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ad report card
Martin Scorsese Makes Fun of Himself
If only he were joking.
By Rob Walker

Monday, May 19, 2003, at 7:56 AM PT

A recent American Express Card ad is built around an unusual celebrity endorser: Martin Scorsese. Yes, he's made cameos in a number of films, from *Taxi Driver* to *Gangs of New York*, but we know him as a director, not an actor. And he's not playing a character, a la Spike Lee's Mars Blackmon in the famous Nike commercials. Scorsese is playing himself. Sort of.

In the spot—which you can see here, at an Amex site—Scorsese is standing at a drugstore counter, going through a batch of birthday-party photos he's just had developed. Talking rapid-fire, he's delivering a withering self-critique to the baffled clerk. "This one," he says, "it's far too nostalgic." He asks the clerk about one snapshot; the clerk says, "It's pretty." Perfectionist Scorsese stares back in disgust. "How could I have done this? I've lost the narrative thread." Muttering that he'll have to re-shoot, he buys more film with his Amex card. Stalking off, he cell-phones his nephew: "It's your Uncle Marty. How'd you like to turn 5 again?"

So what Scorsese is doing is playing himself as a control freak. That's his reputation, and it's a funny ad. But of course what he's *really* doing is playing a guy who has a sense of humor about his reputation as a control freak. This is often the case when celebrity pitchpeople, particularly those who aren't full-time actors by trade, show up in ads: They play up whatever trait they're famous for (think of Yogi Berra, ever-befuddled), or they play on their public image by going outrageously against type (like a touchy-feely Bobby Knight in a Minute Maid ad from a couple of years ago). Either way, the point is to humanize the spokesperson by having fun with his or her reputation. Only those who are properly self-deprecating would be willing to play cartoonish versions of themselves. Right?

Amusingly, *Advertising Age* recently noted that before the real-life Scorsese would agree to be in the spot, he demanded to see and approve a reel of work by the ad's director, Jim Jenkins. Happily for Jenkins, his résumé passed muster. Obviously this anecdote takes nothing away from Scorsese's performance—in fact, it enhances it. It's much harder to convincingly lampoon your image as a pushy control freak when you really are a pushy control freak.

In the *Ad Age* piece, Jenkins recounted visiting Scorsese to talk about the ad in the latter's suite at the Casa Del Mar in Santa Monica, Calif., joking that its bathroom was about the size of his own room at another hotel. "But," Jenkins added, "he really is the self-deprecating character that he plays in the commercial." Wait a minute—the character in the ad isn't self-deprecating at all. Hmm. Maybe Jenkins misspoke. Or maybe not.

Update: A few weeks back I wrote a column about the efforts of Dr Pepper/7Up to market a new milk drink called Raging Cow through stealthy Web sites. In response, reader Dan Kois draws my attention to Cool 2B Real. This colorful site seems to be aimed at teenage girls—as the copy puts

it, "real girls like you!" There are various contests, chat features, and the like. And an area labeled "Keepin' It Real" says, "Make **snacks with your friends** and get some real energy with **fitness tips**." Clicking along, we find snack suggestions such as "a tortilla wrap with slices of lean roast beef ... ," "a barbecue beef sandwich ... ," and "An English muffin pizza with ground beef crumbles." And, scrolling to the very bottom of the page, we find the words "Funded by America's Beef Producers." Insert your own joke about raging cows and beef consumption here—and remember to keep it real.

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assessment

Paul Bremer

Can he bring peace to Iraq—and the Bush administration?

By Chris Suellentrop

Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 3:09 PM PT

By now, Paul Bremer must have come to grips with the enormity of the task facing him. As President Bush's special envoy and the chief U.S. civilian in Iraq, he must mediate among fierce tribal factions riven by ancient hatreds. And that's just in the Bush administration.

Bureaucratic infighting between the State Department and the Defense Department helped topple Bremer's predecessor, Jay Garner, who presided over an embarrassing debacle in Baghdad that the *New Republic* has compared to an "an Arab version of the Watts riots." Turf wars between Foggy Bottom and the Pentagon predate the Bush administration, of course, but Bremer may be able to bridge the long-running divide. After all, his short tenure in Iraq has managed so far to combine the best elements from both departments: With the neoconservatives at the Pentagon, Bremer shares a loathing for militant Islamic radicalism and a desire for a free Iraq. But like the realists in Foggy Bottom, he understands the need—at least in the short run—for stability over democracy.

Perhaps the best evidence for Bremer as The One comes from the early debate over whether he was Colin Powell's or Donald Rumsfeld's man. On May 2, reports in both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* on Bremer's appointment declared it a Foggy Bottom victory. Presumably, the crowing in the State Department came from Bremer's résumé as a career diplomat: 23 years under six secretaries of state. There was even some griping on the right about his selection. "Bremer doesn't know anything about Iraq," an anonymous "conservative Mideast specialist" complained to the *Los Angeles Times.* "I wonder if it's not one more episode in [the State Department's] attempt to wrest this from" the Defense Department.

Soon, however, the neoconservatives were mollified. Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, hardly State allies, handpicked Bremer, with Colin Powell, George Tenet, and Condoleezza Rice

reportedly concurring, and Bremer works directly for Rumsfeld. Furthermore, for more than a decade, Bremer has been pushing an offensive approach to the war on terrorism. He headed the National Commission on Terrorism, which in 2000 recommended several aggressive steps that the Bush administration adopted after Sept. 11, including the repeal of rules that limited who could be recruited to infiltrate terrorist organizations and a recommendation that, in "extraordinary circumstances," the Defense Department should become one of the lead agencies in the war against terrorism.

Granted, Bremer hasn't hewed perfectly to the neocon line over the past couple of years. In a Dec. 16, 2001, *Wall Street Journal* op-ed titled "Iraq Shouldn't Be the Next Stop in War on Terror," he advocated a Bob Graham-style campaign against terror, urging that Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria be told: Dismantle your terrorist training camps, or face unilateral military attack. But Bremer conceded that the United States faced an "inevitable confrontation" with Iraq, and by January of this year, he had endorsed war against Saddam sooner rather than later.

Another thing that delights the Wolfowitz crowd is that, despite a career in the State Department, Bremer has disparaged the multilateral approach to fighting terrorism. During the Clinton administration, he wrote in the *Washington Post* that, when confronting Osama Bin Laden, the government should "ignore the fruitless discussions in the U.N.—an endless litany of resolutions and solemn declarations don't impress terrorists." And immediately after 9/11, Bremer cautioned against "a mindless search for international 'consensus' for our actions."

In Iraq, Bremer has implemented this unilateral approach on a smaller scale by wisely dumping the "listening tour" approach employed by Garner and introducing a series of long-overdue actions. The trash is getting picked up, for one. The Associated Press on Tuesday reported that 360 tons of garbage had been removed from a single Baghdad neighborhood. (More striking, the AP said that was "about one-fourth of the amount of garbage on the streets.") Under Bremer, Baath Party members are being tossed from public positions, the Iraqi populace is being partially disarmed, an Iraqi provisional government has been postponed, and looters are being jailed. These actions encompass elements from what both the Pentagon and Foggy Bottom have recommended: State's tolerance for Baathists in the name of stability enrages neocons while the Defense Department's preference for anarchy in the name of democracy worries those who believe that stability is the best way to promote self-rule in the long run.

Bremer and his team have made a couple of missteps—the leak in the *New York Times* that soldiers were "going to start shooting a few looters so that the word gets around" got things off on the wrong foot, and Bremer's "This is not a country in anarchy" declaration from Baghdad had a whiff of wishful thinking. The *Independent*'s Phil Reeves poked fun at the "peculiar endorsement of Saddam's judicial system" when Bremer said that some of the prisoners released by Saddam need to be re-jailed, but Bremer's tough actions are exactly the kind of necessary ruthlessness that

Slate's David Plotz reported would be necessary to restore order in Iraq. Baghdad needed an Al Haig, someone who would step up and proclaim that they were in charge, and Bremer has performed that role ably. A little rebellion may be a good thing, but for the past month, Iraq has had too much of a good thing.

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ballot box

Hearing It From Howard

Gov. Dean's evolving spiel.

By William Saletan

Wednesday, May 21, 2003, at 1:09 PM PT

On Sunday, Howard Dean fielded questions at the "Hear It From the Heartland" forum, a rotating presidential candidate audition hosted by Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa. Dean tried out several new campaign messages. Here's a review.

1. *Bush "is not popular because of his policies, because most Americans don't agree with his policies. … The reason people like George Bush is they think he's a leader. They think that he says what he means in unambiguous terms. And the way to beat him is not to try to be like him [on the issues]. The way to beat him is to unambiguously state our Democratic Party agenda, because if you put a Democratic agenda next to a Republican agenda, the Democratic agenda's going to win every time."*

There's a good case to be made for this theory. Polls show Bush is substantially more popular than most of his policies are. Furthermore, Dean would be an excellent nominee to test the theory. He has a Reagan-esque, strong-backboned appeal even to people (like me) who find him too liberal. He'd either win the presidency or discredit the theory, so we wouldn't have to hear about "the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party" for another four years.

2. *"One of the things I think this president misses is that defense is not just about a strong military. It's also about building middle-class nations with democratic ideals where women fully participate in the economic and political decision-making of those countries. Because those kinds of countries don't go to war with each other, and they do not knowingly harbor groups like al-Qaida. So if you want a strong defense policy, we ought to think about how to help other countries, and not just how to offend every single one as this president seems … to have done."*

This is an interesting attempt to redefine the issue most troublesome to Dean. He has no history of significant military responsibility and no evident passion for the subject. In a recent visit to U.S. Marine training exercises in South Carolina, he looked as though he was visiting a foreign country.

Now he appears to be trying to redefine "defense" to include diplomacy. Good luck. Americans do want the affection of other countries. But I doubt they'll let that endeavor substitute for the traditional, muscular meaning of defense.

3. *"My reason for opposing the war in Iraq wasn't because I thought Saddam was a wonderful guy and I wish he'd stay around. I'm delighted that he's gone."*

This is a major improvement on Dean's lukewarm statement at a Children's Defense Fund forum last month: "We got rid of him. I suppose that's a good thing." At the May 3 South Carolina debate, Dean pronounced himself "delighted" at Saddam's demise and seems to be sticking with that formulation.

4. Responding to a question about governing a much smaller state than Texas: *"Well, Texas has the 48th best education system in the country; we have the sixth. Texas has the highest percentage of children with no health insurance in America; we're No. 1. We have a balanced budget; Texas just tried to cut every single kid off health insurance … to balance their budget. I think the people of this country are going to have a great opportunity to choose between whether they want the Vermont model or the Texas model."*

Dean rattled off these lines as though he's been practicing them for the general election. The Vermont half sounds pretty good, but the Texas half is a bit odd. People don't think of Bush as the governor of Texas anymore. If his election didn't give him presidential luster, Sept. 11 did. As for fiscal and financial woes, why pick on Texas—and possibly alienate parts of the Southeast and Southwest—when the whole country is in the toilet? It's the national economy, stupid.

5. *"My health insurance plan … is built on the existing system. It's not that the existing system is so great; it's just that I'm tired of trying to get the reforms through Congress and then have the Democrats fight among each other about how to do it, and then the Republican special interests come in and kill the whole thing. So what I want to do is just build on the existing system, get everybody insured first, and then we can have a big fight as to how to change the system."*

This is the clearest statement I've heard yet from Dean as to why his plan is better than the others. The health-care issue is enormously complicated and will become more so as other candidates pile their plans on top of Dean's, Dick Gephardt's, and John Kerry's. Nobody's going to believe that one of these plans is better than all the others in every respect. Each candidate needs to convey in a simple way the standard by which his proposal is the best. Dean has now done so, in a way that enhances his credibility by conceding which virtues his plan compromises to achieve its object. Let's see whether Gephardt, Kerry, and the rest can follow suit.

ballot box

Early Labor

The Democrats debate in Iowa.

By William Saletan

Monday, May 19, 2003, at 2:25 PM PT

This weekend, seven of the nine Democratic presidential candidates appeared together at a "town-hall meeting" in Iowa, hosted by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. The candidates were too busy flirting with the union delegates to engage in the mutual sniping we saw in South Carolina two weeks ago. But they did try out a few new tricks. Here's a review of each contestant, in reverse alphabetical order.

Al Sharpton. Credit him for opening the most interesting line of attack. "There's a misnomer," he said. "We're saying that Bush is cutting taxes. He's *shifting* taxes. Because when you have to pay more money for mass transit, when you have to pay more money for sales tax, that's a tax on working-class people. … Taxes have gone up all over this country." Other candidates picked up this refrain and extended it to Medicaid. It's a tricky argument, since Bush's fingerprints aren't on state and local tax hikes. But if voters start to make the connection, Bush could lose his image as a tax cutter.

Carol Moseley Braun. Her platform isn't catching on, so she's advertising her gender. Here's how she began her closing statement: "When reporters and other people ask me, 'What makes you different than the other candidates?' I have traditionally just responded with an answer about the economy or taxes or security or diplomacy or civil liberties—an answer about a program. But the fact of the matter is that the thing that makes me different is really the most obvious: I am a woman, and we do things differently. Women focus in on the harmony and security of the whole community."

Whoa. The idea that women are fundamentally different from men, especially in their preoccupation with harmony, is a major reason why many people are reluctant to vote for a woman. Is this a message female candidates want to send after 9/11?

Dennis Kucinich. Talk about the zeal of a convert. Three years ago, Kucinich's voting record earned a zero rating from the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League. Now he's demanding a pro-choice litmus test: "It's going to be important for the next president of the United States to tell the American people that he or she will cause any appointee to have to answer on the question of *Roe v. Wade,* that there must be a litmus test on this question, and that no one should be appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States unless they are ready to keep *Roe v. Wade* in place and protect a woman's right to choose."

Really? Which of the 20 pro-life votes Kucinich cast in 1999 and 2000 does he now repudiate? And why should we believe him?

Bob Graham. He wins the Bob Dole Award for referring to oneself in the third person. ("Bob Graham is the most electable candidate.") But the headline is Graham's escalating accusations of deceit in the war on terror. He charged that Bush "has engaged in a cover-up of important information that will tell the American people what happened before 9/11, what's happened since 9/11, and who has yet to be held accountable for 3,000 deaths." The good news: Graham is no longer boring. The bad news: He's starting to sound slightly unhinged.

Dick Gephardt. He takes the prize for Most Shameless Bribe. To the AFSCME audience: "If you want to give a billion and a half dollars from the federal government to state and local government here in Iowa in the next three years, then I am your candidate."

John Edwards. He has picked up one of Bill Clinton's lines ("I will wake up every morning going to work for working people") and is trying to turn political issues into legal issues. He often boasts of working with John McCain on the patients' bill of rights. On Saturday, he twice proposed a "workers' and shareholders' bill of rights." Why does he make everything into a bill of rights? Because then you need a lawyer to defend it.

Edwards also hammered Bush's pals for having "inherited, not earned" their wealth. He accused them of "hoarding" rather than "sharing" opportunity. The emphasis on inheritance is crucial, because while both Bush and Edwards are rich (in fact, Edwards is probably richer), Bush was born wealthy, and Edwards wasn't. You can see the outlines of a fascinating class-warfare debate taking shape, with Bush ripping parasitic lawyers and Edwards claiming to have "earned" his wealth by "sharing" it with needy clients.

Howard Dean. He held his tongue better here than in South Carolina, but he couldn't resist answering Graham's claim to be from the electable wing of the party. "I'm very proud to be a member of the Democratic wing" of the party, Dean replied. You can tell he's itching for a fight. "You have the power to take this party back," he told the crowd.

There's something profoundly true in Sharpton's critique of Bush's tax cuts. But there's something equally incongruous between that critique, which virtually all the Democrats embraced at this forum, and Dean's longstanding complaint about Bush's "unfunded mandates," which the candidates likewise echoed. If Bush can't give the states mandates without money, why should the Democrats give the states money without mandates? Isn't that what Gephardt, Edwards (who dangled a $50 billion offer), and their colleagues are proposing? If Delaware wants to raise teacher pay, why should Nebraskans foot the bill?

I'm all for aligning funding with mandates. But the deal has to go both ways.

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books

Glass Houses

Stephen Glass still doesn't believe in the world around him.

By Hanna Rosin

Wednesday, May 21, 2003, at 10:21 AM PT

Maybe the character of "Lindsey Ditmar" in Stephen Glass' new novel *The Fabulist* is based on me and maybe she isn't. I was his closest female friend at the *New Republic* during the time he was making up all those stories, and he spent half his days in my office. On the other hand, my husband does not work at the *New York Times* and my parents are not reporters. Whatever. Between the upcoming movie about Glass, *Shattered Glass*, and this book, I've come to accept my humble role as composite sassy sidekick to my old friend Steve—Elaine to his Jerry, Janet to his Jack.

Early in the novel, the fictional "Stephen" mentions how in his desperate last days of cover-up he let the clueless Lindsey defend him and how badly he feels about that. But pretty soon he comes to realize that it was Lin, in fact, who had betrayed *him*. He hears from someone that she has "taken back their friendship retroactively—whatever that means." When she calls, he's sure she must be working on an article about him, so he doesn't call back. By the end of the book he has decided that Lin and company were lame anyway, compared to his new crew of doting misfit friends from the video store (where he now works).

Well. I am obviously too involved to be objective but allow me a quick reality check. Here is what actually happened in that spring of 1998: After several desperate messages from Steve about how he was about to get fired I cut short a trip to New York to see what I could do. He told me that then-editor Chuck Lane was screwing him, so I marched into Chuck's office and all but called him an asshole for daring to call our sweet Stephen a liar. When I learned Steve had been fired I tried to call and e-mail. Not because I was writing a story—but because what normal friend wouldn't? But five years have passed, and I still have not heard a word from Steve, not a phone call, not a letter, not an e-mail, never mind an apology. And *I'm* the betrayer?

So it goes in *The Fabulist*. Scores are settled, debts are paid. Our hero feels bad that he lied to his friends—but then he re-imagines them as people not really worth feeling too bad about. Brian (presumably a version of his close friend Jon Chait, who still works at *TNR*) is right to be angry; but ultimately, we learn, Brian doesn't appreciate Steve's friendship. Robert Underwood, the editor who fires him (a very thinly disguised Chuck Lane, now my colleague at the *Washington Post*), is either bullying or delivering portentous speeches about journalistic ethics. ("There's a reason

journalists have these strict rules about truth. Journalism is fragile. Our only asset is credibility. ... ") Underwood then writes a book about his role in the affair called *Defender of Truth*, which Stephen catches him flacking on television. (The irony of this plot twist seems totally lost on Steve, who just appeared on *60 Minutes* for that very same reason.) Lurking behind every suburban post-office box are venal reporters whose only motives for writing about Steve are to advance their own careers. One sleeps with him and then writes a story about how he doesn't seem contrite. A journalist friend turns obsessive, stalking Steve for the good part of a year just to get an "exclusive."

Our hero, meanwhile, is a soul repentant. He is humble, contrite. He is sad and afraid. He sweats, he shakes, he is haunted by night terrors. And he's also a few shades hipper than the original: Rather than going to law school, as Glass did in real life, he works in a video store, goes to strip clubs and Vietnamese massage parlors—and always gets his girl after the first date.

In a way we are lucky Steve wrote this book as fiction. With a memoir, he might have strived for a coherent *mea culpa*. Here we have his imagination unfettered, his true fantasy of how things might have been. "An autobiography can distort; facts can be realigned," wrote V.S. Naipaul in an essay about the fictional Michael X. *[Correction, May 22, 2003: Michael X is not a fictional character.]* "But fiction never lies; it reveals the writer totally."

I read the novel hoping for some insight into why Steve did what he did. I learned some weird things—for instance, when Steve invented someone for one of his stories he dressed up to get into character, putting on rouge and lipstick the color of "cherry Tootsie Pop." But otherwise, the insights were shallow. "Here's the answer," he writes at one throat-clearing moment. "What I truly wanted was to be well regarded by the people around me—actually, to be loved by them." This is no doubt true but also somewhat too tremulous an explanation, and a little generic. (I believe "Curing the Disease to Please" is actually a regular feature in *O* magazine.)

After reading the novel, I have a few guesses of my own about why Steve so easily turned into "the fabulist." 1) Steve doesn't really understand journalism. The reporters in the book are either dullards or jerks. The fictional editors at his magazine talk in wire-service zombie-speak about "nut grafs" and "time pegs"; their headlines are failed attempts at being clever. All the other journalists are scumbags who'll do anything for a story. He must think the profession is base—and that it corrupted him rather than the other way around. He doesn't seem to get that truth is essential to journalism, or that journalism done the honest way serves a critical role in society.

2) Steve could so easily fabricate people because at some level he doesn't see them as real, only as superficial extensions of himself. The characters in the book have no existence except in relation to Steve; they are classified by their level of loyalty to him. In real life, his friends at the magazine did not spend all day thinking about how they didn't love him anymore after he was fired. We had

other thoughts: about what in ourselves allowed us to believe all his stories, about our own writing, about the fragility of friendships—but that would require a level of empathy he can't seem to muster, not even in fiction. And then there are all the munchkins who populate the novel: the fat woman in the "I Love Purple" sweater, and the schlumps who play bingo, and the pushy old Jewish ladies (who of course play mah-jongg and sing *Fiddler on the Roof* songs)—all types that will be familiar to close readers of the Steve Glass oeuvre, and all cardboard testimonies to Steve's failure to see flesh and blood.

From the very first page of the book Stephen Glass anticipates reviews such as this one. His fellow journalists will never believe he's sorry or been punished enough, will wish him to remain forever ashamed, he writes. But this too is just another form of narcissistic fantasy. Most of us don't think about him all that much unless he publishes a novel and goes on *60 Minutes* to hawk it. I, for one, am sure Steve is sorry. How could he not be? He was always sorry for even minor infractions; how much more so for this extravagant, ongoing lie. I'm sure too he's been punished enough, having lost his career and all his old friends. I don't wish him ill. But I'm not convinced he's changed all that much.

Correction, May 22, 2003: Michael X is not a fictional character.

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books

Insidious Sid

Sid Blumenthal rearranges facts and besmirches the character of his fellow journalists. And he wonders why people dislike him.

By Michael Isikoff

Tuesday, May 20, 2003, at 3:53 PM PT

In the fall of 1998, just as the House impeachment hearings on Clinton were gearing up, White House aide Sidney Blumenthal was contacted by Jeffrey Toobin, a former colleague from *The New Yorker*. Toobin was trolling for sexual dirt on House Judiciary Committee chair Henry Hyde. As it happened, Blumenthal didn't have much. But he confided that his mother had once worked in a secretarial pool in Chicago in the 1940s, and Hyde, then a Chicago area lawyer, had had a "reputation"—apparently, all the women had "avoided his office." The details of this "reputation" didn't become known until a few weeks later when another friend of Blumenthal's, at *Salon*, broke the news that 31 years earlier the Illinois congressman had had an extramarital affair with a furniture salesman's wife.

This unintentionally revealing anecdote is buried deep inside Blumenthal's 822-page bloated opus, *The Clinton Wars*. Curiously enough, it seems to have been included because the author somehow

thought it would exonerate him: Soon after the *Salon* story was published, Republicans in Congress accused Blumenthal of leaking it from the White House. No such thing was true, Blumenthal protests; the charge is just one more example of the recklessness of Bill Clinton's enemies and their determination to "demonize" him.

But Blumenthal never stops to explain why he told his old *New Yorker* friend Toobin anything (or what exactly Toobin did with the helpful steer). Nor does he consider the fact that, not too long before the day that Blumenthal gossiped with Toobin about Hyde's sex life, President Clinton had capped his semiconfessional about his affair with Monica Lewinsky with this admonition: "It is time to stop the pursuit of personal destruction and the prying into private lives." Wasn't Blumenthal's admittedly vague tip to Toobin a direct contravention of his president's marching orders?

The point is not that Blumenthal is a hypocrite (although he seems to be exactly that). The point is that throughout this book Blumenthal seems utterly incapable of understanding how his own uncompromising, take-no-prisoners defense of the Clintons contributed to the poisonous political atmosphere that he bemoans. Time and again, in the book as in life, he rearranges facts, spins conspiracy theories, impugns motives, and besmirches the character of his political and journalistic foes—all for the greater cause of defending the Clintons (and himself). Hyde, Kenneth Starr, Hickman Ewing, Lindsey Graham, Tom DeLay—each was malicious, narrow-minded, bigoted, buffoonish, and anti-democratic. Meanwhile, Blumenthal wonders repeatedly why so many people dislike him. At one point, bizarrely, he suggests it is because he is "intellectual" and "Jewish."

Needless to say, I am not exactly a disinterested party. My reporting on the Monica Lewinsky story is maligned repeatedly in *The Clinton Wars*. (At least I am in good company: Jeff Gerth, the *New York Times* reporter who broke the original Whitewater story, is depicted as a credulous tool of Clinton's enemies. The late Michael Kelly, who succeeded Blumenthal as Washington editor of *The New Yorker*, is portrayed as a hysteric who screams obscenities over the phone at the slightest provocation—"You fucking asshole! You fucking asshole! Your reputation will be nothing!") But it is abundantly clear that distortion is standard fare for Blumenthal. Although there are slivers of truth in most of what he writes, the facts are dishonestly rearranged to settle scores or whitewash his and the Clintons' actions.

Consider one small example: Blumenthal's effort to extricate himself and Hillary Clinton from a clumsy attempt to build a White House dossier on Susan Schmidt, the *Washington Post*'s most aggressive reporter on Whitewater. Blumenthal's role in this vaguely Nixonian exercise was first reported five years ago in a story by the *Post*'s media reporter, Howard Kurtz. When Michael McCurry, who was then press secretary, learned of the project, he proclaimed it "crazy" and killed it. Instead of admitting his involvement, Blumenthal pretends that he was a passive party. After hearing "constant complaints" about Schmidt's reporting from White House legal aides, he writes,

he suggested they "should present the facts to the *Post* to correct any errors. Beyond that, I never knew about a study of Schmidt's reporting. I asked Hillary Clinton, and she had no memory of anything either."

But others *do* remember—quite differently, as it turns out. Mark Fabiani, the White House lawyer who ran the counsel offices' "damage control" team, said he recalls getting a phone call from Blumenthal strongly urging him to do a report on Schmidt. When Fabiani didn't follow up, he then got a call from Hillary Clinton's chief of staff instructing him to get moving on the job**.** This led to the preparation of a lengthy dossier (one that did little to effectively discredit Schmidt, according to Fabiani) and a series of meetings—including one with Hillary Clinton—about what to do with it. The White House lawyers knew exactly what had happened, says Fabiani. "We all laughed about it. We knew [Blumenthal] had called Hillary and told Hillary this should be done. … He was sort of the brooding, omnipresence over the whole thing."

Another more serious example of Blumenthal's malleable relationship to the truth involves his testimony before Kenneth Starr's grand jury. It was during the early days of the Lewinsky scandal, and Starr's prosecutors were convinced that Blumenthal was at the center of an organized campaign—complete with private detectives—to dig up dirt about their pasts. So, the prosecutors subpoenaed Blumenthal. After a brief session with Starr and his prosecutors, Blumenthal emerged on the courthouse steps and, as if mimicking Joseph Welch before Joe McCarthy, indignantly portrayed himself as a First Amendment martyr. "I never imagined that in America I would be hauled before a federal grand jury … and forced to answer questions about my conversations, as part of my job" with news organizations, he proclaimed. He then named eight of the news organizations he was "forced" to answer questions about, including the *New York Times*, CNN, and CBS. Months later, the transcript of the Feb. 26, 1998, grand jury session became public as part of Starr's impeachment report. It showed that Blumenthal wasn't asked about any news organizations at all. He was asked if he had ever leaked to the press DNC "oppo research" about two members of Starr's team. It was Blumenthal, not the prosecutors, who brought up the names of the news organizations—apparently so he could later claim that the questioning was more sinister than it really was.

That wasn't even the worst of it. After his second grand jury session, on June 4, 1998, Blumenthal called up his friends Anthony Lewis and James Bennet *[Correction, May 22, 2003: Bennet says he is not a friend of Blumenthal's]* at the *New York Times* and fed them another set of outlandish questions that he said Starr's prosecutors had forced him to answer, including "Does the president's religion include sexual intercourse?" and "Does the president believe that oral sex is sex?"—each of which showed up in Lewis' column. But the transcripts later showed that *none* of those

questions were asked. No prosecutor ever brought up Clinton's religion. The closest things came to any of this was when one prosecutor, in the midst of questioning Blumenthal about a Jan. 21, 1998, meeting with Clinton, in which the president denied having done anything "wrong," asked him: "Did you specifically ask the president whether he had received oral sex from Monica Lewinsky?"

Blumenthal's post-courthouse antics irritated the grand jurors. By the end of his third and final session on June 25, they decided to give him a lecture. "We are very concerned about the fact that during your last visit that an inaccurate representation of the events that happened were retold on the steps of the courthouse," the grand jury forewoman told him, according to a transcript of the session.

I wrote about Blumenthal's courthouse deceptions in my own book *Uncovering Clinton*. So I when I picked up *The Clinton Wars* I was mildly curious to see how he would handle the subject. Would he show the slightest contrition for his deceptive public statements? Not at all. In *The Clinton Wars*, Blumenthal recounts in exhaustive, self-congratulatory detail how he turned the table on Starr. The day after his courthouse press conference, he writes, he attended a White House staff meeting where "I sat down to raucous applause." He tells how Starr's poll ratings tanked after his courthouse attack on the prosecutors. But he never concedes there was the slightest discrepancy between what he said took place before the grand jury and what *actually happened*. True to form, he slams the anonymous grand jury forewoman for what he calls her "highly inappropriate" comments and suggests darkly—without any evidence—that she was put up to it by Ken Starr.

If *The Clinton Wars* has any central point it is that the scandals that beset the Clinton presidency—from Whitewater to campaign finance to Lewinsky to Marc Rich—were each and every one of them entirely concocted, from start to finish. This is patently absurd. It is, of course, true that many of Clinton's critics made wild, unsubstantiated charges and that Starr's prosecutors overreached. But Blumenthal's blanket whitewash is close to ludicrous—and sustainable only by erasing huge chunks of the historical record.

How, for instance, do you write about the campaign-finance scandal—another Republican "pseudoscandal," Blumenthal claims, in which "all the charges were revealed to be empty"—without even mentioning the Lincoln Bedroom sleepovers or Clinton's connivance with Dick Morris to circumvent the campaign laws by crafting soft-money sponsored "issue ads" from his White House office? There is not a single reference to Johnny Chung or any others in the long parade of Democratic donors who later pleaded guilty to federal crimes in connection with Clinton's re-election campaign. Blumenthal defends the pardon of commodities fugitive Marc Rich. He calls Rich "a financier of the peace process"—and entirely skips over the role of Beth

Dozoretz, a Democratic fund raiser who had pledged $1 million to the Clinton library and who peppered Clinton with phone calls about Rich during his final days in office.

About Whitewater, Blumenthal has this to say: "There was never anything to in the beginning, middle or end." What convinced him? In January 1994, Hillary Clinton called him into her office and told him so. "I believed Hillary Clinton," he writes. "Her telling of the story … sounded convincing; her demeanor struck no false notes."

As for the Lewinsky matter—it was all very simple: It was about the efforts of rigid, culturally repressed conservatives like Starr to use sex as a "tracer" and a "code" to thwart progressive politics. Remember Vernon Jordan's phone call to Revlon to get Lewinsky a job—made just days after Clinton's lawyers learned that Lewinsky was on a witness list in the Paula Jones case? There's barely a mention of that. What does Blumenthal have to say about Clinton's famous session with presidential secretary Betty Currie right after he testified falsely in his deposition? ("I was never alone with Monica, right?" he said. "Monica came on to me and I never touched her, right?") He never talks about it.

"It is my serious intent to have written this as a history," Blumenthal recently told the *New York Times*, insisting that his book was written "dispassionately." But not to belabor the obvious, to write history, you have to have some basic respect for the historical record. You have to make at least some effort at understanding the motivations and thinking of political antagonists—including those you happen to strongly disagree with. Blumenthal has done none of this. His book isn't history; it's one big orgy of political spin.

Correction, May 22, 2003: James Bennet says he is not a friend of Blumenthal's.

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In his book, Blumenthal claims that I had been "used at every turn by everyone from Jones's lawyer to Lucianne Goldberg to Starr." The charge by now is well-worn and easy to dispose of. To be "used" in journalism is to be fed false information from an interested party. If the material is published without proper verification, the reporter gets egg on his or her face. That never happened in my case: My stories on the Lewinsky saga in *Newsweek* hold up as well today as when they were written. No question I played a major role in exposing key details of Kenneth Starr's investigation into the Clinton-Lewinsky matter. But I was also the first to report many crucial

questions about Ken Starr's case—the ambiguity of the Tripp-Lewinsky tapes on whether Vernon Jordan asked Lewinsky to lie, for example, or Linda Tripp's deceitful role in arranging her own subpoena in the Paula Jones case—appeared first in the pages of *Newsweek* under my byline. That's one reason why my reporting on the Lewinsky affair won a National Magazine Award, as well as a host of other journalistic prizes.

My book *Uncovering Clinton* contains the first thorough account of the role of the "elves" (my term)—the cadre of conservative lawyers who secretly guided the Paula Jones case. Blumenthal uses the term and appropriates other important material from my book—in some cases without attribution. See, for example, his account on Page 351 of a critical dinner in Philadelphia, when the elves first informed a member of Starr's staff about the existence of Lewinsky. Blumenthal doesn't explain where he got this information. In fact, he got it from Page 267 of *Uncovering Clinton*. Although Blumenthal quotes from *Uncovering Clinton* at times, he seems to go out of his way to avoid sourcing it when he finds something useful. In one case, Blumenthal (on Page 224) uses a quote from a *Washington Post* editor describing Executive Editor Len Downie's attitude toward Whitewater. ("Len thinks this is his Watergate.") Blumenthal sources the quote to a book by Marvin Kalb, *One Scandalous Story*. In fact, if readers turn to Kalb's book, they'll see where he got the quote—from Page 36 of *Uncovering Clinton*.

Blumenthal makes a couple of allegations about me that are worth responding to. He claims on Page 356 that I "forgot to report" (and by implication concealed from my readers) information that undercut widespread suspicions at the time that President Clinton's lawyers had crafted the "talking points" memo Lewinsky had given to Tripp. (If they had, it was arguably obstruction of justice.) The information in question was a letter that Tripp had sent to *Newsweek* five months earlier, in August 1997, which seemed to use some of the same language as the talking points. The similarity suggested that the mysterious talking points memo had emerged as a result of conversations between Tripp and Lewinsky rather than by dictation from White House lawyers.

It is true that, during the early days of the scandal, I "forgot" about the August 1997 letter. Blumenthal knows this only because I wrote about it in my book. But while Blumenthal quotes me writing about my imperfect memory, he ignores the very next sentence in the book—one that demolishes his implication that I was concealing exculpatory evidence about the president from the readers of *Newsweek*. That sentence (on Page 402 of *Uncovering Clinton*) states that as soon as I remembered the letter a few weeks into the scandal, "I pressed my editors for full disclosure as quickly as possible and *Newsweek*, in three separate issues over the ensuing months, cited the August 1997 Tripp letter as possibly casting doubt on the theory of secret White House authorship of the Talking Points."

Finally, Blumenthal writes somewhat comically that I "had been secretly meeting for years with David Brock," the disreputable right wing dirt-digger who was serving as Blumenthal's spy on the

world of the elves and Starr's office throughout the Lewinsky scandal. Let's see. I can recall two or three meetings with Brock over the years—including a lunch in 1996—I agreed to show him some of my leftover reporting from the Paula Jones case in exchange for an advanced peek at his upcoming book on Hillary Clinton. But "secretly"? I'm a reporter. I'm quite sure I put the lunch down on my expense account. I didn't realize I was supposed to notify Sid Blumenthal as well.

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books

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Sid Blumenthal's personality problem.

By Timothy Noah

Tuesday, May 20, 2003, at 3:31 PM PT

Of the many delusions plaguing the right throughout the Clinton impeachment crisis, none was more peculiar than its belief that Sidney Blumenthal, a political journalist turned White House aide, stood at the white-hot center of the Clinton cabal. In truth, Blumenthal was a somewhat peripheral figure in the Clinton White House. One of roughly two dozen "assistants to the president," Blumenthal was Clinton's big-ideas man, the guy who got whisked into the Oval Office whenever the president wanted to consider his place in the cosmos. Blumenthal's principal task was to organize a series of conferences on the "Third Way," wherein marquee intellectuals and leaders from various countries gathered at swell places like Harold Acton's Tuscan Villa La Pietra to steer the course of history, as the cliché goes, past the Scylla of collectivism and the Charybdis of market fundamentalism. Perhaps the only sincere compliment I can pay Clinton's successor, George W. Bush, is that he doesn't go in for this sort of gum-beating.

There are moments in Blumenthal's new book, *The Clinton Wars*, when Blumenthal himself recognizes the oddity of his demonization. "I was wildly overestimated as a ubiquitous, omnipotent, and spectral presence at the White House," he writes, "a delusional Nostradamus, a dark sorcerer, a Rasputin." Most of the time, though, Blumenthal buys wholesale into a notion of himself as Clinton's indispensable man, the steadfast friend and aide who could see around corners that others couldn't.

This grandiose posture never did Blumenthal much good in the Clinton White House, but it helped him earn a reported $650,000 advance for this book, which is best understood as the work of two people whom I'll call "Good Sidney" and "Bad Sid."

At the punishing length of 802 pages, *The Clinton Wars* fully chronicles (as subjects of equal importance) both the Clinton presidency and Blumenthal's interactions with it. Blumenthal, we learn, introduced Clinton to Tony Blair before the latter was prime minister; set in motion Hillary

Clinton's New York Senate race (by advising the scandal-addled first lady to spend more time in New York, where people would "understand her and her concerns"); persuaded Clinton to pressure Argentina's Carlos Menem and other autocrats to grant more freedom to the press; gave Clinton the idea of organizing his 1996 State of the Union address around the idea of "one America"; and helped conceive something called the White House Millennium Council. (Blumenthal actually appears in more of the photographs used to illustrate the book and its cover than Clinton, its ostensible subject. One of these, an inadvertent echo of a famous Nixon resignation photo, shows an anguished Blumenthal embracing Hillary on the day of Clinton's impeachment as someone tears out a newspaper clipping in the background. Who's that man with Sid Blumenthal? Oh, the president.)

Blumenthal would have done better to heed the dictates of his ego and write a shorter book focused tightly on his experience as an adviser to the Clinton presidency, which began well before he abandoned his perch at *The New Yorker* for a nook in the West Wing. Blumenthal's analysis of the Clinton presidency is sound on most of the policy particulars. He lauds Clinton's elimination of the deficit, expansion of the earned income tax credit, co-option of welfare reform, and conduct of the war in Kosovo; he criticizes Clinton's fumbles on gays in the military, health care, Rwanda, and Bosnia. He also provides a tiny handful of colorful insider details—let the record show that Stephen Spielberg taught Clinton the card game "Oh, Hell." But the prose frequently lapses into fawning cliché ("The Oklahoma City tragedy was a shock, but Clinton emerged from its whirlwind as a commanding figure") and historical digression ("The earliest records of slavery in the New World are to be found in St. Augustine, Florida," he writes, by way of introducing the topic of 2000's disputed Florida "long count"). This is Good Sidney, chronicler of civilization's march and organizer of Third Way conferences, straining to pronounce the meaning of the 21st century as Henry Adams did the early 20th.

I much prefer Bad Sid, author of the bracingly disrespectful *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment* and a 1985 *Washington Post* dissection of Star Wars advocate Greg Fossedal that remains the definitive portrait of that Reagan-spawned phenomenon, the Young Conservative Ideologue on the Make. Bad Sid isn't vicious or evil or a teller of lies, as the right believes. (Anyone who bothers to read this book will discover that his reputation as a hard leftist is way off the mark. Hard leftists don't preach a Third Way.) He *is* somewhat conspiracy-minded but states in the book that he took no offense at the nickname his White House colleagues pinned on him, "Grassy Knoll," and seems able to joke about it. During the 1990s I spent some pleasant times listening to Bad Sid dish from his front porch. (I should disclose here that Bad Sid and I are longtime acquaintances, and that the porch is now mine, my wife and I having bought the house in the waning months of the Clinton presidency. The principal conflict this transaction creates for me as reviewer—*caveat emptor!*—is heightened interest in a photograph of Tony Blair and Hillary Clinton standing in what is now my dining room.)

Most of the memoir portions of Blumenthal's book are written by Bad Sid, who has an interesting story to tell. The day he arrived at the White House, the *Drudge Report* accused him falsely of beating his wife, prompting Bad Sid to file a libel suit aimed at securing not only a retraction (which Drudge posted swiftly), but the names of those who had spread the vile rumor. One of these was almost certainly John Fund, a *Wall Street Journal* editorialist who volunteered, "I'm sorry for the mistake I made about you," which Blumenthal, quite reasonably, construes as a confession.

Bad Sid stumbled into the impeachment drama a few days after the Monica Lewinsky story broke, when Clinton called him into the White House and denied that he'd had a sexual relationship with Lewinsky. Clinton said she'd made a sexual advance that he'd rebuffed and that she'd become, in essence, a stalker. Like Clinton's earlier testimony in Paula Jones' sexual harassment lawsuit, this was untrue, and the House impeachment managers would subsequently try to argue that Blumenthal and Clinton had plotted together to obstruct justice by spreading false stories about Lewinsky. It was a ridiculous allegation, much less plausible than the Starr Report's claim that Clinton had coached his secretary, Betty Currie, to give false testimony about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. But when three witnesses were finally chosen to appear in Clinton's Senate trial, it was Blumenthal, not Currie, who was made to testify along with Lewinsky. Currie was bypassed out of fear that she would be too sympathetic a victim of congressional bullying and because the Republicans were nervous about how it would look if they cross-examined two blacks. (The second being Vernon Jordan, a former civil rights leader and Clinton friend who'd tried to get Lewinsky a job.) Bad Sid, the House managers figured, would come across unsympathetically and might even be so rude about Lewinsky that he'd provoke her into becoming a friendly witness.

Bad Sid's description of his Senate trial deposition is the best thing in the book. He portrays Rep. Lindsey Graham, the House manager who questioned him, as a befuddled bumpkin, raking his hand through his hair, jiggling his leg, and groping clumsily through his pockets for notes:

> Senator Specter's irritation at Graham's ineptitude was obvious, and he began to refer to him as "Congressman Lindsey." … "Perhaps," he said to Graham, "you can avoid [objection from Blumenthal's attorney] by just pinpointing [your question] a little more."
>
> "Yes," Graham replied. "We'll try to be laser-like in these questions." He rambled on about strategy meetings in the White House, whether we had been alarmed, whether we thought the scandal was a "bad story," and then he eventually circled back to his conspiracy theory.

The partisan hysteria surrounding Clinton's impeachment created so much mayhem on Capitol Hill that the articles of impeachment never included Clinton's perjury in the Jones case, the one crime we know that Clinton committed. Bad Sid isn't quite bad enough to underscore that irony. Ever the

loyal friend and aide, he edges close to endorsing Clinton's ridiculous claim that he hadn't lied in the Jones deposition because blow jobs didn't constitute sexual relations. It was, looking back, a singularly unedifying episode in American history, one that Good Sidney portrays as a culmination of the Republican Party's flight during the last four decades from any semblance of honorable purpose. The GOP may not need conferences in Italian villas, but it could certainly use a Third Way. Who wants to be the next Sidney Blumenthal?

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books

The War Room

What Robert Dallek's new biography doesn't tell you about JFK and Vietnam.

By Fred Kaplan

Monday, May 19, 2003, at 4:31 PM PT

Would John F. Kennedy have gone to full-scale war in Vietnam, like his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson? This may be the most haunting question of the past 40 years. Certainly it accounts for whatever traces still survive of the "Camelot myth." For all the revelations of scandal that have tainted the image of JFK, there remains the monumental *what if*: Had Kennedy dodged the bullets in Dealey Plaza, might America have dodged the nightmare of the subsequent decade—the 50,000 body bags, the Chicago riots, the election of Nixon, the cynicism of a generation?

The historian Robert Dallek doesn't state the matter this dramatically, but his new book, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*, argues that JFK would not have waged war in Vietnam. I agree. But if I didn't, this book would not have persuaded me. There's a compelling case to be made, but Dallek doesn't nail it.

Dallek musters familiar quotations, cited by many before him, in which JFK expressed deep reluctance to wade into the Vietnam quagmire—the memo ordering a 1,000-troop pullout, the interview with Walter Cronkite where he says the war is not ours but South Vietnam's, his assurances to Sen. Mike Mansfield that he'll get out after winning the '64 election.

But this sort of evidence is suggestive, at best. For instance, there's a tape recording from May 27, 1964, of Lyndon B. Johnson telling his national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, that he doesn't think Vietnam is "worth fighting for." Had Johnson dropped dead the next day (and had his successor continued to escalate) historians might now be arguing that LBJ would have pulled out of Vietnam had he lived.

What, then, *is* the compelling case for why JFK wouldn't have gone to war? Those who argue that JFK would have gone into Vietnam just as LBJ did make the point that Kennedy was every bit as

much a Cold Warrior as Johnson. They also note that the advisers who lured Johnson into war—Bundy, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and the rest—had been appointed by Kennedy; they were very much Kennedy's men.

But this is where there is a crucial difference between JFK and LBJ—a difference that Dallek misses. Over the course of his 1,000 days as president, Kennedy grew increasingly leery of these advisers. He found himself embroiled in too many crises where their judgment proved wrong and his own proved right. Dallek does note—and very colorfully so—Kennedy's many conflicts with his military advisers in the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But he neglects the instances—which grew in number and intensity as his term progressed—in which he displayed equal disenchantment with his civilian advisers. Yet Kennedy never told Johnson about this disenchantment. It didn't help that Johnson was a bit cowed by these advisers' intellectual sheen and Harvard degrees; Kennedy, who had his Harvard degree, was not.

A turning point in Kennedy's relationship to his advisers took place a little more than a year before Kennedy's assassination, in October 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In those 13 days when the United States and the U.S.S.R. nearly engulfed the world in nuclear war, Kennedy assembled his top advisers to discuss what to do about the situation: Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had been caught secretly shipping nuclear missiles to Cuba, 90 miles off American shores. The CIA estimated the missiles would be up and armed in a matter of weeks, easily capable of wiping out huge swaths of the United States.

For 20 years, the historical accounts of the crisis painted a dramatic scene where half the president's advisers urged him to bomb the missiles pre-emptively, half urged him to seek a diplomatic solution, and JFK himself took a middle course—a naval blockade instead of a direct attack—that forced Khrushchev to back down.

Then, in 1982, several of these advisers revealed that, in fact, JFK had settled the crisis by cutting a secret deal with Khrushchev: The Soviets would remove their nuclear missiles from Cuba; the United States would remove its nuclear missiles from Turkey.

Dallek recounts this story, of course, and quotes at some length from Kennedy's secret tapes of the sessions with his advisers (the so-called ExComm meetings, for the "Executive Committee of the National Security Council"), which have gradually been declassified over the past 15 years.

However, Dallek fails to note the key revelation of those tapes—that on Saturday, Oct. 27, the last day of the crisis, when Khrushchev offered the Cuba-for-Turkey trade, every U.S. official in the room was virulently opposed to the deal and wanted to bomb the Russian missile sites—everyone but JFK and Undersecretary of State George Ball. (Not insignificantly, Ball became the top internal dissident on Vietnam policy during LBJ's presidency.)

When Khrushchev's offer came over the wire, Kennedy immediately spoke in favor of it. He can be heard on the tapes saying, "To any man at the United Nations, or any other rational man, it will look like a very fair trade. … Most people think that if you're allowed an even trade, you ought to take advantage of it."

Bundy protested most passionately. You can hear him quivering as he says, "I think we should tell you … the universal assessment of everyone in the government who's connected with alliance problems—if we appear to be trading the defense of Turkey for the threat in Cuba, we will face a radical decline."

McNamara expressed firm opposition to the trade, then recited a series of steps that needed to be taken "before we attack Cuba." The attack plan, drawn up a few days earlier by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and endorsed by McNamara, called for 500 conventional bombing sorties of the Soviet missile sites and air bases daily for seven days, followed by an invasion of Cuba.

Kennedy, remarkably calm, mused, "I'm just thinking about what we're going to have to do in a day or so. … 500 sorties … and possibly an invasion, all because we wouldn't take missiles out of Turkey. And we all know how quickly everybody's courage goes when the blood starts to flow, and that's what's going to happen in NATO ... when we start these things and the Soviets grab Berlin, and everybody's going to say, 'Well, this Khrushchev offer was a pretty good proposition.' " (For more excerpts from the tapes, click here.)

That evening, JFK called his closest advisers into the Oval Office and said he was sending his brother (who bitterly opposed the trade) to tell the Soviet ambassador that he was accepting the deal, as long as it was never publicly revealed. Significantly, Lyndon Johnson (who was also against the trade) was not at this meeting. Nor was he among those let in on the secret.

This is telling for several reasons. Bundy later admitted that hushing up the missile trade had catastrophic consequences for the Vietnam War and foreign policy generally. He wrote in his 1988 memoir, *Danger and Survival*, "We misled our colleagues, our countrymen, our successors, and our allies" into believing "that it had been enough to stand firm on that Saturday." Richard Nixon often cited the pseudo-lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis to justify his tough bargaining stance with the North Vietnamese. Johnson not only learned the same false lessons, but was deprived of the opportunity to see that Kennedy didn't always agree with his smart advisers.

Indeed, the secret tapes are rife with examples of JFK's challenging the wisdom of Bundy, McNamara, and the other architects-to-be of Vietnam. These disputes show up nowhere in Dallek's biography. Yet the argument that Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam becomes truly compelling only when you place his skepticism about the war in the context of his growing

disenchantment with his advisers—and, by contrast, his failure to share this view with Johnson.

Long before "the best and the brightest" became a term of irony, Kennedy realized that they could be as wrong as anybody. Kennedy knew he could trust his instincts; Johnson was insecure about trusting his. That is why LBJ plunged into Vietnam—and why JFK would not have.

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Johnson, like Kennedy before him and Nixon after, tape-recorded many of his meetings. On May 27, 1964, he said to Bundy (as transcribed by Michael Beschloss in his book *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes 1963-64*):

> It looks to me like we're getting into another Korea. It just worries the hell out of me. I don't see what we can ever hope to get out of there with, once we're committed. I believe that the Chinese Communists are coming into it. I don't think that we can fight them 10,000 miles away from home. … I don't think it's worth fighting for and I don't think that we can get out. It's just the biggest damned mess that I ever saw.

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The definitive accounts until the mid-1980s were two memoirs by JFK advisers—*Kennedy* by his speechwriter Theodore Sorensen and *A Thousand Days* by the "palace historian," Arthur Schlesinger. Sorensen, who sat in on the ExComm meetings, later admitted that he deliberately falsified the section on the Cuban Missile Crisis, which reports that Kennedy rejected Khrushchev's missile-trade offer as "propaganda." Schlesinger, who took no part in the meetings, simply wrote down the lies that Sorensen and others told him. The impression one gets from these accounts is that Kennedy simply stared Khrushchev down, and Khrushchev surrendered. There is no talk of a bargained settlement. Robert Kennedy's memoir, *Thirteen Days*, which was published after RFK was assassinated in 1968, was based on diaries that he kept during the crisis. Sorensen told me a few years ago that he had edited the diaries and deleted some of the material on the

missile trade. For example, in the section on the Saturday night meeting with the Soviet ambassador, the memoir as edited gives the impression that RFK brought up the matter of a missile trade informally. One almost gets the sense that it's his own idea. Ironically, in a 1971 revised edition of his scathingly revisionist book *The Kennedy Imprisonment*, Garry Wills cites this chapter as evidence of RFK's incipient dovishness, contrasting him to his hawkish and macho brother. The irony is that in October 1962, RFK was the hawkish Kennedy and JFK, by comparison, the dove. Wills' view of JFK is based on a libertarian reading of Sorensen's fabrication.

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If you think McNamara was a rock of reason back then, listen to his Strangelovian reasoning on why to reject Khrushchev's missile-trade deal. "We must be prepared to attack Cuba quickly, that's my first proposition," McNamara begins in a nervous tone. "Now, the second proposition. When we attack Cuba, we're going to have to attack with an *all-out* attack … The third proposition is that if we do this and leave those missiles in Turkey, the Soviet Union may—and I think probably will—attack the Turkish missiles. Now the fourth proposition is: If the Soviet Union attacks the Turkish missiles, we must respond with conventional weapons … against Soviet warships and/or naval bases in the Black Sea area. Now that, to me, is the absolute minimum, and I would say that it is damned dangerous … Now, I'm not sure we can avoid anything like that if we attack Cuba, but I think we should make every effort to avoid it, and one way to avoid it is to defuse the Turkish missiles before we attack Cuba."

This is so plumb crazy that even Lyndon Johnson, who has said almost nothing until now, can't stand it. "Bob," he says with clear exasperation, "if you're willing to give up your missiles in Turkey, why don't you say that to Khrushchev and say we're cutting a trade, make the trade there? Save all the invasions and the lives?" (Later in the meeting, Johnson makes it clear that he opposes taking Khrushchev's deal; his protest here seems to be driven by an unwillingness to give up the Turkish missiles at all.)

(It's too bad that Johnson didn't remember this exchange a couple years later while listening to McNamara spell out the reasons for bombing North Vietnam.)

There's also a classic exchange between McGeorge Bundy and George Ball, which foretells many an argument that would take place over Vietnam. Ball agrees with JFK on the missile trade, noting

that the U.S. Navy's new Polaris submarines, which are equipped with nuclear missiles, will be sent to the Mediterranean in a few months; they'll provide Turkey with a more secure defense. "These things," Ball says of the land-based Jupiter missiles in Turkey, "are obsolete anyway."

Bundy doesn't like this turn of events. "And what's left of NATO?" he asks glumly.

Ball replies, "I don't think NATO's going to be wrecked, and if NATO isn't any better than that, it isn't that good to us."

Again, you will come across nothing remotely resembling any of these exchanges in Dallek's book.

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In this rather brave passage, Bundy takes responsibility for perpetuating the Vietnam War even after he, McNamara, and Johnson had left office. In *The Kennedy Imprisonment*, Garry Wills, who didn't know about the secret missile-trade deal any more than Johnson or Nixon did, wrote that the official lesson from the missile crisis (or at least what Sorensen, Bundy, and the others had previously said was the lesson)—stand firm, never negotiate—was what Johnson and Nixon disastrously "applied year after year in Vietnam."

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A few words on these tapes. JFK, wanting a reliable means of recording what happens in historically important meetings, secretly set up a tape-recording system in various parts of the White House in July 1962. Generally, the system was activated by a push of the button. Among officials present, only he and RFK knew the reels were spinning. The Kennedy Library began to declassify transcripts, then actual tapes, in the mid-1980s. (I would argue that Bundy, Sorensen, and McNamara decided to reveal the secret missile-trade deal in 1982 because they knew that the tapes from the ExComm meetings would soon be released. They decided to put a little spin on the truth ahead of time. For instance, they did not say in 1982 that they had all opposed the trade and

that, in fact, with the exception of George Ball, JFK was the only person in the room who favored the idea.) In 1997, Harvard University Press published a book-length transcript of the Cuban Missile Crisis tapes called *The Kennedy Tapes*, edited by Philip Zelikow and Ernest May. It was a dreadful tome, full of inaccuracies and bereft of analysis. In 2001, Norton published *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy*, a three-volume collection of all the recordings, on a variety of topics, up to the end of '62. (Three more volumes covering 1963 are due out this year.) Zelikow was involved in editing these transcripts as well and did a much more careful job. Even so, Sheldon Stern, the retired historian of the JFK Library, is about to come out with his own tapes-based narrative of the crisis, which, he tells me, will include a 15-page appendix citing 100 substantive errors." Some of Zelikow's problems may have been caused by the noise-reduction processing that he used in making copies of the (often quite noisy) tapes. As most audio engineers know, noise reduction eliminates hiss, not random room noise. The frequency of hiss is very similar to the frequency of the tongue and lip-smacking sounds formed when people pronounce the letters "p," "t," "d," and so forth. Unless done very expertly, noise reduction can render the human voice less intelligible.

The citations from the tapes that appear here are based on my own listening and transcribing, as well as some consultations with Stern.

One more note: Some have wondered if Kennedy comes off so good on these tapes because he knew that the mikes were on and tape running. This is extremely unlikely. First, he would never have thought these tapes would be made public. Second, RFK also knew about the tapes, yet he and JFK disagreed on many matters. Third, and more to the point, it would have been impossible to know, in the middle of a crisis, what it means to "look good." Kennedy opposed attacking the Soviet missile sites. This looks smart today. But if Khrushchev hadn't offered the missile trade, hadn't backed down, and had proceeded to put nuclear warheads on the missiles, it would not have looked so smart.

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This may have been Kennedy's most unforgivable error. The most remarkable thing about Dallek's book is its detailed cataloging of JFK's vast array of illnesses. It is amazing that JFK lived into his 20s, much less that he could keep his cool under the tremendous, nearly nonstop pressures of the years when he was president. Knowing of his extreme fragility, JFK was grossly irresponsible in not keeping his vice president (i.e., his not-at-all-unlikely successor) better-informed of his views.

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bushisms

Bushism of the Day

By Jacob Weisberg

Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 8:33 AM PT

"All up and down the different aspects of our society, we had meaningful discussions. Not only in the Cabinet Room, but prior to this and after this day, our secretaries, respective secretaries, will continue to interact to create the conditions necessary for prosperity to reign."—Washington, D.C., May 19, 2003

Got a Bushism? Send it to bushisms@slate.com.

For more, see "The Complete Bushisms."

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bushisms

Bushism of the Day

By Jacob Weisberg

Wednesday, May 21, 2003, at 10:30 AM PT

"First, let me make it very clear, poor people aren't necessarily killers. Just because you happen to be not rich doesn't mean you're willing to kill."—Washington, D.C., May 19, 2003

Got a Bushism? Send it to bushisms@slate.com.

For more, see "The Complete Bushisms."

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chatterbox

Sid Blumenthal Framed, Part 2

When Chatterbox disproves a canard, he expects it to stay disproved.

By Timothy Noah

Wednesday, May 21, 2003, at 2:14 PM PT

Michael Isikoff's ***Slate*** review of Sidney Blumenthal's *The Clinton Wars* repeats a canard that Chatterbox thought he put to rest five years ago. (See "Sid Blumenthal Framed!" To read

Chatterbox's own review of the Blumenthal book, click here.) The false accusation—also leveled in a tendentious footnote to Isikoff's otherwise excellent 1999 book *Uncovering Clinton*—is that Blumenthal conned the press when, on emerging from his first appearance before Ken Starr's grand jury, he said the Monicagate prosecutors had pestered him about his conversations with reporters. Isikoff claims this was shown to be untrue when Blumenthal's testimony was later made public. Not so. Blumenthal told the truth.

"I never imagined that in America," Blumenthal told the press stakeout assembled that day on the courthouse steps, "I would be hauled before a federal grand jury to answer questions about my conversations with members of the media." Starr's prosecutors, he said, had "demanded to know what I had told reporters and what reporters had said to me about Ken Starr's prosecutors. If they think they have intimidated me, they have failed."

This peroration can be faulted for being melodramatic, but not for being inaccurate. In *The Clinton Wars*, Blumenthal provides a more detailed description, one Isikoff can't dispute because it matches the grand jury transcript:

> **The prosecutor said, "Did you distribute [talking points denigrating Kenneth Starr's prosecution team produced by the Democratic National Committee] to anyone outside the White House?" This question was aimed directly at my contacts with the media. I responded by listing the news organizations I had dealt with most recently. By grouping them together I hoped to avoid intrusive questions picking apart my relations with individual reporters: "If reporters called me or I spoke with reporters, I would tell them to call the DNC to get those talking points, and those included news organizations ranging from CNN, CBS, ABC, *New York Times*, New York *Daily News*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Observer*, *LA Times*."**
>
> **"Would you, though, distribute the talking points? Would you cause the talking points to be distributed to any of these news organizations?"**
>
> **In order to break the pattern of these invasive questions, I went out of the room to consult my attorney.**

Isikoff says that Blumenthal "wasn't asked about any news organizations at all" and speculates that he volunteered the names of the news organizations "so he could later claim that the questioning was more sinister than it really was." But whom does Isikoff suppose the prosecutors had in mind when they asked Blumenthal about distributing DNC talking points "outside the White House"? Blumenthal's cleaning lady? They meant, of course, the press. Indeed, "sources familiar with the testimony" cited in a *Washington Post* story that day confirm that Blumenthal was asked

"questions about his contacts with the press." Since Blumenthal and his lawyers were speaking freely on the record, these "sources" familiar with a secret proceeding had to be either grand jurors or, more likely, prosecutors. (It's well-documented that Starr's office leaked like a sieve.) If Blumenthal said he was asked about press contacts, and the party questioning him said he was asked about press contacts, why should Isikoff dispute that?

Blumenthal's explanation for why he named particular news organizations—that he hoped it would pre-empt any attempt by the prosecutors to find out which particular reporters he'd spoken to—is extremely plausible. In any event, the question of whether Blumenthal had leaked DNC material to the press had no bearing on whether Clinton, Blumenthal, or anyone else had committed any crime. Blumenthal's dishing DNC dirt about Starr was none of Starr's business, and Blumenthal was right to be angry he was asked about it.

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chatterbox

Fleischer Tells Truth!

Is he leaving because he's lost his touch?

By Timothy Noah

Monday, May 19, 2003, at 1:27 PM PT

Ari Fleischer will soon relinquish the post of press secretary to President Bush. Might the reason be that he was starting to tell the truth?

Fleischer was, in his prime, an energetic teller of lies on behalf of the Bush administration, responsible for no fewer than three entries in Chatterbox's "Whopper of the Week" archives. (To sample Fleischer's work, click here, here, and here; note that this last Whopper item, a doubleheader, documents *two* lies.) Several times, Chatterbox bypassed Fleischer howlers to avoid tedium. Recently, however, Chatterbox weakened and composed a Fleischer Whopper built around Fleischer's obviously false claim that President Bush had flown by military jet to the carrier the USS *Abraham Lincoln* (thereby creating a gorgeous photo op) because the *Lincoln* was too far offshore to accommodate travel by helicopter.

In the course of writing this Whopper, it dawned on Chatterbox that this was *not* a Whopper because it couldn't be demonstrated that Fleischer's statement had been false. Pondering the matter further, Chatterbox came to believe Fleischer's self-exculpating explanation for the statement was *true*! Chatterbox aborted his mission.

Here are the circumstances of Fleischer's pseudo-Whopper. On May 1, Fleischer described President Bush's pending visit to the *Lincoln*. He said Bush would be flying on a Navy S-3B

Viking jet. Fleischer was asked "how far offshore" the carrier was, and whether it could be described in "hundreds" of miles. Fleischer said he didn't know, but would find out. Eventually, Fleischer told reporters that the carrier *would* be hundreds of miles offshore, and therefore too far to get to by Marine helicopter. That meant the picturesque flight by military jet was dictated by necessity. In the event, however, the *Lincoln* turned out to be a mere 30 miles off shore. This caused the White House press corps to say that Fleischer had lied, as he had so many times before.

But let's look at how Fleischer explained himself on May 6:

> ***Q:*** **The other question about numbers is just to set the record straight. On the visit to the aircraft carrier, I believe you told us from this podium that the reason the President had to take a jet out was because the carrier would be hundreds of miles offshore. And as it turned out, it was way, way less than that.**
>
> ***Fleischer*****: Correct. Correct.**
>
> ***Q*****: Were you misled?**
>
> ***Fleischer*****: No, the original planning was exactly as I said and when I—when I announced it, that was exactly how the plan had been anticipated. And then, the President wanted to land, exactly as I told you on the flight out there, which was the day of the trip when we knew the exact—or when we knew how close the carrier was. The President wanted to land on it, on an aircraft that would allow him to see an aircraft landing the same way that the pilots saw an aircraft landing. He wanted to see it as realistically as possible. And that's why, once the initial decision was made to fly out on the Viking, even when a helicopter option became doable, the President decided instead he wanted to still take the Viking. But, no, that was all part of the original planning.**

Chatterbox doesn't see how anyone can use this to prove that Fleischer lied. Fleischer said, in essence, that circumstances had changed, and that Bush was told the costly flight by military jet could no longer be justified on the grounds of necessity. Yet Bush was so wedded to the idea of flying by jet that he more or less said, Cost be damned, I want to fly a jet. This explanation is not especially flattering to the Bush administration. It pretty much proves the press's underlying (and somewhat petty) point that taxpayer dollars were wasted so that Bush could be photographed in a flight suit. It gets Fleischer off the hook, but leaves Bush on the hook. This is precisely what a press secretary is never supposed to do. Sometimes, though, you have to, if you want to tell the truth.

A conspiracy-minded person might speculate that Fleischer created a false alibi that shifted blame

to Bush because he knew he was headed out the door anyway. But assuming Fleischer wants a future in public relations, he must know that you don't improve your marketability by burning the client. The only really satisfying explanation is that Fleischer was telling the truth. The guy is obviously burnt out.

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culturebox

Cellini's Stellar Cellar

The mystery of the saltcellar with the sky-high price.

By Jim Lewis

Friday, May 23, 2003, at 8:43 AM PT

On May 11, thieves stole a saltcellar worth $58,000,000 from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Austria. I'll give you a moment to ponder the conjunction of a piece of tableware and all those zeros, and then we'll begin again.

Benvenuto Cellini was a 16th-century Florentine sculptor and goldsmith. According to his *Autobiography*, itself one of the masterpieces of the Renaissance time period, he led an especially colorful life, full of brawls, feuds, and clandestine bouts of buggery. He confessed to three murders and was several times imprisoned, in one instance breaking out of the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome by climbing down a homemade rope of knotted bedsheets.

Despite these distractions, his career proceeded apace. As a boy, he had apprenticed with a local craftsman and then studied briefly with Michelangelo. His skills were undeniable, and so was his conniving. He was, in many ways, a monstrous man—a terrible braggart, vain, egotistical, and self-serving. He was obsequious to his benefactors (among them two popes, one of the Medicis, and King Francis I of France) and savagely dismissive of his competitors. But he knew how to create luxurious objects, and the tone of the times was just right for his flourishes.

As Cellini reached adulthood, Italian art was entering into its Mannerist phase. The discoveries of the Renaissance—perspective, knowledge of the human form, heightened compositional sophistication—had been assimilated into visual culture. Now it was time to get playful, to push style to its limits, to overdo everything that could be overdone—just the sort of thing Cellini was good at. For some years, he fashioned medallions and the like for popes and cardinals; in his 40s he finally got the chance to produce full-scale sculpture, most notably a statue of Perseus beheading Medusa that now stands in the Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence.

And then there was the saltcellar. Cellini made the thing of gold, enamel, and ivory between 1540 and 1544, on commission for the king of France. On it there are two recumbent figures: One

represents the Earth, with a miniature temple by her side where peppercorns were to be stored; the other represents the sea, with a boat beside him for holding salt. Additional reclining figures, representing winds and the times of day, are carved into the base upon which the whole thing stands. It measures about 10 inches by 13 inches, and it remains, to this day, one of the most striking and celebrated works of Mannerist design—indeed, the very emblem of that era's excesses. According to Cellini, the king himself "gasped in amazement and could not take his eyes off it." No other work of Cellini's goldsmithing survives.

The thieves who took it had a laughably easy job: They broke into the museum at about 4 a.m., setting off an alarm that a guard then immediately reset, assuming it was a glitch in the security system. It was four hours before anyone noticed the saltcellar was gone; Interpol was then called in and the enormous price tag released to the press.

The figure they cited is stunning, and no wonder: It comes out of an empyrean that few objects ever visit. Art, like any other commodity, receives its worth partly from the quality of the artifact and partly from its scarcity. But the Cellini is unique—and not just in the sense in which all artworks are unique: Nothing even remotely like it exists. Lose a Warhol, and you can always get another one. Rembrandts are hard to find, but not impossible. But there's only one Cellini table piece.

It is, then, a peculiar thing to appraise. There is simply no precedent for such a thing being on the market. It's a national treasure; museums exist to acquire these sorts of artifacts, and no one ever sells them: To do so would be like hocking the Liberty Bell. Still, one can speculate about what would happen were such an auction to take place. "It's an icon of its period," David Redden, vice chairman of Sotheby's, says of the saltcellar. "It's a sensational piece; it's extraordinary. There's nothing else like it. It would be desired by every great museum in the world, every great collection in the world. It's our view that $58 million is, if anything, much too low. We could be talking nine figures." Which would be a record sale, by many millions of dollars.

But the same forces that make the Cellini so valuable at auction make it almost impossible to sell on the black market. A corrupt collector with, say, a stolen da Vinci drawing can probably hang it safely on his wall; only a specialist would know the provenance of the thing. But anyone who's taken an introductory art history class would recognize the Cellini at a yard sale. It's a hot potato: Show it, and you might as well be wearing a sign that says "Arrest me."

In truth, then, I misspoke when I said the piece was "worth" all that money since there's no possible market for it, no economic transaction in which it can function—except, perhaps, ransom or insurance. You can use the Cellini at your table, I suppose, in which case it's worth about as much as a pair of plastic salt and pepper shakers from Target: $3.98 or so. Beyond such practical terms, it's as worthless as it is priceless.

Well, this is fun, this talk of art and money; it's like a hyper-inflated episode of the *Antiques Roadshow*. But of course it's beside the point. For those of us—and it is most of us—who neither buy nor sell artworks, art is free, or nearly so. Gallery-going remains one of the only forms of cultural adventure that costs nothing at all, and many museums do not charge more than the price of a movie to get in and take a look. To the viewing public, then, art is worth only and exactly the pleasure they get from looking at it.

What's more, art is a public thing; it gets its meaning from the interaction of artist, material, and audience. And as the last of these diminishes to a single viewer, the worth of the object approaches nil. The loss of the Cellini is heartbreaking, but there's a chance it will be recovered; these things often are. In the meantime there's this small consolation: If whoever has it paid more than $3.98 for it, he got rooked.

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dear prudence
Love Bytes
Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 8:35 AM PT

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

Dear Prudie,

I have been married for nearly 22 years. We have separated several times, and the last time I found out he had been seeing someone he met online and spending the weekends with her. I decided to forgive him and try one more time. Then I found out the computer was satisfying him, which was why we were never intimate anymore. Is it being unfaithful when someone has "sex" with a computer instead of his wife? How common is this? Within the last five years, we have been intimate maybe four times a year. Now he won't even touch me or tell me he loves me. I have finally moved out of the bedroom into my own room, and we have been living like this for about six months, just as housemates. What kind of marriage is this?

—Lonely

Dear Lone,

It is a marriage that sounds as though it has run its course. It is hard to see a reason to hang on when your husband is a serial philanderer, showers you with indifference, and has marital sex on a quarterly basis but enjoys it frequently with a computer (though Prudie is not exactly sure what you mean by that, she has an idea). As housemates go, it is a good bet that you can do much

better—and without the aggravation. Make the next separation your last. That is, make it permanent.

—Prudie, forwardly

Dear Prudie,

I have met the man of my dreams (sigh). He is an awesome father, a thoughtful partner, and a wonderful lover. The problem is his ex-wife. We met while they were separated, and she still harbors such profound resentment, I can hardly wrap my head around it. I, too, have been divorced and know the pain of it, but she has taken this to a whole new level. She has called my mom, my boss, and even MY ex-husband to vent about my relationship with "Steve." She is incredibly verbally abusive to Steve and uses profanity in an almost artistic fashion in front of their teenage girls. She also only refers to me as "the slut" to her daughters. In that marriage she was loveless, both sexually (eight years without physical contact) and emotionally, so I don't think she misses Steve. I am concerned for the damage she is doing to these two girls and wish desperately for peace. Should I try writing her a letter of truce? Any other ideas? P.S.: Steve has kindly and firmly requested that she stop this behavior, but that only seemed to make it worse. HELP, PRUDIE!!

—Peace-Lover in Iowa

Dear Pea,

The ex is a head case. And you say that this trouble-making, profane woman doesn't even miss him, so her angry and punitive behavior has clearly been driving the situation. Forget writing her a letter. If "Steve" tried and it inflamed her, imagine if one came from you. It would be useful not to respond to any of her outbursts and try to explain to the teenagers that their mother's responses are troubled—something they undoubtedly already know. *If* Steve decides she is actively mucking up the girls' lives with her vitriol and her temper, then perhaps you two should consider having them with you. As for the recipients of her phone calls, everyone's got her number, so to speak, so don't even give that a thought. Hell hath no fury like a nutty ex-wife.

—Prudie, distantly

Dear Pru,

I'm currently involved in a long-distance relationship with a wonderful woman. As with all relationships, we've had our ups and downs, but we've always managed to keep our problems manageable by discussing issues as soon as they arise and not letting things simmer. About a month ago, an old high-school friend of hers came back into her life, which thrilled her because

she'd been feeling a bit out of place in her old hometown. This friend, however, soon began expressing a romantic interest in her. She told him that she was in a loving relationship, that she liked hanging out with him but gave him a cease-and-desist order on the romantic advances. He hasn't stopped, despite his promises to the contrary. It makes her uncomfortable, but he's been, she says, a good friend, and she feels guilty if she tries to tell him to get out of her life. Personally, I feel that his continued advances, despite her requests that he stop, show an utter lack of respect for her. I feel awkward telling her this, though, because I feel it's going to come across as though I don't trust her hanging out with him and that she will feel that my protests are based in jealousy, not a genuine assessment of the friend's character. I want her to have friends locally, especially considering that I can't be there if she should need me (well, barring a four-hour flight). However, this friend isn't good for her, in my opinion, much less our relationship. Is this just my jealousy talking, or is the friend in question out of line?

—Stewing

Dear Stew,

The friend in question is out of line. If your inamorata has invited him to retreat from the romantic approaches and he has not, then she needs to do without this particular hometown boy. A woman cannot be involved in a romance, even a long-distance one, and have some guy mooning around who won't take no for an answer.

—Prudie, definitively

Dear Prudence,

I am a cake decorator and instructor by trade, as well as an avid cook. It's my hobby and the way I unwind. Because I love to cook and experiment with candy, cakes, cookies, etc., when I am asked to bring food to an event (such as my 5-year-old's class party), I bring fun items I've made. I've been dubbed "Martha Stewart" and "Susie Homemaker" by other moms. I guess that is a compliment of sorts. A couple of moms, however, always seem to have a comment that makes me uncomfortable. One has said, "Oh, I hate you, in a good sort of way." Another commented to me recently that my daughter's Valentine party at our house was just me "wanting a reason to make a cake." That same lady told me at the class Christmas party that she thought of making candy, but she "knew I'd show up with my perfect candy and make everyone feel bad." My husband says to let it roll off my back because those moms don't know how to just say that they admire what I do. I know he is probably right, but I get tired of those comments over and over. Is there a kind way to let them know that I just do what I do for fun and that anyone can do it if they just take time to learn?

—No Showoff

Dear No,

What odd acquaintances you have. Most women just say, "How great!" or "If only I could bake like that." Your husband is correct, however, about these women admiring your skills and perhaps being envious. And Prudie is not so sure they even want to learn how to bake. Sometimes people just want to say *something*, and what comes out is not always the right thing. Next time there is a remark you don't care for, just smile.

—Prudie, sweetly

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diary
By Brooke Williams
Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 12:32 PM PT

Subject: Entry 1
Posted Monday, May 19, 2003, at 12:33 PM PT

The prospect of writing this Diary is somewhat daunting to me because I am not actually a writer at all. (Except, maybe, a writer of the occasional list.) I do lots of things—play music, model, act in commercials—though I am primarily a photographer (at least in terms of bread-winning). But even within that category, it gets messy. I hate when people ask me what kind of photography I "do" because a) you don't really "do" photography and b) I've never really come up with a good one-line answer to that question. I basically just take photographs of whatever I see. I am an obsessive recorder of memories … and they can take all shapes. Maybe they are images of my old car (a 1966 Plymouth Valiant), which I frantically shot last month before I donated her to charity. Or maybe they are some of the spots I visited this weekend at the Pittsburgh airport while I waited (forever, it seemed) for my plane back to New York. Usually when people ask me what I do, I just mutter something lame about editorial portraiture and album covers, and maybe, if they seem really interested, I talk to them about "fine art" and SX-70 Polaroid grids, and then, when their eyes glaze over, I change the subject back to them, which is what most people really want to talk about anyway.

I went to Pittsburgh to begin photographing a series of portraits of members of various African-American social clubs. (I am now, by the way, writing this in my apartment in Brooklyn.) These groups exist all over the country, but few people know about them. My mother is the national president of a club called the Northeasteners, a women's group founded in the 1920s. My mother's

mother in Baltimore was also a member, as were many of her friends. I remember growing up surrounded by the photographs of these women with their husbands, all dressed up at various events. They seemed so important and yet so remote at the same time. As I've gotten older and become more interested in the history of my family and culture, I've tried to make sense of where I fit into all of this—and eventually I realized that what I needed to do was simply record this world, in the same way that I have recorded so many other aspects of my life. To make a photographic list of all of these people and let their images speak for themselves.

The Northeasteners hold a national convention each year in a different city. This year's convention was in Pittsburgh, and, since my mother is the president and because it would have made my grandmother so happy, I decided that this was the year to go and photograph all these people at their big Saturday-night black-tie dinner and dance. I packed up my equipment (and some that I'd rented), hopped on a plane early Saturday morning, and off I went to the William Penn Hotel in far western Pennsylvania in search of a little piece of my heritage in the form of a couple hundred black people in fancy outfits.

The weekend was lovely and sentimental; I met so many women who told me stories about my grandmother and how much fun she was, how they've known my family for three generations … and on and on. Most important, they told me how happy they were that "a young person" was taking time to record, for posterity's sake, who they are and what they have achieved. I suddenly felt like I'd taken on this huge responsibility, and I wondered if I would be able to do it justice. On the other hand, surrounded by people who have been the one black kid in their class, or one of only three black executives at their office, I felt comfortable this weekend in a way that I rarely do in my everyday life. I felt honored to be among the people who have made it possible for me to do so many of the things I take almost for granted. I set up my camera and a light right outside the hotel's grand ballroom and talked to couple after couple, to mothers and daughters, to groups of friends, from all over the country. Everyone was so happy to have the opportunity—the luxury—to get together and learn a little bit about a different city and themselves at the same time. I guess I'm trying to learn a little bit about myself, too.

Subject: Entry 2
Posted Tuesday, May 20, 2003, at 2:28 PM PT

First off, a bit more background. Here's a picture of myself I took recently. Now you all know what I look like.

Yesterday afternoon I went to the International Contemporary Furniture Fair at the Jacob Javits

Center to spend a day posing as a design representative for my friend Adam Simha's small furniture company (MKS Design, in Cambridge, Mass.). Adam decided to have a booth at the fair this year, and, since you can really do something like that alone, he wisely lined up his New York-based friends to spend each of the four days with him, to help him answer questions, take orders, etc. I had a great time fantasizing about the furniture I'd like to buy and talking to all sorts of designers, architects, and (most important) press people about what a genius my friend is and how their lives won't be complete without buying or writing about his stuff. It's amazing how easy it is to sell things that are not your own. It probably took me two years to work up the nerve to propose the portraiture project to the Northeasteners (see yesterday's entry), while I had no problem talking to editors of large Italian design magazines about the brilliance of Adam's stainless steel chairs. All in all a successful day. (The food at the Javits Center being a minor exception—I tasted what I think may have been the worst scone ever created. Adam couldn't even swallow the bite he took; he had to run to the garbage can in the corner to spit it out.)

The fair ended around 5:30, and then I went back to Williamsburg, picked up my car (a Honda, graciously donated by my mother-in-law after the passing of the shark), and drove over to the Roebling Hall Gallery where my friend Courtney Smith was having a little closing party for an exhibit of her sculptures. (In line with what seems to be my theme for today, Courtney's current work is composed of altered pieces of furniture.) A group of us sat around a table, drank wine, and talked about art. My friend and Courtney's studio mate, Ellen Harvey—who refused to let me take her picture because of a bad haircut she had just given herself—is about to make a mosaic for the Queens Plaza subway station, and always has some great project idea up her sleeve. It is really an inspiration to spend time with these people, to watch how their work has grown and become recognized, to feel part of a vibrant community of creative and supportive people.

When I think about it, this is the point of almost everything I do. My obsessive list-making, whether it's a to-do list or, say, a photographic list of the attendees of the Saturday night dance in Pittsburgh, is an attempt to create some order in this chaotic world and to find my own place within it. The Northeasteners are actually doing a similar thing. In the 1920s, here was a bunch of educated African-American women, many of whom were professionals with stable economic lives, in a world that barely acknowledged their existence. So they created a network of friends, a symbolic place where they could feel comfortable being exactly who they were. Not altogether different from the group of artists sitting around the table drinking wine in Brooklyn (albeit quite a bit more organized).

One reason I think the Northeasteners are so happy that I've taken an interest in documenting their gatherings is that their relevance is constantly being challenged by younger generations. The world is a different place now; schools and lives are integrated, middle- and upper-middle-class blacks are a known commodity. (I mean, we have *The Cosby Show*, right?) So the question naturally

arises: Do we really need these groups and networks, or are they just holding us back? I myself have no definite answers. I am a self-employed artist and spend the majority of my time worrying about paying the rent, maybe a moment here and there thinking about a family of my own, now that I'm married. When would I have time to belong to a group like the Northeasteners? And yet over the past weekend, when I spent time with these women, some of whom I've known all of my life and some of whom I only just met, I felt that sense of community I am always searching for. By photographing these people, my extended family of sorts, I am staking a place for myself within that community—but on my own terms. I will be interested to see how my feelings change as I continue this project.

Subject: Entry 3
Posted Wednesday, May 21, 2003, at 3:32 PM PT

I was up this morning before 7, it's now well past midnight, and I still have miles to go before I sleep. I spent the day running errands because tomorrow morning I am leaving for Naples, Fla., where I'll be shooting a conference for minority women executives. Today my to-do list read something like this: move car (in Williamsburg, you have to alternate sides of the street to avoid being ticketed), write diary, get Josh out of bed (surprisingly difficult: He generally asks me to call his work—his own company—to tell them he's sick), file diary, check e-mail and general condition of studio, scout location for next week's Web-site shoot, get manicure/pedicure, take laundry to laundromat, buy film for Florida, pick up lens (a rental), go to drugstore for last-minute items, meet Josh at Lincoln Center for ballet, pack, and write today's diary. Unbelievably, I've actually accomplished almost everything on the list. But I am exhausted.

My photography studio is a huge loft in Greenpoint, which is the neighborhood just north of Williamsburg, the area in Brooklyn where I live. I've hardly been there at all this week and I miss it. At the moment I am working on several SX-70 Polaroid grids, and every time I stop in and don't have time to play with them, like today, I feel a little sad. The same goes for the musical part of my life. I have a little studio (rudimentary, but it works) in my Greenpoint loft that I've also neglected. Luckily I'm playing a live show soon (on June 10 at Pete's Candy Store in Williamsburg), or I wouldn't have set aside any time at all to play guitar the past few weeks. These days, I play solo under the name The New Black (because you never know, I may once again become a band someday).

I always have a hard time describing my music. I sing, play the guitar, and usually sample some kind of elemental beat and toy-keyboard sounds. It's fairly punk, in the original, unpolished sense; but it's also full of pretty melodies and it's got a bit of a groove. For the sake of comparison, I

would say my music is a mix of the Young Marble Giants, Joy Division, and maybe Goldfrapp without the strings. Yet even that's not quite right. I tell myself that it's better to make music that defies definition and hope desperately that I'm right. But I would be dishonest if I didn't admit that I try to imagine who might be the audience for my songs: Are they black or white? Are they teenagers? What posters do they have up in their rooms? I photographed a girl in Brooklyn for *Teen Vogue* who had a well-worn issue of *Adbusters* on her floor. ... I secretly hoped she would be one of my fans. This summer I'll (finally!) start recording an album of my own. I'd like a good portion of it to be as-yet unwritten material, which means I'll have to remember to take a keyboard with me to Florida. For some reason I do really well writing music in hotel rooms. This trip could be the breakthrough I've been waiting for.

The rest of my day was hectic as usual. The weather was sunny and beautiful, so the fact that I am my own messenger service (as well as bookkeeper, rep, roadie, and cleaning lady) was easier to bear. My manicure and pedicure made me feel like a lady, and they seemed necessary before spending five days with a bunch of high-level businesswomen. I had pizza on the street for lunch (thank God for New York City pizza), and got home just in time to change clothes and rush up to Lincoln Center for what I thought was going to be the ballet, but instead turned out to be an evening of Greek song and poetry (and one short ballet) in honor of the 2004 Athens Olympics. Josh became obsessed with one line from a song where the singer refers to himself as a shimmering light and his love as a little pomegranate. He has now taken to calling me his little pomegranate, which I would normally hate, but I have an enormously high level of tolerance for him—especially because he does things like cook a delicious dinner when we get home and try to stay awake while I finish writing. I'd take a picture of him asleep on the couch right now, but he might divorce me, so you'll all just have to use your imagination. Soon, I too will be blissfully asleep, though not for long. I have to get up at some ungodly hour to go to the studio and finish a few things before my 10:30 a.m. flight. Being rested is overrated anyway, right?

Subject: Entry 4
Posted Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 12:32 PM PT

It's 11:50 on Wednesday night, and I've just finished talking on the phone with my husband, who is currently stuck in traffic while trying to cross the Williamsburg Bridge to get home to Brooklyn. It turned out there was a construction tie-up, but of course I immediately assumed the delay was because of the heightened terrorist alert and the police checkpoints that always go along with that. I felt suddenly nauseated and worried about him, myself, and everyone else who lives in so-called "high-risk areas." Trying to go about a normal life with the awareness that you could, at any point, be blown to bits, or suffocated by a cloud of strange chemicals, or made deathly ill by a white powder, is next to impossible. Most days I simply ignore the stockpile of water at my house and

the first-aid kit in my car and pretend that nothing is wrong, but there are times, like today, when the reality is impossible to ignore. And days like this—when the alert is at orange and you have to cross a bridge or get on a plane—are hard. I have no idea how they do it in Israel.

Earlier today, I found myself on yet another airplane, this time headed down to Naples, Fla.—where the weather is a thousand times nicer than it's been all spring in New York—to photograph women at the Spa Odyssey business retreat. Organized by a remarkable woman named Linda Spradley-Dunn, the conference, now in its fourth year, brings over 400 female executives of color together in one place (this time it's the Ritz Carlton in Naples) to listen to speakers, hold seminars, indulge in spa treatments, and generally have a good time while networking up a storm. Linda has also decided to start a travel magazine (called *Odyssey Couleur*) that targets the affluent traveler-of-color, which is where I come in. I've been brought down here, along with two other photographers, to shoot some stories for the second issue, as well as provide the magazine with much needed stock imagery. There just aren't a lot of stock photos of black people getting spa treatments, or of multicultural groups hanging out on a beach, if you know what I mean.

This particular group of women is truly remarkable not only because they have overcome incredible odds and succeeded in what most people think of as the exclusively white, male world of the high-level executive, but also because they are all so supportive of each other. They prioritize helping women who may be just starting out in the business world; they take time to really listen to each others' stories and share pieces of themselves. Tonight, after a sumptuous dinner hosted by Mercedes-Benz (who wisely realize the marketing potential of a retreat like this), an emcee got up on stage and, to the pulsing sound of Nelly's "Hot in Herre," got the majority of attendees up and on the dance floor—not just for that one song, either. They went straight into the "Electric Slide"—which everybody knew; nothing like a group dance to foster solidarity—and then on to Parliament's "Flashlight" … the hits didn't stop. I stood dumbfounded, camera in hand, and watched while at least 300 affluent and very adult women of color threw their hands in the air and celebrated themselves. And then I pulled myself together, began taking pictures again, and even started dancing myself. Nothing like a room full of dancing women to rid you of your post-9/11 paranoia.

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dispatches

Inside the *American Idol* Studio

The weird vibe at the show's finale.

By Michael Joseph Gross

Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 2:12 PM PT

It was not like going to a rock concert.

The Universal Amphitheatre was close to its capacity crowd of 6,189 for yesterday's broadcast of the *American Idol* season finale; and if the place was not, as sweet-and-sour host Ryan Seacrest joked, "jam-packed with Hollywood freeloaders," it also wasn't exactly packed with true fans. I tried to pick out people who looked like they had no link with the entertainment business, but practically everyone had gotten their ticket by working some kind of connection.

One guy I talked to had dressed the part of the true fan as well as anyone there: He wore a temporary tattoo of the *American Idol* logo high on his left shoulder and a vintage Paula Abdul concert T-shirt with the sleeves ripped off. ("I got it on eBay for, like, 15 bucks. Nobody was bidding on it.") But he turned out to be part of a radio crew from Philadelphia, in Los Angeles to cover the show. He had been at the previous night's taping as well, and he said he actually preferred watching at home. "It's not as intimate in person. You're a little more removed from it here."

With four minutes to air, Nigel Lythgoe, *American Idol*'s co-executive producer and de facto audience warm-up guy, made sure the crowd at Universal understood the limits of intimacy they would be allowed with the judges and performers: "no hugs, no kisses, no autographs." Then he started playing the crowd like a light switch: "Who's for Clay? … Who's for Ruben?" until a robotic voice interrupted: "One minute to air. …" For the next two hours, the crowd's energy rose and fell strangely. A few songs got a rise from the audience—they screamed for Kelly Clarkson's high notes, and when Clay Aiken and Ruben Studdard sang their respective theme songs ("Bridge Over Troubled Water" and "Flying Without Wings"), the place exploded.

But during other numbers, like the medley tribute to *American Idol*'s guest judges (Olivia Newton-John, Neil Sedaka, et al.), the Amphitheatre was weirdly quiet. Everyone was standing up—because that was the only way to see the stage, because everybody else was standing up—but almost no one was clapping or grooving. (Later that evening, watching the show's broadcast at home, I had to wonder why the crowd sounded just as crazy during this song as it had during the songs where the crowd actually made noise.)

In the commercial break that followed, Lythgoe was clearly feeling a little cross with all of us bumps-on-logs. "Try and stop looking like you're too hot," he said. "And make yourselves look alive. Breathe."

Lythgoe took questions from the audience during some commercial breaks. For Paula: Did you want to kiss Simon? For Simon: Did you want to kiss Paula? For Randy: Weren't you jealous about Simon kissing Paula? On the surface, these what-are-you-*really*-like questions seemed only

natural: After all, *American Idol* purports to offer a sped-up, interactive look inside the star-making process. But really, those questions were irrelevant. *American Idol* eliminates the element of mystery from stardom, with its message that a star is not a special person with secret passions but a piece of equipment that can be melted down and reconfigured whenever the powers that be think of a new way to sell soft drinks. Take a look at *American Idol*'s credit sequence, which features a quicksilver cyborg—transformed from male to female and back again by animated force fields that slice through its body—making a glorious, pointless march across an imaginary America.

Over the course of the evening, Seacrest announced state-by-state results of the voting, which had closed the previous night. Savvy viewers probably figured out the final outcome when it was revealed that Florida went for Ruben. When the victory was finally announced, the audience whooped it up. Ruben accepted his *Idol*-hood with another rendition of "Flying Without Wings," the only performance of the night that had the confident, cool quality of a real rock star.

After the confetti guns emptied their rounds on the audience, the music in the Amphitheatre ended abruptly as soon as the final credits had rolled. Stagehands started dismantling the judges' podium immediately. Why wait? The *American Idol* finale wasn't for the piddly 6,000 who came to the Universal Amphitheatre, it was for the 25 million people watching at home. Like a political convention, this event was mounted for reasons that had little to do with the event itself.

I went outside to the souvenir stand, where Kimberley Boloven, a pretty 12-year-old girl, was buying an *American Idol* T-shirt for $20. Her sister, who lives in Los Angeles, got her into the show, but for Kimberley the satisfaction of nabbing a hot ticket was clearly secondary to the deep connection she felt with Clay. She held a big homemade poster that said, "Northville, Michigan [heart] CLAY!!" I asked, "Did you come all the way out here just for this?"

She wheeled around and looked at me with tears in her eyes. "Yes," she said. "And he lost."

"Are you glad you came? Was it better than watching on TV?"

She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. "It's a lot more exciting to be here. You feel like you're a celebrity, too. Because we were screaming and he was mouthing 'thank you.' To us. Right to us. You feel like you're inside it."

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everyday economics

We Find Ourselves … Guilty

Should we punish juries that get it wrong?

By Steven E. Landsburg

Monday, May 19, 2003, at 7:46 AM PT

Twelve years ago, a New York jury acquitted Lemrick Nelson of stabbing Yankel Rosenbaum and set him free. This week, following Nelson's stunning confession that he had in fact stabbed Rosenbaum, a federal jury convicted him of violating Rosenbaum's civil rights (though they also seem to have concluded that the stab wounds did not cause Rosenbaum's death). In other words, the first jury blew it.

Five years ago, an Indiana jury convicted Richard Alexander of multiple sexual assaults and sentenced him to 70 years in prison. Three years later, two other men were charged with the same crimes after one was linked to the assaults by DNA evidence and the other confessed. By then, Richard Alexander had served three years in prison for a crime he did not commit. In other words, that jury blew it too.

But the members of those juries will never be punished for their errors. That means they never had the right incentive to get their verdicts right in the first place.

That's not to say the juries were intentionally malfeasant. It's only to say this: Weighing evidence is a difficult job. It requires a lot of attention and a lot of energy. And it would be a good thing if juries performed that job with diligence. The way to make workers diligent, as every manager knows, is to reward them when they succeed and punish them when they fail. It would be easy to apply that principle to juries: When subsequent evidence reveals that jurors got the verdict right, send each of them a big fat check. When subsequent evidence reveals they got it wrong, hit each of them with a big fat fine. And if you worry the associated risk will discourage people from serving on juries, pay them each a big fat fee for serving in the first place.

With that system in place, there would be a lot fewer jurors falling asleep in the courtroom, or ignoring evidence that might take some intellectual effort to decipher, or allowing others to cow them into submission in the jury room. There would still be some manifest unfairness—cases where jurors do the best possible job, still get the verdict wrong, and are punished despite their good efforts. But manifest unfairness is part of *any* good incentive system. You can spend years learning the restaurant business, carefully line up your investors and decorators and kitchen staff, brilliantly fill a market niche—and still fail because of a stray rat, a random terrorist attack, or a sudden fad for cooking at home. That's unfair in a sense—but we accept such unfairness as part of a system that encourages entrepreneurs to do the best they can with the limited information they've got, and yields, on average, better restaurants than we could get any other way.

Likewise with juries. Of course juries will make mistakes, and of course some of those mistakes will be unavoidable. But if we punish the juries who acquit the Lemrick Nelsons or convict the Richard Alexanders, we'll get better verdicts on average.

Of course, the goal is not to get jurors to convict everyone they think is probably guilty; it's to get them to convict everyone they think has been proved guilty *beyond a reasonable doubt*. But it's easy to adjust incentives to get whatever results you want. If there's a general sense that juries are too quick to convict, we can either raise the penalty for a false conviction or lower the penalty for a false acquittal. If they're too quick to acquit, do the opposite. In fact, that's one of the hallmarks of a good incentive system—it's easily tweaked when you want it to work a little differently.

One problem with this scheme is that cases like Nelson's and Alexander's, where the truth emerges eventually, may be too few and far between to concentrate a juror's mind. Rewards and punishments are less effective when they're less likely ever to be delivered. One solution might be to hold occasional "mock trials" of defendants who are known in advance (say through confessions or incontrovertible DNA evidence) to be either guilty or innocent. Withhold the key piece of evidence from the jury, let them deliberate, and then ignore them if they get it wrong and reward them if they get it right. Jurors would never know whether they were sitting on a real trial or a mock trial, so there's always the prospect of a big reward and an incentive to be accurate. The mock trial system would be horribly expensive, but it would also have benefits in the form of better verdicts. Is the cost worth the benefit? I haven't a clue, but it's at least worth thinking about.

In the meantime, there's no reason we couldn't use the occasional Lemrick Nelson case to send jurors a message. Every assembly line worker in America, every cab driver, every doctor and lawyer and magazine columnist, reaps financial rewards and punishments that depend on his performance. Only jurors are excepted. You can justify that exception only if you believe that getting court verdicts right is the least important job in America.

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explainer

How Much of Our Food Is Bioengineered?

By Brendan I. Koerner

Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 2:12 PM PT

In a speech yesterday at the Coast Guard Academy, President Bush blasted the European Union for restricting the import of genetically modified foods. How much of the food produced and consumed in the United States qualifies as bioengineered?

A lot more than you probably realize. Two of the nation's biggest crops, soybeans and corn, are subject to frequent genetic tinkering, often intended to help them fend off insects. Corn is commonly modified with the addition of a gene from the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis*; the resulting plant kills maize-devouring caterpillars. Other added genes bestow resistance to certain herbicides, which might otherwise decimate the crop.

Approximately 76 percent of last year's American soybean crop was GM, as well as 32 percent of corn. (Some estimates place the corn figure closer to 50 percent.) As habitual label readers know, soybean and corn products are ubiquitous on grocery-store shelves, present in everything from Pop-Tarts to veggie burgers to Campbell's tomato soup (which lists "high fructose corn syrup" as a primary ingredient). No government body keeps precise statistics, but a popular guesstimate among university researchers is that around 70 percent of processed foods contain GM ingredients. Considering that about 90 cents of every dollar spent at the supermarket goes toward processed foods, chances are you've been unwittingly consuming GM victuals since the mid-1990s, when they began appearing in stores.

The other two crops that are regularly modified are canola and papayas. About half of canola consumed in the United States is GM, though the bulk of it comes from Canada. And upward of 90 percent of Hawaiian papayas are tweaked to ward off insect infestations. GM potatoes were phased out three years ago, due to consumer backlash; the fry-eating public was worried about the long-term health risks (the FDA does not review individual GM products for safety), and the middlemen who sell to McDonald's and Burger King refused to peddle fine-tuned taters. The Flavr Savr tomato, one of the first GM vegetables, is also out of circulation, but only because it didn't taste very good.

There are few guidelines regarding the labeling of GM foods in the United States. The Food and Drug Administration mandates that bioengineered foods be labeled as such only if the nutritive content has been substantially changed or if a potential allergen (like a peanut gene) has been added. The European Union, by contrast, has placed a moratorium on the import of GM foods, a serious blow to American farmers.

Next question?

Explainer thanks Mike Vayda of the University of Maine and Craig Winters of the Campaign to Label Genetically Engineered Foods.

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explainer

What's Worse, a Virus or a Worm?

By Brendan I. Koerner

Tuesday, May 20, 2003, at 3:58 PM PT

"Palyh," the latest Internet contagion, masquerades as an e-mail from Microsoft technical support. Some writers term Palyh a virus, others a worm. What's the difference?

It's all about reproduction. Like their parasitic namesakes, computer viruses need to attach to "hosts" in order to survive. A virus latches onto a program like Word or Excel, modifying the host (by inserting its code into the application's code) and replicating itself when the host program is active. A virus can thus spread all over a single user's machine but needs help to infect other computers. Unwitting humans can do the trick with an infected floppy disk, but the more common approach is for a virus to spread through a "Trojan Horse."

As the *Iliad*-derived name suggests, a Trojan is a delivery program that appears benign but actually carries a virus-filled payload. In the case of Palyh, the executable attachment masquerading as a Microsoft patch is a textbook Trojan. Opening the file will not update your operating system, but rather infect your computer with Palyh while sending additional Palyh-laden Trojans to the e-mail addresses stored on your computer. Like many other Trojan-borne viruses, Palyh has an expiration date—it will no longer be active after May 31.

Worms are a smaller subset of viruses. They can also propagate via Trojans, but once a worm infects your computer, it acts as a stand-alone program and does not require a host in order to survive and reproduce, seeking instead to copy itself without your help. Worms can do this because they are generally "network aware"—that is, they automatically seek network connections over which to spread, searching for security holes and other weaknesses. These pests are considered more loathsome than viruses, especially in networked environments. If one doofus worker clicks on an infected attachment, every machine in the company may soon be tainted. If that same doofus clicks on a traditional virus, his or her co-workers may still need to open the resulting Trojan-bearing e-mails for the virus to spread. According to anti-virus vendor Symantec, Palyh looks for shared folders to infect and thus deserves the worm appellation.

These definitions aren't written in stone, and hybrids are common. Also up for debate is the origin of the term "worm." One school of thought holds that it dates back to the 1960s, when computer code ran on reel-to-reel tapes. This ostensibly gave rise to "tapeworm," later shortened to its current length. The other theory is that the word comes from the 1975 John Brunner novel *The Shockwave Rider*, a proto-cyberpunk classic. As for "virus," it's pretty much agreed that the term's father is computer scientist Fred Cohen, author of the landmark 1984 paper "Computer Viruses: Theory and Experiments."

Next question?

Explainer thanks William Knowles of c4i.org.

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fighting words

Weapons and Terror

Did the Iraq war really boost al-Qaida?

By Christopher Hitchens

Tuesday, May 20, 2003, at 10:06 AM PT

It's fascinating to be this far into the post-Saddam period and still to be arguing about weapons, about terror, and about Saddam. According to one school, the total effect of the whole thing has been to expose WMD claims as a sham, ratchet up the terror network, and give Saddam a chance at a populist comeback.

I don't think that this can be quite right. I still want to reserve my position on whether anything will be found, but I did write before the war, and do state again (in my upcoming ***Slate***/Penguin-Plume book) that obviously there couldn't have been very many weapons in Saddam's hands, nor can the coalition have believed there to be. You can't station tens of thousands of men and women in uniform on the immediate borders of Iraq for several months if you think that a mad dictator might be able to annihilate them with a pre-emptive strike.

The Iraqis also tended to admit things in reverse. In other words, it was only at the height of the Blix moment in 2003 that they conceded how near they had been to a nuclear weapon in 1990, when almost nobody believed they had such a capacity. And we know how many chemical and biological weapons they possessed at one time because they reluctantly handed over long lists stating what they were.

Thus if nothing has been found so far, and if literally nothing (except the mobile units predicted and described by one defector) is found from now on, it will mean that the operation was a success. The stuff must have been destroyed, or neutralized, or work on it must have been abandoned during the long grace period that was provided by the U.N. debates. One senior U.N. inspector adds a caveat to that, which is worth stressing. The intention of the regime to acquire weapons at some point, or to reacquire them, should not be doubted. There are many blueprints and many brains and many computer discs full of know-how. These would be nearly if not actually impossible to discover, and they will now not be reassembled by a Baathist government. Thus if you take my line of the "long short war," and a timeline of 1990 to 2003, Saddam Hussein went from being a threshold nuclear potentate with the capacity to invade Kuwait to an ex-potentate unable even to deploy his Republican Guard. This was the outcome of a series of measures, from sanctions to bombing, designed to create the conditions for regime change or to make regime change (desirable for numberless other reasons) possible. The anti-war movement opposed even the sanctions at first and the military part of the operation at all times. But Iraq is now disarmed, and who will argue that it was not the believable threat of intervention that brought this about?

Perhaps half-aware that this is true, anti-war Democrats and some others are now saying that the world has nonetheless been made more dangerous because of the threat of additional terrorism.

Some stuff may have gone missing, and the fanatics may have been encouraged. Well, they can't have this both ways, either. If there was stuff to go missing, then it was there all along, wasn't it? And it wasn't being kept for recreational use. The incompetence of the U.S. protective and investigative teams, in this and in some other areas (like the elementary delivery of supplies and repairs) doesn't alter that fact. As to the terrorists who (remember?) had "no connection" to Saddam Hussein, they seem moved nonetheless to take revenge for his fall. Can that possibly mean they feel they have lost a friend?

Let us skip over this obvious point and inquire about what they managed. In Saudi Arabia, which is a fertile place for anti-Western feeling of all sorts, they managed to kill a number of Saudi officials and bystanders while inflicting fairly superficial damage on Western interests. Widespread and quite sincere denunciation of this has been evident across Saudi society. While in Morocco, where the evidence for an al-Qaida connection is not so plain, whatever organization did set off the suicide attacks in Casablanca has isolated itself politically. Please try to remember that al-Qaida and its surrogates are engaged in a war with Muslims as well: They boast of attacking the West in order to impress or intimidate those Muslims who are wavering. But they are steadily creating antibodies to themselves in the countries where they operate. The jihadists who murdered tourists in Egypt were widely execrated and not just because they threatened to ruin the tourist industry. The Bali bombers in Indonesia caused something of the same effect. The recent suicide atrocities in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv were clearly directed, by their timing, against elements in the Palestinian Authority who want to make a deal.

This is where all our political and cultural intelligence will be required. In a civil war within the Islamic world, secularists and liberals have the chance to make many allies against theocracy and its gruesome tactics. It is not just Christian Nigerians who oppose the imposition of *sharia* law in that country and the stoning of Amina Lawal. As the jihadists begin to explode themselves and their devices on Arab streets, they will not fulfill the usual prediction of bringing ever more recruits to Bin Laden. Quite the contrary. Instead, and as in Afghanistan and Iran, there will be more people willing to oppose theocratic absolutism. Of course this political project can be called a "war" because it does also necessitate the use of remorseless force. But when the murderers strike next on American or European soil, it won't prove that it was wrong to fight them, and it certainly won't demonstrate that we brought it on ourselves by making them cross (i.e., by fighting back). It will remind us that it is indeed a war. So, it's depressing to see that, just as many Arabs and Muslims are turning against Bin Ladenism, some Western liberals are calling for a capitulation in the mind and hinting that this war is either avoidable or, even worse, not worth fighting, lest it offend the enemy.

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in other magazines
Turning Right

By Julia Turner
Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 10:34 AM PT

The Nation, June 2

There is an intelligent piece to be written about *The New Yorker*'s coverage of the Bush administration's War on Terror. But Daniel Lazare's essay on the topic—which runs under the subhead "How a nice magazine talked itself into backing Bush's jihad"—isn't it. In a scattershot analysis, Lazare seems initially fazed by *The New Yorker*'s tendency to speak "with many voices, not all of whom completely agree." (A magazine that publishes diverse political opinions? Heaven forfend!) But Lazare moves on, choosing to pick apart a few pieces that represent the magazine's "overall conservative turn" since the Sept. 11 attacks.

He dismisses Jeffrey Goldberg's Feb. 10 story—about Pentagon and CIA intelligence analysts hunting for an Iraq/al-Qaida link—as administration propaganda, writing that Goldberg "dutifully jotted down" all that Donald Rumsfeld, George Tenet, et al. told him about the unsettling partnership. Politically, Goldberg may or may not be head cheerleader for the Mighty Hawks, but as IOM remembers it, his piece deftly piled up quotes in which these sources described how, post-9/11, intelligence analysts lowered "the threshold for what is credible." So as Goldberg nimbly reported the government's case for an Iraq/al-Qaida connection—something that had yet to be done—he also raised questions about the strength of the intel used to make that claim.

The essay also insists that *The New Yorker*, in failing to "encourage opposition" to the war, stumbled badly. Lazare argues that *The New Yorker* "helped middle-class opinion to coalesce against US intervention in Vietnam, [and] might well have served a similar function today by clarifying what is at stake in the Middle East." Well, sure. But if *The Nation* is concerned about persuading "the bourgeoisie" to oppose the war, why delegate that responsibility to *The New Yorker*? Why not try to persuade the politically undecided itself?

New York Times Magazine, May 25

Campus conservatives are gaining influence at universities nationwide, and they no longer look like Alex Keaton. Tired of being "pigeonholed as loafer-wearing jerks," these days right-leaning students dress scruffy, use irreverent humor in their publications, and tend to be more culturally inclusive than their forbears, in a libertarian kind of way—they think the government should stay out of the working man's gun closet *and* the gay man's bedroom. But they still receive funds and PR advice from national conservative foundations. **…** A profile of Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian Authority's finance minister, details his quest for fiscal accountability—and an end to corruption—within the Palestinian government, which he'd one day like to run. He drafted its first

budget, and hopes to get security forces paid by direct deposit, so rival security chiefs can't misuse the cash. **…** A piece on a white supremacist who is half black yields a fascinating story, but the article's ruminations on "passing" seem simplistic at best.

The New Yorker, May 26

Fox News Chairman and CEO Roger Ailes earns his Media Big Shot badge: a Ken Auletta profile. Auletta portrays Ailes as a competitive sort who just wants to win the cable news wars; his "opinionated and conservative" network, which posted better ratings than CNN during Gulf War II, is doing just that. Ailes rails against the lefty media but seems to truly believe Fox News provides the "fair and balanced" news it promises; Auletta does note that Fox didn't hesitate to break word of George W.'s DUI on the eve of the 2000 election. But the piece also suggests that Ailes lacks certain journalistic chops; when Auletta poses a classic journalism conundrum and asks whether Ailes would have published the Pentagon Papers, his answer borders on incoherent, and Auletta includes the whole darn thing. And the last word goes to Aaron Brown—the CNN anchor Fox hosts once likened to a dentist at Ailes' request. "There's room for conservative talk radio on television," Brown says. "But I don't think anyone ought to pretend it's the *New York Times* or CNN."

Weekly Standard, May 26

Standard Editor William Kristol, however, seems to think that Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.—which owns Fox News and publishes the *Weekly Standard* and the tabloid *New York Post*, but no august American dailies—should launch a "first-rate newspaper of record," an alternative *New York Times*. His editorial argues that the Jayson Blair scandal has revealed the *Times* to be "irredeemable." A new paper of record would be "*fair, balanced*, and unafraid [italics IOM's]. Who will found it?" Who indeed? How's about it, Rupes? **…** Christopher Caldwell's feature on the scandal walks well-trodden ground but concludes with a novel hypothesis: The *Times* has "magazine envy." Its quest for "expressive" journalism, "front-page stories on trends and passions and tough-to-capture states of mind," fosters fabrication, Caldwell says. An emphasis on expressive journalism may or may not encourage writers to lie, but if a reformed *Times* includes fewer trend pieces on outmoded hipsterisms—like this weekend's yawn-worthy opus on trucker hats—we at IOM will be very happy.

Newsweek, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, May 26

Three weeks ago, Dubya declared: "We have seen the turning of the tide" in the war on terror. Last week, terrorist attacks ripped apart "soft targets" in Riyadh and Casablanca, and both incidents

were linked to al-Qaida. This week, the newsmag covers feature Jayson Blair (*Newsweek*), FBI director Robert Mueller (*U.S. News*), and some guy who didn't get a raise (*Time*). *Newsweek* also puts little wings—sorry, I mean the words "American Idol"—on its cover, presumably hoping the issue will fly off the stands. Granted, news of the Casablanca bombings came just as the weeklies were closing, and a pair of attacks might seem more cover-worthy than a single hit, but could Terror News Fatigue Syndrome also have played a role?

On Osama, and why he'll play it again: If the covers seem myopic, the pieces inside are anything but. *Time*'s argues that capturing key al-Qaida operatives, though useful, won't put an end to the group's attacks; the agents who remain are too adept at harnessing the existing discontent of local rabble-rousers and directing it toward international targets. And cutting off Bin Laden's funds is a step in the right direction, but now that al-Qaida doesn't have to spend big bucks to run its terror training camps, the network needs less cash. (The Bali bombings cost an easily amassable $35,000.) **…** *Newsweek* notes that al-Qaida may be plotting attacks in Texas but has turned its attention to "targets of opportunity" in Arab countries deemed too friendly with the West. **…** Fareed Zakaria argues that this strategy will backfire: Violence against Arabs "means governments [in the region] gain support to act."

On Jayson, and why he'll write again: OK, so the guy admits his journalism career is over. But *Newsweek*'s Seth Mnookin reports that Blair "is in talks for book, movie and television deals." The piece also reveals that Blair has been treated for alcoholism, cocaine abuse, and manic depression; that he didn't clean his bathroom for two and a half years; and that he told friends he "identified with [sniper suspect Lee] Malvo." And when discussing his current emotional state in an interview, Blair drops this too-good-to-be-true line: He appreciates loyal friends who have made an effort "not to believe everything they read in the newspapers."

On FBI agents, who finally have e-mail: They didn't, until recently. But *U.S. News* reports that Robert Mueller's key initiatives have included shifting the agency's focus from investigation to prevention, updating its technology, and centralizing terrorism inquiries in the Washington, D.C., office. No word on who will do the investigating, now that the FB of Investigation is becoming the FB of Prevention.

On your paycheck, which may get smaller: *Time* reports that cash-strapped companies now frequently resort to salary decreases to cope with the economic downturn; workers, who fear layoffs, aren't complaining.

Economist, May 17

The *Economist* takes aim at peaceniks in its lead story, rejecting the argument that U.S. foreign

policy aggravates Muslim hatred so much that it causes more evil than it prevents. While the article concedes that the alleged link between al-Qaida and Saddam is looking pretty shaky, it points out that Iraq's people are now free and hungry for democracy. There is also some obvious advice for Iraq's struggling nation-builders: Establish order, and bring in the United Nations, at least for weapons inspections. **…** Another article has some more Middle East peace hints for George Bush when Ariel Sharon visits him next week. For the road map to work, the United States must get the two sides to move in parallel and force Israel to end its ongoing settlement campaign.—*E.F.*

***New Republic*, May 16**

The cover stories draw a picture of an Iraq sinking into chaos and a Bush administration unwilling to deal with it. The first dispatch, titled "Beirut Redux," portrays Baghdad debilitated by anarchy, petty turf wars, religious fanaticism, and a U.S. military force reluctant to go outside its centralized cocoon; especially worrying is the report that Hezbollah may be opening an Iraqi branch. From Washington, Iraq hawk Lawrence Kaplan reveals the Bush administration's turf wars have subsided; both State and Defense agree that the best move in Iraq is to withdraw troops ASAP. Kaplan calls this decision an "enormous mistake," warning that the "United States may have to wave goodbye to its vision of liberalism in the Arab world" **...** An article on America's new North Korea policy is equally harrowing. Bush's new approach favors using strict border controls to stop Kim Jong-il from exporting plutonim. The author calls this tack a "dangerous fantasy," pointing out the impossibility of sealing off a 780-mile border with China and the sheer lunacy of trying to interdict every departing flight.—*A.Z.*

—Ed Finn and Ari Zenilman also contributed to this column.

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international papers

Sharon's Cop Out?

By June Thomas

Wednesday, May 21, 2003, at 6:47 PM PT

After five suicide bombings rocked Israel in the space of 48 hours early this week, the London *Times* declared, "The diplomatic 'road map' is … in danger of being all map and no road." The editorial noted that the terror cluster was "grimly inevitable" as there had been apparent progress—however slight—toward peace in the previous week. Since the first assaults coincided with Saturday's first meeting between the new Palestinian Prime Minister, Mahmoud Abbas, and his Israeli counterpart, Ariel Sharon, the paper concluded "they were directed as much against Mr Abbas and his supporters as Mr Sharon and his colleagues."

The Arab press was predictably dismissive of Sharon's decision to cancel his trip to Washington. On Monday, the *Jordan Times* attacked the Israeli prime minister: "How convenient for Sharon yesterday's suicide attacks were. He himself could not have found a better excuse to once again avoid facing his responsibilities and the unanimous will of the international community. Instead, these Jerusalem bombers handed over to him on a silver plate the perfect pretext to continue ignoring international and regional peace efforts." An op-ed in London's *Al-Hayat* agreed: "The official reason is the bus bombing. But the real reasons are well known; he simply had an opportunity to prove that he is in no rush to carry out the road map, and to inform the Americans that terror has once again prevented him from responding to their invitation. But that is only a waste of time." (Translation courtesy of Britain's *Guardian*.)

The *Financial Times* explained that Sharon has demanded an end to "all terrorism" before Israel will begin navigating the road map, but Thursday's *Jerusalem Post* reported that the United States is pushing Israel to start implementing the plan, without fully endorsing it, to get the ball rolling. Israel has offered at least 15 objections to the road map, but sources told the *Post* the United States "does not believe Israel's reservations … are enough of a reason not to move forward on the plan." *Al-Khalij* of the United Arab Emirates said, "The implementation of the road map should actually begin from Israel and nowhere else in the region, because Israel is the unjust and occupying country committing ugly terrorism against international laws and conventions … under U.S. protection." (Translation courtesy of the Lebanon *Daily Star*'s Middle East press review.) An op-ed in Israel's *Ha'aretz* agreed that the peace process was in Sharon's hands: "He should not only blame the shaky Palestinian Authority. He should not say he doesn't have the political power to pry the process forward and even come out of it a winner. He has the political power. He has the personal authority. As far as can be seen, it's the desire he doesn't have."

The *Jerusalem Post* called for a change of tactics: "[F]or all the sense that we are doing everything we can, we tend to rule out the one thing we have not tried: going after not just the 'troops' of terror but its leadership." By maintaining its hands-off approach, the editorial said, the Israeli government encourages terror:

> This must change. If Sharon, understandably, does not want to part ways with the US, he should say to Bush that Israel, like the US, must fight terror at its source, from the top down, rather than letting more of us die to test the intentions of leaders he has already said must be removed. Bush will understand, and even if he does not, further restraint will only serve to legitimate the terror against us.

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international papers

Osama Strikes Back?

By Michael Young

Monday, May 19, 2003, at 11:09 AM PT

On Monday morning, newspapers in the Arab world had suicide bombings front and center, though between the blasts in Saudi Arabia last week, the explosions in Casablanca Friday night, and the bombings in Israel Sunday, they were beginning to lose track.

Sunday's bombing of a Jerusalem bus killed seven people and prompted Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to postpone a visit to Washington. The bombing was one of several weekend attacks claimed by the militant Hamas movement. (Monday saw two more suicide attacks: one in Gaza by a Palestinian riding a bicycle and one in a mall in Afula.) Newspapers were quick to point out that one intended target was the effectiveness of the new government of Palestinian Prime Minister Abu Mazen, who resumed negotiations with Sharon Saturday. The London-based *Al-Hayat* led with the headline, "The Suicide Operations Encircle Abu Mazen's Government." Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* agreed that Hamas sought to undermine progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations: "The defense establishment said that three of the attacks since Saturday night … were part of a Hamas campaign aimed at disrupting efforts to launch the road map."

The attacks again raised questions as to whether Israel's government would expel Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, whom it accuses of surreptitiously encouraging suicide bombers. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, however, Sharon nixed calls for expulsion, since "from his point of view removing Arafat from the Mukata [Arafat's headquarters] where he is would create a 'less comfortable' situation for Israel than if he continues to be holed up in his compound." For Amos Harel, writing in *Ha'aretz*, the real story was that the suicide bombers all belonged to the same Hamas cell yet were unknown to the Israelis: "In other words, a lethal cell, which managed to initiate the most deadly wave of terror in recent months, sprouted under the nose of the Shin Bet [Israel's domestic intelligence service]." Indeed, one of the bombers was recruited while in Israeli detention.

Two days after the Casablanca bombings, there was still some doubt as to whether the attacks were linked to al-Qaida. London's *Sunday Times* claimed that Osama Bin Laden had promised attacks in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Pakistan in a tape released three months ago. However, the London-based Arabic daily *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* reported that the suicide bombers came from the fundamentalist Moroccan Al-Siraat al-Mustaqim (the Righteous Path) group and that authorities had arrested seven suspects. The *International Herald Tribune* added, "The group is believed to be linked to the Salafist Jihad group; one of its spiritual leaders, Ould Mohammed Abdelwahab Raqiqi, was jailed this year for inciting violence against Westerners." Both *Al-Hayat* and *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* suggested that another Salafist group, Al-Takfir wal-Hijra, might have been involved as

well. In their sweep of Islamists, the Moroccan security services also arrested men who had fought in Afghanistan and who might constitute sleeper cells for al-Qaida.

There was widespread condemnation of the attacks in the Moroccan press. The bi-weekly *Al-Tajdid*, published by an Islamist party, the Unity and Reform Movement, declared, "The Islamic movements in Morocco are united in their condemnation of the latest bombings in Casablanca." The French-language *L'Opinion*, published by the Istiqlal (Independence) Party, said the attacks were "fratricidal crimes" carried out by "poor wretches from miserable neighborhoods … who were caught in an international web without any real knowledge of the reality on the ground [and] who attacked the poorest and least well protected of Moroccans." The French-language *Le Matin* argued that democracy means "not conceding anything to the dictatorship of the minority, not accepting imported models that are completely different from our values anchored in an Islam of peace, well-understood modernity, and universal democracy. Extremism is not and will never be a destiny for the Arab-Muslim world."

In an effort to find meaning in the various attacks, Beirut's pro-Syrian *Al-Sharq* took the familiar route of victimization in a front-page editorial. Though the paper recognized the differences between the bombings in Riyadh, Casablanca, and Jerusalem, it also saw a similarity in that "they were all results, not causes." Such attacks were to be expected, and "the Americans bear a great deal of the responsibility in light of what they did, and what they are expected to do, in their ferocious assaults against Arab and Muslim rights."

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kausfiles

More Hurt for Kurtz

Plus: Lusting after JFK, accepting Iraq.

By Mickey Kaus

Wednesday, May 21, 2003, at 11:23 PM PT

From the David Talbot *Salon* interview with Sidney Blumenthal:

> **How's the book tour going? Are you getting attacked by the right-wing conspiracy?**
>
> As a matter of fact, I just finished doing Sean Hannity's radio show. He had me on for 45 minutes; he wanted me to do the whole hour, but I told him I had to run for this interview.
>
> David, excuse me, it's the president on the other line. Can I call you back?

> [Twenty minutes later]
>
> **So how's the president doing?**
>
> I'm sorry, I couldn't get him [Clinton] off the phone -- he's pumped about all this stuff.

Here's a question: Is Talbot slyly making fun of Blumenthal here? A *Slate* colleague says yes--the "twenty minutes later" is gratuitous. I say no way--Talbot's not that subtle, and Blumenthal's his guy. Talbot probably thinks the incident makes Blumenthal look bigger, not Clinton smaller. You, the reader, make the call! ... **Pssst, Sid!** He's not "the president" anymore. ... 1:39 A.M.

"Life is so much better now": *USA Today* covers the Big Good News in "ghetto poor" communities, and gives welfare reform partial credit. ... 3:08 A.M.

Hit 'em Where It Hurtz? *WaPo*'s Howie Kurtz has been hammering the *New York Times* hard on the Jayson Blair scandal. I'm sure *NYT* editor Howell Raines is **much too professional and thick-skinned** to retaliate by ordering up a story on Kurtz's glaring, indefensible, begging-to-be-publicized conflict-of-interest in reporting about CNN while also being paid by CNN. ... Give Kurtz points for writing what he's written when he's got such a fatally exposed flank. ...

More: *Instapundit* says I'm wrong--as long as Kurtz discloses his conflict, "everybody knows about" it. *Scrutineer* says *Instapundit*'s wrong. Jeff Jarvis says *Instapundit*'s right. I say *Scrutineer*'s right!

Why? In general, I agree that conflicts of interest are overblown (by Howie Kurtz, among others), are to some degree unavoidable, and in some cases might even be desirable. Michael Kinsley once asked if it was a conflict of interest for a mother to have two sons. Politicians balance competing interests all the time--it's their job. And if the *Washington Post* wants, say, to let a paid publicist for General Motors write its coverage of the automotive industry--hey, it's a free country. The *Post* can do whatever it wants.. As long as the conflict is disclosed readers are equally free to trust the *Post* or not.

But of course it would be a big scandal if the *Post* did that, the *Post* would *never* do it, and it would get all huffy if, say, the *New York Times* did it. Letting someone in the pay of General Motors write automotive stories--Charles Kaiser's more precise Kurtz analogy--is also something the *Post* would never do, even with full disclosure. The rule against it might be overly cautious prophylaxis, but it's the normal rule.... Remember, **the editor of the *Washington Post* , Leonard Downie, *doesn't even vote*** for fear of introducing a subtle element of bias into his news judgments. Kurtz himself once sniped at, yes, me, after I got a fully-disclosed $1.92 (one dollar, ninety-two cents) from Amazon.com when readers bought a favorably-reviewed book through a link on my site. My guess is CNN pays Kurtz more than $1.92 to host his network TV show.

So **a)** Kurtz's conflict, whether or not it should be that big a deal, violates his own pedantic standards, his paper's standards, and the general standards of the mainstream press. That's at least hypocritical and makes Kurtz vulnerable to a Kurtz-like attack; **b)** A minor point--it turns out Kurtz actually doesn't always disclose; **c)** A major point--Kurtz has in fact gone soft on CNN in at least one big recent story, the Eason Jordan confession. I always assumed Kurtz was pretty fearless once he was on the case (though the way a conflict would most likely do

damage is by tempting reporters to not to even *start* covering stories that might cause trouble). After the Jordan business I started to have doubts. Maybe this isn't just the appearance of a conflict after all, but **the *substance* of a conflict**, and not a desirable one either. I bet Kurtz's CNN gig is mighty important to him--it's why he's a national figure. A prophylactic rule doesn't seem stupid at all in this case. It's do-able--Kurtz's conflict is hardly unavoidable. If he doesn't want to quit CNN, give him a new beat at the *Post*! As a *WaPo* reader, I'd rather have a media reporter whom I didn't have to worry about when it came time to blast or defend a major press institution. ... **More:** *Instapundit* responds. ... 2:34 A.M.

A clean break: I haven't watched any of the Democratic debates, so maybe somebody has already had this idea, but isn't the obvious move for one of the non-hawkish Democrats to **accept the Iraq invasion as a fait accompli**, and question not whether it should have happened but whether the Bush administration is doing enough to capitalize on its possible upside (and avoid the downside)? This approach would immediately open up two obvious, strong lines of attack: **1)** Bush is frittering away the fruits of victory not being prepared, not having enough troops on the ground, not spending enough money to rebuild Iraq; **2)** Bush is also blowing our new advantage by not doing as much as possible to bring Ariel Sharon, as well as the PLO, along on the "roadmap." ... True, this strategy would require embracing the idea that the invasion (and the grand neo-con strategy) did have a possible upside, which is something Democratic primary voters might not want to hear. And point (2) might alienate some mainstream pro-Israel organizations. But one way to distinguish yourself in a crowded field is to show you're willing to alienate people the rest of the pack is scared of. (Plus you'd get money from these guys!) ...Certainly the idea that Bush isn't capitalizing on our victory seems more salient at the moment than the Democrats' favorite charge--that Bush is somehow stinting on "homeland security." ... 2:22 A.M

Lucianne Goldberg, who bizarrely worked in the Kennedy White House, is highly informative about the lust of JFK's interns ("the Muffykikideedees") for the boss, in an era when women weren't supposed to admit to such things. ... 2:00 A.M.

Monday, May 19, 2003

More Big Good News: The left has complained for years when welfare-reform enthusiasts measure success by the sharp (more than 50%) reduction in caseloads since the mid-1990s. I agree--lower caseloads are good but they're not everything. Yet the left's proposed measure of success, income and poverty, is equally flawed. If all the 1996 welfare reform did was take non-working single mothers on welfare and turn them into *working* single-mothers with *exactly the same incomes*, it would be a huge success. Voters, who supported reform by huge majorities, thought welfare recipients *should* work and that good social consequences would follow if work replaced welfare.

That's the real test of success--**whether life is actually getting better in America's "underclass" ghettos.** Now there is powerful statistical evidence that this is in fact happening. Concentrated poverty (a bad thing, and one of the defining characteristics of the "underclass" as described by sociologist William Julius Wilson) has dropped dramatically in the U.S.--by almost a quarter--after doubling from 1970 to 1990. Robert Pear, citing researcher Paul Jargowsky, reports:

> "Concentrated poverty — the share of the poor living in high-poverty neighborhoods — declined among all racial and ethnic groups, especially African-Americans," Mr. Jargowsky said.
>
> In 1990, 30 percent of poor blacks lived in high-poverty neighborhoods. Ten years later, the proportion was 19 percent.

Pear rightly credits welfare reform, in part, with this success. The reasons seem obvious: welfare reform produced a dramatic jump in the participation of single mothers in the labor force. When you work, you not only get richer--you also tend to get out of your neighborhood and discover the rest of your city. Working also breaks down stereotypes of lower income, single mothers--especially African-American single mothers-that may underlie resistance in non-poor areas to having such people as neighbors. Not to mention the gauzier benefits of working, like "role-modeling" and the effect of the disciplined rhythm of work on home life and school performance. ... **More:** Here's the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* report on "a development that normally sober social scientists are calling 'astonishing,' even 'stunning" .... Here's the Brookings Institution event (which starts in a few hours) that will discuss Jargowsky's findings. ... **Bonus Raines angle:** Hey, didn't Howell Raines' *NYT* editorial page adamantly oppose the successful 1996 welfare reform? It did! Raines' page called the reform "atrocious," denounced President Clinton for signing it, and predicted **"the effect on some cities will be devastating"!** ... Raines experts say the *NYT* executive editor's self-righteous, egomaniacal G.S.W.B. moralism made him as un-blindered in evaluating welfare policy as he was in evaluating Jayson Blair! ... 1:59 A.M.

***Newsweek*-skipper:** I didn't know Jayson Blair had resigned from the Univeristy of Maryland college paper he ran, "for 'personal reasons,'" (according to *Newsweek*). I'd thought the college paper had been his big credential. More evidence of **due diligence, diversity-style**. ... Allan Sloan says it would take 6 of 8 Sulzberger family trustees to ditch Pinch. Seems like a longshot. ... Jonathan Alter defends Sulzberger's paper- "When *The New York Times* loses power, the U.S. government gains it."--as if the *Times* were synonymous with "the press." What's the *Washington Post*, chopped liver? ... Ellis Cose makes clear the dynamic the *LAT*'s Tim Rutten also identified: It's either "blame affirmative action" or "blame the editors"-- which means that defensive affirmative-action supporters *on the left* are among those coming down hardest on Raines & Co.. After all he's done for them! ... 1:25 A.M.

Sunday, May 18, 2003

David Warsh, who (as he notes) lost his *Boston Globe* gig when *NYT* publisher Pinch Sulzberger sacked his boss, helps move the post-Blair debate away from "blame Raines" to "blame Pinch." ... It turns out Pinch was **not a shoo-in for the publisher's job**, according to Warsh -- there were various shareholding cousins to satisfy, and other candidates for the position. *The Globe's*'s publisher had been a potential internal rival, Warsh argues ... But having told us that Pinch was vulnerable once, Warsh doesn't answer the much-more-relevant question of **whether Pinch could be deposed now** if the *Times* board gets worried. ... Warsh does contribute a good graf on the younger Sulzberger's susceptibility to managerial BS:

> All of which must be disappointing to a man who rode into the Times on his enthusiasm for "Total Quality Management." In fact, Sulzberger has displayed throughout his career a softspot for management fads, "mission statements," "leadership moments" and the like. In recent years a favorite gimmick around the Times has been to speak of "the moose in the room" — a reference to a cautionary

> business fable about out-of-bounds problems in which a moose is invited to dinner and no guest is willing to ask why.

Cautionary note to Warsh: I don't think there was a "mounted head of a moose" on the stage of the movie theater where the Pinch/Howell/Gerald troika held their recent mass venting session. My sources, plus the *Daily News*, say Pinch had a stuffed toy moose in a plastic bag and dumped it on Raines' lap (which might be kind of symbolic, if you think about it)... 12:59 P.M.

Saturday, May 17, 2003

Vision, Please! *Kf* demands that Don Graham follow Stanley Kurtz's advice and take the *Washington Post* national. ... Graham should have done it years ago, and now seems like a propitious moment to rectify that strategic mistake: *WaPo*'s historic competition, the *New York Times*, has been humbled. The *NYT* is not inconsiderably discredited among the opinion elite. Its editor is hated by half his staff. Dozens of good *Times* reporters are ready to jump ship. ...The *Times*-despising Bushies would be so grateful they'd probably get the FCC to throw in a couple of extra television licenses! ... Will Graham do it? Almost certainly not. He's always been happy to stay local, watch his profits go up while his paper's footprint on the national landscape shrivels. ... **Is that what Graham wants on his tombstone: "He made his stock go up"?** ... As long as the *Post* is only the local paper of the nation's capitol, remember, sources with prime information to leak will always tend to give it to the *NYT* first. ... **Plan B:** Join with the Tribune Co. (owner of the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*) to put out a national edition while spreading the inevitable initial losses. Make Pinch Pay! ... 12:40 A.M.

Friday, May 16, 2003

"We ain't helping these people": The *N.Y. Post*'s Jonathan Foreman has been a strong supporter of the Iraq invasion, and he's now on the ground in Baghdad, so when he says we're blowing the reconstruction of Iraq, and gives chapter and verse, it gets your attention:

> ORHA [the U.S. Organization for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Aid] - America's inadequate, notoriously slow-moving substitute for an interim occupation government - is as unpopular with the U.S. soldiers on the street as it is with ordinary Iraqis.
>
> And for good reason - even though ORHA is sometimes blamed for the failures of its counterparts in Army Civil Affairs units.
>
> These soldiers see the reservoir of Iraqi goodwill draining away while bureaucrats take their time holding meetings and making plans as if time were somehow not an issue. **They fear that their successors here will face an *intifada* in the summer if**

power, water, medicine, gasoline and food don't start reaching Iraqi civilians.

"We ain't helping these people" says Sgt. Johnny Perdue of the 4/64 Scouts. It's just so f----ing frustrating. ORHA say they're doing it. Well, they're not doing it in the places we go."

"I'm no bleeding heart" says Sgt. Leon "Pete" Peters (who had more than his share of kills during the fighting south of the city). "I'll pull the trigger quick as anyone. But this place is going to go crazy if we don't find a way to help these people . . . I've been here for more than 30 days and I've yet to see a single yellow humanitarian food package."

Don't Bush and Rove realize that this is one of the few issues that could cost them the election? Maybe it's not as salient as the economy--but Bush can't exercise much control over the economy. He *can* control the reconstruction of Iraq.. ... [*Hasn't he appointed a new chief U.S. administrator, Paul Bremer--ed.* Yes, and Bremer got off to a bad start by telling what Foreman calls a **"laughable untruth"** about Iraqi access to electricity.] 5:45 P.M.

Late-breaking Moose: *Kf* source Deep Times, who claims to be a current *NYT* staffer and *seems* to know what he/she is talking about (but who for all I really know is Stephen Glass or V. Botkin) emails to clarify the deeper meaning of Pinch Sulzberger's stuffed moose:

Gawker doesn't quite have the moose story right.

It really happened. A bunch of management types

from the editorial and business side were holed

up at a conference in the countryside for one of their annual cluster-f**ks.

They weren't getting along but they were being polite,

not discussing their differences openly.

Mostly they were all looking out the window and

smiling to themselves about a moose that was plainly

wandering around out there. But nobody said, hey,

look at that moose. They only realized later that they had all been watching the moose instead of paying attention to the meeting. So it became a metaphor, complete with

props -- "talk about

the moose in the room" -- the problem nobody will talk about.

Here's the **moose in The Times newsroom:** Gerald Boyd.

[Emphasis and asterisks inserted by *kf.*] 3:08 P.M.

Memo to Jacob Weisberg: We have to stop Lee Siegel from writing for *Slate*. Right now. 1:19 A.M.

***I* Decide What's 'Reflexively Left' Around Here, Buddy!** Hugh Hewitt argues the *L.A. Times* is as bad as the *NYT* when it comes to "reflexively left" politics. But the *LAT* is getting better under its new owners while the *NYT* has been sliding ever since the younger Sulzberger took it over (which was years before Howell Raines advanced to the top editorial job). ... Hewitt's right about the Los Angeles paper's op-ed page, but the *LAT*'s recently-hired Nick Goldberg is *trying* to diversify it--just as, for that matter, the *NYT*'s just-promoted David Shipley has been diversifying the *NYT* op-ed page, to the extent that's possible given the lineup of regular columnists. I counsel patience with both op-ed pages. ...These media-obsessed bloggers are so quick to criticize! ... 12:42 A.M.

All the Moose That's Fit to Print: *Junkyard Blogger* Chris Regan searches the Web in vain for the meaning of Pinch Sulzberger's stuffed moose. He missed *Gawker*, which has a solid graf of moose 411. The moose is less ridiculous than you might think. But it's close! ... [OpinionJournal made *the "All the Moose .." joke yesterday-ed.* So they did. They have even **more moosology** today.]12:21 A.M.

Thursday, May 15, 2003

Does Jayson Blair really exist? Nick Gillespie has doubts. ... 1:52 P.M.

Needlenose defends **Salam Pax** against David Warren's assault. ... 1:33 P.M.

Who controls Hollywood?

From the March 9, 2003, *kausfiles*:

> **Great Moments In Social Equality:** Jack Grubman's kids enter public school! (This, according to the *N.Y. Post*, will be after their rejection by "at least eight exclusive prep schools" ....) **Memo to Jeff Zucker:** Two words -- 1) sit 2) com. ... 1:20 A.M.

From today's *Washington Post*:

> Fox's other new series:
>
> -"Arrested Development," a comedy about a rich family that heads to the poorhouse when the father, played by Jeffrey Tambor, is arrested for illegal accounting practices.

1:12 P.M.

First, try spin. If that fails, look into your heart! *NYT* executive editor Howell Raines has now confessed that race was one reason he gave Jayson Blair "one chance too many." But **didn't he deny this very thing to *NPR*'s Melissa Block** just a few days ago? ... I think so. But you, the reader, be the judge of whether **Raines tried to dissemble** to Block when he thought he could get away with it. From "All Things Considered," May 8:

> BLOCK: ... And I wonder now, looking back, if you see this as something of a cautionary tale, that maybe **Jayson Blair was given less scrutiny or more of a pass** on the corrections to his stories that you had to print because the paper had an interest in cultivating a young, black reporter.
>
> RAINES**: No, I do not see it as illustrating that point.** I see it as illustrating a tragedy for Jayson Blair, that here was a person who under the conditions in which other journalists perform adequately decided to fabricate information and mislead colleagues.

Now, Raines admits "the answer is yes." ... **P.S.:** The false "race had nothing to do with it" spin was also the official position of the *Times*, spouted by its spokespersons, who presumably get their talking points from on high. ... **P.P.S.:** Ann Coulter notes that *Times* has editorialized righteously about the need for "explicitly taking race into account" at the University of Michigan. Yet in the crunch it felt it had to initially deny it had done any such thing itself. Why, if it's such a great policy? ... Also see Coulter's entertainingly **brutal last graf**. ... **P.P.P.S.:** I don't know why people are so tough on Pinch Sulzberger. It's not like he brings stuffed animals to important staff

meetings. ... Oh, wait. ... How did Howie Kurtz, who has detailed catharsis-coverage here, **miss the moose**? ... **P.P.P.P.S.:** It's also a good thing that people in the *Times* organization aren't scared of Raines now that he's pledged to change his ways. Otherwise they might suppress columns critical of him! ... [**Update:** The *Globe*'s editors have apparently come to their senses and published the ant-Raines column. It's very strong.] **More:** Excellent Don Wycliff column says Gerald Boyd's denial of the race factor "does not ring true," and details the perils of being the boss' "anointed" star.... **More:** Raines said he was at the meeting to "listen to your anger." Just don't use curse words or he'll get his back up! We want civil, moose-like anger! (The *N.Y. Post* says Raines subsequently apologized for "acting prickly," saying "I've been under a lot of stress lately.") ...2:21 A.M.

Wednesday, May 14, 2003

Is famed Baghdad blogger Salam Pax coming to the end of his Western media fame cycle? David Warren has a speculative takedown here, and *Instapundit* links to other pungent commentary. ... Is S.P. an "anomic thirtysomething smartass," or worse? ...**Update:** *Needlenose* defends Pax against Warren's "smear." ... 8:49 P.M.

Just a Reminder: *Still* Not Enough Troops in Iraq, argues *NY Post*'s Ralph Peters. ... Peters is in favor of giving the troops a freer hand than seems wise, but he's good at ridiculing Rumsfeld's apparent **almost anarchistic assumption** that once the initial military battle was won, order would spontaneously and organically emerge from the leaderless Iraqi people.. ... 8:34 P.M.

Guilty Southern White Boy confesses. Stop the presses! I'm reluctant to draw grand conclusions based on a brief news flash on *Drudge*, but it would seem that Howell Raines himself **has now admitted that he cut Jayson Blair extra slack because Blair is black**. **Update:** Drudge's quote differed from the one in the *NYT*'s own story by only a couple of inconsequential words. Here's the *NYT* account:

> "Our paper has a commitment to diversity and by all accounts he appeared to be a promising young minority reporter," Mr. Raines said. "I believe in aggressively providing hiring and career opportunities for minorities."
>
> "Does that mean I personally favored Jayson?" he added, a moment later. "Not consciously. But you have a right to ask if I, as a white man from Alabama, with those convictions, gave him one chance too many by not stopping his appointment to the sniper team. When I look into my heart for the truth of that, the answer is yes."

Doesn't that statement definitively end the attempt of affirmative action defenders (e.g., and e.g.),

as well as the *NYT's* official spokesperson, to **deny the bleeding obvious?** ... Has Raines cleverly realized that if it's not **(a)** affirmative action's fault, then it's **(b)** *his* fault--so he's choosing the self-preservationist explanation (a)? ... I tend to think he's just telling the truth, but it's a truth that serves him well. ... **P.S.:** But isn't he a little old to still be stuck in the identity-politics 'I'm-a-white man from Alabama irrevocably defined by my race and backgound' mindset? ... **More:** Here's a colorful, no-BS take on the Blair affair by Ciro Scotti that actually adds value even at this late date. (I'm ignoring Scotti's ritual, half-hearted exculpation of "diversity efforts"--this in a piece that partly blames the *NYT*'s "frantic pursuit of diversity.") ... 7:47 P.M.

TomPaine.com steps in to fill the blog-vacuum on the left. ... *Instapundit* (citing Bryan Preston) thinks they should avoid the anonymous posts. I tend to agree--anonymous posts reinforce the impression that some institutional party line is being enforced. (That causes dissonance when it isn't--i.e., when the blog-line contradicts the probable magazine-line, as with the *TNR* blog's recent straw-grasping defense of affirmative action. Who at *TNR* likes race preferences--bet it's not Marty!--and why won't they tell us their name, or at least their initials?). ... But *TomPaine* seems to be focusing less on windy opining and more on linking--a good move, since the real need is for an ***Instapundit*-like one-stop clearing house for liberals**. They're almost there already. ... **Update:** While I wasn't looking *TAPPED* got fairly comprehensive as well. ... 4:37 P.M.

Tuesday, May 13, 2003

Breaking: Raines calls emergency (job-saving?) meeting. (See second-to-last graf.) ... *Drudge* has the e-mail. ... Suggested closed-door line for Pinch: 'Howell, isn't there a book you want to write?' ... **Update:** Boy, do I wish somebody had been a blog on the wall at this meeting. Was it a) cathartic venting, b) k*umbaya*-bonding (*Lucianne*'s prediction) or c) East German Party Rally? America wants to know. If anyone has news please email *kausfiles*. Thanks. ... **More:** Drudge has a flash summary. ... **More**: Reuters indicates it was (a). ... 4:21 P.M.

More evidence of the dynamic that might threaten *NYT* editor Howell Raines in the Blair scandal: The alternative for those on the left who don't want to "blame affirmative action" is rapidly becoming **"blame Raines."** *The New Republic* travels down that road here. *Mnoosweek* falls in line here. ...

P.S.: Isn't this what we neolibs used to somewhat murkily call a "false choice," since both factors are obviously to blame? *TNR* argues Raines went beyond simple "affirmative action" and indulged in something it calls "the fetishization of diversity," defined as the "**monomaniacal fixation** on a single goal, whether the goal is diversity or proper grammar or having a certain type of Danish at editorial meetings." But this is hardly the bright line, good/bad distinction *TNR* seems to think it is. Any time you promote an employee, you're taking some risk he or she will screw up, and weighing

that risk against the evidence of the their competence. The whole point of affirmative action, as advocated by *TNR*'s blog (though I doubt by at least two of TNR's three owners) is to tilt this multi-factor calculus in favor of candidates of certain races. That means un-tilting other competing factors, like the risk of screw-ups, which means they will sometimes be outweighed. With Blair the risks just came to fruition. ...

P.P.S.: The *Times*' own defense of affirmative action--that many minorities *weren't* promoted the way Blair was--suggests that race was one factor competing with other factors, not a monofactor. That doesn't get race off the hook when the other factors turn out to have merited more weight. It does mean *TNR*'s big distinction between "a slight boost" and "monomania" is artificial and inapposite. ... (Not only is the distinction a matter of degree, but the slope involved is slippery. If a "slight boost" for minorities doesn't produce the desired numbers, then maybe a slightly less slight boost is called for, etc.)

P.P.P.S.: If affirmative action only gives a "slight boost" to minorities is it really worth all the stigma it generates? The stigma would seems to come from the preference itself, not the degree of preference (whether it's a "boost" or "fetish"). *TNR*, arguing against this idea, suggests that **suck-ups who followed Alabama football games** might get promotions from editors who follow Alabama football. How true. (I remember getting a call from an aspiring young reporter I knew, asking for a xerox of an article Howell Raines had written about Alabama football. The reporter needed to read the article in order to suck up to Raines in a job interview. The reporter is now on the national staff of the *Times*.) That's just life in all its human idiosyncracy, *TNR* seems to argue--only monomaniacal pursuit of Alabama fans would be bad. But ***TNR* stacks the deck** by picking a quirky, non-widespread bias. If 12 percent of the nation's population were Alabama football fans, and they were readily identifiable by their skin color, and employers across the country had programs in place to promote Alabama fans ahead of other more qualified applicants, then Alabama fans everywhere would operate under the same affirmative-action stigma African American reporters must now operate under at the *Times* and elsewhere,. That would be true even if the pro-Alabama bias was but one factor among many, and not pursued "to the exclusion of almost everything else." ... The fact that it's only a "slight boost" that generates this nationwide stigma is an argument *against* giving the boost, not in favor of it. ...

Again (it **"bares repeating,"** as the *NYT*'s editors would say) **get rid of race preferences and Jayson Blair becomes just an individual screw-up**, not something that leaves "a large, looming shadow over an entire generation of young black journalists trying to get their feet in the door at a major newspaper." ... 2:40 P.M.

Blair update: It's all about prepping Howell! "Heads should roll," says a *NYT* staffer., according to the *N.Y. Post*. How is Sulzberger going to roll his own head? Maybe there are instructions on the Web somewhere. ... But the *Post* emphasizes the "Raines high-handedness" factor as the theme of

staff disaffection--a theme that gets Sulzberger off the hook more than the "affirmative action" explanation, which is why it's much more dangerous to Raines. ... **Bill Keller** (runner-up to Raines for the executive editor's job) is **looking better and better**, isn't he? He's sitting there on the bench, presumably ready to play. Maybe the fourth quarter belongs to *him*! ... **Update:** Raines has formed a task force, the "Siegal Committee," and also plans

> a fast-track version of the process that was so **helpful to me** during the months before I became executive editor. At that time, I met with many groups of editors, reporters, photographers, designers, artists and researchers. ...
>
> The collective wisdom of these groups **helped prepare me** for the enormous challenges of my first 18 months on the job.

It did? That's one of the questions in dispute, no? [Emphasis on **bizarre, morale-crushing solipsism** added.] ... I get it: If only Raines meets with enough editors and reporters, then his high-handed dismissal of editors' and reporters' advice will be better-informed! ... 2:34 A.M.

Monday, May 12, 2003

An e-mail posted by Andrew Sullivan gets at another aspect of the Blair fiasco: editor Howell Raines' apparent habit of overruling and ignoring his subordinates (e.g., the metro editor who tried to stop Blair) while running the paper with his gut. That practice can be good (Ben Bradlee certainly went with his gut at *WaPo*, often to great effect). It can also be **"arbitrary, unaccountable, with a dose of almost feudal personal favoritism"** and not so good--if, to pick a random example, the editor is an **egomaniacal Guilty Southern White Boy, running a star system based in part on loyalty**, whose self-image involves him singlehandedly helping deserving African-Americans claim their rightful place in American society! ... **P.S.:** How would you like the assignment of serving on the *Times*' "task force ... to identify lessons for the newspaper," also advertised in this e-mail to *NYT* staffers from Raines, publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. and managing editor Gerald Boyd. After, all, it's pretty clear from the *NYT*'s own account that **these three are the main screw-ups** in the Blair saga (apart from Blair himself). What do you think the chances are that the "task force" will come back, after weeks of fact-finding, and say: "After careful deliberation, Mr. Sulzberger, **we've concluded the problem is *you*** and the two men you appointed ..."? 4:15 P.M.

The *World Socialist Web Site* comes to Jayson Blair's defense. They make a **good point about Walter Duranty**, though. ... 11:09 A.M.

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Links

Drudge Report--80 % true. Close enough! **Instapundit**--All-powerful hit king. **Joshua Marshall**--Escapee from *American Prospect*. ***Salon***--Better click fast! **Andrew Sullivan**--He asks, he tells. He sells! ***Washington Monthly***--Includes "Tilting at Windmills" **Lucianne.com**--Stirs the drink. **Virginia Postrel**--Friend of the future! **Peggy Noonan**--Gold in every column. **Matt Miller**--Savvy rad-centrism. ***WaPo***--Waking from post-Bradlee snooze. **The Liberal Death Star**--Registration required. ***NY Observer***--Read it before the good writers are all hired away. ***New Republic***--Left on welfare, right on warfare! **Jim Pinkerton**--Quality ideas come from *quantity* ideas. **Tom Tomorrow**--Everyone's favorite leftish cartoonists' blog. **Ann "Too Far" Coulter**--Sometimes it's just far enough. **Bull Moose**--National Greatness Central. **John Ellis**--Forget that Florida business! The cuz knows politics, and he has, ah, *sources*. **"The Note"**--How the pros start their day. **Romenesko's MediaNews**--O.K. they actually start it here. **Center on Budget and Policy Priorities**--Money Liberal Central.. **Steve Chapman**--Ornery-but-lovable libertarian. **Rich Galen**--Sophisticated GOP insider. **Man Without Qualities**--Seems to know a lot about white collar crime. Hmmm. **Overlawyered.com**--Daily horror stories. **Eugene Volokh** --Smart, packin' prof, and not *Instapundit*! **Eve Tushnet**--Queer, Catholic, conservative and not Andrew Sullivan! ***WSJ's* Best of the Web**--James Taranto's excellent obsessions. **Walter Shapiro**--Politics and (don't laugh) neoliberal humor! **Eric Alterman**--Born to blog. **Joe Conason**--Bush-bashing, free most days. **Lloyd Grove**--Don't let him write about *you*. **Arianna**--A hybrid vehicle. **TomPaine.com**--Web-lib populists. **Take on the News**--*TomPaine*'s blog. **B-Log**--Blog of spirituality! **Hit & Run:** *Reason* gone wild! **Nonzero**--Bob Wright explains it all. [*More tk*.]

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moneybox

Heir Jordan

Will Nike's $90 million gamble pay off?

By Seth Stevenson

Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 2:18 PM PT

Kobe Bryant has got to be just a little pissed off today. Already down after his Los Angeles Lakers got booted from the playoffs, he wakes up to see this: ESPN reports that high-school basketball star LeBron James has signed a seven-year Nike endorsement contract worth more than $90 million.

Kobe, since breaking off his Adidas deal last year, has been shopping himself around to the big

sneaker companies. Word is his asking price was outrageous—and he allegedly demanded his wife have a hand in designing his signature shoe—but nevertheless it must be galling to see LeBron get that kind of money. Kobe is a three-time world champion, easily one of the top five players in the league. LeBron hasn't played a single NBA game, or even a college game. Yet this deal likely means Nike has decided that LeBron is the new Michael Jordan and will put all its legendary marketing and design genius behind him to make it so.

Why would Nike put so much on the line for a kid who hasn't proved he can play like the pros, never mind sell shoes like them? Two reasons: 1) fear; 2) because it's worked before.

The "marquee" basketball category—hoops shoes that sell for more than $100 at retail—is home to perhaps the sexiest battle in all of footwear. It brings massive margins, approaching 50 percent, as these cheaply made shoes fetch prices up to $140. (Nike tried to get $200 for a recent Air Jordan model, but kids balked at forking out that much.) Nike has traditionally owned this category, due in large part to the phenomenal sales of Air Jordans, but with MJ retiring this year there seems to be a chink in the armor.

So competitors have lined up young guns. Reebok has Allen Iverson; Adidas has Tracy McGrady (and, until last year, Kobe). And Nike has tried to turn Toronto Raptors guard Vince Carter into its new Michael Jordan. Carter at first seemed the real deal, but he's lost luster over the years as he has been felled by numerous injuries, and it doesn't help that he plays up in Canada. Right now, Iverson, McGrady, and Jordan are the only guys who really move product, and Jordan's on the way out. In short, Nike's desperately searching for a new Michael.

Is LeBron James the one? That's up to the market, but Nike clearly thinks that LeBron is its cup of tea. Marquee shoes are aimed at black, inner-city kids who are willing to spend huge amounts of money every time the new, hot shoe hits shelves. An Adidas exec once told me that "the day after payday" is the biggest sales day in this category (the way he said it, you could tell that exploitation was not really an issue for him). To ring these kids' consumer bells, endorsers need to be just a little bit flashy and a little bit dangerous. Iverson fits the bill, with his tats and his slightly sketchy past; Kobe does not, with his squeaky clean demeanor (he speaks fluent Italian, for goodness' sake). McGrady's athletic, street-ball moves on the court do the trick; Shaq's oafish approach to the game, though perhaps the most dominant in the NBA, doesn't sell shoes. What about LeBron? Already put under investigation for receiving "throwback jerseys" (stylish, vintage team wear) and a Hummer SUV while still an amateur, he has the controversy angle sewn up, and anyone who's seen him dunk knows he's got all the moves.

Seeing another potential Iverson, Reebok apparently put the hard sell on LeBron, and this may be what pushed Nike over the edge. According to John Horan, of *Sporting Goods Intelligence*, the signing was a "defensive" move for Nike and partly just about "keeping LeBron out of Reebok's

hands." Why so scared? Nike has had a huge falling out with Foot Locker recently, resulting in Nike's announcement that it would withhold future big-launch products from Foot Locker shelves. If LeBron were to go to Reebok, Foot Locker—the pre-eminent marquee shoe outlet—would be filled to the gills with LeBron wear, while whatever new shoes Nike came up with would be kept out of the store. With LeBron under contract, Nike now assumes kids will seek out his shoes wherever they can be found.

It's a huge risk, this massive contract for an untested rookie. But it's got a nice precedent. In 1984, Nike signed a rookie named Michael Jordan to a five-year contract worth $2.5 million (plus, thankfully for MJ, royalties). *Fortune* magazine ridiculed the deal at the time, coming as it did at a time when Nike's business seemed vulnerable. Though Adidas was Jordan's first and heartfelt choice, it had offered far less money and no signature shoe.

If LeBron James can jump-start Nike's basketball line, and indeed the whole company, the way Jordan did in 1984 (perhaps "Shox LeBrons" will be the new "Air Jordans"?), the deal will be worth every penny.

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moneybox

Who's Afraid of George Soros?

Huge hedge funds could once threaten major currencies. Not anymore.

By Daniel Gross

Wednesday, May 21, 2003, at 1:57 PM PT

The struggling U.S. dollar appeared to take another hit yesterday. Appearing briefly on CNBC, George Soros, the hedge-fund manager who earned his place in trading history by betting successfully against the British pound in 1992, disclosed that "I now have a short position against the dollar." Having taken the position "relatively recently," Soros was now betting that the dollar would decline in value "against the euro, against the Canadian dollar, the Australian dollar, New Zealand dollar and gold."

A decade ago, such a statement would have sent convulsions through the currency markets. But thus far, Soros' musings haven't had any noticeable effect. That's because Soros and the type of hedge fund that he represents occupy a much different place in the investing firmament in 2003 than they did in 1993. To a large degree, his currency bets simply don't matter much anymore.

In the 1990s, Soros (born in Hungary, educated in Great Britain, and based in the United States) became a prominent player on the global stage. He used profits from his immensely successful Quantum Funds to endow democracy initiatives in Eastern Europe and penned big-think tomes on finance, globalization, and the future of capitalism.

The Quantum Funds typified a species that once sat atop the hedge-fund food chain. So-called global macro funds—others included Julian Robertson's Tiger Management and the ill-fated Long-Term Capital Management—made massive, highly leveraged "macro strategy" bets. They would buy bonds, stocks, or currencies—or all three—in a particular market, based on broad economic assumptions. They would short the S&P 500 if they thought the U.S. market was bound to fall, or go long the deutsche mark if they believed Germany was poised for a recovery. In 1990, when hedge funds collectively had about $50 billion in assets, "anywhere from 50 to 70 percent of the funds were in global macro funds," according to Robert Rosenbaum, senior vice president at Tremont Advisers.

By borrowing money to buy and sell futures contracts—themselves a powerful form of leverage—macro funds possessed the capability to move indexes like Japan's Nikkei or to influence significantly the value of important international currencies. Which is exactly what Soros did in 1992, when he earned an estimated $1 billion profit by helping push the British pound out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism. Soros was lionized—or demonized—as "the man who broke the Bank of England," and his opinions about currencies—and his ability to leverage up huge positions in them—could become self-fulfilling. In 1997, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad accused Soros of bringing down the Malaysian ringgit. (This research paper concludes that Soros and other hedge-fund managers did not ring up huge profits by betting against the ringgit.)

In fact, it turns out that the market volatility of the late 1990s was bad for the global macro funds. Long-Term Capital famously melted down in 1998. And with passively managed index funds racking up 30 percent annual gains in the late 1990s, the returns racked up by risky global macro funds didn't seem so special. No longer able to compete in a stock market he deemed irrational, Julian Robertson essentially retired in March 2000. Others, like Soros and Paul Tudor Jones, started to behave more like other stock-pickers, betting on individual stocks or sectors. In the ninth inning of the bull market, for example, Soros started buying tech stocks. And in April 2000, with the Quantum Funds down for the year, Soros ostensibly retired.

Last year, *Business Week* reported that Soros had quietly returned to the active management of Quantum. But now Quantum eschews large currency bets in favor of concentrated positions in a few stocks. And while it's still large, Quantum is a shadow of its former self. *Fortune*'s recent takeout on the hedge-fund elite doesn't even mention Soros. At the end of 2002, according to Tremont Advisers, global macro funds made up only 9.87 percent of the estimated $600 billion hedge-fund industry.

When it comes to currency trading, this is a much different world than it was in the early 1990s. Economies are far more interconnected than a decade ago; currency markets are far more liquid

and active. Each day, some $2 *trillion* in currencies is traded—several times the size of the daily trade in 1993. (Soros brought down the Bank of England with a $10 billion leveraged position.) Today, professional speculators do not conduct most currency trading, even in comparatively obscure currencies. Foreign exchange markets are more *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* than *Liar's Poker*. Exchange rates are effectively set by American backpackers taking rupees out of a cash machine in Bombay, or Italian tourists getting dollars at Disneyland, or Nokia selling phone equipment to China Telecom, or Coca-Cola selling syrup to a South African bottler, or Daimler buying Chrysler, or Intel paying local firms to construct a facility in Taiwan—in fact by the interaction of all these forces. The unfathomably immense number of cross-border transactions, investments, and exchanges now affects currencies far more than any single trader can.

Soros obviously grasps the change, which is why he may be spending more time writing books about globalization than trying to influence the fate of national currencies. During his CNBC interview, the financier explicitly posed as more of an attentive bystander than a catalyst. He was short the dollar, "because I listen to what the secretary of treasury is telling me. So who am I to stand in the way?"

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moneybox

Good Deal

Defending the SEC's settlement with MCI.

By Daniel Gross

Tuesday, May 20, 2003, at 3:26 PM PT

At first blush, the settlement that the company formerly known as Worldcom tentatively reached with the Securities and Exchange Commission appears rather straightforward. To resolve charges that the company illegally inflated revenues and earnings by $11 billion, the bankrupt firm (which now goes by MCI) will pay a $500 million fine. As per the mandates of the Sarbanes-Oxley law, the cash will be distributed to investors. The SEC will cease pursuing MCI, while continuing to focus on former Worldcom executives who may have perpetrated the fraud.

William Barr, the former attorney general and the aggrieved general counsel of Verizon, finds the fine insulting. He has been lobbying for the imposition of the death penalty on Worldcom's rump because he believes its assets, customers, and contracts are ill-gotten gains. And, as Barr put it, "Bankruptcy is not a mechanism for laundering stolen goods." (Even worse, from Barr's perspective, if MCI emerges from Chapter 11 this fall with less debt and aggressive expansion plans, it could prove a formidable competitor.)

The justice in this case *is* plainly more symbolic than retributive. The $500 million is only a small chunk of the bankrupt company's current cash hoard. Based on MCI's recent monthly operating

reports, the fine represents about one week's worth of revenue. And while elements of MCI's bankruptcy are troubling, Barr's reasoning doesn't hold up. The bankruptcy system recognizes a different form of justice than that meted out by prosecutors, and it refuses to grant victim status to the competitors of failed companies—regardless of why or how they failed. Besides, continuing to punish MCI would be a little like keeping sanctions on Iraq even after Saddam Hussein's regime has ended.

Barr's brief goes as follows: By falsely claming to have made profits on its services in the past few years, Worldcom forced those who used honest accounting to engage in self-destructive discounting. And if MCI emerges from bankruptcy this fall, shorn of its once-onerous debt load, the second-largest long-distance company will be able to compete aggressively for new business. Because he believes Worldcom won many of its existing contracts by guile or fraud, Barr compares MCI to an organized crime enterprise. "If I go out and steal trucks for my business, I can't keep those trucks by claiming bankruptcy," he says.

But by any definition, today's MCI bears comparatively little relation to the Worldcom of a few years ago. And none of the people who are alleged to have stolen the trucks at Worldcom are keeping them.

Chapter 11 is a means of transferring ownership from debtors to creditors. It's also a re-branding experience. The company has changed its name from the scandal-ridden Worldcom to the more romantic MCI. (MCI, of course, was the upstart that took on Ma Bell back in the early 1970s, when offering competitive long-distance service was essentially illegal.) The company is moving its headquarters from the ethical swamp of Clinton, Miss., to the comparatively salubrious climate of suburban Washington. And it has a new chief executive, former Compaq head Michael Capellas, who has no link to the ancien régime.

Worldcom was run like a private piggy bank for CEO Bernard Ebbers and a selected coterie of officials. Today's MCI is run as a trust for its creditors, who, upon the company's emergence from Chapter 11, will become its new shareholders. In the future, there will be no way for the disgraced Ebbers to benefit from any of the competitive advantages MCI may have reaped under his leadership. His options and stock are worthless. His pension has been cut off. And because Ebbers has missed payments on loans made to him by Worldcom, MCI is starting to sell his assets. Meanwhile, both the SEC and the Justice Department are continuing to build cases against senior Worldcom officials. (Ebbers hasn't been charged. Yet.) Levying a giant fine on bankrupt Worldcom would take cash out of the pockets of people who have legally recognized claims on the company's assets.

MCI may be receiving some special treatment in Washington. Enron was barred from bidding on federal contracts after it went into Chapter 11. But MCI, which provides services to more than 75

government agencies and is a huge government contractor, continues to receive them. Still, MCI isn't the only telecommunications company to benefit from such favoritism. Verizon, to take one example, reaps enormous benefits by virtue of its favored regulatory position in the local telephone business.

In the end, the settlement was less a product of blind justice than of cold calculation. The SEC angled for an attention-grabbing headline number. The financial types at MCI, after consulting their spreadsheets and cash-flow matrixes, figured out what price the recovering firm could reasonably pay for the sins of its previous owners.

Chapter 11 is always a dissatisfying, zero-sum game. Creditors generally settle for pennies on the dollar. Even the SEC isn't getting what it had hoped. The settlement actually requires MCI to pay a civil penalty of $1.51 billion. But because the company is bankrupt, the agency agreed to accept the $500 million on behalf of defrauded investors. In bankruptcy, even the Feds have to take a haircut.

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movies

Oh, God!

More heartwarming mush from Jim Carrey.

By David Edelstein

Friday, May 23, 2003, at 9:13 AM PT

The prospect of Jim Carrey playing God (or, more precisely, God for a Week) in ***Bruce Almighty*** (Universal) is tantalizing—the smartest high concept for a comedy I've heard all year. When great manic comedians like Carrey are in the groove, they have a godlike aura: They can pull conceits out of the air, physicalize them, twist them inside out, then nonchalantly bat them away; they can use mockery to affirm—or explode—the interconnectedness of all things. Think of the ecstatic confidence of Richard Pryor in the '70s, Robin Williams in the '80s, and Michael Keaton in *Beetlejuice* (1988): They raged, they purged—they mixed vaudeville and rock 'n' roll in equal proportions. (Yes, cocaine often gave them gas, but it didn't give them genius.) Carrey has been close to that sensational. His mugging can be oppressive, but at his best (in, say, *The Mask* [1994]) he has a whirligig bravura and a dancer's aplomb: He's truly the master of his realm.

That Carrey shows up in *Bruce Almighty*. If you've seen the coming attraction, you'll remember the shot where, in anticipation of wild sex with his girlfriend (Jennifer Aniston), he arches his back like Esther Williams and his clothes fly off: genius. You'll also remember him bopping along the street to the strains of "I've got the power," then pivoting and zapping a fire hydrant, from which issues three mighty streams. As Bruce Nolan, an unhappy, unsuccessful Buffalo, N.Y., TV reporter

who is suddenly given the power to rule the world, Carrey rules the screen with a demonic glint. But oh, so briefly.

There's a very funny half-hour of *Bruce Almighty*—after he gets the power but before he learns the lesson that with power comes responsibility, etc. See him part the waters in a bowl of soup! See him toilet-train his dog! See him contrive to be on the scene for sundry miraculous happenings, earning the nickname "Mr. Exclusive"! See him sabotage the conceited sap (Steven Carell) who got the anchor job instead of him! See what happens when a thug says he'll only apologize for beating Bruce up the day a monkey comes out of his butt!

It's obvious stuff, but it plays right to the nasty revenge fantasies of the average impotent moviegoer. The other hour, though, is a bland family film—a Carrey picture for people who prefer their Carrey cut with Sweet'N Low. It's not that he's low-key: He still feels compelled to cram shtick into every margin. It's that he's harried in a bland, sitcom way, like Darrin on *Bewitched* or Dean Jones in innumerable Disney comedies opposite ghosts and big dogs and sentient Volkswagens. *Bruce Almighty* turns into a slapstick *Touched by an Angel*: It even ends with a pitch for giving blood.

The director, Tom Shadyac, directed Carrey in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), but has since segued into sickly mystical uplift. He was the man behind the gruesome *Patch Adams* (1998), in which Robin Williams brought inspirational zaniness into the lives of terminally ill kids, and last year's *Dragonfly*, in which Kevin Costner was haunted by a ghost with a loving agenda. The much-maligned Farrellys (whose work I adore) have a sentimental streak, too, but it's organic: Comic spazzes and the genuinely disabled are on the same continuum, laboring to make do with what a jokester God has given them. For Shadyac, there's a comic realm (the gags are an elbow to the ribs) and a "sincere" realm. The God of *Bruce Almighty* is ultimately a Sunday school principal who doesn't mind putting the world in the hands of a narcissistic idiot if it teaches him a thing or two about the miracle of love. He's a primetime, family-hour God.

It's a blessing—for real—that the Almighty is Morgan Freeman, who does parts like this in an easy, soft-shoe style. In a radiant white suit, Freeman drops into the movie on occasion to deliver a zinger or a homily and then gets out. He's wonderful—that is, he's wonderful if you don't mind seeing God (and a god among actors) limited to wagging his head with folksy sagacity. I like my God, though, like I like my comedies: ruder, cruder, and able to show me things I haven't seen before. *Bruce Almighty* is sadly miracle-free.

It is, however, highly watchable, which is more than can be said for Andrew Fleming's coarse and chaotic remake of ***The In-Laws*** (Warner Bros.). The 1979 original is a classic crazy comedy and something of a fluke: The tight screenplay (by Andrew Bergman) is unexpectedly enhanced by the sloppy, uninsistent direction (by Arthur Hiller); and the two leads, Peter Falk and Alan Arkin,

manage to play comic opposites (a secret agent and a fubsy doctor respectively) yet remain gloriously in synch. The movie has a long half-life: Yell "Serpentine!" to anyone who has seen it and you're sure to double them over.

There was no reason on earth to remake *The In-Laws*, but Fleming—who made the loose and convivial Watergate sendup *Dick* (1999)—seemed a good choice for the unenviable job, and I laughed when I heard the casting. Michael Douglas and Albert Brooks are opposites for real: the former a smooth, confident deal maker—the actor as businessman; the latter a brilliant, often paralytic depressive. As the perpetually frowning straight man, Brooks has better timing than in his last two self-made movies, but his lines are cringe-worthy. And he has little in the way of a partner. Douglas—whose role requires a manic intensity—plays every scene distractedly. You can picture his many assistants just off-camera holding up cell phones and mouthing, "It's your lawyer," "It's your accountant," and "Catherine wants to know what time Consuela should have dinner ready."

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music box

Addicted to New Pornographers

The power-pop album you'll be listening to obsessively.

By Sasha Frere-Jones

Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 3:09 PM PT

There is a common Pavlovian trend in record reviews to substitute references for analysis. A band featuring a singer who can carry a tune, a drummer you can hear, and two electric guitar players will often be described as "Kinksy," "power poppy," or "Cheap Tricked-out," even if the band actually sounds like a passable Tall Dwarfs rip-off. (Who? Well, that's the point.) This tactic spares the reviewer precious effort, makes the reader feel relieved to know the references, and gives the artist unearned credibility by association. The New Pornographers' *Electric Version*—one of the year's best; buy three, put two in the bomb shelter—could actually survive this process. New Pornographers songwriter Carl Newman has done his homework four times over, and if a couple of decades of history hadn't moved the goalposts, he'd do pretty well as an understudy for the Kinks' Ray Davies or Cheap Trick's Rick Nielsen. At a raw materials level, some of the songs on *Electric Version* have so many hooks that they become bouillon—, over and over. Added to water, it would yield three perfectly good pop songs.

In the past five years, there have been approximately 6,756 records based around loud guitars and multipart vocal harmonies, many of them referencing music of the '70s and '60s. To be reductive about it, because you have things to do, where overrated bands like Olivia Tremor Control and underrated bands like the Shins are still hung up on the Beach Boys and pot, Newman is nostalgic

for the first five Elvis Costello and the Attractions albums. And I'm guessing he pounds the coffee. (There is also a reference to Adam and the Ants' "Dog Eat Dog" drum part on "."). What Newman takes from Costello is a preference for vigorous tempos, rapidly changing chords, information-packed melodies, and a commitment to execute, execute, execute. (Newman's sole innovation for indie rock, stolen 50 years after pop established it, may simply be that he has tossed out the romance with lousy singing and playing as proof of some unspecified authenticity.) Newman, like Costello, prefers double-decker lyrics that swipe at 10 things instead of grabbing one. From the opening track, "": "The card you're dealt by the crowd goes wild, make believe you are an only child./ Here are the clothes, please put them on. Still to come/ a new parade of faith and sparks, the electric version harks back to the day/ when there was no wrong just as long as it sounds lost/ streaming out of the magnets."

This style doesn't mean Newman gets called the "literary" one. That's Dan Bejar, who plays Colin Moulding to Newman's Andy Partridge, contributing three of *Electric Version*'s 13 songs. Bejar's songs are more narrative and easier to understand but shorter on high-octane singing. He's the conversational singer. (REFERENCE ALERT: Bejar's own band Destroyer is the place to go if you thought the late Pavement records beat the early ones but should have been sleazier and catchier.) Both Bejar and Newman are perfectly talented all by themselves, but the New Pornographers are better than Destroyer, and they're better than Newman's other bands, Zumpano and Superconductor. That's not just because Bejar and Newman have grown as songwriters. And it isn't because everyone involved is from Vancouver, B.C., though that is astonishing and true. Neko Case is why the New Pornographers are the bestest.

Case's voice is slightly too big, as if she can't quite handle it. This makes her a great rock singer and a bit lost when she makes country albums, a genre concerned with controlling and conquering things (heartbreak, booze, pitch) before they control you. Strictly a singer in the Pornographers, Case has described herself as Newman's "puppet," though he prefers the term "robot." Newman is smart enough to double-track her voice when the song needs it, and with Case's double-barrel alto. When these voices get up high, the record goes with them. Where other records have all the references down pat, Case makes *Electric Version* the thing, instead of *about* the thing. (Nirvana? Same thing. Start and end with the voice.) Newman's sweat-soaked take on arranging means the album's parade will move along nicely, but Case is where the music spins out and you get inside, a little bit in love with yourself for being smart enough to play this, rather than another, record.

I am going back to "The Laws Have Changed," because you are going to. Many times. It will become a problem. When I thought the song was about *The King and I*, I was already transported. When I realized it's a parable linking primogeniture of pharaohs and the collapse of democracy under the Bush dynasty, I got so happy I just about wrenched something. Let's quote: "It was crime at the time but the laws, we changed 'em/ though the hero for hire's forever the same one./ Introducing for the first time, Pharaoh on the microphone." This is the only good thing to happen

this year featuring the plural word "laws." Cheap Trick does have a new record, which we don't need to discuss, and if you got stuck with major label power pop newcomers Rooney, you'd be fine for three or four songs. But the New Pornographers have this nervous pop thing on lock right now. Only effort can displace effort.

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music box

Searching for Kelly Clarkson

The grim fate of American Idol winners.

By Jon Caramanica

Tuesday, May 20, 2003, at 11:54 AM PT

More so than any other so-called reality-based show, *American Idol* trades in honesty. Each week, singers vie for the ears and hearts of voters with overwrought renditions of familiar hits, a karaoke purgatory with the potential to grate at nearly every turn. But on *Idol*, the voice is the thing. Performing live in a series of televised, neon-heavy theme nights—music of the Bee Gees, country hits, etc.—contestants must somehow transcend their material and put a unique stamp on it. The most accomplished of them begin to cultivate the personalities that will ferry them to pop stardom, succeeding, presumably, on their own merits.

Impishly pretty 21-year-old Kelly Clarkson won the first season of the contest thanks to brassy, faithful renditions of classic songs—like "Respect" and "(You Make Me Feel Like a) Natural Woman"—that showcased her and hypertrophied diaphragm. Even if she didn't have the best voice of the competitors—that belonged to Tamyra Gray, currently starring on Fox's *Boston Public* and recording her debut with Babyface—she still exuded vocal maturity wildly out of proportion to her diminutive stature. Week in and week out, she cultivated a distinct vocal identity. While other competitors melted into their songs, Clarkson took command of them, making them her own.

Which is what makes her solo debut album, *Thankful*, such a surprise: Clarkson sounded more like her own woman belting out other people's hits on *Idol* than she does on her own record. A furious exercise in multiple-niche marketing, *Thankful* marries Clarkson to a dizzying number of genres. Some work, some don't, but what's lost on *Thankful* is any inkling of what allowed Clarkson to trump her fellow *Idol* wannabes. It's an album any of her peers could have made.

Strictly speaking, *Thankful* isn't a failure—it sold an impressive 300,000 copies in its first week, debuting atop the *Billboard* chart—but it does prove that what it takes to win *American Idol* is radically different from what it takes to have a hit record. Clarkson's first pair of singles, released just after she won the contest last summer, play more to her strengths. "A Moment Like This" and "Before Your Love" are forceful, uncomplicated ballads, simple enough to convey sentiment and

spare enough to let Clarkson in delivery, for better and worse. The versions of these songs that saturated pop radio in the weeks after her victory were almost identical to her delivery of them on the show. What you heard was what you got.

But after 10 weeks of TV performances that out-piped the competition and two insta-hit singles, Clarkson met her match: the studio. And like most singers with her lack of experience, she lost. *Thankful* is more *Extreme Makeover* than *American Idol*. "Miss Independent," the lead single, is a gauche number that aims to kick ass but only grunts in agony, with and filtered vocals better suited to a cosmetics commercial than an open-mike contest. Not surprisingly, it was co-written by Christina Aguilera, a girl-power collaboration to do Gloria Steinem proud: "Miss Unafraid/ Miss Out-of-My-Way/ Miss Don't-Let-a-Man-Interfere/ Miss On-Her-Own/ Miss Almost-Grown/ Miss Never-Let-a-Man-Help-Her-Off-Her-Throne."

Elsewhere, Clarkson's a little bit country and a little bit rock 'n' roll. "Low" and "Just Missed the Train" evoke a more bombastic Faith Hill. "You Thought Wrong," on the other hand, sounds like a Pink song gone awry. A duet with Tamyra Gray, it begins coy and cloying, an update of Brandy and Monica's 1998 hit "The Boy Is Mine." Then suddenly, a sets the two divas-in-training a-wailing at each other like fingernails on a chalkboard, a truly gruesome demise.

Such a scattershot sound isn't unique to Clarkson; it's the hallmark of most contemporary pop albums. But in rendering Clarkson so schizoid, *Thankful* elides her strengths—youthful vim and the ability to hurl syllables with astonishing volume—and underlines her inherent weaknesses. As a blue-eyed soul matron would-be, she's perfectly capable of warmth, but, as on the amiable "The Trouble With Love Is" and the numbingly bland "Some Kind of Miracle," it's the digitally homogenized, rote sort of warmth.

The sad truth is that there's no place in pop for the voice anymore. In the early '90s, singers like Michael Bolton and Celine Dion were allowed to have fruitful careers, even if their unrelenting cheesiness virtually obscured their formidable vocal gifts. The most impressive pop singer of the last decade, Mariah Carey, launched her career peddling torch songs, but her later career has been filled with gaudy hip-hop production that brutalizes her at every turn. A commercial failure as well as an aesthetic one, New Mariah should be an object lesson to the Kelly Clarksons of the world, or at least to their production teams.

So, are these twentysomethings cut out to be pop stars away from the *American Idol* structure? *Idol* holds that conceit at its core, but *Thankful* only shows how difficult the transition can be and how raw talent can sometimes be a hindrance to pop palatability, and vice versa. Indeed, this season, *Idol* judge Simon Cowell, the surly Brit, threw his support behind a 17-year-old Mormon girl named Carmen Rasmusen not for her natural vocal ability but rather because she had the "most commercial" voice in the group. Only right-wing cabals could have kept military man Joshua

Gracin in the competition longer than Rickey Smith, operatically trained, gangly, and awkward, who had maybe the finest voice in the bunch but got eliminated midway.

And what of the two finalists, who face off against each other in tomorrow's finale? In a recent interview, reedy Clay Aiken cited the '80s soft-rock balladeer Peter Cetera—the former Chicago front-man and singer of the *Karate Kid* theme song "Glory of Love"—as a model for the songs he hopes to make, though it's more likely he'll be positioned as a soul man for the post-boy-band generation. A few weeks ago, after big-and-tall teddy bear Ruben Studdard delivered a tender reading of the Carpenters classic "Superstar," Cowell conceded, "If you released that song tomorrow, you'd have a No. 1 single." Unlikely, but with a production assist by the Neptunes, and maybe a few songwriting tweaks courtesy of R. Kelly, it just might be so.

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obit

Slain, at Last

The late, great Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

By Hillary Frey

Wednesday, May 21, 2003, at 11:11 AM PT

Tuesday night marked the end of an era. After seven years on prime time, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was vanquished once and for all, like a demon impaled with a wooden stake. For those who've loved Buffy through romance and war, through hideously fringed jackets and ridiculously sleek up-dos, through life, death, and not one but *two* resurrections, the series finale was a dark hour. We said goodbye to a weekly dose of girl power; so long to *Buffy*-centric e-mail lists; farewell to ritualistic Tuesday night gatherings. But we also breathed a sigh of relief.

This season of *Buffy*, well, *sucked*, and I, for one, am glad it's over. The show should have ended a year ago, when Buffy's witch-sidekick Willow, overcome by grief when her girlfriend was killed by a bullet meant for Buffy, nearly destroyed the whole world—an appropriately High Romantic ending to a series that revolved, dizzyingly, around the dangers of wielding power. (Willow's friend Xander, the erstwhile buffoon, managed to talk her out of it at the 25th hour.) Now we're forever stuck with memories of this last season—a Buffy-verse cluttered with too many new characters, inadequately explained plot twists, and endless, boring chatter. The series finale—an anti-climactic trip to "the Hell-Mouth," from which Buffy and most of her gang emerged intact—was a one-hour throwaway as poorly scripted as the worst of this season.

In its early days, *Buffy* was wittier than your average show because it took the premise of every teen drama—life is a living hell—and turned it into allegory. Joss Whedon, the series creator, transformed insensitive jocks and nightmarish roommates into actual demons for Buffy to take

down. As Buffy grew up, Whedon's social critiques grew riskier and more ambitious. In Season 4, Buffy became entangled with The Initiative, a government research project on demons, and the show provided a shrewd commentary on genetic engineering. All along, Buffy sparred with demons of the real-world variety, too—personal trials far more difficult to handle than any evil god or Übervamp. There were the doomed relationships—like many young women, she was drawn to the wrong men—first Angel, a hunky vampire as forbidden to Buffy as Romeo was to Juliet, and then Riley, a pawn of The Initiative. Then there was her mother's excruciatingly drawn-out death; later, her decision to sacrifice herself (literally) to save her sister.

Of course Buffy was a feminist, too, and her superpowers ensured that she'd always stand up for herself and call the shots. But Buffy's vulnerability—a quality lacking in other iconic small-screen sirens like, say, Xena the Warrior Princess, or even Wonder Woman—helped the show become a cross-generational hit. When Buffy felt dead inside (after dying the second time), she sought out sex with Spike (one of the undead) in an attempt to feel alive. She regularly shut her friends out—especially in this last season—when she felt they couldn't understand her. (Not surprisingly, they turned on her.) Blending fantasy with social realism, Whedon made the least-condescending show about young adults to run on prime time in recent memory.

But in Season 7, as Buffy took on The First—as in the first and most evil being *ever*—the complexity that once differentiated *Buffy* from *Mutant X* and other supernatural schlock vanished. A simplistic, apocalyptic, weirdly religious good-versus-evil narrative took over; subplots, aside from those concerning the urgent desire among the supporting characters to have pre-end-of-the-world sex, slipped away. For most of the season, Willow, arguably the show's best character, was stripped of her impressive powers (lest she attempt to destroy the world again). Buffy, instead of kicking ass, spent long minutes of nearly every episode preparing a gang of young, annoying, potential slayers for battle, with pious sermons about war and leadership that would barely have been tolerable coming from President Bartlet on *The West Wing*. With the exception of one or two episodes (most notably "Conversations with Dead People") this season of *Buffy* was leaden, slow, and overwrought.

And yet like the declining Roman Empire, *Buffy*'s influence on Western (well, American) civilization as we know it has only grown more ubiquitous in the show's final days. (The *New York Times* published an editorial today about the end of the show.) At one end of the pop spectrum, the show is a darling of the cultural studies crowd: *Buffy*'s interrogation of the ethics of power, violence, and gender (that eternally beloved triad) is explored on *Slayage: The On-Line International Journal of Buffy Studies* and in more than one essay collection—including, most recently, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy*. At the other end, in the bathrooms of young men across America, *Buffy* has finally been appreciated for, well, its dazzling supply of eye candy; this month, *FHM* features "The Girls of *Buffy*" on its cover, focusing not on *Buffy*'s metaphysical underpinnings but on a more important question: What is Willow's preferred form of bikini wax?

But *Buffy*'s legacy will endure beyond the groves of academe or the pages of men's magazines: The show's influence can be felt on scores of shows, from ABC's hit *Alias* to the canceled *Dark Angel* and *Birds of Prey* and the mysteriously enduring *Charmed*. Before *Buffy*, the only women who kicked ass on television did so metaphorically, in the courtrooms or in the ER. The show may have died last night, but its spirit, like its protagonist, will undoubtedly resurrect itself again. Luckily, like the vampires Buffy had yet to slay, the show crawled into its coffin just in time to stay alive in our memory.

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obit

June Carter Cash

The den mother of country music.

By Patrick Carr

Tuesday, May 20, 2003, at 2:04 PM PT

The late June Carter Cash is due an honest appraisal. That's what I'll try to give her. I have to say up front that I knew June and liked her very much. She was kind to me for some 30 years. So I'm biased, but I'll do my best.

You may have already heard that June was more important than anyone acknowledged or even realized during her lifetime: a more significant artist, a more gifted performer, a more influential innovator, a more important mover in the music and musical community she called home. True but not so true.

It depends on your frame of reference. June Carter was not just Johnny Cash's wife and sometime singing partner. She was also the daughter of Maybelle Carter of the Carter Family, the first major recording stars and foremost progenitors of Southeastern country/folk music. She was the sister of Helen and Anita Carter, with whom she continued the family act long after the first generation was gone. She was the mother of Carlene Carter, her greatest gift to country rock, and the stepmother, mother-in-law, and/or den mother of Rosanne Cash, Rodney Crowell, Nick Lowe, Marty Stuart, Kris Kristofferson, and many other seminal musicians of the '60s, '70s, and '80s. She was a stellar songwriter ("Ring of Fire"); an author of unsurprising skill and heart; an actress of sometimes uncanny accuracy (*The Apostle)*; and a comedienne both instinctive and studied. And of course, she was a singer. In her private time, she ran a clan and several households, read voraciously, and brought joy and prosperity to Wal-Marts, boutiques, and fine antique emporia all over creation. There was nothing in the world like shopping with June.

The scope of her experience was spectacular. She hit the road as a newborn in the Great Depression, bouncing along in the back of A.P. Carter's Ford, and that road went on for 73 years.

Presidents, preachers, pushers, prophets, the country, the city: singing in Vietnam, filming in Jerusalem, gardening in Jamaica, hoofing in Budapest, pressing on and on. She was tough—she played places Madonna couldn't even imagine and bettered people who'd scare Courtney Love. Elvis thought she hung the moon, and she was romanced by James Dean. Johnny Cash recognized her as the love of his life the day he met her, and he hasn't said anything different since.

The singing was a problem. June didn't trust herself around a microphone, as she admitted both readily and rightly, and unless she was in full growl (check out "Jackson"), the listening experience could be nerve-wracking. So she never really qualified as an underappreciated recording artist. She pressed on regardless, holding down her corner in the ensemble and ensuring that Anita, Helen, and a shifting selection of Carter offspring could work as much as they wanted, singing "Wildwood Flower" and the family anthem, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," everywhere. Helen and Anita died before June, both quite recently.

June was known as a Christian and renowned as a pillar of strength. There again, true and not so true. She was in fact convinced that her salvation lay in the love of Jesus Christ, and she wasn't at all shy about that—people around her heard a lot of prayers—but she wasn't a very stereotypical pillar of strength, either. The oft-told tale of her rescuing Cash from pills and godlessness was true enough in its way but a beat or three off their real life's rhythm. Cash was rescued, all right, but not exactly *by June,* and not forever. June stood strong in the center of her blended family, but she was not immune to the addictions running in their blood. She was not always the good one. Cash was not always the bad.

Except, of course, that they were always good together. I've never known such a couple—him deep, quiet, and black-dog dark, she forcing light and speech, summoning chaos and imposing order. And they both knew how they worked and laughed at it. Cash is one of the funniest people I know, by the way, his style a dry, economical, deadeye irony, but June made me laugh more. Her comedy was physical, audiovisual, dynamic—she played the loony, and she loved it—and her tragedy was physical, too. It's interesting to muse on how Cash's death announced itself years ago through mysterious, almost abstract neurological malfunctions in his brain while June was felled by a sudden, brutal kick to the heart.

Her legacy? I believe it lies in the job she did with her family or, more accurately, the extended unit that revolved around her and Cash—not just those already mentioned, but hundreds of others, from never-famous Nashville pickers to Roy Orbison and Bob Dylan, Emmylou Harris and Elvis Costello, Bono and the boys in U2, Flea and the fellas in the Red Hot Chili Peppers. I think it was her centrality to the sustenance of these people that really mattered to her: how she lent them a home, put them together for company and creative cross-pollination, and stood by them when they were down. That was the job she chose over polishing her own star, and it was important. The people among whom she centered herself were themselves central—vital, really—to the

sustenance of the music. Certainly the soul of country music could not have survived the past 30-plus years without them, and they surely didn't find care and comfort in many other places within the mainstream Nashville world.

Finally, there's the question we won't duck. What will become of Cash now that June is gone? In my imagination last night, I sidled up to him and whispered, "Hey, John, how soon do you think you can leave?" He just smiled.

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poem

Shelley's Guitar

By Michael Collier

Tuesday, May 20, 2003, at 8:13 AM PT

to Michael Collier reading this poem.

How much more beautiful it is

because it's Shelley's guitar—

a coffin of trapped song

in a body like a grave.

Because it's Shelley's guitar

it's been put on display,

a case within a case,

a wooden hand inside a velvet glove.

And nearby, the copy of *Adonais*

that held his heart for thirty years.

Next to it, other incomparable relics:

his baby-rattle, a watch, the plate

off which he ate the beautiful

raisins of his diet. Everything

encased, preserved, though

the heart now is only a stain, a watermark

on pages his widow used to save it.

Never mind the guitar was given to his friend,

Jane, as if it were the heart

unauctioned, a neck

with tuning pegs, gut strings, arabesque

filigree. And never mind the guitar

was meant to be a pedal harp

he couldn't afford. "Take this slave

of music," the poem says, "for the sake

of him who is the slave of thee."

Whose heart is it but Shelley's?

Whose grave, whose book, and glove and raisins?

All those things that have been given

either by "action or by suffering,"

left behind, collected, to prove

the dead have substance.

politics

From Soccer Moms to Spam Dads

Can obnoxious e-mail ads save the Democrats?

By Steven Waldman

Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 2:41 PM PT

I recently gave my sons their own "for kids only" e-mail accounts on AOL. It felt like the 21st-century equivalent of giving them their own pocket knives. Joe, then 8, and Gordon, 6, excitedly typed out messages to some friends about Pokémon or favorite birthday presents. They hit "send" by themselves.

The next day we sat down to check their accounts. Sure enough, the handle on the you've-got-mail icon was up. We excitedly opened the mailbox to find Joe had gotten a personalized e-mail about … Penis Enlargement.

I turned off the computer before they could see. I really wasn't ready to have this conversation. ("Well, son, some people say size doesn't matter, while others …")

But it made me angry, and I wondered, isn't there something Dennis Kucinich can do about this? OK, my daydream wasn't that specific, but I did want some opportunistic crusader to help me. Spam is ready to become a prime-time political issue.

On one level, it's a classic Tipper Gore kind of problem. Cultural pollution is pouring into our homes, and we need, as Bill Clinton (or was it Dick Morris?) said, "tools" to protect our families. Spam seems a much more severe threat than raunchy rock lyrics or violence on television, or even Bill Bennett's gambling. Religious groups recently scored a victory by getting Wal-Mart to pull the salacious magazine *Maxim* from its newsstand shelves. But that seems a bit beside the point when you can't collect your e-mail from Aunt Minnie without scrolling past ads for sex with barnyard animals.

The single greatest development of the Internet era is not live chat, streaming video, or even the World Wide Web in general. It is e-mail. Studies by the Pew Internet Project show that on any given day 88 percent of those online send or read e-mail. The next most popular action is reading news, which is done by 50 percent of those online. "Everything else is chump change," says the group's Lee Rainie. I literally would not have been able to start my business (Beliefnet) if I hadn't been able to lazily send out free business plans, pitches, and pleas without having to schlep to the post office. More important, e-mail has rekindled the art of letter-writing. And not to sound overly sentimental, but it's helped bring families together. I'd bet parents communicate with their kids at college far more as a result of e-mail than they would if they had to rely on the phone alone. Spam is anti-family.

In another piece of evidence that this is growing as a political issue, Sen. John McCain held a splashy hearing about the scourge just yesterday. "E-mail messaging has fundamentally changed the way we communicate," he said. "The growing affliction of spam, however, may threaten all of this." At the hearing, industry witnesses reported that spam now accounts for almost half of e-mail sent, up from 7 percent in 2001. Spam has ushered in a golden age of consumer fraud. A Federal Trade Commission study concluded that two-thirds of all marketing e-mails are at least partially fraudulent.

Given all this, you'd think Congress would have done something by now. While either political party can use spam to crusade for good values, Democrats have the added advantage of being able to attack the administration for failing to protect the little guy. There may even be a battling-the-special-interests angle. So, why haven't they pursued it? A recent article by Associated Press reporter David Ho explained the legislative inaction so far: "Congress has in the past been reluctant to crack down on spam, in part because of lobbying from retailers, marketing firms and others who use such e-mail for their businesses."

Conservative groups like the Heritage Foundation will be flummoxed by this one because the normal checks and balances of the marketplace are not working. Regular snail-mail junk mailers have to be somewhat discerning in targeting their material because they do have to pay for printing and mailing. E-mail, though, is virtually free to whip out; spammers have an economic incentive to send to every e-mail address they can get. If even a miniscule percentage respond, it's cost-effective.

I admit the spam issue may seem a bit pedestrian compared to terrorism or unemployment. There probably won't be many single issue anti-spam voters. And candidates would certainly need to be careful not to overstate its importance. (Example: "Dick Gephardt will destroy al-Qaida—and spam. You can count on it.")

But this is one of those ideas, akin to Clinton's use of improved child-support collection, that send a signal that the candidate is attentive to the concerns of ordinary Americans. One of the differences between Al Gore's approach and Clinton's was that Gore didn't have a stable of issues that enabled him to wax red-state about cultural values.

There are good pieces of anti-spam legislation out there, like one sponsored by Sen. Chuck Schumer, that propose similar approaches to those that have curbed telemarketing or junk faxes. Because spammers operate all over the world, it requires national and international action. Perhaps a coalition of the willing might help.

Of course if Democrats don't act quickly, it would be easy for President Bush to take over this

issue himself. Some might say that lowering himself to the level of junk e-mail is beneath the presidency, but the reality is that helping to solve this problem would actually benefit more people than repealing the tax on stock dividends. Maybe he couldn't put the argument quite that way, but it is clear that the anti-spam vote is up for grabs.

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readme

Sympathy for the *New York Times*

Often plagiarized. Seldom plagiarizing.

By Michael Kinsley

Wednesday, May 21, 2003, at 10:41 AM PT

Although rarely reluctant to join in a schadenfreude festival, I nevertheless feel sorry for the *New York Times*. Duped by one of its own reporters, hemorrhaging rumors and leaks like the institutions it is used to covering, its extravagant public self-flagellation merely inviting flagellation by everyone else, the paper is at a low ebb. Much of the criticism and self-criticism is deserved. But after two weeks of *Times*-bashing, it's time for a bit of therapeutic outreach.

One reason the *Times* has my sympathy over being duped by a writer is that I've been there. And let me tell you: The clarity of hindsight is remarkable. A couple of years ago, ***Slate*** published a vivid, rollicking yarn about an alleged sport called "monkeyfishing." The author claimed to have used a rod and reel, with rotten fruit as bait, to catch monkeys living on an island in the Florida Keys.

As editor of ***Slate*** at the time, I read the piece before it was published and didn't like it—for a variety of wrong reasons. So I cannot even claim to have been blinded by enthusiasm. Others at ***Slate*** did like it and so we published it. When outsiders challenged it, I read it again.

It was like reading an entirely different article. Red flags waved from every line. At first the author stood by his story and we stood by him. But within days, poking around by ourselves and others made this position untenable, and so we both caved. The question remains, though, why my baloney-detectors didn't function beforehand, when they could have saved us considerable embarrassment. All I can say is: Congress is about to exempt dividends from the income tax—i.e., stranger things than monkeyfishing actually do happen.

Whatever the reason, reading an article with doubts raised is a different experience from reading it in its virginal pre-publication freshness. As ***Slate***'s Jack Shafer has pointed out, most readers of Jayson Blair's *Times* articles did not spot the hints of fabrication or plagiarism either. This includes many of the critics who now say that the *Times* missed important clues because of institutional arrogance or political bias or an affirmative action mentality.

Of course readers are entitled to assume that published articles have been pre-skepticized. And Jayson Blair duped the *Times* again and again. But holding foresight to the standards of hindsight is a bit unfair.

My second reason for feeling sympathy for the *New York Times* is that it now wears the Scarlet P, for plagiarist, when in a way we are all plagiarizers of the *New York Times*. Plagiarism technically applies only to an article's words, not to the ideas and information contained in them. But the value of a newspaper article lies more in the ideas and information than in the precise words. And much or even most American news reporting and commentary on national issues derives—uncredited—from the *New York Times*.

Even if you don't read the *Times* yourself, you get your news from journalists at other media who do. The *Times* sets the news agenda that everyone else follows. The *Washington Post* and maybe one or two other papers also play this role, but even as a writer who appears in the *Washington Post*—a damned fine newspaper run by superb editors who are graced with every kind of brilliance, charm, and physical beauty—I would have to concede that the *Times* is more influential.

It's not just the agenda setting. Our basic awareness of what is going on in the world derives in large part from the *Times*. How do you even know that Baghdad exists? Have you been there? Touched it? How do I, sitting in Seattle, know the current status of the Bush administration's Mideast road map, about which I may choose to opine with seeming authority? Column-writing is an especially derivative form of journalism. But even the hardest of hard-news reporters starts with basic knowledge that probably comes more from the *Times* than her own two eyes.

It's true that the journalistic food chain runs both ways: Big media like the *Times* often pick up stories and information from smaller fish, often with insufficient credit or none at all. But it is the imprimatur of the *Times* or the *Post* that stamps the story as important before sending it back down to other papers—as well as up to the media gods of television.

This near-universal dependence on the *Times* helps to explain the schadenfreude (dependence causes resentment) as well as the more serious alarm about the *Times*' reliability. It also puts Jayson Blair's rip-offs of others, if not his fabrications, in perspective. No one gets ripped off more than the *New York Times*.

The social critic Dwight Macdonald, reminiscing about the left-wing *Partisan Review* crowd of the 1930s, wrote: "The N.Y. Times was to us what Aristotle was to the medieval scholastics—a revered authority, even though pagan, and a mine of useful information about the actual world." Today's equivalent of that sect-ridden, conspiracy-minded, alienation-proud political world is on the right. I was listening to a right-wing broadcast crank the other day as he carried on about how the *Times* can't be trusted, among half a dozen current issues. I don't know where he got his

information, but I have a guess.

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recycled
Moving Out of Spin City
Monday, May 19, 2003, at 10:23 AM PT

Today, White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer announced his intention to leave the position in July. Michael Kinsley wrote about his Q&A aplomb during wartime press briefings in 2001: "[M]y colleague David Plotz gave short shrift to Fleischer—dismissing him as an evasive bore. This doesn't give Fleischer nearly enough credit: He is a *great* evasive bore."

William Saletan also analyzed Fleischer's eight tricks for highly effective spin control during the Enron scandal in this article from 2002: "[M]aking something look like nothing is easier than it sounds. All you have to do is phrase it in the negative. When asked to explain why Bush officials decided not to bail out Enron, Fleischer says there's no action to explain, because 'they took no action.' "

Fleischer appeared frequently in the "Whopper of the Week," as compiled by Timothy Noah. As Noah commented in February 2003, "Ari Fleischer's ability to repeat a lie even after it's been shown, repeatedly, to be false is what separates him from the amateurs." For more Fleischer fibs, consult the 2002 and 2001 Whopper Archives.

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shopping
Meaty Issues
Are the new low- and no-carb breads, beers, and sweets any good?
By Kelly Alexander
Monday, May 19, 2003, at 8:30 AM PT

It's dismaying when, as you're writing about someone, that person dies. Dr. Robert Atkins, 72, the most successful diet guru in the known universe, unexpectedly expired a few weeks ago. His legions of followers breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't been felled by a massive coronary; instead, he fell down, hit his head, and never recovered.

Speaking of not recovering, I have friends who are on the Atkins diet. If you are one of the five Americans unfamiliar with *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution*—sales of the book, first published in 1972 and updated 20 years later, have exceeded 10 million copies—you should know what it sets

forth. According to Atkins, our excessive consumption of carbohydrates causes our bodies to produce more insulin than we need, raising our blood-sugar levels and making it impossible for us to lose weight; only by severely limiting our intake of carbohydrates can we reverse the course. We are allowed from very little to no bread, pasta, flour, sugar, grains, and fruits. Instead, proteins and fats are our new best friends. Steak, bacon-wrapped steak, bacon-and-cheese-wrapped steak? Go for it, caveman.

Whether or not you buy its science—an article by Gary Taubes in the *New York Times Magazine* last summer called "What If It's All Been a Big Fat Lie?" suggested there was more truth in Atkins' plan than food-pyramid pushers had given the doctor credit for—you cannot ignore its effects. If you eliminate a vast number of items from your "things I eat" list, you're bound to lose weight. I dropped a whopping six and a half pounds during a one-week test of Atkins. That was neat, but I still don't like diets, and I especially didn't like this one. How is it OK to eat steak and eggs dipped in butter but not an orange? Why is it acceptable to consume a whole leg of lamb but not a banana?

Fear of fruit is not the most bizarre part of the Atkins phenomenon. The real puzzler is the horde of carbohydrate-substitute foods creeping out of the laboratories. As a study commissioned by the market-research firm Productscan Online and reported by ABC News discovered recently, in the past two and a half years more than 816 products making low- or no-carb claims were introduced in the United States. They cost a lot more, too: A pound of low-carb pasta is approximately five times more expensive than its starchy alternative. The people who give up carbs seem willing to do anything to eat toast without actually eating it.

The Test

It is unfair to test low-carb foods against their "regular" counterparts. That is like comparing Jason Biggs with Vin Diesel. A carb-starved person will overlook important inadequacies in taste in order to eat breadlike things while still slouching toward skinniness. My goal was to determine whether any of the products was remotely tasty, and to what level of desperation one would have to sink into before eating it.

The Science

Ersatz chocolate is sweetened with one of two things (sometimes both): maltitol, a sugar substitute that is absorbed very slowly into the human body, so that part of what is ingested reaches the large intestine, where metabolism yields fewer calories; and Splenda, another artificial sweetener, this one made from sucralose, a calorie-free chemical that contains sugar but is not absorbed by the body. (For ***Slate***'s take on artificial sweeteners, click here.) Instead of regular flour, low-carb bread is loaded with fibrous density courtesy of soy flour, soy protein, and wheat fiber. Low-carb beer, according to Ray Daniels, a longtime home brewer, beer-writer, and the organizer of Chicago's Real Ale Festival, is made by utilizing enzymes such as pullulanase. These enzymes are added to

beer during its mash stage, and they break down starches, reducing residual carbohydrates in the brew. This is exactly how "lite" beers are made, too, and in truth there is very little difference between the two.

Bread, Pasta, Muffins

Product: Atkins Penne Rigate pasta

Key ingredients: defatted soy flour, soy protein isolate, wheat gluten

Net carbohydrates: 6 grams per 2-ounce serving ("net carbohydrates" is an Atkins trade term, referring to the carbohydrates a food has after its digestible fiber content is subtracted)

Calories per serving: 230

Cost: $4.99 per pound

Taste: Uncooked, this looked like normal whole-wheat pasta. I made a nice, garlicky marinara for it. I should have thrown the sauce away for the good it did. Cooked, the pasta had otherworldly textural problems; each piece seemed to crumble the second you put it into your mouth, and yet, chew as you might, it would not disappear.

Level of desperation: I would not eat this again unless I had lost some of the brain cells governing my memory due to carbohydrate deficiency.

Product: Darielle Penne Rigate pasta

Key ingredients: defatted soy flour, pasteurized egg white, rice flour

Net carbohydrates: 10 grams per serving

Calories per serving: 160

Cost: about $3.79 per pound

Taste: This tasted a little better but still too much as I imagine wet IKEA furniture would.

Level of desperation: If my only choice were this or Atkins-brand pasta, I'd pick this one. And then pray for a Good Humor truck to run over me.

Product: Controlled Carb Gourmet Fiber Rich Bread

Key ingredients: whole-wheat flour, rye flour, wheat bran

Net carbohydrates: 3 grams

Calories per serving: 45

Cost: about $5.99 per loaf

Taste: Eureka! Some tasty Atkins-friendly food—and bread, at that. Slices of this bread are very small—about three inches square—and very thin. But though its texture was a tad cardboardlike, it boasts such ingredients as "spices" and "salt" and made for fine eating. If not exactly the kind of bread that screams, "Use me for French toast," then at least the kind made for absentminded dunks into coffee. It was also put to use repeatedly for making some excellent, Atkins-friendly grilled-cheese sandwiches.

Level of desperation: I'd eat this bread again with little to no provocation. Full-carb packaged brands have basically nothing on it but size. Ditto the Controlled Carb bagels, which were no worse than the grocery store staple Lender's.

Product: Atkins Country White Bread

Key ingredients: water, wheat protein, enriched wheat flour

Net carbohydrates: 3 grams

Calories per serving: 70

Cost: about $5 per loaf

Taste: Whether you toast these slices (also small) or not, or spread them with giant pats of butter (allowed by Atkins) or not, they are the blandest and chewiest food I have ever tasted. I timed my husband while he ate one three-inch piece of celery, the most fibrous food I know; I then timed him while he ate one piece of this toast. He chewed normally, taking a new bite only after he had swallowed the previous one. It took two minutes and 16 and a half seconds for him to eat the celery. It took two minutes and six seconds for him to eat the toast. It took two days for me to be forgiven.

Level of desperation: If I developed a hankering for particleboard, I'd sate it with this. Ditto the fake bagels, also made under the Atkins brand.

Product: Controlled Carb Gourmet Banana Muffin

Key ingredients: water, canola oil, egg whites, maltitol

Net carbohydrates: 1.5 grams

Calories: 330

Cost: about $7.99 for four muffins

Taste: Sticky business, this muffin. It sticks to its cellophane, to your fingers, to a napkin. And because its makers hide the banana (it is but the 16th of 18 ingredients), eating it is a pretty empty experience.

Level of desperation: I would not seek out this food. I would hide if it looked for me. It's a shame, though, because we've seen that low-carb baked goods can taste good.

Sweets

Product: Atkins Endulge Chocolate Candy Bar

Key ingredients: maltitol, chocolate liquor, cocoa butter

Net carbohydrates: 2 grams

Calories: 150

Cost: about $1.49 per bar

Taste: The great doctor scores. The chocolate bar is waxy and sweet and good; although it's smaller and more expensive than other candy bars, I defy anyone to choose, in a blind taste test, which is Endulge and which is Hershey's. If you love ultradark and rich chocolate, Endulge is not for you. If you can slum with a Nestle's once in a while, you'll be able to ignore its only drawbacks: a faintly grainy texture and slightly bitter aftertaste.

Level of desperation: If no one were watching me at the grocery store, I would buy one. Actually, I did buy one—I wanted some chocolate, and I didn't want to feel bad about eating it, which is exactly the point of this entire industry of products. Ditto the chocolate "crunch" version.

Product: Carb Not Beanit Butter

Key ingredients: roasted organic soybeans, naturally pressed soybean oil, soy concentrate

Net carbohydrates: 5 grams per 2-tablespoon serving

Calories: 170

Cost: about $5.99 per jar

Taste: If you like homemade peanut butter, freshly ground with naturally sweet flavor, you will be excited by the look of this product. If you like things that taste good, you will not be enthused. Beanit butter is extremely grainy and not particularly sweet.

Level of desperation: If you find supermarket and even natural peanut butters too sweet for you, as some people do, the Beanit Butter would be a spread of choice. I, however, am sticking with extra-crunchy Skippy.

Product: Carbolite Milk Chocolate Bar

Key ingredients: maltitol, cocoa butter, chocolate liquor

Net carbohydrates: 2 grams

Calories: 250

Cost: about $2.98 per bar

Taste: Nice and creamy consistency here, and no grainy mouth feel. This is a typical waxy affair, no better and no worse than dime-store chocolate candies. It's eminently edible and would be good for those after-dinner, "I don't want dessert but I want a little something sweet" moments.

Level of desperation: If I could erase the word "Carbolite" from the packaging, I would be caught dead eating this.

Beer

Product: Michelob Ultra Low Carbohydrate Light Beer

Net carbohydrates: 2.6

Calories: 95

Cost: about $7 per six-pack

Taste: Beer is a personal passion, especially good beer, especially Belgian beer. But there are times when I have hunkered down at a bar and ordered an Amstel Light because I worried about getting fat. For people who have those moments every time they look at a length of fettuccine, there is this beer, which has only 7.2 grams of carbohydrates fewer than an Amstel and only .6 grams less than

a Miller Lite (on the market since 1974). Here is beer-flavored water with a really bad, bitter aftertaste. It contains about 35 percent less alcohol than other beers, too.

Level of desperation: I tried this beer in a number of ways, and the only way I could tolerate it was supercold and enhanced with a generous squirt of lemon. I'd have to be drunk to try it again any other way.

The Low Down

It must be said that Dr. Atkins went out like a champ, enjoying an uncommon predeath rise in popularity that many famous dead people, including Jesus, never got to experience. In his wake, he has given birth to an industry of low- and no-carb foods; clearly in its infancy, this business has spawned an inconsistent array of products. The good news, for subscribers to Atkins and maybe even for people who just want to monitor their carb intake, is that there are reasonable alternatives out there for some hallmark carb and sugar items—specifically bread and chocolate. As for me, if I wanted to Atkins-ize myself permanently (highly unlikely), I would simply eat pork-chop-wrapped duck breasts for every meal.

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slate fare

Welcome to Doonesbury@*Slate*

A note from the proprietor.

By Garry Trudeau

Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 3:22 PM PT

Ever since Mike Kinsley first slipped into Gore-Tex and lit out for the coast to found ***Slate***, we at the Doonesbury Town Hall and Web Presence (an older, more established site) have been more than a little interested in whether he and his talented crew could make a go of it. As a comparable online media pavilion featuring the same unstable mix of pungent commentary and little income, the Town Hall felt it had an emotional stake in the fledgling magazine's future.

Well, after seven years, it's time to exhale and scatter a little confetti about. Not only did ***Slate*** finally find a winning financial formula (6 million distinct monthly visitors helps), but its restless, voracious search for contrarious content brought them to our doorstep. Not to downplay the agonizing negotiations that ensued, setting otherwise decent people at each other's throats, but today the Doonesbury Town Hall finds itself happily, proudly, annexed.

What does this mean to the typical ***Slate*** visitor? Well, if you hate comic strips, not much, but what

does that say about you? For everyone else, it's a chance to toggle between serious journalism and spitball satire without having to leave the site. To be honest, we've designed the Town Hall to be a one-stop sinkhole for your discretionary time, but we're not greedy. We're happy to host you on a single page—such as Today's Strip, or Daily Briefing, or our Arcade section, where thousands of lunch hours are blown off every day. For core Doonesbury aficionados, we offer Cast Bios, Flashbacks, GBT's FAQs, and many other features, all at a level of comprehensiveness that closes in on obsession. You can literally wander around for days, toll-free and with no supervision, and some people do. (We don't really understand that kind of single-mindedness, but we're happy to cater to it.)

Some people have commented on the unlikeliness of finding Doonesbury under the larger MSN umbrella, and for them we've cranked up a special edition of Straw Poll this week, where they can go to safely blow off steam. For folks who think we are a natural fit in the ***Slate*** environment, we have a special message: We agree, wholeheartedly.

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sports nut

The NBA's Grassy Knoll

Why conspiracy theorists flock to pro basketball.

By Sam Eifling

Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 2:58 PM PT

Tonight marks the NBA's draft lottery, the league's annual ritual of rolling up its sleeves, turning its palms to the crowd, and magically pulling Ping-Pong balls out of a hat. The NBA assigns non-playoff teams a portion of 1,000 combinations based on their records, then draws Powerball-style for the top picks. The system, unique to basketball, is designed to keep bad teams from jockeying for a top player by racing to the bottom of the standings. Yet despite the lottery's transparency, it's also an occasion for skeptics to accuse the NBA of running the most crooked league in sports.

Sportswriters tend to roll their eyes at such talk, but they may as well be the Warren Commission to some fans. The NBA has crackled with conspiracy fever for years. Exhibit A is the New York Knicks getting the top pick to select Patrick Ewing in 1985. Then there was Orlando beating long odds to win the draft lottery in 1992 and 1993, a huge growth spurt for the new franchise. The latest irregularity was the Los Angeles Lakers' unlikely playoff comeback against the Sacramento Kings last season, aided, some suggest, by dubious officiating in Game 6. That the San Antonio Spurs last week knocked off the Lakers "hushed conspiracy theorists all over the world," wrote ESPN.com's Marc Stein, who suggests the NBA show the lottery live to quell accusations of

chicanery.

Even coaches and players have kvetched that the fix is in. Donnie Nelson, an assistant with the Dallas Mavericks, called his father Don's ejection from last night's game "peculiar." Then-Milwaukee Bucks guard Ray Allen cried foul after his team's 2001 playoff loss to the Philadelphia 76ers, and the league fined Allen, his coach, and the Bucks a combined $85,000. Commissioner David Stern told reporters, "We can't just take it as a joke that the league is involved in some kind of criminal conspiracy."

Why does the NBA among pro sports syndicates draw such distrust? Too much order among chaos, perhaps. Since 1980, the league has featured huge TV markets Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, or Houston in all but one finals series (Detroit over Portland in 1990). That, in turn, has maximized the number of sets tuned in to the league, which last year inked a TV contract worth about $4.6 billion, double its previous deal. With safeguards like the salary cap and draft lottery, the big-market mastery of the playoffs is simply too lucky. If you're sitting in Sacramento, prima facie the league looks crooked.

Then there are the officials. A crooked baseball umpire or NFL ref could theoretically throw games, but the NBA official has one power the others don't: He can remove a player from the game with six personal fouls or two technicals. Thus, when a player hits the pine, fans wail that the fix is in. (The theory extends to college basketball, too; Duke allegedly draws more post-season calls than any other school.) It doesn't help that NBA refs placate the league's superstars by granting them extra steps in the lane and push-offs against defenders as time winds down, like in Game 6 of the 1998 Finals—all of which fosters even more speculation. With the top markets bounced from this year's playoffs, the conspiracy du jour is that refs have marching orders to extend each series as long as possible to guarantee high ratings.

Commissioner Stern himself doesn't exactly allay conspiracy talk. He's suave and smiles well but has a vague oiliness about him. In a TV biopic, he would be played by a tanned and subdued Jon Lovitz.

What many of the conspiracy theorists overlook is how the NBA's supposed favoritism reflects basketball itself. Intimate arenas and minimalist uniforms mean NBA stars have facial expressions, hair, tattoos, voices—Dennis Rodman would have been wasted in a hockey uniform—and largely as a result, no sport creates stars more efficiently. Seven years ago the Lakers got to resume their dynasty because Shaquille O'Neal gravitated to the glare of Hollywood, and sure enough, he seems to be constantly hawking Whoppers and Crunch bars. Surely the NBA doesn't favor big-dollar markets any more than its image-savvy players do.

Since basketball is highly individualistic, power shifts slowly. With just five players on the court,

one or two marquee players can lead a team of hoi polloi into contention for a solid decade. All of which makes the selection order in the NBA's abbreviated, two-round draft all the more critical. Last year Houston beat long odds to take the top pick, selecting Yao Ming, who, if most conspiracy logic held, should have wound up playing in Madison Square Garden, a Q-train ride from New York's Chinatown. This year the no-duh pick is LeBron James, the *Sports Illustrated*-anointed "chosen one" who could carry one lucky team for the next 15 years. The allegedly professional teams in Denver and Cleveland each have a 22.5 percent chance of getting the top selection and thus dibs on James, while Chicago has a 4.4 percent chance and New York 1.5 percent. Cover your ears for conspiracy buffs' howling if either of the latter teams gets the top slot. Then again, wouldn't it be just like Stern and his front-office cabal to banish LeBron to Denver, just to shake us off their scent yet again?

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summary judgment

Bruce All Righty

If Jim Carrey were God, he'd send critics to hell.

By Emily Nussbaum

Friday, May 23, 2003, at 9:19 AM PT

The In-Laws (Warner Bros.). "Perhaps the oddest thing about *The In-Laws* is that it's aimed at an audience old enough to remember not only the original, but also how much funnier it seemed at the time," remarks the *Onion*'s Scott Tobias. A.O. Scott notes that this remake's remakers appear to have "set out to make a movie that would be mediocre in every respect. If so, they have completely succeeded." Others lament the loss of the original's "pinpoint-Borschty dialogue," a wasted Albert Brooks, and an undercurrent of "all that enlightened parenthood crap" (Lisa Schwarzbaum, *Entertainment Weekly*). A faint defense arrives via the *LA Weekly*'s John Patterson, who calls the comedy "more than passable, often extremely funny." (Buy tickets to *The In-Laws*.)

Bruce Almighty (Universal). A split decision, with many critics focusing less on the comedy than on Jim Carrey himself. The *New York Times*' Stephen Holden marvels, "All this star has to do is stand there and grin to convince you that once the layers of civilization have been peeled away, what's left is an insatiable, rampaging id." The *Chicago Tribune*'s Mark Caro rages against the comic's egotism: "OK! OK! OK! We're sorry *The Majestic* and *Man on the Moon* didn't work out, and we respect your comedic skills!" *Premiere*'s Glenn Kenny agrees that the film is "Carrey's own flash on *Sullivan's Travels*, with a soupcon of Jerry Lewis–style self-regard/self-pity thrown in." And in *EW*, Owen Gleiberman praises the comic as "an id, a tornado, a rubber-limbed punk jester"—although he notes that "even the star's rowdiest antics now feel less as if they're breaking a mold than fitting snugly into it."

(If critics are taking the actor's work personally, the feeling's mutual: At the *Bruce Almighty* junket, Carrey commented that if he were God, "First of all I'd send anybody who didn't like *The Majestic* to the fiery pit of hell and then I'd start a new Utopian society. People made out of Nerf material so that I could cave the critics' heads in and then they would pop right back out. No one would be hurt and I'd get my rocks off. ...") (Buy tickets to *Bruce Almighty*.)

Jazz Critics. In *The Nation*, Adam Shatz defends provocateur Stanley Crouch, recently fired from *JazzTimes*—arguing that if at times Crouch is over the top, he's also aesthetic top dog. Shatz also confirms Crouch's slams of his paler peers: "The typical jazz critic is a white man in his 50s who feels underappreciated by the publishing world, a state of affairs he mistakenly blames on jazz's marginality—or on more prominent critics like Crouch—rather than on the quality of his prose." The real scandal in jazz criticism "isn't race—it's bad writing."

The Clinton Wars, by Sidney Blumenthal (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux). Score-settling and self-importance aside, Robert Dallek finds this memoir a "powerful and generally persuasive defense of Bill, Hillary and Blumenthal." Almost everyone else disagrees. In the *New York Review of Books*, Joseph Lelyveld suggests that Blumenthal has Clintonian Stockholm syndrome, calling the book a rough draft of the Clintons' upcoming memoirs. "It's difficult to imagine that either Clinton will defend the president's record more enthusiastically or unwaveringly than Blumenthal," cracks the *Los Angeles Times*' Ronald Brownstein, who complains that "ultimately [Blumenthal] is too much the believer to be believed." And in the *New York Observer*, Blumenthal's ideological enemy (and former editor at the *New Republic*) Andrew Sullivan paints the author as a lovable dupe, suggesting that the Clintons "used him for his propagandistic skills and his fawning loyalty. They used him to drape their own modest but defensible record with the patina of world-historical significance. And they used him to lie to one another. Some people would find that demeaning. It tells you a lot about Sidney Blumenthal that he regards it as an achievement worth recording for the ages." To read Michael Isikoff's take on the book, click here, and click here for Timothy Noah's reactions, both in ***Slate***. (Buy *The Clinton Wars*.)

The Quality of Life Report, by Meghan Daum (Viking). "Daum manages the near impossible: to make fun of people without judging them," delights Karen Karbo in the *New York Times*. Others agree that this Manhattan-Gal-Goes-Midwestern saga transcends typical Chick Lit: "In the midst of the laughs, the author tells a serious story of addiction and recovery, not of the usual suspects from inner-city ghettos, but educated, well-fed, middle-class whites," the *Boston Globe*'s Dan Wakefield writes (somewhat mysteriously—are we really short on middle-class addiction stories?). And *Publishers Weekly* begs to be blurbed, calling this a "confident first novel, full of wit and deft social criticism, often very funny and frequently wise" and Daum herself "a rising star." But a

snitty Amazon reviewer—suspiciously located in Lincoln, Neb.—delivers this pot/kettle slam: "Daum seems only to want to impress us with her lack of brevity and conciseness." (Buy *The Quality of Life Report*.)

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television

Matt Lauer Sees a Serious Place

The Today show finds "military overtones" on Korea's DMZ.

By Virginia Heffernan

Monday, May 19, 2003, at 5:25 PM PT

One way to tell *Today*'s coverage of world affairs from the kind you see on the evening news is that on *Today* (NBC), soldiers are urged to send shout-outs to their moms at home. Like the crowds in Times Square, they also must hoot for the live cameras. In Korea's Demilitarized Zone—"in the crosshairs on the axis of evil," as Matt Lauer put it, broadcasting live from the border Monday morning—the Americans who spend the lion's share of their days at Camp Bonifas in silent staring contests with North Korean soldiers also fielded questions from Lauer like, "What's it like to serve here?" To which they answered, "It's great, sir."

That's reassuring. Making even a day of morning news from the DMZ—providing a capsule history of Korea's Sunshine Policy, cracking leery jokes about sex-starved servicemen and Jennifer Aniston, and finally throwing back to Al Roker in Manhattan—would try the nerves of even the toughest newsman. But Lauer, whose live broadcast from the DMZ was history's first, is, fortunately, an airhead, and a patient one. He managed, therefore, not to get stressed out, as he would have put it; calmly, he strolled, interviewed, ruminated, and schmoozed with Americans along the immaculate and menacing border. (The North Koreans have a standing army of 1.2 million; they also, of course, boast of nuclear capacity.) And while Lauer failed to communicate much urgency about North Korea, neither did he appear anxious. Only once did an emotion come through: "Katie, I have to be honest with you. This is one of the most serious places I've ever been to in my life." (Has he already forgotten co-hosting *Fame, Fortune, and Romance* with Robin Leach?)

Monday's *Today* took place at night in Korea, from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. The NBC camera crew was forbidden to use lights when filming the central structures on the border; Lauer explained that bright lights could be construed as a provocation. Viewers were left with a queasy green night-vision image of a handsome concrete building finessed with pagodalike allusions. You couldn't see many North Korean soldiers, but they were said to be watching the NBC people like hawks.

Lauer was in Panmunjom, 40 miles from Seoul, a "negotiation area" whose conference room features a long rectangular table that's split down the center, right on the 38th parallel itself. North

Koreans take the north; Southern Koreans the south. This keeps things fair when the two sides negotiate, which is never.

While Lauer spent a fair amount of time setting up prerecorded pieces on North-South family reunions, life in Seoul, and the history of the Korean War, he also toured the DMZ live with the head of American military operations there. He visited the Bridge of No Return, the fascinating landmark between the two countries over which Koreans were given one chance to pass after the war; once they'd chosen a side, they couldn't go back. Ominous-looking guards were shown standing at the midpoint of the bridge.

On these walks, Lauer appeared deeply serene, neither daunted nor impressed by hard news. He seemed to have made himself at home. He called the DMZ "the DMC" once or twice, and he caught himself saying "South Carolina" instead of "South Korea." No big deal. Periodically, when he turned to hyperbole, he did so as if to wake himself up. He was "on the bull's-eye" in "the scariest place on earth," "the most heavily fortified border anywhere," and "the most dangerous place in the world." But that was all right, too.

Lauer may have sounded most like himself when he surveyed the area from a high observation point. He breathed deep and said, as if to himself, "If this didn't have such a military overtone, it would be a pretty beautiful place."

"Thank you, Matt," said Katie Couric. In other news, *Les Misérables* is closing.

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today's papers

Dov Connection

By Emily Biuso

Friday, May 23, 2003, at 3:42 AM PT

The New York Times and *Los Angeles Times* lead with word that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is moving toward endorsing the U.S.-backed Middle East peace plan that would create a Palestinian state. *USA Today* leads with news of the $320 billion tax cut package rolling toward Congressional approval and expected to take effect this summer, much to the delight of President Bush. (According to the *LAT* and other early morning reports, the House approved the tax cut in the wee hours as expected.) The *Wall Street Journal* tops its world-wide news box with the 14-0 United Nations Security Council vote (Syria was absent) to immediately end sanctions against Iraq, enabling resumption of Iraqi oil exports within a few weeks. *The Washington Post* leads, a day late, with an Associated Press report on Wednesday's 6.8-magnitude earthquake that killed at least 1,092 and injured 6,782.

Details are vague about Sharon's apparent backing of the peace plan. According to the *LAT*, Sharon "reluctantly agreed" to take the plan to a Cabinet vote this weekend as a trade for a U.S. promise to consider Israeli objections to the so-called road map. The *Post* stuffs the story and says that the Bush administration has "acceded to Israel's demands that a U.S.-backed peace plan be subjected to significant revisions." The *NYT* reports "the wording of Mr. Sharon's endorsement of the peace plan ... was not disclosed." When revealed, it should be pretty interesting, considering Israel has been at odds with many parts of the plan. For example: Israel has been demanding a ban on the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees who fled at the founding of Israel, while Secretary of State Colin Powell has specifically rejected that request. The *LAT* reports that the real progress occurred during talks between National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Sharon's chief of staff, Dov Weisglass. The agreement between the two has "very creative wordsmith-ship," an "Israeli source in Washington" tells the *LAT*. Among other points, negotiators have been urging Israel to withdraw from Gaza; release some Palestinian prisoners; and dismantle illegal Jewish settlements, which most observers regard as the stickiest wicket.

Everybody but *USAT* notes that France's endorsement of the Security Council measure doesn't ease the crankiness of U.S. officials over lack of support in the past. In Paris for the first time since the war, Powell said at a press conference, "Does it mean that the disagreements of the past are totally forgotten? No. Let's not paper it over and pretend it didn't happen—it happened."

Everybody agrees that the tax cut and Security Council vote are big scores for Bush. In a front-page news analysis the *NYT*'s David E. Rosenbaum points out that though the official tax bill price tag is barely two-fifths of the $726 billion initial proposal by Bush, if it's calculated on a 10-year basis and assumed that the sunset clauses will be repealed (yesterday's papers and TP explained that that's likely), the cost in lost revenue is actually over $800 billion.

Of course, Bush's victories on the domestic and foreign fronts don't necessarily qualify the rest of us as winners. As a *WP* editorial puts it, the tax cut is either "among the most dishonest, gimmick-laden tax packages in history—in which case its true cost is far more than advertised. Or the bill's provisions really will take effect and then quickly fade away—in which case its economic value is far less than promised. Either way, it manages, rather impressively, to be more skewed to the wealthy than President Bush's original proposal."

The *WSJ* reports that Saddam Hussein's oldest sun, Odai, is hiding in a Baghdad suburb and is negotiating his surrender with U.S. forces. The paper cites "a third party with knowledge of the discussions."

All the papers note the retirement of Army Gen. Tommy Franks, who led the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Everybody names Lt. Gen. John Abizaid, an Arabic speaker who is the No.

2 officer at Central Command, as a possible successor. The *NYT also mentions* Lt. Gen. David McKiernan, the commander of ground forces in Iraq, as a contender. The *LAT* reports that Franks' other deputy, Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Michael DeLong, is another candidate.

The *Post*, *NYT* and *USAT* all front excited dispatches on the first round of the first woman to golf in a PGA Tour event in 58 years. Annika Sorenstam's 1-over-par 71 performance left her in the bottom half of the field, but no one seemed to care.

Nothing to Bragg about ... There's apparently quite a bit of better-late-than-never fact-checking going on at *The New York Times* these days. In an editor's note, the paper corrects the record on a story that ran June 15 with the byline of superstar Rick Bragg and the dateline of Apalachicola, Fla. Oops! After a review of the article that took place "in response to a reader's letter," the *Times* learned that "while Mr. Bragg indeed visited Apalachicola briefly and wrote the article, the interviewing and reporting on the scene were done by a freelance journalist, J. Wes Yoder," a reporter for Alabama's *Anniston Star*, the paper where Bragg got his start. The *Times* concludes Bragg should've shared the credit with the younger Alabaman.

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today's papers
Sunset Bullevard
By Eric Umansky
Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 2:51 AM PT

The *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal* world-wide news box, and *USA Today* all lead with word that U.N. Security Council members, including former hold-outs France, Germany, and Russia, said they've agreed to lift sanctions against Iraq. The *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* lead with news that Senate and House negotiators have tentatively agreed on a tax-cut deal, with cuts on paper totaling $318 billion. In order to get the bill past a key swing-vote senator, Republican George Voinovich of Ohio, the bill also includes about $20 billion in state aid and $15 billion in refunds to low-income families with children.

The American-sponsored sanctions resolution, which is expected to be passed today, gives the U.S. and Britain almost complete control of Iraq, but also gives the U.N. a slightly larger role than in previous drafts. A U.N. representative will be given what one diplomat described as a "tangible but independent" role on reconstruction efforts. The resolution will also phase out the U.N.'s oil-for-food program; oil revenues will instead be overseen by the U.S. and Britain with an audit board of U.N. and international representatives.

The tax bill includes a reduction in the dividend tax to 15 percent and a capital gains tax reduced to

that same rate. Those decreases account for about half of the cuts—$150 billion—the other portion comes from expanding the child credit from $600 to $1,000, ending the so-called marriage penalty, and phasing in slightly lower income taxes (for some brackets) a few years earlier than had been planned.

The tax deal's stated cost is less than half of President Bush's original proposal. But part of that lower price-tag was achieved by including clauses to eliminate many of the cuts after a few years. Known as sunset clauses, such deals are prime candidates for repeal, as GOP leaders say they want to do in this case. That, of course, means that the actual cost of the cuts could well be higher than advertised. The *Journal* hammers home that point, saying up high that the clauses are "budget tricks that were ridiculed in the Senate's tax plan, including by House leaders." The other papers mostly skip such tough-minded analysis and instead have brief "he said, she said" glosses on the clauses. That kind of timid coverage leaves readers to guess about what's really going on.

In fact, one of the best ways to get informed about the cuts is to skip the news stories—and read the editorials. Sure, they can be preachy. But editorial writers aren't reticent, as many of their news-side colleagues are, about outing politically touchy, seemingly partisan, truths. It is a fine line for news-writers, but too often they don't come anywhere near it. Consider today's *NYT*: The lead editorial says the bill goes "against some of the best economic advice in the land," and will cause the nation's deficit and debt to rise, dramatically increasing the real costs of the cuts. Maybe that's just hype. But the *Times*' news story doesn't even visit the (important) questions and get experts' take on them. Instead, it spends disproportionate space on a pulpy narrative of the political drama ("stormy meetings," "accusations of arrogance and broken promises," etc., etc.). The *Post* has also had a fine series of editorials about the cuts. See here, here, and here.

The *NYT*, alone among the papers, fronts an earthquake in Algeria yesterday that killed at least 530 people and left roughly 5,000 injured.

The *WP* fronts current Iraq boss Paul Bremer's statements yesterday that an interim authority won't be set up until at least July and even then won't have much power. Bremer said he is focusing on getting Iraq's security under control, and the *Post* suggests he's beginning to make progress. More police are now on the streets in Baghdad, and on Wednesday, "for the first time in several days," there were no reported U.S. casualties. (Obvious question: How many casualties have there been recently?)

The *WP* and *NYT* front the resignation of EPA chief Christine Todd Whitman who often found herself a punching bag of some in the administration as well as of environmentalists. Whitman said, of course, she wants to spend more time with her family, who live in New Jersey. But the decision wasn't all about having more free time. "This is the kind of job when you come home at

the end of the day, you really like to have someone to sound off to," she told the *NYT*.

A lengthy front-page *NYT* investigation says that in the 1980s Bayer Corp. kept selling a blood-clotting drug overseas years after the company had replaced it on the domestic market with a safer version that didn't risk exposing users to HIV. The paper also found documents that the FDA at one point ordered Bayer to stop the selling the stuff abroad but to do so without "alerting Congress, the medical community and the public."

Monday, this column complained about how difficult it is to contact *NYT* staffers, and how other papers do a better job of making themselves available to readers. As a number of TP readers have pointed out, there is actually a neat trick, mentioned deep in the *NYT*'s Web site, to get in touch with Timesians. You can get a fairly comprehensive, though somewhat dated, list of staffers' e-mail addresses by sending a blank message to staff@nytimes.com. (Go ahead, try it.)

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today's papers

Appeals and Oranges

By Eric Umansky

Wednesday, May 21, 2003, at 4:51 AM PT

The *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal* world-wide newsbox, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today* all lead with the White House's decision to ratchet up the terrorist threat index to orange, or "high risk." The *New York Times*, stuffs the alert (reasonably, see next paragraph), and leads with word that U.S. authorities in Iraq are set to announce that just about all AK-47s or larger weapons will be confiscated. The *Times* says officials don't really expect most Iraqis to give up their guns. Instead authorities are hoping that the new rules will encourage people to keep their Kalashnikovs off the streets.

A top Homeland Security official announced that the threat-index increase "is based upon the recent terrorist bombings in Saudi Arabia and Morocco, also in conjunction with intelligence reports concerning anti-U.S. terrorist group intentions." Despite playing the alert inside, the *NYT* has the best analysis, explaining up high that the hike has less to do with specific intel on potential domestic attacks and is essentially based on educated guesses. "This is an analytical judgment that we've entered a dangerous period," said one administration official.

As the *LAT* and *Post* emphasize, there does appear to be hard intel about potential attacks abroad. Citing information about "imminent" attacks, the U.S., Britain, and Germany all said they're closing their embassies in Riyadh. "It's not if, it's when," said one Saudi official. The *Post* says the intel was gleaned from interrogations of recently arrested militants.

The papers report that administration officials say they have intel that an al-Qaida cell behind the attacks in Riyadh actually operated out of Iran. The *NYT* says that the White House, which has long urged Iran to go after AQ, is "livid" about the latest discovery. But about halfway through the *Times*' piece, it says that while some administration officials call the information "rock-hard," others think that there is "still no conclusive intelligence linking the Qaida members in Iran to the Saudi attack." (It seems like that should have been played higher than the 11th paragraph.)

The *NYT* says above-the-fold on Page One says that President Bush is considering traveling to the Mideast. It would be Bush's first trip to the region and, the paper says, an attempt "to salvage [the] administration's battered Middle East peace plan." But despite that and the prominent play, the details don't seem all that Grand Gesture-y: Bush might swing by Kuwait or Qatar, but probably not Israel. The trip would be focused mostly on visiting GIs. The *LAT* devotes all of one sentence to the potential visit.

The papers all add that Bush called both Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas to urge them to follow the peace "road map." The *NYT* says the White House is pressing Sharon to make some sort of "dramatic" non-security-related concessions, mainly dismantling some new settlements. The paper also suggests, way down low, that the administration is considering changing tacks and allowing Israel to make some changes to the road map—because, explains the *Times*, the only other option right now seems to be abandoning the road map all-together.

An Associated Press piece in the *WP* notices an unusual protest in the Gaza Strip yesterday: After Israeli troops raided their neighborhood, about 500 Palestinian residents came out to protest against *local militants* who routinely attack a nearby settlement. "They brought us only destruction and made us homeless," said one man.

Citing unnamed sources, the *NYT* says there's now a consensus within various intel agencies that the mobile labs recently found in Iraq were indeed intended to produce bio-weapons, though, perhaps because the labs had been disinfected before they were discovered, there's no evidence that they actually made the stuff. Iraqi scientists insist that the labs, some of which have equipment made within the past year, were used to produce hydrogen for weather balloons. "Iraq never told the United Nations that it had made such units," retorted one official. "Why would you have a covert program for filling weather balloons?" The *Times*, in a less-than-fleshed-out passage, says that Iraq *did* declare the units—as "food testing laboratories."

The *NYT* says inside that a wide-ranging group of Iraqi political figures, including Kurdish leaders and Pentagon favorite Ahmad Chalabi, are about to sign an open-letter protesting the U.S.'s

decision to delay empowering an Iraqi interim government. "We do not want to make your presence here an issue," warned Chalabi.

While we're on Iraq and the *Times*: The paper has yet to correct its Page One report from last week that told readers of a new U.S. policy to shoot looters. Anybody heard of lots of looters being shot? As ***Slate***'s Jack Shafer recently noted, the *Times* is great at fixing ticky-tack errors, but often doesn't come clean on bigger stuff. In fairness, the *NYT* isn't the only paper with that habit. But it would of course help things if the paper had an ombudsman column. How about it, Howell?

USAT, the *NYT*, and *WP* all front the single case of mad cow disease that was diagnosed in Canada and that prompted the U.S. to ban all Canadian cattle from crossing the border. It's the first time in 10 years that a cow in North America has been diagnosed with the disease.

The *NYT* off-leads, and the *WP* stuffs, a Justice Department report that discloses, less-than comprehensively says the *Times*, how it has used post-Sept. 11 anti-terror laws. The *Post* emphasizes that the DOJ listed plenty of examples where it used its new terror-law powers for non-terror related investigations. Both papers note that the report confirmed that 50 people had been detained without charges as "material witnesses" in connection to 9/11.

The *NYT*'s A-list headline writers appear to have taken a personal day: 1) "ISRAELIS LOOK FOR A WAY TO STOP SUICIDE BOMBINGS"; 2) "EXPERTS SAY TECHNOLOGY IS WIDELY DISSEMINATED INSIDE AND OUTSIDE MILITARY."

The *WP*'s Howard Kurtz flags an extraordinary, somewhat rambling, interview that the disgraced Jayson Blair gave to the *New York Observer*. Blair says that race did play a factor—both for and against him—but that overall it hurt him, "Racism had much more of an impact." Then he compares himself to his *compadre*, plagiarist-in-arms Stephen Glass, who is white. "I know I shouldn't be saying this," says Blair. "I fooled some of the most brilliant people in journalism. He [Glass] is so brilliant, and yet somehow I'm an affirmative-action hire. They're all so smart, but I was sitting right under their nose fooling them."

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today's papers

Bombing Barrage

By Eric Umansky

Tuesday, May 20, 2003, at 2:34 AM PT

The *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* world-wide newsbox, and *Washington Post* all lead with

the fifth suicide bombing in Israel within 48 hours. Three people were killed and about 50 injured in the latest attack, which happened outside a mall in the northern town of Afula. The *Los Angeles Times* and *USA Today* front the bombings but lead with the Supreme Court's ruling upholding a Maine program that uses the threat of withholding state Medicaid business to push drug companies to offer the uninsured cut-rate prices on pills. Many states are considering emulating Maine's plan, though the Bush administration has opposed the program.

The papers say that Islamic Jihad and the Fatah-connected Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades both claimed responsibility for yesterday's attack—the *NYT* wonders whether it was a joint effort.

As the papers note, while President Bush reiterated his support for the so-called "road-map" peace plan, given the attacks it's not clear whether he is willing to push Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to sign onto the plan. The *Post* says that White House officials are still urging Sharon to visit the White House next week, where pressure would probably be applied. The *LAT* says don't hold your breath. "I don't expect this administration to push Sharon while his people are suffering," one former American diplomat told the paper. The *Post* says that when Sharon met with Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas on Friday, Abbas said he would follow through on a security plan (details of which aren't mentioned) so long as Sharon formally accepted the road-map. Sharon turned him down.

The lead editorials in the *NYT* and *Post* both urge Bush to not merely pay lip service to Mideast peace and to keep pushing Abbas and, especially, Sharon.

Meanwhile, *Post* columnist David Ignatius criticizes Sharon for refusing to endorse the road map. As Ignatius points out, the plan calls for Palestinian security services to crack down on terror while also saying that Israel should take "no actions undermining trust, including deportations [or] attacks on civilians," a path Israel hasn't yet followed. By "dickering and delaying," says Ignatius, "Sharon is only retarding a process that could bring greater security to Israel."

The *Post*, alone among the papers, fronts what appears to have been the largest protest march in Iraq since the occupation began. According to the *Post*, 10,000 Shiites—and no doubt that number is a WAG—called for the U.S. to hand power over to Iraqis. Other papers also cover the march, but the *Post*'s piece, by Anthony Shadid, excels and gives useful context: The march, which was peaceful and orderly, wasn't simply about Shiites vs. the U.S. It was also a show of strength by one Shiite faction (led by Moqtada Sadr) that is competing for influence with SCIRI, the Iranian-influenced party that is the largest Shiite political group. Sadr hasn't called for jihad against the U.S and recently suggested he wants to negotiate. By the way, score one for reporters, like Shadid, who actually report on location. The *NYT*'s subpar piece mentioning the protest, though filed from Baghdad, quotes placards by citing Reuters.

Also in Iraq yesterday, a Marines helicopter crashed, killing all four passengers. One soldier who tried to rescue those aboard also died.

The *Post* says inside that the number of revenge killings against Baathists seems to be picking up as Iraqis are losing hope that the U.S. is really going to go after former party hacks. "Why can Americans kill anyone they want? Why can't we?" said one man. "I will kill Baathists myself. This is my right." Given the state of things in Iraq, the *WP* understandably doesn't have hard numbers on the recent killings. But within the past few days, one well-known suck-up singer to Saddam was murdered as was the former head of Iraq's official artists union.

The *NYT* and *Post* go high with WorldCom's agreement to pay about $500 million to settle charges that the company defrauded investors by falsely claiming it was profitable. The SEC is overseeing the settlement, but, thanks to a provision in the corporate reform bill that passed last year, the money will eventually be doled out to investors.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer announced yesterday that he's quitting, effective July, because wants to spend time with his new wife and make some cash. As the papers all mention, those reasons appear to be the real thing. The *WP* though does get a bit of dirt, writing that FOA (friends of Ari) "say he chafed at the constraints put on him by top aides, and [that] he occasionally battled with some members of Bush's inner circle."

Fleischer is, of course, less-than-loved by WH correspondents, and they get their revenge. As the *Post* puts it, "His tight-lipped approach undermined his credibility." But don't expect things to change. "I know there was frustration among the press with how Ari did his job," said one GOP official. "But I guarantee you that Ari did his job the way this White House wants the job done."

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today's papers

Peace in Pieces

By Eric Umansky

Monday, May 19, 2003, at 2:25 AM PT

The *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* world-wide newsbox, and *Washington Post* all lead with word that after this weekend's series of suicide bombings in Israel, which killed nine Israelis, any potential peace talks have been put off by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Hamas claimed responsibility for the attacks. (According to early morning reports, a suicide bomber on a bicycle in Gaza blew himself up, injuring three Israeli soldiers.) *USA Today* leads with Saudi police saying they've arrested four suspected al-Qaida members who had prior knowledge of last week's

bombings in Riyadh. The four were among the 19 militants who slipped through a Saudi raid two weeks ago. Citing Moroccan and U.S. officials, the *Los Angeles Times*' lead says that Friday night's attacks in Casablanca were probably carried out by a local militant group that coordinated the strike in some way with AQ.

Sharon said that he won't make concessions toward peace until terror attacks stop. The U.S. plan calls for both sides to go forward simultaneously. Sharon also delayed a visit to the White House and ordered a general closure of the West Bank. The *NYT*'s lead focuses on Sharon's "implicit repudiation" of the peace plan, while the *WP* lays the blame on the bombings (and bombers) themselves, saying they "paralyzed a nascent peace effort."

Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas is trying to convince Hamas and other terror groups to disarm, but the Israelis are pushing him to get on with it and do it by force. The *NYT* all but says that Abbas doesn't have the strength to do that even if he wants too. The paper explains that Yasser Arafat and not Abbas ("who has almost no popular backing") controls much, if not most, of what's left of the Palestinian Authority. By the way, one thing the papers haven't been clear on: What is the White House's position, if any, on whether Abbas should go after Hamas militarily ASAP or should try to negotiate first?

Citing both U.S. and Saudi officials, the *Post* fronts word that members of Saudi Arabia's national guard are suspected of selling arms to al-Qaida. The *Post* says that some guard members for years have been selling guns to anyone with the cash. Apparently, Saudi officials have long known about it but haven't dealt because of "bureaucratic inertia." The *Post* also says that the Saudis, despite saying otherwise to their domestic audience, have so far given U.S. investigators a central role in the investigation. That's unlike previous terror investigations, during which they essentially shut out the FBI.

The *WP* emphasizes that Saudi police officials say they've identified the bodies of three of the suicide attackers and that they too were part of the Saudi cell that was recently uncovered, the strongest indication yet that AQ was behind the attacks. The *Times* also says briefly, far down in its story, that some diplomats and Saudi officials wonder if the attacks were actually committed by local militants "with military training" (read: former soldiers?) who were ideological compatriots with AQ but not really part of the group.

The *WP* says that the Bush administration has reversed itself and will now unequivocally support the WHO-sponsored anti-tobacco treaty. Last month, the U.S. had asked the 171 nations supporting the treaty to put in a clause allowing any nation to opt out of any provision. Though the *Post* stays modest and doesn't mention it, the paper's own Page One outing of the White House's poison-pill position might have had something to do with the administration's backdown.

A Page One picture in the *NYT* teases the feel-good story of the San Quentin Giants, a prison baseball team that competes against local, non-incarcerated teams. "Every game, of course, is a home game," chortles the *Times*. The *LAT* fronted the story last year.

Department of Inappropriate Puns: According to the front page of the *LAT*, "HUNGER GNAWS AT ETHIOPIA."

NYT columnist Bob Herbert revisits the Jayson Blair scandal and says, "the race issue in this case is as bogus as some of Blair's reporting." TP agrees with Herbert that those who confidently assert that race was *the* factor in management's messing up are full of it. (After all, how do they know?) But the same holds for those, like Herbert, who insist that race had *nothing* to do with it. "I believe in aggressively providing hiring and career opportunities for minorities," said *NYT* top editor Howell Raines last week. "Does that mean I personally favored Jayson? Not consciously. But you have a right to ask if I, as a white man from Alabama, with those convictions, gave him one chance too many. When I look into my heart for the truth of that, the answer is yes."

Final Blair thought ... There are no doubt a number of institutional and management issues that in some way or another helped Blair snooker the *Times* and readers. Here's one to add to the pile: The *NYT* makes it unnecessarily difficult for readers to contact staffers. The *LAT*, *WP*, and *WSJ* all use a standard e-mail naming scheme. So, if you know the name of a reporter or editor, you can e-mail them. The *LAT* helps that along by publishing an editorial staff directory, while the *WP* has an easily contactable ombudsman. The *NYT* has none of that. Nor does it seem to have an e-mail address exclusively devoted to corrections.

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today's papers

Reaching the Summit

By Caroline Benner

Sunday, May 18, 2003, at 4:07 AM PT

The *Washington Post* leads with, and the *Los Angeles Times* catches, word that a suicide attack on a Jerusalem bus killed at least seven passengers and wounded at least 20. Another suicide bomber detonated explosives nearby. Only that attacker was killed, and no one was hurt. The attacks happened overnight U.S. time. According to the Moroccan official the *New York Times* interviewed in its lead, the five synchronized suicide bombings that hit a Spanish restaurant and cultural center, Jewish organizations and a hotel in Casablanca Friday night were the work of a Moroccan organization with ties to an international terrorist group. The official didn't want to say on the record yet that the group was al-Qaida. The death toll from those bombings was 41 people,

including perhaps 13 attackers. One hundred were wounded. Most victims were Moroccan, a few were European, and none was American. The *LAT* leads with the Moroccan bombings as well: Its angle is that the bombings were the work of al-Qaida (European law enforcement officials said so) and that they represent a "widening war of terror" because Moroccan and Spanish interests have not been attacked in recent years by Islamic militants.

The *LAT* says some Spanish officials think Spain was targeted because it has been an ally of President Bush's campaign against Iraq; others don't think that's the case. Morocco may have been hit because it is a moderate Arab state that cooperates in the American war against terrorism. Moroccan authorities are sweeping up Islamic militants, the papers report.

Everyone notes that the first Palestinian-Israeli summit in over two years did little to move the sides forward along the American-proposed road map for peace. The papers say that Israeli Prime Minister Sharon is still refusing to accept the road map until he talks Bush into changing the plan so it doesn't undermine Israeli security. Sharon did go through with the meeting with the Palestinian prime minister despite a suicide bombing in Hebron on Saturday that killed an Israeli husband and pregnant wife. He has canceled a trip to Washington scheduled for this week after the Jerusalem bus bombing, the *WP* says.

The *WP* IDs a key al-Qaida planner behind last week's Riyadh bombings. American officials say he's Saif Adel, an Egyptian, a former mid-level al-Qaida operative, and now the organization's new top military commander. According to U.S. officials, he's based in Iran—though Iran says he isn't—and is part of what the paper calls one of two key command groups for al-Qaida.

The *WP* and *LAT* say that U.S. officials fear that the attack in Riyadh is the first in a series. The *LAT* suggests the Casablanca attacks are the second. Last week when this concern appeared in the papers, it seemed based more on speculation than concrete intelligence, TP noted. Now, it appears there's something a little more solid behind it: According to the *WP*, American officials think Saif Adel is trying to carry out as many attacks as possible within a short time frame to demonstrate al-Qaida's viability. The *LAT* says that lots of intel indicators, including electronic intercepts and human sources, point to impending attacks concentrated overseas.

On Iraq: The *NYT* follows up on yesterday's announcement that there would be no interim government in Iraq for now by seeing how leaders of Iraqi political groups feel about that. Predictably, they are unhappy, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party so much so that he left Baghdad to go home. Iraqi political leaders warn that the U.S. will face a hostile nation if the allied forces refuse to create an interim government. In Kirkuk, Kurds and Arabs shot and stabbed each other, leaving at least five dead and 40 wounded. The U.S. captured another most-wanted Iraqi official, the secretary of the Republican Guard.

The *LAT* off-leads an attempt to assess the number of Iraqi civilian casualties in Baghdad. It says 1,700 were killed and 8,000 wounded according to Iraqi hospital records. There are no official civilian casualty counts. The piece offers caveats about the reliability of the hospital record keeping: The hospitals didn't seem to have any rigorous systems for identifying civilian vs. military casualties other than the patient's word or any indication on his person that he was military. Furthermore, records were incomplete or withheld in some cases. Given this, does the story deserve such prominent play?

The *WP* fronts an embarrassing ("darkly comic," the paper calls it) assessment of what the weapons of mass destruction hunters actually have found in places where U.S. intelligence had pointed to evidence of WMD in Iraq: vacuum cleaners, housed in a facility ranked 26 on CENTCOM's list of sites that deserved priority searches, a playground, a research paper written by a failing grad student, a high-school science project, and a swimming pool. One time a WMD search team geared up its specialists to chopper out to a site where anthrax had reportedly been discovered. Turned out they were responding to a lone Marine who told them he had what he thought was anthrax in his pocket.

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today's papers

Baaths Take Bath

By Bill O'Brien

Saturday, May 17, 2003, at 3:54 AM PT

Everybody leads from Iraq with the allied rethinking of the post-war order. The *New York Times* reports that Iraqi self-rule has been delayed indefinitely, reversing the original plan, which was to have an interim government in place by the end of this month. Coverage in the *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* focuses on "de-Baathification," as one U.S. official puts it (in the *WP*). As many as 30,000 ranking Baath party members will be barred from holding jobs in the new government.

The big brass—Paul Bremer, other U.S. and British diplomats, and Iraqi political figures—met on Friday in Baghdad, where it was announced that U.S. troops will remain in place and allied officials will remain in charge, thereby delaying Iraqi self-rule for the time being. The allied rationale, according to the *NYT*¸ is that an interim government would not have the strength and resources to rule effectively at present—and that its failure would tarnish the allied victory.

Iraqi opposition leaders, though "very respectful" to Bremer, reacted with surprise and disappointment, the *NYT* reports. "I don't think they trust this group to function as a political leadership, and for us it is very difficult to participate in something that we have no control over,"

an Iraqi attendee says in the *Times*. "Nobody is thrilled with this," says another, in the *WP*.

The "de-Baathification" appears to be in response to organized efforts by Baath party members to undermine the new social order, according to the *LAT*. This, too, is a policy reversal by the allies, who were initially only interested in banning the party's most senior officials. The *Post* reports that all Iraqis who work for the government will be forced to sign "some form of denunciation or renunciation" of the party, as a senior U.S. official put it. More than 50 aspiring bureaucrats have already signed.

The *NYT* and the *LAT* off-lead the coordinated suicide bombings in Casablanca late Friday night. At least 24 people were killed, including the 10 attackers, who used car bombs and "detonated another device to strike Jewish, Spanish and Belgian targets," according to the *NYT*. "The attacks left body parts strewn over the streets of the coastal city," the *LAT* reports. The chief suspect is obviously al-Qaida, though the Moroccan interior minister said only that the attacks "bear the hallmark of international terrorism." (*NYT*) Hours before the Casablanca attacks, the FBI sent 60 agents to Riyadh to investigate the suicide bombings that killed 34 there on Monday.

The failure to dig up weapons of mass destruction in Iraq has done nothing to damage President Bush's appeal, according to a front-page "analysis" in the *WP*. In a May 1 Gallop poll, 79 percent of Americans said the war was still justified. Democrats critical of Bush before the war have experienced a radical change of heart, placing them in sync with public opinion. Nancy Pelosi, who accused Bush of exaggerating Iraq's nuclear capabilities, said, "I salute the president for the goal of removing weapons of mass destruction." Tom Daschle gave the president "great credit" for winning the war.

Bush filed his papers with the FEC yesterday, becoming an official candidate for the presidency in 2004, according to another *Post* fronter. A million or so fundraising letters go out on Monday, as Bush, in the *Post*'s words, gets "his campaign rolling in the tailwind of wartime popularity." He hopes to reap a record $170 million. (He will not accept federal matching funds and so will not be bound by spending limits.) The *Post* notes that Bush's current 71 percent overall approval rating in the latest *WP* poll falls short of the 77 percent his father achieved after *his* gulf war. A perplexing 52 percent approve of George W.'s handling of the economy.

The *NYT* fronts the futility of drug testing in high schools and middle schools. A study by researchers at the University of Michigan shows that testing has about the same affect as just leaving those kids alone, i.e., not testing. For example, 37 percent of seniors at schools that test used marijuana in the last year, compared with 36 percent at schools that don't—a statistically insignificant deviation. The Supreme Court has twice empowered schools to test for drugs. In 1995, Justice Antonin Scalia described the "efficacy of this means for addressing the problem" of student drug use as "self-evident," according to the *Times*.

"Every meeting, from umbrellas to pants, now turns into a discussion about SARS. The apparel world has been instantaneously changed." That's fashion designer Cynthia Rowley with the *NYT*'s quote of the day. Bans on travel, shipping delays, and "worries about what the future" have disrupted the clothing industry, which does much of its business in China and Hong Kong. But some companies are finding ways around the problem. "When we need to touch and feel, well, that's why God invented Federal Express," says a Federated exec.

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war stories

Build It and It Will Work

The Bush administration's missile defense fantasy.

By Fred Kaplan

Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 1:48 PM PT

The Bush administration seems to be no longer even pretending that its missile defense system will work. More than that, it no longer seems to care. The administration still displays extraordinary support for the program. Its military budget, now before Congress, authorizes $9.1 billion for missile defense next year, with plans for hefty increases each year for long after. The first stages of a system—10 anti-missile interceptors and their launch gear—are scheduled to be deployed in Alaska and California by October 2004.

But look at the Bush's new National Security Presidential Directive, "National Policy on Ballistic Missile Defense," an unclassified version of which was released by the White House on May 20. Buried within the five-page statement—the usual litany of prospective threats and strategic rationales—are these two sentences:

> The United States will not have a final, fixed missile defense architecture. Rather, we will deploy an initial set of capabilities that will evolve to meet the changing threat and to take advantage of technological developments.

"Architecture," in this context, means pretty much what it means in its colloquial sense: a detailed blueprint with measurements, an underlying design, a notion of how a structure's materials fit together, all rooted in basic principles of physics and engineering.

For the administration to start deploying a missile defense system before devising an architecture is no different from a construction firm starting to hammer nails, put up joists, and lay out a roof before knowing the style or size of a house.

Another sign of unreality is the news—revealed this week by Sen. Carl Levin of Michigan, the

ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee—that the Pentagon has, without explanation, canceled nine of the 20 missile defense tests it had planned to conduct between now and 2009. One of the canceled tests—which was to have taken place between April and June 2004 (that is, before deployment begins the following October)—might have marked a major step toward realism-in-testing. For the first time, an interceptor was to have been fired at a missile along the same flight path as that of a missile launched from North Korea. Incidentally, it's not as if the program's test record has been so smashing that its managers can afford to relax their standards—five hits out of eight tries, none of them involving multiple targets, decoys, or realistic trajectories.

A May 19 article on Bloomberg.com—one of the very few pieces about the canceled tests (alas, the piece is no longer online except to the service's subscribers)—quoted Maj. Gen. Peter Franklin, the Pentagon missile defense agency's deputy director, as justifying the cancellations. "To focus just on the interceptor test alone," he said, "does not take into consideration everything else that has been built up to get to the point where we are—numerous ground tests, simulations, and war games."

Franklin surely knows better. Any American officer who has advanced to the rank of general must have learned, at some point in his career, that ground tests, simulators, and war games are unreliable predictors of what will happen in a flight test of real hardware.

Sen. Levin, who is oddly the only Democrat who has made a serious go at challenging Bush's rush to deploy this thing, put the matter in better perspective: "The decision to field an as-yet-unproven system has been accompanied by a decision to eliminate or delay the very testing that must be conducted to show whether the system is effective."

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war stories

Smart Bribes

Centcom's real secret weapon.

By Fred Kaplan

Tuesday, May 20, 2003, at 2:49 PM PT

A fascinating piece in the May 19 *Defense News* quotes Gen. Tommy Franks, chief of U.S. Central Command, confirming what had until now been mere rumors picked up by dubious Arab media outlets—that, before Gulf War II began, U.S. special forces had gone in and bribed Iraqi generals not to fight.

"I had letters from Iraqi generals saying, 'I now work for you,' " Franks told *Defense News* reporter

Vago Muradian in a May 10 interview.

The article quotes a "senior official" as adding, "What is the effect you want? How much does a cruise missile cost? Between one and 2.5 million dollars. Well, a bribe is a PGM [precision-guided munition]—it achieves the aim, but it's bloodless and there's zero collateral damage."

One official is quoted as saying that, in the scheme of the whole military operation, the bribery "was just icing on the cake." But another says that it "was as important as the shooting part, maybe more important. We knew that some units would fight out of a sense of duty and patriotism, and they did. But it didn't change the outcome because we knew how many of these [Iraqi generals] were going to call in sick."

All of which further reinforces the vague sense that—for all the embeds, armchair generals, and round-the-clock news coverage—we still know startlingly little about what really happened in this war.

The *Defense News* article raises what could be the biggest military question of all: Just what won this war so swiftly—the high-tech prowess and agility of the modern American military, or old-fashioned back-alley spycraft? Which was the real wonder weapon—the smart bomb or the greenback?

I suspect a bit of both. But before we rush ahead and restructure the entire U.S. military on the basis of the lessons from the war, it might be good to find out for sure just what those lessons were.

A month ago, I posed eight unanswered questions about this war. (Only one of them has since been resolved.) Here's another:

How many Iraqi generals, representing how many brigades or divisions, were paid off? How much money passed hands? Where are these generals today? As a broader assessment, to what degree did the Republican Guard collapse because they were bombarded and outmaneuvered—and to what degree because their generals went on paid leave? This is not a matter of mere curiosity. If bribes played a major part, we should understand that the tactic may not work against more ideologically driven commanders—say, North Koreans (who would have nothing to buy with the money, in any case) or al-Qaida higher-ups (who have apparently turned up their noses at the $25 million reward for turning over Osama Bin Laden).

While we're at it, here's another question, about the continuing mystery of the missing weapons of mass destruction. When Secretary of State Colin Powell made his Feb. 5 presentation to the U.N. Security Council—the much-lauded but rejected pitch for taking action against Iraq—he played two tape recordings of intercepted conversations between Iraqi officers. On one, from Nov. 26,

2002, the day before U.N. weapons inspectors were to visit a certain site, an Iraqi colonel told a Republican Guard brigadier general, "We evacuated everything. We don't have anything left." On the second, one Republican Guard commander told another, "Write this down: Remove the expression 'nerve agent' whenever it comes up in wireless instructions." These tapes struck many at the time as persuasive evidence (I called it a "smoking gun") that a) Iraq possessed illegal weapons, b) was deliberately hiding them from the inspectors, and c) was not likely to give up the weapons on its own.

So, here's the question, which could now presumably be answered: Who were these officers on the tapes? Are they still alive? Were they among the Iraqi officers who were bribed before the war? Were they taken away someplace and interrogated—or could they be interrogated now—on exactly what was "evacuated" and just where those hushed-up "nerve agents" are? If not, why not? The U.S. intelligence officials involved in this intercept must have known, or could have found out, the identities of the Iraqis speaking. Is it possible that we let these A-list witnesses disappear?

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At least one of these Arab papers, the Lebanese *Sawt al-Urouba*, also claimed that some of the "human shields," who traveled to Baghdad before the war and pledged to tie themselves to likely targets so U.S. warplanes wouldn't bomb them, were in fact CIA agents who—operating under ideal cover—went around the city, pinpointing targets and paying bribes. (Plausible? Yes. A great movie plot in any case? Absolutely.) The *Defense News* article, which is available online only to the paper's subscribers, does not make this claim.

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The one question that has been answered concerns how the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Division managed to make it through the Karbala pass, a narrow passageway that many officers had feared might prove to be a bottleneck, subject to attacks—possibly chemical attacks—from Fedayeen and Republican Guard forces. As Gen. William Wallace, the Army's Persian Gulf commander,

revealed in a May 7 press conference, some elements of the 3rd Infantry feinted an attack up the pass. This drew Iraqi soldiers out of hiding, whereupon they were pummeled by air strikes and by much larger ground forces that came at them from another angle.

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well-traveled
By Tad Friend
Friday, May 23, 2003, at 9:21 AM PT

From: Tad Friend
Subject: Three Cheers for American Engineering!
Posted Monday, May 19, 2003, at 2:48 PM PT

Today's slide show: Images from Paris.

Today's : Tad Friend and Amanda Hesser describe the magic of travel by Segway.

Today's : Our first day on the Segways, exploring the streets and parks of Paris.

My wife and I arrived in Paris in the middle of a general strike—something about pension funds, though the French never seem to require an excuse to strike. Buses and metros were basically out, and it took us two hours in heavy traffic to get from Charles de Gaulle airport to our hotel on the Left Bank. We were here to ride Segway Human Transporters, the new two-wheeled scooters, around Paris' crooked sidewalks and to have a cultural exchange on the fly with our favorite cheese-eating surrender monkeys. The strike seemed almost too apt for our purposes; it made our first foray out with the Segway HTs as overdetermined as the opening scene of a Hollywood movie:

> **We open on a swirling, helicopter shot of the EIFFEL TOWER, then take a fast AERIAL TOUR of the CHAMPS ELYSÉES before the camera comes to earth midway down the traffic-snarled Boulevard Saint-Germain, which is filled with EXCITABLE FRENCHMEN, who stand beside their Renaults and Citroëns waving BAGUETTES over their heads, dashing their BERETS to the ground, and gesticulating at the state of their beloved CITY OF LIGHTS, which has not seen so much CHAOS since the GERMANS arrived in 1940. We hear angry voices ("*Mon Dieu!* What a folly of mankind it was to build cities zat no one can navigate" … "Who can save us from zees catastrophe of our own devising?" etc., etc.)**
>
> **Suddenly, all heads turn as a devastatingly charismatic team of three Americans**

(the bespectacled and bookishly sexy TAD; AMANDA, his incredibly chic and provocative wife; and CHRISTIAN, the team's bearded, gnomic, all-knowing technology guru)—blaze down the sidewalk on SEGWAYS, the miracle scooters that will solve all of PARIS' transportation problems!

They move with such EASE, going where they will simply by leaning FORWARD and BACK, that they seem to herald a JOY of FLYING that mankind had hitherto only found in dreams. Before anyone can stop them they ZIP around the corner in search of new adventures, and we . . .

CUT back to the faces of the FRENCHMEN, who have lowered their BAGUETTES and now seem SCANDALIZED but PIOUS. Once again, the AMERICANS have arrived to bail them out, as we did in WORLD WARS I and II and by generously going along with that whole BEAUJOLAIS NOUVEAU SCHEME, and these OVERCIVILIZED DENIZENS OF OLD EUROPE cannot help—despite their grievances with us about IRAQ and McDONALD'S, and our ADAM-SANDLER-STYLE CULTURAL IMPERIALISM—feeling … what is it? The Frenchmen seem to rack their memories for the feeling, it is so foreign to them—*Mais qu'est-ce-que c'est le mot juste? Ah, oui!* GRATEFUL.

Oddly enough, when we began training on our Segways outside our hotel, that is more or less what happened. It took us about 20 minutes to learn the basics from three Segway representatives: Lean forward on the machine and you go forward, lean back to stop, keep leaning back to go backward, and twist the left handlebar to turn right or left. The machine has a zero-turning radius—you can spin on a dime, and it's really fun. There were a few small accidents—Christian unhorsed himself, and I took a stripe of green paint off a building trying to thread a narrow sidewalk—but within half an hour we were all able to navigate even the heavy medieval cobblestones in front of the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés with ease. We were flying along at two or three times pedestrian speed. And we were grinning like school kids. Going where you want to go just by following your own inclination is like having a magic carpet.

Everyone—everyone—was transfixed by us. A burly man ran out of a brasserie and whistled down the street; when I turned he gave me a huge thumbs up. Two stylish women in blue raincoats grabbed each other and laughed from sheer pleasure: "*C'est superbe!*" A homeless man threw his arms over his head when Amanda went by: Hallelujah! "It's like being Jennifer Aniston!" Amanda said. "And I'm so tall!" (The platform gives you an extra 8 inches in height, putting my head right at awning level.)

Whenever we stopped at a corner, we were surrounded: "What is it?" (A Segway Human Tranporter, invented by Dean Kamen and produced in Manchester, N.H.) "How does it work?"

(Each wheel is driven by high-speed electric motors that you recharge simply by plugging the Segway into an outlet overnight. The machine has five gyroscopes and two tilt-balancing sensors that determine, 100 times per second, what the terrain is like and how your body is arrayed.) "How fast does it go?" (Up to 12.5 miles per hour in top gear; we had them in sidewalk mode, where the top speed is 8 miles per hour.) "Is it available in France?" (In a few weeks, Keolis Group, Segway's partner in Europe, will start a pilot program along the Champs Elysées for 150 "responsible citizens.") "How much does it cost?" ($4,950 in the United States—they're available exclusively on Amazon. You can't buy them in France, but Keolis is planning to rent them out for about $8 an hour within a few months and eventually expects to set up "Oxygen Stations" at metro stops around the city where you could pick up a Segway, zip around for a while, and then drop it off at another Oxygen Station.)

The prevailing mood was curiosity and wonder: Thumbs up, applause, admiring head shakes. But on two separate occasions very serious men with brush cuts parked their BMW motorcycles and came over to write down all the Segway's specifications, assessing the undercarriage with frowns, as if they planned to reverse-engineer the machine that very evening on their lathes.

And one 40ish woman, her Joan Jett hair dyed that dark shade of henna that only French women consider stylish, stared at us at on rue de Seine, her left foot on the floorboard of a low chrome scooter, her face a mask of deep injury. When I looked back 10 seconds later, she still hadn't moved. She was yesterday's future and we were tomorrow's, blowing on by and leaving her in our noiseless, emissionless, dust-free dust.

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From: Tad Friend
Subject: The Force Is With Us
Updated Tuesday, May 20, 2003, at 1:02 PM PT

Today's slide show: Images from Paris.

Today's : Project director Sylvain Pernin describes his Segway epiphany, and its rewards.

Today's surround video: The plaza of St.-Germain-des-Prés is one of the cultural centers of Europe.

As I write this, Amanda is sitting cross-legged in a chair by our hotel room window, eating petits fours out of a pink box from Ladurée and reading French *Vogue*. "Who are you, Kate Moss?" she murmured just now, staring at the supermodel's druggie-chic cover photo. I laughed, and then saw that the cover line was actually, "*Qui êtes-vous, Kate Moss?*"

Only the French, still in thrall to the *nouvelle vague*'s belief that style is character, would expect that a two-page magazine article should plumb Kate Moss' soul, and that its failure to do so might even be—*Qui êtes-vous, Kate? Qui? Qui?*—cause for despair. In America, we expect only to audit Moss' newest incarnation. She is not a soul to be understood but an amalgam of views and accomplishments to be downloaded. Ever practical, our cover line would read, "Newly Fit and Focused, Kate Moss Talks—About Sex, Men, and How She Stays So Thin."

The French have Voltaire and Sartre; we have Eli Whitney and Thomas Edison. Of course, we have philosophers, too (Will Rogers, Fred Rogers), and they innovators (the French invented pasteurization, coquille St.-Jacques, and the Maginot line, along with two or three other things). But it is universally understood that an educated Frenchman's cultural role is to be the *philosophe* who produces nothing but can explain everything, while an educated American's—*mais, quel paradoxe*—is to be the idiot savant who can fashion wondrous things (DDT, thalidomide, bunker-buster bombs) but always uses them incorrectly.

Some of these thoughts occurred to me as Amanda, Christian, and I were Segwaying this afternoon from the Hôtel Bel Ami on the Left Bank to the Radisson on the right. We had gotten comfortable enough on the machines to use the advanced "red key" to start them up, meaning we could now travel at their top speed, 12.5 miles per hour. We crossed the bone-colored crushed gravel paths of the Tuileries, rising and falling over the small ridges as if we were riding through the desert, three abreast in our raincoats, and Christian said, "*Star Wars* police." It was the perfect image. At the next crosswalk, Amanda said, "It's funny you said that. I was just thinking that all the other people there on foot looking at us were like the weird creatures in *Star Wars*, and we were the normal ones: Luke, and Leia, and Han Solo."

Christian stands erect in his Segway with an absentminded air, like a man out walking his dog: He is Han Solo. Amanda grips her handlebars, lowers her head, and braces her legs as if she's manning the helm during a fierce sou'wester: She, clearly, is Leia. And I like to push the speed limit and slalom between bollards or oblivious pedestrians, but sometimes I lose the Force and bang a curbstone: I am Luke.

The assumption that we are the normal ones is not shared by Parisians: They see us as the circus come to town. Along the Champs Elysées, I parked my Segway against a tree and went to look at a milelong exhibition of French trains, from a stunningly restored old Wagons-Lits parlor car to the

newest TGV locomotive. When I returned, there were 13 people gathered around Christian and Amanda; all of them had come to walk the railway timeline, all of them were now much more interested in the Segway. I found myself giving a Segway lesson to a friendly man named Jean, explaining with great authority the techniques I'd learned the day before. An orotund, P.T. Barnum-ish note came into my voice, and I found myself accepting Jean's praise as my own just due. Simply by being American, and in temporary possession of a Segway, I felt at least partially responsible for its reverse-torque braking mechanism.

Near Place Clemenceau, a policeman sitting with a few colleagues in a white van gestured to us to halt then put on his cap and squared it before stepping out to address us. You're not supposed to ride Segways in the street, as we had briefly been doing. As we discovered this morning, when we went shopping in the Sixth Arrondissement for shoes (Amanda) and birthday presents (that is, shoes), it's much easier and more fun to blast down an alley on your Segway rather than beetle it along the tiny, crammed sidewalks.

As it turned out, this policeman simply wanted to understand what the hell this thing was. As Amanda explained the Segway's specifications, he nodded as if it all had been foreseen. Young and assured, he had roses in his cheeks and an air of good humor. He touched the machine. "*Anglais?*" he asked.

"*Americain*," I said.

"*Beh!*" He gestured and walked away—then turned back with a grin. A crowd had gathered by now, and he was enjoying the audience, embracing his cultural role as the true interpreter.

"Who uses them?" he asked.

I explained that police at the Atlanta airport and the Los Angeles Mass Transit Authority were using them for security patrols. In a confusion of bad French, I used the word "*flics*" for cops—slang roughly equivalent to calling an American policeman a "pig." He smiled, enjoying the gaucherie, then turned his mouth down at the corners (not for us, such vehicles). An older woman in a lime-green raincoat walked by and assessed the situation: the *Star Wars* police being interrogated by the real police. "Is it an American thing?" she asked.

"Yes," the policeman said, pausing with the relish of a man who knows he's about to get off a zinger. "But for an American—not bad."

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From: Tad Friend
Subject: Segways and Social Stratification
Posted Wednesday, May 21, 2003, at 12:40 PM PT

Today's slide show: Images from Paris.

Today's : Tad Friend comments on the view from the Eiffel Tower.

Today's : Another day on the Segways takes us to the Eiffel Tower, Paris' premier landmark.

A cold, rainy day in Paris; this morning Amanda cocked one eye at the window and declined to arise for our Segway trip to the Eiffel Tower. She had, in any case, to exchange a pair of black sandals on rue Mouffetard; both shoes had proved to be for her right foot. When she phoned the store, the salesman denied the mistake and then refused to countenance her suggestions for how they could fix the problem without making her bring the shoes all the way back. "*Je suis desolé*," he said, and hung up. You hear that a lot here: No, there is no iron in the hotel that works; no, the hotel staff does not know of a manicurist in Paris; yes, we told your caller from the United States that you were not staying at the hotel: *Je suis desolé*. In theory it means, "I'm sorry," but it is invariably said with a curt shrug that translates as, "I'm sorry that I have allowed you to intrude upon my consciousness for one instant with your ridiculous needs."

Christian and I had gotten advance permission to take our Segways up the Eiffel Tower's elevator to the second platform, 380 feet above the city, but when we arrived we were told that security had been tightened after the terrorist bombings in Casablanca, and so the Segways must remain earthbound. "*Je suis desolé*," etc., etc. As it turns out, the platform was a gauntlet of girders, staircases, and rain-drenched tourists, so it was just as well that we didn't have them with us. As we looked out on the city, feeling sleepy and aimless and somewhat trapped high in the air, a Nepalese man with a windblown map asked me to point out Notre-Dame, and we fell into conversation.

Indara, a middle-aged clerk with a kind smile and bad teeth, was one of the 15,000 Nepalese who work in Kuwait. He sends money home to his family every month. After 14 years, he had finally saved enough to make his first trip to Europe but not enough for any of his family to join him. He talked eagerly and confidingly about how the Kuwaitis treat all Asian guest workers like animals; how the massacre of the Nepalese royal family was never properly investigated by the government, which is sickeningly corrupt; and how, if you support the government, the Maoist rebels will kill you, but if you support the rebels, the government soldiers will kill you. After 10 minutes, we shook hands, wished each other a safe journey, and parted.

As Christian and I were trudging down the stairs, it occurred to me that Indara would never have approached us if we had been standing on our Segways. All the people who have come up to talk to us about the machines—the hundreds of people, by now—have had the look of being able to afford one, or at least to rent one for a few hours. The poor don't approach. The other day on the rue Mouffetard, a few yards from Dr. Evil's shoe store, we bought two boxes of extremely tasty raspberries from a fruit vendor in his traditional French blue coat. (After eating the first one, Amanda said, "It's like you put a small, furry animal in your mouth that dissolves into a cloud of sweetness.") The vendor eyed our Segways but said nothing, even when other shoppers began to ask questions. After I explained about the gyroscopes and the tilt sensors, he said, "*Technologie*" in a low voice, as if it were an idea such as "celebrity" or "immortality" that would be forever beyond his grasp, handed me my change, and turned away.

Like cell phones and computers, the Segway will commence its life as a device for the rich. And like those earlier technologies, it will gradually develop an accompanying etiquette. The two hotels we have stayed at here have seemed delighted to have us ride our Segways into the lobby, to park and recharge them for us in their luggage rooms, even to have us ride them in the elevators up to our rooms. Their sensible belief is that the hotel itself shines in the glow of our cosmopolitan style. After Segways become commonplace, they will be viewed by hotel managers not as a branding opportunity but as a burden on physical space and employee time.

When that happens, it is by no means certain that the Segway will continue to be ridden indoors; propriety, for now in bewildered abeyance, may come down against these frolicsome man-chariots. The verdict will occur when we decide—probably at about the same time as we finally come up with a name for the current decade—whether the Segway is at heart a form of aided walking, like a wheelchair, or of regulatable transportation, like a bicycle.

That determination will affect a host of other questions: Where will one park them? How fast should one go on a crowded sidewalk? Should one pass on the left or the right? As the machine has no horn, how will one warn pedestrians of a wish to overtake? Walkers don't respond quickly to an "Excuse me"—they don't expect trouble from the rear—but "Segwaying on your left" is cumbersome and inscrutable, and "Make way, lowly biped!" is probably not quite the thing. One wants to convey apology together with lordly resolve, a tricky combination. Perhaps the French have a phrase that would suit.

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From: Tad Friend
Subject: Segways: Toys or Useful Tools?
Posted Thursday, May 22, 2003, at 11:02 AM PT

Today's slide show: Images from Paris.

Today's : Sylvain Pernin envisions a Paris transformed by Segways.

Today's surround video: The Place de la Concorde grounds one end of the Champs Elysées.

Great buckets of café au lait could not get me started this morning. It was cold and rainy for the third straight day, and I was hung-over. I had no wish to venture out and buttonhole Frenchmen about their views. My body shrank from responsibility. I was like a spacecraft that fails to achieve the proper angle of re-entry and bounces off the Earth's atmosphere into deep space.

Amanda and I went to dinner last night at one of the 10 three-star restaurants in Paris. She wore a beautiful black frock and I a jacket and tie, and we Segwayed stylishly up to the doorstep of Pierre Gagnaire and hovered, waiting. The maitre d' appeared and thrust his hands out in horror, giving us the full Heisman. After some alarmed back and forth—yes, we had a reservation; no, we need not bring the vehicles to our table—he found room for the Segways by the fire exit, and we sat down for a five-course, five-hour meal with our voluble friend Jeffrey Steingarten, the food writer for *Vogue*.

Meals with Jeffrey are always fascinating—we learned all about the role of the Jews under the Ottoman Empire, as well as the history and manifold virtues of spelt and neffles, two foods I had never even heard of until they surfaced on Pierre Gagnaire's menu—but can also remind one, by the shank of the evening, of being stuck with Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*'s Overlook Lodge. Acres of food, a crazy man with an ax, and no way out.

When we finally left at 1:30 in the morning, we discovered that Segwaying is even more fun when you're a little drunk. (The author is strongly opposed to people operating machinery in the dark while drunk. I mean it. All Microsoft's many lawyers mean it. Now, back to the story.) Like dancing and sex and most excitements, Segwaying comes more easily if you don't think about it too much. I have no idea where in one's brain the "Segway handling" protocol gets lodged, but it must be near the driving and skiing regions, as it borrows from each. Sometimes you borrow from the wrong one, and instead of squatting into a snowplow-style skiing stop, you press on the Segway's foot brake. There is no foot brake.

The Segway is not always perfectly intuitive: You can't step off the machine and walk away or it

will take off and then topple; the kickstand breaks easily; it's a pain to line up the holes in the wheel well so you can thread a bike lock through them; the battery recharging light is impossible to see unless you kneel and crane your head sideways; and, as there are no shock absorbers, your calf muscles quiver after an hour's ride. On the whole, however, it is a wonderful machine.

But the jugular question is whether it is a toy or a useful tool. After riding a Segway for a few weeks in his sidewalk-free subdivision, the *Wall Street Journal*'s Walter S. Mossberg concluded, "It's not easy to use in the suburbs." Nor is it always easy to use in Paris. Cobblestones and narrow sidewalks make for a jerky ride, and if you come to a curb higher than 4 inches tall, you have to step off, put the machine into "power assist" mode, wheel it over the curb, and get back on. I had never before realized how many 5-inch curbs there are in Paris.

Ideally, from Segway's point of view, cities would be reconceived to suit the new technology, as cities were remapped to make way for freeways and underground parking garages. Sylvain Pernin, the gallant, optimistic Segway Project director at the Keolis Group, a transportation company that is going to rent out Segways here in the coming months, acknowledges that there are difficulties at the moment. "But when we have 10,000 Segways here, it may be different," Pernin says, hopefully. "This machine is so beautiful, I think that the government will have to widen the sidewalks."

In the city's Marais or Latin Quarter, there is no room to widen the sidewalks without paving over the roads. Segways may be better suited to Paris or London than to, say, Los Angeles, but even Paris is currently configured—often badly—for cars. Which gives me an idea. What about building a Segway car, one that would run on batteries and accelerate as you leaned forward in the driver's seat? I have a feeling the Segway car would be anathema to Dean Kamen, the Segway's inventor—gravel-voiced, brilliant, with an eraser nub of black hair, in interviews he often seems dismayed by the world as it is—but, you know, Dean, the thing about roads is we already have them.

The other big thing a Segway car could do is protect its driver from the elements. The current Segway is no fun when it rains. So, this morning, when we finally stirred ourselves and went to the Pompidou Center to see some modern art—which mixes so beautifully with hangovers—we took a taxi.

The Pompidou turned out to be closed because of the ongoing general strike. We walked, in the drizzle, to the Musée Picasso. It, too, was closed. We angled sleepily down rue Vieille-du-Temple to the Seine, looking in at the shops, most of which were also closed. We walked across a bridge to the Ile St. Louis and then to the Ile de La Cité, and came upon the rear of Notre-Dame. Every tourist in Paris, driven by the twin horsemen of storm and strike, had gathered beneath its dirty gray buttresses hoping to get in.

We turned away and sought a taxi. On a corner a few blocks up, we found three cab drivers, all wearing black sweaters and smoking. Two were in side-by-side white Renaults, and the third had his foot up on the first car's bumper. The driver of the car in the middle of the road reluctantly agreed to take the fare. He had been lying fully reclined in the driver's seat, and when he raised himself, he had bushy gray hair and circumflex eyebrows and the toothy grin of a mad professor. He would be the ideal driver of my Segway car, I was thinking as he eased in the clutch, still talking to the others through the open passenger-side window. "*Oui, oui*!" he said, laughing, "*Absolument oui!*" Picking up speed, he shot them a kiss.

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From: Tad Friend
Subject: Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité—and Segway
Posted Friday, May 23, 2003, at 9:12 AM PT

Today's slide show: Images from Paris.

Today's : Amanda makes dinner plans and wonders about a Segway in New York.

Today's : Taking the Mike's Bikes tour of Paris on another kind of two-wheeler.

Paris is a walker's city, built for sauntering, window-shopping, the sideways topple into the cafe chair. On our final day here, we finally realized that the best way to get around on Segways is to use the bike lane rather than the sidewalk. The ride is fast and uncluttered, and you aren't constantly giving pedestrians heart attacks. Technically, Segwaying in the street is illegal, but the policemen who stared us down at intersections and in front of President Chirac's house all seemed to be following the same penal-code decision tree ("Not a bicycle, yet has two wheels and moves in a leisurely manner: ALLOW TO PROCEED").

Our belated epiphany came courtesy of David Mebane, the owner of Mike's Bike Tours, which conducts bicycle tours of the city. (Yes, he knows it should be called David's Bike Tours; long story.) David, an easygoing 27-year-old Texan, led us around Paris for four hours on his Schwinn as we followed on our Segways, "Make Way for Ducklings"-style. Every once in a while he would stop, lean over the handlebars, and explain something: "Marie Antoinette's head was lopped off in the *place* there, totally decapitated by the guillotine"; "If you go over to the third window to the

right of that arch of the Louvre, you can look in and see the Venus de Milo for free"; "Down there in the Hôtel des Invalides, my favorite building in Paris, so beautiful when it's all lit up at night, the French resistance built a false ceiling in the dome—just below that second level of windows. They hid U.S. airmen who'd been shot down, bomber crews and so on, between the two ceilings."

He had the patient manner of someone who must explain to American visitors, several times a day, why the ATMs here don't dispense dollars. While an implacable enemy of French bureaucracy, he loves the French and their history. At Place Clemenceau, he wheeled up beside a dark green statue of Charles de Gaulle and said, "Little World War II story. Obviously, de Gaulle was leading the Gaullist resistance, but there was also a Communist resistance, and when the Allies took Paris back there was a void of power—who's going to take over? August, 1944, de Gaulle flies in from London to take command but gets extremely low on fuel, it's a near thing, is he going to make it?" I guessed that he would. "He lands with nothing in the tank," David continued, "then walks down the Champs Elysées in a big parade with all the soldiers and citizens, from the Arc de Triomphe to Notre-Dame, with German snipers on rooftops taking potshots at him, whatever, craziness, but nobody hits him and he takes the keys to the city. There's just this tremendous celebration of liberation."

Amanda looked up at de Gaulle in his uniform and kepi. "He looks like he belongs in *Singin' in the Rain*," she said. The figure did look rather as if it were beginning to pirouette and break into song.

"Or like the Morton Salt girl," David said.

It was a sunny day at last, and all Paris seemed to be out and in a cheerful mood. It might well have just been coincidence, but cultural understanding of the Segway seemed to have seeped into the collective consciousness. On our first day here no one knew what the machine was, but today four different people seemed to know all about the Segway and its gyroscopes and began explaining it to other bystanders as we talked nearby.

As we slalomed around I.M. Pei's glass pyramid in the Louvre's courtyard, a photographer who shoots Polaroid photos of tourists there at 6 euros a snap began asking rapid-fire questions. A short, intense man in a red windbreaker, he was curious about the Segway's range. When I said that it was 17 to 25 kilometers, he frowned and seemed to take against the whole idea. "But that's nothing," he said. "Paris is very large—what can you do with 20 kilometers? You can't get to the office and back!"

David took up the cudgels. After riding the Segway in the courtyard, he had decided that he wanted one for leading his tours. "You can always recharge. It takes no time." (Well, five or six hours.)

"Four hours of use before you need to recharge, it's nothing," the photographer said. "My cell phone has a five-hour charge! And whose boss will let them charge the machine at the office?"

"The Segway engineers are working on extending the battery life," David said, which is true, but he was winging it. "The newest technology, magnesium—" he looked at me.

"Cadmium," I said, not entirely sure if that was what you use for batteries or enemas.

"Cadmium," David repeated confidently. "All the problems will be solved. Now, if this machine were a little cheaper and had a larger range, would you be interested?"

The photographer lowered his sunglasses and looked at it again, up and down, then broke into a charming smile. "It is very interesting," he said. "Very."

After we wound through the crooked streets of the Marais and had some superb sandwiches at Lina's, just off the rue de Rivoli, I noticed that my battery indicator was getting low. Halfway up the Champs Elysées, it indicated that I had no reserve at all, and as we were entering the home stretch on rue de Bassano, the user interface screen begin flashing red: nothing in the tank! My Segway was slowing, creeping, humming just a little: Would I make it?

I guessed that I would. And indeed I coasted up to the front door of the hotel with nothing in the tank. There was no tremendous celebration of liberation, just a chance to get off and recharge and think happy thoughts about the imminent possibility of dinner. The French helped liberate us in 1776, we returned the favor later, and now both countries are free to be provoked and intrigued by each other and to disparage each other's wine.

Amanda had been following right behind me to give me a push if necessary. "*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*—and Segway," she said.

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Promotional Considerations for "Segways in Paris"

Air transportation was provided by Air France, the airline with the most flights between the United States and France and with service to more than 238 cities in 91 countries. The airline flies from 12 U.S. gateways and provides direct connections from an additional 97 cities through its code-sharing agreements with Delta Air Lines.

Located in a converted 18th-century print works in the heart of the Left Bank, the Hôtel Bel Ami provided accommodations for the team for the first part of the trip.

The luxurious former mansion in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, with one of the city's largest indoor gardens, the Hôtel Le Bristol Paris, offered accommodations for the middle part of the trip.

An intimate, 46-room hotel located on the site of the former headquarters of designer Louis Vuitton, on the Avenue Marceau just off the Champs Elysées, the Radisson SAS Hôtel Champs Elysées provided accommodations for the latter part of the trip. Contact: Radisson SAS Hôtel Champs Elysées, 78 Avenue Marceau, F-75008 Paris, France. Phone: +33-1-5323-4343; for reservations call 1-800-333-3333.

The French Government Tourist Office (Maison de la France) and its able media relations manager, Louise O'Brien, assisted mightily in logistical planning for the trip.

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wine's world

Grape Deceptions

Why most wine collectors are also compulsive liars.

By Mike Steinberger

Friday, May 23, 2003, at 8:21 AM PT

One of the wine world's dirty little secrets is the apparently vast number of wine lovers who harbor dirty little secrets. The amount of time and money wine collecting consumes can be hell on a relationship. Determined not to see their hobby cause friction at home, many oenophiles keep the peace not by limiting their buying (an impossibility), but by going to enormous lengths to conceal it. To get the vino, sometimes you have to sacrifice the *veritas*.

Presumably, most serial sneaks would prefer to be honest about their profligacy, but coming clean is simply not feasible—not when their spouses insist on treating wine like a mere beverage and believe that spending hundreds of dollars a month on fermented grape juice is irresponsible and asinine, possibly even immoral. This is the regrettable attitude many wine buffs confront.

Making matters worse, the partner not besotted with wine is often the one in charge of household

finances. (Stockpiling huge quantities of wine requires a certain impracticality and insouciance, attributes that do not readily lend themselves to mundane tasks like balancing a checkbook.) This is a problem. Prices for Bordeaux, Burgundies, Rhones, Napa Valley cabernets, and other blue-chip wines have soared in the last decade as more Americans and, to a lesser extent, Asians, have become serious oenophiles.

At the same time, the market has been saturated with stellar vintages. The Southern Rhone in 1998. The Northern Rhone in '99. Bordeaux in 2000. Germany in 2001 … and on and on. (Only now is this glut, combined with the sour economy, beginning to weigh on prices; expect some steals in the months ahead.) There is just no end to the must-haves these days. For all but the most affluent buyers, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain a respectable cellar and placate their parsimonious spouses. Something has to give, and it is their significant others who are doing the giving. They just don't know it.

Hiding the extent of one's habit can take a variety of forms, off-balance-sheet transactions being the most common. These are usually done in cash, but many wine nuts establish separate credit card accounts and have the bills sent either to the office or to a postal box. But paying for the wine is one thing; smuggling it into the house is another. Some don't even try, opting instead to rent space in wine warehouses. Others take delivery at the workplace and keep the bottles there until it is safe to sneak them home and into the basement.

To get a sense of how prevalent these shenanigans are, I rang a friend—let's call him Johnny—who owns a popular Manhattan wine shop. He agreed to cough up some stories, but only if I wouldn't print his name (and discretion is exactly what you want in an enabler). "Lying is rampant," he told me, "I see it all the time." He spoke of one regular who comes in several nights a week and inevitably walks out with two bottles: an inexpensive, quotidian wine and a gem. The former is paid for with plastic and goes into a store bag; the latter he buys with cash and buries in his briefcase, presumably to be squirreled away somewhere later that evening.

With some clients, Johnny takes an active role in the deception. In fact, he recently helped pull off one of the great snookerings of his career: A customer who frequently makes purchases behind his wife's back came into the store, spouse in tow; with just a few signaling winks and nods, Johnny and his client managed to execute a costly sale while keeping the wife completely in the dark.

Another retailer shared with me his most cherished tale of deception. He had a client with deep pockets and a passion for Burgundies (a passion that requires deep pockets). According to the merchant, this customer never purchased a wine under $100 a bottle. To mask his extravagant buying, he obtained a debit card and began storing wine in an empty office down the hall. Over five years he accumulated some 300 cases, all of which he stashed in the spare office. (There are

12 bottles in a case; if every bottle was $100, the total works out to $360,000. Given that many of the wines were far costlier, the price tag was probably well above $500,000.) The long-running ruse came to an abrupt end when his wife paid a visit to the office and opened the wrong door. For some time thereafter, the marriage was evidently on the rocks. However, the couple eventually worked out their differences—so successfully, in fact, that she was next seen helping him organize his wines.

Not all wine-hiding tales end so happily. Jeff Zacharia, owner of Zachy's, the great wine emporium in Scarsdale, N.Y., told me of one former customer (former because he isn't allowed to buy wine anymore) who amassed a collection worth around $20,000 without his wife's knowledge. She eventually found him out, and Zacharia's client was given a choice: Sell the wine or see me in court. He sold.

There is, of course, a common thread here: It is men—husbands, usually—who are doing the lying. When it comes to wine collecting and concealing, there is indeed a gender gap. Preferring to open bottles, not cans of worms, I won't speculate as to why this is so, and in any case, the gap seems to be narrowing. At a recent dinner, I found myself discussing cellar strategies with a female executive from Los Angeles who ruefully admitted that because her husband is a penny-pinching beer drinker, she does her buying on the sly. I was of two minds about her. I was glad to learn that wine is capable of driving women to deceit, but I was also glad she wasn't my wife. As far as I'm concerned, there's only room in a relationship for one wine cheat.

As you may have suspected, I do have some experience in these matters. Wine has caused pain in my marriage. My wife, an editor at a food and wine magazine, has more than a passing interest in chardonnays and Vouvrays, but for her, wine is not an obsession. She thinks of wine collecting chiefly in terms of opportunity cost, while I think of it chiefly in terms of opportunity lost—if I don't buy a particular bottle, I might come to regret it. (That said, I've got a very modest cellar—150 bottles, give or take 200.) As a result, we have endured our share of long evenings and near-divorce experiences on account of credit card charges and receipts I neglected to burn.

Our most recent wine spat was two years ago, when I was hit with an unexpected $300 excess-baggage fee for several cases I was carrying back from France. On the flight home, I finally decided to put myself on a budget. (It is a modified budget, in that only wines meant for cellaring count against it; wines for immediate consumption are paid for out of my wallet.) I have done a fairly good job of adhering to my self-imposed limits. Since my son's birth in 2001, most of my purchases have revolved around his needs. To mark his 10th birthday, for instance, he'll need something better than a Bud Lght, so I recently preordered a bottle of 2001 Haut-Brion, the least expensive of the Bordeaux First Growths but also the best (the wine hasn't reached stores yet; it is now being sold on a pre-arrival basis).

And obviously, he'll have to go to college; I can no longer count on the stock market to fund his education, so, as a form of insurance, I am now accumulating wines that are likely to have significant resale value. Will I resell them? Not a chance, but it is good to have the option and useful, too, to have a more convincing explanation for any displeasing items on the Amex bill. Actually, wine can be a stellar investment: The 1982 Chateau Petrus, to give just one example, has delivered substantially higher returns than the S&P 500 over the past two decades. Among spendthrift oenophiles, pointing out wine's investment potential is a popular means of deflecting irate spouses. It's much better than the lesser-evil argument (marital infidelity being the most frequently cited alternative) because not only does it not sound defensive; it sounds downright prudent. In a bear market, who can dispute the need for appreciating liquid assets?
