job-killing incentives that will drastically increase the cost of hiring new workers."

Uncannily consistent on placing the administration in the same circle with ISIS in their fixation on killing, yet the Cassandras seem to have peered into a cracked crystal ball. Reports out today paint a fairy upbeat story on jobs and their creation.

In fact, the "job-killing" actions have had little deleterious effect for years. The job report from October notes, "businesses have now added 13.5 million jobs over 68 straight months, extending the longest streak on record."

My Bowie Story

January 12, 2016

I became a David Bowie fan – as I suspect many people my age did – following the release of "Space Oddity" in 1973. Re-release actually. Unbeknownst to many at the time, Bowie had

first released the song in 1969, and by 1973 had had a professional musical career in the UK for several years. But to teenagers in 1973, David Bowie was new on the scene. (In fact, David Bowie continued through his life to be new on the scene every couple of years, morphing his persona and changing his musical style in an apparent effort to avoid triteness and predictability.)

Drawn to Bowie's words and music, I plunged into learning more about the musician, reading stories in *Circus* and *Creem* magazines which at the time covered him the way media today covers Miley Cyrus – as a somewhat provocative freak show. Was he gay? What was with the bizarre wardrobe? Why was one of his pupils dilated?

I quickly accumulated all his albums available up through 1973: "Space Oddity" (which was a rerelease of "Man of Words/ Man of Music"), "Man Who Sold the World," "Hunky Dory," "The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars," "Aladdin Sane," and "Pinups." I copied all of them onto 8-track tapes for my car. And I tried to get a Bowie-like haircut which made me look like a human toilet brush. Then in the summer of 1974, I caught an ad in the local newspaper for a Bowie concert at the Cleveland Public Auditorium; I recall the price of a ticket was $8. I resolved to see Bowie live.

I bought four tickets for myself and three buddies (all under 16 years old) which in those days required a check to be sent via U.S. Mail to some promoter who may or may not really exist. I didn't have a bank account, so I had to ask my mother to write the check, which naturally begged inquisition. "You're going to Cleveland? By yourself? With those hooligans? Who's going to drive you? You're driving yourself!? Where are you going to stay?" At that point my father intervened and reserved a room for us gentle boys at a Holiday Inn (I think) on Euclid Avenue near the Public Auditorium.

On the morning of the concert I headed west on Interstate 90 in the family Pontiac LeMans with my three droogs – at one point passing three Corvettes in a row – on route to the Holiday Inn. Fearful of becoming woefully lost I exited at the first opportunity onto Euclid Avenue – just a mere 204 blocks from my destination. No one told me Euclid Avenue is one of the longest streets in America.

We arrived at the hotel just after lunchtime, grubby luggage in hand. Imagine: checking into a hotel with no ID and no credit card. I just referred to my father's reservation number and they gave us a room. We fucked around for a while, smoking some weed and strolling the hard-bitten streets of downtown Cleveland. I tried to buy a six-pack and was rebuffed. Believe it or not, one of the younger dudes in the party was successful at another package store (his hair was dark, he had bad teeth, the drinking age in Ohio was only 18 at the time… OK, fuck it, I was a loser.)

Later, we took in a swim at the Holiday Inn's indoor pool where we encountered the only other occupants: a young boy about 3 years old and his nanny. The boy, who spoke with a British accent, implored us to play games with him in the pool. My friends and I took turns goading him off the diving board and playing catch, while the nanny looked on gratefully. One of us would do a funny dive off the board, and the kid, who wore a life jacket, would proceed to imitate it, declaring "I can do that." It came out "Ockendoo thah."

Finally, concert time. The four boys from cosmopolitan northwestern Pennsylvania strutted down 6th Street to the Public Auditorium. Although we had tickets for assigned seats, it became clear immediately that the floor was open to whomever had the guts to invade it. The air was thick with marijuana smoke. Most of the fans were dressed in appropriate Ziggy Stardust regalia: satin

pants, flaxen hairdo's, orbs painted on foreheads. Security guards stood on the periphery, cotton stuffed in their ears, planning to do nothing fascist unless something akin to a nuclear war broke out.

The lights dimmed, the curtain rose and… I don't remember what song kicked off the session. I do remember getting separated from the others as I lurched to get closer to the stage. Many of the songs performed were from an album I had not yet heard: "Diamond Dogs." Bowie was once again shedding a past skin and moving on. Unlike the glittery masses in the audience, heavily made up like oh-so 1972, Bowie was stylishly dressed in an off-white suit. His hair was bright orange, but cut in a style more like James Brown than Aladdin Sane.

Of course, he performed "Space Oddity" – from a crane that swooped him out above the delirious fans in the orchestra section. I'm sure the band played "Sweet Thing" and "1984" and probably "Panic in Detroit" and "Suffragette City." Like the puerile child I was at the time, I wanted more of what I was familiar with, but that's not what you get with Bowie. Still, an unforgettable performance. The evening at the Public Auditorium flew by in a blur – partially lubricated by dope, mostly by the charisma that Bowie exuded.

He may have finished with "Rebel, Rebel," but it's also possible he performed the classic wrap-up "Rock n Roll Suicide" with its plea to the audience to "gimme your hands cause you're wonderful." No matter. It was the best show I had seen to that moment, not to be outdone until perhaps a performance by Roxy Music in Pittsburgh. Or maybe by Todd Rundgren in Poughkeepsie, of all places.

Back at the Holiday Inn, we found the place to be overrun by groupies and hanger's-on. It occurred to the boys and me that

perhaps David Bowie himself may be staying in the same hotel with us. There was so much activity taking place in the lobby that the hotel bar was completely empty – even the bartender was AWOL. One of my buddies boldly reached over the bar and snatched the first bottle within his grasp – a nearly-full fifth of sweet vermouth. We busted his balls for failing to steal whiskey or vodka. Needless to say, however, later in our room we drank up all that shitty vermouth straight.

Anyway, as the crowds built in the lobby of the Holiday Inn, we became thoroughly convinced that David Bowie and his band would imminently walk through the doors and begin signing autographs or perform some such fan-stroking activity that our delusional minds imagined possible. Suddenly a bevy of gorgeous groupies in platform shoes, short furry jackets, and shorter mini-skirts bolted down a hallway – followed by every fanatic (including the boys from Pennsylvania). And in that moment, David Bowie most certainly entered the hotel through a side door usually reserved for produce deliveries. We never saw him, although we hung out in the lobby for another thirty minutes in futility.

The next morning after I checked out, the nanny from the pool came by to thank us for showing her charge a wonderful time. It seems the little boy had become weary of the traveling routine, following his famous father from city to city while he entertained the legions of glam-rock fans who adored him – but the four boys from northwestern Pennsylvania had made this trip to Cleveland just a bit brighter.

On the drive back from Cleveland, someone challenged me to get the car up to 90 miles an hour. I vividly recall retorting, "Ockendoo thah."

Truly Unfortunate Timing

January 12, 2016

On the very fucking day David Bowie died, *The New York Times* ran a small piece headlined "Saluting David Bowie at Carnegie Hall" that opened: "It's a good time to be David Bowie." Oh, damn.

This Week in Depravity

January 22, 2016

Virtually every day of the week some atrocity is committed by Islamic fanatics somewhere in the world. The mindless death and destruction are insidious, yet sadly routine. Because it happens with such regularity, many who are far from the action exhibit a certain ennui. Sometimes, however, the sheer depth of depravity of the perpetrators demands attention, and calls into question a culture that could form and develop such cretins. Here are the headlines for this week in depravity:

Afghan Woman's Nose Is Cut Off by Her Husband.

Defiling the face of one's wife is unfortunately not an uncommon crime committed by angry or jealous husbands in and around Afghanistan and Pakistan. Countless stories abound of aggrieved men splashing acid onto women's faces, or slashing the flesh so as to disfigure their "loved one," thus turning her into the village freak. It happened again this week after a sub-human named Muhammad Khan and his wife Reza Gul got into an argument. Choosing violence over marriage counseling, Khan sliced off his wife's nose. After the assault, Khan and his brother whisked Gul off with the intention of killing her, but family members interceded. Although Gul made it to the hospital before bleeding out, her severed nose was too damaged to be reattached.

By the way, the argument started when Khan, 25, informed his duly-shocked wife that he had taken his uncle's 7-year-old daughter as his fiancée, with the intention of making her his second wife this year. And she had the nerve to protest!

Boy Accused of Blasphemy Cuts off his own Hand. During a religious celebration, a cleric named Shabbir Ahmed posed a question to the congregation: "Who among you is a follower of Muhammad?" Everyone (naturally) raised their hands. Ahmed asked another probing question: "Who among you doesn't believe in the teachings of the Holy Prophet? Raise your hands!" A 15-year old boy raised his hand – and when he noticed his was the only hand up, he belated realized he had misheard the question. After all, the cleric had followed a positive question with a confusing negative. Rather than perhaps giving the boy a chance to answer again, this literal blockhead began calling out the boy as a "blasphemer" – a tough accusation in a country like Pakistan where freedom of thought is not looked upon kindly.

The boy subsequently went to his family's barn, turned on some kind of power tool, and sliced off his own right hand – which he then took to the cleric to demonstrate his profound sorrow for being a blasphemer (even though he must have known he was certainly not.)

Thankfully, the police arrested the cleric. The local police chief noted, "Such illiterate imams of mosques should not be allowed to deliver speeches." Unfortunately, his opinion seems to be in the minority.

The boy's father, although saddened by his son's action (and the expense that would accrue from his new handless state), said, "My only solace is that he did it for the Prophet."

Man Hurled Off a Building Because He was Gay. The headline says it all: depraved self-appointed arbiters of acceptable

behavior who decide proper punishments – no doubt drawn from medieval texts – tossed a human being off a tall building for the crime of being gay. (Although judging from past stories of horrific punishments, it is just as likely as not that the executioners were mistaken about the man's orientation.)

This story reminded me of another report from September in which U.S. military personnel revealed how they could hear Afghan police officers sexually abusing boys they had brought to the base – and were ordered to ignore it.

According to *The New York Times*, "Rampant sexual abuse of children has long been a problem in Afghanistan, particularly among armed commanders who dominate much of the rural landscape and can bully the population. The practice is called bacha bazi, literally 'boy play.'" No doubt, these depraved hypocrites prey upon young boys because they are so incompetent when it comes to courting women. Strangely, though – I haven't read any reports of Afghan commanders getting the boot off of a building.

Iowans – Step to the Rear

January 22, 2016

Once again, a couple hundred thousand mostly white, mostly conservative, mostly religious caucus-goers in tiny, rural Iowa cast votes and steered the 2016 election all out of proportion with their place in the United States – which most of the time is in a backwater corner of the nation. And let's not forget that the Iowans are also angry. *The New York Times* interviewed 71-year-old Esther Toney who exclaimed, "Oh, I'm very angry. I'm extremely angry. We've got politicians that are just there for their own gain. They should be thinking about how they can make our lives better. And they don't." She went on to seethe, "They vote on things to support their PACs or whoever gave them money." Given that

Iowans benefit tremendously from government boondoggles like undeserved farm subsidies and the ridiculous ethanol mandate (because of the very things she excoriates) Esther's anger seems a bit misplaced. But hey, being the first state to vote – every fucking election cycle – is a cross the Iowans must bear to save another state from having their issues heard and attended to by every presidential wannabee.

People have groused forever about the inanity and unfairness of giving Iowa and another bush-league state, New Hampshire the first votes. No point in rehashing all that here. How about a recommendation for change?

Why not create five partitions of the country made up of the 50 states, DC, Puerto Rico, and the four U.S. Territories – each partition roughly equal in population, and made up of a mix of states in different geographic regions. We'd have five primaries that would take place on the first Tuesdays of February through June. And every four years, a different partition of states and territories would go first – rotating around until everyone got a shot at being first.

An example of a partition might consist of Texas (big, South), Pennsylvania (big, mid-Atlantic), Tennessee (medium, Appalachian), North Dakota (small, mid-west), New Mexico (medium, Southwest), Maine (small, New England), Kansas (small, Heartland), Minnesota (medium, Great Lakes), Colorado (medium, Rockies), Alaska (small, out there), and Guam (small, territory). That's ten states and a territory with a combined population of about 66 million, or one-fifth of the U.S. population. People in these states would vote first in 2020, second in 2024, etc. until they voted first again in 2040.

Candidates would be forced to address a variety of national and local issues. And they wouldn't have to pander so much to

corn-belt cretins. Just the thought of eating something besides corn-dogs washed down with a pint of ethanol has got to be appealing. Furthermore, decent candidates of more than one-dimension could survive longer.

I know this type of sensible set-up would never happen because the parties are too timid to offend the tiny front-loaded states. And deep down, the circus that accompanies the run up to the Iowa caucuses drives a shit-load of money into advertising, polling and campaign coffers.

Besides, everyone knows Iowans have tremendous clairvoyance when it comes to choosing the party's eventual nominees, including Dick Gephardt, Tom Harkin, Bob Dole, Mike Huckabee and Rick Santorum.

Scalia Ducks Out

February 15, 2016

During a hunting expedition in Texas this week Antonin Scalia croaked at age 79, leaving a big hole in the Supreme Court. Depending on your point of view, Scalia was either a beacon of judicial brilliance or a piece of work. Undoubtedly the man was talented and scholarly; he was confirmed by the Senate 98-0. He also fancied himself an "originalist," approaching Constitutional questions as though he were riding in a carriage and wearing a tri-corn hat.

The voluble, acerbic, toad-like Scalia often teamed with his mute doppelganger, Clarence Thomas to issue concurrences and dissents that often seemed to be on the wrong side of the popular zeitgeist. But I guess that's what can happen when you take a hard-line, literal interpretation of the original intent of the Constitution – a great document that has served the country well, but was written in consideration of the state of things as they existed

more than 225 years ago. Trying to read the minds of the original framers on subjects like same-sex marriage, television commercials, international air travel, cloning, internet communications and virtual currency might be an interesting parlor game, but it doesn't help advance things in the current era.

Other times, Scalia seemed to abandon the constitutional rigor so as to affirm a position to comport with his prejudices. He would strike down same-sex marriage even though the definition of marriage is clearly a right left to the states in the Constitution – and the Constitution in its "full faith and credit clause" requires states to recognize marriages granted in the other states.

His position in Bush v. Gore clearly indicated his naked desire to see Bush become the next president. In that notorious decision, the majority on the court put a stop to Florida state's vote-counting process before the deadline for completion had passed. Scalia declared, "The counting of votes that are of questionable legality does in my view threaten irreparable harm to petitioner Bush." In essence, it was better in Scalia's mind to interfere with the state of Florida's constitutionally protected process and to force them to stop counting votes early rather than continue for another three days because some of the votes might not have been cast properly. How this "harms" petitioner Bush, other than keeping him from becoming president, is a mystery.

And in Citizens United v. FEC (2010), in which Scalia was in the majority, the Supreme Court took on the narrow question of whether an organization can air a political hatchet piece right before an election, and blew it up into a sweeping declaration that campaign contributions should essentially have no limits. The case was not about campaign contributions, but the Court took the opportunity to strike down laws going back a century. Doesn't

seem too constitutionally sound, given the deference the founders placed on the voice of the people – the Legislature.

Ever since the rejection of the patchy-bearded Robert Bork in 1987, the nomination and confirmation of Supreme Court justices have been overly fraught with partisan politics. Knowing that a justice will likely sit on the court for decades – well past those who did the nominating and confirming have moved on – the decision whether to seat the person has generated gladiatorial-like conflict between the sides. This is especially true when the President and Senate are from competing parties, as is the case today.

The Republicans in the Senate are laying down the gauntlet in front of Obama: don't bother nominating a replacement for Scalia. They believe that right belongs solely to the next president – again an extra-Constitutional idea dreamed up by partisan hacks. Such obstruction would leave a vacancy on the court for at least a year, resulting no doubt in numerous unsatisfying 4-4 split decisions. The whole charade in outrageous, but refusing to hold hearings and grant a vote would be an apt capstone to the Republican's eight-year theater of hatred for Obama.

Here's the salient question: Would the Senate Republicans take this stance if Mitt Romney were president? I think you know the answer, which is why the Senators in question deserve all the opprobrium they'll receive for the rest of the year.

In the "be careful what you ask for" category, it is quite possible that the Republicans could engineer the following scenarios:

- Obama nominates someone of intense interest to a segment of the population the Republicans need to win (e.g. Asian, Hispanic, woman) – and by obstructing the person they alienate a critical constituency and lose in November.

- Key cases of interest to conservatives in 2016 that would normally be decided in their favor by a 5-4 majority will fall to a 4-4 tie.
- Clarence Thomas dies, leaving just seven justices who will vote 4-3 in favor of stuff the conservatives despise.
- Either Sanders or Clinton win in November and nominate someone more loathsome to conservatives than Obama would have put forward.
- A Republican wins the presidency, but the Democrats take back the Senate and return the favor.

Should be fun to watch the media hump the story. So much fun in fact that Americans will forget all about less-important concerns like the nuclear-nut-balls in North Korea. If we get hit, it will be our own fucking fault.

Opioid Induced Constipation – The Invisible Killer

February 19, 2016

With regularity the pharmaceutical industry pumps out one after the other miracle drug to address a problem no one knew they had. A-Fib, psoriatic arthritis (Phil Mickelson disease), dry eye syndrome, restless legs – big pharma has taken notice. And now through an ad aired during the Superbowl, the world learned that AstraZeneca, the London-based multi-national, has taken on the mission to vanquish OIC: opioid induced constipation. The miracle drug this time is called MOVANTIK – a name presumably derived from "movement," as in bowels. Apparently, many people who take opioids like OxyContin, Vicodin and Percocet for chronic pain suffer when the drugs interfere with their ability to take a shit.

The ad for MOVANTIK has also taken some shit from critics who believe the existence of the drug will lull people into believing long-term opioid usage is a normal activity. Gov. Peter Shumlin of Vermont is one such critic. His state is overrun by opioid addicts, and he's not happy with the cheeky ad. Shumlin railed against "advertising a drug to help people take even more opiates during the most watched sporting event of the year."

The ad in question is actually more gross than provocative of drug abuse. It features an actor who plays a shit-clogged opioid user who is surrounded by people who are content in their ability to move their bowels. The actor, sitting in a diner and struggling with a balky sugar shaker, takes note of a dude exiting the men's room, hiking his pants and sporting the satisfied grin of one who has just pinched off a substantial loaf. He later encounters a woman with a piece of toilet paper hanging off her shoe. She tosses him a sly smile, as though she knows he's constipated and he wishes he could drop a deuce like she just did. She almost takes delight in his jealousy. Hell, the guy's even envious of a dog, for god's sake.

So here we have a new drug to deal with the effects of another class of drugs. But what about the side-effects of MOVANTIK? Those who take MOVANTIK to overcome the side effects of opioid use may suffer from hyperhidrosis, chills, diarrhea, abdominal pain, anxiety, irritability, and yawning (?). Which pharmaceutical company will be first to develop a drug to offset the effects of MOVANTIK? How long before a person who injures his back shoveling snow will be on a regimen of Vicodin for the pain, MOVANTIK for the constipation caused by Vicodin, an anti-sweat drug for hyperhidrosis caused by MOVANTIK, another drug to deal with skin irritation caused by the anti-sweat drug, and on and on. Better just to hire someone to shovel the walk.

RIP George Kennedy

March 2, 2016

Burly George Kennedy, winner of the 1968 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor in the always-fresh "Cool Hand Luke," died the other day at age 91. Kennedy was one of those rare supporting character actors whose both face and name were instantly recognizable, even when not accompanying each other. If you caught a snippet of "The Dirty Dozen" or "The Eiger Sanction" when Kennedy was on screen, you instantly recognized the face and recalled the man's name.

Kennedy started in motion pictures in 1960 with an uncredited part in "Spartacus" and soon began to bang out three, four, sometimes five movies a year. And many were damn entertaining: "Charade" with Cary Grant, Audrey Hepburn and James Coburn; "Thunderbolt and Lightfoot" with Clint Eastwood and Jeff Bridges; and of course, "Cool Hand Luke" opposite Paul Newman. His portrayal of Dragline, a prisoner on a chain gang in the deep South served as the encouraging force behind Newman's character Luke who has a powerful wanderlust and inventive capacity for escaping incarceration. That same year he put his heart and soul into the Dragline character (winning an Oscar), the indefatigable Kennedy performed in three other films.

It's probably safe to say George Kennedy's career moved in a new direction after he starred in the first of many disaster films to hit the cinemas in the 1970s: "Airport." (Kennedy also appeared in the ridiculous "Earthquake" – although no more ridiculous than 2015's "San Andreas.")

Despite its many flaws, "Airport" was a decent nail-biter, and it established the disaster genre. And "Airport" went on to become a franchise in its own right. Kennedy played rough-hewn Joe

Patroni in every incarnation of the "Airport" saga, starting in the original 1970 film as a ballsy supervisor of runway maintenance workers. By the time the final episode, "The Concorde – Airport '79", screened, Patroni had been promoted to pilot of the supersonic Concorde. Whoever steered Joe Patroni's career should be in the Mentor Hall of Fame.

Eventually, the disaster movie industry ran its course and jumped the shark – probably no more egregiously than in "Airport '79" when the Concorde is being chased by fighter jets. Patroni executes a barrel roll (!) to evade missile fire, and then steers the sleek aircraft into a backflip. The best part: Patroni actually rolls down the window in the cockpit (is that even possible, and what's it like to hang your arm out the window going a few hundred MPH?) and fires a flare to confuse heat seeking missiles. Forget that the engines of a Concorde flying at Mach 1 are probably 1,000 times hotter than a flare – the heat seekers leave the scene to chase the decoy.

The Zucker brothers took comedic inspiration from the progressively outlandish "Airport" franchise and produced the popular and hilarious spoof, "Airplane." "Airplane" revived careers for many of George Kennedy's peers: Lloyd Bridges, Leslie Nielsen, Robert Stack and Peter Graves. Each of these fine film actors found new careers playing parodies of themselves – and Kennedy soon followed suit in "The Naked Gun" series as Capt. Ed Hocken. The last episode, "Naked Gun 33□ : The Final Insult" came out twenty years ago, and after that George Kennedy finally began to slow down – although he continued to act in film and TV off and on right up to 2014.

I remember watching "Cool Hand Luke" in high-school – sort of a holiday treat for us overworked prep boys – and absolutely loving the car-wash scene featuring the whole chain gang. The

maniacally horny Dragline is the best – slobbering over himself while the buxom blonde gets her translucent top soaked in suds.

The French Conniption

March 25, 2016

Every so often, an organization of authority declares a policy that is immediately understood to be ludicrous. The backlash is universally scathing and completely predictable. Happens often in business, but is more prevalent in government where clueless bureaucrats and feckless politicians sit ensconced in opaque towers separated from the zeitgeist of the populations they supposedly represent.

In recent weeks, the French government, wary of the societal disruption that could accompany the influx of Muslims from outside Europe, declared a ban on the dreaded… "burkini?" Designed by Aheda Zanetti, the Burkini (her name for it – a combo of "burka" and "bikini", but 99.5% burka) is targeted at Muslin women who want to practice modesty yet still engage in athletics and outdoor physical activities. (All the fuss over the French ban on the piece of clothing has driven sales through the roof.) The justifiably paranoid French government noticed the growing display of the burkini on their luxe Mediterranean beaches and concluded it represented a smoldering defiance poised to become a jihadist conflagration. Amazingly, the existential Armageddon posed by an article of clothing is just as worrisome to the French as the threats to the airports, subways, trains and nightclubs that emerge daily in Paris, Lyon, Nice, Grenoble, and Marseilles.

The logic: the burkini represents the extreme (male) Muslim enslavement of the woman – an act that cannot be tolerated in liberal France. To allow women to be subjugated into donning the burkini was to accept repugnant foreign influence. Concluding that

women wearing a burkini at the beach are victims of an extremist faction forcing a dress code upon them, France interceded and took the enlightened approach of forcing a dress code upon them. It's true: in a country where crazy Islamist interlopers have gunned down civilians in bistros and concert halls, assassinated cartoonists in cold blood, and driven a truck into a crowd enjoying a Bastille Day celebration, the authorities are devoting law enforcement personnel to the beaches to demand removal of the burkini or impose a stiff penalty.

Considering that the French haven't passed laws against such beachcombers as nuns wearing habits, Jews wearing yarmulkes, or skin cancer victims wearing a coverall that might make the burkini look like an actual bikini, it's hard to conclude anything other than the government is in over-react mode. And the consequences are easy to predict: France's claim on the *joie de vivre* crumbles, local politicians in such resort spots as Toulouse and Cannes appear worse than Donald Trump, and legitimate concerns about Islamic terrorism are trivialized by the trivial.

I have no issue with the banning of clothing that fully covers someone's face – to allow that would be a green-light for lots of nefarious behavior by people all and no faiths – but the burkini ban is a public relations nightmare that was ludicrous before it was born.

Norman Agonistes

April 6, 2016

Thirty years ago, this week at Augusta National Golf Club, Jack Nicklaus pulled off an improbable upset over several top professional golfers to win his sixth Masters tournament and his record 18th major tournament at the "advanced" age of 46. Written off at the time as being over-the-hill, Nicklaus was viewed

as one of the several emeritus Masters winners who are allowed to play in the tournament by virtue of a lifelong exemption. It wasn't until the 9th hole on the last day of the tournament when Nicklaus started to bomb birdie putts on his way to a back nine of 30 that the gallery and whispering commentators began to take notice of the Golden Bear's surge. This week the Golf Channel broadcast a nice, succinct reflection on what might be the most exciting and famous professional golf contests of all time.

For those who know a little about golf, it is understood that players compete against each other, but unlike in other sports, they have no direct influence on the performance of those challenging for the title. Nicklaus's victory obviously depended on his superb play, but equally important was the faltering of top players who had been in much better contention: Seve Ballesteros, Tom Kite, and especially Greg Norman.

While focusing on Nicklaus's unlikely march to the Green Jacket, the Golf Channel feature called "'86" served to remind viewers once again of Norman's cruel fate in golf's major tournaments. In this particular episode, Norman was just as amazing as Nicklaus coming down the stretch.

After apparently falling out of contention with a double bogey on 10, Norman made a remarkable string of birdies at 14, 15 and 16. And on 17, Norman managed to thread the ball through two closely situated pine trees to within 8 feet. He sunk the putt and was now suddenly tied with Nicklaus who had already finished and was nervously sweating it out in Jones Cabin. Norman struck a perfect drive on 18 – all he had to do was land the ball on the green. A birdie would bring a win, a two-putt would tie.

Instead, Norman flew the ball into the gallery in what had to be, pound for pound, the worst shot of the tournament. He

flopped the ball close, but failed to make the par, leaving Jack Nicklaus to stroll out of the cabin to pick up his sixth Green Jacket.

Painful, but that's Norman's M.O. Whether through untimely gaffes or cruel run-ins with Madame Fate, Norman has managed to lose so many major tournaments that rightfully belonged to him. Eight times the man has come in second in a Major tournament. Here is a summary of some of the more painful exhibitions.

Masters 1996. In what is considered by many to be the biggest collapse in the history of golf, Greg Norman blew a 54-hole lead of five strokes ahead of the next contender, Nick Faldo. Norman started the final round at 13 under par and was considered by everyone to be on his way to redemption after failures in 1986 and 1987 (see below). Instead, the wheels fell off Norman's game. He posted a horrifying 79 to Faldo's spotless 67. Norman hooked tee shots, lipped out putts, threw shots into the water – he almost missed coming in second, for god's sake. Norman's golf-pro buddy Nick Price was quoted as saying, "I can't stand to watch" as he headed for his car. That was an understatement. It was like watching a train wreck – painful and fascinating at the same time.

Masters 1987. Exactly one year after throwing away a chance to snatch a Green Jacket from Jack Nicklaus by pushing the ball into the gallery on the 72nd hole of the contest, Norman suffered another mortal stab to the heart. Norman could have won outright on the 72nd hole had he made a 20-foot birdie putt, but that didn't come to pass, forcing a three-way tie and a sudden death playoff with Seve Ballesteros and Larry Mize. After the first hole of sudden death, Ballesteros was out, leaving just Norman and the underdog Mize to duke it out. On the second hole, Norman watched as Mize hit his approach shot well right of the green. In response Norman hit a conservative shot that landed on the fringe, well within range for a two-putt par. The 110-foot shot Mize faced was

ominous – just keeping his pitch shot on the sloping green would be a challenge. But we're talking about Greg Norman, and his eerie aura that seems to draw in misfortune. Sure enough, Mize holed out to deny Norman the Green Jacket he never got to put on in his career.

1984 U.S. Open. Once again, we go to the final hole of regulation in a Major tournament. Norman is tied for the lead, this time with now-disgraced Fuzzy Zoeller who is playing behind him in the final two-some. And once again, Norman flies his approach shot off course into the grandstand. He gets a free drop but the ball takes up a dicey lie in Winged Foot's notorious rough. Norman skulls the ball across the green leaving him a lengthy 40-footer for par – which he makes! – forcing a tie with Zoeller. Under U.S. Open rules, the two must play an entire 18 hole round the next day to choose a winner – and Zoeller cleans Norman's clock by eight effing strokes. Imagine if Norman for once could just stick the ball close when it mattered.

1989 British Open. At Royal Troon, Norman started the final round seven shots behind leader Wayne Grady, and proceeded to shoot a course-record 64 to get into a tie with Grady and Mark Calcavecchia. The rules this time called for a four-hole playoff – best score wins (if still tied, they start sudden death.)

After the first three holes of playoff, Calcavecchia had carded two pars and a birdie; Norman had two birdies and a par. That means that after 21 holes of golf that day, Norman was 10 under. Then we come to the final hole of the playoff– and guess what? Norman hits out of a bunker, over the green, and out of bounds. Out of the running, Norman picked up and carded a DNF.

1986 PGA Championship. Heartache once more for poor Greg Norman, this time at Inverness Club in Ohio. Norman started the final round with a four-shot lead and kept it up through

the first nine holes, then trouble. A double bogey at 11 and a bogey at 14 and Norman was suddenly tied with Bob Tway. The two co-leaders remained tied until the final hole when Norman hit an approach shot to 25 feet just off the green, and Tway plopped his shot into a green-side bunker. Advantage Norman? Have you not been paying attention? Once more, the Satanic ripples that surround Norman on final holes of Major tournaments increased in strength. Tway holed his bunker shot for a birdie, putting pressure on Norman to make his putt from the fringe. He didn't. (Interestingly, Norman led all four majors in 1986 after the third round, but won only the British Open.)

1993 PGA Championship. Back again at Inverness, Norman was the leader coming into the final round just a stroke ahead of Paul Azinger. Azinger got hot though and shot a course record 30 on the back nine to tie Norman at the end of regulation play – familiar territory for Greg. Off to appropriately-named sudden death. Norman and Azinger tied the first hole, but on the second hole Norman needed to make a four-foot putt to extend the contest. He lipped it out, of course, by order of Satan himself.

Gwyneth Paltrow Adds to the Celebrity Cookbook Glut

April 18, 2016

I loathe the celebrity recipe book. These fatuous and largely derivative products crowd out limited space in bookstores that could be better stocked with works by struggling authors. After all, who really needs yet another goddamned cookbook – especially one that includes recipes for such exotic dishes as breakfast crepes, avocado toast, chicken piccata, and fried egg sandwich (honest to god, see page 9 of Gwyneth Paltrow's new book, "It's All Easy: Delicious Weekday Recipes for the Super-Busy Home Cook").

Gwyneth explains her motivations: "When I sat down to start this book, I had been polling my friends and colleagues on what sort of cookbook they were looking for." Her friends all seemed to have a common culinary yearning. "They wanted a collection of recipes that they could prepare easily." I would say her friends all seemed to have a common malady as well – an extreme lack of curiosity in trying to locate one of the 10,000 cookbooks already published that offer easy recipes. Naturally, Gwyneth doesn't undertake such a challenging project alone; she collaborates with Thea Baumann who no doubt was assigned the grunty work of conjuring up the details of the recipes. For that, she gets her name on the cover in type that is about one-tenth the size of Gwyneth's name.

A reviewer on Amazon wrote, "I noticed that by page 24, there were 8 photos of Gwyneth; by page 56, there were 15, by page 91, there were 21 and all in all, there are about 40 of her in this cookbook if you count the front cover. If this were really about food, why does it appear more to be a lifestyle photo-essay about Gwyneth Paltrow, her home, her kids, her tastes and her aesthetics?"

The answer: it's a vanity project for the rich and famous. The reviewer goes on, revealing her true genius: "Maybe that's why many of us will buy her latest book – to see and emulate her style."

El Al Can't Help Us

May 20, 2016

Another modern jetliner fell out of the sky yesterday into the Mediterranean Sea, and considering its origin (France) is a top target of ISIS (Islamic State of Insanity Squared) and its destination (Egypt) is likewise a target of Islamic militants, it's fairly safe to say EgyptAir flight 840 was sabotaged. After all, aircraft like the reportedly well-maintained Airbus 320 piloted by men

with 9,000 hours of flight time between them traveling at cruising altitude in perfectly clear weather don't just malfunction without warning. Terrorism involving commercial aircraft is on the rise; add Metrojet Flight 9268 out of Egypt (Oct 31, 2015) and Daallo Airlines Flight 159 out of Somalia (Feb 2, 2016) to yesterday's tragedy. Perpetrators are getting better at developing harder-to-detect explosives in smaller packages and circumventing ever more sophisticated and intrusive detection methods. The latter has of late become fodder for opprobrium by pedestrian air travelers (and members of Congress who are partly to blame for the growing mess) suffering hideous delays at major airports resulting in missed flights and unexpected overnight stays in no-star rated airport hallways.

Experts warn that behind the TSA's iron wall that regular passengers must crawl through half-naked to board a flight exists a poorly-policed back door through which all variety of potential miscreants pass largely unmolested: maintenance workers, food service employees, baggage handlers, private pilots and their elite passengers, dudes who mow the grass around the runway. I can readily believe that. Anyone who has ever worked for a company that requires a badge to enter the property knows that Joe will happily hold the door open for Sam, if Sam has been his co-worker for any length of time. This gap certainly must be tightened.

Where I depart from some aviation experts who come out of hibernation to appear on CNN, Fox and MSNBC whenever tragedy strikes is on the subject of emulating Israel's El Al. Such experts, following a terrorist attack on aircraft often call upon the TSA to adopt El Al's methods and procedures. It appears to be sound advice. Just one El Al flight has ever been hijacked (1968), and the airline is the only one in the world that equips its planes with missile defense systems. Passenger scrutiny by Israeli

government officials, the IDF and El Al personnel is famously rigorous, including comprehensive baggage inspection, passenger profiling, and psychological analysis to go along with physical examination of person and property. Airport security guards operate both in uniform and undercover. Wait times are extensive, but given Israel has long been the target of fanatics who call for the nation's destruction, passengers happily take it all in stride.

What is often left out of the argument for emulating El Al in America is the tiny footprint the Israeli national airline occupies, which allows it to implement its strict regimen. El Al serves just 45 destinations and flies 4 million passengers a year. American Airlines offers an average of nearly 6,700 flights daily to 350 destinations in 50 countries and flew 146 million people in 2015; Southwest flew 144 million and Delta flew 138 million. Israel boasts one major airport: Ben Gurion which handled about 16 million passengers last year (the next five biggest Israeli airports combined handle a bit more than 2 million). Hartsfield International Airport in Atlanta, one of 30 airports in America that handle more passengers annually than Ben Gurion does, manages to squeeze through 96 million souls a year.

Israel and El Al deserve tremendous credit for the air safety system they've created, but to the aviation experts: stop pretending such a system could ever work in America.

Phil Mickelson: A Master from Tee to Greed

May 20, 2016

I guess the multiple millions in income from winning more than 40 professional golf tournaments, including five major championships, and the payoffs from sponsorship deals derived from an illustrious career on the links was not enough for Phil Mickelson. According to *Forbes*, Mickelson takes down $48 million

a year as a shill for Callaway, Barclays, KPMG, Exxon Mobil, Rolex and Amgen. That's in addition to whatever he wins on tour and accrues in investments. Pretty healthy, and yet Mickelson deemed it necessary to turn to insider trading to buttress his cash flow by at least another million bucks, according to details of an SEC complaint released yesterday.

But don't immediately assume it's all about greed (despite the cocky headline above). Apparently, Mickelson has been leaking serious coin for a number of years thanks to a string of bad luck at the games of chance.

The CEO of Dean Foods named Thomas Davis owed huge sums from gambling losses to Las Vegas sports betting impresario William Walters, and tried to work down his debts by feeding Walters inside poop on the comings and goings of the company he ran. Walters threw some of the proprietary info to Michelson. At the time, Mickelson also owed money to Walters for a gambling debt. The SEC claimed profits Mickelson made on trading shares of Dean Foods went to reimburse Walters. Both Walters and Davis were charged with crimes, but the SEC passed on nailing Phil as they concluded he was blissfully ignorant of the situation. Phil's penalty was to disgorge about a million in ill-gotten gains.

Is Mickelson another John Daly with a better golf game? (TMZ reported Daly, a two-time major golf champ, lost $90 million gambling.) Mickelson might not be too far behind Daly – who knows. He's dumped property, including a fire-sale on a 9,200 square foot mansion in Rancho Santa Fe for $5.75 million in 2015, a sum that is almost a quarter of a million less than what he paid for it all the way back in 2001. And Phil has groused a little too vocally about the high taxes he pays, suggesting it's more than just a sore point harbored by a rich bastard who can afford it but simply hates the principle of the thing. Is the man on the verge of

financial pain? Will one or more sponsors exit stage right? Kinda sad, but I can't say I have much sympathy.

Hulk and Erin: A Study in Double Standards

May 28, 2016

Fox Sports host Erin Andrews recently won a court judgment in March for $55 million in a civil case against the Nashville Marriott Hotel and a cretin named Michael David Barrett who secretly filmed a naked Andrews through a peephole he installed in a locked door connecting her room to his, and posted the grainy video to the internet where it replicated onto untold numbers of websites. No doubt millions of voyeurs saw the unsuspecting Andrews in the nude. How Barrett came to occupy the room next to Andrews was fairly simple – he manipulated a clerk at the Marriott front desk to divulge in which room the sportscaster was staying, and then later requested a room next to hers.

After a two-week trial in which a teary Andrews was called to testify about the emotional damage inflicted upon her, the jury decided to award the multi-million-dollar damages – although not the $75 million she had petitioned for – to be split almost evenly between the two defendants. Barrett had years earlier completed a jail sentence in the criminal case that was filed in 2009.

After the judgment was made public, I noticed that quite a few observers commented on what they considered an outrageous sum of money to lavish on someone for what they suggested was hardly a crime at all. Many mocked Andrews' appearance as not "hot" enough to justify $55 million – a position that seems hopelessly irrelevant and downright stupid. Here is a sampling of commentary to an ABCNews story:

- She is a gold-digging floozy. Her salary went up 5 TIMES, as a result of that stupid video. Give us all a break Erin.
- $75 MILLION?? They don't reward that much money in a MURDER TRIAL. Get a clue. The video is grainy and blurry anyway. And her body is NOT that hot. Not even CLOSE.
- This happened over 9 years ago… and she's coming out now how tormented and harmed she is? She seems pretty fine to me – DWTS hostess and sideline reporter for the World Series and the NFL. Not to mention dating a series of athletes. I guess we're in the age of PC.
- This lady obviously just wants money and more attention than she was getting before.
- She owes the guy who shot the video several million dollars… these celebs today make all their money of negative media attention, whether she likes it or not.
- She is nothing but an opportunist. Comes out of nowhere to bump a professional like Pam Oliver off the # 1 team calling NFL Football games at Fox.
- Now looking to get 75 million dollars from a hotel chain because her skinny naked body appears on the internet. She ain't that great looking and her body is only fair wearing designer clothing. Just absolutely amazing.

Around the same time another lawsuit cut from similar cloth was resolved in a case brought forward by Hulk Hogan against the slimy Gawker media property after a surreptitiously-captured video of him having sex with the wife of a close friend was posted to their website. A jury in Florida awarded the former professional wrestler damages totaling $140 million. Gawker argued they were

protected by the First Amendment – which would seem to carry more weight than any argument Barrett could have conjured in his own defense – but the jury concluded that Hogan's privacy rights trumped Gawker's constitutional protections.

Clearly both Andrews and Hogan deserve privacy protection, but to me Hogan seems to be the lesser-aggrieved of the two. Hogan is a well-known public figure, making him less able to blunt attacks from the press, and Gawker was not the perpetrator of the illicit filming, unlike the person sued by Andrews. And Andrews was outed by a private citizen who broke laws to acquire his footage, whereas Gawker simply posted content acquired from a third-party source.

In any event, unlike the tenor of commentary accompanying reportage of Andrews's so-called outsized or undeserved award, observers of the Hogan-Gawker confrontation seemed to concentrate more on vilifying Gawker than ranting about the obscene amount of money awarded to Hogan. Some comments again from accompanying ABCNews coverage:

- We need solid consequences for irresponsible journalism.
- Cough up Gawker! That's a body slam!
- Anyone with even a hint of common sense would know that posting a video of someone else having sex (without their permission) is not considered free speech, yet they did it anyway. Since their motive was money, the punishment is money, although frankly I think they should be prohibited from ever working in the news field again as well.
- Gawker is filth for the misinformed, misled masses of 20-somethings with no morals. News is news, Gawker is mindless distractions. What they did wasn't "Free

> Speech". What they did was take an illegally recorded video and post it to their website to generate money for their company.

A woman is awarded $55 million after her privacy is violated and the chatter is about how ridiculous the payout is; a man gets $140 million under similar circumstances and the chatter is about how fucked up the perpetrator is. Truly thought-provoking.

Cut That Man a Check

June 13, 2016

The moment the stock market opened on the Monday after this past weekend's horrific mass shooting in Orlando, the share prices of prominent arms makers – Ruger, Smith & Wesson, and Olin (which owns Winchester) – all popped. The boards of directors of each of these publicly traded firms should cut a check to Omar Mateen – the perpetrator of the mayhem that cost 50 people their lives, and wounded more than another 50. Or to his family, as Mateen is now thankfully deceased. Smith & Wesson's market cap went up $90 million in the first few hours that anxious investors could place orders. Ruger is up $100 mil.

Once again, like counter-intuitive clockwork, the fiscal health of gun makers improves dramatically following gun-related tragedies. If the same thing happened in the pharmaceutical industry, the stock price of Pfizer would skyrocket after discovery that dicks fall off of men who take Viagra. Every time a fucking nutcase commits mass murder with assault rifles and semi-automatic handguns, the gun-owning public shudders at what they believe will be the start of a complete government confiscation of personal weaponry. Fifty people are murdered by a crazed gunman, and hundreds of thousands of people immediately rush out to Gander

Mountain to purchase another 10 guns to add to their collections before Obama can swoop in on his black helicopter.

Forget the fact that since 2004 it's never been easier to acquire any and all manner of weapons, ammunition, and assorted accessories to shooting. Gun laws in most states are as lenient as they've ever been: stand your ground laws let you shoot anyone who makes you feel threatened; conceal carry laws let you take guns into movie theaters, bars, schools; laws bar enforcement agencies from collecting and sharing gun violence info.

So, the knee-jerk reaction to bid up gun-makers' share prices after every mass gun shooting makes no sense, but as with much that happens on Wall Street, it's not the business fundamentals that drive the market – it's the folkloric "received wisdom" that initiates the lemming-like behavior. Mass shootings are good for business – and that's sadly outrageous.

McCain Insane in the Membrane

June 17, 2016

It went widely unreported that prior to the commission of mass murder by Omar Mateen at an Orlando dance club, Barack Obama picked up Mateen at his home, gave him a few hundred rounds of ammo, and drove him to the club. If it hadn't been for a tax-and-spend briefing back at the White House that evening, Obama would have carried in Mateen's AR-15 assault rifle for him. Thanks to an increasingly addled John McCain, we now know that in regards to the massacre, "Barack Obama is directly responsible for it."

However, in the interest of national security McCain kept the sordid details under wraps, instead blaming Obama "because when he pulled everybody out of Iraq, al Qaeda went to Syria, became ISIS, and ISIS is what it is today thanks to Barack Obama's failures

— utter failures, by pulling everybody out of Iraq, thinking that conflicts end just because you leave. So, the responsibility for it lies with President Barack Obama and his failed policies."

Not a bad cover story, except that McCain forgot that a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) calling for the withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq was signed by Obama's predecessor in 2008. Article 24 of the agreement states "All United States combat forces shall withdraw from Iraqi cities, villages, and localities no later than the time at which Iraqi Security Forces assume full responsibility for security in an Iraqi province, provided that such withdrawal is completed no later than June 30, 2009." It also states that "All the United States Forces shall withdraw from all Iraqi territory no later than December 31, 2011."

McCain's foggy brain also seems to have leeched the memory that by 2008 – five years after the "cakewalk" Iraq War was kicked off – the citizens of the United States by and large were beyond weary of military conflicts paid for and led almost exclusively by Americans in the Middle East. Most people just wanted the U.S. to get the hell out of Iraq, knowing that, like Vietnam, the country would fail whether we left in 2009 or 2099. The SOFA of 2008 also acknowledges that "the United States recognizes the sovereign right of the Government of Iraq to request the departure of the United States Forces from Iraq at any time" which they did in 2010.

The idea was that following extensive training by the Americans, the Iraqi forces would be able to manage on their own. Article 27 of the SOFA anticipates that the Iraqis would likely face military opposition from terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda: "The Parties agree to continue close cooperation in strengthening and maintaining military and security institutions and democratic

political institutions in Iraq, including, as may be mutually agreed, cooperation in training, equipping, and arming the Iraqi Security Forces, in order to combat domestic and international terrorism and outlaw groups, upon request by the Government of Iraq."

Well, as soon as the Iraqi military faced ISIS, they dropped their guns and ran – leaving perfectly good U.S.-supplied heavy weaponry like tanks and rocket launchers for the terrorists to confiscate and use against them. But let's not forget what McCain said – Obama was *directly responsible* for the massacre in Orlando. Which raises an interesting point: it was not until the night of the massacre that the perpetrator made a claim of aligning with ISIS. He did not travel to the Middle East for ISIS training, attend radical Mosques, or write rants against infidels. It is very possible that Mateen's primary motive was to kill gays, whom he associated with the "filthy ways of the west." And now the press is reporting that Mateen's wife has claimed the man so enraged against gays was himself gay. Could this massacre be more about self-loathing than ISIS?

If so, McCain will have to modify his claim that Obama is "directly responsible" because he failed to prevent the Stonewall Riots in 1969.

Sadly, John McCain has lost his mind. The man is so desperate to win re-election this fall in a tight race that he'll say and do anything. Donald Trump specifically belittled McCain's suffering as a POW at the hands of the North Vietnamese who held him captive for years following the downing of his plane. McCain at the time registered modest offense, but now he endorses the draft-dodging Trump.

If McCain finally goes down in November, he can retire to one of his many homes in Arizona and watch cartoons all day.

Trump Does the "Walk on Back"

June 20, 2016

A headline in today's *Washington Post* reads "Trump, amid criticism, walks back suggestion that armed clubgoers could have prevented Orlando massacre." Apparently, the notion of several dozen clubbers – many no doubt at least half-drunk – simultaneously opening fire in a crowded venue in the dark against an unknown assailant was too loopy even for Donald Trump to support for more than a day. Trump asserted after the tragedy, "If in that club, you had some people — not a lot of people, 'cause you don't need a lot of people — but if you had somebody with a gun strapped onto their hip, somebody with a gun strapped onto their ankle and you had bullets going in the opposite direction, right at this animal who did this, you would have had a very, very different result, believe me, folks."

Almost certainly the very different result would have been even more people shot and killed as every person shooting would appear to be the "active shooter" to all the other shooters. Shortly after, Trump did what he always does – he walked it back. "When I said that if, within the Orlando club, you had some people with guns, I was obviously talking about additional guards or employees." Obviously. He did forget, however, to note that indeed an armed guard *was* present at the Pulse club in Orlando that evening, and fired some rounds at Omar Mateen, the assailant.

If you have any doubts that Donald Trump is the corporeal incarnation of an IHOP waffle, consider these recent headlines documenting his numerous walk-backs:

Fund Raising: "Trump fundraisers walk back goal of raising $1 billion for campaign" per *American Thinker*.

Attacks on Republicans: "Donald Trump's campaign tries to walk back his attacks on Republicans" per *The Washington Post*.

Abortion: "Trump attempts to walk back abortion comments" per *The Hill*.

Muslims: "Trump Tries To Walk Back Comments On Registering All Muslims In A Database" per *Think Progress*.

Tax Plan: "Donald Trump Walks Back Tax Plan, Saying 'It's Going to Be Negotiated'" per *ABC News*.

George Bush: "Trump walks back attack on George Bush" per *The Washington Examiner*.

America's Debt: "Trump walks back pledge to eliminate debt in a decade" per *The Washington Examiner*.

Abortion Punishment: "Donald Trump Walks Back Statement on 'Punishment' for Women Who Have Abortions" per *Breitbart*.

Visas: "Trump quickly walks back remarks on visas" per *The Hill*.

Bathroom Law: "Donald Trump Walks Back Criticism Of North Carolina's Anti-Trans Bathroom Law" per *MSN*.

Trump University: "Trump Walks Back Trump U Comments" per *AOL*.

Supreme Court: "Trump Walks Back Supreme Court List" per *NanoNews*.

Hillary Clinton: "Donald Trump Walks Back His Past Praise of Hillary Clinton" per *The Wall Street Journal*.

(An update from September 2020 now that Trump has been playing president for more than three years. These are just some of the latest topics he's had to "walk back."

- Delaying election day.
- Blocking funding for the Postal Service
- The cause of an explosion in Beirut
- Voting twice: by mail and then in person
- Ingesting disinfectants to fight COVID-19
- Raising tariffs on China
- Shutting down the border with Mexico
- Cutting funding for Ebola prevention
- Targeting cultural site for destruction)

USGA Duffs it Bad

June 20, 2016

As 2016 U.S. Open victor Dustin Johnson stood over a par putt on the fifth hole of the final round Sunday, his ball imperceptibly rolled backward toward him about 5 degrees. Because he had not placed his putter on the surface of the green behind the ball, and did not cause the ball to move (according to him), that should have been the end of it. But in the hyper-anal world of the "Rules of Golf," all professionals know to consult the army of circulating rules officials rather than make a decision on their own that could cost them a trophy or push them down the leaderboard. Better to inform an official that the ball moved on its own and let him or her give a blessing to proceed, than to make an erroneous assumption. (Johnson more than most can appreciate that, as he took a two-stroke penalty on the final hole of the 2010 PGA Championship and lost a chance to win because his club touched a worn out spot on the course that had been deemed a hazard.)

The rules official at yesterday's U.S. Open concluded on the spot that the movement was not caused by Johnson; DJ putted out for par and moved on. Now, lay people may ask what possible difference could it make if a golf ball moves a millimeter prior

to being struck – and they would be correct. The USGA finally softened the rule recently which used to penalize players when, through no fault of their own, the wind kicked up and waggled the ball. Now, the rule stipulates that the player must be the culprit in causing the ball to move.

In Johnson's case on number 5, it seemed pretty clear from the grainy video that he was not the culprit. Seven holes later, however, the USGA informed Johnson that, on second thought, he might get a 1 stroke penalty after all, despite the exoneration of the rules official (essentially the closest thing golf has to an umpire). Just keep playing and we'll let you know when you're done. A USGA official joined the TV sportscasters to give a laughable explanation of the situation, and yet neither Joe Buck nor Paul Azinger at the desk bothered to point out what an asshole-ish position the USGA had taken.

How can a sporting contest proceed if players don't know the outcome of a ruling until after it's all over? This is especially the case in golf where trophies are often won by a single stroke – the amount that hung in the balance for Johnson. It turns out the USGA *did* assess a penalty on Johnson, but his margin of victory was sufficient to weather the ruling body's retardation. (Imagine if Johnson had signed his card with a par on 5, before the USGA belated assessed the penalty… would they have DQ'd DJ for signing an erroneous card? Did I mention golf's rules are hyper-anal?)

The issue really isn't that the USGA most certainly incorrectly assessed a penalty, but that they dithered forever to make that incorrect call. If the USGA was running the NBA, we may not yet know whether the Cavs beat the Warriors because they'd still be trying to determine whether LeBron James traveled in the first quarter.

And the USGA wonders why interest in golf is flagging. Morons.

Good Guys with Guns Run

July 11, 2016

A week after a brain-fried miscreant in Newtown, CT shot and killed 26 people including 20 children, Executive Vice President of the NRA Wayne LaPierre exclaimed at the organization's annual meeting in response to another mass shooting, "The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun." The implication was that if only schools employed armed guards, if only teachers could carry weapons into 3rd grade geography class, such mass murders could be a thing of the past. Reinforcing LaPierre's prescription was Larry Pratt, executive director of Gun Owners of America, who said days later, "No teacher, no administrator, no adult had a gun at the Newtown school where the children were murdered. This tragedy underscores the urgency of getting rid of gun bans in school zones."

We'll probably never have a better laboratory to test Wayne's hypothesis than the site of this week's massacre of five white Dallas police officers by a racist ex-Army Reserve soldier named Micah Johnson. Deployed in Afghanistan, Johnson was well-trained by the Army in urban assault tactics which he applied in downtown Dallas during a "Black Lives Matter" protest. And at that protest, more than a dozen people along the march route were carrying AR-15s and other long guns as is their legal right in Texas.

Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings said that about 20 people in "ammo gear and protective equipment and rifles slung over their shoulder" participated in the rally last Thursday. According to Dallas Police Chief David O. Brown, "They were wearing gas masks. They were wearing bulletproof vests and camo fatigues, for

effect, for whatever reason." Rawlings went on to say, "It's logical to say that in a shooting situation, open carry can be detrimental to the safety of individuals." Rawlings is a Democrat, so of course whatever he has to say on the subject is addled bullshit.

But the item I found interesting was not the presence of wannabe Rambos outfitted for combat, but that when the shooting began, they ran. And because they ran in the middle of the shooting, Brown said the police on the scene viewed them as suspects. "Someone is shooting at you from a perched position, and people are running with AR-15s and camo gear and gas masks and bulletproof vests, they are suspects, until we eliminate that." I wonder how many of them, if any, came to the rally expecting to be considered suspects in a deadly shooting rampage. How conflicted would the sentiment have been among the pro-gun, pro-cop segment if one of the men there carrying a semi-automatic rifle had been shot and killed by a police force that thought he was aligned with the killer Micah Johnson?

But let's go back – why were they running? Wasn't each of these 20 or 30 people a "good guy with a gun"? Why weren't they scoping the assailant and leveling him with their heavy weaponry? If their instinct was to run instead of fight back, why did they bring the guns in the first place? Was it all just for show – a middle finger to guys like Rawlings and Brown?

Dallas posed a prime opportunity for the good guys with guns to stop a bad guy with a gun – and it didn't happen. Just like it wouldn't have happened in an Orlando disco; or in a theater in Aurora, CO; or on the campus of Virginia Tech. It's a fantasy.

Concealed-carry proponents will argue the opposite, but every story I can find about armed citizens saving the day deals with an individual confronting another individual – the drunk who wanders into someone's home, the petty thief who threatens a

couple in their bedroom, a ruffian bent on stealing the take at a Seven-Eleven, the guy who shoots his girlfriend's nun-chuck-wielding ex-husband.

Read "The Armed Citizen: Proof Guns Save Lives" in *The Daily Caller*. Or "Armed Citizen Stories" in *The Armed Citizen*. Or "10 Stories That Prove Guns Save Lives" in *Townhall*. Or any of the plethora of reports assembled on the NRA's website. All fine stories of good guys stopping a bad guy – but none involving a mass-shooting. None involving an active shooter wearing body armor and loaded to the gills with weapons and ammo firing away in a dark, crowded public venue. That's a fantasy that one day will get a law-abiding, AR-15-toting dude a round between the eyes from a cop in the fog of urban war.

Bloviators and Their Dogs

July 25, 2016

Two of the most heinous and grating talk show hosts infecting the AM airwaves today are Michael (Savage) Weiner and Mark Levin. Each makes hyperbole, racism, condescension, prevarication and sudden, over-the-top rage the daily staple of their respective shows. Every time I accidentally catch them while flipping through stations on long drives, I'm met with their warmed-over drivel of how the left is responsible for everything bad that has ever happened anywhere in the world. An unstable teenager kills nine people in a Munich mall – Hillary's fault. Last year's Ebola outbreak – Obama has doomed America to be overrun by the deadly disease by his pandering to radical Islam.

Savage is especially rabid against Muslims no matter where they reside or what they believe. He'll deny it, but the man conflates all Muslims with radical Islamic terrorists – and hitches every evil to the entire population that follows the religion. He also has a boner

for people of Central America who dare to set foot on American soil. A recent Savage newsletter claims, "The Democrats are bringing death squads into America" backed by some very inane arguments like "more green cards have been issued in one year than the entire population of the original 13 colonies." I suppose you could also note that the amount of salsa consumed last year would take up more space than the cargo hold of the Mayflower, if that means anything. In another of his phoned-in newsletters, Savage says of NYC mayor Bill De Blasio: "this communist was put in power by the black population of New York." And the conclusion? "What that tells you is that the entire Democratic Party is based upon division between the races, division between the sexes and class warfare." QED, I guess.

The man who changed his name from Weiner to Savage is a shrill, incendiary buffoon whose voice is almost as hard to listen to as Mark Levin's high-pitched squeal. Levin, who modestly refers to himself as "The Great One," is cut from the same cheese cloth as Savage, emoting hatred for all things to the left of Josef Stalin. And like Savage, he knows all – just ask him.

As is common among the chattering classes, Savage and Levin have written many books documenting the looming decline and fall of Western Civilization that only hard-right bromides can avert. Levin's oeuvre includes such uplifting tomes as "Liberty and Tyranny: A Conservative Manifesto," "Plunder and Deceit: Big Government's Exploitation of Young People and the Future," and "Ameritopia: The Unmaking of America." Savage has a similarly depressing backlog including "Stop the Coming Civil War: My Savage Truth," "Liberalism Is a Mental Disorder: Savage Solutions," and the soon-to-be released "Scorched Earth: Restoring America after Obama." But in what might seem an incongruity (until you think about it), both men have books out about their dogs. Levin

was first with his 2009 treacly, woe-is-me puddle called "Rescuing Sprite: A Dog Lover's Story of Joy and Anguish." Basically, it's a story about how the dog he rescued got sick and eventually died – and how poor Mark had to suffer through it all. One reviewer said, "The amount of constant whining and inability to accept his beloved Sprite was going to pass soon was way too much. He was constantly internally debating whether he could make the decision to "destroy" Sprite. I thought the book was going to be about how Sprite and how his life brought joy to the Levin family; that we the readers would get a better understanding and hear stories about how wonderful a companion Sprite was to the family. But most of the book was constant whining and drivel." Apparently, the man who runs roughshod daily on the radio over anyone who disagrees with him ("Get off the phone ya big dope!") is actually a pathetic pussy.

Savage just came out with his dog book titled "Teddy and Me: Confessions of a Service Human." Among other revelations, readers learn from this thin, 128-page picture book that Savage reads bedtime stories to Teddy. And of course, he has to throw in that Muslims hate dogs.

That both these grating, hateful talk show hosts would write books about their dogs lends credence to the notion put forth in the movie "Wall Street" in which heartless Gordon Gekko makes this observation about WASPs, but could be talking about Savage and Levin as well: "They love animals, they can't stand people."

Hatchet Jobs Top Best-Seller List

August 8, 2016

About a month ago, *The New York Times* reported on a rapidly emerging glut of books on the subject of Donald Trump, noting, "this year is shaping up to be an exceptional one in terms of the

sheer volume of writing devoted to Mr. Trump. Some publishers and writers are exhuming out-of-print Trump biographies published decades ago and slapping new covers and introductions on them. Others are rushing out new books that explore Mr. Trump's stunning political rise."

Completely understandable given the morbid fascination with Trump's sketchy background and his increasingly bizarre behavior. Still, the top three Best Sellers on this week's *NYT* Book Review non-fiction list are hit-jobs on… Hillary Clinton (no. 12 is a screed by the ignorant and smug Fox talking head Eric Bolling titled "Wake Up America: The Nine Virtues That Made Our Nation Great–and Why We Need Them More Than Ever" that blames Obama and Hillary Clinton for all the nation's ills, real or imagined.) The top 15 list includes not a single one of the many Trump books that industrious publishers are said to be churning out in the lead-up to Election Day. Where are they?

The imbalance in buyer activity for books about the two presidential candidates implies to me that haters on the right want and need constant reassurance that their views are valid and shared by others, whereas the haters on the left are less-needy to seek out mutual comfort from like-minded members of their tribe. They seem to be more confident in the foundations of their opinions than their counterparts on the right who demand a daily fix of reinforcement from AM radio, Fox News, and the *NY Post* lest they discover one day it was all a hallucination.

Interestingly, the top three books all bear the ignominious burden of having been authored by complete and utter fools.

Number one this week is "Crisis of Character: A White House Secret Service Officer Discloses His Firsthand Experience with Hillary, Bill, and How They Operate" by former Secret Service agent Gary J. Byrne, in which a man sworn to protect the president

tries to offer slime on the Clintons that he purportedly witnessed while on duty. Think about that. If every person protected by the Secret Service had to worry about their personal activity being exposed by a future media whore, how could the protection system function? Nonetheless, Byrne's book is more along the lines of a boring autobiography than a scintillating expose of human sacrifice and satanic rituals overseen by the Clintons. Typical of the reviews on Amazon is this observation: "This book is little more than a re-hash of Bill Clinton's indiscretions and Gary Byrne's ax grinding against the Secret Service." More telling though is this from a review of a hater on the right: "I bought this book thinking I would learn more about the Clinton's." Learn more, you glutton? Clearly, no amount of indiscriminate prying into the lives of the Clintons over the past 30 years is too much for some losers.

Nutcase Dinesh D'Souza is aptly number two this week. His hatchet piece is titled "Hillary's America: The Secret History of the Democratic Party." Published by hard right Regnery Press, the cover of "Hillary's America" boasts a blurb by of all people "The Exorcist" author William Peter Blatty – in case there was any doubt about the tone of D'Souza's rag. D'Souza pled guilty in 2014 to the charge of using a straw donor to make an illegal political campaign donation, and was sentenced to eight months in a halfway house, five years' probation, and a $30,000 fine. Prior to that, super-holy Christian D'Souza was forced to resign as president of King's College after he was scoped out having a tryst in a motel with a woman who was not his wife. But hey, he's a moral authority on the evils of Hillary Clinton.

Finally, we come to number three on the Hit parade: Dick Morris – everyone's favorite ingrate. The pompous and despicable Morris has penned another (toe)nail-biter modestly called "Armageddon: How Trump can Beat Hillary." (I wonder if

Morris got his inspiration from Steve Gill's prescient 2007 book, "The Fred Factor: How Fred Thompson May Change the Face of the '08 Campaign"). Right about now, Hillary Clinton's gotta be wishing she murdered Dick Morris instead of Vince Foster. Among the Dick's recommendations for the Donald are: get more white people to vote, trash Wall Street (that should be a convincing tactic coming from a billionaire like Trump), and amazingly, win over women, blacks and Hispanics!? Not surprisingly, nearly a quarter of the reviews for "Armageddon" on Amazon are one-star. But Morris is nothing if not resilient. Somehow this nitwit manages to infiltrate his way onto political talk shows despite a sparkling history of being wrong on practically every count. One example: he went on TV to announce "here comes the landslide." He was referring to Mitt Romney's imminent blowout in 2012. Right.

Before we wrap this topic, let's come back to Eric Bolling. This is a man who claimed without shame on television, "I'll tell you about who doesn't know a whole lot about terrorism, is President Obama. And he's proven that over the last eight years. If you point to Bin Laden, that wasn't Obama's administration that got Bin Laden. That was the Bush administration that set up the kill shot, and Obama took the kill shot." Talk about terminally deluded. Bin Laden was killed in 2011, years after Bush faded into the Texas brush. This is what Bush had to say in 2002 about Bin Laden being just "one person:" "I really just don't spend that much time on (him)"

Our 19th Century Congress

August 8, 2016

Senator Chuck Schumer pleaded this week with his fellow congressmen to step up and fully fund the effort to combat the

insidious Zika virus which is beginning to pop up with more regularity north of the Equator, including Schumer's state of New York. He wants them to approve a $1.9 billion emergency bill. Schumer said, "This emergency funding package is an investment because the cost of doing nothing — which is what we are doing right now while Congress is on recess — will cost us even more in both dollars and in health consequences." He added, "That's why I've joined my colleagues in urging Congress to go back to Washington-even for just a day-to pass this $1.9 billion emergency bill to help fight Zika."

That's all. Just arrange for 535 people to fly back to Washington DC for a day to close the deal. What the fuck! Why can't Congress join the 20th Century (forget the 21st for now – too big a lift) and allow its far-flung members to vote over the internet. Or through an app. Or over the freaking phone. Come on you sclerotic institution. If you're going to be out of the office 254 days a year, at least figure out a way to get a couple important things done while you're back home fly-fishing with CEOs and groveling for money.

Rigged and Disgusting: Trump's Exit Ramps

August 16, 2016

When a candidate for public office starts raising the specter of a "rigged" election it usually means that candidate has resigned to the reality that he's going to lose. Raising a thread-worn Republican argument, Donald Trump said recently, "The only way we can lose, in my opinion, I really mean this, Pennsylvania, is if cheating goes on." Undoubtedly, behind soundproofed closed doors, Trump's advisors are assessing myriad other ways he can lose, but the message to the public is that Trump's only vulnerability stems from hundreds of thousands of Democrats who will each vote 15 times.

On the other hand, Trump may be talking about rigged elections because he's quite familiar with them, having been the beneficiary of a ludicrous primary process for the past year. The participation of crazy, unpredictable Trump in the 2016 GOP primary seemed to have raised general curiosity about how the system works – and what people discovered is a bizarre patchwork of rules presumably designed to winnow out the weakest, but instead dragged out like a painful infection. Some states award delegates in proportion to votes won, others give all delegates to the overall winner regardless of the proportion of votes won. Still others require candidates to amass 15-20 percent of the vote before they are eligible to receive any delegates. With more than 15 candidates in the race at one point in time, marginal leaders were able to accrue large numbers of delegates. Trump more than any other benefited from this "rigged" system.

In the vast majority of states, Trump accumulated a percentage of delegates that far exceeded the percent of the votes he won. In the important early-polling state of South Carolina, for example, Trump captured all the delegates even though he didn't even get a third of the votes. In Missouri, he received 41 percent of the vote and received twice the percentage of delegates

And in case the complaint of a rigged election isn't sufficient to explain a Trump defeat, there's always the "disgusting media" led by the "failing" *New York Times*. If the paper of record would only stop protecting Hillary Clinton, Trump would be beating her by 20 points!

Forget that Trump feeds the press beast daily with his gaffes, lies, flip-flops and incoherent "policy" pronouncements – the media has treated Donald very unfairly. And when he says the media, he means the "liberal media." Which raises an interesting question: when did the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal*

become part of the disgusting liberal media? In a startling editorial published on August 14, the very conservative Journal excoriated Trump, saying "he needs to stop blaming everyone else and decide if he wants to behave like someone who wants to be President—or turn the nomination over to Mike Pence." (Imagine how such a turn of events would go over with the several candidates who suffered for months in Iowa and New Hampshire vainly seeking the GOP nomination.)

The editorial opines, "Mr. Trump is right that most of the media want him to lose, but then that was also true of George W. Bush, George H.W. Bush and Ronald Reagan. It's true of every Republican presidential nominee. The difference is that Mr. Trump has made it so easy for the media and his opponents. The latest stories comport with what we also hear from sources close to the Trump campaign. Mr. Trump's advisers and his family want the candidate to deliver a consistent message making the case for change. They'd like him to be disciplined. They want him to focus on growing the economy and raising incomes and fighting terrorism."

Alas, that is not the way of the Donald. And for that, the media must atone.

Where No Man Has Gone Down Before

August 29, 2016

I find it hard to believe – maybe even a trifle troubling – but it was 50 years ago that the first TV episode of "Star Trek" aired. Although the original series lasted less than three years, the franchise thrived and grew into more than a dozen movies and a number of derivative TV series. And, of course there are the myriad ancillary "Star Trek" products and annual Trekkie conventions that keep the memories alive.

As Andrew Fazekas, author of "Star Trek: The Official Guide to Our Universe: The True Science Behind the Starship Voyages" opined in this month's *National Geographic*, the secret of the show's highly logical success: "taking real science seriously." Yeah, real science like the ability to travel faster than the speed of light, go backwards in time, enjoy gravity on the Enterprise as it flies through space, reverse aging, communicate in English with every alien life-form in the universe, and talk a computer into blowing itself up.

In reality, I think the show's success derived from the audience's voyeuristic fantasies about which space alien babe Captain Kirk was gonna do the nasty with each episode. Talk about going where no man has gone before. I can imagine Kirk thinking to himself before making it with the green-haired Amazon spilling out of her metallic bra: "does the carpet match the drapes?" And I'm sure Kirk had to wonder, as he was about to go down on the green-skinned seductress: "does it taste like Brussels sprouts?"

Perhaps the biggest science hole in the show was the conceit that every female among the thousands of species across the universe had the sex organs compatible with earthlings. How does Fazekas explain that? I suppose no one cared as long as James T. Kirk laid pipe after wiping off some Klingons?

A Cavalcade of Summer Disappointments

September 6, 2016

A front-page article in Monday's *New York Times* addressed the failures of Hollywood's 2016 summer of "megahits, super-flops and little else," suggesting that some Tinseltown moguls would like to blame lackluster box-office on movie-goers. Supposedly, according to Hollywood execs, a large population of movie-goers who once trekked to the theater with no particular film in mind to

watch now tend to stay home unless they're eager to see a specific intriguing movie.

Sounds bogus. More likely the retrenchment is a direct result of the poor-quality line-up of dreck that studios have offered this summer (and at prices that have converged on obscene.) Let's presume that a common pitch in Hollywood goes like this: "We take [fill in the blank with the title of a classic movie], add sex, special F/X, maybe 3D, attach a few egotistical stars who want to play the same roles as [fill in the names some famous dead actors who appeared in the original], and twist the ending so it's not completely derivative. Hey, it worked for 'Cape Fear' – why not 'Ben Hur'?"

Paramount's "Ben Hur," which came out a couple weeks ago was the $150 million flop of a remake of the 1959 film of the same name directed by William Wyler. Although Wyler's version starring Charleton Heston in the title role was no masterpiece (despite winning Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor), it had the qualities of an epic sword-and-sandals drama and, famously, that rollicking chariot race. Still, it's conceivable that in the hands of a talented director and screenwriter, a remake could surpass its source material. Sadly, for Paramount, this did not materialize. Critics largely placed the blame for the fiasco on director Timur Bekmambetov and screenwriters John Ridley and Keith Clarke ("one of the worst screenplays ever written in English by… grown men who should have known better" per Jim Lane of *Sacramento News & Review*.) Shit, even the race was a bust; Joshua Rothkopf of *Time Out NY* said that the "15-minute-long climactic chariot race feels like a videogame, shimmering with digital dust and overblown colors."

All in all, "Ben Hur" may be remembered by anyone who invested in it as "Ben Dover." Still, I'm sure there are execs at

Paramount whose post-mortem of the film's piss-poor results (it has yet to recoup even 10 percent of its initial outlay) will conclude that movie-goers just had other things to do than to trek off to the cineplex in mid-August.

Here are some other lackluster flicks courtesy of a blinkered film industry that the *NYT* called "a cavalcade of summer disappointments."

"The BFG": Creepy-looking giant reminds me of the poorly animated "Polar Express" in which the characters' soulless eyes are repellent. The BFG: Big Fucking Goof

"Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows": Presumably the studio believed children who grew up with these characters who speak in gnarly out-of-date 1980s vernacular would still enjoy their stupid antics as adults with more important things to do.

"Ghostbusters": Sony has rebooted the 1984 original with a female cast – presumably a gimmick to make a repackaging seem new. But backlash was pretty strong, if indefensible.

"The Legend of Tarzan": It seems reasonable to assume that the existence of at least 48 movies about the Tarzan story (according to IMDB) hurt audience interest in a 49th. More likely, this version could not meet the standard set by 1981's "Tarzan, the Ape Man" in which Bo Derek exposes much flesh.

"Independence Day: Resurgence": The original "Independence Day" made no sense and was scientifically bereft. But the world survived and that should have been the end of it. To make a sequel in which the aliens

come back is pure laziness, and provides ample reason for movie-goers to back off the cineplex.

"Neighbors 2: Sorority Rising": It's the same movie as "Neighbors" except this time the family feuds with a sorority instead of a fraternity. This is what passed for high Hollywood concept this summer.

"Alice Through the Looking Glass": Undoubtedly, audiences are worn out watching Johnny Depp and his Siamese twin Helena Bonham Carter portray fantasy characters in outrageous costumes and caked on make-up.

"Ice Age: Collision Course": Looks like five times is not a charm; this piece of shit snatched all of 12% on Rotten Tomatoes. *Rolling Stone* called it a "loud, lazy, laugh-starved cash grab that cynically exploits its target audience." In other words, a sequel.

"Now You See Me 2": Inferior sequel to the original which wasn't all that compelling to begin with. Sort of an "Ocean's Eleven" with magicians pulling off the heists, but too twisty and convoluted to be believed. James Berardinelli of *ReelViews* said, "Based solely on merit, 'Now You See Me 2' is a sequel that should never have been made." And thus, it makes total sense in Hollywood that "Now You See Me 3" is set to premier in 2017. Jeez.

Clinton Campaign: Basket Case

September 10, 2016

There's a scene in "All the President's Men" in which inside-scooper Deep Throat angrily chastises Bob Woodward for blowing a story.

Deep Throat: "You let Haldeman slip away."

Bob Woodward: "Yes."

Deep Throat: "You've done worse than let Haldeman slip away: you've got people feeling sorry for him. **I didn't think that was possible.**"

I was reminded of that scene after I saw footage and the aftermath of Hillary Clinton's ill-advised jeremiad against "half" of Trump's supporters: "You know, to just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables."

What better way to energize your opponent's base and look like a flaming asshole at the same time. Even more amazing, say something this stupid with less than 60 days until the election and you have a major case of self-inflicted immolation.

Naturally, Trump, who has insulted practically every demographic in America and by all rights should be polling at 10 percent, played the hurt puppy, the aggrieved party – and it was Clinton who was forced to make an apology.

I didn't think that was possible.

Astounding. Trump has insulted women, the military, business leaders, foreign leaders, congressmen, the press, judges, Muslims, and on and on – and it's Hillary Clinton who found it necessary to apologize for her remarks.

Bottom-feeder Trump was practically invited by his opponent to mount the high ground and proclaim, "For the first time in a long while, her true feelings came out, showing bigotry and hatred for millions of Americans."

No doubt bewildered Clinton supporters will feel as though they've fallen through the looking glass. And in a couple months when the press is writing stories about President-Elect Trump, they'll remember the "basket" comment as they slit their wrists in the bathtub.

Trump's Genius Revealed 916 Million Times

October 3, 2016

Only in a demented corner of America could a man who led his company to a $916 million loss be held up as an exemplar of business acumen. As *The New York Times* breathlessly reported over the weekend, Donald Trump in a 1995 NY State tax filing (which mirrors material reported to the IRS) claimed his vaunted business suffered a nine-figure loss – allowing Mr. Genius to offset positive earnings for 18 years (15 forward, 3 backward) and rendering much of his subsequent multi-million-dollar income tax-free.

(Coming soon from Trump University. Master Class: How to lose billions, sustain your arrogance, flummox asshole bankers, dupe the dupable, and still laugh at the IRS.)

Calling Donald an "absolute genius," Rudy Giuliani extolled the orange man's fi-douche-iary responsibility to his investors (read: his immediate family): "This is a perfectly legal application of the tax code, and he would have been a fool not to take advantage of it." Hefty lapdog Chris Christie went on record to slobber, "There is no one who has shown more genius in their way to maneuver around the tax code."

Getting the most out of the tax code is logical for anyone, but Bridgegate Christie and America's Mayor seem to have whizzed right past the salient point that 'ABSOLUTE GENIUS' DONALD TRUMP LOST NEARLY A BILLION DOLLARS IN ONE YEAR!

Just think, if Donald Trump had lost a few million more he'd be smarter than Stephen Hawking.

Every hard-working American who watches helplessly as his or her weekly salary is garnished immediately for federal, state and FICA taxes knows that the kinds of "genius" tax maneuvers made

by the likes of Trump are outside their reach. In reality, companies and wealthy individuals across the fruited plain that routinely denounce a complicated tax code that supposedly stifles investment and innovation refuse to acknowledge that the code is the way it is because of their manipulation of it.

Undoubtedly, more than 90 percent of the voluminous tax code rules exist because big business lobbied and paid Congress to put them there. Yes, it's a rigged system… in favor of dudes like Trump.

As a self-proclaimed expert on U.S. tax laws, Trump is presenting himself as the best (only?) person who can fix it. After the *Times'* revelation, I have to assume Trump's use of the word "fix" is the same as it would be in discussing the outcome of a horse race.

Does anyone really think such sops as carried interest loopholes, real estate depreciation schedules, and laws that allow corporate behemoths like Apple to pretend the majority of their revenue flows through a pub in Ireland were enacted by Congress for the betterment of a guy working at Lowes (when he's not driving for Uber on third shift)? It's easy to understand how the strongest constituency for Trump is the uneducated – no one taught them how to question charlatans and sniff out Trump-branded snake-oil.

I would be surprised if those close to Trump hadn't months ago expected a late-game revelation of his slimy tax practices. Perhaps a few tried to convince Genius Don to dribble out some numbers to placate the wolves, but in the end he knew it was better to try to run out the clock with bullshit about audits. If only the bad ole IRS would back off, he'd open the kimono on all Trump dealings back to when they were the Drumpfs.

Now, Trump's handlers are predictably vilifying the *Times* for publishing a few pages of '95 tax returns they received anonymously in the mail from some apparently disgusted and/or disgruntled insider. Lawsuits will be filed and subsequently dismissed without merit. Flaks will blame the leak on Hillary Clinton, or the Kenyan Secret Service, or Miss Universe – but it won't help. But it may not hurt either. Millions of shlubs at the bottom of the rung who pay their taxes all year every year, and then spend hours of their own time in April reconciling a few hundred bucks prior to filing 1040s will exult the genius of Trump – oblivious to how their man has played them for fools.

President Pussy Grabber

October 11, 2016

Politics in America are an upside-down affair where the damage from a scandal is inversely proportional to the significance of the office being contended. Today, sleazy behavior and lewd chit-chat that might bring down the candidacy of someone running for city council seems to have little bearing on the fate of a person campaigning for president of the United States. Trump's candid remarks to smarmy douche-bag Billy Bush aboard the "Access Hollywood" bus en route to a photo session seemed only to round out the orange man's curriculum vitae.

Nearly all righteous incumbent Republican congressmen and women running in tightly contested races suddenly divorced themselves from Trump in feigned shock over the "Access Hollywood" tape as though none of his prior bullshit was worthy of consideration – when in reality the latest revelation was to be expected, and amounted to nothing more than a moment in a continuing saga of head-shaking foolishness. In fact, it's amazing that no one doing opposition research during the primaries uncovered the

tapes, given Trump's well-known penchant for aggrandizing his machismo to anyone who will listen.

Trump was captured – unbeknownst to him – explaining that his stardom entitled him to grab women by the pussy, and for a couple days his campaign appeared doomed to collapse all around him and his deluded supporters. But as it has been through this entire campaign cycle, Trump seemed to slither away from what would have been certain doom for any pol seeking lesser office. He blew off the comments as mere "locker room banter" and immediately shifted attention to Bill Clinton's dalliances in an effort to tar the slick one's wife. Furthermore, Trump submitted the proposition that Bill's actions (vs. Trump's mere words) were the epitome of egregiousness, including rape. (Trump may have used "words" to describe pussy grabbing – but it sure as hell sounded like he spoke from actual "hands-on" experience.)

Now, conspiracies about the Clinton's will never fade away no matter how much investigative sweat is expended upon them, so it's certain that many voters who should normally turn from Trump and puke into the toilet will no doubt remain loyal to him and their deep-seated hatred for the Clintons.

But what about a largely ignored story about Trump that transcends all the boorishness reported to date? Why hasn't the case of child rape asserted against Trump and his pedophile friend, jailbird Jeffrey Epstein gotten more traction – or at least as much traction as the stupid "Access Hollywood" tape? It is uncontested that billionaire Epstein organized sex parties at his Upper East Side home in Manhattan where young, and sometimes under-aged, girls were made available to selected guests. He was also found to keep live-in sex slaves flown in from Eastern Europe under the pretense of working for a modeling agency. Epstein, who is now a level 3 registered sex offender, spent 13 months in Palm Beach county jail.

One of Epstein's selected guests of at least one sex party is said to be Donald Trump, who, along with Epstein, was served this past June with a "complaint for rape, sexual misconduct, criminal sexual acts, sexual abuse, forcible touching, assault, battery, intentional and reckless infliction of emotional distress, duress, false imprisonment, and defamation" by a girl who claims all this shit happened to her in 1994 at Epstein's mansion when she was 13.

Who knows if any or all of it is true, but the allegations are at least as heinous as those refried charges Trump is throwing around about Bill Clinton (who ain't running for anything, by the way). Time for the Epstein/Trump sex party story to get some more attention.

It Runs in the Bush Family

Some Trump apologists are blaming TV personality Billy Bush for goading the Donald into bragging about his sexual prowess aboard the "Access Hollywood" bus. As evidenced on the secret tape, Bush certainly played the sycophantic role, pressing Trump for details and inviting him to comment on a soap opera actress. Trump disembarked the bus after fumbling with the door handle, and received a hug from the actress. Like a trifle sidekick, Billy whined for "a little hug for the Bushy."

Later on, Billy Bush, a first cousin of George W. Bush, was promoted to a host spot on NBC's Today Show – and is currently on suspension for his cameo on the bus. Contrite Billy said, "Obviously I'm embarrassed and ashamed. It's no excuse, but this happened eleven years ago — I was younger, less mature, and acted foolishly in playing along. I'm very sorry."

Sounds familiar. I'm pretty sure I heard George W. say something like, "I used to be a drunk. I snorted cocaine. I mighta gone

AWOL a bit from the National Guard. But that was a long time ago. I was young and irresponsible. Now, let me be president."

Cuomo's Egregious Nuke Calculus

October 18, 2016

The life of a person living in Westchester County is worth more than that of someone in far Upstate New York. Andrew Cuomo, Governor of New York, lives in Westchester and he believes that fully. Indian Point nuclear plant, commissioned in the early 1970s and located on the Hudson River in Buchanan, NY provides power from its reactor units to about 25 percent of the consumers in New York City and Westchester County. The plant has a dodgy safety history, starting almost immediately when just five months of powering up the plant had to be shut down because a steel liner in the protective concrete dome buckled. Over time additional failures occurred, most piling up in recent years as the plant has aged past its projected life span. This past February, radioactive tritium-contaminated water leaked into the groundwater around the plant and into the Hudson.

Understandably, Cuomo has vigorously raised concerns about the safety at the plant, and has called for its closure. He said, "This is a nuclear plant that is in the densest area on the planet. You do not have a nuclear plant in as dense a populated area anywhere else on the globe—it's literally about 20 miles from New York City. If something goes wrong at Indian Point, it goes seriously wrong and it affects a lot of people, so I'm very, very careful when it comes to Indian Point."

The plant also happens to be a lot closer to Cuomo than New York City, which for him and the millions of neighbors in the vicinity of meltdown fallout is a constant looming nightmare.

For years I have wanted to see the plant shut down. It sits in the middle of a huge population center that could never be evacuated in time using highways that often resemble parking lots on any normal day. The plant also sits atop geologic fault lines, one of which was discovered in 2008 a mere one mile from the site. And if you don't think earthquakes happen on the East Coast, ask the National Park Service which has been repairing damage to the Washington Monument after a 5.8 magnitude earthquake, occurred near the capital in 2011. But most disturbing is the richness of Indian Point as a terrorist target. Mohammed Atta flew a passenger jet right past the plant on his way to impaling the North Tower of the World Trade Center in 2001. Yes, I've heard claims that had he flown into the dome around the nuclear core that the plane would have disintegrated around it; I've also heard it told that no one thought the towers would collapse either.

So, I think I speak for many who would agree with Cuomo that it's past the time to shut down Indian Point, and find alternative power sources, for the sakes of everyone within a 50-mile radius of the plant.

But in a stunning display of hypocrisy and arrogance, Cuomo is fighting hard to keep four other nuclear plants in New York alive for years to come: the Ginna reactor near Rochester and the FitzPatrick, Nine Mile Point One, and Nine Mile Point Two which occupy a single site on Lake Ontario. In fact, Cuomo is offering up billions in subsidies to help the owners – Entergy and Excelon – continue to operate.

The stated logic is that Cuomo wants to move New York away from power generated with fossil fuels – and to bridge the gap between now and 2030, or whenever there is sufficient solar and wind power production to replace the nukes, they must stay online. Under a normal, government hands-off approach, these

aging, decrepit plants would be shut down by the owners within a year – but that would go against Cuomo's plans. The only way today to replace the power generated by the four is to build plants that burn natural gas, and that's not where he wants to go. (He's also mindful of the blow to the weak Upstate economy should the nukes close, putting about 2,000 workers on the street.)

But how to reconcile the dissonance between strident calls to shut down Indian Point while leaving the Upstate Plants operating for another couple decades? Put another way: if Indian Point is too dangerous to operate, then why is it OK to continue to operate the Upstate reactors which are more decrepit than Indian Point, have the same design deficiencies as the Fukushima plant that melted down in Japan, and are among some of the oldest plants in the U.S.

The sorry answer is that Cuomo values the dense population of which he is a part over the sparser region that might as well live in Mongolia.

With Voters Like These…

November 7, 2016

No matter what happens tomorrow, Trump will at least get the votes from these schnooks whom he cruelly insulted, emasculated and diminished in rough fashion.

"Little Marco" Rubio who once said, "we have a frontrunner, in my party, who has fed into language that basically justifies physically assaulting people who disagree with you."

"Lyin' Ted" Cruz who once said, "I'm gonna tell you what I really think of Donald Trump: This man is a pathological liar. He doesn't know the difference between truth and lies. He lies practically every word that comes out of his mouth, and in a pattern that I think is straight out of a psychology textbook, his response is to accuse everybody else of lying."

"Bridgegate" Chris Christie who once said, "I just don't think that he's suited to be president of the United States. I don't think his temperament is suited for that and I don't think his experience is;" and to whom Trump once said, "The George Washington Bridge. He knew about. They're closing up the largest bridge in the world — the biggest in the United States — traffic flowing during rush hour. People couldn't get across for six, seven hours. Ambulances. Fire trucks."

Rudy Giuliani who once said in an addled speech on post 9/11 homeland security, "in the eight years before Obama came along, we didn't have any successful radical Islamic terrorist attack in the United States. They all started when Clinton and Obama got into office," um, forgetting about 9/11.

"Weak and ineffective" Paul Ryan who once said this about a Trump statement: "Textbook definition of a racist comment."

Mitch "the Turtle" McConnell who once said, "I strongly believe that Trump needs to apologize directly to women and girls everywhere, and take full responsibility for the utter lack of respect for women."

"Pathological" Ben Carson, whom Trump once suggested was "a child molester, a sick puppy."

Although you'd never guess it by their caustic remarks from the past, that's seven solid pro-Trump ballots in the can – and in America's antiquated, necrotic system that should be good enough for at least 100 Electoral College votes.

RIP Janet Reno

November 7, 2016

Janet Reno, former United States Attorney General under Bill Clinton died yesterday in her hometown of Miami at the age of 78. Reno was that rare DC creature who served for the entire length

of her president's two-term tenure. Reno was also the first woman to become AG – an accomplishment that would have been more laudable if she hadn't been preceded by two other women who couldn't get past the vetting process. Shortly after taking the oath of office in 1993, Clinton nominated Zoë Baird for the country's top law enforcement job. Baird possessed a stellar resume in the Department of Justice, the White House and in private practice, but it was soon discovered that she and her husband employed illegal immigrants to watch the kids and drive the car (and Zoë failed to withhold social security taxes to boot.) In the maelstrom of "Nannygate," Baird dropped out. Clinton then nominated Kimba Wood, the next "first female AG." Wood was a noted attorney specializing in anti-trust law and was appointed to a District Court seat by Ronald Reagan. She was famous for sentencing Michael Milken to a lengthy term for his rude junk bond schemes. Then she became more famous when it was discovered that she too hired an illegal immigrant to be her children's nanny. Even though Wood paid the social security taxes and broke no laws at the time, the episode served to tarnish Clinton's administration as a hapless bunch of rookies (which they were.)

By this time, you might think Clinton would have dispensed with trying to be the first president to appoint the first woman AG, and just go with a middle-aged white-shoe lawyer from Haw-vud. But clearly insider pressure persisted. I can imagine Clinton demanding of his quavering staff: "Just find me a woman with no kids who can correctly spell 'attorney' on three tries! She gets a pass if she misspells 'general'."

Enter Janet Reno. Although her resume was not as stellar as the two before her, she had respectable credentials in Florida. As AG she presided over a number of high-profile incidents:

The Good:

- Convictions of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, Oklahoma bombers Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, and the 1993 World Trade Center bombers.
- Filing well-deserved anti-trust action against Microsoft.

The Bad:

- The Branch Davidian siege in Waco, TX that left 76 people dead.
- False accusation against Richard Jewell as the Atlanta Olympics bomber.

The Ugly:

- Forced return of Elian Gonzales from relatives in Florida back to his father in Cuba (although I agreed with it.)
- Agreeing to let Ken Starr run amok in search of Clinton peccadilloes connected to Paula Jones that led to the first impeachment of a president since Andrew Johnson in the mid-19th Century.

First, Kill all the Pollsters

November 9, 2016

For months, professional polling companies have offered daily prognostications of voter preferences cut by age, gender, race, education level, occupation, shoe size, you name it. Every day a new poll would be published that seemed to contradict something produced the day before. The level of volatility was similar to what you might find if you took your blood pressure every five minutes – and the outputs equally useless. But one seemingly constant

figure offered every day was the simple probability that each major 2016 presidential candidate would win the White House. Day in and day out, the pollsters concluded that Hillary Clinton's chances of winning hovered in the mid-80 to low-90 percent range, leaving Donald Trump with barely double digits. This version of reality was promulgated right up to and deep into Election Day. There's Hillary holding steady at 80 percent at 8:30 PM like she had all summer – then inside of an hour she's tied with the Orange man. By 11:00, she's asymptotically scraping the x-axis, barely pulling 5 percent. How is that fucking possible?

If pollsters were actual professionals, they'd be subject to malpractice suits and disbarred from the tribe. Although they're obviously not professionals, they should minimally resign from the Society of American Statisticians and promptly jump off the nearest bridge with a span exceeding 150 feet. The only person who was right about the astigmatism of the polls was Trump himself who endured ridicule by the media. He likely challenged what he saw more out of bravado than mathematics, but so what?

If you're gonna subject the public to an hourly onslaught of polling data, at least break a sweat to get it mostly right. After all, the media outlets that would rather dissect polling data than inspect the candidates' positions on significant issues are using your stinky shit to propel narratives and dodge the hard work of journalism. More disconcerting is the likelihood that hundreds of thousands of voters who would have cast a vote "for Her" glanced at Clinton's seemingly insurmountable "probability to win" and chose to vegetate in their La-Z-Boys rather than drag their dimpled asses to the polling station. We'll never know how many blissfully ignorant Clinton votes stayed on the couch last night; I guess we could ask the pollsters to model the scenario, but you already know that would result in useless garbage.

Now, the pollsters in their defense will say that their predictions are based on what people tell them; and those people often lie about what they intend to do – perhaps out of embarrassment, or revulsion with pollsters. In other words, the pollsters blame their shoddy outputs on shoddy inputs. Garbage in, garbage out they say. If that's their defense, then they really should fall on their protractors.

Now, looking below the presidential race at the so-called incumbent vulnerables defending Senate seats, again we see the pollsters whiffed. Time and again they told us the Senate would likely go D because so many Republican incumbents were struggling with the Trump baggage. Prognosed to go down were Pat Toomey (PA), Rob Portman (OH), Kelly Ayotte (NH), Richard Burr (NC), Mark Kirk (IL), Ron Johnson (WI) and to a lesser degree, John McCain (AZ) and Marco Rubio (FL). Only Ayotte and Kirk lost their seats, and the Senate stayed red. Nice work, guys.

Time to Stand and Deliver

November 9, 2016

So, Trump won and both chambers of Congress stayed in Republican control. Soon Trump will replace Scalia with another troglodyte, returning the Supreme Court to the way it's been for 40 years. No excuses now. Time to deliver. Here's what I want to know:

- What great thing will Trump replace Obamacare with?
- What is the detailed budget and timeline for building the wall? And when will we see the arrangement for Mexico to pay for it?
- What is the plan to defeat ISIS?

- How many new coal mining jobs will be produced in 2017?
- How many enforcement personnel and judicial officers will be hired and at what cost to identify and deport the 11 million illegals? What is the timeline for 0 illegals to exist in the U.S.?
- After abrogating the agreement with Iran, what will the U.S. do when they restart their nuclear program?
- When the Supreme Court overturns Roe v Wade, what will the penalties be for performing illegal abortions?
- What percent of Trump voters will benefit from the repeal of the Inheritance (aka. Death) tax?
- When and how will NATO countries be forced to increase contributions?
- What's the plan to deal with China's expansion into the South China Sea, with North Korea's nuclear missile program, with Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, with Saudi Arabia and Yemen?

I wonder whether Trump just got his worst nightmare. He won't be able to disengage from difficult projects through bankruptcy courts like he's used to doing. The Secret Service will probably take away his cell phone. Golf will be cut back and he'll find it tougher to grab pussy when his every move is logged by White House staff. Melania will age out beyond her usefulness, but divorcing the First Lady will not be an option. His comeback as a TV star will have to wait at least four years when he'll really be an alter kocker. Damn, being POTUS is such a buzzkill!

I stand by my earlier belief that in the beginning that Trump never expected nor wanted to be the president. And by winning,

the fucker lost. Expect investigations, revelations of unseemly behavior, payoffs, etc. Should be fun.

Promises, Promises

November 15, 2016

It's been estimated that the cost to completely deport an immigrant living illegally in the U.S. is about $40,000 per person. There are the costs to fund the enforcement teams who are needed to smoke out the infiltrators and run them through the due process of the courts. Some may say "due process" is for pussies, but it's hard to imagine that people would be denied a chance to prove they are living legally in the States. As such, many people rounded up will be entitled to taxpayer-funded legal counsel, adding to the cost. And of course, once someone has been adjudicated an illegal, there are the costs of transportation back to wherever the person came from (if that can be ascertained, and the country of origination agrees to accept.) Presumably if the deported person leaves behind children who are citizens, those children would become wards of the state.

Trump boasted on the campaign trail that he would kick out all 11+ million illegals, but as is his habit he modified the goal down to just the 2-3 million who are supposedly criminals. (It's interesting to note that many of the illegal immigrants who have committed crimes are sitting in American prisons, and cannot be deported before their sentences are completed.)

Deporting 2-3 million people at $40,000 a head would cost conservatively $80-$120 billion to execute. And that's why Trump won't get it done.

Building a brick and mortar wall 1,989 miles from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean along lightly populated areas over rough terrain and through private property is a heavy lift. In order

to prevent breaches over and under it, the wall must be high as well as deep. It must be patrolled by an army of border guards equipped with high-tech devices, including those that can detect tiny drones from flying over the wall with ropes or contraband. Inspections at the few openings in the wall must be vigilant (and lengthy) to achieve the stated goal of keeping out the Mexican rapists and drug smugglers. Ironically, the logistics of transporting the materials and concrete to build the wall would favor Mexican companies who would reap a windfall over their American competitors from its construction.

And as it's impossible to build the wall right atop the U.S.-Mexican border, it must necessarily traverse land well inside U.S. territory, essentially cutting off hundreds of square miles of public and private lands from access (at least from the American side.) And although I doubt any proponent of the wall cares, it would cut across animals' migratory paths and become a place where garbage piles up against after every heavy. And for all this trouble, the cost to build the "beautiful" wall is estimated to be $25 billion – which really means $50-75 billion in government-ese. And that's why Trump won't get it done.

All throughout the campaign, Trump derided the Affordable Care Act as a disaster, and, parroting an oft-stated Republican fantasy, said he would repeal and replace the law. Replace it with what? "Something great!" After several dozen votes in Congress to repeal the ACA where the timid opposition was able to express outrage without actually having to consider the consequences – given Obama's insurmountable veto – Trump has the ability to shitcan the law. Reps own Congress, so no excuses for failing to repeal and replace.

Since becoming president-erect, Trump has backed off talk of "disaster." He actually likes some stuff after all, specifically

allowing children up to 26 years old to stay on their parents' policies, and banning insurance companies from denying coverage to people with pre-existing conditions. Of course, he's also opposed to the mandate for many people to buy insurance or pay a penalty. The problem is that it's financially difficult if not impossible to preserve the pre-existing condition ban without the mandate/penalty feature. Trump's vision would crater the insurance industry; Congress's vision would cause several million people to lose coverage – most, I assume, sick people in poorer, rural areas who thought Trump would solve their problems, not fuck them up. These are the stark choices of truly repealing ACA. And that's why Trump won't get it done.

Trump is considering a roster of ossified career politicians and Washington insider cronies for key admin and cabinet positions. Most assuredly in line for influential positions include Newt Gingrich, Rudy Giuliani, John Bolton (former ambassador to the UN), Jeff Sessions (long time Senator), Jamie Dimon (JP Morgan chief), Sarah Palin, Bob Corker (Senator from Tennessee), Sam Brownback (failed Governor of Kansas), and (maybe) Chris Christie. This cast of characters has hovered inside and around the fringes of Republican politics for centuries.

And let's not forget Trump's rank nepotism of putting his children on the transition team and using them as "informal" advisors – while they also run the Trump businesses. That's a looming malodorous miasma. Trump said he'd "drain the swamp" but his team is the swamp. And that's why Trump won't get it done.

Okay, so Trump won't accomplish much of what he promised. What will America get, then? I predict we'll see a return to the old tried-n-true agenda when Republicans own the whole show: tax cuts for wealthy people, ballooning deficits, cuts in regulations meant to protect the lower classes, cozy deals for big business

(certainly no abrogated trade treaties), poorly conceived costly military adventures, ridicule of climate change, attempted gutting of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, installing more voting restrictions, continued gerrymandering, and interfering with gay peoples' lives. Y'know, stuff that large swathes of Trump's supporters really couldn't care less about. They foolishly thought they'd get their old jobs back in the coal mines and steel mills, but as Marco Rubio once said, Trump is "a con artist." And although he voted for the "con artist," Little Marco had it right.

They Left Their Spleens in San Francisco

November 29, 2016

A straight news story reporting on a poorly designed and potentially dangerous high-rise building in San Francisco garnered several hundred comments, but not many pertained to the actual topic of the article. You might expect to read observations about the looming danger and how the city should plan to deal with it. Or maybe some caustic remarks about the hubris of building developers and smug architects. You might even hope beyond hope that a few comments would come in from learned engineers with suggestions for approaching and ultimately solving the problem.

Instead, this patently non-partisan story about a dodgy building instigated a maelstrom of insanity from what would appear to be bigoted nitwits in flyover country. It's the stuff of ignorant assholes who probably fancy themselves god-fearing Christians but who sound more like their own parodies of jihadist Islamists who would call upon Allah to inflict painful death upon their enemies.

Who could blame Californians – who pay way more in taxes than they get back in federal spending so that underachievers in red states can rake in their handouts and subsidies – for wanting to bolt the union?

Below is a sampling of the responses which capture the spirit of a good deal of the sick commentary (or should I say dysentery?)

Enuffsenuff: Can someone please make sure Nancy Pelosi is on the downside when it falls?

Anonymous: Libtards say it's not sinking it's actually the ground around it rising. They're calling it Global Elevation Change and a few new taxes are needed to fix the problem before it's too late.

apostlejohn7777: City full of Perversion and crime and corruption – Let the whole city sink. California sucks. Take it from someone who lives here.

Alex: Hopefully that entire wasteland of a city will sink right to the bottom of the pacific and take all those illegals with it.

Cave Cave Deus Videt: Rent the side that isn't leaning to Rosie O blabber mouth, it will be level in a heartbeat.

Michael: It's San Francisco — just play music from the Village People around the block nice and loud. That will keep the tower erect.

Mojo: It might be because San Franmexico has had a sudden explosion of feral gerbils and they are tunneling to escape the passions of the you know whos.

Jim: There's still hope the rest Of SF will sink as well. I hope polousi / feinstain is there when it happens & takes a lot of illegals w/ them .

Rebeldawg: Sinking as fast as the left wing morons that rule the city… can't wait for the Big Oneto hit and clean out that Sodom & Gomorrah…

Ben: The World Trade Center buildings in NYC came

straight down. I always thought it would be more exciting to watch a tall building tip over towards the side.

Tom Friedman's Head is Flat

December 9, 2016

Tom Friedman, *New York Times* op-ed writer and the author of "The World is Flat" penned a column the other day titled "Say What, Al Gore, Ivanka Trump and Donald Trump?" The piece oozed ignorant optimism that Trump, by meeting with Al Gore, might harbor second thoughts about the state of climate change which he has called a hoax perpetrated by China to gain commercial advantage. Apparently Ivanka Trump was behind the invitation for Gore to meet her father in the glorious faux-gold Towers. Tom gushed in his column, "Ivanka clearly has an influence on her father's thinking, and the fact that she went out of her way to set up a meeting with Gore, who has done more to alert the world to the perils of climate change than anyone else on the planet, and the fact that Gore described the meeting as 'a sincere search for areas of common ground… to be continued,' offer a glimmer of hope."

A "glimmer of hope?" Seriously, Tommy? Such foolish analysis serves as ample evidence that Tom Friedman's head is flat. By now it should be obvious to even the casual observer – let alone a so-called visionary like Friedman – that Trump plays these transparent head-games all the time. Meeting with someone from the mainstream, saying something cogent, to lull his skeptics into a false hope before bringing down the hard-right hammer.

Soon after Trump's magnanimous sit-down with Gore-tex, he named Oklahoma AG Scott Pruitt to head the Environmental Protection Agency. That Pruitt is an avowed climate change denier and asshole buddy of the fossil fuel industry makes him the perfect

choice to decimate the EPA – which was what Trump has always said he wanted to do. The Gore meeting (insult?) was a sheer and obvious diversion, and Friedman fell flathead over heels for it.

Pruitt has written that "scientists continue to disagree about the degree and extent of global warming and its connection to the actions of mankind," by which he meant of the several thousand scientists covering the field, there are still those crazy five or six who think global warming is bullshit (and that the moon is made of green cheese.)

In similar fashion, billionaire Trump ran around posing as the champion of blue-collar workers, expertly convincing them that his cloistered, silver-spoon up-bringing somehow made him a kindred spirit with those who drive fork-lifts, scrape coal seams, manufacture air conditioners, and dip French fries into molten oil. He accepted accolades for saving (aka. purchasing with taxpayer funds) 1,100 jobs at Carrier (a number that is closer to 750 when you disregard jobs that weren't going to Mexico in the first place), then in a bait-n-switch promptly installed Andrew Puzder, the head of the Carl's Jr. and Hardee's fast-food restaurants, as Labor secretary. Puzder is not too pro on raising the $7.25/hour minimum wage, fearing that lavishing additional money on workers will price them out of the market – or worse, drive the cost up of a burger by an extra dime.

As Puzder's company, CKE, is no longer publicly traded, it's not clear what his annual compensation currently is, but when CKE was last public in 2009, the Puz pocketed $7.35 million (not counting stock grants and other such perks.) Unless Puzder worked a million hours at minimum wage that year, it is more likely his take was closer to $2,500 an hour.

Trump has strung along countless cabinet wannabees (Chris Christie, Rudy Giuliani, Mitt Romney) – who have absolutely no

chance with the Orange man – just to embarrass them in the end; it's his vindictive style. So obvious. Yet Flathead Friedman gushes when he perceives a scintilla of change in Trump's black heart. Take my advice Tom and stop being so damn gullible!

The Curse of Salvator Mundi

December 15, 2016

Renaissance-era painting titled "Salvator Mundi" thought to have been executed by a student of Leonardo Da Vinci around 1500 was sold at auction in 1958 for less than $100. No doubt the seller considered it a good deal, for the painting, an oil on wood panel depicting Jesus Christ as the savior of the world, was in the words of one restorer "heavily overpainted, which makes it look like a copy. It was a wreck, dark and gloomy."

Around 2005 an art dealer purchased the painting at an American estate sale for $10,000. No doubt the sellers considered it a good deal because art experts still considered it the product of Da Vinci's school and not by the master himself. The painting soon came to be owned by a consortium that includes the New York art traders Alexander Parish and Robert Simon.

Then in 2013, after the experts reversed course and concluded the painting was an actual Da Vinci, the traders, with the help of Sotheby's brokered a private sale to a reclusive Swiss art collector named Yves Bouvier for $80 million. Careful, painstaking cleaning and restoration of the painting revealed the tell-tale brushstrokes of the master – a sort of DNA that revealed the hand of Da Vinci. "Salvator Mundi" ("Savior of the World") suddenly joined the mere 15 or so paintings by Leonardo Da Vinci known to exist. No doubt the sellers considered it a good deal; after all, in the span of less than 10 years they earned an 800,000 percent profit on their estate sale steal.

Funny, though, how every time "Salvator Mundi" changes hands, the seller seems to get boned in the ass. It's nothing short of a curse. Yes, even the guys who pocketed multi-millions after speculating on a 26 by 18 1/2-inch piece of art believe they got taken.

The consortium that sold the painting for $80 million watched in horror as Bouvier flipped the masterpiece to Russian billionaire Dmitry Rybolovlev just days later for a $47.5 million profit. Perhaps Rybolovlev considered it a good deal – after all some experts now think the painting could be worth $200 million – but there's so much more to the story.

Unlike the long list of people who once owned "Salvator Mundi" and silently regretted its departure, the poor, suffering art traders who sold the painting for a trifle ~$80 million profit have filed suit against Sotheby's, claiming they knew or should have known the painting was worth a lot more. They also looked skeptically upon the auction house's long relationship with Bouvier. In other words, Sotheby's, who gets paid a handsome commission for its due diligence, either blew the estimate, or worse, was in cahoots with Bouvier. Did Bouvier have a ready buyer in Rybolovlev for "Salvator Mundi" before he flipped it? That seems established. Bouvier, Rybolovlev and a Sotheby's rep met in Rybolovlev's apartment to look over the painting before it was ultimately sold to Bouvier.

So, it would seem the aggrieved traders have a case that Sotheby's didn't have their best interests at heart. But Rybolovlev is also pissed – apparently, he was under the impression that Bouvier had purchased the painting on his behalf for a number closer to the $127.5 million he charged the Russian. When he learned that Bouvier slimed a quick $47 mil on the transaction, Rybolovlev hit the ceiling. Where it goes from here, who knows? But in case you

ever wondered what life's problems for the .001 percenters look like, l'affaire "Salvator Mundi" offers a unique glimpse.

Strap Gail Collins to the Roof

December 20, 2016

Gail Collins, one of the lamer op-ed columnists for *The New York Times* wrote a piece the other day about Mitt Romney's embarrassing dinner with Trump in which the former Governor and presidential candidate sucked up to the orange man in a futile gambit to become Secretary of State. As soon as I saw that Romney was Gail's subject, I knew instinctively that she would throw in an aside about Mitt's dog traveling to Canada on the roof of his car. You see, many years ago it was reported that Romney once drove to Canada on family vacation with Seamus the Irish setter riding atop the minivan in a cage strapped to the vehicle's roof rack. As Mormon Mitt has a large family – a wife and five boys – it would not seem to me a flight of fancy that the dog might take the trip in his own carrier, no doubt protected from the elements in a properly outfitted cage. Seamus probably endured nothing more stressful than any dog who has flown sedated in the belly of an airplane.

But for some bizarre reason Gail Collins thinks this is an affront that must be mentioned every time Romney appears in one of her inane op-ed columns. Sure enough, as if edicted by Federal law, in her column of December 15 titled "For Mitt Romney, Dinner and a Kiss-Off," she wraps up the piece by noting, "And, of course, he's the guy who once drove to Canada with the family Irish setter strapped to the roof of the car. The worst part was his excuse — not 'too many kids in the back seat' but 'my dog loves fresh air.' Somewhere, the spirit of Seamus is laughing."

You think I'm joking about her obsession with Romney's

god-damned dog? It even got so bad, that Gail once wasted a full *NYT* column – a platform any pundit or social observer would kill for – explaining her obsession with Seamus on the roof. It appeared on March 7, 2012 in puff piece titled "Dogging Mitt Romney." But needless to say, she proceeded to hype the meaningless event, tethering it to Romney whenever he appeared in one of her columns.

As Romney hasn't been big news since he lost his bid in 2012, we have to go back a few years, but here's a sampling of Gail's handiwork:

Mitt! Again! What? June 18, 2014. "Don't leap to any conclusions. After all, there are a lot of different ways to be back. You can be back as in "back running for president." Or just back as in "back in the public eye." Or back driving to Canada with a dog strapped to the car roof."

Mitt's Oval Office Moment. November 30, 2012. "As Romney's SUV approached the White House grounds, police stopped a man who tried to reach for the car yelling "Mitt! Mitt!" It wasn't clear what he had in mind. Perhaps he was an angry dog lover who still hasn't gotten over the fact that Romney once drove to Canada with an Irish setter strapped to the car roof."

Anybody Notice a Pattern? November 16, 2012. "It appears that Mitt Romney was a terrible presidential candidate. O.K., some people have known that ever since the story broke about strapping his dog on the car roof."

Mitt's Snake-Bit Season. September 19, 2012. "It's not all that unusual for a vice-presidential candidate to go low-profile. And it is totally not true that Mitt Romney

strapped Paul Ryan to the top of a car and drove him to Canada."

Political Page Turners. August 17, 2012. "Ryan is the one who likes to catch catfish by sticking his fist into their burrows and dragging them out by the throat. Romney is the one who drove to Canada with his dog strapped to the car roof."

Mitt's Political Vortex. July 13, 2012. "The Republicans currently have a symbolic legislative agenda and a presidential candidate who can be in two places at one time, but whom nobody likes. Other than that, it's all good. Nobody's brought up the dog on the car roof for days."

The (Sort of) New Mitt. June 22, 2012. "This isn't an election about two people. This isn't an election about being a Republican, Democrat or an independent. This is an election about …

A) lowering the corporate tax rate.
B) lowering the individual marginal tax rates.
C) keeping dogs off the car roof.
D) the future of America."

Mitt Speaks. Oh, No! February 1, 2012. "Does anybody truly believe that Romney is planning to spend any presidential time dreaming up ways to fix the safety net for the benefit of the very poor? Be real. This is the guy who drove to Canada with the family dog strapped on the roof."

OK, Enough already. Screw the pooch, Gail Collins!

Carl Paladino and Mad Cow Disease

December 26, 2016

Artvoice, a Buffalo-based media outlet recently posed a set of four mundane questions to local personalities as part of an end-of-year puff piece. It's the kind of thing many local newspapers and e-zines commonly publish in the slow weeks leading to a new year. Here are *Artvoice*'s scintillating questions:

1. What would you most like to happen in 2017?
2. What would you like to see go away in 2017?
3. Who would you like to see run for mayor of Buffalo in next year's election?
4. Should the new $50 million Amtrak station be at Central Terminal or Canal Side?

Sue Marfino, the owner of a retail shop called Shoefly predictably answered the first two questions as follows: 1) A return to shopping in communities and at brick & mortar stores, and 2) Mindless shopping online. Jan Jezioro, *Artvoice*'s classical music columnist was a bit more partisan with his responses: 1) Impeachment of Donald Trump, and 2) Donald Trump – as was Jeff Mucciarelli, co-owner of 31 Club who said 1) ISIS removed from this earth, and 2) President Obama and the Clinton corruption.

Everyone offered an opportunity to email answers to *Artvoice*'s questions came back with reasonably thoughtful, if irreverent responses. Everyone, that is, but Carl Paladino, real-estate developer, school-board member, one-time failed candidate for New York State governor, and self-described friend of Trump. Apparently misunderstanding the light-hearted tone expected

from *Artvoice* in a holiday season, Cro-Magnon Carl vented his spleen in a way he might have thought was amusing but came across to most sentient beings as horribly vicious – and worse, unfunny.

1. Obama catches mad cow disease after being caught having relations with a Herford. He dies before his trial and is buried in a cow pasture next to Valerie Jarret, who died weeks prior, after being convicted of sedition and treason, when a Jihady cell mate mistook her for being a nice person and decapitated her.
2. Michelle Obama. I'd like her to return to being a male and let loose in the outback of Zimbabwe where she lives comfortably in a cave with Maxie, the gorilla.

Wow. Now that's the kinda guy we all wish was on our school board.

Given a chance to prognosticate 2017, Paladino reached into the abyss of bestiality, racism, and paranoid Islamophobia. Michelle Obama turning back to male? Living with a gorilla? Damn, even Obama haters had to wince a bit at that. And what's with the arcane reference to Valerie Jarret, someone virtually no one outside the beltway has ever heard of? Is she the scariest boogie-woman Paladino could think of?

When questioned about his words (and implicitly, his sanity), Mr. Charming replied, "It has nothing to do with race." He went on, as is so often the case with racists, to blame the media, "That's the typical stance of the press when they can't otherwise defend the acts of the person being attacked." Remember: Paladino's words were not something he foolishly uttered by accident in a

breezy interview; the dude took the time and effort to craft this slimy shit before pressing send on his semen-crusted keyboard.

Naturally, Paladino came in for some rancid opprobrium following his intemperate commentary. Erie County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz called on Paladino to resign immediately, as did Assemblyman Sean Ryan of Buffalo. Governor Cuomo slammed the remarks as "racist, ugly and reprehensible." William Paladino, son of Carl, called his old-man's ravings "disrespectful and absolutely unnecessary." The head of the Buffalo School Board wants his addled head on a platter. (Although they should first investigate whether poor Carl caught "Mad Cow" disease from ingesting too many slippery Trump Steaks.)

Hell, even Trump's transition team found the whole thing sordid, writing in a statement, "Carl's comments are absolutely reprehensible, and they serve no place in our public discourse." It's interesting to note that Trump himself couldn't find the time or energy to type out 140 characters to call out Carl – maybe he was too busy working on something more important like slamming Alec Baldwin (again) for his SNL impressions.

But before we shun Paladino for the rest of eternity, let's consider a likely explanation for his "reprehensible" comments: Poor Carl himself is suffering from mad cow disease – not exclusively from having sex with a Herford, but from consuming one of those rancid Trump Steaks that sat out too long under the Klieg lights.

The Oaf of Office

January 22, 2017

We present the real official transcript of the Oaf of Office as administered by Chief Justice of the U.S. John Roberts to Donald Trump, January 20, 2017:

Roberts: Raise your right pussy grabber and repeat after me. I, Donald John Trump --

Trump: -- I, King Donald the First, Emperor of Fifth Avenue, Conqueror of the Southern Extremes, Defender of the Eleventh Chapter, Pageant Master, Arbiter of the Loser, Negotiator of Souls, Tweeter in Chief, Gatekeeper of the--

Roberts: Do solemnly swear--

Trump: --You want me to swear? Seriously? OK. Fuck the dishonest media, and fuck Alec Baldwin. And that asshole from CNN who tried to ask a question. Fuck him. ISIS? Eat my taco-bowl-bowel movement, scum-bags! And those bitches who made up total lies about me fondling them? Suck my dick – I mean it… later… in the Oval. And Rosie O--

Roberts: That I will --

Trump: Are you cutting me off? Cuz no one cuts me off. Well, maybe Jared, when he does that cute thing with his nose, but, uh… No one cuts me off!

Roberts: That I will faithfully execute --

Trump: --Execute? Really? I can do that, too? Oh, man… well, for starters, Crooked Hillary, Bill Maher, all those horse-faced bitches suing me, Romney, everyone still in Guantanamo--

Roberts: --That I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States --

Trump: Wait a minute. Let me look up this word "faith-fully." Not sure what that word means… Never heard it before… OK, I probably can't do that, but hell, who

cares. I will faithfully execute the Orifice of President of the United States…

Roberts: And will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.

Trump: Hold on. I need to see this Constitution thing before I sign off on all that beautiful bullshit you just laid on me. Remember, I wrote the "Art of the Deal." Huge seller. I know deals, and this "preserve, protect and defend" shit doesn't sound like a good one to me. Where's Deutsche Bank? Unless they're into this with 90 percent of the financing, and there's an indemnification clause that protects me from liability, I can't go forward. Where's my Ray Cohn? Maybe if it was just preserve, or just defend, but hell, you want me to take on all three projects? At the same time? Where's my leverage? Am I gonna have to file a 13D when this is all done?

Roberts: I'm, uh, not sure. Scalia would know.

Trump: Goddammit! Where the fuck did Barron go now? Melania! Wake up!

Roberts: So help me, God. Really. Help me, God!

This Must be Awkward on Easter

January 22, 2017

Gwyneth Paltrow is shilling on Goop for a revolutionary "secret" product referred to as a "jade egg" which women are instructed to insert in their vaginas. The poop from Goop is that "jade eggs harness the power of energy work, crystal healing, and a Kegel-like physical practice. Fans say regular use increases chi, orgasms, vaginal muscle tone, hormonal balance, and feminine energy in general." Just so you know, the jade egg is $66, but

there's also a rose quartz egg for $55 – not sure what the benefits are of spending an extra eleven bucks, though.

In any event, at least one gynecologist, Dr. Jen Gunter of Kaiser Permanente in San Francisco, thinks the concept of sticking an egg in the yoni is a "load of garbage." Gunter explains: "The claim that they can balance hormones, is quite simply, biologically impossible… As for female energy? I'm a gynecologist and I don't know what that is!" She also mentioned something about toxic shock syndrome that sounded kinda bad.

All this makes me wonder… should I stop using my Prince Peter Pecker Pump while driving to work?

Trick Question

January 29, 2017

"The Generals," as Trump refers to them as though they're an amorphous blob (or maybe he's confused them with the team that always loses to the Harlem Globetrotters), must be wondering if their Commander-in-Cheese had posed a trick question. This past Saturday Trump signed yet another in a flurry of executive orders directing his new defense secretary James Mattis to submit a strategy within 30 days to defeat the Islamic State, aka. ISIS.

That's right. Donald Trump, the man who insisted for months that he had a plan to defeat ISIS – a plan he had to keep secret so the enemy wouldn't be ready for it, and so that his political opponents wouldn't co-opt it as their own – has now asked "the Generals" to come up with a plan of their own. No doubt Trump has posed this challenge for which he already has a "foolproof" solution simply to test Mattis's battlefield skills – kinda like Mr. Miyagi in "The Karate Kid."

After all, while on the presidential trail Trump dangled these coy teasers:

- "I don't want the enemy to know what I'm doing. All I can tell you, it is a foolproof way of winning, and I'm not talking about what some people would say, but it is a foolproof way of winning the war with ISIS."
- "I have a simple message for ISIS: Their days are numbered. I won't tell them where and I won't tell them how… We have to be unpredictable. And we have to be unpredictable starting now. But they're going to be gone. ISIS will be gone if I'm elected president. And they'll be gone quickly."
- "The problem with politics is if I tell you right now, everyone else is going to say, 'Wow, what a great idea.' You're going to have 10 candidates go and use it, and they're going to forget where it came from, which is me. But no, I have an absolute way of defeating ISIS."

But even though they sink ships, Trump's got loose lips. Here's the secret master plan as revealed by its architect:

- "I would bomb the shit out of 'em. I would just bomb those suckers. That's right. I'd blow up the pipes… I'd blow up every single inch. There would be nothing left."
- "The other thing with the terrorists is you have to take out their families. When you get these terrorists, you have to take out their families."

And there it is; the genius of Trump. Proposing a strategy no one had ever previously imagined: bombing the shit out of ISIS and their families. (It's entirely possible Obama independently arrived at this option too, but as the "founder of ISIS," had no desire to carry it out.)

And what of Mattis? Does he parrot back Trump's answer to the challenge and risk looking like a brown-noser? Does he come up with something completely different and bear Trump's wrath for failing the test? Does he distract Trump with a plan to invade Grenada again? Or does he just coast along, knowing that this week brings seventeen more executive orders for the emperor's signature after which the 30-day defeat ISIS quiz will fade away like a fart in the wind?

A Kushy Job

February 2, 2017

The U.S. recently raided an Al-Qaeda compound in Yemen with the goal of confiscating laptops and cell phones in the hope of collecting inside intel on the terrorist group – and hopefully kill a few of the militants along the way. As is often the case in such risky endeavors, the fog of war descended and plans went out the window. Military men got hurt and killed, an Osprey aircraft crashed and had to be destroyed, civilians died. *The New York Times* ran a piece in today's paper citing the back-story that led to the decision to go forward with the mission.

"Just five days after taking office, over dinner with his newly installed secretary of defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, President Trump was presented with the first of what will be many life-or-death decisions: whether to approve a commando raid that risked the lives of American Special Operations forces and foreign civilians alike. With two of his closest advisers, Jared Kushner and Stephen K. Bannon, joining the dinner at the White House along with Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., Mr. Trump approved sending in the Navy's SEAL Team 6, hoping the raid early last Sunday would scoop up cellphones and laptop computers that could yield valuable clues about one of the world's most dangerous terrorist groups."

Wait. Jared Kushner was there? Is it even remotely possible to make a coherent case why a child like Kushner should be involved in, or even nearby, a decision whether to send men into deadly combat? Even if Juvie Jared was just sitting at the big-boy table to snarf *coq au vin*, or to ingratiate himself further with daddy-in-law – his presence in (and possible contribution to) a decision of life and death is deeply troubling.

Silver-spooner Kushner was born into a wealthy real-estate development family just like big daddy Donald, and soon learned the ways of leveraging other people's money. He graduated from Harvard in 2003 (he was admitted after his father donated $2.5 million to the university), and went on to snatch advanced degrees from NYU (after his father donated $3 million to the university.) At the ripe old age of 25, Jared bought the *New York Observer* for $10 million with money he earned from his paper route (and some loans backed by his family.)

Unless he held an undercover assignment reporting to Sylvester Stallone, there's no evidence Mr. Presidential Advisor ever served in the military. Still, Kushner holds tremendous sway inside the West Wing, giving his approval or black balls to various and sundry contenders for plum White House appointments. And he may also be opining on matters of greater impact, like whether America should engage in fisticuffs with Iran, or help Israel abscond with the entire West Bank.

How did the fate of the country become the purview of a rank amateur? Kushner is just one among many uniquely unqualified agents in the executive branch, including Ben Carson at HUD, Rick Perry at DOE (!), and Betsy DeVos at Education.

Don't be surprised if, as Los Angeles or Chicago or Miami is smoldering, Donald Trump pats Jared on the back and exclaims, "Kushy, you're doin' a heck of a job."

Nuclear Option

February 2, 2017

Whoever came up with this doomsday moniker for a Senatorial procedural change to filibuster rules was an obviously bit of an alarmist. Leave it to coddled U.S. Senators to equate what little they do to something as manifestly devastating as a nuclear bomb. Whatever you want to call it, Democrat Harry Reid when he was Senate Majority leader took the radioactive step of shit-canning the filibuster rule as it had applied to presidential nominees (except Supreme Court Justice appointments) – and people of all stripes swooned and called for the smelling salts. No longer did a candidate have to garner 60 votes to take a seat. No longer could a fussy minority halt all progress with a simple tantrum.

Republicans called it tyranny (even though their own shameful abuse of the filibuster kept hundreds of appointments in limbo for no good reason other than to spite Obama); some Democrats wrung their hands, fearful of what might happen if the tables turned and the Reps got the Senate back.

Sure enough, the Reps won the Senate – and they're poised to approve any and all of Trump's nominees, be they shameless sycophant, clueless billionaire, or mere multimillionaire newbie to politics. Democrats are now ruing the day Reid changed that rule by invoking the "nuclear option," whining as though the Republicans would never have done the same thing when given a chance had Harry not already done the dirty work for them. Stupid fucks. It is manifestly obvious that regardless of what Reid did or didn't do, that the Reps would have pushed the nuclear button down when they got the chance. And if the Dems try to pull a filibuster of Neil Gorsuch, Trump's nominee to the Supreme Court, watch how fast Mitch "the Bitch" McConnell does a Harry Reid impression and completes the circle in closing off the filibuster

altogether. (I say *if* because there are quite a few poopy-pants Dems up for re-election in 2018 in red states who fear decimation if they hold up Gorsuch's appointment.)

Trump called for it. "If we end up with that gridlock I would say if you can, Mitch, go nuclear," – and so the Bitch will have no choice but to comply with his master's voice. (Update: he did it in April 2017, just like clockwork.)

Twitty Conway

February 6, 2017

By now the whole world knows (whether any will admit it is another thing) that Kellyanne Conway, the Trump Whisperer, is a bona fide twit.

The ditzy blonde went on MSNBC to tell fellow twit Chris Matthews that Trump's ban on Muslims from seven countries – whose emigrants to the U.S. have committed a sum total of zero terrorist attacks on American soil since 2001 – was very much akin to Obama's ban on Iraqi's after the not-so-famous "Bowling Green Massacre." Not-so-famous because, as Twitty Conway noted, "Most people didn't know that because it didn't get covered."

She could have gone on to say, "It didn't get covered because it didn't happen," but that would have ruined the fairy tale – kinda like telling the kiddies that Cinderella died in a three-pumpkin pileup at midnight on the road out of the Prince's castle.

Of course, whiz-bang interviewer Chris Matthews just lets Kellyanne's devastating hallucination about some "Bowling Green Massacre" go unchallenged. Shit, had she known Chris was so brain dead, she could have tossed in the "Wilkes-Barre Flesh Eating Slime Disaster" and the "Sarasota Rectal Itch Plague of 2006" – two more of Obama's massive fuck-ups that no one covered.

Of course, such a monstrosity of a lie could not remain unchallenged for long, even in this era of fake news and shameless artifice. In due course, Kellyanne explained the whole kerfuffle away, saying she simply meant to say "Bowling Green terrorists." "I misspoke one word," complained the aggrieved twit.

Soon though, thanks to the fact that everything ever written has been stored somewhere in the wondrous "cloud," it came to light that Conway had made the same bogus argument in late January in phone interviews with TMZ and *Cosmopolitan*. Attempting to equate Trump's ham-handed ban with a tightening of vetting ordered by Obama, she falsely claimed Obama banned Iraqis "because two Iraqi nationals came to this country, joined ISIS, traveled back to the Middle East to get trained and refine their terrorism skills, and come back here, and were the masterminds behind the Bowling Green Massacre of taking innocent soldiers' lives away."

Was it a slip of the tongue to mention "Bowling Green Massacre" twice? Only if your tongue is forked. Twitty Conway has been properly brutalized since making the claim to Matthews. But what people should do instead of, or in addition to, making fun of Kellyanne is to demand that no television outlet allow her to come on the air anymore. It always galled me that losers who were fatally wrong at every step before, during and after the Iraq War were allowed to come on TV later and be treated as experts on foreign affairs. Giving air time to a proven dissembler and half-wit twit like Kellyanne Conway strikes me as equally misguided.

Out Like Flynn

February 14, 2017

Forced by circumstances of his own making, General Michael Flynn belatedly tendered his resignation as Trump's National Security Advisor, ending a tenure of 24 whole days which is just a few orders of magnitude fewer that those of his predecessors serving under other presidents. "Flim-Flam" Flynn (Trump loves it when his generals have cool nicknames) felt the pressure to bolt after it became painfully clear he had violated the Hatch Act by engaging as a private citizen the Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak on the matter of sanctions the Obama administration imposed on the Reds for messing with the 2016 election. Furthermore, Flim-Flam denied to VP Pence of having so blabbed before reversing himself in a classic case of mis-remembering – aka. lying. Pence defended Flynn on TV which surely pissed him off to no end when he found out he'd been punked. (Had Flynn consulted Kellyanne Conwoman he might have been able to keep his job, citing "alternative facts" as his defense.)

In the days leading up to the resignation, mixed messages came forth from Team Trump, with Kellyanne saying Flynn had Trump's complete confidence while Sean "Spicy" Spicer indicated Trump was mulling over a firing. Finally, when it was beyond obvious that Flynn had to go, Trump accepted the letter of resignation – then he quickly tweeted this load of bullshit: "The real story here is why are there so many illegal leaks coming out of Washington?"

Sorry, Mr. Orange: that's not the real story. Good try, though.

For a guy who purports to be the world's greatest CEO, a regular genius of a hands-on General Manager, Trump really is out of his element. First, Flynn had previously run the Defense

Intelligence Agency under Obama and was forced out because, as *The Washington Post* reported "Critics said that his management style could be chaotic and that the scope of his plans met resistance from both superiors and subordinates. At the same time, his tenure was marked by significant turbulence, including the fallout from the classified intelligence files leaked by former intelligence contractor Edward Snowden, as well as other emerging crises."

If a cretin like Flynn can't cut the lower level job, why would a world-class GM like Trump consider him for a far more complicated assignment? Second, soon after Flynn had his call with Kislyak in December, intelligence officials who monitor comms with the Commies concluded the general had probably crossed the line. They consulted with the Justice Department who concurred and together took the bad news to Trump's minions; whether they informed their boss or cowered away to bury the news is not yet known. Still, all the evidence that Flim-Flam Flynn was a toxic creature from a black lagoon seems to have been ignored like the reports that Saddam had no WMDs.

But most telling is point three: that a so-called intelligence expert like Flynn didn't know or care that his conversation with an official Russki would be monitored and subsequently revealed in due course. Total rookie asshole move. In the end, Flynn should have been fired for stupidity first, unlawful behavior second, and lying to a superior third. But Trump would prefer to overlook all that and blame unnamed "leakers" for the failure.

Puzzed!

February 17, 2017

After Ronald Reagan nominated Robert Bork for a seat on the Supreme Court, Democrats in the Senate went after the scraggly-bearded Duck Dynasty judge with a vengeance. Having been one

of Richard Nixon's loyal automatons during the Watergate scandal, Bork made plenty of enemies. The fact that his judicial ideas placed him just a bit to the right of Vlad the Impaler didn't help his cause with the liberal Dems – and a half dozen Republicans. In the end, Bork was denied confirmation after 58 Senators voted no. Soon, after the campaign to deny him the seat, a new verb in the lexicon was created: *to bork*. As per the Oxford English Dictionary, to bork means "to defame or vilify (a person) systematically, esp. in the mass media, usually with the aim of preventing his or her appointment to public office; to obstruct or thwart (a person) in this way."

Now, following Andrew Puzder's withdrawal from consideration for Secretary of Labor it may be time to add another verb to the dictionary: *to puzz*. Similar in nature to bork, to puzz means "to defame or vilify *one's self* systematically, esp. in the mass media, with the unintended aim of preventing *his or her own* appointment to public office; to thwart one's own achievement in this way."

Although Puzder was just one of many of Trump's unqualified nominees, it was not his complete unsuitability for the job that caused him to bow out. After all, such inexperienced and clueless morons as Rick Perry (DOE), Betsy DeVos (Education) and Scott Pruitt (EPA) were able to slither into their positions thanks to blinkered Republicans in the Senate. No, the Puzz's downfall was less about a strident opposition (the Dems this time are the toothless minority in a filibuster-free world) than his own compendium of self-inflicted misbehavior that made even some of the biggest Senate rubber-stampers gag.

Puzder sought to become the leading advocate for the American labor force straight from his role as the CEO of fast-food conglomerate CKE Restaurants, yet he behaved more like a 21st century plantation owner than a steward of fair play for workers. He is against raising minimum wages from their

penuriously low threshold. And if the Puzz had his way, all those high-priced burger development managers and French-fry engineers would be replaced by robots. He told *Business Insider* this about robots: "They're always polite, they always upsell, they never take a vacation, they never show up late, there's never a slip-and-fall, or an age, sex, or race discrimination case."

And speaking of sex discrimination, Puzder was sued in 2004 by Caroline Leakan, CKE vice president of investor relations for harassment. Among his offending behavior, "Puzder made it a habit of reaching down to his genitals and 'adjusting himself' in front of Plaintiff," according to Leakan's complaint. Perhaps Puzder had simply tried to retrieve a dropped bite of Monster Thickburger from his Shriveled Puzzy Bacon Bit.

Puzder also had a complex, internecine arrangement of investments that called into questions about potential conflicts of interest, but this would have been the least of anyone's worries. Of course he has conflicts of interest! In Trumpworld, not having conflicts of interest is a conflict of interest.

What really caused Puzz to get puzzed was the creepy revelation that he beat his wife; allegations that were contained in divorce papers from the 1980s when he was a lawyer in St. Louis. Ex-wife Lisa Henning said that Puzder, "attacked me, choked me, threw me to the floor, hit me in the head, pushed his knees into my chest, twisted my arm and dragged me on the floor, threw me against a wall, tried to stop my call to 911 and kicked me in the lower back." Pulling an Ivana Trump, recanting Henning now claims Puzder did not abuse he after all – maybe the perpetrator was a robot that just happened to look like him. Either she's lying now or deserves a SAG award for her TV performance on Oprah Winfrey's show. Doesn't really matter now anyway. Andy got puzzed and that's good news for every working American who toils away for dick

wages while harboring a strange feeling of being followed by a robot.

No CPAC Reach-Around for Milo

February 21, 2017

Conservative, gay rabble-rouser Milo Yiannopoulos (nee. Hanrahan) was thwarted recently from making a speech at U.C. Berkeley by rowdy students who didn't appreciate giving the flaming flame-thrower a platform to disgorge what they considered hate speech. Based on Yiannopoulos' past, the students' opprobrium for him was understandable – although one could agree that shutting down the speech played into the hands of right-wingers who love to bash weak-kneed liberals over their thin and delicate skins. Still, it's fair to say that anyone afforded the opportunity to address a broad audience on a noted college campus should earn the right by having something useful to say – and Milo is not that person. The phony, provocative bullshit he's produced at *Breitbart News* would seem clearly disqualifying. Some observations from the big Y:

- The solution to online 'harassment' is simple: Women should log off.
- Birth control makes women unattractive and crazy.
- Hoist it high and proud: The Confederate flag proclaims a glorious heritage.
- Would you rather your child had feminism or cancer?
- There's no hiring bias against women in tech, they just suck at interviews.

Classy dude, that Milo. My guess is that Yiannopoulos doesn't actually believe any of this shit – he just wants to stick out in an

ever more crowded and bizarre world of online cretins. Sort of like a less-funny, right-wing version of *The Onion*. He more or less confirmed this in his recent appearance on Bill Maher's show.

Anyway, back to the U.C. Berkeley episode: after Yiannopoulos decided it better to retreat from the angry college students, Trump naturally felt compelled to tweet out a dollop of ignorance. Tweeteth the Orange Man: "If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view – NO FEDERAL FUNDS?" Clearly the so-called president strongly supports freedom of speech, if not the function of the government's appropriation and disbursement laws.

Then just the other day, conservative CPAC, following the lead of liberal Berkeley, withdrew *its* invitation for Milo to speak at their upcoming convention. Apparently, after it was brought to CPAC's attention that Yiannopoulos had espoused the benefits to young boys for having gay sex with older men, the Conservative Political Action Conference got cold feet. Here's some of the spicy banter that turned the stomachs at CPAC:

> **Milo:** "In the homosexual world, particularly, some of those relationships between younger boys and older men — the sort of 'coming of age' relationship — those relationships in which those older men help those young boys discover who they are and give them security and safety and provide them with love and a reliable, sort of rock, where they can't speak to their parents."
>
> **Interviewer:** "It sounds like Catholic priest molestation to me."
>
> **Milo:** "But you know what? I'm grateful for Father Michael. I wouldn't give nearly such good head if it wasn't for him."

And so now the world awaits a tweet from the world's greatest defender of free speech – and yet nary a chirp. Most likely, Trump is too busy investigating the threats building among reindeer-herders plotting terror in Sweden.

This Week in Boners

March 1, 2017

It never ceases to amaze how often highly-paid, so-called professionals screw the pooch. Here is a brief synopsis of just some of the boners pulled this past week.

The Oh, Really? Factor. Fox News stooge and formerly bow-tied dweeb Tucker Carlson recently hosted a Swedish filmmaker who, as part of his movie "Stockholm Syndrome" had interviewed a couple Swedish cops about rising crime in the country that brought us Anita Ekberg, Ingrid Bergman, Absolut Vodka, and Abba. The gist of Carlson's interview with Ami Horowitz was that thanks to Sweden's policy of unfettered immigration of less-than-blonde people, rampant terrorism had infiltrated the fair country. But the cops Horowitz interviewed took umbrage of having their comments taken out of context. One of them protested, "It was supposed to be about crime in high risk areas. Areas with high crime rates. There wasn't any focus on migration or immigration. We don't stand behind it. It shocked us. This is bad journalism."

It was such bad journalism that Trump included it in his speech at an ego-caressing rally in Florida. Immediately afterwards, Trump's observation was challenged by Swedish government leaders as uninformed cornpone. On command, partisans from both sides began their appointed routes either to vilify the Orange man or defend him to the death. In the latter category was Bill O'Reilly who just couldn't wait to come to Trump's defense; so

motivated to prove Trump right that he failed to do a smidgen of due diligence. O'Reilly happily gave lucrative airtime to one Nils Bildt who, as a so-called Swedish Defense and National Security Advisor, corroborated all the fairy tales.

Sure enough though, within moments of Bildt's 15 minutes of infamy, the Swedes came forward once again with something called "reality" and denied that Bildt was ever an advisor to their Defense and/or National Security apparatus. Proving he's Fox-worthy, Bildt placed the blame on O'Reilly and team for the calamity, claiming he was just a U.S. based analyst and had nothing to do with being called a Swedish operative.

The show's not called the "Oh, Really? Factor" for nothing.

Anti-Leak Meeting is Leaked. Trump is pissed, PISSED, that highly sensitive national security type shit is leaking out from his cadre of lieutenants. That the material being leaked is almost universally negative about the inside operations of his nascent administration is the primary cause for Trump's irritation; if the leakage was less anal – say a release about how Trump beat Putin in an arm-wrestling match – you can bet Mr. Orange would have no complaints. Don't forget, Trump, using a pseudonym, planted exaggerated stories in the tabloids about his own love life and business acumen when he trolled the celebrity soirees of Manhattan's night life.

Nevertheless, leaks from within the White House are no laughing matter. Given that much of the activity described in leaks passed through the press office, Press Secretary Sean Spicer took it upon himself to ferret out potentially nefarious activity perpetrated by his underlings. He called an all-hands meeting where he confiscated everyone's personal devices to be examined for evidence of misbehavior. When the inquisition was over, Spicer forbade everyone from mentioning that it ever took place.

Within minutes, the existence of Spicy's anti-leak meeting was leaked. So much for well-tuned machinery.

Is DeVos plural for Devo? You'd think that after coddled billionaire Betsy DeVos secured the position of Education Secretary by the absolute narrowest of margins, she might make at least a token effort to redeem herself with a demonstration that she had a clue. But no. As part of a gathering in the White House of leaders of historically black colleges and universities, poor Betsy made these remarks:

"A key priority for this administration is to help develop opportunities for communities that are often the most underserved. Rather than focus solely on funding, we must be willing to make the tangible, structural reforms that will allow students to reach their full potential. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have done this since their founding. They started from the fact that there were too many students in America who did not have equal access to education. They saw that the system wasn't working, that there was an absence of opportunity, so they took it upon themselves to provide the solution. HBCUs are real pioneers when it comes to school choice."

It's beyond refute that DeVos is smitten with the promise of privatization of education (fondly known as "school choice"). She longs for the day when all public schools in America collapse to be replaced at taxpayer expense by Catholic schools run by the likes of Father Feely and Sister Mary Torquemada. But to suggest that blacks who established their own institutes of higher learning because they were barred from attending whites-only colleges is somehow an illustration of school choice is just fucking addled. I suppose Negro-only drinking fountains were a form of beverage choice back in the good ole 1950s.

Give Betsy time. Perhaps she thought she had been appointed to head of the Department of Ejukayshun.

Rumors Greatly Exaggerated. One of my favorite segments of the often-dreary Oscars ceremony is the "In Memoriam" tribute to key figures – actors, directors, producers, editors, screenwriters – who have succumbed in the past year. It's the only part of the ceremony that looks back at the movies' rich heritage. Not everyone cited is a household name which is a reminder that movies are more than what appears on the silver screen (or a 3.5-inch LCD).

Such is the case of Janet Patterson, a costume and production designer specializing in period costume from the 19th century, and a four-time Oscar nominee. No doubt her most famous movie involvement was with "The Piano" starring Holly Hunter and Harvey Keitel. The Academy deemed Patterson worthy of a spot in the "In Memoriam" segment but not her likeness – for which they mistakenly substituted in that of Jan Chapman, a producer friend of Patterson's who also worked on "The Piano."

Most of the time the biggest controversy surrounding the "In Memoriam" is when someone connected to Hollywood croaked but didn't make the cut. Examples include Abe Vigoda, Dennis Farina, Jonathan Winters and Adam Sandler's career. This year however someone who *didn't* croak made the cut – and for that we witnessed the biggest boner of this year's Oscars!

Well, maybe not.

PwC heading to Ca Ca Land. For more than 80 years, PwC (formerly PricewaterhouseCoopers) has been the sole accounting firm to handle the secret Academy Award voting, including the management of the dozens of sealed envelopes that hold the names of winners across all the categories. That means they've

overseen the distribution of envelopes probably a couple thousand times without incident.

Face it – although the job of handing envelopes to the stars who present the awards appears to be glamorous, it really is a job for monkeys. You take an envelope from the briefcase and give it to the famous dude in a tux. The whole process could be replaced by one of those machines that spits out a ticket before you drive into the parking garage.

Still, there is a lot of heritage at the stodgy Academy that would seem to rule out automation – and given PwC's lengthy, spotless stewardship, there was never a reason to veer from the proven process. Until this past Sunday when a PwC partner named Brian Cullinan who was goofing off near the end of the show handed the wrong card to Warren Beatty who along with Faye Dunaway strode out in front of a billion people and announced "La La Land" as the Best Picture winner, when in fact "Moonlight" had taken the honor. Cullinan had moments earlier tweeted a picture of Emma Stone who had just won Best Actress for her role in "La La Land" – and apparently in this moment of distraction failed to move the Best Actress card to the dead pile, setting up perhaps the biggest gaffe in Oscars history, as well as a massive embarrassment for PwC who may lose the contract with the Academy, or at least suffer heavily in future contract negotiations.

It's a wonder flummoxed Beatty didn't reprise his role as Clyde Barrow and mow down all the PwC jerks with a Tommy gun. The host for the evening's festivities, Jimmy Kimmel said, "This is very unfortunate what happened. Let's remember, it's just an awards show." I'm sure all the Academy brass appreciated that sentiment. *Just an awards show?* That's like telling a Catholic that the Resurrection was just a magic trick.

NSA to Wikileaks: 404 Page Not Found

March 10, 2017

By now it should be clear that Wikileaks and its slithery founder Julian Assange exist explicitly to hurt and embarrass the United States – not that the U.S. doesn't deserve some reprobation for its decidedly covert, undemocratic actions. But the selectivity with which Wikileaks treats the material it publicizes demonstrates its egregious bias. Maybe Wikileaks started out with grandiose goals to speak truth to power, but it's now really nothing more than diplomacy's version of TMZ.

Virtually every high-profile Wikileaks release contains damaging info about no country other than America. And during the 2016 presidential election, are we really to believe that the Democrat's servers were eminently hackable while the Republicans were impenetrable? That there was no lowly and disgruntled GOP underling willing to disgorge some fugly facts about Huckabee's eating habits, Santorum's sexual deviancies, Carly Fiorina's gender, Jeb Bush's favorite brand of white bread, or Trump's taxes and/or the secret to his cantilevered hairdo? Obviously, Assange – who hates Hillary Clinton – decided to dribble out damaging info (most certainly with assistance on timing from Trump insiders) to tilt the election against her. (Trump's sentiment last Fall: "I love Wikileaks." Indeed.)

The salient question: why won't the NSA or the CIA (two top U.S. cyber agencies exposed and insulted by Wikileaks) take down the organization's ability to operate? I can't believe it's for a lack of ability – after all, the two agencies should be capable of running roughshod over a ragtag bunch like Wikileaks after slurping up tens of billions of taxpayer dollars every year.

C'mon spooks – get mad. Take down this Ecuadorean

Embassy squatter, send him back to Sweden, and force feed him lutefisk until he reveals the other half of the Wikileaks' treasure trove – including the video of Trump and his golden shower party.

Media Never Learns

March 10, 2017

On the front page of today's *New York Times* under the headline "After Halting Start, Trump Plunges Into Effort to Repeal Health Law" is this opening statement:

"President Trump, after a halting start, is now marshaling the full power of his office to win over holdout conservatives and waffling senators to support the House Republicans' replacement for the Affordable Care Act. Mr. Trump is deploying the salesman tactics he sharpened over several decades in New York real estate. His pitch: He is fully behind the bill to scotch President Barack Obama's signature domestic achievement, but he is open to negotiations on the details. In so doing, Mr. Trump is plunging personally into his first major legislative fight, getting behind a bill that has been denounced by many health care providers and scorned by his base on the right. If it fails, Mr. Trump will find it difficult not to shoulder some of the blame."

Mr. Trump will find it difficult not to shoulder some of the blame? Are you kidding???

Will the *Times* and the rest of regular journalism ever get smart? For decades it's been Gospel According to Don that Trump never, ever, ever takes the blame for anything. Ever! Events like bankruptcies, court-ordered judgments, billion-dollar losses, and picking a guy like Mike Flynn to be National Security Advisor would normally be considered failures, but in Trumpworld, they're spun into glorious illustrations of his majesty's brilliance. When a Navy Seal was recently killed in a raid in Yemen, Trump was

quick to blame "the generals" instead of "shouldering" some of the responsibility as Commander-in-Chief for green-lighting the mission. That's the way Trump rolls – and always will be.

If the Republican's imaginary new Obamacare replacement shits the bed – as is likely given that it will be shown to raise the deficit thus allowing the Dems to filibuster – don't expect Trump to shoulder a goddamned thing. He'll be the first to gin up and tweet out a new phony scandal (time to bring back Anthony Weiner?) that outlets like *The New York Times* and CNN will follow dutifully into the rabbit hole, leaving Trump shoulder-free to take on the next non-problem facing the country.

Untied Airlines

April 11, 2017

A United Airlines passenger who had paid for a valid ticket and was sitting in his assigned seat – locked and in the upright position, tray table stowed – was forcibly removed by thuggish "airport cops" because the airline needed four seats for some crew members. The story has reverberated around the globe and much derision and vitriol has been justifiably spewed United's way – including some harsh treatment for the CEO Oscar Munoz.

Among the more asinine things Munoz said in defending the removal was that poor United Airlines crew aboard the flight from Chicago to Louisville "were left with no choice but to call Chicago Aviation Security Officers to assist in removing the customer from the flight." That's right: United had no other choice but to manhandle the guy out from his seat, bang his head silly, and drag him down the aisle like a deer shot dead in the woods.

You can throw a dart in the internet and likely find a story that takes a shit on United's and Munoz's head; this entry is about the completely stupid airline practice of purposefully overbooking

flights. Although legal in this industry at least, it seems patently unfair – and bad business – to sell seats more than once and then play a game of chicken at the gate (or on board) with your customers when more than 100 percent of them show up for a service for which you already took their money.

The airlines execute this practice because they have observed that some customers don't show up for the scheduled flight – and the financial wonks at the airlines cravenly see opportunity to make a few more bucks. You never see such behavior at a Broadway show, a baseball game, or at any number of venues where tickets are purchased in advance. If someone buys a ticket to sold-out "Hamilton" and on the way to the theater is delayed by a car accident, that person's seat remains empty when the curtain goes up. You don't see flunkies milling about outside the Richard Rogers Theater trying to sell that patron's seat again. The understanding outside the airline industry is that once a seat is sold, revenue is recognized, and that's the end of it.

Nonetheless, the airline industry which for years struggled with huge losses came up with the idea of overbooking as a hedge against flying planes with empty seats. Using powerful computers and data mining software, the airlines calculate the likelihood that on any given flight, at any given time and day, some number of passengers will not arrive on time (or at all). I suspect this works out nicely for the airlines most of the time; they scratch out extra revenue from selling a handful of seats twice. And they get to screw the people who failed to show up by charging them an exorbitant fee to rebook them. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if United would bump the co-pilot if they could sell his seat to a higher bidder.

But from my experience it seems quite common that the airlines flub the bet and are forced to deal with the self-inflicted

problem of winnowing out some legitimate ticketholders. The obvious solution: bribery. Almost always the airlines can entice enough travelers who are not in immediate need of cramming their asses into seats the width of a booster chair to forego the flight with vouchers to be used on future air travel. It's funny to watch the gate agent play this moronic auction game while passengers sit and stew. The agent starts out with a low-ball figure which everyone knows is not the best and final offer (known as a BAFO), but soon enough a number north of $500 is proffered and some people cave in and relinquish their seats.

But not always. When this happens, the airlines can (again, legally) pick out the passengers for involuntary expulsion. How they do this probably borders on illegal or unethical discrimination. People chosen for involuntary expulsion almost always leave without incident, harboring disgust and revulsion for the treatment meted out by the airline. (Remember: it's the airlines who put themselves into this public-relations chokehold with their overbooking schemes.)

The weird twist in the latest United Airlines imbroglio is that the people chosen for involuntary expulsion were asked to vacate the jet to make room for four United crew members who had to deadhead to Louisville. That's right – United kicked paying passengers off the flight so that they could fly employees in their place. One of those passengers, a doctor who argued that he needed to be in Louisville the next day to see patients, refused to deplane – and the ugly mess was caught on video and has been viewed more than 100 million times. (Some pundits argued that United blew it because they didn't offer him a bigger voucher, but that's a red herring – as if bigger and better bribery is the always the answer.)

Consider the magnitude of CEO Munoz's asshole-dom when he said United was "left with **no choice** but to call Chicago

Aviation Security Officers." Chicago to Louisville is less than a five-hour drive, and it probably costs a few thousand to charter a flight, yet United decided it was better to embroil themselves in a public relations fiasco of legendary proportions than to make alternate plans to get the crew to Kentucky. Why would United repel their own customers by acting like fascists? If you have to ask that, you haven't flown in the past decade. (As an aside: when the four United crew members finally took their ill-gotten seats, the derision from the other passengers was devastating.)

As I write this United stock (UAL) is down $2.50 a share which means that since the forced expulsion became widely known the company has shed $750 million in market cap. But hey, they had no choice.

Alien Abduction

April 13, 2017

There's only one explanation for it: Trump was abducted by aliens and replaced with a hollow orange shell topped by a lemon meringue hairpiece. Sometime after January 20 – perhaps from the rooftop of Trump Tower or the 9th hole at Mar-A-Lago – aliens took over a man who had boasted bluntly about upending the status quo in America, and left the country with a guy who seems to have misremembered everything he promised as a candidate.

On China. Then: "On day one of a Trump administration, the US Treasury Department will designate China a currency manipulator. I will direct the Secretary of the Treasury to label China a currency manipulator."

Now: "They're not currency manipulators."

On NATO. Then: "I said a long time ago that NATO had problems. Number one it was obsolete, because it was designed many, many years ago."

Now: "I said it's obsolete. Now it's no longer obsolete."

On Syria. Then: President Obama, do not attack Syria. There is no upside and tremendous downside. Save your "powder" for another (and more important) day!

Now: Congratulations to our great military men and women for representing the United States, and the world, so well in the Syria attack.

On the Export-Import Bank. Then: "I don't like it because I don't think it's necessary."

Now: "Actually, it's a very good thing. And it actually makes money, it could make a lot of money."

On the Border Wall. Then: "I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words."

Now: "We're going to get reimbursed. But I don't want to wait that long. But you start, and then you get reimbursed."

On Moving the American Embassy to Jerusalem. Then: "I'll move the embassy on day one."

Now: "I am thinking about the embassy, I am studying the embassy, and we will see what happens. The embassy is not an easy decision."

On Unemployment. Then: "Don't believe these phony numbers. The number is probably 28, 29, as high as 35. In fact, I even heard recently 42 percent."

Now: (via Spicer) "I talked to the president prior to this, and he said to quote him for this, 'they may have been phony in the past, but it's very real now."

On the Debt. Then: Get rid of the more than $19 trillion debt "over a period of eight years."

Now: (via Mulvaney) "I'm not going to be able to pay off $20 trillion worth of debt in four years."

On the Military. Then: "We're going to rebuild out military. Our military is in shambles."

Now: "It's so incredible. It's brilliant. It's genius. Our technology, our equipment, is better than anybody by a factor of five. I mean look, we have, in terms of technology, nobody can even come close to competing."

On Healthcare. Then: "I know that we're all gonna make a deal on health care — that's a very easy one. And I think that's gonna happen very quickly."

Now: "Now, I have to tell you, it's an unbelievably complex subject. Nobody knew health care could be so complicated."

On Golfing. Then: "I'm going to be working for you, I'm not going to have time to go play golf."

Now: In his first 12 weeks as POTUS, Trump spent 17 days at a golf course. Both Bush and Obama spent 0 days in their first 12 weeks. (Update: As of September 6, 2020, Trump paid 278 visits to a golf course since he began "working for us.")

"O" Zone Depletion

April 23, 2017

In his most recent and ill-timed book release titled "Old School," one-time king of Fox punditry Bill O'Reilly – sounding like a crotchety bastard who demands of neighborhood kids: "get off my lawn!" – bemoans the loss of such wonders as landlines, and misses the days when a kid could enjoy the freedom of falling off a bike and breaking his skull instead of having to wear a doofy-looking helmet that might save his life. Those who disagree with Mr. O are derided as "snowflakes" – presumably a swipe at people who now attend "New School." This is just what America needs right now: a clueless screed by an angry white dude who

remembers the world through the eyes of Ward Cleaver who was often justifiably "hard on the Beaver."

Another observation O'Reilly makes of the "old schoolers": "Boys never bothered girls because of the 'Brother and His Large Friends' rule." I interpret that to mean that if it weren't for those menacing protectors, O'Reilly and his fellow O.S.-ers would have been free to cop feels, slip tongues, reach under plaid uniform skirts, and otherwise take advantage of the fairer sex. Contrast O'Reilly's righteous defense of girls from "Old School" to his alleged (and now infamous) "loofah" comments to Andrea Mackris who sued him in 2003:

> "So anyway, I'd be rubbing your big boobs and getting your nipples really hard, kinda kissing your neck from behind... and then I would take the other hand with the falafel (sic) thing and I'd put it on your pussy but you'd have to do it really light, just kind of a tease business."

I guess Andrea didn't have a brother with large friends at the time. In any event, O'Reilly's dalliances with women who find him repulsive go back a long way, and have left a trail of million-dollar settlements – ultimately paid for by 21st Century Fox corporation and its shareholders. Despite the continued misbehavior, Fox Chairman Rupert Murdoch stood by his ratings beast O'Reilly whose prime-time cable show brought in disproportionate revenues for the company. Until it didn't. After a scathing front-page story in *The New York Times* (and a steady drumbeat of follow-up coverage) detailed Mr. No Spin's sordid behavior, advertisers headed for the hills. The loss of revenue coupled with more derision than even hard-boiled Fox execs could bear drove the

Murdoch's to the same decision they arrived at with portly blob Roger Ailes this past summer.

Despite paying the $13 million bill for O'Reilly's misbehavior, Fox kept him in the prime-time slot, judging the settlements a simple cost of doing business. But all good things must come to an end, so O'Reilly has taken his $25 million severance and left what had long been known to his critics as the "Oh, Really? Factor."

Once he takes a well-deserved vacation – perhaps Thailand where he can proposition pre-teen sex workers who are too young to sue – Bill O'Reilly can start on his next book, a sequel to his book "A Bold Fresh Piece of Humanity." Working title: "A Bold Fresh Piece of Shit."

Trump's Massive Tax Hike on American Corporations

April 28, 2017

Trump released a one-page list of "bullet points" that was touted by his administration as a once-in-a-generation tax overhaul, but derided by economists as nothing more than a big tax cut for corporations and rich people. What went unnoticed is that by setting the corporate tax rate to 15 percent, Trump would inflict a serious tax *hike* on a multitude of corporations that currently pay a lot less than that. Many in fact pay less than 0 percent. Is Trump prepared to withstand the backlash from aggrieved companies that see his massive tax hike as a betrayal?

Consider Facebook which paid -$429 million on profits of $1.06 billion in 2012. That's a tax rate of -40 percent. I highly doubt Mark Zuckerberg is gonna click "like" on Trump's new 15 percent slam. And what about Southwest Airlines, Texas Instruments, Occidental Petroleum, Duke Energy, Priceline, Corning, Consolidated Edison and the New York Stock Exchange

– all of whom had positive net earnings but paid less than zero corporate taxes in 2012? How will these companies continue to exist if they are required to reach the 15 percent threshold?

Then you have General Electric, Verizon, Boeing and Northeast Utilities that paid no federal income tax for five straight years. Hell, GE booked $27.5 billion in profit over five years and *received* a $3.05 billion refund for a tax rate of -11 percent. If they have to pay taxes, will GE ever bring good things to life again?

Pundits and politicians who bemoan America's high corporate tax rate of 35 percent never mention that virtually no company with even a half-smart tax accounting department pays anything close to that figure. The juicy loopholes involving inversions, stock options, depreciation, foreign earnings and on and on give corporations a massive toolbox to avoid taxes. Of course, it would be irresponsible for a company beholden to shareholders to pay more than their legal requirement – but the solution should focus on the loopholes, not an arbitrary reduction of the top rate.

A one-time Treasury official, Len Burman, summed up the situation well: "In a rational system, a corporation's tax department would be there to make sure a company complied with the law, but in our system, there are corporations that view their tax departments as a profit center, and the effects on public policy can be negative."

Knocking out the complicated loopholes and setting a rational rate would allow companies to downsize the tax departments, and bring some needed equity to the system. But there's no reason for optimism. Loopholes are like weeds – even if Congress eliminated the most egregious of them, within a year, corporate lobbyists would succeed in adding back dozens of new ways to game the system.

Meanwhile, rank and file citizens who have few if any tools in their tax-avoidance kit are sitting ducks. Most middle-class people will see minimal reductions, and many who live in states with high state and local taxes (SALT) may actually see their federal tax burden increase. At least these losers will have the satisfaction of knowing that when they press "send" in Turbotax that someone in GE's tax profit center will be pressing "receive."

This Week's Biggest Asshole

April 28, 2017

The award goes to Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies – a group that "studies immigration" and concludes there must be less of it. He's also the author of "The New Case Against Immigration: Both Legal and Illegal" whose cover captures the true spirit of the American dream. I suppose Lady Liberty put her hand up like a traffic cop stopping a wayward pedestrian *after* Krikorian's ancestors came through Ellis Island.

Unlike most of his anti-immigrant ilk, Krikorian is not a big fan of Trump's border wall for the simple reason that it won't work. Nevertheless, he now advocates for it because of its symbolism. "Following through on wall construction is one of the ways that the political class can win back trust on this topic. It's a tangible thing. You can take pictures of it and imagine it in your head."

That's right. You can take pictures of it! And imagine it! In your own head!

That's pretty stupid, but what makes Mark Krikorian this week's biggest asshole is his shameless call to spend billions on a worthless piece of shit. He lamely admits, "Even if the border wall did no good at all to control immigration, it would be important to build. Even if it did nothing, even if it was completely ineffective,

it's important politically." Perhaps in parallel with building the beautiful wall, we should commence a mission to send men to colonize the sun. Even if that was completely ineffective, it would make for some good pictures.

Those Who Can't Do Preach

May 9, 2017

Ivanka Trump, no doubt with extensive help from one or more ghostwriters, released a new book titled "Women Who Work: Rewriting the Rules for Success" – and the response has been either stellar or vicious depending on whether the reader is a Trump sycophant or an actual working woman who finds repugnant the idea of a coddled Ivanka lecturing about something with which she has no experience.

A graph of the book's reviews garnered on Amazon as of May 6 indicates a bifurcated distribution of many 1-star and many 5-star endpoints with virtually nothing in-between speaks volumes about how Ivanka is perceived. It's rare to find such widely disparate sentiment for a book.

I've vehemently railed against the celebrity vanity book project, for they gobble up publishers' attention and crowd out talented and struggling authors who are writing more interesting and creative material. It's understandable that a publisher would feel more confident in making revenue quotas with a book associated with a celebrity in command of a large, loyal, established following – but there's something sad about an industry relegating its presumed core mission to second-class status.

Like all Trumps, Ivanka's ulterior motive is brand enhancement – and "Women Who Work" is really nothing more than a vehicle to inspire (coerce?) women to buy her shit in the hopes that doing so will make them more like the wildly successful

author. Forget that Ivanka was born into fabulous wealth and was handed a business on a silver platter – maybe buying a pair of her foreign made sweat-shop shoes could actually rewrite the rules for success.

The book proffers cracker barrel philosophy and corn-pone bromides such as

- "If you want to achieve greatness, stop asking for permission."
- "The most courageous act is still to think for yourself. Aloud."
- "All women benefit immeasurably by architecting their lives."
- "Honor yourself by exploring the kind of life you deserve."

If any of these sounds familiar, it's because Ivanka has quoted other women – which means "Women Who Work" is actually a meta-book, a directory for received wisdom. One of my favorite passages involves Ivanka recalling how tough it was to hump her ass around the country campaigning for daddy – so tough in fact that she rarely found time for "treating myself to a massage or making much time for self-care." I'm surprised she didn't mention the time her Kia broke down in Iowa and she had to replace the fuel pump… by herself… in the dark… with an emery board.

As for the Amazon reviews, the negatives cluster around the notion that it is insulting and unseemly for a pampered heiress to tell real working women what they've been doing wrong. And the positives seem to be written by Trump supporters who want to counteract the low scores. Examples from both sides below:

- Ivanka shows again how the entire Trump family, even the women, know nothing about the reality of working women. Tone deaf and annoying this book isn't worth the paper it's written on.
- Written by a woman who has nannies, drivers, maids, possibly a personal chef.
- Ivanka should donate the proceeds from the book to those children and families her family is harming by taking healthcare away from. She has no clue what it is like to have no barriers in life and succeed despite your barriers.
- She has no idea what it means to be a working woman, coming from a privileged upbringing and having all doors open to her without any qualifications (e.g., Anna Wintour's job offer) or working her way up. And, btw, ALL women work.
- A book written for working women by a woman who does not work.
- This reeks of being a useless publicity stunt to enhance the trump brand. Please close your wallet and save the money for an author who has real work experience. It really pushes the boundary of what you define as work. It's very interesting to consider the channels the author used to achieve success. The women in my family told me that they found it insulting. Consider work from the perspective of someone who didn't take time to write their own book.
- Purchased just because Liberal/Democrats are complaining about it. My next trip to the bookstore I'll purchase several copies for gifts. Keep whining… this book may be the bestselling book of all time!

- Great Book! #MAGA
- Growing up as the daughter of a billionaire would certainly have its challenges! Ivanka Trump has captured the emotional depths of working women everywhere. She has an uncanny ability to identify with all walks of life. Highly recommended!

I never thought of it that way – maybe being the daughter of a billionaire is really a pre-existing condition.

Eff is for Ford

May 26, 2017

Detroit automakers hate government regulations and will deploy armies of lobbyists to get their way in Washington. And they routinely win. The argument goes like this: auto industry experts at GM, Daimler, Ford and others know way more about the car business than "Washington bureaucrats"… and besides, if said auto industry experts get it wrong, they know Washington will bail them out anyway, so what's the problem?

Since the 1973 OPEC shaft-job Washington regulators have consistently called for higher fuel efficiency from the automakers' fleets only to receive immense pushback from the U.S. industry which wants to sell more high-profit, big-ass vehicles that slurp gas. Although profit is the motive, the industry will insist the regulatory goals are technically infeasible. And as long as gas prices stay low, everything's copacetic.

But when gas prices spike (often before the emergence of a recession), buyers head for the smaller, more efficient vehicles which are for the most part supplied by Detroit's competition. GM's mix of vehicles leading up to the Great Recession was heavy on trucks and SUVs. The economy turned south, people fled

the big rides, and GM headed for bankruptcy – only to be backstopped by Bush's TARP bailout to the tune of $30 billion (that includes GMAC.)

Now Ford is back complaining about fuel efficiency regulations – specifically the requirement that the industry deliver greater numbers of electric vehicles. Ford CEO Mark Fields squawked about it to *Bloomberg News* in December 2016. According to the report:

> "Ford Motor Co. plans to lobby President-elect Donald Trump to soften U.S. and state fuel-economy rules that hurt profits by forcing automakers to build more electric cars and hybrids than are warranted by customer demand. 'In 2008, there were 12 electrified vehicles offered in the U.S. market and it represented 2.3 percent of the industry,' Mark Fields said. 'Fast forward to 2016, there's 55 models, and year to date it's 2.8 percent.'"

Clearly Ford wants to go in a direction opposite that of Tesla Motors which has been the top cheerleader for electric vehicles and a leading pioneer of the technology. Then in early April, the market cap of Tesla Motors surpassed that of Ford suggesting that investors have a sense that electric is a bigger deal than CEO Fields believes. Suddenly on May 22, Ford abruptly fired Fields who had been at the company for 28 years. Ford Chairman Bill Ford said at the time, "Our world has changed dramatically. Look at the pace of change and the competitors coming into our space, and we need to match or beat that." Ya think? (Update: Volatility rules the day, but today Tesla boasts a market capitalization that exceeds that of Ford by 10X.)

"Integrity" Steps Aside for Trump

May 20, 2017

Before Trump acquired the fabled Mar-a-Lago from breakfast cereal heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post, the compound gates sported the coat of arms of Joseph Edward Davies, Marjorie's third husband. In 1939 the powers that be in Britain granted Davies the heraldic symbol which features a fist holding an arrow atop a shield of three lions and two chevrons. Below the shield is a ribbon upon which the word "Integritas" – Latin for integrity – appears boldly.

After Trump came along, he saw to it that the places in and around Mar-a-Lago would continue to showcase Davies's coat of arms with one small alteration: the word "Integritas" would be replaced with "Trump." This makes sense as Trump must mark everything he owns (or borrows) with his moniker, like a dog pissing on a favored plant. In with "Trump" and out with "Integrity" – could there be a better metaphor for the man's intrusion into the American psyche?

It's fair to say Davies's heirs and rightful owners of the coat of arms are upset by Trump's confiscation of the family's symbol. It's a moral and probably legal offense. Some heirs want to sue, but at least one elder advises against it; not that there's insufficient case, but as he notes about Trump, "I knew him and the way he operates. And the way he operates, you don't sue Trump, because you'll be in court for years and years and years." Integritas indeed.

RIP Adam West

June 11, 2017

Although die-hard Batman fans favor the darkness of the franchise captured in the several films – especially "The Dark Knight" featuring a staggering performance by Heath Ledger as the Joker – over the campy, 1960s television take on the *DC Comics'* heroes

and villains, the TV series was nevertheless a generally popular success during its bumpy three-year run.

As a boy of about 10, I chose to skip joining the Boy Scouts because the den meetings took place on Thursdays – the same Bat-Time that the show aired on the ABC Bat-Channel. The network, hurting for content, decided to air two Batman episodes on consecutive days each week, ensuring the series would become particularly addictive to those with pliant minds.

It was common for the script writers to title each companion episode for the week as a couplet unworthy of Shakespeare, e.g.: "The Puzzles are Coming" followed by "The Duo is Slumming".

Adam West, who played millionaire Bruce Wayne and his alter-ego Batman died the other day at 88, thus reviving oldster's memories of that campy Batman show. Forced to recall 1960s Batman in West's wake, I fondly remembered one of my favorite episodes (#37 & #38) entitled "Hot Off the Griddle" / "The Cat and the Fiddle." In the first half of the two-part episode that aired on a Wednesday lo the many decades ago, the Catwoman has incapacitated Batman and sidekick Robin on the roof of a building where a pair of giant magnifying glasses loom over the Dynamic Duo. Catwoman has put a plan in motion whereby the sun will soon align with the magnifying glasses and griddle the two heroes. Like every baddie in the movies, she inexplicably bolts the scene before the sizzling destruction occurs. In the second half, Batman and Robin miraculously escape the clutches. Can you guess/remember how they got away? Hint: "Apocalypto."

The Cabinet of Dr. Demento

June 13, 2017

Trump ran a cabinet meeting in front of the press and in a fashion usually associated with such illustrious narcissists as Kim Jong-Un and Saddam Hussein, went around the room and coerced

statements of praise and fealty from his pitiful underlings. While each cabinet member sought to out-suck the previous sycophant, Trump sat there with an evil grin – relishing the embarrassment he was putting his staff through. The spectacle simply added new reaffirmation that Trump is a sick fuck. He had the nerve to spout such bullshit as:

- "Never has there been a president, with few exceptions who has passed more legislation, done more things." The Republican controlled Congress hasn't passed a single piece of major legislation.
- The wonderfulness of his plan for the "single biggest tax cut in American history." He has not proposed a plan; Congress ain't working on one.
- Taking credit for an economy that generated 1.1 million jobs in the past seven months, noting "No one would have believed it." In the previous seven months, the economy generated 1.3 million jobs – also unbelievable, I suppose.

Observers continue to debate whether Sir Orange is a liar or hopelessly deluded. Does it really matter which? Knowing that most civilized people could not watch the entire cabinet charade without throwing, I have compiled the best of the worst ass-kissing cabinet-member statements and helpfully rated them 0 to 4 on the "pile of shit" meter.

- **Tom Price, HHS**. "Mr. President, what an incredible honor it is to lead the Department of Health and Human Services as this pivotal time under your

leadership. I can't thank you enough for the privileges you've given me and the leadership that you've shown." *3.5 piles*

- **Sonny Perdue, Agriculture.** "I want to congratulate you on the men and women you've placed around this table… This is the team you've assembled that's working hand in glove with – for the men and women of America, and I want to – I want to thank you for that." *2.5 piles*
- **Elaine Chao, Transportation.** "Thank you so much for coming over to the Department of Transportation. Hundreds and hundreds of people were just so thrilled, hanging out, watching the ceremony. People loved you." *2 piles*… until the last sentence, then she added a pile. *3 piles*
- **Mike Pompeo, CIA Director**. "Mr. President, it's an honor to serve as your CIA director. It's an incredible privilege to lead the men and women who are providing intelligence so that we can do the national security mission. *2 piles*
- **Steve Mnuchin, Treasury**. "It was a great honor travelling with you around the country for the last year and an even greater honor to be here serving on your cabinet." *1 pile*
- **Reince Priebus, Chief of Staff**. "On behalf of the entire senior staff around you, Mr. President, we thank you for the opportunity and the blessing that you've given us to serve your agenda and the American people." *4 piles*
- **David Shulkin, Veteran's Affairs**. "Mr. President, thank you for your support and commitment to

honoring our responsibility to America's veterans. I know that this is personally very important to you." *½ pile*

- **Ben Carson, HUD**. "Mr. President, it's been a great honor to – to work with you. Thank you for your strong support of HUD and for all the others around the table that I've worked with." *1 pile*
- **Rick Perry, Energy**. "America is not stepping back, but we're stepping int place and sending some messages, that we're still going to be leaders in the world when it comes to climate, but we're not going to be held hostage to some executive order that was ill-thought out. And so, my hat's off to you." *1.5 piles*
- **Rex Tillerson, State**. "Thank you for the honor to serve the country. It's a great privilege you've given me." *2 piles*
- **Ryan Zinke, Interior**. "Mr. President, as your SEAL on your staff… it's an honor to be your steward of our public lands and the generator of energy dominance, I am deeply honored." *2.5 piles*
- **Mike Pence, VP**. "It is just the greatest privilege of my life to serve as the vice president to the President who's keeping his word to the American people and assembling a team that's bringing real change, real prosperity, real strength back to our nation." *4 stinky piles*
- **Gen. James Mattis, Defense**. "We are grateful for the sacrifices our people are making in order to strengthen our military." *0 piles.*

Trump's ISIS Head Fake

June 18, 2017

Remember Tora Bora? Until the other day it hadn't been in the news for years, so it's completely understandable if someone born after 1996 thinks Tora Bora is a tiki bar in Cape May. But others will recall it as the rugged mountainous region interlaced with caves and tunnels on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan where Osama bin Laden and his murderous Al Qaeda and Taliban acolytes hid out after the U.S. began its retaliation for the attacks of 9/11. It was at Tora Bora where American special forces closing in on bin Laden's ass were pulled aside, on the orders of the George W. Bush administration, so that the local Afghan mujahadeen could close the deal. Who'd a thunk that the Afghan mujahadeen might be susceptible to taking bribes to allow bin Laden to escape into friendly Pakistan where he'd live another dozen years to watch porn and plot intergalactic destruction?

Anyway, after a decade in which Tora Bora was so low key that even Airbnb to this day has no listings, we saw this ominous headline in *The New York Times*: "ISIS Captures Tora Bora, Once Bin Laden's Afghan Fortress."

The first and only legitimate reaction has to be: Why is ISIS still around to sneak into Tora Bora given Trump's claim more than a year ago that he has the best plan to beat the Islamic State (a plan he was keeping secret so as not to tip off terrorists, or worse, to inform one of his competitors for the nomination of his master plan?) The future POTUS boasted at the time at a rally in Connecticut, "We're gonna beat ISIS very, very quickly folks. It's gonna be fast. I have a great plan. It's going to be great. They ask, 'What is it?' Well, I'd rather not say. I'd rather be unpredictable."

Strangely – after all, he said he already had the perfect plan – once in office on January 28th, Trump signed one of those nifty

leather-bound folders with his Crayola thus ordering his generals: "Within 30 days, a preliminary draft of the Plan to defeat ISIS shall be submitted to the president by the secretary of defense." Then, precisely 30 days later the Defense Department laid on Mr. Orange a plan so terrific he had no choice but to tout its brilliance. "As promised, I directed the Department of Defense to develop a plan to demolish and destroy ISIS, a network of lawless savages that have slaughtered Muslims and Christians and men, and women and children of all faiths and all beliefs. We will work with our allies, including our friends and allies in the Muslim world, to extinguish this vile enemy from our planet."

That's the plan. The whole plan. A whole plan for a plan which is a whole plan. And that's why ISIS now owns Tora Bora.

I Love the Smell of KY in the Morning

June 18, 2017

I have a feeling that actual Vietnam vets disagree with the sentiments of draft-dodging "Bone Spurs" Trump who once said this: "It's amazing, I can't even believe it. I've been so lucky in terms of that whole world, it is a dangerous world out there. It's like Vietnam, sort of. It is my personal Vietnam. I feel like a great and very brave solider." And this: "You know, if you're young, and in this era, and if you have any guilt about not having gone to Vietnam, we have our own Vietnam — it's called the dating game. Dating is like being in Vietnam. You're the equivalent of a soldier going over to Vietnam."

Trump's version of a land mine? Vaginas.

Presumably Mr. Germ-a-Phobe Donald Trump has managed to escape contracting any serious venereal diseases throughout his meat-market days (although based on his pronouncements of late, we can't rule out the long-term effects of syphilis). And because

he personally requires no assistance to deal with sexually transmitted diseases, it only makes sense that no one else in America should either.

Today, six members of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA) resigned in protest of the Trump administration. One of those members, Scott Schoettes said, "The decision to resign from government service is not one that any of us take lightly. However, we cannot ignore the many signs that the Trump administration does not take the on-going epidemic or the needs of people living with HIV seriously."

Schoettes noted that the Trump administration took down the Office of National AIDS Policy website and has not yet appointed anyone to lead the White House Office of National AIDS Policy. Maybe if Schoettes and his gang had served in Playtime-Vietnam like Trump, he wouldn't need to fret over a few HIV/AIDS sufferers who must recognize that, according to the late, great and likely queer Jerry Falwell, "AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals. It is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals."

Where's Alex Jones on Alexandria?

June 21, 2017

Should we expect Alex Jones and his conspiracy website Infowars to call bullshit on the recent alleged shooting at a Republican baseball practice in Alexandria, Virginia last week? The one in which a person supposedly from Illinois whose name is said to be James Hodgkinson might have opened fire on Congressmen and aides with what might or might not have been an assault rifle and/or a semi-automatic pistol? After all, the whole episode parallels the so-called Sandy Hook massacre in which 20 children and six staff members were supposedly mowed down in 2012 by a

whacked-out dude code-named Adam Lanza. After Sandy Hook, Infowars and like-minded patriots called into question the validity of the attack, claiming it was a staged event by anti-gun zealots looking to gin up sympathy for shredding the Second Amendment. Proceeding with careful analysis, Infowars' grand pooh-bah Jones said in 2014, "I've looked at it and undoubtedly there's a cover-up, there's actors, they're manipulating, they've been caught lying, and they were pre-planning before it and rolled out with it."

Might not the same be said about the baseball assault? Wouldn't it be consistent in the eyes of Infowars followers for anti-gun nuts to stage a false attack on Representative Steve Scalise, Republican Whip, and others in his entourage so as to foster support for stricter gun laws, or worse, total confiscation of all firearms? Think about it. Have you seen any pictures of anyone shot at the ball-field besides Scalise? Where are these people? And what about Scalise's alleged gunshot wound? A bullet to the hip and he's in grave danger of losing his life!? Never in the history of Westerns and Arnold Schwarzenegger movies has anyone croaked from a shot to the hip.

Are people really supposed to believe that the "cop" throwing out the first pitch of the eventual ballgame between R's and D's was struck by a bullet from a deranged middle-aged white guy? He seems fine enough to cast aside the prop crutches and hurl a fast ball down the middle.

And why were the Capitol police at a practice scrimmage on a weekend? Obviously, they knew in advance about the plan and were poised to take in Democrat stooge Hodgkinson before he could rat about the conspiracy. Finally, you can rearrange the letters in "Hodgkinson" to spell "Kinghoods." More than anything else, that constitutes irrefutable proof that the shooting was a hoax.

Let's hope Alex Jones continues to monitor the situation

closely for ties between Scalise, Hodgkinson and the pizza joint that fronts for Hilary Clinton's pedophile sex-trade ring.

Kalanick Takes a Hike

June 21, 2017

Uber founder Travis Kalanick has finally resigned his position as company CEO just a few days after saying he would take a short sabbatical from the job. After upending the moribund taxi industry with a slick app that connects people seeking rides with drivers seeking to give rides, Kalanick presided over a steady compendium of foolish errors that blemished Uber's image – but haven't dented the company's valuation (yet). These include sexual harassment, price-gouging customers during times of panic, hosting phony versions of their app to elude local laws, bait-n-switching drivers by lowering their take per ride, prying into the privacy of a rider who was raped by an Uber driver, deploying an app called "Hell" to track rival Lyft drivers. Uber is a living case study of all that can be morally wrong with a company.

Back in July 2015, I wrote that the biggest affront to society that Uber might inflict is the exploitation of its massive database of rider behavior. Uber knows an awful lot about where their customers come from and where they go, when they go, how long they stay, how often they visit a destination. They can establish a pattern of customer travel behavior, and detect when they deviate from it. All of this info poses a tremendous opportunity for Uber to fuck with people's lives in ways small and large. Advertisers crave access to the data so as to offer deals based on where people go. Law enforcement wants rider data to make cases and solve crimes. And most concerning are governments that want access to the data so as to monitor behavior, predict unrest and harass the populace. In early June, it was reported that the Egyptian

government asked Uber for access to Uber's live ride tracking tool known internally as "Heaven." (Tools called Heaven and Hell? Is Kalanick a Dante fanboy?)

Supposedly Uber declined, so the Egyptian apparatchiks offered preferential treatment to a local rival called Careem who also supposedly declined. Egypt's police state must have gotten a boner thinking about how they could predict the time and location of protests and shut down ride-hailing services to thwart transportation options to the protest sites. As Uber strives for world domination, they will undoubtedly face greater pressure from government organizations (including the U.S.'s NSA) to share live and archived data on riders. Odds are, they'll buckle. Kalanick's resignation will be met positively by investors, but the genie is already out of the bottle. Things are destined to get worse with Uber – only now the damage will be under the radar instead of on TMZ.

What a Difference 3 Days Make

July 4, 2017

New Jersey is among many states that have constitutional mandates to pass a balanced budget every year starting on July 1. That is to say, the governors and their legislatures have 365 days to come up with a budget that each can swallow. Of course, many can't seem to muster the wherewithal to accomplish this basic task, and like NJ this year start off another July without a closed budget. Brinksmanship ensues. Miserly shutdowns of public services follow (despite the fact that essential services can somehow be maintained). In NJ's case, the illustrious public servants, on the July 4th extended holiday, chose to shut down… public beaches.

Today we learned that what was an intractable, inscrutable problem that defied solution over 365 days was eminently solvable

in 368. How very odd. Sadly, showing no sign of shared suffering you might expect from a normal political leader, absentee governor Chris Christie was discovered lolling about a stretch of verboten beach during a period in which mere Jersey mortals were barred from the famous shore and instead turned to reruns of Snookie and The Situation styling their armpit hair.

Luckily for the porty Christie, no one from Greenpeace came upon him, otherwise they may have mistaken him for a humpback whale in need of a push back into the briny.

A Lesson from 1996 ALCS

July 14, 2017

New York Yankees fans of a certain age will no doubt remember a strange game late in the 1996 season when the Bronx Bombers met up with the Baltimore Orioles for the first game of the ALCS. With the Orioles up 4 to 3, Derek Jeter hit a solid shot into deep right field – solid, but not quite enough to clear the fence. Just before the ball plopped into the glove of Oriole Tony Tarasco for a certain out, a young Yankees fan named Jeffrey Maier reached out and snagged it away. (The glove that Maier used to catch the ball went for $22K at auction.)

Incredibly, obvious fan interference was ruled by officials to be a home run for Jeter thus tying the game; the Yankees went on to win the game 5 to 4, and the series 4 to 1. It's clear from every angle that the ball did not or would not have cleared the fence, and that Master Maier interfered. But despite indisputable evidence the Yankees benefitted from a phenomenally horrible call by the umpire standing mere feet from the play, Yankee fans – instead of exhibiting some semblance of restraint over the tainted outcome – celebrated Maier and his interference. *The New York Post* called

him the "Angel in the Outfield" as though God approved of the Yankees ill-gotten victory. Maier was feted all over town as a hero.

I bring up this episode because it serves as an illustration of how people willfully ignore any and all evidence that their chosen team succeeded unfairly. And that no amount of protestation by opponents can penetrate the obstinance. I'm sure every legitimate complaint levied against Yankee fans by Oriole fans was swatted away as "fake news."

This is a lesson that the anti-Trump crusaders have to reckon with. As evidence mounts daily of collusion with Russian players to influence the election, Dems and lefties hold out hope that the Trump base will finally cave to reality and admit their guy cheated his way into the Oval Office. They'll say they're beating the story to death because the whole sordid affair was an egregious assault on American democracy (which it was) – but in fact, the bigger objective is to wipe the smirk off the faces of "the deplorables." They can't wait for the day when the Yankees admit they should have lost to the Orioles that late summer day in 1996.

It will *never* happen.

Trump could be impeached, Kushner and dim Don Jr. could be imprisoned, Melania could go public on the heartbreak and shame of E.D. – and the base wouldn't flinch. Trump will always be a business genius. He'll always be the greatest deal maker of all time. Every American will beg to stop winning so much because of Trump's terrific agenda.

Give it up Anderson Cooper and Don Lemon. Put a sock in it Rachel Maddow. Stop being so dramatic Joe (I used to be a Rep) Scarborough. Your quests to get the Trump base to show humility, eat crow, admit mistakes, beg forgiveness are, well… have you heard about a $22K baseball glove once owned by a 12-year old boy?

Just Look Out the Window

July 14, 2017

I received a letter in the mail from Lawn Doctor the other day advising how to manage my lawn during the dry conditions of the current drought – which begs this question: at what medical school did Dr. Lawn do his internship, Trump University?

It has rained just about every day in the Northeast since precipitation stopped being solid in April. Memo to Lawn Doctor: stop sending boilerplate memos and start crafting some missives that I can use – like how to cultivate cranberries in my back yard that is now a bog.

Coulter Suffers in Coach

July 18, 2017

Leggy right-wing pundit Ann Coulter tweeted out this snark the other day: "Just when you think it's safe to fly them again, the worst airline in America is STILL Delta." Obviously, she's never heard of Spirit Air. Given the rancid reputation for customer dissatisfaction the American airline industry has cultivated over the past years and months, it's hard to imagine how an aggrieved passenger could actually generate sympathy for one of the big companies flying the unfriendly skies. But leave it to right-wing wench (say that three times fast!) Coulter to upset the dynamic and allow a company like Delta to grab the moral high ground.

Apparently the big time TV personality and author of such rabidly anti-liberal one-word megahits as "Godless," "Mugged," "Treason," "Guilty," "Demonic," "Slander," and the hilariously titled "In Trump we Trust" was requested by Delta's inflight service personnel to relinquish her seat – in the coach (!) section that the millionaire personality had paid an extra whole $30 to secure. No doubt she foolishly believed the extra 3 inches of legroom was

worth the risk of succumbing to on-board Gestapo tactics from Delta's SS storm troopers – as well as the added responsibility of having to open the emergency door in case the plane from New York to West Palm Beach pulled a Sully and bellyflopped into the Atlantic Ocean.

Coulter tweeted out some more sarcasm on July 16: "Delta employee questionnaire: What is your ideal job? Prison guard? Animal handler? Stasi policeman? All of the above: HIRED." For certain, if Delta actually hired Stasi agents, they would have dismembered Coulter and stowed her body parts in an overhead bin, instead of moving her to another seat in the same aisle.

According to Delta, "Coulter originally booked seat 15F, which is located by the window in an exit row, however; within 24 hours of the flight's departure, the customer changed to seat 15D, which is by the aisle. At the time of boarding, Delta inadvertently moved Coulter to 15A, a window seat, when working to accommodate several passengers with seating requests."

That explanation seems to describe a situation just a trifle less fascist than the episode when United Airlines bloodied a passenger in its effort to remove him from his fully-paid seat so a flight attendant could deadhead in his place. Still, Coulter had reason to be pissed. After all, as Ann explained she had consumed $10,000 worth of her own time to research and book the precise seat meeting her needs… in coach. Still smoldering, on July 17 she tweeted out this fantasy: "$30! It cost me $10,000 of my time to pre-select the seat I wanted, investigate type of plane & go back periodically to review seat options." Somehow that complaint seems disingenuous. She spent $10K worth of Coulter-time to optimize her experience in coach, when less than $1,000 would have secured a cushy seat in first class? Are we to believe that Coulter can't afford to take NetJets, or hop aboard a chartered

plane, or even pay to get into first class and avoid all the bullshit? She's bitching over being denied the perks that $30 buys on a run-of-the-mill airline? Are her books selling so poorly that she must slum with the rest of the "deplorables" heading to muggy, soulless Florida with pockets stuffed full of Golden Corral coupons?

It's hard to feel pity for Miss Coulter. After all she could have taken her *own advice* from 2013 and flown an alternate airline to West Palm Beach where a certain Orange-tinged creature might have awaited her services. Her tweet from 2013: "If the only way you can get someplace is on Delta, don't go."

Trump Family Thesaurus

July 25, 2017

Trump's children with Ivana, plus in-law Jared Kushner, have played an outsized role in government while continuing to reap personal and financial benefits in a clear cauldron of conflicts of interest. However, their collective bad behavior is not homogeneous (that would put them on the wrong side of the Trump base that abhors homo-anything.)

As it turns out their various forms moral turpitude are rather complex in nature making it difficult for some to accurately describe their abhorrent characteristics.

Here is a quick guide on how to refer to the Trump kids in friendly conversation. First, imagine a two by two matrix (four cells) in which to place each of the children: Donald, Jr., Eric, Ivanka, and Jared. The four sides of the matrix are as follows: Sinister, Clueless, Self-Serving and Inconsequential.

Here are the cells into which each fits:

- Don, Jr.: Sinister but Inconsequential
- Jared: Sinister and Self-Serving

- Eric: Clueless and Inconsequential
- Ivanka: Clueless but Self-Serving

With that taxonomy in place, here are the adjectives you can use whenever discussing these cretins at sophisticated parties. Feel free to construct the matrix on an index card.

- Don, Jr.: smarmy, vulgar, sleazy, grimy, coarse, witless, narcissistic
- Jared: brazen, boorish, slick, mendacious, manipulative, effete, narcissistic
- Eric: tacky, tasteless, crude, cheesy, witless
- Ivanka: tawdry, garish, preachy, ostentatious, gaudy, effete

You're welcome.

RIP Martin Landau

July 29, 2017

I was a faithful fan of the 1960s TV show "Mission: Impossible" with its dramatic self-destructing tape introducing the week's impossible mission to IM Forces leader Jim Phelps. Following the tense theme song by Lalo Shiffrin, the next few minutes of the program would dramatize Phelps's process of assembling his team. He'd ponder glamor photos of several candidates but every episode included the same cast: a strong man (Peter Lupus), a demolitions/MacGyver-type dude (Greg Morris), an elegant couple experienced in the finer arts of espionage (real-life married couple Barbara Bain and Martin Landau), and someone to fill a mission-specific role played by a different guest actor each week.

It was always Martin Landau as Rollin Hand who was the most captivating of the ensemble cast. He was the inside man most at risk. The man who had to survive on wits, cunning and confidence. The man most likely to be "disavowed by the secretary" should anything go wrong – per the baritone voice on the opening tape.

Years later I discovered Landau as the preening yet sinister henchman in "North by Northwest" along with heavy-weights Cary Grant, Eva Marie Saint and James Mason. Landau's performance was especially delicious as he played the character with just the right amount of obsequiousness.

Sadly, after "North by Northwest" and the successful run of "Mission: Impossible" for which he won a Golden Globe, Landau found himself in the wilderness, unable to snag decent roles befitting his skills. Like all good actors he kept acting, but it wasn't until 1989 that he got a substantial role in Woody Allen's "Crimes and Misdemeanors," a study in avarice and deceit. Finally, in 1994, Landau was cast in an award-winning multi-dimensional role as the aging Bela Lugosi in Tim Burton's "Ed Wood" opposite Johnny Depp. For that, he took home the only Oscar in his career. RIP Martin Landau.

Liberty Mutual: Insurance for Wimps

July 29, 2017

In a recent TV ad, Liberty Mutual explains its superiority to Brand X because it covers a call to the local auto repair shop to *fix a flat tire*! That's right – young men today cannot be expected to manage such daunting tasks as changing a tire. That's what insurance is for. A feeble boy in the ad struggles with a panoply of tool-like objects while his sorry-case-for-a-human friend phones daddy for advice. The kid doesn't know a crow-bar from a juice-bar.

My god. Meanwhile, a different dude whose parents pays Liberty Mutual, stands next to mommy and smirks smugly, knowing he'll never need to learn any of life's fundamentals because Liberty Mutual is there (for a fee) to handle shit when things go wrong.

Sadly, I suppose starting a car by popping the clutch, changing the oil, and driving with the left hand while insinuating the right down a girlfriend's blouse are lost arts now.

The Mooch Screws the Pooch

August 1, 2017

In 2012, B-List "American Idol" runner-up Clay Aiken appeared on "The Celebrity Apprentice" hosted by carnival-barker Donald Trump. He was "fired" in the season finale. In an interview Aiken gave later to the *News & Observer* of North Carolina, he claimed "Trump didn't decide who got fired on Apprentice, I mean, NBC made those decisions." Aiken added this embarrassing indictment of Trump's lack of program control: "There used to be a little thing right on his desk that looked like a phone — he pretended it was a phone — but it was actually a teleprompter where the producers were sending him notes."

In other words, the cool and decisive businessman Trump portrayed on "The Apprentice" was nothing more than a suited puppet. Given Trump's hiring and firing practices since taking office it would seem Aiken's insights are spot on.

It should be clear to all by now that Trump is a terrible hirer. He has taken very public issue with the performance of several employees including "very weak" AG Jeff Sessions, Chief of Staff Reince Pubis, Press Secretary Sean Spicer and HHS Secretary Tom Price who took shit from Trump for not closing the Obamacare repeal deal (as if he pulls all the levers to accomplish that feat.) Oddly, Trump berates these people as though he inherited them

from a previous administration instead of having chosen them himself. No doubt Trump will keep up the abuse against Sessions in the hope the little Hobbit will resign on his own and save Trump the grief of firing him.

In the most recent head-scratcher, Trump brought on board the bloviating Anthony "Mooch" Scaramucci as the new communications director – presumably to tighten up the operation and shut down damaging leaks from the West Wing. In reality, I believe Scaramucci's sole purpose in joining the administration was to browbeat Spicer and Pubis into quitting so that Trump wouldn't have to fire them. No sooner had Scaramucci gotten his foot in the door, Trump retained a new Chief of Staff – Gen. John Kelly – who promptly fired the undisciplined, foul-mouthed Mooch. Note that Kelly, not Trump was credited for chopping off Mooch's head. The Mooch lasted all of 11 days in the job – just long enough to sow panic in the ranks and accomplish the purge Trump wanted but couldn't bring himself to engineer.

Lord of the Lies

August 13, 2017

CNN booted Trump shill Jeffrey Lord from its AC360 program hosted by Anderson Cooper for tweeting the infamous Nazi shout-out, "Sieg Heil!" (hail victory). Lord was reacting in a fashion often familiar to hard-right wingers to a Twitter antagonist who took issue with him. Lord quickly deleted the Tweet, but as everyone who has graduated third grade knows, once you blurt out a tweet, it lives forever. That Lord would choose a Nazi salute to diss his tormentor publicly is just one more example of the poor man's intellectual disorder.

Jeffrey Lord – an early Trump supporter and sycophant – was added to the AC360 talking-head lineup in yet another of cable

TV's ill-advised attempts to "balance" the slate. This is never a good thing. Panelists should come to the table with bona-fide reputations for intelligence, integrity and honesty – and their political persuasions should weigh very little in their recruitment. When a left-leaning show like AC360 brings on a righty to mix in with the cadre of liberals, the audience doesn't perceive balance – they see craven tokenism.

In the case of AC360, Lord played the punching bag every night – and deservedly so. His comments and analysis were routinely ridiculous to the point of risibility. A common defense of Trump or someone in the administration would be to point out how some democrat in years gone by had done the same thing. Lord would make nonsensical analogies that often made his own case worse. Jeffrey Lord was an embarrassment – yet he maintained his perch at Anderson Pooper's table precisely to be the embarrassing foil for the rest of the gang. I'm sure CNN was upset with the "Sieg Hiel" tweet not because of its caustic history but because they'll now have to scrounge up another nitwit to wear the token dunce cap.

After all, that CNN kept Lord in the line-up after Cooper lost his shit so many times is *prima facie* evidence of their tolerance of Jeffrey's useful idiocy.

Resign with Honesty, Please

August 24, 2017

Former White House press secretary Sean Spicer endured unrelenting opprobrium and ridicule during his short stint in the job – much of it coming from his malignant boss, Trump. Day after day, week after week the man could do no right. Yes, he self-immolated regularly, but he also was dealt one after another shit hand. Trump would make some lofty pronouncement that Sean

was forced to defend, only to learn that Mr. Unpredictable had reversed or revised it moments earlier.

So, when Spicer finally concluded resignation was the only path forward, he explained that it was in response to Trump's decision to bring in a new Communications Director – the vile Anthony Scaramucci. Everyone knew Spicer had 1,001 real reasons to leave, but he chose to shamelessly blame it on the Mooch.

A few days ago, top American CEOs warming the bench on a couple of Trump's fig-leaf business advisory boards resigned en masse. IBM's Ginni Rometty lead the exodus and explained it this way:

> "The despicable conduct of hate groups in Charlottesville last weekend, and the violence and death that resulted from it, shows yet again that our nation needs to focus on unity, inclusion, and tolerance. For more than a century and in more than 170 countries, IBM has been committed to these values. … We have always believed that dialogue is critical to progress; that is why I joined the President's Forum earlier this year. But this group can no longer serve the purpose for which it was formed."

Again, the resignation was blamed on some bad alt-right behavior in Virginia instead of the real reason, which is Trump's instability and lack of business acumen. And when it comes to issues facing the economic health of the nation, Trump is a buzz-kill. To wit: his desire to simply walk away from NAFTA with no plan for the fallout, his willingness to shut down the government unless his asinine wall gets funded, his suggestion that it's OK for the government to default on its debts, his maniacal focus on resurrecting 19th century industries while ignoring those of the

future. Despite his so-called CEO bona-fides, the man is a menace to big business.

But Rometty and gang could not bring themselves to cite their real reasons for disbanding the economic forum. Hell, they didn't even lay blame for Charlottesville even tangentially on Trump's ante-bellum rhetoric.

Now we learn that Dan Kammen has resigned his position as Science Envoy for the State Department because… Trump screwed up on Charlottesville. Really? That's why Kammen is bagging his 20-year career in government? Kammen has been a scientist in the employ of the Department of Energy, the EPA and the State Department – and he also holds a directorship at UC Berkeley. Why couldn't he just cite the real reason for his resignation: that Trump and his addled deputies are the most anti-science Luddites to run a government since Pope Urban VIII and his Vatican vagabonds castigated Galileo for daring to suggest the earth revolves around the sun. (How do you say "fake news" in Latin?)

Otherwise you'd have to believe that eminent scientist Dan Kammen was willing to accept Trump's ignorant war on science forever as long as he kept his rancid racism in check.

C'mon all future resigners: have the guts to say it loud and proud exactly why you're leaving the stink factory. Because it stinks.

The Day the Clown Died

August 24, 2017

The death of comedian, actor, writer, director and TV huckster Jerry Lewis revived discussion of his never-screened, rarely-seen debacle of a movie titled "The Day the Clown Cried." The Lewis production – which deals with imprisoned children, Nazi gas chambers… and a clown – is legendary for being perhaps

the worst movie of all time. And we're not talking bad in a good way like the films of Ed Wood and John Waters. Or even low budget stinkers like "Squirm" and "Porky's 23."

If you believe those who were involved in its production, or the handful of people close to Jerry who got to scope some dailies, "The Day the Clown Cried" is an inadvertently tasteless clump of poor acting, bad cinematography and nauseating storyline.

Jerry plays over-the-hill circus clown Helmut Dorque (pronounced Doork according to the script) who is arrested by the Gestapo after a couple of their agents spotted him drunkenly insulting a framed photo of Adolf Hitler. Deep into the story Dorque suffers the wrath of fellow inmates who challenge him to perform his supposedly world-class clown act, only to watch him fail miserably. (The movie may have done better as a half hour "Twilight Zone" episode – but reading the script it's clear Jerry tried to stretch a thin tale into a full-length epic.) Could there be anything more pathetic than watching a clown be unfunny? Here is some of the treacly dialog:

PRISONER: "If he's Germany's greatest clown, God help the Fatherland. Doork, the Great! You got paid for that? To go without food is bad enough, but to have to watch that!"

2ND NEW PRISONER (accusingly): "You're not the clown I saw. You lied. You're big all right. A big liar."

4TH NEW PRISONER (contemptuously): "And I was going to tell my kids!"

UHLMANN: "He's no clown. Not even a bad one."

HELMUT: "I am. I am a clown! Give me a chance. I just got started."

But the men continue to walk away. Helmut tries to do a hand stand, but his hands slip in the mud, and he lands ignominiously on all fours. When he looks up, only Adolf, Galt and Uhlmann remain.

ADOLF (sadly): "That's what we've been eating our hearts out to see! You stink. You really stink."

HELMUT: "I… I slipped. I can do it."

Someone kicks mud into Dorque's face and soon the clown is on his knees in complete humiliation. Suddenly a small child approaches and, naturally, finds Dorque's antics hilarious. Soon enough the Nazis discover that Dorque's abilities to charm young children with his goofy antics might be useful in keeping them calm before their ultimate demise in the gas chambers. Yikes! What a concept – and probably the main reason Lewis decided after the movie was in the can to keep it there. In the end, Dorque – like the Pied Piper of Hamlin – escorts his young fans into the chamber and goes down along with them.

Someday, maybe soon, now that Jerry is gone, this artifact will play somewhere for cinephiles to ogle and debate. Will the audience sentiment be that "The Day the Clown Cried" was far ahead of its time – or will they exclaim "I've seen better film on teeth?"

Paul Newman's Rolex

September 5, 2017

A rare Rolex Daytona watch given to Paul Newman by his actress wife Joann Woodward is set to go to auction on October 26. Auction house Phillips in New York whispered a target price of $10 million. That buys a lot of Casios. In fact, you could probably buy the whole Casio watch factory for that sum. But the Newman Rolex is in a class by itself.

The watch is stunning; but add in the Newman effect – engraved with a loving phrase from Joann, featured in several photos upon Paul's wrist, worn in top class auto races – and you have an auctioneer's wet dream. Prediction: the watch goes for north of $15 mil. (Update: the watch went for $17.8 million the next month.)

This Week Through the Looking Glass

September 14, 2017

Many people in the past several days have made pretzel-logic comments worthy of Lewis Carroll. Here is a sampling.

Sarah Huckabee Sanders. During a press conference in which the main topic was Trump's gutsy decision to shut down the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy (aka. DACA), Sarah Huckabee Sanders defended her boss for "upholding the law." DACA was an Obama nod to reality that spending big bucks to dog children who had been brought to America illegally by their parents was not the best use of limited immigration enforcement resources. After all, these kids known as "Dreamers" had no say in the decision to come here, and in the meantime had grown up like every other American kid: going to school, playing sports, working and paying taxes. Their threat level is certainly lower than that of Eric Bolling. Regardless, many people see Dreamers' presence on US soil as an affront that must be dealt with through expensive tracking, lengthy judicial review and ultimate deportation.

Still, Sanders fell through the looking glass when she said this: "We are a nation of law and order. And the day that we start to ignore the fact that we are that, then we throw away everything that gives these people a reason to want to come to our country." In other words, the very existence of a DACA policy keeps young people from wanting to come to the U.S. Although it sounds

absurd – like something from the mouth of the Red Queen – it makes sense why Trump may ultimately change his mind and support DACA.

Scott Pruitt. Following the devastation visited upon Florida by Hurricane Irma, EPA head Scott Pruitt said this about the inevitable chatter linking a super-storm to climate change: "To use time and effort to address it at this point is very, very insensitive to this people in Florida." Mr. Pruitt meet the Mad Hatter. Bringing up climate change after a major weather event most likely exacerbated by the effects of climate change (ocean warming, rising sea levels) is "insensitive"? Are Floridians softer than the cheeks of Jared Kushner? Following Pruitt's logic, we shouldn't mention terrorism on 9/11 lest we force sensitive New Yorkers into underground safe spaces. C'mon, Scott. Come up with a better way to perpetuate denial and resurrect phrenology.

Martin Shkreli. Out on $5 million bail and suffering from shkrelitis (a rare disease in which a person is born without a soul,) former hedge fund scammer and pharmaceutical scrooge Martin Shkreli posted a bizarre challenge on Facebook: grab a strand of hair from Hillary Clinton's head during her upcoming book tour and receive a $5,000 award. Although Shkreli's lawyer noted "He says things that are stupid. I don't think stupid makes you violent," the judge in the case thought otherwise and revoked the massive bail. Given that Clinton is protected by Secret Service, any attempt to yank out one of her hairs would no doubt cause a slight fracas. The smirking Shkreli can now play the Cheshire Donkey in prison while he awaits trial in January.

Paul Ryan. Paul Ryan on Trump's plan to end DACA (September 1 version): "I actually don't think he should do that. I believe that this is something that Congress has to fix." Paul Ryan on Trump's plan to end DACA (September 6 version): "President

Trump was right in his decision. He made the right call." Ryan: playing both Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee.

Fuck you Equifax

September 14, 2017

By now half of America knows Equifax – the collector and disseminator of personal information under the ruse of doing a service known as calculating a credit score – is a sham operation with no scruples, no technical competence and no ability to manage crisis. Why do they even exist, given that two other companies, Experian and TransUnion, provide redundancy? Several weeks ago, Equifax learned that detailed personal records of a mere 143 million Americans were confiscated by hackers, and in the ensuing days in which they kept the breach a secret, at least a few Equifax execs dumped their company stock. Since going public with the debacle, Equifax has behaved worse than Uber on steroids.

The minimum they could do is to help people lock their files so further damage is reduced – but no. These hollow-souled corporate miscreants can't or won't even provide basic support. Equifax stock has justifiably plummeted $30 a share to $114 in the past week.

In any event, as suggested by several news outlets I visited an Equifax website where I was supposed to be able to request a credit freeze which would thwart would-be criminals from initiating an unauthorized raid on my family jewels. Sure enough, I met more Equifax incompetence. After putting in my last name and last 6 digits of my social, I had to pass one of those irritating Captcha tests. You know – the ones that challenge you to click on the blocks in an array that contain a picture of a storefront, or a road sign, or an Equifax exec drinking Louis Roederer Cristal in Monaco. Sure enough, every time I successfully satisfied Captcha,

I was presented with another Captcha to navigate. After four or five tries, I peered around my office looking for a peephole and waiting for Allen Funt to jump out and yell, "Smile – you're on candid camera!"

The Heist Movie

September 18, 2017

As a fan of good heist movies, I saw "Logan Lucky" last week and was, as expected, disappointed – for too many heist movies suffer from the same problems: major plot holes and all-too-convenient twists that turn certain doom into success, and whose odds are lower than winning Powerball twice in a row. Despite killer ensemble casts, exotic locations, cool cars and clothes, the heist genre usually involves an outlandish script that, in the end, leaves the viewer wishing things could have been better. Directed by heist-meister Steven Soderbergh (Oceans 11, 12 & 13), the action in "Logan Lucky" is fast and exhilarating, and the cast of characters involved in the heist all have their requisite unique quirks. In fact, the pace is so fast you often don't realize how ridiculous the action is until hours after you've left the theater. Without giving anything material away, the Logan family – Jimmy (Channing Tatum), Clyde (Adam Driver), and Mellie (Riley Keough) – are among a long line of Logan's who have a black cloud of bad luck hovering over their heads. After Jimmy loses his job working underground construction at a NasCar track, he conjures a plan to steal money from the track. It's time to turn the Logan luck around.

He comes to this point after learning on the job that the track stores cash from concession stands in an underground vault – and that the cash is transported automatically from POS terminals through a network of pneumatic tubes. Jimmy needs a demolitions expert (mandatory for all heist movies) who happens to be

incarcerated in a local jail. All Jimmy needs to do is break his demo buddy Joe Bang (Daniel Craig) out of jail on the day of the job, and secretly return him to serve out his sentence afterwards.

If that's not enough, the plan requires Clyde to go to jail on purpose to accompany Joe in the plan – and he too must be broken in and out. Although by the end of the movie it's not clear why it was necessary for Clyde to go inside. Anyway, that's enough bullshit right there to make you shake your head. But it only gets crazier as additional conspirators join the heist. They're able to masquerade as exterminators, garbage haulers, maintenance workers – anyone you need them to be to waltz into a place unchallenged. In fact, everyone on the team seems be able to saunter anywhere they want without worrying about security guards, locks, fences, surveillance cameras, motion detectors – all the kinds of things you'd expect to thwart penetration of the track vault, and none that exist.

Do they get the money? Can they get Joe and Clyde in and out of jail undetected? Can Mellie the hot chick drive better than Richard Petty? Watch the movie, but don't be shocked if your suspended belief doesn't come out of its coma. Oh, another question to ask yourself at the right time: Did they even need the demolitions expert which prompted the whole idiotic break-in/break-out scheme in the first place?

The heist movie genre tends to be fairly formulaic in that several elements appear in just about every attempt. Here are a few:

- The place where the loot is stored must be absolutely impenetrable – so impenetrable that no human being needs to monitor it. It can be underground encased in 100-foot thick concrete, guarded by a lattice of lasers,

submerged beneath the ocean floor – yet in the end not so impenetrable after all.

- If the vault is monitored by security guards watching on closed circuit TV, one of the following weak spots will exist: there will be a corner of the vault that is out of sight of any camera, the closed circuit TV system can be disabled with a wire cutter, someone can hack the system and put up a visual façade that fools the monitors that all is well in the vault.
- Trained personnel overseeing the security of phenomenal wealth are easily distracted, easily fooled and remarkably gullible. Every heist movie includes characters that waltz right past shady behavior and blow off suspicious interactions.
- Sixty seconds in a heist movie takes 10 minutes of screen time.
- The heist gang must acquire a device that does not really exist, pull off a stunt that mortal, earth-bound humans cannot perform, or rely on a total breakdown of internationally accepted norms of behavior.
- If the heist movie was made before 1970, the robbers must get jammed in the end; after 1975 they must get away with it.
- Finally, and thankfully, most heist movies feature a delightful ensemble cast which usually makes a disappointing movie enjoyable.

Now, here are some examples:

Oceans 11 (1960). Slick movie featuring the Rat Pack. Requires the heroes to knock out the electricity of the

entire Vegas strip on New Year's Eve. Yes, it requires a demolition man. They get the loot out in a garbage truck which passes swiftly thru a police roadblock – maybe because it's driven by a shuckin' black guy (Sammy Davis, Jr.). In the end, the loot – which they store in a dead co-conspirator's coffin – is burned up when the dude is cremated.

Oceans 11 (2001). Modern-day substitute Rat Pack-ish actors redo the original. This time it takes a thing called the "pinch" to knock out Vegas' juice. Really? This pinch is something you can actually obtain? And its theft doesn't spur a national dragnet, given its awesome power?

Oceans 13. The gist of this heist is to cause full mayhem at a ritzy casino owned by a dirtbag. The plan is to rig the casino's myriad games to pay out in unusually generous quantities, then encourage all the winners to leave before they can lose their winnings back. The heist team includes guys who go to a factory that make casino dice so they can trick them out to come up 7's. And they get the casino owner to carry a cellphone that disrupts a key security element of the casino. More unbelievable shit occurs climaxing with the boys simulating a scary earthquake with a gigantic drilling machine. Don't ask.

Sexy Beast. The team must extract enormous wealth by breaking into a vault from under water via a pool in a next-door bathhouse. Funny how often banks build their impenetrable vaults adjacent to easily accessible structures. In the end the lead character is allowed to keep a pair of ruby earrings and 10 pounds while his

psychopathic tormentor winds up buried beneath a swimming pool.

Heist. The goal of David Mamet's intricately crafted heist: steal gold bullion from a Swissair jet right before its scheduled to take off. The diversion: blow up a radar unit on the grounds causing the taxiing plane to stop on the tarmac. The heist: remove the gold while no one in the airport does a fucking thing. By the way, the robbers are able to bring a van onto the runway without the bat of a lash from anyone in authority. And as in "Oceans 11," the robbers drive the loot off the property past a phalanx of law enforcement who have no imagination and nary a hint of curiosity.

The Killing. Directed by Stanley Kubrick and released in 19xx, this heist movie has moxie. Since this is 1956 all it takes for the robbers to enter the sanctum sanctorum at the racetrack is a knock on the door. In the end the mastermind gets away with it – almost. Just before he boards a plane, his luggage with the loot breaks open, scattering bills across the tarmac.

The Usual Suspects. A handful of guys overwhelm 30+ armed men to board a ship full of… nothing. Well, nothing except Keyser Sose.

Mob Movie Alumni Succumb

September 18, 2017

In just a couple days three actors who played in critically acclaimed mob movies died:

Frank Vincent ("Goodfellas," "The Sopranos") Played Billy Batts in Martin Scorcese's award-winning Goodfellas and

then had to wait a few years before he could join the cast of "The Sopranos" because show-runner David Chase thought Vincent had been too identifiable as Batts. In the end, Frank Vincent as Phil Leotardo fleshed out the final years of the TV series in fine fashion.

Gastone Moschin ("Godfather Part 2") Moschin, a well-regarded Italian actor in his native country played the manipulative Don Fannuci who eventually gets the bullet in the head from young Vito Corleone.

Harry Dean Stanton ("Godfather Part 2") Harry Dean went on to play an amazing array of characters, so his brief stint in GF2 is not that impactful. Still he was a member of an extraordinary cast. His role as an FBI agent was to oversee the turncoat Mafioso Frank Pentangeli. Of course, why he needed to continue to provide protection after Frank decided not to help the prosecution of Michael Corleone remains a head-scratcher.

If You Have to Torture Animals to Make Art, You're Doing it Wrong

September 22, 2017

Under pressure from animal rights people, the Guggenheim Museum pulled some works from an upcoming exhibition. One such work titled "Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other" is a video showing pairs of vicious pit bulls snarling and frothing at each other, prodded into a frenzy but restrained from actually attacking one another. The dogs, you see, were placed face to face but restrained on treadmills. Yes, the pit bulls never engaged in a dog fight, no flesh was torn, no blood was shed. Still, it seems a cruel provocation that no doubt caused the dogs stress – even

if they cannot touch each other. Artists and others slammed the Gug for folding. The argument was the usual one: that offensive art should not be censored just because it offends. But in the case of "Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other," it's not a question of whether the piece is offensive or not, but that the piece was created by abusing animals.

Although the Gug probably wrung its hands waffling about the pros and cons of pulling the piece, they came up with the right decision. Tom Eccles of Bard College said, "Museums are here to show works that are difficult, uncomfortable, provocative. The chilling effect of this of course is museums will now look to make exhibitions that won't in any way offend."

We seriously doubt this is the beginning of the end for museums exhibiting provocative art. We also doubt Eccles would be okay with showing, say, a live re-enactment of Joseph Mengele's difficult, uncomfortable, provocative experiments on the bucolic Bard campus.

The Feminine Side of Jared Kushner

September 22, 2017

Soft and fair Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner has pulled his share of boners in the past 12 months. He's had to refile federal documents more than once because of false entries, omissions and oversights. The kind of stuff that carries stiff penalties (for other people.) Jared was also outed for using a private email account to conduct official White House business – something that was at one time a mortal sin in Trumpland, but now downgraded to a nothing-burger.

Then it was discovered the other day that Jared registered to vote as a woman. So, the next time someone mentions the name of Jared Kushner, shout "Lock her up!"

Rage Against the Machine Gun

October 2, 2017

It appears that the maniac who shot and killed nearly 60 people at a Las Vegas country music concert from the comfort of his 32nd floor hotel room in the Mandalay Bay at some point during the massacre used a fully-automatic machine gun. Machine guns are one of the few remaining weapon types in America that are still somewhat hard to own – although not impossible, so says the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action which advises the following on Nevada law: "It is lawful to possess, purchase or sell a machine gun or silencer that is legally registered and possessed in compliance with all federal laws and regulations." (Oddly, in Nevada it is unlawful to carry a concealed handgun or other firearm without first getting a permit to carry – so that gives the NRA at least something to work on in the Silver State.)

Because machine guns are hard to come by, shooting ranges on the outskirts of Las Vegas make a fortune offering the general public the unique thrill of firing M-16s and Uzis. One person who came out for some Uzi fun was a 9-year-old girl who blew the head off her instructor when the military grade weapon got away from her girlish grip.

Questions will abound as to whether the Vegas shooter, Stephen Paddock of Mesquite, NV was permitted to possess the machine gun, and if not, how did he come to acquire it. Did he have access to them through a connection at one of the shooting ranges? Did he modify a semi-automatic weapon as described on innumerable websites and YouTube videos? Did he suffer from an epileptic trigger finger? (Update: he used a device called a bump-stock which helps the shooter repeatedly pull the trigger.)

In any event, the mandatory short-term hand-wringing period has commenced about what to do about the gun situation in America – this time machine guns in particular. Expect much chatter on cable news and strident pushback from the NRA. But don't worry – it should be over by Wednesday.

Obama: Gun-makers' Best Frenemy

October 5, 2017

Perhaps the worst thing that could have happened to the gun industry was the expiration of Barack Obama's term as president. As long as Obama could be held up as a roving maniac on a mission to confiscate every god-fearing American's guns, the industry could count on buyers to scarf up ever more guns in an illogical quest to hoard the mother lode in advance of the inevitable descent of the black helicopters. This behavior was especially intense after major gun massacres like Sandy Hook, Aurora, San Bernardino and Orlando. After a gunman killed 49 people and wounded 53 at the packed Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Fla., on June 12, 2016, the stock price of Sturm, Ruger & Co. jumped 10 percent. Now, after the first major gun massacre during Trump's reign – the horrific sniper attack in Las Vegas that killed 59 and injured more than 500 – Sturm, Ruger's stock blipped up just 3 percent. Smith & Wesson stock spiked up 11.5 percent after the San Bernardino attack, but only 3 percent after Vegas.

(Las Vegas shooter Stephen Paddock purchased 33 guns in the past 12 months and enough ammunition to single-handedly re-enact the Battle of the Bulge. Talk about the kind of repeat customer any company would, uh, kill for.)

It's still sad that the stock prices of gun manufacturers increase at all after a tragedy instead of cratering in the way Boeing stock would if one of their planes fell from the sky. But it seems clear

that gun owners no longer irrationally fear national confiscation of guns and the repeal of the 2nd amendment. The odd thing is that there was never anything to the canard that Obama or his minions sought to take away the guns. How did the fearful gun owner think such a sweeping action could be carried out – and on what authority? Clearly the angst was ginned up by the likes of the NRA which has long ceased being an advocate for gun owners, trading in that mission to be the lobbying arm for gun makers.

Gun manufacturers have done well under the enemy Obama. The big question now: will they do well under a compliant Trump and a look-aside Republican Congress?

An Empty Head Opines on an "Empty Barrel"

October 22, 2017

Are the assholes in the Trump administration ever going to conduct a modicum of due diligence before they plod along and once again spew out provably false assertions? These miscreants who bark "fake news" at anything that doesn't comport to their skewed view of the world are in fact the biggest purveyors of all that is fake. And they are so inept that it takes but mere minutes for anyone with an internet connection to refute their falsehoods. C'mon, alternative facters – try harder!

And still, even when caught red-handed and flat-footed, the shills in the White House comms department brazenly proceed in support of the falsehoods, doubling down in the hopes that listeners' heads will explode, thus halting inconvenient inquiry. Presumably, Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders and her ilk check their souls at the door when they punch the clock.

John Kelly, head of the Department of Homeland Security for six whole months before coming to Trump's rescue following the White House staff purge that swept away then Chief of Staff

Reince Pubis, made an unusual appearance at a press briefing the other day to detail one of Trump's condolence calls to the wife of a slain soldier.

He talked about honor and such stuff before railing on an unnamed "empty barrel" of a congresswoman for listening in on Trump's call to the wife of Sgt. La David Johnson who was killed in action in Niger – a tragedy that may be traceable back to Trump's decision to bar travel from Chad, a one-time African nation partner in the war against terrorism that quit working with the U.S. following that executive order. Kelly "recalled" some egotistical behavior on the part of the empty barrel – aka. Representative Frederica Wilson – in which said barrel got up in front of the audience at the 2015 dedication of a new FBI building to brag about bringing home some $20 million worth of bacon. He "recalled" how she took credit for twisting Obama's arm for the money and then sat down. Kelly was "stunned" by Frederica the Empty Barrel's "stunning" stunt.

Never mind that Wilson wasn't even in Congress when the funds for the building were appropriated (nice research, Kelly staff). Then the video (there's always a video, Kelly staff) came out and guess what? Whatever Kelly "recalled" about the Empty Barrel's speech that day bore no resemblance to the facts revealed in the video tape.

In short, Kelly fabricated some shit which was easily and quickly proven to be fabricated shit. Why does the Trump clan continue to do this? Presumably the price to pay for being within the Orbit of Orange is the ruination of your reputation for having once being an honest human being. That doesn't seem remotely close to a fair bargain – yet the sycophants continue to grovel for the Trumpworld jobs. Such a sad state in which we live today.

A Deficit of Deficit Tweets

October 22, 2017

Barely a month into his presidency, Trump was taking credit for some good news. It was February 25th and the Orange Man tweeted this missive: "The media has not reported that the national debt in my first month went down by $12 billion vs. a $200 billion increase in Obama's first mo." Obviously, the man has no clue about how America's revenues and expenses fluctuate month to month.

Then on October 20, the Treasury Department issued some news that Trump seemed less eager to take credit for. Oops. *The New York Times* reported, "The United States has recorded its largest annual budget deficit in four years, highlighting the nation's worsening fiscal trajectory as lawmakers consider a $1.5 trillion tax cut. A Treasury Department report released on Friday showed that the budget deficit for fiscal 2017 grew by $80 billion, to $666 billion, as federal spending eclipsed revenues and economic growth remained tepid. The deficit also edged higher as a share of the economy, rising to 3.5 percent of gross domestic product from 3.2 percent last year."

Although the news was troubling, you might still see Trump spin it into more evidence of how he's beating Obama: "Best deficit EVER!"

35 Years in the Coal Mine for a Sofa

October 22, 2017

Intellectual giants like Sarah Palin once derided Obama for using a teleprompter – but at least the guy could read from it. Addressing the audience at the recent Values Voter Summit, Trump delivered a speech from the teleprompter and waxed poetic about how mothers and fathers sacrifice every day for the "furniture" of

their children. Fake news, you say? Visit the official transcript from the White House. Here's what Trump said:

> "We see this spirit in the men and women who selflessly enlist in our armed forces and, really, who go out and risk their lives for God and for country. And we see it in the mothers and the fathers who get up at the crack of dawn; they work two jobs and sometimes three jobs. They sacrifice every day for the furniture and — future of their children. They have to go out. They go out. They work. The future of their children is everything to them. They put it before everything. And they make sure that the future of their children has God involved in it."

Donna Brazile Serves Cheese with Grease

November 5, 2017

I rarely read post-mortem books about political campaign intrigue written by minor players. They tend to be incidental, lack durability, tend toward the mundane, and usually include a flaccid "bombshell" to attract the gullible partisan. Two weeks after hitting the bookstores, any remaining unsold material will be consigned to the remainder bins – or sent to the factory for pulping. (I did read Hillary Clinton's "What Happened" and Katy Tur's "Unbelievable" and found both to be interesting and enjoyable.)

Democratic operative Donna Brazile's new book is out: "Hacks: The Inside Story of the Break-ins and Breakdowns That Put Donald Trump in the White House." Presumably we are supposed to believe that Brazile was a campaign insider and that the campaign staff that helped Clinton amass 3 million more votes than Trump were a bunch of hacks.

One hundred actual Clinton campaign staffers signed a letter in response to Brazile's tome calling her out, saying "we do not recognize the campaign she portrays in the book." They also take

a swipe at Donna, stating in frustration at the end, "we are pretty tired of people who were not part of our campaign telling the world what it was like to be on the inside of our campaign and how we felt about it." Ouch.

New reports say Brazile claims in the book that she was considering making a move to dump Hillary and VP candidate Tim Kaine from the slate and replace them with someone better – presumably in direct defiance of the millions of primary voters who had already cast ballots for her. Did she actually have such sweeping authority, and did she think for even a second that that would go down smoothly? Had she made such a bold move, I'm sure we'd see someone else publish a book titled "Whacked: The Inside Story of Donna Brazile's Breakdown That Put Donald Trump in the White House."

The big "bombshell" in "Hacks" is that through Hillary's financial support of the Democratic National Committee she was able to tilt the rank and file her way. Brazile called this "unethical" if not "illegal." I don't know much about the inner workings of a national political committee, but I would assume that if you take the money, you are vulnerable. If Hillary giving contributions amounted to unethical behavior, what should accepting the money be called?

The weirdest reaction to the revelation that Hillary propped up the DNC and in return received favorable treatment came from the Bernie Sanders supporters who whined and moaned about how the game was rigged against their guy. Did they forget that Bernie is not a Democrat?

It always seemed odd to me that a political party would even allow a non-member to seek nomination as their top candidate. Would the Republicans tolerate Michael Moore running for Governor of Michigan on their ticket?

If the dude wanted to run for president on the Democratic ticket and benefit from all the Democratic funding, support, logistics, polling and the like – then he should have joined the party.

New York Votes on a Constitutional Convention

November 7, 2017

New York State is known widely – and legitimately – as one of the worst run states in America. Taxes are among the highest in the nation. New York ranks number one in highest total tax burden at nearly 13 percent, and individual income tax burden. When it comes to education, the average per student expenditure across the country in 2015-16 fall enrollment was $11,787; New York spent $21,606 – 83 percent higher than the US average. New York State teachers receive the highest average salaries in the nation. And for all this largesse, how does New York rank against the other states in pre-K through 12th grade? Number 23. Tops in spending – middle of the pack in results. You want to visit a state park, drive on a highway, cross a bridge, stay in a hotel – be ready to open your wallet. It now costs $15 to cross the George Washington Bridge into Manhattan. If you're stupid enough to smoke, you'll pay $4.35 a pack in taxes – highest in the nation. New York City bumps it another $1.50. Gasoline taxes are 42.6 cents a gallon – third highest in the country.

More than any other state New York is the capital of political corruption. In just the past few years New York has seen a rogues' gallery of so-called leaders go to prison and/or resign in disgrace, including top guys like Assembly Speaker (Sheldon Silver), Senate Majority Leader (Dean Skelos), The Majority Leader before him (Joe Bruno), Governor (Elliot Spitzer), Congressmen (Anthony Wiener, Michael Grimm), and Comptroller (Alan Hevesi.)

Some might argue that poverty-stricken states like Alabama or Tennessee are worse places to live – but damn, at least the people there get what they pay for. Tennessee ranks number 48 in total tax burden, so it should be expected that quality of life may suffer. But New York? Given the table stakes, you'd expect a personal podiatrist to come to your house three times a week to polish your calluses.

Today, Election Day, New Yorkers have the opportunity to vote "yes" on authorizing a Constitutional Convention. Such an opportunity comes but once every 20 years – the last time the state convened a "Con Con" was in 1967. The purpose is to allow voters to consider the state of their state, and if they conclude things need some tweaking to stunt corruption or straighten out finances, they can order a review and subsequent amendment of the constitution.

As you probably suspect, the current constitution contains a lot of stuff that would be better off handled via legislation. And that the state's current status as worst run in the U.S. is an artifact of the clunky constitution. Yet, all signs point to the electorate voting *against* the rare opportunity to reform the state. Apparently, many people worry that the convention will be a waste of money (can't have that going on in our state!) Others are afraid that special interests enshrined in the constitution may get scrubbed out during a convention. But it seems voting against the Con Con is flat out stone cold stupid.

It's like a terminally ill patient with three months to live refusing an experimental cure because it might make him worse.

Can't Think of a Better Reason

November 7, 2017

In 1985, Vernon Madison killed a man in Alabama and was sentenced to death (yes, Vernon is still alive 32 years later.) Now that the day of reckoning is closing in on Vernon, *The New York Times* reports that his lawyers are asking the court to stay the execution because their client can't remember doing the crime. After being booted about in lower courts, the Supreme Court decided against Vernon Madison, allowing the execution to proceed. Bad memory, it seems, is not an exculpatory ploy.

Coming to his defense, Justice Stephen G. Breyer described Mr. Madison's current condition: "He is legally blind. His speech is slurred. He cannot walk independently. He is incontinent."

Shit, Steve, you just made the best case for putting down Ole Vernon.

Could Bannon be That Smart?

November 14, 2017

The worrisome tale of Roy Moore's alleged fondling and harassing of teenage girls (at least one who was only 14) when he was a 30-something prosecutor in Alabama raises questions about the brilliance of his chief benefactor, Steve Bannon.

After Alabama Senator and early Trump sycophant Jeff Sessions was relieved of duty to become the embattled Attorney General in Trump's ass menagerie he calls an administration, his empty seat was filled by the appointment of the aptly named Luther Strange. Strange got to be 'Bama's temporary junior senator filling Sessions's seat until after a special election that will be held on December 12. Instead of coasting to victory as you would normally expect, Strange got primaried by the bible-thumping Judge Roy Moore who was twice booted off the bench for fancying himself above the law.

Strange was supported by the so-called Republican Establishment led by Mitch "the Turtle" McConnell who directed hefty sums into Luther's wobbly campaign. Bannon and his alt-right acolytes pushed hard for Moore – and simultaneously used the primary as a cudgel to beat up on McConnell and his errant establishment ways.

Trump was clearly conflicted. I'm sure his gut told him to follow Bannon's lead and support Moore, but those around the Orange Man – sensing Moore too loose a cannon – talked him into backing Strange. Of course, Strange lost – as Bannon (the Oracle of Breitbart) predicted – and Moore became the Republican candidate. And true to form, never-wrong Trump essentially tweeted "Luther who?"

Shortly after Moore's victory, five grown women came forward to accuse the creepy judge of crossing the line when they were less than half his age. Moore's denials have been tepid at best, and now the tide in the Establishment has turned against him, with several top Senators calling for him to drop out – which ain't gonna happen.

You might think that the Republicans are afraid Moore will lose to Jones, thus shrinking their lead in the Senate to just a single vote – but in reality, they more correctly fear he'll win. Luther Strange can try a write-in campaign, but the Alabamans have already spoken. And to turn on Moore at this point would be tantamount to them knuckling under to the pressure of "elite" outsiders – something they could never countenance.

So, what if Moore wins – what then? The Republican Establishment – again flailing like amateurs against Bannon the chess-master – is suggesting they will refuse to seat Moore. Or maybe they'll seat him, but immediately expel him. Maybe they think the Governor of Alabama would then appoint Sessions back into the seat he probably wishes he'd never given up.

But could Bannon be so smart as to have planned this whole thing to turn out exactly as it has? Once the Establishment Senators kick off their crusade to deny Moore, the right-wing that aligns more closely with Bannon than with the old Turtle will demand McConnell's head on a platter. Just what Bannon wants. And other Senators who have excoriated Moore – Lindsey Graham, Pat Toomey, Orrin Snatch, Chuck Grassley, Thad Cochran – will be frog-marched behind McConnell for similar punishment the next time they come up for re-election. By putting McConnell and crew in the unenviable position of denying the rightful winner of an election from their own party, Bannon has cornered the Establishment's king. Checkmate is assured.

(Update: Democrat Doug Jones won in blood-red 'Bama. That's how terrible Moore was.)

Is Frottage a Family Value?

November 22, 2017

I used to enjoy the jolt of schadenfreude that came with the inevitable next case of a bible-thumping, evangelical-type, family-values pimp ignominiously revealed to be a randy hypocrite living exactly the lascivious life for which he would thoroughly and publicly condemn his lessers – especially those god-denying liberals residing in forlorn towns such as Sodom, NY and Gomorrah, CA.

Who wouldn't take guilty pleasure in the foibles of such holier-than-thou cretins as David Vitter (prostitutes), Mark Sanford (adultery), Dennis Hastert (pedophilia) and Larry Craig (gay solicitation)? It's just too rich.

But now, it seems the magic has worn off. I've simply tired of the relentless outing of right-wing scolds who harbor salacious skeletons in their overstuffed closets. What was once a thrill has

become sadly routine. No longer surprising. In fact, we've come to expect it. The vehement ire these sanctimonious nags have against gays and their lifestyles is directly proportional to their propensity to puff peter. It's so predictable now that the shock and its commensurate charm have worn off.

Roy Moore of Alabama has gobbled all the attention, but just under the radar a steady stream flows of hypocrites calling for the demolition of gay rights and the imposition of their narrow view of family values

Take for example 33-year-old Wesley Goodman, an Ohio lawmaker who is staunchly against gay marriage and stands proudly for "the ideals of a loving father and mother" and "committed natural marriage." We now know holier-than-thou Wesley also digs consensual sex with men of his gender. And then it was reported the other day that former Oklahoma State Senator Ralph Shortey will plead guilty to charges related to his sexual encounter with a 17-year-old boy in a room at the dazzling and chic Super 8 Motel. Shortey (coincidentally the nickname he gave his member) rose fast in state Republican politics, and with the help of the Baptist community funded an underdog campaign to win a seat in 2010. He's pro-family and anti-abortion, natch, and was instrumental in introducing a bill to ban food made with aborted fetuses. And here I thought it was OK to include fetus parts in soups and sauces as long as it's listed in the ingredients.

Just as the NRA and other special interests assign scores to politicians based on their fealty to the cause, someone should rate the same pols on their likelihood to tumble into scandal. Perhaps a consortium including Kik, Tinder, Grindr, Snapchat, Tango, Craigslist and WhatsApp can take up the challenge – given they hold all the salacious evidence in their mighty cloud.

Trump's Drinking Problem

November 22, 2017

In a Larry King interview in 2006 with Donald Trump the subject of the newly-launched Trump Vodka came up. Trump has touted it as the greatest vodka of all time – better than all the other top-shelf brands, predicting, "by the summer of 06, I fully expect the most called for cocktail in America to be the T&T or the Trump and Tonic." I don't think that ever happened – and today, when the name Trump is mentioned, it's more likely people will think T&A.

Getting back to the King interview on CNN, sclerotic Larry asked, "How do you know how good it is?" And Trump, who doesn't drink alcohol, replied, "I have been told that it's a fantastic vodka." Now that's a tell: Trump extolling the virtues of something for which he personally knew nothing about. That would become one of his hallmark traits as president – spouting off boastfully about his unique insight on trade deals, health care, diplomacy, economics and much more, only to retreat with a variation of "no one knew how complicated it is."

Trump doesn't imbibe alcohol because he witnessed the sad decline and ultimate death of his older brother Fred Trump, Jr. due to alcoholism. Nevertheless, Trump clearly has a drinking problem. In a recent press briefing, Trump got a bit of the old cotton-mouth. No big deal. Talking under hot lights can do that. He reached for a bottle of water, unscrewed the cap, and proceeded to take sips using both hands. It seemed as though he had not the strength in his right arm to complete the move to his puckered mouth. Now *that's* a drinking problem. It was the move of a toddler just weaned off the milk bottle. Trump's dry mouth and his fumbling with the bottle brought back memories

of his own cruel vilification of Marco Rubio who suffered from the same dry mouth while delivering a televised speech following Obama's State of the Union address.

Of course, Teflon Don suffered no blowback. But we all should keep an eye on this guy's health, as there may be a neurological issue emerging.

The Seven Words You Can't Say at the CDC

November 22, 2017

Shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker and tits. Those are the seven words that, at one time, could not be spoken on television as we learned in a skit by the late comedian George Carlin on his "Class Clown" opus. Of course, he was riffing on censorship at a time when TV consisted of three networks broadcasting over public airwaves.

Now, what at first appeared to be a spoof by *The Onion* or SNL has been reliably reported as fact: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has actually articulated their own set of seven taboo words that cannot be used by their employees in reports, websites and other communications. The offending list: vulnerable, entitlement, diversity, transgender, fetus, evidence-based and science-based. That the CDC would edict such a thing – and reveal exactly *seven* words, thus inviting scornful comparison to Carlin's rant – proves their bureaucratic handlers suffer from some form of brain-eating parasite that remains undiscovered due to budget cuts at the agency.

The CDC offered no approved alternatives for the words except for "evidence-based" and "science-based" which should be replaced with the Orwellian phrase "CDC bases its recommendations on science in consideration with community standards and wishes." Community wishes? I can't imagine any controversy

surrounding the definition of that. Presumably in a community that believes dunking can identify who among them is a witch, the CDC will develop recommendations on proper dunking methods and offer remedies for preventing and controlling the disease of witchcraft.

It's sad to watch the rapid decimation of the country's once-admired science departments like CDC, EPA and DOE as they go down the shitter because ignorant political hacks and ideologues intrude where they don't belong. Clearly dispatching "vulnerable, entitlement, diversity and transgender" from the lexicon is pure politics – the kind that encourages divisive tribalism and seeks to mollify the angst of tribe members who fear and loathe the unfortunate ("vulnerable"), the poor ("entitlement"), non-whites ("diversity") and anyone who can't be slotted solidly into the heterosexual camp ("transgender"). As for "fetus"? I always hated that word myself. Sounds like something from another planet. Perhaps the CDC can recommend a replacement word, say "fleshy-blob-that-lives-in-a-water-filled-sac."

Time for a Remedial Class in Civics

November 22, 2017

Orrin "the Snatch" Hatch has been Utah's senator since 1976 making him the longest serving Republican in U.S. history. The Snatch is also the current President pro tempore of the Senate – the second highest ranking official in the august body. All of which would make you expect Orrin to be well-versed in the workings of American democracy. One who clearly understands and defends the fundamental separation of powers which places the executive, legislative and judicial branches on equal footings.

The other day when asked to comment on another of Trump's oddball tweets, Orrin Snatch came to his Orangeness's

defense: "I'll say this for you. He's been one of the best presidents I've served under." "Served under?" Does Orrin see himself as Richard Rich to Trump's corpulent Henry VIII – a venal supplicant who will do his master's bidding at the urging of a heavy axe?

C'mon, Orrin. We all know there's something strange in the water in Utah, but can't you at least pretend to be a worthy of the title of President pro tempore – whatever that is.

"Not Qualified" is the New Qualification

December 20, 2017

Trump is lately having a hell of a time getting his nominees confirmed for important judicial assignments. Perhaps if his team nominated people who knew how to correctly spell "law" given three chances, he'd have better luck.

The recent losers in the usually rubber-stamped Senate confirmation process include Brett Talley (never tried a case, lauded the KKK, failed to mention he's married to the chief of staff for Trump's White House counsel) and Jeffrey Mateer (responded to a transgender's lawsuit by noting "it just shows you how Satan's plan is working and the destruction that is going on.") Other potential nominee losers include Damien Schiff who called Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy a "judicial prostitute," and Thomas Farr who worked to suppress the black vote in North Carolina. Truly class acts. In Trump's favor, the Senate did confirm Leonard Steven Grasz to serve on the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals despite being rated "not qualified" by the American Bar Association. Since 1988, no president has even nominated someone rated "not qualified" except George W. Bush and Trump.

Perhaps the most egregious of Trump's rogue's gallery of nitwit nominees is Matthew Petersen, a commissioner with the useless, toothless Federal Election Commission. Petersen was

nominated by Trump's crack staff for a district court judgeship. You know, the kind of dude who sits in a bench wearing a black robe and runs trials. Presumably Petersen believed the stamp that is rubber would press lightly upon him, providing him frictionless passage to a fancy promotion. Unfortunately for him, a Republican on the Judiciary Committee, John Kennedy (who considers jurisprudence something of import) challenged the "honorable" Matthew Petersen just a smidge.

Here's some of the painful back and forth.

KENNEDY: Mr. Petersen, have you ever tried a jury trial?
PETERSEN: I have not.
KENNEDY: Civil?
PETERSEN: No.
KENNEDY: Criminal?
PETERSEN: No.
KENNEDY: Bench?
PETERSEN: No.
KENNEDY: State or federal court?
PETERSEN: I have not.
KENNEDY: Have you ever tried a — taken a deposition by yourself?
PETERSEN: I believe not — no.
KENNEDY: Okay. Have you ever argued a motion in state court?
PETERSEN: I have not.
KENNEDY: Have you ever argued a motion in federal court?
PETERSEN: No.
KENNEDY: Well, as a trial judge, you're obviously going to

have witnesses. Can you tell me what the Daubert standard is?

PETERSEN: Sen. Kennedy, I don't have that readily at my disposal but I would be happy to take a closer look at that. That is not something I've had to contend with.

KENNEDY: Do you know what a motion in limine is?

PETERSEN: I would probably not be able to give you a good definition right here at the table.

KENNEDY: Do you know what the Younger abstention doctrine is?

PETERSEN: I've heard of it, but I, again —

KENNEDY: How about the Pullman abstention doctrine?

PETERSEN: I — I —

Oh… my… god.

The VSG Strikes Again

January 14, 2018

Michael Wolff in his controversial new book "Fire and Fury" devotes a chapter to commenting on the rampant ineptitude of Trump's skeleton-crew administration in the first few weeks following the inauguration. To make his point, Wolff cites the hurried executive order banning travel to the U.S. by people from one of the so-called "countries of concern:" Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen. Not only did the rushed-out order cause a shit storm of chaos, especially at the nation's major airports, but it also quickly received blockage from federal judges. After the judicial beat-down, Trump's crack staff massaged the order around the edges and reissued a new version a short time later – only to have it slapped down once more as a poorly disguised, and unconstitutional Muslim ban.

Naturally, Trump & team argued the order was devised strictly to protect Americans from harmful entities and in no way constituted a Muslim ban. To which the judge responded in essence: dude, you said it was a Muslim ban. True enough, the Trump campaign website specifically claimed "Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States."

Is that the kind of work you'd expect from a VSG – Very Stable Genius – like Trump? Pushing edgy doctrine while simultaneously undermining it with hackneyed comments and bald-faced lies?

The VSG showed his prowess early on when he fired FBI Director James Comey for the flatfooted and ill-advised announcements he made during the 2016 campaign. Then within days the VSG blithely admitted during a TV interview that he actually fired Comey because the Director was investigating Russia collusion – a statement that has only deepened the misery for Trump and his acolytes.

In his quest to Make America Choke Again, the VSG directed his Interior Department head Ryan Zinke to open virtually all United States coastal waters to oil and gas drilling. Merely days later heads spun to the news that Zinke had decided to exempt Florida where the VSG has a tony, ocean-front property and the governor there needs popular support in his political career quests. As expected, within hours of the flip-flop announcement almost every other governor of a state with a coastline on the Atlantic demanded the same exemption Florida received, basing their arguments on the very capricious action directed by the VSG. The VSG struck again. Now it seems likely that the vast expansion of off-shore drilling will remain a wet dream for the extraction industry while lawsuits pile up in courts for decades.

And now, just the other day in face-to-face negotiations with Reps and Dems in Congress over plans to figure out immigration, the VSG opined that certain people from certain countries should receive lower priority when being considered for entry into the U.S. (if not kept out altogether.) Certain people, who as the VSG explained, hail from "shithole countries." It was no doubt understood by those in the meeting that such "shithole" residents have a greater propensity than Norwegians to be smelly, ignorant, diseased, less-blonde, and consumers of weird foods.

Any hope for striking a good immigration deal for the country has likely been cast to the winds because the VSG just could not maintain a minimal sense of decorum. What portends for 2018? Will a solution be hammered out for any of the myriad problems facing the country this year? Will North Korea behave itself? Can the stock market maintain its upward trend? Could Trump play even more golf in 2018 than 2017?

Ask the VSG – then ask him again in five minutes.

Skidding the Friendly Skies

January 14, 2018

A Pegasus Airlines Boeing 737 skidded off the runway in Trabzon, Turkey, traveled over the edge of a cliff and stopped just short of plunging into the Black Sea. No doubt many of the 162 people aboard the plane needed time afterwards to change out of soiled underwear, but anyone reading the news story might wonder what all the fuss was about. Recounting the situation, a Pegasus spokesman noted the 737 "had a runway excursion incident." Sounds like something you might see at a fashion show.

Cut, Cap and Balance: A Promise Right Up There with Repeal and Replace

February 10, 2018

Trump signed a bill this week that *hikes spending, increases the deficit and raises the debt ceiling.* As *The New York Times* reported, "any semblance of fiscal austerity… is dead." Trump has pushed "cut, cap and balance" for a long time, and other than cutting, capping, and balancing, he's done a perfect job. Now for a trip down memory-hole lane with some tweets from Trump when he occupied the cheap seats.

- No member of Congress should be eligible for re-election if our country's budget is not balanced - deficits not allowed!
- Congress is back. TIME TO CUT, CAP AND BALANCE. There is no revenue problem. The Debt Limit cannot be raised until Obama spending is contained.
- Disappointed in GOP and Dems - Giving Obama power to raise the debt limit next year is a mistake.
- Our country's debt crisis cannot be solved by tax increases. We must cut government spending.
- The greatest threat to our security is our debt. It is already past 100% GDP. We need to make real budget cuts.

The Straight Poop

February 10, 2018

Unlike most companies, toilet paper manufacturers can't advertise on TV by depicting the proper use of their product for the purposes for which it is intended. Dodge can demonstrate Ram

trucks scaling the steep, red mesas of the American Southwest without getting ticketed by the National Park Service, TaylorMade can highlight Jason Day beating golf balls 350 yards so as to convince a 30-handicapper that he can do likewise, and Sonic can show two bi-curious simpletons in their car deep-throating a Chili Cheese Coney. But the makers of toilet paper really can't depict some guy wiping his ass after taking a nice, satisfying shit. That's a road too far. Instead, the ads invariably skirt the obvious by showing people (or cute cartoon animals) caressing the paper, absorbing liquids with it, or in probably the most famous TV ad campaign for toilet paper, squeezing it. Charmin got the point across that their paper is softer than a corn cob by introducing Mr. Whipple, a skeezy grocery store manager who harps on female customers for squeezing the product, only to be caught molesting the rolls himself in the end. This foolishness went on for many years.

Now, we have a new form of toilet paper ad that seeks to weave the many uses of toilet paper (except ass-wiping) into the fabric of our lives. Consider an ad for AngelSoft. The piece features a progression of vignettes starting with a doting single father (who looks like a stereotype liberal from central casting) holding his baby daughter while waiting to enter the women's bathroom so he can change her diaper and ending with him comforting his grown-up and bawling teenaged daughter after her date went badly. AngelSoft manages to somehow insert toilet paper into each vignette. In the middle, the father teaches his daughter how to shave her legs by demonstrating the task on his own hairy appendage – and when he nicks himself, AngelSoft comes to the rescue.

The big question: does this guy have no adult female friends who could step in once in a while to help with the "girl" stuff? And does the daughter have no friends who can share grooming

tips? Because if they don't, I'd hate to imagine how good old dad personally demonstrates for his daughter the proper way to use feminine hygiene products.

Pass Out the Pistols

February 23, 2018

In a memorable episode of "All in the Family," Archie takes to the airwaves to deliver his opinions on gun control, which, as you would expect, are decidedly negative. But what made his appearance on TV so ridiculous was his solution to airline hijackings: arm all the passengers. At the time such a proposal was understood to be so outlandish that it transcended debate. Archie's idea was patently foolish and everyone in the audience knew it and laughed at it.

Now, however, following another mass shooting last week, this time at Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school, some have proposed a similar solution to a societal ill: arm the teachers (or hire professionally-trained armed hall monitors). Trump made his case for arming some teachers and giving them bonuses for doing so, and then channeled the NRA (or perhaps the porn industry), declaring, "You want a hardened school, and I want a hardened school, too."

Here are the reasons why it won't catch on.

There are about 90,000 elementary schools in the U.S. and another 22,000 high schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, public school systems employed about 3.2 million full-time-equivalent teachers in the fall of 2017. Although the NRA would have multiple consecutive orgasms if school districts around the country went on a bender to purchase guns for millions of teachers, is it really feasible to outfit, train and compensate such a large, inexperienced group in the finer points

of handling weapons and shooting humans? And what about the cost? Will taxpayers passively accept the inevitable hike in taxes to fund such a program?

Perhaps some schools will opt to hire armed guards. For all intents and purposes this would constitute a serious increase in payroll – on the order of tens of thousands of new employees taking paychecks, paid vacations, health benefits and pensions. I'm sure that will go over well with fixed-income seniors who shoulder a good chunk of the school tax burden.

Add to the expense of arming and training teachers to pack heat the inevitable increase in the costs of insurance. Insurance companies don't care one way or the other about such things as Second Amendments – they only care about one thing: risk. And a school full of teachers in possession of guns is at higher risk for disaster than one that is free from weaponry. You can guarantee that on a daily basis some teachers around the country will leave their guns unattended in an unlocked desk to be pilfered by wily students. Will the next mass shooting take place with a gun stolen from a teacher? You can also guarantee that in the course of a school year dozens of teachers will accidentally discharge weapons, perhaps with tragic results. Hell, there's a popular video on YouTube of a cop lecturing students about gun safety… who goes on to shoot himself in the leg.

Insurance companies will not like this, and push up premiums accordingly – to the consternation of taxpayers, many of whom are no doubt pro-gun. I think it's also realistic to worry about the effect of false positives. How many people will be shot by armed teachers who mistakenly perceive a mass shooting threat? It's a very real concern knowing how many people have been shot and killed by police who mistook a cell phone for a gun. It's easy to imagine a teacher pulling a pistol on a distraught student when in the past

he would have taken a subtler approach as an unarmed counselor. And it's easy to imagine multi-million-dollar lawsuits brought by grieving parents prevailing in court – and the subsequent increase in taxes and insurance premiums to cover the penalties.

Now consider the mind of a would-be mass shooter. It's well-known that many mass shooters desire to go out in a blaze of glory by so-called "suicide by cop." Will the presence of an armed professional roaming the hallways actually *attract* mass shooters? A middle-aged former cop sitting at a desk with a rifle just might make the mass shooting all the more daring – just what a warped teenager on a death wish might hope for.

But if it works is it worth doing? Would the presence of armed adults in a school stop or cut short an armed assault? Columbine High School employed an armed guard, and his involvement was obviously limited, as two armed students successfully massacred more than a dozen kids. Scot Peterson, the armed sheriff's deputy assigned to Marjory Stoneman Douglas where 17 people were killed took cover outside rather than charging into the building when the massacre began, according to the Broward County sheriff. So much for counting on the good guy with a gun.

If the NRA lobbied for the auto industry:

- Cars would not have airbags, or seatbelts, or shatterproof glass, or any other safety features that add unnecessary costs (or give the impression there is something dangerous about cars.)
- Anyone could own and drive a car anywhere they want to. And they wouldn't be required to register it.
- Reckless driving would be blamed on mental illness.
- Drunk drivers would not lose their licenses to drive,

because there would be no such thing as a license to drive.

- Auto makers would never recall a vehicle because they would be immune from lawsuits over shoddy construction.
- After every pile-up on the freeway, word would go out that the government wants to take away your car. You would then go out and buy two more cars.
- The best way to deal with bad drivers would be for good drivers to run them off the road.

Zuck You!

March 24, 2018

Although the entertaining 2010 film "The Social Network" is not a documentary, it's clear from the portrayal of Mark Zuckerberg that the Facebook founder was an antisocial douchebag who likely stole ideas from others and fucked over friends so as to develop for Harvard a campus-wide platform for picking up girls and humiliating those who chose not to play along. At no time did Zuckerberg seem to envision a time when Facebook would grow to a level that would cross into terrain requiring adult supervision – even as he pressed hard to expand Facebook off the Harvard campus onto other colleges, and eventually across the universe.

As with any entity that takes venture capital and makes an IPO, Facebook eventually had to satisfy investors by making and growing revenue at a dizzying clip.

Recognizing that the users of Facebook were not the customers, but rather the product, Zuckerberg and his lieutenants embarked on an aggressive strategy to make money the only way it conceivably could: through advertising. Any advertising. Especially

advertising that compelled Facebook users to log in more often, for longer periods of time so they could consume more of it.

For years, Facebook has fooled around with its terms of use and privacy policies – so much so that the users mostly shrugged and complied. After all, the addictive Facebook had become for millions not so much a forum for ideas or a cool way to communicate, but rather a tool for self-validation. Accumulating "friends" and capturing "likes" was proof of existence. Similarly, "unfriending" became the ultimate insult, the most damning form of disrespect (although some might argue that changing one's status from "in a relationship with X" to "single" without notifying X is more insidious.) The user base gladly, if irresponsibly, shared enormous amounts of personal and psychographic data just so they could give a thumbs up to a gif of a masturbating monkey.

The recent revelation that Cambridge Analytica – founded by the cretinous Steve Bannon, Robert Mercer, and Mercer's amply-foreheaded daughter Rebecca – vacuumed up detailed profile info on 50 million users without their knowledge or consent just adds further evidence that Facebook is a nefarious entity with no scruples and little interest in maintaining integrity.

And it's through Facebook that the Trump campaign most likely colluded with Russians to influence the 2016 election. It is no secret that Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, Prince Jared of Kushnerland investigated the idea of micro-targeting pliable voters in swing precincts so as to target them with materials that could sway them toward the Orange Man. Here is Jared speaking to *Forbes* right after the election: "We brought in Cambridge Analytica. I called some of my friends from Silicon Valley who were some of the best digital marketers in the world. And I asked them how to scale this stuff. We basically had to build a $400

million operation with 1,500 people operating in 50 states, in five months to then be taken apart. We started really from scratch."

Okay, so we know that Trump's campaign – like others before it – sought to use big data analytics to influence specific voters. But influence them with what information? And when? That's where the Russians come in. I'm convinced that Russians developed phony stories and memes trashing Hillary Clinton that were posted on the Facebook feeds of pliable users chosen by Kushner's team, and delivered on a schedule determined by the Trump campaign

The granularity of those chosen to receive bullshit stories was down to the precinct level. So rather than blanket the entire U.S. Facebook population with patently ludicrous messages, the Trump campaign was able to direct the Russians to pinpoint the propaganda and avoid broad opprobrium from less-gullible voters.

And what did the Facebook company do while this subterfuge was taking place? Other than counting profits, nothing. Zuck you, America!

Death Race 2018

April 2, 2018

Elaine Herzberg has the dubious distinction of being the first pedestrian killed by an autonomously-driven Uber vehicle which was undergoing tests in Tempe, AZ. Apparently Herzberg was crossing a busy street while walking her bicycle when she was struck. Although the Uber car was monitored by a human in the driver seat (who was not paying attention, according to video from inside the car,) the self-driving system did not respond in time. Uber temporarily suspended tests in Arizona and California, and then quickly settled with Herzberg's family – presumably to avoid a court case that could have set ugly precedents for dealing with accidents involving autonomous vehicles.

Clearly, the specter of imperfect robotic vehicles barreling down the road has instilled fear in many who call for a moratorium on testing – and even a ban on deploying the technology altogether. It's unfortunate that a shitty company like Uber has invested in autonomous R&D, because they are bound to cut corners and deviate from safety standards which will invariably lead to more negative stories like Herzberg's – and to more calls to slow down or stop the research. No one is better positioned to scuttle peoples' confidence than the inept fools at Uber.

That would be too bad. As the technology improves and finds itself embedded into more and more vehicles, allowing them to communicate with each other and share data, highway safety will improve. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, "In 2013, there were 4,735 pedestrians killed and an estimated 66,000 injured in traffic crashes in the United States. A total of 4,653 traffic crashes each had one or more pedestrian fatalities. On average, a pedestrian was killed every 2 hours and injured every 8 minutes in traffic crashes." A fatality every 2 hours, and yet no one is calling for human-operated vehicles to be banned. In fact, the trend seems to be leaning toward increasing punishment of the jaywalking pedestrian rather than the motorist. Last December, a guy in Saugerties, NY stepped into traffic from between two park cars, was struck by a car, went to the hospital for shoulder and hip injuries, and received a ticket for failure to yield right of way to vehicle. So, let's be cool when autonomous vehicles occasionally mow down granny, and think instead of the wonders to come.

Just Offer Free Amazon Prime and Shut Him Up

April 2, 2018

Trump is upset at Amazon for not paying enough taxes. This from a guy who said minimizing taxes makes a person smart, and probably paid nothing in federal taxes for more than a decade. He also doesn't like that Amazon sends some of its products using the US Postal Service, deriding the on-line retailer for treating the USPS like a "delivery boy." The Postal Service hasn't weighed in on whether it feels like a delivery boy, but they have stated plainly that the contracts they have with Amazon cover costs (which is a concept you rarely connect with the Postal Service.)

Trump has a boner for Amazon for shirking taxes, but he's flaccid when it comes to other profitable corporations that paid no federal taxes in recent years, such as International Paper, Priceline.com, General Electric, and Duke Energy. Most likely Trump is pissed because he hates the coverage he gets from *The Washington Post* which is owned by Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon. In fact, Trump has often tweeted about negative *WaPo* articles as fake news and sometimes ends his 140-character tirades with #AmazonWashingtonPost – as if Amazon owns the newspaper.

As with much of what Trump says and does, his attacks on Amazon – because he hates the coverage he gets from a newspaper tangentially connected to the company – are bad for the country. As are his slams against the *NY Times*, and CNN, as well as his cocksucking endorsements of Fox News and (of all things) grocery store fave, *The National Enquirer*.

When an insecure, narcissist leader like Trump gets to punish and reward companies based on the level to which they are willing to lick his ass, real trouble abounds.

A Wonderful Word

April 2, 2018

Aibohpphobia – The fear of palindromes.

Congress Say the Darnedest Things

April 13, 2018

A few months ago, the Republican-led Congress placed a tax bill on Very Stable Genius's desk which he signed, thus lowering tax burdens by the millions for corporations and rich people while showering the proles with an average tax cut of about $12 a week. Of course, there is a cost for this largess. The Congressional Budget Office reported the other day that – thanks to the latest tax scam – the budget deficit is on pace to surpass $1 trillion in just a couple years. The Party of Fiscal Reprehensibility strikes again. Dems, who have only slightly more credibility on this issue, have strived to take the high ground.

Chuck E. (Cheese) Schumer whined, "From Day one the Republican agenda has always been to balloon the deficit in order to dole out massive tax breaks to the largest corporations and wealthiest Americans, and then use the deficit as an excuse to cut Social Security and Medicare." Nancy Pelosi blasted, "The C.B.O.'s report exposes the staggering costs of the G.O.P. tax scam and Republicans' contempt for fiscal responsibility." Defending the GOP was Representative Jeff Duncan, a conservative Republican from South Carolina who made this provocative statement: "To every House Democrat on social media today complaining about the debt and deficit for the first time: I look forward to seeing you vote for the balanced budget amendment later this week. That is, of course, assuming you are actually serious about addressing our debt."

Congress say the darnedest things.

Let's make this easier to understand with a bonehead analogy: You work at a Home Depot (sorry). Your colleague Jeff Duncan stacks boxes too high and they keep tumbling down on customers. You complain. In response, Jeff, festooned in an orange apron arrogantly defies you to join him in repealing the law of gravity. You shake your head and quickly apply for a job at Lowes.

Now consider this week's Congressional inquisition of Facebook head Mark Zuckerberg over his company's fast 'n loose stewardship of user data. Zuck the Fuck played the proper trained seal and offered a sufficient quantity of mea culpas to the preening senators to ensure a delay on regulations, thus assuaging stock holders who drove the shares up during his testimony. Give him props, at least, for buttressing his financial position.

Many on the Senate Commerce and Judiciary committees – prepped, no doubt, by millennial staffers 1/3rd their ages – tried mightily as they grilled Zuck with "tech talk," invoking terms like cloud, scraping data and dark web. (At least none of the august members of the committee referred to the internet as a "series of tubes" as defunct crustacean Ted Stevens once risibly did.)

A lot of moral grandstanding and regulatory threats were spewed forth from the high 'n mighty senators, but one line of attack seemed ill-considered: Ron Johnson of Wisconsin pushed the Zuck on the subject of Facebook's terms of service. His contention: No one actually reads the lengthy legalese before clicking "agree." Of course, he's right. The terms are several thousand words long, many of which are more than two syllables. In other words, Johnson was chastising Facebook for constructing terms of service documents that are too complicated and wordy for anyone to read, resulting in passive acceptance – and all the shit that follows. But, when it came time to reflect on the massive, 2000-page Republican tax cut bill, Johnson saw things a

bit differently. After Dems complained about having no time to review last-minute changes made by the Reps, Johnson said, "You really don't read this kind of legislation… you have to study it and you have to study the major provisions." Ron Johnson: aka. the stupidest person in the Senate.

They Fell for the Con Man

April 15, 2018

Flame-throwing partisan Ann Coulter, Inforwars' crazy-man Alex Jones, talk radio's Michael "Savage" Weiner and Fox TV's Fucker Carlson are among many right-wingers who are newly pissed at Trump for bombing Syria. It seems they took the patently obvious con-man for a principled leader. They apparently believed Trump when he bloviated about the foolishness of intervening in Middle East fiascos, ill-conceived nation building, and "endless wars." They reveled in his direct attacks on Obama for being a clueless "leader" at a time when Trump was just a grating private citizen sitting in the comfort of the sidelines. They adored such shit-tweets like this:

If the U.S. attacks Syria and hits the wrong targets, killing civilians, there will be worldwide hell to pay. Stay away and fix broken U.S.

AGAIN, TO OUR VERY FOOLISH LEADER, DO NOT ATTACK SYRIA -IF YOU DO MANY VERY BAD THINGS WILL HAPPEN & FROM THAT FIGHT THE U.S. GETS NOTHING!

What will we get for bombing Syria besides more debt and a possible long term conflict? Obama needs Congressional approval.

The President must get Congressional approval before attacking Syria - big mistake if he does not!

Now that Trump has fully flipped and made good on his

telegraphed threat to bomb Syria, the hard-right expresses shock and dismay that the Very Stable Genius has reneged on stuff he repeated over and over, discovering that it all just amounted to armchair conversation. Alex Jones went on a hilarious, batshit rant, slamming his desk and spouting "fuck Trump" and (horrors) "fuck his family!".

Others stuck to Twitter to express their dismay at Trump's treachery – even suggesting the Syrian government was not responsible for the chemical weapon attack. Sadly, the real fools in all of this are the Ann Coulters, Alex Joneses, Laura Ingrahams and countless lesser known right-wingers who should have known better. It's like they ordered the grilled shit sandwich and then recoiled when the waiter brought them a grilled piece of shit sandwiched between two slices of bread. You really can't complain about getting a shit sandwich when you literally order a shit sandwich.

C'mon guys. You must have read "Art of the Deal" where Trump wrote about his use of "truthful hyperbole" – which most people call lying. You must have heard about his bankruptcies, his serial adultery, his non-payment to contractors, his tax evasion. The man is a consummate prevaricator. He was going to focus on "making America great again" and "America First" to such an extent that he'd have no time to play golf – or even leave Washington. Right.

Consider just this one grotesque account from a devastating timeline in *New York Magazine*: "Trump jets to Mar-a-Lago via Air Force One at a cost to taxpayers of $142,380 per hour. For years, Trump heckled President Obama for taking vacations and golfing trips at government expense. If elected, he vowed, he would "rarely leave the White House, because there's so much work to be done." In fact, during his first three months in office, Trump's

taxpayer-funded flights to his private properties exceeded $20 million — on track to quickly surpass the amount Obama spent on travel during his eight years in office. Trump made more than 90 visits to his golf courses and played almost twice as much golf as Obama. His family joined in, requiring Secret Service agents to rack up an extra 4,054 days of taxpayer-funded travel to keep up."

Trump was going to tear up trade agreements, drain the swamp, hire the best people. He was going to repeal and replace Obamacare with "health care that is far less expensive and far better," and that the whole thing would be done "essentially simultaneously… the same day or the same week… could be the same hour."

And don't forget Trump University.

But more than any other promise, Trump was going to build a beautiful wall on the Southern border to keep out rapists and drugs. It was his favorite go-to applause line on the campaign trail. And lest we forget, Mexico would pay for it "one hundred percent." One week into his presidency, Trump admitted full tilt in a leaked transcript to Mexico's president Enrique Peña Nieto that it was all for show – something any eighth grader (let alone a professional political pundit) should have known all along. Trump told Peña Nieto that the wall was "the least important thing we are talking about."

Trump's back-down from building the wall was the last straw for Coulter – her shit sandwich, so to speak. Once Trump's earliest and biggest cheerleader, she now calls him "a shallow, lazy ignoramus," adding, "he's not giving us what he promised at every single campaign stop." Duh.

In a revealing interview with *The New York Times*, Coulter explained that she's done with Trump. She's one of a growing cadre of "Former Trumpers" as she calls them; one-time

supporters who are now disillusioned with him. Disillusioned that a fully-documented con-man let them down. I would call it deluded instead.

Make America Choke Again

April 22, 2018

Although it happened almost 50 years ago, I clearly recollect celebrating the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970 when our entire eighth grade class marched several blocks to nearby Villa Maria College to listen to speeches denouncing the ongoing desecration of the environment and warning of the looming disaster should things carry on as they had for a 100 years.

I also clearly recollect the conditions that motivated activists to challenge the government to do something substantial to deal with the problem. At the time I lived near the shores of Lake Erie downwind of several steel mills and other dirty industries located in Ohio that abused the waters and the airs for profit. Ohio was the home of the infamous (and inflammable) Cuyahoga River, slicked with oil and debris which caught fire on several occasions, most notably in 1969 when the fires damaged a bridge and (horrors!) forced some steel mills to shut production temporarily.

I witnessed the devastation to Lake Erie caused by local company Hammermill which during the process of manufacturing paper dumped hot, contaminated water into the lake. Sensing warmth, hundreds of thousands of fish would swim toward the Hammermill docks and quickly suffocate. Looking out from the shores one could watch a silvery carpet of dead fish undulate with the slow motion of the dead lake.

My grandmother owned a cottage on Lake Erie with a private sand beach. It had been in the family for decades. Starting in the mid-60s the appearance of dead, bloated fish entangled in the

newly thick seaweed stripped away the allure and romance of waterside living. My grandmother dumped the property for a song when it became clear no one wanted to go there anymore.

On many Saturdays I would accompany my father to the city incinerator where locals with ID could dump household trash directly into a 10-foot square opening in the floor exposing a raging blaze. The only thing left from the incineration was the smoke and ash sent directly into the air through a tall, brick chimney. No scrubbing required – just the pure mix of mercury, arsenic and lead to mix with the same miasma emanating from automobiles, trucks and trains running on dirty fuels.

And speaking of dirty, by the time Earth Day was a thing it was becoming noticeable that a lot of people were content with disposing their garbage right into the highways and byways of America, and onto public spaces, and into the waters that communities tapped for drinking. Clearly, Americans just didn't give a shit anymore.

Today, gone is much of what some might call the "good old days" when people were free to shit on the environment and in turn ingest all the poisons thrown back at them with predictable health implications. Hammermill closed shop, and so did the incinerator. Lake Erie is mostly restored, and that cottage my grandmother sold is now among properties fetching several hundreds of thousands. (Lake Erie, the shallowest of the Greats, remains vulnerable to algae blooms from farm runoff, and the effects of an invasive species epidemic.) Vehicles are much less polluting and the internal combustion engine is facing obsolescence mid mid-century.

All this thanks to the Clean Air and Water Acts and the formation of the EPA. People born after the early 1970s (about 65 percent of the population) have no recollection of how horrible the environment was in the U.S. – especially in industrial parts

of the country. Perhaps that's why there seems to be little outcry now that the EPA is in the slimy hands of Scott Pruitt – the most corrupt villain in Trump's house of wax (followed closely by on-the-take Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke who never met an unspoiled expanse of scenic beauty and didn't see oil derricks and strip mines.)

To all those out there content to overlook Trump's crimes against the environment as long as the stock market rises and the 401ks grow – start thinking about the cancer regimens on which to spend your portfolio gains.

RIP Verne Troyer

April 22, 2018

Diminutive actor Verne Troyer died the other day at age 49. No official cause of death was revealed, although it had been reported that he fell off a sheet of paper. Troyer was most famous for his portrayal of Mini-Me, the tiny alter-ego of Mike Myers's Dr. Evil character in the Austin Powers franchise. Troyer was hailed as a consummate professional – one who never forgot his lines (or would have forgotten had he had lines.)

At a trim two-foot eight, Verne played his first role as a stunt double for a baby. He later found semi-fame performing in music videos, visiting Howard Stern, and playing himself on reality TV where his alcoholism shined. On "The Surreal Life," Verne drove his scooter into a room on the set, pissed on the floor and summarily passed out.

Upon hearing that Verne wanted to be cremated, "Austin Powers" co-star Robert Wagner said he knew where to get some dead Wood. You know. For the fire.

The March of the Wooden Lawyers

May 3, 2018

On March 10, *The New York Times* reported that Trump was considering Emmet Flood, a one-time counsel to Bill Clinton, for a position on his feeble legal team. The story miffed Trump who took to Twitter, of course, to slam the "false story" and express confidence in his team of lawyers. One of those lawyers was John Dowd. Here's the tweet: "The Failing New York Times purposely wrote a false story stating that I am unhappy with my legal team on the Russia case and am going to add another lawyer to help out. Wrong. I am VERY happy with my lawyers, John Dowd, Ty Cobb and Jay Sekulow." Less than two weeks later Dowd "retired" from doing a great job that made Trump "VERY happy."

Trump made sure everyone was clear on his satisfaction with the performance of another of his legal team – Special Counsel Ty Cobb. Just check the adoring tweet: "I have full confidence in Ty Cobb, my Special Counsel, and have been fully advised throughout each phase of this process."

And then on May 2, the March 10 "Failing" *New York Times* report that Trump disparaged as a "false story" came true. Trump brought Emmet Flood on board after all. Oh, and Ty Cobb got the boot.

Just the other day Trump added to his legal team former NYC Mayor and Nosferatu stunt-double Rudy Giuliani. Rudy promptly went on Fox TV's "Hannity" program and screwed the pooch – and maybe Trump himself. By the time Rudy closed his trap, he had essentially contradicted everything Trump and his former lawyers had uttered about how money moved around the Stormy Daniels affair. Gulp.

Reading this latest headline, one has to wonder whether Trump will recycle his tweet from 2017: "The next time Rudy Giuliani has something unfair to say about me, I hope he'll say it to my face and NOT thru the crooked media."

Put a Sock in it

May 10, 2018

If you're a fan of monster movies you know that the monster must always have a weakness – something that allows the tortured protagonists to finally vanquish their nemeses in the final reel. Dracula had his wooden stake and Werewolf had his silver bullet. The relentless T1000 robot in "Terminator 2" had a problem wading in molten steel, and the shark in "Jaws" had a weakness for consuming anything that entered his formidable maw. The indomitable Martian invaders in "War of the Worlds" succumbed to simple bacteria that feeble Earthlings had built up an immunity to after breathing in funky air and ingesting green-tinted meat for millions of years.

And the aliens in "Signs," like the Wicked Witch of the West couldn't countenance water spritzed upon their skins – which is the movie I drew parallels from after a recent viewing of "A Quiet Place," directed by former star of "The Office" John Krasinski. This time around, an isolated family must bob and weave in total silence to avoid being chomped on by swift, toothful aliens who apparently overtook Earth, leaving nothing but apocalypse in their wake. Visual clues like newspaper headlines presented early on "tell" the audience that although the invaders are unable to see they possess ultra-sensitive hearing capabilities. Additional exposition occurs in the form of a white board in the family's basement that documents a stream-of-consciousness take on the grim situation that includes the question, "What is their weakness?"

The creepy aliens (who bear some resemblance to the stalkers in "Signs") have such superior auditory gifts that any creature that should utter a sound, or cause a sound to be uttered is quickly annihilated in the most gruesome fashion.

So, "A Quite Place" is truly a quiet place as none of the nervous characters dare speak, drop a utensil, or even fart. They walk around barefoot on sandy paths and communicate using sign language – in which each is conveniently fluent, as one of the family members is deaf (is that irony?) The movie is compact and tense, yet relies too often on cheap jump scares. And when you think about it, there are an awful lot of sounds emitted in the wilds of the forest near the family homestead. Why do the aliens always seek out the source of a human whimper or the sound of a breaking plate when there exists a never-ending background cacophony of rummaging creatures, blowing winds and falling trees to confuse them? I suppose the movie sprints along too quickly to allow the audience to question such thing.

But let's return to the monsters' weakness – a subject alluded to often in flashes to that white board in the basement. Yeah… what the fuck is their weakness? What could possibly immobilize a creature that possesses super-sensitive hearing? (Remember: all the world's nations and their military might could not vanquish what is essentially a marauding pack of unarmed jackals – albeit jackals possessing stunning speed and fangs galore.) Is it so hard to figure out, as our favorite family finally does, that the power of the aliens' hearing is also the root of their downfall? Shit, a little bit of feedback throws these wretched creatures to the floor writhing in pain, vulnerable to a shotgun blast in what passes for a face on their planet.

Still, I enjoyed A Quiet Place not in spite of but because of its appropriation of material from other films. Watch it for its homage (intentional or otherwise) to "Signs," "Terminator," "Aliens," "War of the Worlds," "Predator," and "Night of the Living Dead."

U.S. Moves a Sign

May 15, 2018

On the campaign trail, Trump, like his predecessors dating back decades promised to move the U.S. embassy in Israel from cosmopolitan Tel Aviv to the perennially turbid and contested city of Jerusalem. I predicted he'd never do it – and I stand behind that position today, even though Trump claims otherwise. For Trump really didn't move the embassy; he simply told his minions to pull down the embassy sign that pointed to Tel Aviv and reoriented it to point to a small consulate building in Jerusalem. For all intents and purposes, the heart of U.S. diplomacy, including the place where the ambassador and his staff will conduct most of their business, will remain in the fortified confines of the building in Tel Aviv. That didn't stop the crowds from going wild. Nor did it prevent the terminally narcissistic Trump from sticking his fucking name on the building as if it was the latest "luxury" property.

Yes, the relocation of a sign drove 'em wild. The hard-right leaders in Israel gloated that the new "embassy" signaled America's inalterable preference for their country's well-being over all other parties in the Middle East, as if that already hadn't been well-established since 1948. They've remained steadfast in their argument that Jerusalem has always been the capital of the Jews – although the Bible clearly states that the Jews took the city from the Jebusites who were, um, there first. Perhaps the descendants of the Jebusites might one day come forward to reclaim Jerusalem from the invading Jews. Or at least to lobby to operate a casino on the Via Dolorosa.

The so-called "Christian" evangelicals – those zealous "family values" hypocrites who routinely overlook Trump's multitudinous transgressions against God's directives – fell into a rapture with the move, as it represents one more step closer to living the Revelations dream. Now that the embassy is located in Jerusalem, it's only a matter of time before Jesus comes back and smites all the non-believers.

Who might they be? Anyone who ain't a Christian. Who said so? How about the Southern Baptist preacher slash asshole Robert Jeffress who spoke at the embassy opening ceremony – the dude who said "Judaism — you can't be saved being a Jew," and further expounded, "Not only do religions like Mormonism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism — not only do they lead people away from the true God, they lead people to an eternity of separation from God in hell." Yeah. A keynote speaker at the opening of the new U.S. "embassy" thinks Jews are going to hell – and the hard-right Israeli leaders batted not an eyelash.

Jared Kushner, his wife Ivanka, Treasury Secretary Steve Munchkin and countless hangers-on got to do a big reveal in front of a googoo-eyed audience longing for a whiff of Trump glamour. Hell, the spectacle smacked every bit as much as the garish ribbon cutting of the Trump hotel in Washington that took place while the Orange Man was running for president – a position that should have precluded him from benefitting financially from the hotel if anyone bothered to uphold the Constitution.

Of course, the Palestinians also went wild, as is their wont. Given their somewhat limited arsenal, they took their usual approach and conjured up low-level mayhem on the border between Gaza and Israel. As they rushed the border fence (soon to be upgraded to a beautiful wall funded by Mexico), the Israeli

military mowed them down by the dozens as their Arab "brothers" sipped fine wines and smoked imported cigars.

Jared the quisling summed up the situation: "As we have seen from the protests of the last month, and even today, those provoking violence are part of the problem and not part of the solution." Left out was any contemplation as to why 1.8 million impoverished people locked inside a blockaded strip of land the size of Nantucket but with no place to get a decent bowl of lobster chow-dah would protest in the first place.

Most Middle East experts (that is to say people on the polar extreme from the dimwits in Trump's advisory circle) believe the movement of the sign was a gratuitous ploy by Trump to chalk up a "win" and further cement his bona fides with his Cro-Magnon base that only served to inject more turmoil in the region. So what if the artist of the deal gave away a valuable bauble for nothing in return – he got to carve his name on a plaque. And if that means America has ceded its tenuous position as the premier peace dealer in the Middle East to Russia, China and Iran, so be it. #MAGA.

Mo Better Brains

May 19, 2018

Growing up in the 1960s at a time when the space race was on, JFK was pushing science and technology initiatives through Congress, and a thing called "new math" was permeating schools across the country, I came to believe as a grade-schooler that American society would inexorably advance and prosper according to scientific principles. I figured that decisions about the economy, health care, energy production and the like would be made on the basis of science, and as such, life in the U.S. – and perhaps the world – would improve vastly.

As a kid I was truly awed by the Gemini and Apollo moon missions, and the first heart transplant. And let's not forget Jiffy Pop. I imagined super-sonic commercial air service, cordless phones, driverless vehicles and cancer cures – ideas that came not just from science fiction novels but from actual R&D that was taking place in the heady 60s. I had every reason to believe at the time, given that man had stepped on the moon in 1969, that a mere 32 years later we'd watch astronauts travel to Jupiter (as portrayed in "2001: A Space Odyssey") on our wrist TVs.

I loved watching a TV spot in the mid-60s called "The 21st Century" where host Walter Cronkite presented lofty possibilities for which an anxious populace awaited. Good stuff from such a hopeful time. But today – with nearly 20 percent of the 21st century gone – it's clear we've instead entered a dark, extended period of anti-science.

Members of certain tribes in America vehemently adhere to positions that are demonstrably incorrect and deny the findings of settled science. More and more, people understand natural phenomena from what they've read or heard about from the fanciful writings of ancient civilizations.

Who would have thought in 2018 that 4 in 10 Americans (and at least one addled lawmaker) believe the earth is less than 10,000 years old? Or that all humans are descendants of Adam and Eve (who frolicked with dinosaurs in the Garden of Eden); and that Noah somehow gathered pairs of all creatures including penguins from the Antarctic and cockroaches from the Lower East Side onto an ark constructed somewhere around Asia Minor?

We once had as the heads of the Department of Energy – the premier organization responsible for atomic research and the nuclear arsenal – physicists holding PhD's and Nobel prizes. Now we have a shallow Rick Perry at the DOE helm; a man Trump

once derided for his stupidity, saying, "he put on glasses so people will think he's smart."

We got to witness the spectacle of Sam Clovis, a one-time radio show host nominated to be the chief scientist (!) of the Department of Agriculture who withdrew from consideration after he had to admit he's not a scientist. Details.

Scott Pruitt at the EPA is making it hard for scientists to do their jobs, the CDC has limited what researchers can report on, and the Census Bureau is planning to use bogus statistical methods to count the population in 2020.

Climate change denier James Inhofe – of all people – chaired the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, and a retrograde congressman named Mo (short for Moron) Brooks continues as a member of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology.

Consider this embarrassing charade led by Mo at a recent meeting of the House Science committee where the subject of inquiry was the effect of so-called climate change on so-called rising sea levels. Giving testimony to the skeptical Republican Luddites on the committee was Philip Duffy, president of the Woods Hole Research Center in Massachusetts and holder of a PhD in applied physics from Stanford University. While Duffy tried to blame rising sea levels on melting ice, Mo exercised the unqualified egg-head PhD from the "left coast" on an alternative explanation. Here's the verbatim retardation, starting with big Mo:

> "What about erosion! Every single year that we're on Earth, you have huge tons of silt deposited by the Mississippi River, by the Amazon River, by the Nile, by every major river system — and for that matter, creek, all the way down to the smallest systems. And every time you have that soil or rock whatever it is that is

> deposited into the seas, that forces the sea levels to rise. Because now you've got less space in those oceans because the bottom is moving up."

Duffy tried to interject, perhaps out of a sense of duty to protect Brooks from making a complete horse's ass out of himself, but the empty-headed congressman from Alabama (yeah, I know) would have none of it.

> "What about the white cliffs of Dover? California, where you have the waves crashing against the shorelines and time and time again you have the cliffs crash into the sea. All of that displaces the water which forces it to rise, does it not?"

A ranking member of a congressional "Science" committee thinks that the seas are rising because rocks are falling into the oceans – kind of like how your pool overflows when you drop your cell phone into it.

How far we've fallen from the idealistic years of the 1960s. If Walter Cronkite were around today to host "The 22nd Century" he'd probably wow us with the promise of diesel-powered AM radios, ethanol-based mouthwash, counter-top devises for making soylent green, and the secrets to how dancing in a circle will reverse climate change.

The Shit Trump Sez

May 28, 2018

This is not a piece about Trump's wild claims and serial prevarications. Many in the media have dissected his bizarre obsession with the thin crowds at his inauguration, and the provably false assertions that he won the popular vote if you discount the several million illegal immigrants who pulled the lever for Señora Clinton.

For years Trump pimped the Obama-Kenya canard, and when he finally admitted Obama was in fact born in America, he took credit for debunking a myth he claimed was started by Hillary Clinton. Yeah, Trump says some weird shit.

This piece however is about the verbal tics that Trump uses; repetitious words and phrases that might suggest the guy has some crossed wires in his addled brain. Consider this mess of words Trump uttered a couple days ago when addressing the on-again/off-again summit with "Supreme Leader" Kim Jong-un. "We're gonna see what happens. We're talking to them now. It was a very nice statement they put out. We'll see what happens. No, no, we'll see what happens. It could even be the 12th. We're talking to them now. They very much want to do it. We'd like to do it. We're gonna see what happens."

We're gonna see what happens. That's one of the more ubiquitous Trump-tics; spoken so often and in so many situations that *The New York Times* felt compelled to do a full story on it. Hell, he even got Rex Tillerson hooked on it. Trump's used some variant of "we'll see" when speaking about the future of Michael Flynn, the Iran deal, Steve Bannon, NAFTA, Syria, Robert Mueller and many other topics for which he has no definite idea what to say.

Trump also loves to go superlative when speaking of himself and his big ideas – so much so that he's practically worn out the effect.

- "I will be the greatest jobs president that God ever created. I tell you that."
- "I will build a great wall – and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me."
- "I cherish women. I want to help women. I'm going to

be able to do things for women that no other candidate would be able to do."

- "I am the least anti-Semitic person you've ever seen in your entire life."
- "I have the best people."
- "I am the least racist person, the least racist person that you've ever seen, the least."
- "I know words, I have the best words."
- "I'm speaking with myself, No. 1, because I have a very good brain and I've said a lot of things."
- "I'm the king of debt. I understand debt better than probably anybody. I know how to deal with debt, so well. I love debt."
- "I beat China all the time. All the time."

You almost expect him to apply his over-the-top observations when speaking of bad things. I'm surprised he hasn't yet noted on his watch the "greatest school shooting ever" or "the biggest, best Ebola outbreak of all time."

And Trump just can't help but attach the word "beautiful" to practically every object and subject he speaks about – especially things that are rarely, if ever, associated with beauty – like military equipment, coal and even his temperament.

Of course, there's Trump's "big, beautiful wall on the Southern Border," but he's also said this beautiful shit:

- "We're gonna have that big, beautiful door in the wall."
- "I was sitting at the table. We had finished dinner. We're now having dessert. And we had the most beautiful piece of chocolate cake that you've ever seen and President Xi was enjoying it." "Sad to see the history and culture of

our great country being ripped apart with the removal of our beautiful statues and monuments."

- "One of the things that we will discuss is the purchase of lots of beautiful military equipment because nobody makes it like the United States."
- "And the arena erupted in boos toward the end of his speech, because they saw he wasn't going to endorse. And I thought that was a beautiful thing."
- "My temperament is totally controlled, so beautiful." That's my favorite.

The man mangles the English language more than Foster Brooks or Jose Jimenez ever did.

Read this portion of a "speech" Trump delivered in Sun City, SC and tell me if it doesn't sound like it was translated from Mongolian into English via Pig Latin using a "Speak-n-Spell" toy from 1980.

> "Look, having nuclear—my uncle was a great professor and scientist and engineer, Dr. John Trump at MIT; good genes, very good genes, OK, very smart, the Wharton School of Finance, very good, very smart—you know, if you're a conservative Republican, if I were a liberal, if, like, OK, if I ran as a liberal Democrat, they would say I'm one of the smartest people anywhere in the world—it's true!—but when you're a conservative Republican they try—oh, do they do a number—that's why I always start off: Went to Wharton, was a good student, went there, went there, did this, built a fortune—you know I have to give my like credentials all the time, because we're a little disadvantaged—but you look at the nuclear deal, the thing that really bothers me—it would have been so easy, and it's not as important as these lives are (nuclear is powerful; my uncle

> explained that to me many, many years ago, the power and that was 35 years ago; he would explain the power of what's going to happen and he was right—who would have thought?), but when you look at what's going on with the four prisoners—now it used to be three, now it's four—but when it was three and even now, I would have said it's all in the messenger; fellas, and it is fellas because, you know, they don't, they haven't figured that the women are smarter right now than the men, so, you know, it's gonna take them about another 150 years—but the Persians are great negotiators, the Iranians are great negotiators, so, and they, they just killed, they just killed us."

Conservatives called Reagan the Great Communicator for his ability to read the teleprompter like the professional actor he once was. Trump will go down as the Great Wockyjabber, the most, beautifulest tawker ever in the wholest of the whole world ever.

The Whiny Bitch

June 3, 2018

Trump is a whiny bitch – that much is evident from the myriad times he's cast himself as having been treated "very unfairly." Despite having been born with a silver tea set in his mouth and a convenient bone spur in his heel, the Orange man never passes up an opportunity to portray himself in public as the aggrieved party in any transaction. (Behind the scenes he no doubt brags incessantly about his unmatched prowess in securing the best deals of all time.)

But when it comes to his decision to name Jeff Sessions as his Attorney General, Trump has just got to stop complaining that he got blindsided by Sessions's decision to recuse himself on matters pertinent to investigations about Russian meddling in the 2016 election. Ever since Sessions "betrayed" his master, Trump has

relentlessly gone after the diminutive man from a small Shire in Alabama. He constantly berates Sessions despite the fact that the Justice Department has engineered punitive programs on immigration and drug use that mirror Trump's most evil inclinations. And in the face of all that opprobrium, Sessions suffers in silence. Still, Trump (whose volatile words, deeds, and tweets about the Mueller investigation suggest he knows he and/or his entourage is guilty of several crimes) beats Sessions on the head for his recusal. A recusal that was eminently appropriate given Session's intimate involvement in Trump's campaign while the Russia shenanigans were in full tilt.

The other day, Trump made it clear: he wished he had picked someone other than Sessions. Trump agreed wholeheartedly with a quote from Trey (Draco Malfoy) Gowdy to make his point. Here's what Gowdy said:

> "I think what the President is doing is expressing frustration that Attorney General Sessions should have shared these reasons for recusal before he took the job, not afterward. If I were the President and I picked someone to be the country's chief law enforcement officer, and they told me later, 'oh by the way I'm not going to be able to participate in the most important case in the office, I would be frustrated too… and that's how I read that – Senator Sessions, why didn't you tell me before I picked you… There are lots of really good lawyers in the country, he could have picked somebody else!"

Trump tweeted, "And I wish I did!"

Here's the flaw in Trump's whiny, bitchy argument: it is without doubt that advisers to President-elect Trump – including Sessions – knew well in advance of Trump's decision to appoint Sessions as AG that Sessions would have to recuse himself. Maybe Trump

didn't understand, but there's no way that given the well-established information about rampant Russian intrusion right after the election and the fact that Sessions was intimately involved in the campaign that an inevitable investigation would require recusal.

In other words, Sessions didn't need to warn Trump that he might have to recuse himself. That outcome was already predetermined before Trump even considered the little man. In the waning days of the Obama administration, dozens of Russian diplomats were expelled from the U.S. as punishment for election fuckery. Clearly, before Trump was president, the Russian interference fiasco was a big thing. Anyone with a partial brain could see that Russia would almost certainly become a real issue to be investigated by Congress and/or the DoJ.

But well before the Obama actions against the Russki's became public, presidential candidates Trump and Clinton began to receive regular intelligence reports. As early as August 2016, Trump was snoring through intelligence briefs that most certainly covered Russian interference in the election. But forget all that formal stuff. Trump had to know he was vulnerable on Russia months before he took the oaf of office. Clinton email hacks. Wikileaks. Paul Manafort. Meeting with Russians in Trump Tower. George Papadopoulos. Roger Stone. Carter Page. Steele Dossier. Even if there was no collusion with Russia, Trump should have known the topic would undergo investigation. And if he picked for an AG a toady who worked on his campaign, said toady would have to recuse.

Once again, our Very Stable Genius stepped on his own dick – and is now ginning a smear campaign against his AG for treating his master "very unfairly." Oh yes –"VERY UNFAIRLY" – in case you missed the nuance.

RIP Ted Dabney

June 3, 2018

I can't say I'm happy Ted Dabney created Pong. After all, as an adolescent in the late 60's I had honed a level of mastery of one of the premier amusement games of the times that still involved the deft manipulation of actual objects (e.g. steel balls on a tilted wooden surface.) I spent countless hours in the game room of the airport lounge near my home, honing my pinball skills. But it soon became clear that pinball would eventually fall to the video game.

(As an aside: In the 1960s, in addition to playing pinball in an airport, you could also visit the tower where the FAA controllers plied their trade and stroll out to the edge of the tarmac without a thing called a "boarding pass" to experience the blast from a DC3 taxiing out onto the runway.)

I first encountered Atari's Pong in the mid-1970s at a local bar called the "Lantern" where the proprietors stuck the bulky contraption away from the manly billiard table. I can't say I liked the moronic simplicity of the 2D black-and-white graphics, but I sensed that times were a-changin'. From there it was a only small step to PacMan, Space Invaders, Donkey Kong, and, well, you know.

Now slacker dudes and dude-esses wearing shades and bulky headphones play complex computer games in competition with other gamers in what has become a spectator sport ravenously consumed on Twitch.

Can we blame Ted Dabney, an original member of the Pong development team for this unfortunate turn of events? Not really. It was bound to happen that generations of overweight slobs with super-human thumbs would evolve from regular humanity – regardless of Ted's invention.

Who Will Trump Toss Next into the Woodchipper?

June 9, 2018

Despite recorded evidence to the contrary, Trump claimed during the 2016 election that he was against going to war with Iraq in 2003 – using the lie as a cudgel against his opponent Hillary Clinton who voted to authorize the invasion. Of course, it's easy to stake a claim when you're a private citizen and your actions are hypothetical, but Trump repeated his pseudo-opposition often.

With that background, it might seem strange that Trump-the-anti-invader would bring in as his newest National Security Adviser a hard-core neo-con like John Bolton. The former UN ambassador with the "got milk?" 'stache has long been among so many chicken-hawks who see all the world's problems as an opportunity to impose shock and awe (and bomb and occupy.) Why would an America-Firster who made the case that the U.S. should stop trying to police the world in "endless wars" hire a rank interventionist like Bolton? Yes, Bolton talks tough which certainly adds to his appeal to Trump – a like-minded guy who adheres to the ethos of "bomb the shit out of them." Perhaps he brought in Bolton because Trump isn't actually a non-interventionist. That would make sense because Trump isn't any of the things he said he was on the campaign trail.

But I think the real reason Trump brought in Bolton as his National Security adviser was to use him as a punching bag, much like he's treated such cannon fodder as Jeff Sessions, Rex Tillerson, H.R. McMaster, Rinse Pubis, and many others. Bolton is one of those guys who postures as the cock-sure expert – and in Trump world there can be only one cock-sure expert. Already in his brief tenure Bolton has taken grief from Trump who slapped him

for cluelessly bringing up the disastrous (for the dictator) Libya play as a useful model for North Korea. Soon enough, Bolton was banished from discussions about the upcoming meeting with former "Little Rocket Man" and now "very honorable" supreme leader Kim Jong-Un. (Will Trump, in an effort to charm the portly Kim, give him the new nickname "The Chosen Un?") Expect Trump to remind people soon enough of Bolton's ill-advised cheerleading on the 2003 Iraq invasion, casting the war-monger as an out of touch dinosaur who couldn't measure up to Trump's demanding standards.

The same might happen to Rudy Giuliani as well. Again, Trump brought in Rudy ostensibly to take over the legal communications job with respect to Mueller's investigation, Stormy Daniels's lawsuits, and assorted related slime. But in reality, Trump intends to bash Giuliani – a stooped cretin whom he certainly dislikes. Trump was just waiting for Giuliani to make ill-conceived public comments so he could put his boot on Rudy's turkey neck. No sooner had Rudy gone on TV to reveal Trump's "secret" Stormy hush reimbursement to lawyer Michael Cohen when Trump blasted Giuliani, saying he was still "learning the subject matter" and will "get his facts straight." Take that Mr. America's Mayor! Giuliani is a media whore – but because he doesn't look the part, Trump would like nothing better than to snuff out his access to the cameras.

Larry Kudlow, Trump's new Economic Adviser – and one of the most consistently wrong economic pundits ever – harbors ideas that diverge significantly from Trump's. Kudlow is all about free markets and the power of globalization. Trump is a tariff loving 19th century mercantilist whose understanding of how the world economy works is simplistic and out of step with "reality." Kudlow is an ass-kissing sycophant, so it is likely he'll parrot

Trump's viewpoints despite the fact they run counter to Larry's gut. But it's only a matter of time before Kudlow stumbles and contradicts his master. And then Trump will pounce. He'll bring up all the times Larry got it wrong – the stock market, the 2008 recession, unemployment – and force Kudlow to grovel or resign. Or preferably, both.

Mistreatment of others is one of Trump's favorite sports. For one thing, it can be played by people who have bone spurs in their heels. But treating people like shit helps fertilize the Orange Man's ego. Is it any wonder Trump's "Best People" are actually the worst people? Who, other than masochistic, mediocre hacks who crave access to Trump, would sign up for his bullshit?

A High-Tech Game of Leapfrog

June 20, 2018

In a high-tech game of leapfrog, makers of the world's fastest supercomputers (and their countries of origin) compete to assemble the machine that will sit at the pinnacle – a determination that happens every six months and is published on the website Top500.org. Taking the number one spot is seen as a validation of a supercomputer company's technical prowess, and has become a proxy for the innovativeness of countries at large. This clash of the countries started in 2002 when Japanese company NEC reversed years of American leadership by developing a machine that debuted at 5 times faster than the previous number one machine, an IBM system. Although the NEC machine, dubbed Earth Simulator, stayed at number one for two and a half years (a record for longevity at the time), its fundamentally limited architecture prevented it from growing in a financially viable way. In late 2004 IBM took back the mantle with a system twice as fast

as Earth Simulator yet one that consumed a fraction of electricity and floor space.

At the end of the month in Frankfurt, Germany, the Top500 group will formally announce that another IBM system nicknamed Summit will grab the top spot – the first time an American company has taken the crown since China achieved number one five years ago – and has continually maintained the position since then. Summit is about 3 million times faster than the IBM system that retook number one less than 15 years ago. This remarkable improvement in performance is partially attributable to the ongoing increase in the speed and improvement in the design of microprocessors – just as it is with laptops and smart phones. But today, thanks much to software innovations supercomputers are able to grow in scale by "simply" lashing together more and more computers that work interdependently, breaking up problems into smaller pieces that are solved in parallel.

In reality, the only practical limit to making the world's fastest supercomputer is money. That's why the cachet of holding down the top spot on the Top500 list is as much about a country's economics as it is about the computer maker's technical chops. Researchers in universities and national labs and less-smart members of Congress all soiled themselves when Japan swooped by native IBM and every other U.S. based vendor. (Some dubbed the arrival of Earth Simulator "Compute-nik" in a nod to American apprehension that accompanied the Soviet launch of Sputnik.) And that's why the half-decade Top500 leadership by Chinese manufacturers seemed to herald a depressing future where China would come to dominate the making of things more strategic than tee shirts, plastic toys and bootleg DVDs.

If China can fund what it takes to make the world's fastest supercomputers over a long run, what will stop them from

dominating any strategically important sector? No doubt they are conjuring up the resources right now to make Summit a one-termer. The funny thing about the Top500 list is that the rankings are determined by running a computer workload that is not very representative of the kinds of problems actual companies encounter. It may have been OK 20 years ago, but today there is a deep disconnect between the problem that supercomputers run to get on the list, and what modern industry needs to conduct artificial intelligence – yet the old workload persists so that equivalent comparisons can be made year after year.

As an illustration of how the Top500 has become more of a marketing tool than an honest assessment of the state of computer power, consider how companies respond to the publication of the list every June and November. A search of past company press releases will show that when manufacturers like IBM or Cray achieve the number one spot (or some other milestone like the most entries on the list of 500), they pour out gallons of ink touting their innovativeness and commitment to the scientific community. When those same companies underperform, they make pronouncements that the Top500 is not representative of reality and being on the list is actually meaningless – until they capture the top spot again when magically the list becomes relevant once again.

In a telling article in *Market Watch* a few years back it was reported that the Chinese were primarily using supercomputers as a PR statement more so than to conduct research. According to the author, "it seems a lot of these massive machines, usually made with large government investment, lie idle after they are made, or are even abandoned midway, due to fundamental defects in China's traditional bureaucratic management system."

Perhaps one day the Top500 fever will break and companies and governments will focus their attention on investing in technologies that benefit a broad swath of humanity, and not just on the guys who are trying to perfect a nuclear weapon that can fit in your hat.

Problems Solved with the Stroke of a Pen

June 25, 2018

Let's face it: Trump, led by the nose by his xenophobic advisers Steven Miller and Jefferson Bagins Sessions, blew it with his executive order separating children from immigrant parents seeking asylum. Yes, this kind of shit plays well with the 30 percent base, but it also has the potential to rile up the usually-moribund fence-sitters to flip against him – just in time for the 2018 midterms.

The optics of tiny little crying children held in cages disgusted viewers across a spectrum that excludes slavish Fox fans. Regardless of your political persuasion it's gotta be hard to come to Trump's defense after he repeatedly lied about a non-existent Democrat law for tying his hands and forcing him to incarcerate children away from their parents – thus inviting comparisons to fellow travelers who once ran Nazi death camps and Japanese internment camps (or if you're Laura Ingraham, "summer camps.")

For a week or so Trump shirked the problem he created, blaming Congress for inaction – only to cave in and sign in crayon another stupid "executive order" (aka. Memo to staff – do something) stopping the separations. While the immediate turbulence on the southern border subsides somewhat, Trump stews.

Reporting on Trump's turbid mindset following his humbling retreat on a signature issue, *The New York Times* wrote "He has instead gone on the offensive, complaining to aides about why he could not just create an overarching executive order to solve the

problem, according to two people familiar with the deliberations. Aides have had to explain to the president why a comprehensive immigration overhaul is beyond the reach of his executive powers."

Imagine that. Trump grumbling for instant gratification. If someone would just give him a piece of paper to sign, he could solve the immigration problem once and for all.

In fact, why not solve every problem with a stroke of the crayon? How about the Birch and Swinnerton-Dyer conjecture – a complex mathematical problem for which the Clay Mathematics Institute has pledged $1 million to anyone who solves it?

Although Matiyasevich showed in 1970 that Hilbert's tenth problem is unsolvable – i.e., there is no general method for determining when equations of the form $X^n + Y^n = Z^n$ have a solution in whole numbers – the Birch and Swinnerton-Dyer conjecture asserts that the size of the group of rational points is related to the behavior of an associated zeta function $\zeta(s)$ near the point $s=1$. In particular the conjecture asserts that if $\zeta(1)$ is equal to 0, then there are an infinite number of rational points (solutions), and conversely, if $\zeta(1)$ is not equal to 0, then there is only a finite number of such points.

You understand, right? Seems kinda hard. That's why the Birch and Swinnerton-Dyer conjecture has remained unsolved – until today! – when the Very Stable Genius Donald J. Trump issued an executive order declaring the conjecture solved. And for that, he'll be receiving the award check for $1 million.

Wharton Wants its Diploma Back

July 1, 2018

Harley-Davidson, once upon a time a darling in Trump's orbit for making iconic motorcycles in America, has now incurred the

wrath of the vindictive Orange man. And how did that happen? Harley had the temerity to behave like a for-profit company whose leaders are charged with fiduciary responsibility to shareholders. It's a concept a Very Stable Genius businessman should understand and embrace, not vilify. When the European Union retaliated against Harley and other U.S.-based companies in return for Trump's tariffs on their metals and other goods (who could ever have seen that coming?), Harley indicated that they might have to move production of some motorcycles destined for the EU… to the EU.

About one-sixth of Harley-Davidson's revenue comes from sales of bikes to Europeans – a significant slice that Trump put into serious jeopardy with his "national security" tariffs. To have a chance at saving that portion of their revenue stream, Harley might have to move some production to avoid the EU tariff that would slap thousands to the price of the American-made bike. That's not un-American – that's as American as the Wharton School of Business (as anyone who supposedly attended should know.)

But while Trump was throwing around veiled threats in response to Harley's supposed disloyalty ("Harley Davidson, please build those beautiful motorcycles in the USA, please, OK? Don't get cute with us. Don't get cute."), his illustrious Treasury Secretary, Steve "the Munchkin" Mnuchin opined as follows: "I can't possibly understand why Harley would be moving production outside of the United States at this point."

Really, Steve-o? You can't possibly understand why a company would make business decisions based on market forces? I guess that's what makes you one of Trump's "best people" along with protector of the environment Scott Pruitt and Ejucayshun Secretary Betsy DeVos. By the way, Trump has to be the first

person ever to accuse Harley-Davidson – the preferred supplier to the Hell's Angels – of being "cute."

The Sanctity of Some Lives

July 1, 2018

Sadly, Trump has another opportunity to put a Neanderthal on the Supreme Court now that Anthony Kennedy has submitted his resignation with the understanding Trump would respect the Justice's middle-of-the-road legacy (Kennedy also purchased a stake in the Trump Brooklyn Bridge.)

Of course, the Jesus-lovers squirted in their pants (or in some cases, on an altar boy's face) at the notion that someone who will overturn Roe v. Wade is only moments away from joining the court. (Early rumors had it that Trump was planning to nominate Dallas County District Attorney – *the* Henry Wade of Roe v. Wade – until someone told him he was dead. Then reconsidering, Trump decided he'd pass as Wade was the "loser" in Roe v. Wade.)

One such Jesus-loving squirter is Iowa's Greg Heartsill, a conservative State Representative who has been pushing for a new law in his state that would prohibit abortions after a fetal heartbeat is detected – usually around six weeks into a pregnancy. He hopes the legislation, which was recently signed into law could eventually overturn Roe v. Wade. Heartsill said, "What we are asserting in Iowa with this legislation is that if you have a heart beat you have a life, and if you have a life the government is bound by the constitution to protect that life and ensure equal protection under the law."

Curiously, Greg carves out an exception for certain people with a heartbeat – criminals deserving of the death penalty for crimes that Greg deems sufficiently evil. Iowa hasn't had the death penalty for 50 years, but Heartsill thinks it's time to bring 'er on

back. "This is not just a matter of justice for the victims' families, it's about putting another tool in the toolbox of law enforcement, because the death penalty has been used as a huge bargaining chip," sayeth Heartsill.

And as Heartsill – the protector of beating hearts in the heartland – is the consummate public servant, it's not a surprise that he has also introduced legislation mandating lethal injection by corn ethanol. And if it that fails to snuff the perp, Heartsill calls for death by corndog.

Kudlow the Anti-Nostradamus

July 1, 2018

Larry Kudlow, Trump's economic adviser, former TV personality and the man who has been wrong about everything, made this bogus claim the other day: "The deficit, which was one of the other criticisms, is coming down, and it's coming down rapidly."

Sorry, Larry – wrong again. And this time you're so wrong that it took the average mental midget 4 seconds to prove it. The Congressional Budget Office just published a report on the subject and it more or less (OK, more) refutes Carnak Larry.

At this point, traders listen to Larry and invest against him with 100% confidence, knowing that he can't even predict yesterday's weather.

Trip Advisor circa 1941

July 11, 2018

Gudrun Burwitz, the daughter of Heinrich Himmler, died the other day at age 88. As the chief Nazi architect of the "Final Solution" to the Jewish problem, Himmler treated his young daughter at the time to visits to concentration camps. One such visit in 1941 included Dachau where 30,000 prisoners were put to death.

Little Gudrun who was about 11 years old wrote in her diary: "We saw everything we could. We saw the gardening work. We saw the pear trees. We saw all the pictures painted by the prisoners. Marvelous. And afterward we had a lot to eat. It was very nice."

No doubt the guests at Dachau agreed wholeheartedly.

One can only wonder, however, what she might have written had TripAdvisor existed at the time. "The rooms are tiny – not going to lie – but all have a window that opens with dark shutters to block out the sun. We saw a room with a bunk bed – each room has a very spacious latrine that is cleaned out at least once a year. The heating unit is strong and works great, as you can tell from the never-ending plumes of smoke from the stack. The best part is the overhead shower. WOW – a deluge! I give it five bent crosses!"

Trump's Pecker

July 22, 2018

One way to distinguish real journalism from the phony version is whether the publisher will pay people for their stories. Real journalists don't do that. Grocery store toilet paper like *The National Enquirer* on the other hand does so regularly. *The National Enquirer* has purchased many bombshell stories from insiders who may or may not have witnessed bad behavior of celebrities and other famous souls, and then published their stories whenever the editors believed the sordid tales might drive circulation.

Sometimes the *Enquirer* has chosen not to publish material they paid for – not because the story was found to be false – but because the publisher wants to protect the subject of the story. Ever since Trump-bud David Pecker took over the *Enquirer* in 1999, the magazine has bent over backward to protect the Orange Man from greasy revelations about his abject libido. Most recently, Pecker paid $150,000 to former Playboy Playmate Karen

McDougal for the rights to her first-hand account of her yearlong affair with class-act Trump that started shortly after his wife gave birth. Now that would make some great copy and would probably move a lot of papers off the rack above the conveyor belt, but Pecker decided not to publish – a move called "catch & kill." Hoping to help Trump avoid even more embarrassment right before the 2016 election, Pecker locked up McDougal's story. As expected, when inklings of the deal leaked in 2016, Trumpists like his communications gal Hope Hicks spouted indignation at the absurdity of it all saying, "We have no knowledge of any of this" and labeling the affair "totally untrue."

And by "totally untrue" she meant "absolutely true – this is randy Donnie we're talking about."

Everyone now knows it's true because audio tape of Trump discussing the Pecker payment with his shifty lawyer Michael Cohen has just surfaced. Of course, none of Trump's cult – including the Jesus-loving evangelicals – gives a shit.

Before this whole Pecker-Trump cabal came to light, I had remembered the *Enquirer* (and others of its ilk like the *Weekly World News* and the *Globe*) for producing mind-rot about aliens consorting with the Clintons. Here is a sample of actual headlines in the *Weekly World News*:

- Alien Backs Clinton! (Photo of "alien" shaking hands with Bill Clinton)
- Hillary Clinton Adopts Alien Baby (Photo of Hillary cradling an alien baby)
- Alien in Slammer after Fistfight with Bill... Over Hillary! (Photo montage of Hillary screaming, and Bill sporting a black eye.)

Little did I realize that Pecker's obsession with Hillary Clinton had become a full-on neurosis. For a while, the *Enquirer* portrayed Hillary as a feeble old biddy on her last legs who would be dead before anyone could ever vote for her. One headline: "Hillary: Six Months to Live." Then miraculously, when this line of scam was deemed a failure, the *Enquirer* flipped narrative to reveal that the woman who was supposed to be dead by now had gained an astonishing 103 pounds. What a turnaround!

As Trump made headway in the 2016 campaign, Pecker's team ditched the terminal health condition angle and hit Hillary on corruption – no doubt the more effective tactic with the haters who pick up the *Enquirer* while checking out their bacon-wrapped corndogs and 64-oz bottles of sodey pop.

I used to work at a grocery store in the 1970s where the *Enquirer* and other moronic tabloids perched by the checkout counter – and I, as a teenager, wondered what kind of asshole would buy into the sensational stories blazed across the covers. Now I know.

By the way, have you heard the latest? Bat Child Escaped!

Papa Boner

July 25, 2018

I wonder how many people hear the name John Schnatter and think "now that's Italian!" Nevertheless, the owner of that name who goes by the more familiar "Papa John" is the proprietor of the fourth largest pizza restaurant chain in America, and as a 30 percent shareholder in the company is worth at least $600 million.

Some years ago, presuming that those who enjoy watching football might also be inclined to consume pizza (regardless of its resemblance to cardboard), Papa John embarked on a close sponsorship relationship with the NFL, and recruited former

star quarterback Peyton Manning to appear in TV commercials as himself. Papa was there too in all his oily splendor pitching his pies.

After one-time San Francisco quarterback Colin Kaepernick popularized the silent "take a knee" protest during the playing of the national anthem – and Draft-Dodger-in-Chief Trump maligned the spectacle to divert attention from whatever asshole shit he was doing at the time – fan interest in watching NFL games began to tail off. By putting all his pepperoni chips on the NFL, Papa suddenly felt vulnerable. Furthermore, he was placed in the unfortunate position of having to take sides between the players' right to protest and the "patriots" who make up a big portion of the pizza-eating, football-loving fan base.

As Schnatter was already on record trashing Obamacare for adding 14 cents to the price of a pizza – something he would rather fight than accommodate for the betterment of his employees' health – it's probably not hard to figure out where he stands on certain types of people kneeling during the anthem. Knowing that the company would inevitably be confronted by media on its position, Papa John's hired a marketing firm called Laundry Service to help craft messaging. And when you're so clueless that you have to hire a firm to tell you what to say – especially one called Laundry Service – you should expect rocky seas.

In a conference call with Schnatter and his team, the marketing firm did a bit of role playing with Papa to prepare him for possible hostile questions from the media about the company's coziness with the NFL. Maybe the Laundry Service flak doing the role playing got under Schnatter's pigskin, because Papa John was heard defending himself by noting, "Colonel Sanders called blacks niggers," going on to complain that the Colonel never got called

out for his racism. That should have been the end of it, but some person on the call leaked the slur – and then all hell broke loose.

(When will white public figures learn? Just like they'll never successfully explain away a comment about how their personal travails are equivalent to the Holocaust, they can never, ever utter the N-word under any circumstances without it blowing back on them.)

Now Schnatter is trying to get back on the board of directors of the company he founded in his father's bar after being forced to resign as Chairman. Meanwhile the stock has tanked and is now down about a third since the beginning of the year.

In related humorous turn, during an interview with *Forbes* in January when Papa John's stock (PZZA) was trading around $68, Pree Yerramilli, a Senior Analyst at Eagle Chase Capital explained why he believed the stock was primed to go much higher. Seven months later it's selling for about $45. That's why dudes like Pree are paid the big bucks.

As with Subway's Jared and Sambo's Tiger, John Schnatter is systematically being erased from Papa John's iconography. Could the company pull an IHOP and change its name altogether? Papa Boner, perhaps?

Time to Go Back to CEO School

August 12, 2018

After Martha Stewart of all people was convicted of securities fraud for insider trading, you'd think highly-paid CEOs and members of the Boards of Director of big biz today would tread lightly around any activity that might attract unwanted attention from the Securities and Exchange Commission. Martha was worth about a quarter of a billion dollars at the time she acted on inside information about drug-maker Imclone so as to avoid a few

thousands in losses – a figure that probably equates to less than a week's worth of feed for the heirloom chickens cavorting on her tony Connecticut compound. So stupid.

Yet in the past couple of days we've seen similarly blatant idiocy coming from titans of industry and government. Will they never learn? Billionaire entrepreneur and futurist Elon Musk kinda stepped on his own dick the other day by using Twitter to communicate significant financial information that would normally be contained in a formal SEC-approved document and vetted by the board of directors prior to publication. Musk, who is the head of SpaceX, the Boring Company and most famously, Tesla, the darling manufacturer of electric cars, solar panels and clean energy storage, is tired of having to deal with pesky investors and government oversight of their operations. He says he wants to take Tesla private by acquiring all the outstanding shares of the company. With Tesla no longer a publicly traded company, Musk figures he'll be able to operate the company with fewer morons looking over his shoulder.

In a tweet last week, Musk said this: "Am considering taking Tesla private at $420. Funding secured." Now, as CEO making a statement about possibly taking Tesla private is one risky thing. Stating the price he's willing to offer ($420) is solid because "funding secured" is quite another. Naturally, Tesla stock spiked up immediately before trading was halted due to the furious nature of the activity spurred by the ill-conceived tweet. Was funding really secured? If so, who is the source? Was $420 a bona-fide offer or just a (cannabis sativa inspired) number Musk pulled out of his ass with help from equipment provided by his Boring Company? The SEC wants to know.

Meanwhile, a slew of investors with short positions shit their pants watching Tesla stock fly to the moon on Musk's cryptic

tweet. Some suspect that Musk put out the tweet precisely to fuck with the shorts – something every CEO would like to do in his or her dreams but knows better not to. Last Friday, a trader named Kalman Isaacs filed a class-action lawsuit on the basis that Musk's tweet amounted to securities fraud. Now the fun can begin. If Musk can't validate what he pooped out on Twitter, you can expect more lawsuits and deeper SEC intrusion – not the kind of self-inflicted wound the company needs at the moment. The stock price is back to where it was pre-tweet suggesting investors think Elon was just goofing. I wonder what the investigators will think.

Moving on to the next level of financial idiocy… Representative Chris Collins of New York's 27th district really screwed the pooch when he pulled a Martha and spread insider information to his son and others after finding out the bad news that a pharma company he had invested heavily in would soon be worthless. The company, Innate Immunotherapeutics had been working on a drug for multiple sclerosis, but after final trials, it was proven to be ineffective. As the MS drug was the only asset Innate had, its failure meant the company would go casters up once the news was released. Business genius Collins, who had convinced his entire extended family and at least five congressional colleagues to invest suddenly faced a situation eerily similar to that of Martha Stewart and Imclone. And like Martha, Collins – who should have known better – passed on the insider poop. Of course, treated to the info, the investors quickly dumped the rancid stock on unsuspecting buyers who took a bath when the stock lost 90 percent of its value after the news went public. Funny how that works.

Collins and his son were arrested for insider trading and posted bail. Collins Sr., who did not actually sell his shares on the bad news, initially stood fast on his plans to run for re-election in November, but in the face of a virulent shitstorm from partisans

– and no love from his fellow Republicans – he announced he's dropping out. But not before taking a page from the standard playbook and denouncing the charges as "meritless." Dude – the SEC has your phone records from the moment the Innate CEO texted you the rude news. If by "meritless" you mean "ironclad guilty." then I'll forgive you. (Update: Collins reversed himself and left his name on the ballot – and won re-election! The fucker finally resigned from Congress on October 1, 2019.)

Collins held a position of four million shares in Innate making him the largest shareholder. He was also a member of the board. In addition to being heavily invested in Innate, Collins also holds large positions in Mead Supply, Oxygen Generating Systems Intl., Audubon Machinery Corp, Schlyer Machine, Volland Electric and ZeptoMetrix Corporation.

You would think that such experience would cultivate a sense of business acumen. Getting away with insider trading as blatantly obvious as that committed by Collins is about as likely as hiding a Ponzi scheme for 100 years. Collins had to know that – yet he fucked himself up anyway. Time to go back to CEO school for a refresher – after spending a little time at the grey-bar hotel.

Trump's War on Coal

August 24, 2018

Continuing on his "god"-given mission to undo whatever Obama had done before him, Trump the other day put a stake in the moribund "Clean Power Plan" which called for reductions in power-plant's usage of coal as a fuel. If the Clean Power Plan had taken effect, coal generation would have dropped 29 percent below today's levels by 2030. Trump can't allow such an atrocity to occur, so he's directed the implementation of the "Affordable Clean Energy" rule which gives states lots of leeway to decide

to what extent they want to pollute their neighbors. It's all about halting the "War on Coal" – say "amen."

But looking at the details, we find the EPA estimates that under Trump's Affordable Clean Energy plan, coal-fired electricity will still decline by roughly 20 percent by 2030. Not that different from the results of an Obama-led war. The total amount of coal mined for electricity would drop by one-third, compared with levels that are already the lowest in decades.

In summary, despite the bloviation, Trump is actually continuing Obama's War on Coal. Not only are Trumpists in Kentucky getting short shrift on promises to boost coal they're getting boned on lost bourbon sales thanks to Orange Man's asinine tariffs.

Assuming Trump is serious about reviving the fuel of the Middle Ages, when will he force Detroit automakers to produce coal-fired cars? When will he direct the FDA to declare coal as a food group? Why won't he promote the use of coal for blackface in the theater so more whites can get jobs playing roles that would otherwise go unfairly to Denzel Washington. The powerful "black lung" voting bloc demands answers!

Oblivious to the Digital Age

August 24, 2018

NY Representative Chris Collins got a text about the imminent demise of a company in which he was heavily invested – and he went on to commit securities fraud in apparent ignorance of how cell phones work. He blabbed about the coming crash of the company's stock – unknown to the public – to relatives and friends, and was quickly scooped up by the SEC for insider trading.

Another hot-shot Republican Congressman, Duncan Hunter of California and his wife just pleaded not guilty to misusing

campaign funds. Again, the couple seemed to be ignorant of the tools of the digital age because they spent $250K of campaign funds on international travel, groceries, clothing and even an airline ticket for their fucking pet rabbit – the kinds of transactions that are stored forever in the catacombs of American Express and MasterCard. (And now, manly Duncan is tossing the blame on his wife who supposedly handled all the finances.)

But the best of the worst has to be Melissa Howard, conservative Republican candidate for the Florida House, who concocted the most-easily debunked claim of all: that she'd earned a college degree that she actually hadn't. Howard touted her degree from Miami University in Ohio (yeah – there's a university called "Miami" in Ohio, just like there's a place called "Jersey Shore" in the middle of Pennsylvania.)

Perhaps Melissa thought no one would ever take the time to click twice to discover the real story: that her 1996 graduation was a fake. When first faced with the allegation, Melissa – like the good little Trumper she is – called it all "fake news." Her campaign even went so far as to shit on her opponent Tommy Gregory, saying, "There's nothing he won't do or say to hurt Melissa or her reputation within the community. It's shameful."

Like shoveling against the tide, Melissa pressed on by posting as "proof" a proud photo of herself sitting next to the framed diploma… and deluded Mom. Why she didn't also post the photo of her accepting the Nobel Prize is beyond me.

Fed up with the shenanigans, the authorities at Miami University went into their digital archives and rendered the verdict: they never conferred a degree upon Melissa Howard. You might say "it's shameful."

Fahrenheit 12-D

September 6, 2018

Right-wingers are apoplectic over Nike's new ad campaign featuring ex-49ers quarterback and NFL persona-non-grata Colin Kaepernick. So incensed are they over the appearance of the traitorous Kaepernick in the new "Just Do it" campaign that they are actually burning their sneakers and other Nike gear. Presumably these patriots are burning their shoes because they don't own any books to burn.

Of course, "Bone-Spurs" Trump – always looking for a distraction from his horror-show presidency – jumped on what he claimed to be damage to Nike from boycotts. That sounds more like hope than fact, given that the campaign was only announced a few days ago and will not officially commence for a couple weeks. And Nike has the contract to supply uniforms to the NFL for the next eight years, so the bonds are strong in football-land.

In any event, it's always rich to watch Trump thump his medal-less chest in support of a military he worked so hard to stay out of. More bizarre is how Kaepernick's silent protests against police brutality got re-imagined as disrespect for the military. How did that happen? His beef isn't with the military. Even if it was, how come Kaepernick is seen as treasonous when Muhammad Ali who refused duty is venerated for his convictions? Maybe it's the 'fro'?

To the feckless NFL owners who panicked at the prospect of lowered viewership and revenue contraction the spectacle of Kaepernick and many other players kneeling during the playing of the national anthem was too much to bear. Having no balls to either suck up the status quo or stop playing the anthem while the players are on the field, the owners have patched together a listless array of rules and penalties that will surely exacerbate the situation.

And somehow this is Kaepernick's fault.

RIP Burt Reynolds

September 6, 2018

I'm not sure whether in 2018 women find men with wall-to-wall carpeting on their bodies to be sexy or kinda gross. But when Burt Reynolds peeled it off for *Cosmopolitan* magazine it attracted nationwide attention. Finally, liberated women could drool over a centerfold just like men had been doing since the 1950s.

Burt started in TV all the way back in 1958 and played roles in such fine art as "Branded," "Flipper," "Perry Mason," "Route 66" and, of course, "Love American Style." He graduated into a role of a lifetime playing the rough-hewn canoeist-cum-archer in the hit movie "Deliverance," but soon became typecast as the womanizing wild man once he took on the starring role in 1977's chase-a-thon "Smokey and the Bandit." From there Burt essentially played the same guy in "Semi-Tough," "Cannonball Run I & II," "Stroker Ace," and "Gator." Looking back at the idiocy of the "Cannonball Run" oeuvre, it's hard not to think Burt was frotting with Dom DeLuise in the trailer between takes.

Eventually, Burt started appearing as other characters in remakes of his old shit, including "The Longest Yard" where he played a coach and "The Dukes of Hazzard" (essentially "Smokey and the Bandit") where he donned a white suit to play Boss Hogg.

But as sometimes happens in this business, an aging Burt was plucked and cast into some choice parts and handled them with the kind of aplomb that comes from being in front of a camera for a half century. His performances in "Striptease" and especially "Boogie Nights" proved the man had the right stuff.

Toward the end it was kinda sad to watch Burt crumple. I saw him on an episode of some collectible car auction show on

a three-digit cable channel where one of the Trans-Ams that appeared in the "Smokey" series was on the block. Damn, I couldn't believe what happened to that muscular guy who put an arrow through a hillbilly's chest from 50 paces.

A Wonderful Word

September 6, 2018

Prosopagnosia – an inability to recognize the faces of familiar people.

The Craven Andrew Cuomo

September 22, 2018

Andrew Cuomo (pronounced derisively as "Coo-Mo" by such divergent wags as Jesse Jackson and Rush Limbaugh) will continue after November to be the governor of New York – and everyone in the Empire State will be worse for it. Cynthia Nixon of "Sex and the City" fame never had a chance, although she did her best to expose Andrew as the pompous, craven, inarticulate tool he clearly is. Of course, Democrat Cuomo will steamroll over Republican opponent and spaghetti sauce flavor, Marcus Molinaro, giving son-of-Mario the statewide mantle for a third full consecutive term (unless he bolts around 2020 to take on Trump.)

No one on earth can match Trump for sheer narcissism, prevarication, incompetence, brazenness and stupidity, but Andrew could make a decent horse-race out of it. Trump's speeches consist of repetitious random words spewed forth like a James Joyce novel translated from English to Mongolian to Urdu back to English, whereas Andrew speaks like the love child of Lurch and HAL from 2001 a Space Odyssey. In an infamous speech, Andrew tried to counter Trump's MAGA message by saying "America was never that great," justly receiving gasps and boos from the audience.

Cuomo-lovers extol the man's accomplishments on gun control and minimum wage, but everyone else sees him as an ambitious yet rudderless politician willing to tack in whatever direction the winds take him. Here are some recent Andrew Cuomo charades that have left us disenchanted.

Tappan Zee Bridge. Andrew drove a proposal to rename the rebuilt multi-billion-dollar Tappan Zee Bridge connecting Rockland and Westchester Counties as the Mario Cuomo Bridge. Pure upside-down nepotism – and fruitless, as everyone will still call it the Tappan Zee, just like the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Mid-Hudson Bridge is still called the Mid-Hudson, and the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge is still called the Tri-Borough. But forget the name. Andrew, in a ploy to generate enthusiasm for his tepid gubernatorial campaign, planned a grand opening of the bridge before it was ready. Sure enough, the day after Cuomo and a bunch of "dignitaries" assembled on the deck of the south span to dedicate the new bridge a major part of the old bridge seemed ready to give way and possibly crash into the new bridge. Prudence would have guided a better man to delay the circus until all was safe – but not photo-op Cuomo. Imagine the tweets from Trump had the old Tappan Zee given way and taken out Andrew, Hillary and the rest of the gang.

Aide goes to prison. Andrew considered his close aide, Joseph Percoco, as like a brother to him. That is until Percoco was found guilty of fraud and accepting bribes. Right under Cuomo's proboscis. Percoco was convicted in March of accepting more than $300,000 from companies that wanted to influence decisions by the Cuomo administration – and as skeptics, we must assume he succeeded to some degree. Cuomo called the whole sordid affair a "human tragedy" but in the midst of an election, it was essentially, "Joe who?" Cynthia Nixon tried hard to make this shitball stick to Andrew but voters never considered her a viable opponent.

Abnormal Mailer. For some fucked up reason late in the campaign, Cuomo aides believed it would be wise to try to turn voters against Cynthia Nixon by virtue of her not being sufficiently anti-anti-Semitism – the kind of accusation that plays well in NYC. And it might have worked had Nixon not been raising two Jewish children. Oops.

The state Democratic Party, controlled by Cuomo, mailed a flier to about 7,000 Jewish households right before Rosh Hashana and the primary which claimed, among other BS, that Cynthia Nixon had been "silent on the rise of anti-Semitism." Although Cuomo tried to ooze away from the debacle by claiming the flyer was the idea of some unknown derelict with no connection to his campaign, it was revealed shortly afterwards that one of Cuomo's former top aides approved it. Given that Cuomo was a good 40 points ahead of Nixon at the time, it seems the play was borderline retarded. He was going to win, so why hand his Republican opponent a stick with which to hit him over the head.

That's just the Cuomo goombah style. It works in (enough of) New York, but in the rest of the country – not likely so much. It is conceivable that Andrew Cuomo intends to take on Orange Man in 2019 – but expect a deluge of counter-slime from Trump at his upstart opponent, starting with a dopey nickname like Andy of Gayberry, Little Orphan Andy, or Low-Hygiene Andy.

Clean Coal

September 22, 2018

To no one's surprise, following the deluge that was known as Hurricane Florence, man-made lagoons holding millions of gallons of coal ash broke down and spilled their vile goo into streams and rivers, including the famed Cape Fear River. What is coal ash? It's the detritus that's left behind when power plants

burn coal to generate power – the stuff that cancers are made of. Coal ash contains mercury, arsenic, lead and a host of other three-syllable elements that have been known to kill people as far back as Julius Caesar and Sun Tzu. So, when such a slurry of toxins spills out of its confines into rivers from which humans draw once-potable water, bad things happen.

Suddenly, all those MAGA-hatted, pro-coal patriots come running to the government (run by a socialist deep state) for compensation – also known as handouts.

Coal was a wonder in the time of William of Wallace, but in the 21st century – a point when knowledge of scientific phenomenon exceeds that all of humanity for the previous 10,000 years – you'd think we'd be past burning coal for any reason. Any reason except for votes in West Virginia. People in the Carolinas who are now drinking and bathing in power-plant waste: take a shallow breath and consider your next vote.

Full Court Depress

September 28, 2018

Long gone are the days when presidents nominated people universally acknowledged to be worthy of sitting on the Supreme Court for decades. There was a time when nominees could garner overwhelming support in the Senate because partisanship was not the name of the game in DC. Ruth Ginsburg was approved 96-3, Anthony Kennedy 97-0, Sandra Day O'Connor 99-0, John Paul Stevens 98-0. Even right-wing troglodyte Antonin Scalia whizzed in with a 98-0 slate. That kind of bipartisanship has left the station, maybe never to return.

The core reason nominations to the Supreme Court have become so volatile is that Congress no longer wants to legislate, with the exception of passing falling-off-a-log easy bills

like massive tax cuts and dedicating post offices. None of these invertebrates wants to work hard nor become attached to tough, controversial legislation that might upset their plans for life-long occupancy of a job on the government tit. Better to leave it to nine gnomes in black robes to tell the country what it can and can't do.

Tackle campaign finance reform? Nah – kick it to the Supreme Court in the form of Citizens United. You don't like Obamacare but can't get the votes to repeal it (and don't have a clue what to replace it with)? Find some aggrieved party to take a case to the Supremes. Feckless Evangelicals busting your balls about outlawing abortion but you don't have the guts to actually pass such a law let alone float a bill? Go see the judges (as long as you've packed in at least five like-minded, white male zealots.) Affirmative action got you down? Bring it to Clarence Thomas, the whitest black dude sitting on any court today. He hates affirmative action programs. And he should know – he benefited from them his whole adult life.

Things got really ugly in early 2016 after Scalia croaked, opening a slot for Obama to fill. Violating every norm, and – horrors! – the original intent of the founders, Mitch "the Bitch" McConnell refused to hold a hearing on Obama's nominee, Merrick Garland – the kind of accomplished, squeaky-clean, middle-of-the-road judge who would have been confirmed 95-5 a generation ago. Sadly, the Bitch got away with it and was able to hold the slot open until Trump showed up and nominated Neil Gorsuch. And although conservatives hail Gorsuch's elevation as one of Trump's signature accomplishments, it wouldn't have happened had McConnell not ditched the filibuster of Supreme Court proceedings.

Now we're witnesses to another fugly confirmation – this time of frat-boy Brett Kavanaugh. A confirmation that of late has been

focused not on jurisprudence but penises, gang-rapes, drunken black-outs and lots of beer drinking. Can the fall of America be far behind?

I'm not going to rehash details that are plentiful and easily accessed elsewhere. Instead I lay out unvarnished analysis of what really went on behind the bluster, hand-wringing, and crocodile tears.

Topic 1: The delay in revealing Christine Blasey Ford's shocking allegations of sexual assault.

Diane Feinstein has explained that she sat on the allegations for weeks because the accuser wanted to remain anonymous. The letter Blasey Ford wrote to Feinstein alleging an assault by Kavanaugh was leaked forcing the Senate Judicial committee to address the situation – much to the Republican's chagrin, as they were gliding smoothly to confirming Trump's second nominee. The Reps called foul – why did the Dems sit on these allegations so long and only reveal the slime right before the slam-dunk vote?

Simple: payback for Merrick Garland. The Reps threw all rules out the window and are now dealing with opponents who are following their sordid playbook. Let the tantrums begin.

Topic 2: He said, she said. Then what?

Blasey Ford, when asked how certain she was that Kavanaugh assaulted her, she replied immediately "one hundred percent." When it was his turn in the hot seat, Kavanaugh angrily declared that he was 100 percent innocent. Clearly no room for compromise on this basis. Absent a King Solomon to cut Kavanaugh in half, how to resolve this conundrum?

Simple: Studly beer-drinking sot Kavanaugh blacked out – i.e. he was physically functional (albeit sloppy) but his ability to remember anything of the situation was completely incapacitated. Both Ford and Kavanaugh believe they are telling the truth, and would pass polygraphs. But the best explanation for the Grand Canyon gap in their recollections can best be resolved by relying on Kavanaugh's now-well-known propensity to get hammered beyond recognition. I grew up around the same time as Kavanaugh when alcohol and dope were easily acquired, avidly consumed and present at all sorts of functions. Even some that took place in the middle of the week – not just on weekends like Kavanaugh suggested. I've witnessed unusual and outright bizarre behavior of friends who swore on a stack of bibles that they did not do the things everyone saw them do the night before. Alas, to Kavanaugh's benefit, no cell phones existed then to video the action and post on Instagram.

Topic 3: Lindsey Graham's Oscar-worthy outburst

Lindsey Graham – a guy who used to follow John McCain like a pet poodle and who would fit right in at Tara wearing a big hoop skirt – morphed into the Wicked Witch of the West the other day. Nearly suffering a case of the vapors, Lindsey bloviated about how the proceedings had devolved into a mean miasma of unfairness. So uncharacteristic of the gentleman from South Carolina. Why?

Simple: Dear Lindsey is up for re-election in 2020 and needs Trump on his side to fend off the many primary usurpers who want to take down what they see as an unsuitably conservative toad. He has to act like an out-of-control lunatic to impress Trump and earn his primary-killer endorsement next year. (In many ways, the motivation behind Lindsey's outburst also explains why Kavanaugh angrily spit out his opening remarks in sharp

contrast with those of his polite and demure accuser – to impress Trump. Undoubtedly, it was made known to Kavanaugh that if he somehow failed to get confirmed, Trump would lambaste him (and the Dems and fake news, of course), essentially consigning him to the garbage heap for the rest of his life.)

Although craven Lindsey talked shit about Trump during the 2016 campaign, he is now burrowing like a hamster deep into the Orange Poop Chute for fetid air cover in 2020. It is almost surreal that a Trump sycophant like Lindsey once said this: "I think he's crazy. I think he's unfit for office." And this: "You know how you make America great again? Tell Donald Trump to go to hell." And this: "If we nominate Trump, we will get destroyed… and we will deserve it."

Topic 4: Susan Collins in the wringer

Women aligned to the #MeToo movement were hoping for Maine Senator Susan Collins to vote against Kavanaugh because of the judge's obvious animus toward Roe v. Wade – a case that Collins considers the law of the land. She has portrayed herself as a champion of choice and a defender of Roe. When Trump picked Kavanaugh from a list given to him by the Federalist Society, everyone knew the reasons were the judge's anti-abortion positions and his views on presidential insulation from prosecution – something far more important to Trump than women's rights. Collins must know Kavanaugh would strike down Roe if given the opportunity yet she seemed to accept his lame argument that Roe is settled law. News flash: every Supreme Court decision is settled law – until they overturn it. What's going on?

Simple: Collins was counting on some other Republican senator to put the kibosh to Kavanaugh's nomination: perhaps Lisa Murkowski of Alaska or the exiting Jeff Flake of Arizona.

Collins assumed at least one other rep would flee and then she could follow with less fear of retribution. But now it looks like Flake's gone squishy and Murkowski is silent. In fact, Flake will toe the line even though he has nothing to lose, and the two females will cave as well.

And then we'll have a Justice Kavanaugh rounding out a far-right ticket on the Supreme Court – and all the 18th Century deliberation that that entails.

Kill People, Not Jobs

October 11, 2018

Now that Brew Kavanaugh sits on the highest court in the land, Americans can expect to see their rights crimped and their styles cramped – unless their surnames are Inc. or LLC. One area that will surely find favor with the newly right-bent Supreme Court is the decimation of rules and regulations – twin evils that are blamed for economic stagnation and jobicide. No doubt the titans of industry in such segments as manufacturing, mining, construction, pharmaceuticals and the like will savor the new found freedom to skirt regulations designed to ensure worker safety and protect end users. After all, imagine how much a place like Chipotle Grill could save if workers no longer had to waste time washing their hands after taking a dump? Oh wait – they're already saving on that.

People seem to agree: reduce regulations and watch the economy soar.

And yet the recent devastating crash of a stretch limousine that killed 20 people in Schoharie, NY couldn't have been a better illustration of what happens when an industry is subject to lax regulations, and even those that do exist are lightly enforced, if at all.

Seventeen people and a driver piled into a limo that was created a couple decades ago by chopping an SUV in half and extending its length by welding in some rails. The limo had no side airbags, no structural cage and no roll bars – all features of real limos built in factories. But as no regulations exist with respect to such Frankenstein vehicles, the passengers were sitting ducks when the limo careened down a country highway, ran through an intersection, plowed into a second vehicle killing two pedestrians and wound up crumpled in a wooded area.

Following the accident, it became known that the ill-fated limo had not passed inspection and the driver didn't hold the proper license for driving it. None of that stopped the limo company from conducting business. But you know about rules: too annoying to deal with. Besides, why kill the driver's job when you can just kill the driver?

The history of business in the United States is replete with tragic bellwether events that drove the government to act to ensure such events would never happen again – or at least only rarely. The 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire which killed 146 workers when they couldn't escape out of locked doors resulted in the development of significant safety regulations guiding construction, including mandatory fire escapes in tall buildings.

Upton Sinclair's seminal book The Jungle about the appalling conditions he observed in the meat packing business in the early 1900s Chicago led to the creation of the Food and Drug Administration. I suspect even the staunchest anti-regulation wag would balk at consuming food and taking medicines that have been allowed to avoid inspection.

And the auto industry – despite constant pushback – has developed innumerable safety features that have led to significant drops in highway fatalities despite an explosion of miles driven

over time. Imagine riding in a car without shatter-proof glass, airbags, anti-lock brakes and the like. Think about driving a car that never had to pass an inspection. I recall driving around Cleveland in the 70s at a time when cars in Ohio only had to pass inspection upon transfer of ownership. I saw people driving ancient cars with broken windshields, bald tires, missing headlights, and missing hoods. That madness is no longer the status quo.

Hell, even Kavanaugh's favorite food – "I like beer!" – has been subject to purity laws put in effect 500 years ago in Bavaria.

Of course, anti-regulation people will point out the occasional wacky rule to make a blanket case for elimination across the board. Or the mountains of paperwork that accompany compliance with some regulations. These are valid complaints, but today we're witnessing the tearing down of important strictures that have been in place for decades and for which the evidence of their value is solid. Most regulations in place today were not manufactured out of thin air – they were a response to a bona fide problem afflicting most Americans.

Allowing more mercury and arsenic in drinking water? What the fuck for? So a few coal miners can keep a shitty job? Reducing oversight of big pharma? So we can relive the horrors of thalidomide?

Let's hope Kavanaugh is too busy boofing when anti-regulation cases come before the court.

Someone Hand Trump a Mirror

October 11, 2018

Trump slimed into my old home town of Erie, PA this week to rally the red-hatted MAGA crowd ahead of some elections coming up soon. Luckily there are no urgent issues taking place around the world, affording Mr. Orange maximum time to

travel the country to shill for the Cro-Magnon contingent of the Republican party.

Of course, Trump had to brag about winning Pennsylvania in 2016 and bask in the passe calls of "Lock Her Up!" But the most risible remark from Trump had to be his take-down of Pennsylvania's Democratic senator Bob Casey. Casey is the son of Bob Casey, Sr. who was governor of the Keystone State from 1987 to 1995.

This rank nepotism ran a frisson of disgust up Trump's spine. "He's banking on the name of his father," exclaimed Trump. Yeah, he really said that. The guy who should now be a retired shoe salesman is president because he banked on the name of his father. Jeez, is he that dense?

And then there's this. In his bid to stop Democrats from taking the House, Santa Trump promised to send tons of sand to the eroded beaches of Erie's Presque Isle park. "We're going to get him the sand, okay?" referring to a request by Erie's flak in Congress. The source of the sand gift? That which has accumulated in Trump's shoes from the thousands of times Mr. Never-Will-Golf-As-President has stepped into a sandtrap since his inauguration.

False False Flag

October 29, 2018

Hard to believe, but the asshole sending flaccid explosive devices to enemies of the right (Obama, Clinton, Biden, Maxine Waters, the sucking CNN… What? No love/hate for the failing *New York Times*?) was none other than the type of miscreant everyone expected: a deluded right-wing Floridian and female impersonator known as Cesar Sayoc, aka. the MAGABomber. MAGABomber – kinda like that.

Sayoc is a "law and order" guy railing against immigrants who happens to have been arrested several times – and has a Filipino father. I have to admit though, given the blatant obviousness of the targets combined with the apparent inability of the pipe-bombs to actually cause damage, I was just a smidgen skeptical that the perpetrator might have instead been a deluded left-winger trying to frame Trump's deplorables.

Conservative icons Ann Coulter and Lush Limbaugh, among others, raised the possibility of a "false flag" situation – the notion that a partisan will attack his own kind in an attempt to engender hatred for the other side while garnering sympathy for his cause. Watch Hitchcock's "North by Northwest" for an illustration of the concept.

Everyone in the non-Foxy world of commentary held the "false flag" explanation in disdain. But until they nailed Sayoc, I wasn't ruling it out.

One week after the surprise attacks on September 11, 2001, when Americans were still in shock that such a wide-spread assault was possible, more mayhem emerged in the form of anthrax-infused letters delivered to news offices and to two Democratic Senators Tom Daschle and Patrick Leahy. That despicable insult added another five people to the list of the dead, and 17 others suffering the poisonous effects.

Naturally, everyone assumed the anthrax attacks were a part of the overall terrorist plot led primarily by Saudi Arabians to disrupt the U.S. *The Chicago Tribune* among other reputable news outlets reported that at least one of the 9/11 hijackers had visited a doctor for what was later considered a case of cutaneous anthrax – that is, a skin lesion caused by contact with anthrax spores. Other papers cited people who had recalled seeing 9/11 mastermind Mohammad Atta prior to the attacks with reddened hands

– additional speculation that the attackers had messed around with anthrax with the intention to inflict more chaos. Appealing to Occam's Razor, the consensus among most people was that the spate of anthrax attacks through the mail was the work of a cell of terrorists aligned with the 9/11 plotters.

It wasn't until 2005 that the FBI finally trained their attention on a home-grown scientist named Bruce Ivins who as a researcher at the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases had access to weaponized anthrax similar to that found in the letters of 2001. A complex distillation of anthrax that would have been nearly impossible for a bunch of Arab imbeciles to fabricate on their own.

As the FBI closed in on Ivins, the good doctor took his life – a full seven years after he committed the heinous act. And why had Ivins done the deed? The theory is that he wanted to fabricate a biological attack to illustrate America's vulnerability and the need for ongoing support of his research unit.

False flag? Hell yeah. Apparently, Ivins wanted to justify funding for bio-terror research by committing bio-terror. Didn't work out quite as planned.

UBS Needs to Polish its Crystal Ball

October 29, 2018

On Sept 26, UBS's John Roy upgraded IBM to Buy and raised his price target by $20 to $180. With the stock at $119 a month later, I wonder what other future prognosticated gems Carnak Roy will bestow upon us lesser mortal investors? And a better question: what soporifics are the members of the IBM Board ingesting so as to sleepwalk through the decimation of a Dow Industrial stock that trades today the same as it did at the end of last century?

RIP Good Guy with a Gun

October 29, 2018

Wayne LaPierre, the cardboard executive VP of the NRA proclaimed after the heinous school shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school that "the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." That clever phrase became the mantra for pro-gun people who had been thrown off-balance by the massacre of 20 little kids – and the many subsequent mass shootings. The counter-argument to enacting more gun control was to actually add more guns into the mix by arming "good guys" like teachers and hall monitors.

And so it came to pass during another in a 1,000 mass shootings since Sandy Hook (this time at a mall in Alabama) that a good guy with a gun entered the fray – and then was fatally shot three times in the back by another good guy with a gun. An unfortunate event but one that any reasonable person could see coming a mile away. Any time someone is holding a weapon during the pandemonium that ensues after gunfire erupts is bound to be perceived warily. It doesn't matter that you're a "good guy" if nobody knows for sure that's your status. It certainly doesn't help to be "good guy" when you're also a "black guy" – just ask the family of Emantic Bradford, Jr.

Bradford was present at the Riverchase Galleria in Hoover, Alabama when shots rang out during a busy evening of holiday shopping. Licensed to carry, Bradford, an ex-Army soldier pulled out his pistol – presumably in preparation to confront the shooter, as any "good guy" is now expected to do when these kinds of situations arise. Unfortunately for Bradford, by brandishing a weapon in the midst of the fracas he painted a target on his back. At no time as far as anyone knows did the police ask Bradford for his

"good guy" ID card – they just shot him for appearing to be the shooter they came to subdue. Wholly predictable.

And had the cops not killed Bradford, might he have gone on to shoot and kill an innocent person by mistake – another "good guy" with a gun perhaps? I presume LaPierre knows full well how bad things can get when armed civilians start pulling out the pistols when "bad guys" start shooting. I'm sure Wayne wouldn't feel very comfortable standing next to his vision of a "good guy with a gun" during a mall shooting.

But, hell – he needed a mantra.

Ricky Jay Cuts Out

October 29, 2018

I enjoy the big magic of such luminaries as David Copperfield, Chris Angel and Penn & Teller, but deep down it's the masters of sleight of hand that really impress me. Performing astonishing magic tricks using coins, cards and other simple objects – without the benefit of smoke and mirrors – right in front of a rapt audience takes a special skill that must be honed over many years and practiced constantly.

Ricky Jay, who died this past November was one of the best. His mastery of manipulating playing cards was legendary, as was his devotion to the pioneers of magic who preceded him. Ricky wrote several books about little-known purveyors of magic as well as the odd people who tended to accompany them.

A smooth performer who could engage an audience and command the stage, Ricky was cast later in life in several movies, most notably by director David Mamet. He made his debut in "House of Games," a twisty, psychological con-game thriller with Joe Mantegna and Lindsay Crouse. One of the best scenes involves a poker game con that seems to go wrong, but is in fact

a ploy by Ricky and his cohort to compel the mark to dig herself further into trouble.

Ricky Jay also played colorful characters in Mamet's "Spanish Prisoner" and "Heist" which had big stars in Gene Hackman, Danny DeVito and Delroy Lindo. But he will always be remembered first for his sleight of hand mastery. One of my favorites is a card trick that involves numerous deck shuffles and cuts that ends up with all 52 cards splayed out in exact order.

RIP Rick Jay.

Aiding and Abetting

January 29, 2019

Long-legged, bottle-blonde flamethrower Ann Coulter appeared on Bill Maher's show the other day (towering over him in flats). She came armed with her usual acidic tongue – this time aiming venom for the guy she once wrote about in a "book" titled "In Trump We Trust: E Pluribus Awesome!" You see, Ann is thoroughly over the Orange Man for breaking his promise to build a wall for which Mexico would pay – an applause line Trump pulled out of his rectum whenever the pinheads at his rallies started to lose enthusiasm. Ann was so smitten over the wall that she overlooked the ridiculousness of the whole proposition.

It's fascinating to watch Ann label Trump a "douchebag" and "wimp" now. She was one of the most early and prescient predictors of Trump's election victory – to great derision at the time. In fact, on the same Maher channel in 2015 she called it for Trump while the panel and audience laughed their asses off at her.

In any event, Coulter said some things on her most recent appearance that made much sense. She noted that illegal immigration and the cheap labor that accompanies it is "good for employers." She calls out the Koch brothers and Rupert Murdoch

as crass establishment Republicans who line up behind the anti-immigration crusade but secretly enjoy the benefits of cheap labor – presumably in the form of higher corporate profits when companies can avoid paying working wages.

Which brings us to another recent "shocker": The Trump Organization has for years (decades?) been one such employer that benefits from cheap labor performed on the fairways and in the bathrooms of Trump golf properties by illegals.

The Washington Post reported that Trump Organization flaks had to bring down the hammer on more than a dozen undocumented workers now because the unseemliness of Trump's hypocrisy had finally boiled over. Of course, the firings had nothing to do with incompetence or insubordination. The Trump family even trusted these workers to hold the keys to Eric Trump's weekend home – meaning they had to suffer the assault of shit-stained underwear strewn about and porn magazines sitting by the toilet, their lurid pages stuck together.

Quoted in the *Post* article, Eric the Red-hand said, "We are making a broad effort to identify any employee who has given false and fraudulent documents to unlawfully gain employment. Where identified, any individual will be terminated immediately." He added that it is one of the reasons "my father is fighting so hard for immigration reform. The system is broken."

No shit. You and your slimy family are the reason it's broken.

A Wonderful Word

February 4, 2019

Xoloitzcuintli – a hairless breed of dog

This Week in Stupidity

February 11, 2019

It never ceases to amaze how stupid people can be – especially the elite people who have agents, publicists, lawyers and attendants at their side like guardian angels ready to protect them from ill-considered actions. Still, stupidity abounds and it's worth noting on occasion the most egregious examples of it.

Liam Neeson admits wanting to murder a black man – during an on-the-record interview

It's difficult to pinpoint precisely when Liam Neeson transitioned from a serious screen actor into a cartoon action figure, but it was certainly after Schindler's List (1993), and more likely between "Kinsey" (2004) and the awful "Taken" (2008). Now when casting agents think of Neeson, their image of him is that of a brain-pummeling vigilante instead of the tall, debonair intellectual characters he once played.

In fact, Neeson's latest contribution to film is his portrayal of a simple snowplow driver named Nels Coxman whose son dies a mysterious death. Here's the brief synopsis of the new movie "Cold Pursuit": "His search for the truth soon becomes a quest for revenge against a psychotic drug lord named Viking and his sleazy henchmen. Transformed from upstanding citizen to cold-blooded vigilante, Coxman unwittingly sets off a chain of events that includes a kidnapping, a series of deadly misunderstandings and a turf war between Viking and a rival boss."

Sound familiar?

Nothing could have burnished 66-year old Neeson's sorry image more than his recent ill-advised interview with the Independent. Pimping Cold Pursuit in an interview, Neeson recalled an incident years ago in which a close friend had been

raped by a black man. Distraught at learning about his friend's horrifying experience, Neeson dialed into his own horrid persona and deliberated on what he must do to avenge the assault. Unable to identify the actual perpetrator, Liam decided it best to find a proxy for his evil intentions.

"I went up and down areas with a cosh, hoping I'd be approached by somebody – I'm ashamed to say that – and I did it for maybe a week, hoping some 'black bastard' would come out of a pub and have a go at me about something, you know? So that I could kill him."

Maybe Liam's read too many bad scripts, but if he really trolled the streets intent on killing an innocent person, he should be consigned to an institution akin to a roach motel where checkout is not an option. But in addition to being a morbidly bad person, Liam is stupid as well for revealing such mind-rot to a reporter on the record.

Damage done, Neeson went on Good Morning America to explain that his revenge fantasy happened decades ago and to aver, "I am not a racist" – while the red-carpet premiere for "Cold Pursuit" was being cancelled. Liam tried to justify his past actions, but in the end, even he knows he's stupid. Recalling his interview, Neeson noted, "and I'm saying it to a journalist. God forbid."

Cindy McCain identifies non-existent child trafficking – then lies about it

Cindy McCain, American patriot and widow of John McCain made a tremendous contribution to the safety and security of the nation when she used her super powers to identify a woman trafficking a child in the Phoenix airport. With her uncanny ability to peer into the brain of passersby along with her ability to tell dark

skin from light skin, Super Cindy can detect would-be traffickers whom she quickly turns over to the authorities.

In the most recent episode, Super Cindy recalled her exploits in an interview on KTAR radio: "I came in from a trip I'd been on and I spotted — it looked odd — it was a woman of a different ethnicity than the child, this little toddler she had, and something didn't click with me. … I went over to the police and told them what I saw and they went over and questioned her and, by God, she was trafficking that kid."

Yes, by God! Until, no. Cops concluded the alleged trafficker was at the airport to legitimately pick up a child (of a different ethnicity, of course, which set off alarm bells in Super Cindy's empty head.) The illustrious Mrs. McCain took to Twitter as is often the case in these situations to issue the standard "If you were offended" apology.

Note that the "by God, she was trafficking that kid" part of the sordid affair is left unaddressed – simply redoubling the stupidity with arrogance.

AMI extorts a celebrity – who happens to be the richest man in the world

Soon after gossip site "Gawker" outed billionaire venture capitalist Peter Thiel for being gay, the wrath of god befell the cheeky "news" outlet. Not appreciative of having his privacy invaded, Thiel became the money source behind a lawsuit filed against Gawker by wrestling clown Hulk Hogan. Hogan prevailed and Gawker folded up.

Now an even bigger whale has been poked. This time it's Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos who is the aggrieved party in an increasingly nasty fight with American Media Inc., publisher of grocery store favorite, *The National Enquirer*. *The Enquirer* did a lengthy hit

job on Bezos, using stolen text messages and photos to fill out the lurid piece. Bezos had left his wife and began canoodling with the host of a Fox TV series which is the kind of fodder the thigh-rubbers at AMI salivate over.

But the story didn't end with the publication of the article. Apparently, AMI went after Bezos with a threat to release even more dirt unless Bezos agreed to acknowledge the piece was not payback for how his *Washington Post* newspaper had been covering Trump and Saudi Arabia – two of AMI President David Pecker's best buds.

Learning nothing from the Gawker affair, AMI suddenly – and unexpectedly – got a load of pushback from Bezos. Bezos cried extortion. Given that AMI is already under a court order not to break any laws for three years following their illegal campaign contributions to Trump, an investigation that ends with proof of extortion could be the end of the AMI empire.

Bezos seems to be on a mission to drive AMI into the ground, and he has ample resources to do it. Which makes AMI even more stupid that its detractors had taken them for.

Gerald Cotten dies – and takes critical passwords with him to the grave

By now, even taxi drivers and grocery store clerks know about Bitcoin and similar cryptocurrencies. Billions of dollars' worth of cryptocurrencies are held by individuals and organizations in digital accounts, all of which are protected from theft and corruption by passwords. Losing the password is equivalent to tossing rare diamond necklaces into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean – as demonstrated by the little, white-haired old lady in "Titanic." The asset is gone forever. Everybody knows that.

Clients of cryptocurrency exchange Quadriga CX discovered to their horror last week that they could not access their accounts because the sole person with knowledge of the security keys and passwords died while on a trip to India. CEO Gerald Cotten apparently did not share the critical information with anyone else in the company, nor did he document them in a place where others could access them should something prevent him from executing his duties. Apparently, a mere $250 million is lost forever.

Fucking stupid!

Why a company would entrust anyone to be a single-point-of-failure in a system charged with holding such a fantastic sum has flummoxed experts. In fact, no sooner had Quadriga floated the "dog ate my homework" explanation for the monetary loss that aggrieved clients then began to suspect foul play.

Cotten supposedly died of Crohn's Disease – a crappy affliction, but one not usually known to be fatal, especially for someone as young as Cotten who was only 30. He also died in a far-off land; might he have absconded with the anonymous and fungible resources?

In fact, might Cotten be featured in a future story here titled "This Week in Evil Genius"?

END NOTE

IT feels appropriate that we wrap on the subject of stupidity. After all, hasn't that been the through-line for much of the content in this book? Now that I've concluded curating the hundreds of my blog topics, I reflect back on the manifold material I left untouched in the past two years. Material I could have deviously chased down and eviscerated or applauded. How about these examples of culture justly deserving scrutiny?

- The deaths of Tim Conway, Rip Torn, Gloria Vanderbilt, Doris Day, Peggy Lipton, Peter Fonda, I.M. Pei, Ross Perot, and Karl Lagerfeld. Oh, and of some consequence, Ruth Bader Ginsberg
- Trump's impeachment and the never-doubted Senate "exoneration"
- Boeing's 737 MAX fiasco
- Some obscure disease called SARS-COV2
- Long-anticipated IPOs of Uber, Zoom, Chewy, Slack, Pinterest, Lyft and Beyond Meat
- Drama surrounding criminals Roger Stone, Michael Flynn, Jussie Smollet, Jeffrey Epstein, Michael Cohen, Ron Jeremy
- "Bohemian Rhapsody," "Roma," "Black Panther," "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood," "Joker"
- Nancy Pelosi literally shreds Trump's state of the union address

- Tiger Woods wins his 15th golf major at the Masters; Saints vs. Rams – worst football call in history; for the first time in Kentucky Derby history, the winner is disqualified on site
- Wonderful words: Ephebiphobia, callipygian, nacarat, absquatulate, deipnosophist, mistigris, incunabula
- Crazy number of Trump-bashing books published near the end of the 2020 presidential campaign by such insiders as John Bolton, Michael Cohen, Mary Trump, Bob Woodward, Peter Strzok, Andrew McCabe
- RIP George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Daniel Prude, Jacob Blake, et.al.
- All of Attorney General Bill Barr's anti-American shenanigans; ditto for Mitch "the Turtle" McConnell
- Hard to imagine bankruptcies: Neiman Marcus, Hertz, Pier One, Boy Scouts of America, Brooks Bros., JC Penney, J. Crew, Remington Arms, Lord & Taylor, and most devastating of all, Chuck E. Cheese
- Eight-figure art sales: Claude Monet ("Meules"), Jeff Koons ("Rabbit"), Robert Rauschenberg ("Buffalo II"), Pablo Picasso ("Femme Au Chien"), Andy Warhol ("Double Elvis")
- New Architecture: Opus (Zaha Hadid Architects), UNIC (Mad Architects), TWA Hotel (Beyer Blinder Belle), One Thousand Museum (Zaha Hadid Architects), Academy Museum of Motion Pictures (Renzo Piano)
- Jerry Falwell, Jr. resigns from Liberty University after it was revealed his wife was banging the pool boy – and that Jerry Jr. liked to watch and whack in the corner. Oh, yeah. That would have been a risible riot. Talk about justly deserving scrutiny!

So much material. Maybe I shouldn't have hung up the spurs so quickly. Doesn't matter.

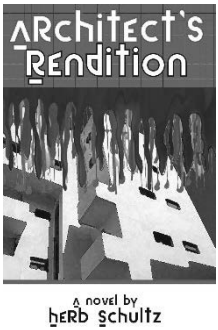
As an obscure composer once wrote, "La Commedia è finita!"

OTHER BOOKS BY HERB SCHULTZ

RonnieandLennie

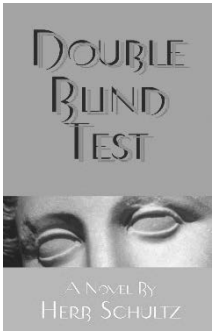
Ronnie and Lennie are identical twins fused in the womb and born into a world that is unprepared to separate them. The reason for their plight is vague and debatable, but one possibility wends its way throughout the narrative. Seemingly chained for life in a rural backwater of North Carolina, Ronnie and Lennie unexpectedly break free, but life apart is not all it's cracked up to be. Serious trouble descends upon our heroes, and they find themselves prisoners of another kind. A case of chronic adjustment disorder compels the twins to drastic action. Throughout the story we are introduced to a broad array of characters that influence the direction and speed Ronnie and Lennie take through life – a rudderless mother, a crazy groupie, an evil gambler, an unconventional doctor, to name just a few. *RonnieandLennie* is a funny, sad, vulgar story that spans decades and visits numerous venues as it chronicles the lives of two boys conjoined at the chest by a rogue band of flesh.

Architect's Rendition



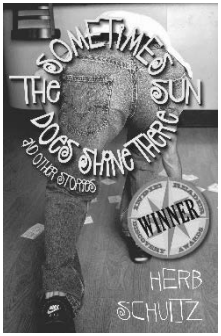
All Gerald Pfalzgraf wanted was to be adored. That, and to possess all of his wife Morcilla's vast fortune. Was that too much to ask for? The founder of Pfalzgraf Associates, an exclusive Manhattan architecture firm catering to elite, wealthy clients, Gerald resents his wife's assertion that her financial support is fundamental to the firm's success – not because it's false, but because it's mostly true. Gerald has come to resent a lot of things over the course of twenty long years of marriage to Morcilla. He meets Wren, a beautiful, vivacious goddess half his age. Her jaw is perfect. He resolves to be with her. After obstacles to his happiness begin to pile up, Gerald tries his hand at architecting something different – a complex enterprise of mayhem. Guided by Machiavelli, his childhood hero, Gerald wields the tools of deception, manipulation and opportunism; he knows that men who seek to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived. *Architect's Rendition* tells the story of an amoral man who tries to secure the life he always wanted to live by cutting a swath through a cast of misfit characters – the kind who allow themselves to be deceived.

Double Blind Test



Tracy Shepard is in the business of alternative dispute resolution – a fancy name for mediation. She is an expert in the art of negotiation, highly compensated by parties from all over the world – Fortune 500 companies, celebrities, wealthy families – locked in disagreement, burning cash on futile litigation, seeking another way out. Dubbed the "Medea of Mediation" for her drive and ambition, Tracy offers to help the owners of a small pharmaceutical lab resolve a difference between them that is holding up progress on a breakthrough drug. She is compelled to help the owners of the lab – identical twins named Fischer and Fletcher Cuttbate – because their drug is meant to cure an insidious eye disease that afflicts tens of thousands of people, including her father. Shortly after meeting them, Tracy becomes attracted to each Cuttbate brother for different reasons: Fischer for his gallantry and business acumen, Fletcher for his artistry and vulnerability. However, in the course of her mediation efforts she discovers disturbing evidence of fraud, and soon she finds that nothing is as it seems. *Double Blind Test* is a story of deceit, connivance, despair and lex talionis which posits this confounding question: What are the chances that two different men have the exact same tattoo . . . on their private parts?

Sometimes the Sun Does Shine There

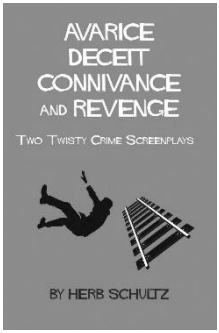


Sometimes the Sun Does Shine There and Other Stories is a collection of five twisted tales of deceit, despair, decadence, derision and revenge. The anchor story presents Larry, a stooper who picks up discarded tickets at the Off-Track Betting parlor hoping to find a winner among the detritus. He is tormented by Vic, a vicious thug who puts him in the hospital where he meets a diligent worker and closet artist named Maddie. Larry soon discovers he is not the only victim of Vic's evil inclinations. A bizarre turn of events puts Larry in a position to rise up from the OTB floor and recover his dignity.

The other stories involve a grocery store robbery that exposes a fiend, a screenwriter on a mission who instead meets a minor character from a major motion picture, and a bratty bond trader who tries to mend a fractured relationship with his upstairs neighbor. The final story features two men who invent a device that scrambles their futures. Believing his business partner absconded with a valuable invention, the determined scientist embarks on a fruitless search which leads to his arrest for murder – thanks to the very device he invented.

Sometimes the Sun Does Shine There and Other Stories is the 2011 winner of the Indie Discovery Award for best short story collection.

Avarice, Deceit, Connivance and Revenge" Two Twisty Crime Screenplays



Imagine two twisty crime screenplays turned into feature-length movies starring Avarice, Deceit, Connivance and Revenge. I hope you agree this would be a better use of talent and financing than the production of yet one more film in which agitated alien robots turn themselves into trucks.

Avarice, deceit, connivance and revenge – such vile human traits. And the stuff of so many entertaining Hollywood movies, from the beginning ("Freaks," "The Thin Man"), through the golden age ("Double Indemnity," "The Maltese Falcon"), to the present ("House of Games," "The Usual Suspects," "LA Confidential"). Yet in recent years, the medium has increasingly become a fountainhead for CGI-dominated wet-dreams, full-length movie versions of mediocre television shows, and money-harvesting sequels that diminish in quality with each iteration.

Allow me to tempt you with the log-lines of the screenplays. First, determined to marry his mistress, a Machiavellian architect enlists three associates in a complex scheme to murder his wife – and each other. And second, after a professional mediator is conned by identical twin businessmen who sought her help to resolve a dispute, she meets another woman in a suspiciously similar circumstance, and the two team up to take down the con artists.

No explosions, dinosaurs, or fart jokes. Just delicious *lex talionis*.

CULTURE JUSTLY SCRUTINIZED

Culture is represented in many forms: art, music, architecture, books, movies, television, advertising, business, fashion, cuisine, sports, technology. Even politics, and especially death. And all of it deserves scrutiny – justly, of course. This eclectic collection of more than 250 essays justly scrutinizes culture over six years beginning in 2012. Some of it virtuous, lots of it venal.

The collection delivers opinionated commentary, offers provocative thought experiments and covers topics esoteric, obscure and absurd – making *Culture Justly Scrutinized* a unique and valuable take on the period. Some essays will pleasantly jog the reader's memory of items vaguely familiar and largely forgotten. Many others will introduce readers for the first time to eccentric people and fascinating incidents that went unnoticed in real-time.

With its diverse content of bite-sized essays, *Culture Justly Scrutinized* is the perfect book for the bedside table, or the rack next to the toilet.

Herb Schultz is the author of the novels *Ronnieand Lennie, Architect's Rendition, Double Blind Test, Sometimes the Sun Does Shine There, and Avarice, Deceit, Connivance and Revenge* He lives in New York.

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