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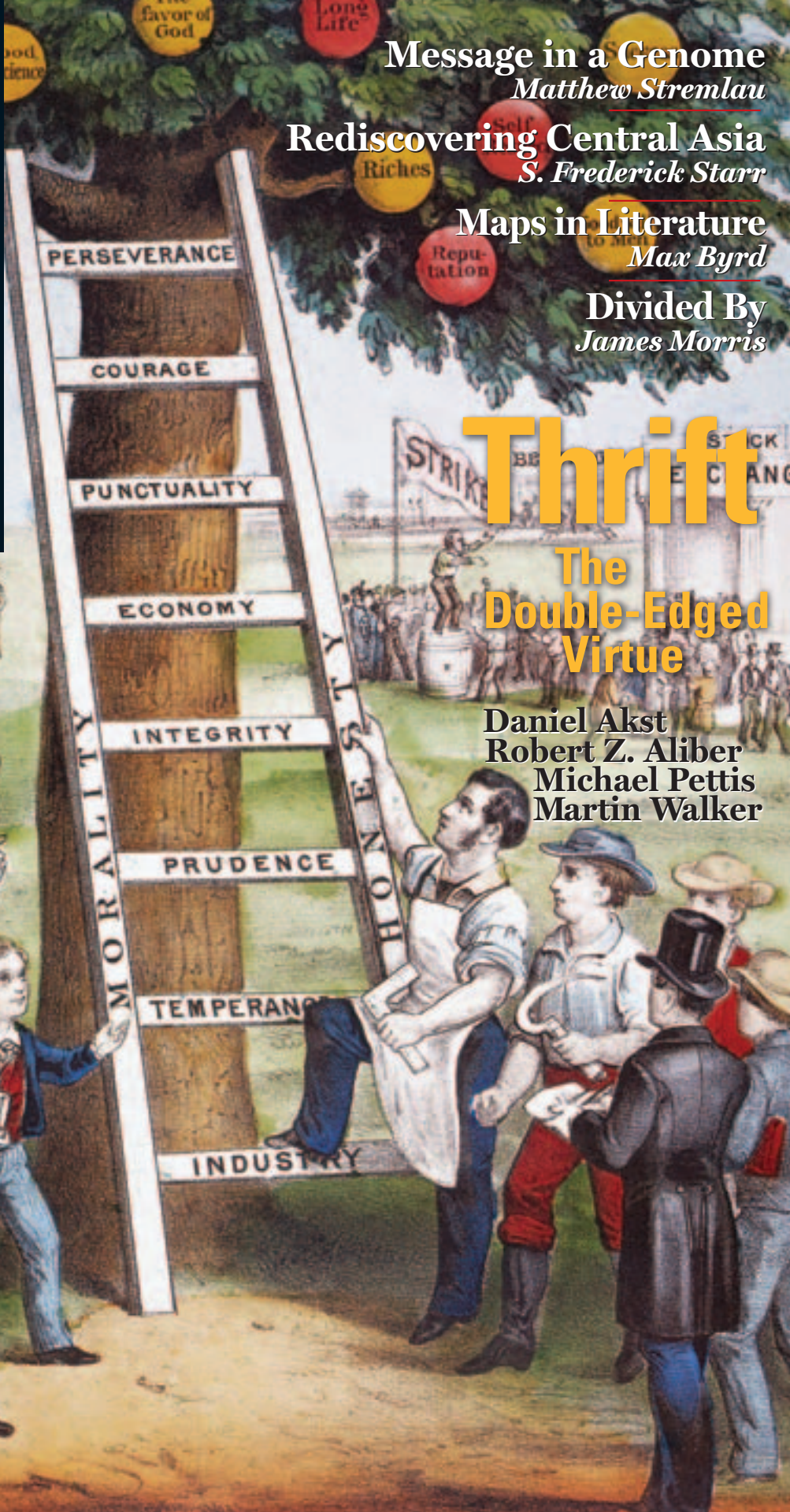
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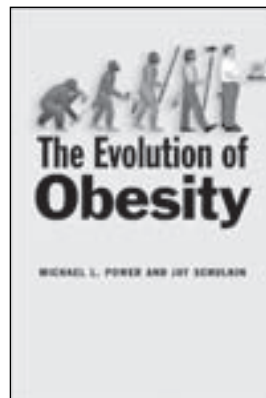
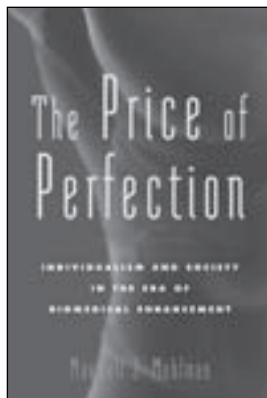
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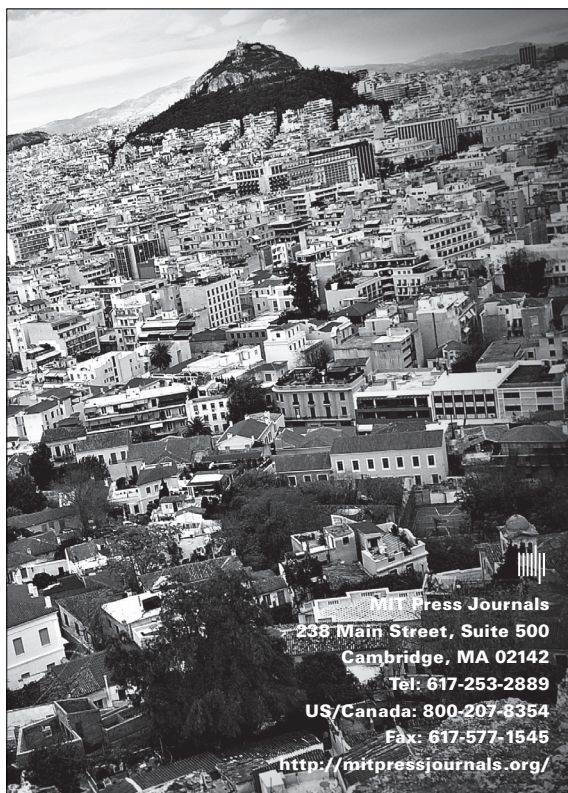
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Dr. Brooks Landon is a Professor of English and Collegiate Fellow at The University of Iowa and Director of The University of Iowa General Education Literature Program. From 1999 to 2005, Professor Landon was chair of the Iowa English Department. He received his Ph.D. from The University of Texas at Austin.

Among Professor Landon's numerous awards and accolades are a University of Iowa M.L. Huit Teaching Award and an International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts Distinguished Scholarship.

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ON THE COVER: *Ladder of Fortune*, an 1875 lithograph by Currier & Ives.

The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

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EDITOR'S COMMENT

Two Cheers for Thrift

I don't want to pick a fight with Benjamin Franklin, but I find it hard to join in the general enthusiasm for the new age of thrift that is supposedly upon us. Let me say here that my personal thrift bona fides are perfectly in order—thanks to diligent recycling, for example, I'm still using the neon plastic paperclips I bought a decade ago.

The old era had excesses, but the new one will too, as the cry for mere thrift becomes a demand for austerity and indignant legislators turn the credit taps tight. Debt has its uses. Most of those now-reviled subprime loans allowed Americans who wouldn't otherwise have had a chance the opportunity to buy—and keep—their own homes. Debt even imposes discipline, as historian Lendol Calder notes in *Financing the American Dream* (1999), and it had an essential role in the American past.

Individual Americans may borrow less in the future, but collectively they will go much more deeply in the hole, as the Treasury sells trillions in bonds to pay for the economic stimulus, two wars, and the normal operations of what will likely be an expanded national government. For a glimpse of individual frugality and collective prodigality in action, consider Japan, with its thrifty citizens and a national debt that has ballooned to nearly 200 percent of the country's gross domestic product since the Japanese bubble burst in the 1990s. America's public debt, by contrast, currently amounts to a relatively modest 60 percent of GDP.

In another way, today's red vistas of debt recall the era of tax cutting under Ronald Reagan. The Reagan Revolution was in part a gamble: Cut taxes, and an alarmed public will demand budget cuts in order to avoid red ink. Now we may be witnessing a kind of reverse Reaganism: Increase the size of government and gamble that an alarmed public will eventually authorize the taxes to pay for it. Reagan's revolution didn't go exactly as planned, though it contributed to the economic growth that allowed budgets to be balanced in the 1990s. Today's revolution will need some of the same good fortune.

—STEVEN LAGERFELD



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LETTERS

THE END OF THE ROAD?

THE THREE ESSAYS ON THE ROLE of America in the world, by Kishore Mahbubani, Tyler Cowen, and Arthur Herman, nicely capture the contours of the ongoing debate about this pivotal issue ["Decline or Renewal?" Spring '09]. I use the word "pivotal" carefully but confidently; the last year has reaffirmed precisely why the topic of America and its power around the world remains at the fore. China and India flit in and out of world discussions. Russia takes a brief bow now and then. Europe, Brazil, and others nod occasionally to show us that they are still with us. The United States, though, dominates the stage.

Only America could have brought off the extraordinary performance we have witnessed since last summer—economic decline and adjustment, political rejuvenation, electoral buffoonery, military redeployment, moral renewal, and diplomatic reconfiguration—with the entire world following every move.

For most of the world, the United States remains simultaneously a problem and a role model, a source of intense fear and an object of envy. The *WQ*'s spring issue required three articles to touch on some basic elements of America's roles and image around the world because there are complexities that cannot be reasonably captured in a single narrative. Only a fool would

try to analyze the United States' place in the world today through a monofocal ideological lens, seeing it as all good or all bad, fixed in stone or bending with the wind. The American national phenomenon attracts the best talents in the world to create great feats and deeds, and often sends back to the world the worst of American pedestrianism, provincialism, and militarism. So we admire it, but duck when it approaches us.

Rami Khouri

Director

Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and

International Affairs

American University of Beirut

Beirut, Lebanon

ARTHUR HERMAN IS RIGHT TO point out that the "pessimist persuasion" often makes for incorrect predictions about a society's decline ["The Pessimist Persuasion"]. But sometimes the prognosticators get it right, as when a British journalist, at the start of the 20th century, posed the question, "Will the Empire which is celebrating one century of Trafalgar survive for the next?"

What America needs today is an optimism rooted in a realistic appreciation of its situation in the world. The reality is that America is relatively less powerful—less able to shape global events—than it was, say, at the triumphant end of World War II or at the conclusion of the Cold War. The reality

is that America is not a global pacesetter but a laggard with respect to defining aspects of modernity such as wireless and green technologies, transportation infrastructure, and health care.

A pessimist, given this realistic context, might conclude that America has no hope of arresting this decline. But an optimist will say that America can greatly improve its plight, if not reverse the fundamentals of the equation, by looking outside itself for lessons in how the best practices of other societies can be usefully applied at home. The optimist will not succumb to the dread disease of nostalgia—the mental illness that can keep proud societies from adjusting to change.

I stand with the optimists.

Paul Starobin

Author, After America: Narratives

for the Next Global Age (2009)

Worcester, Mass.

NOTHING LASTS FOREVER, BUT history also shows that some nations have managed to be successful for very long periods. A crisis can lead to a collapse or prefigure recovery and growth. Kishore Mahbubani is wise to warn of the danger of failing to consider the possibility of failure ["Can America Fail?"].

But although complacency is dangerous, so too is overreaction. Arthur Herman is correct to say that pessimism can weaken a society, convincing successful states that they are in decline, until eventually it becomes true.

Herman's Roman example is more complex than it appears on its face. In

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the first century BC, Sallust had good reason to talk of decline when almost all leading politicians of his generation died violently, mostly at the hands of other Romans. The Roman Republic was torn apart and replaced by the Roman Empire—a military dictatorship, if a veiled, generally benevolent, and highly successful one.

From the third century AD onward, the empire became unstable, and until the fifth century there was a civil war almost every decade. Military, economic, and demographic problems contributed to Rome's fall, and all were made far worse because of steady corrosion from internal conflict. Personal success and survival became the overwhelming priorities of its leaders, fatally weakening the empire's capacity to deal with problems. Rome's leaders forgot why they were there.

Rome survived for so long because it was far bigger, wealthier, and more sophisticated than any of its rivals, and for centuries it lived off its fat. Over time it was able to employ its resources less and less effectively, until in the end they were not enough.

In his piece on the competing powers that shape the global economy, Tyler Cowen emphasizes America's inherent strengths ["Last Man Standing"]. Decline is not inevitable. Nor is renewal, but it can come only while the strengths Cowen describes remain.

Adrian Goldsworthy

Author, How Rome Fell (2009)

Penarth, United Kingdom

ON THE QUESTION OF AMERICA'S decline, Kishore Mahbubani hits the nail on the head by pointing to the inability of American thinkers and policymakers "to listen to other voices on the planet." Indeed, his point is illus-

trated by the other contributors to the "Decline or Renewal?" cluster, who seem to assume that other countries want the United States to lead and who believe that the American economy is still the most dynamic in the world.

If one simply asks other people in the world what they think, these casual assumptions wither away. Global opinion surveys show little enthusiasm in other countries for "American-style democracy," for American ways of doing business, or for the spread of American ideas and customs. Though global opinion of the United States has improved somewhat with the election of President Barack Obama, far more people around the globe continue to characterize American influence in the world as "mostly negative" rather than "mostly positive."

It is difficult to see how the U.S. economy could be regarded as so vital, innovative, and creative at a time when core parts of it are collapsing under the weight of stupefying levels of incompetence, greed, and corruption. Manufacturing has steadily declined as a component of gross domestic product, replaced increasingly by financial services. America does not actually produce much anymore. Now the financial sector has proven a hollow shell, after fostering and encouraging record levels of both consumer spending and debt. This can no longer be sustained, so the U.S. economy is bound to decline, and probably by a lot. As Mahbubani astutely writes, "The time has come for Americans to spend less and work harder."

David S. Mason

Author, The End of the

American Century (2008)

Professor Emeritus of Political Science

Butler University

Indianapolis, Ind.

KISHORE MAHBUBANI'S ARTICLE is itself worth the price of a year's subscription. In its clarity and objectivity, Mahbubani's is a breathtaking view of the United States from an outsider, a perspective that America is in sore need of.

Until the United States addresses some of the issues Mahbubani raises, such as the vast corruption of Congress by special-interest groups and the wildly unfair and hypocritical subsidies to cotton farmers, it will continue to wreck the world's economy and climate in far more devastating ways than its periodic military adventures do.

However, what Mahbubani fails to understand is the depth of Americans' resistance to both self-criticism and criticism by outsiders—a combination of provincialism, jingoism, and latent xenophobia that has marked this nation since Alexis de Tocqueville's day. For these reasons, his solutions probably will not work. Americans are far better at asking the world, "Aren't we great?" than they are at asking, "What is wrong with us?"

America continues to entertain the romanticized picture of its actions during World Wars I and II, when it almost single-handedly saved the world from tyranny. It prides itself both as the savior and caretaker of freedom, and bitterly resents foreign opinions to the contrary.

Until a shift in attitude occurs, the United States will continue to be the bull in the world's china shop, blissfully unaware that the damage we cause to the planet is not the result of defective plates and saucers but of our own willful, destructive actions.

Holmes Brannon

Woodland Park, Colo.

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AT THE CENTER

THE ARAB-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

LEBANESE INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER BISSANE El-Cheikh arrived at the Woodrow Wilson Center late last year as its first Visiting Arab Journalist. On leave from *Al-Hayat*, a London-based newspaper that circulates throughout the Middle East, she set herself a daunting research topic: “How America managed not to home-grow Islamic terrorists, but inspired them all around the world.”

Settling into a library carrel in the midst of the Center’s special Kennan collection of Russian books, she raced to set up interviews with a long list of scholars and policymakers. Three months to conduct research is a rare luxury for a daily journalist, and the animated El-Cheikh was determined not to waste an hour.

In the Beirut office where El-Cheikh has worked for the past eight years, she is known as a reporter who tries to get behind the political stories of the region and write about people, their ideas, and their surroundings. Dressed customarily in the journalistic uniform of blue jeans and jacket, she set out to do the same kind of “shoe-leather” reporting in New York City, with its large concentration of Arab immigrants, as she practiced for *Al-Hayat*.

In the four-part series she wrote while at the Center, she set a key scene in a Yemeni section of Brooklyn because it seemed to her a “miniature model of New York.” El-Cheikh evokes the murmur of Arabic mixed with English and the smell of hot loaves of flatbread at the Happy Yemen Restaurant, across from the Yemeni Unity Restaurant and around the corner from the Damascus Bakery. Such neighborhoods have long been a staple of narrative writing about immigrants, but El-Cheikh found a twist. Arab Americans, she wrote, told her that for years they thought of themselves as immigrants from countries or geographic regions. But after 9/11, their public identity changed. Most came to be identified as Muslims, and many reacted by saying, in essence, “If you treat us like Muslims first and citizens second, then we too shall act like Muslims.”

Muslims, yes. But not followers of Al Qaeda. El-Cheikh, who speaks Arabic, French, and English

fluently and has a passing knowledge of Spanish and Bulgarian, concluded that the U.S. Muslim community is different from Europe’s because its Arab immigrants are different. They arrived earlier and are better educated. The first Arab arrivals were mostly Christian, she wrote, but Muslim businessmen, scientists, and technicians soon followed. Many of them told her that their religiosity was widely accepted in America whether they attended a church or a mosque. Arab immigrants didn’t feel compelled to adopt a purely secular identity as a condition of full citizenship, unlike their counterparts in Europe.

As she sought to explain why America has avoided producing “cells” of jihadists such as those that arose in Britain and elsewhere, she interviewed sheikhs, terrorism specialists, and lawyers. Her greatest challenge, oddly, was getting officials at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to tell the government’s side of the story. “Surprisingly,” she said recently, “a foreign journalist like myself is not welcomed at all, or so I felt.” Her observations are shared by many, if not most, international reporters in Washington, even though the foreign press corps has mushroomed from a mere 160 reporters in 1968 to 1,490 last year, according to a recent study. With its annual Visiting Arab Journalist Fellowship, the Woodrow Wilson Center seeks to offer journalists from the Arab world a different experience—a chance to tackle uninterrupted policy research and interact easily with policymakers and scholars at the Center.

In her *Al-Hayat* series, El-Cheikh concluded that Arab Americans were stigmatized after the 9/11 attacks, and the rights of some were violated during the war on terror as they were punished for suspected intentions, not actions. The atmosphere “terrified” the American Muslim community and ensured that nobody with Al Qaeda sympathies would find a safe haven within it. Even Al Qaeda came to realize that America was not suited “socially” or from a security standpoint for infiltration or recruitment, she wrote. It turned to Europe instead.



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LETTERS

VIOLENCE ACROSS THE BORDER

ALFREDO CORCHADO'S IN-DEPTH and courageous reporting gives readers a grasp of the dimensions of the drug problem on both sides of the border ["A Fighting Chance," Spring '09].

The experience of living in Mexico and being inundated with news of the latest kingpin arrests, beheadings, death tallies, and tons of drugs seized is overwhelming. It's hard to grasp how rapidly Mexican society is changing.

Since Corchado's piece went to press, the death tally for the year has more than doubled—from 1,000 deaths due to drug-related violence to 2,600. How many more will have been recorded by the time this letter goes to press?

Coming to the end of Corchado's article was like coming face to face with an abyss. In the weeks before the midterm elections, 10 local mayors and 18 other government officials were arrested for alleged drug links. But is this a political move or an honest-to-God drug sweep? Part of the problem is that many of us here don't know whom to believe. As Corchado says, the very fabric of Mexico's democracy hangs in the balance.

Susana Seijas

Mexico City, Mexico

ALFREDO CORCHADO IS RIGHT TO argue that addressing demand for drugs in the United States lies at the crux of efforts to fight the narcotics trade, both globally and with respect to Mexico

specifically. He correctly points out that the lack of progress in addressing U.S. demand has only resulted in ever more intense supply-side measures, shifting production and smuggling of illicit narcotics within or among countries, ultimately locating trafficking in Mexico. The appointment of Gil Kerlikowske as the new chief of the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy, as well as the Obama administration's serious acknowledgment of the need to tackle domestic demand, gives force to the hope that the new administration will finally make treatment and prevention the main instruments of its counternarcotics policy.

But even a well-resourced effort on the part of the United States will take years to show dramatic results. It is no longer sufficient to focus on demand reduction in the West and North only. China, Russia, Brazil, and other countries have emerged as major and expanding markets where demand reduction efforts are frequently lacking.

However, supply-side measures cannot be discounted. Although Mexico is primarily involved in moving drugs from other countries to the United States, it does have rather extensive marijuana and poppy cultivation. Including the farmers of these illicit crops, the number of people involved in various aspects of the drug trade and related illegal spillover economies is estimated at several hundred thousand.

Interdiction efforts are important not only to eliminate smuggling or dry up supply, but to limit the coercive and corruptive power of crime organizations. After decades of tolerating, regulating, and managing the drug cartels, which have deeply and extensively corrupted the country's entire law enforcement apparatus, the Mexican govern-

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ment decided to take them on, and thus precipitated the extraordinary level of violence among the crime groups and between them and the state. The state failed to anticipate and sufficiently prepare itself for the intense turf wars that threaten public safety.

Because Mexico's police forces are weak and corrupt, the military had to be deployed to fight the criminal organizations, but this solution is hardly sustainable. Police reform in Mexico must become an urgent priority. Mexico cannot win the war on drugs without strengthening the state in a multifaceted way. There are plenty of opportunities for cooperation with the United States in that effort.

Vanda Felbab-Brown

*Fellow, Foreign Policy
The Brookings Institution
Washington, D.C.*

SOME PUBLICISTS SAY THAT NO press is bad press, but Mexico's president, Felipe Calderón, quite likely is not happy with the coverage of his country in recent months. Alfredo Corchado, who has devoted much time to studying and living on both sides of the border, points out that Mexico and the United States are tied together not only by their shared border and a free-trade agreement—although the more than \$1 billion per day in legitimate trade is important to both countries—but by people. Mexicans, according to the Migration Policy Institute, constitute nearly a third of America's foreign-born population. It's commonly said that when the United States sneezes, Mexico catches a cold. The United States now fears being infected with Mexico's drug violence.

In his sober take, Corchado poignantly illustrates the United States'

important role in the brutal drug war taking place in Mexico. President Barack Obama's trip to the country demonstrates an important evolution in U.S. antidrug policy. U.S. officials are publicly recognizing the responsibility of the United States to address demand issues, and are targeting the supply of arms from the American side as an important contributing factor to the situation.

This attitude is in keeping with the Mérida Initiative, sometimes referred to as a "Plan Colombia" for Mexico. The Mérida Initiative is both more ambitious than Plan Colombia—more than just a technical assistance package, it aims to create a partnership between the two countries—and less ambitious, providing only \$1.4 billion over three years for Mexico and Central America. This is about half the annual resources devoted to Plan Colombia, even though Mexico's population is more than twice as big as Colombia's and its economy is more than five times larger.

Corchado's tale of what has happened to Mexico since Plan Colombia serves as a cautionary note for policymakers deciding how to implement the Mérida Initiative. If history repeats itself, Mexico's violence may be transferred to Central America or even, potentially, to Canada and other ports of entry into the United States.

Barbara Kotschwar

*Research Associate
Peterson Institute for International Economics
Washington, D.C.*

CONSIDERING THE CAUCASUS

RUSSIAN FIGURES FROM NOVELIST Aleksandr S. Pushkin to former president Vladimir Putin paint the Cauca-

sus as dark and dangerous, a region of conflict, blood oaths, ethnoreligious extremism, and violence. Margaret Paxson's portrayal of Akhmed, Haishet, and their daughters ["They Call It Home," Spring '09] attempts to set us free of this powerful cognitive prison.

Tracing the paths through which a Karbardian family negotiates their collective and individual identities reframes the region from one of conflict and violence to one of shifting opportunities in which men and women, youths and adults, must adapt and adjust to build continuity and maintain moral codes. Drumming up the resources for building a life in the region, especially a moral one, can be challenging. Doing so requires a conscious investment.

We too often assume that individuals who live in regions torn by conflict and hardship—places as diverse as Gaza, the Brazilian favelas, and the contentious Caucasus—only rarely have choices. Viewing inhabitants as powerless victims or unthinking members of the mob not only blinds us to their agency and individuality, but also underpins our constructions of the dark and dangerous other. This is not to say that life chances are equal; location matters greatly, as do larger forces such as ethnicity, gender, class, and religion. Still, how individuals view their choices, build their lives, and take their chances is of critical importance. In regions of conflict, we learn more from focusing on the voluntary exchange of cucumbers and tomatoes than on the exchange of violence.

Cynthia Buckley

*Associate Professor
Department of Sociology
University of Texas, Austin
Austin, Texas*

MULLING MILL

RECENTLY I WAS INVITED TO A local Rotary Club luncheon. The gentleman seated next to me told me that the last judge the club had as a guest was a proponent of legalizing drugs. The man said he thought this policy change was a good idea; we should take the profit, and the gangsters, out of the trade. Then he asked my opinion.

I told him I agreed with everything he had said, but that almost all of the cases that cross my desk involve drugs either directly or indirectly, and that I thought we have a right to regulate drugs, so we can have an orderly society.

He politely challenged me: Surely I could not disagree that people should be permitted to use whatever substance they choose in their own homes. Again I told him I agreed, but hesitated to get on the legalization bandwagon because so many crimes occur either in or right outside the home, and might not be committed if people were not influenced by drugs.

When I got home, I happened upon Christopher Clausen's article ["John Stuart Mill's 'Very Simple Principle,'" Spring '09]. How very appropriate and relevant it is today. Alas, I still don't know the answer to the quandary raised by my recent discussion at the Rotary Club, but this article reminded me that it's really the same discussion that just keeps repeating itself in different circumstances.

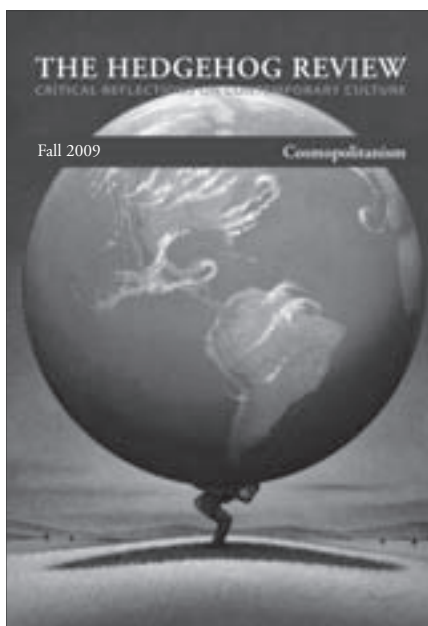
Eileen C. Moore

Associate Justice

California Court of Appeal

Santa Ana, Calif.

Correction: The last name of Russian painter and designer Léon Bakst was incorrectly spelled on page 85 in the Winter 2009 issue.



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FINDINGS

BRIEF NOTES OF INTEREST ON ALL TOPICS

Hard to Stomach?

Endangered species

We're outnumbered: Our bodies contain about 10 microbial cells for every human cell. But those microbes aren't all bad, according to New York University's Martin J. Blaser, an expert on a stomach bacterium called *Helicobacter pylori*.

H. pylori "has colonized the human stomach probably since the beginning of the human species and certainly before prehistoric migrations out of Africa over 58,000 years ago," Blaser said in April, lecturing at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. But it's dying out in the developed world. Once present in 70 to 90 percent of American children, *H. pylori* colonization is down to around five percent of kids today. Possible causes of the drop-off include improved hygiene, smaller families (children often contract the bacterium from older siblings), and increased use of antibiotics to treat childhood infections. "For an organism that has presumably been colonizing us for millions of years," Blaser said, "such a decline is surprising and probably unprecedented." And maybe not entirely welcome.

First isolated in 1982, *H. pylori*

causes gastric and duodenal ulcers (a discovery that won two Australian researchers a Nobel Prize) and stomach cancer. With the demise of the microbe, incidence rates of the cancer and the ulcers are falling, as expected. But *H. pylori* seems to have an upside, too. Several studies indicate that it helps prevent asthma in children as well as gastric reflux and esophageal cancer in adults, three conditions whose incidence has increased sharply in the past few decades. Moreover, the microbe appears to affect production of the hormones leptin and ghrelin, which regulate appetite. Many people without *H. pylori* eat more—those treated with antibiotics to wipe out the microbe show, on average, a 2.4 percent gain in body mass—and, of course, obesity is getting more common just as *Helicobacter* colonization is getting less so.

In the mid-1990s, when Blaser initially proposed that *H. pylori* may protect against esophageal cancer, "I was greeted first by indifference and then by hostility," he said. But attitudes have changed. The National Institutes of Health has launched a \$115 million "Human Microbiome Project" to identify the organisms that inhabit the human body and to explore their role in health. As for

H. pylori, Blaser wonders if we should administer it to at least some children in order to reduce the likelihood of asthma, then eradicate the bacterium before it can cause stomach cancer and gastric and duodenal ulcers, which commonly appear late in life.

Helicobacter pylori is important not just in its own right, but also as a marker of the vast changes in human "microecology." Hygiene, antibiotics, and other supposed advances may turn out to have unexpected and untoward consequences, Blaser said in an interview. "We need to wake up about this."

Cold War, Hot Kitchen

Secret weapon X-61

In 1958, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to a series of cultural exchanges. One of the first was a Moscow exhibition the following year of American products, including the model home where Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev held their famous "kitchen debate." The exhibition and the debate are recalled by Peter Carlson in *K Blows Top* (PublicAffairs), and by contributors to *Cold War Kitchen* (MIT Press), edited by Ruth Ol-



Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev and Vice President Richard Nixon during the 1959 "kitchen debate."

denziel and Karin Zachmann.

The Moscow exhibition's focus on consumer goods was part of what sociologist David Riesman termed the "Nylon War," an effort to enfeeble the communist system from within by showing Soviet women how luxuriously their capitalist counterparts lived. From the outset, the approach provoked criticism even in America. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. said that the United States appeared to be battling "godless materialism" with "godly materialism." To former (and future) presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, the exhibition suggested that Americans embraced "the supermarket as our temple and the singing commercial as our litany."

When the show opened, Muscovites stood in long lines to gaze at the X-61, a prefabricated home that the average \$100-a-week American worker could supposedly afford. (In truth, the typical worker might manage the

\$14,000 house but not the \$5,000 in furnishings.) Nixon brought Khrushchev to the home's appliance-laden kitchen. "What we want to do is make more easy the life of our housewives," Nixon explained.

Khrushchev responded, "The Soviets do not share this capitalist attitude toward women." A woman's place, it seemed, was on the factory floor. Anyway, "newly built Russian houses have all this equipment right now. Moreover, all you have to do to get a house is to be born in the Soviet Union. I was born in the Soviet Union so I have the right to a house. . . . Yet you say that we are the slaves of Communism."

"If you were in our Senate," said Nixon, "we would call you a filibusterer."

Paper Store

Armchair shopping

In 1872, a traveling salesman named Aaron Montgomery Ward tried

something different. He published a page listing 162 items, including hoop skirts and grain bags, that customers could order and receive without leaving home. The one-page catalog grew to more than a thousand pages (plus a chain of department stores) by the middle of the 20th century, Robin Cherry writes in *Catalog: The Illustrated History of Mail-Order Shopping* (Princeton Architectural Press).

The phrase "satisfaction guaranteed or your money back" originated with Ward's. A character created by Ward's for a holiday promotion in 1939 would also prove to have staying power: a red-nosed reindeer. But what to call it? Rollo sounded "too breezy," according to Cherry, and Reginald sounded too British. Rudolph won out.

Special Delivery

Live and in person

Presidents used to deliver their messages to Congress in writing, and *The New York Times* had mixed feelings about changing the practice almost a century ago. An editorial from 1913, reprinted in *The New York Times on the Presidency: 1853-2008* (CQ Press), evaluated Woodrow Wilson's "innovation" of lecturing to Congress about tariff reform in person.

On the one hand, the *Times* said, oral delivery demanded brevity: "If the day of long messages has passed, the country is to be congratulated." On the other hand, might disgruntled members of Congress hiss the president? "That would certainly

be deplorable.”

Then there was the matter of self-promotion. Wilson “has laid himself open to the charge of airing his vanity,” the *Times* said, adding, “The wonder is that in seven years Theodore Roosevelt never thought of this way of stamping his personality upon the age.”

Women’s Work

Switchboard switch

Teenage boys made dandy telegraph operators, but they proved unequal to the demands of a new technology around the turn of the 20th century. “Customers complained that boy operators were rude and cursed at them,” Emily Yellin writes in *Your Call Is (Not That) Important to Us* (Free Press). What’s more, the boys wrestled and drank on the job.

So telephone companies began hiring young women. They were known as “hello girls,” because “when subscribers took their receivers off the hook to place calls, instead of the dial tone that came later, they would hear the operators say ‘hello’ on the other end,” Yellin says. The women “were required to be unmarried, and usually between the ages of about 18 and 26. If they married, they were let go. Dress codes meant they had to look prim and proper always, even though . . . no subscribers would see them doing their jobs.”

They also had to take voice lessons. “They were taught to draw out certain words for clarity because early telephone lines were noisy. So the word ‘please’ would be pronounced ‘pleeeyazz.’ The number nine became ‘niyun,’ and the word ‘line’ turned into ‘liyun.’” Thus was born the elocu-

tion later parodied by comedian Lily Tomlin.

Digital Derision

Bird flippers

Studies have found that making yourself smile can improve your mood. Now it turns out that extending your middle finger can make you perceive hostility.

Psychologists Jesse Chandler and Norbert Schwarz assigned subjects to move their right hands while reading a story. Those who extended middle fingers ranked the man in the story as more antagonistic than those who extended index fingers. The results, Chandler and Schwarz report in *The Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (January), suggest that “giving ‘the finger,’ a hostile gesture, primes the associated concept of hostility.” People you target with a middle finger strike you as combative, or perhaps simply strike you.

Smiling Ladies

Masterpiece mysteries

One Christmas in the White House, Eleanor Roosevelt gave each of her children a framed photograph of herself, according to her grandson Curtis Roosevelt, writing in *Too Close to the Sun* (PublicAffairs). The photo showed the First Lady dressed and posed as Whistler’s Mother. She offered “absolutely no explanation,” the author writes. “When asked about it Grand-mère would only smile enigmatically.”



By 1900, women had almost entirely taken over operation of this telephone exchange in New York City.

Speaking of enigmatic smiles, the *Mona Lisa* had never been so popular as on August 29, 1911, when the Louvre reopened eight days after the painting had been stolen. (Police did not recover it until two years later.) “The mourners and the merely curious filed past the blank wall and paid their respects to the emptiness,” R. A. Scotti writes in *Vanished Smile: The Mysterious Theft of*

The Calm Before

Morning in America

In June, the Library of Congress announced that its Chronicling America website, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov, now contains some 1.2 million pages of American newspapers published between 1880 and 1922. The site offers ample fodder for, among other things, contemplating what was going on just before historic events.

Consider April 18, 1906. When the great earthquake struck the Bay Area at 5:12 a.m., early risers were reading about the rich and famous on the front page of *The San Francisco Call*. In New York, the *Call* reported, J. P. Morgan’s partner had been arrested for driving his carriage on the wrong side of Broadway, after which he had been “Compelled to Await His Turn Among Riff-Raff in Court.” A pros-

perous San Francisco merchant named Courtland S. Benedict, “a man past the springtide of life,” had married his young nurse after a recuperative voyage together to Tahiti (“Cupid journeyed afar”).

In other front-page news, George Glover, son of Mary Baker Eddy, was visiting Denver: “Hale, hearty, active, although nearly 63 years old, he is a good advertisement for his mother’s cult.” And

Russian author Maxim Gorky, touring the United States to raise money for the Bolsheviks, had disparaged his hosts in a telegram to a Paris publisher: “Gorky says that the Americans are the same spitting, vulgar people that Charles Dickens found them and that personal liberty is as much hampered in America as in Russia. . . . The sooner he gets out of the wretched country the better he will be pleased.” The married Gorky was traveling with a girlfriend, prompting the *Call*’s headline: “MAXIM GORKY SAYS YANKEES ARE SPITTERS / Vulgarity of Americans Shocks the Russian Bigamist.”

Porn in the U.S.A.

The geography of desire

Who subscribes to pornographic websites? Benjamin Edelman of Harvard Business School summarizes data from a major provider of online porn in *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* (Winter 2009). Per capita, Utah has the most subscriptions to porn sites, and West Virginia the fewest. Some religious attitudes correlate with subscription rates, Edelman reports: “In states where more people agree that ‘Even today miracles are performed by the power of God’ and ‘I never doubt the existence of God,’ there are more subscriptions.” Residents of states with high rates of churchgoing prove to be about average in their appetite for pay porn—the only difference is that fewer of them sign up on Sundays.

—Stephen Bates



A 1911 French cartoon made mocking reference to a new exhibit, *Le Clou du Louvre* (“The Nail of the Louvre”).

Mona Lisa (Knopf). “The darkened rectangle with the four vacant iron pegs became the empty casket of a missing person. The mourners left flowers and notes, wept, and set new attendance records. There had never been a wait to enter the Louvre. Now the lines stretched for blocks.” Among those who came to gaze at the blank wall, aptly, was Franz Kafka.

Message in a Genome

As scientists tease out the human genome's secrets, it's easy to seize on our genetic differences, which are small and often inconclusive. But the surprising ancestral connections that our DNA reveals are the big story in the post-genome world.

BY MATTHEW STREMLAU

A CENTURY AND A HALF AGO, AN AUSTRIAN priest conducted an elegant set of experiments that eventually led a grudging world into the first genetics revolution. With a garden of nearly 30,000 pea plants, and meticulous persistence, Gregor Mendel developed the modern concept of the gene. His idea was simple: Observable plant traits, such as stem size or seed coat color, were passed from generation to generation in heritable units called genes. A hundred years passed before it was discovered that individual genes were the instructions for manufacturing proteins. Proteins, along with other molecules in the cell, produce the traits we see in living things every day. In humans, they're responsible for that bald spot we wish we didn't have and the artistic ability we wish we did.

Today, we are in the midst of another revolution in genetics. Around the clock, in laboratories from Boston to Beijing, an army of scientists are decoding any DNA they can get their hands on—DNA from human beings, bacteria, even woolly mammoths whose remains were preserved in frozen ground. In the case of humans, the sequencing of the genome determines the exact order for a particular indi-

vidual of the three billion chemical building blocks that make up the DNA of our 23 chromosome pairs. Superfast DNA sequencers are revealing a vast genetic landscape every bit as exotic as the moon must have looked to the astronauts during the first lunar landing.

While the sequence of a single genome—the complete set of genetic material contained in the chromosomes in each of our cells—shows how human genes are organized, it's the ability to rapidly sequence and compare segments of genomes from thousands of people that is revolutionizing genetics. By examining the natural variation of the human genome, we are identifying genes that play a role in many common diseases. With this knowledge, we may be able to design drugs and personalize medicines for individual patients. And we can use the beacons of genomic variation as a sort of GPS to trace all humans back to a set of common ancestors, most likely in eastern Africa.

Perhaps most remarkably, we can now begin to ask, What makes you you, and me me? We can isolate the variations in our genomes that—along with environmental factors—shape our unique personalities and behaviors. Why am I afraid of heights? Why does my sister hate lima beans while I can't get enough of them? Discovering the answers will be thrilling. But

MATTHEW STREMLAU is a member of the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. He received his Ph.D. in biochemistry from Harvard University.



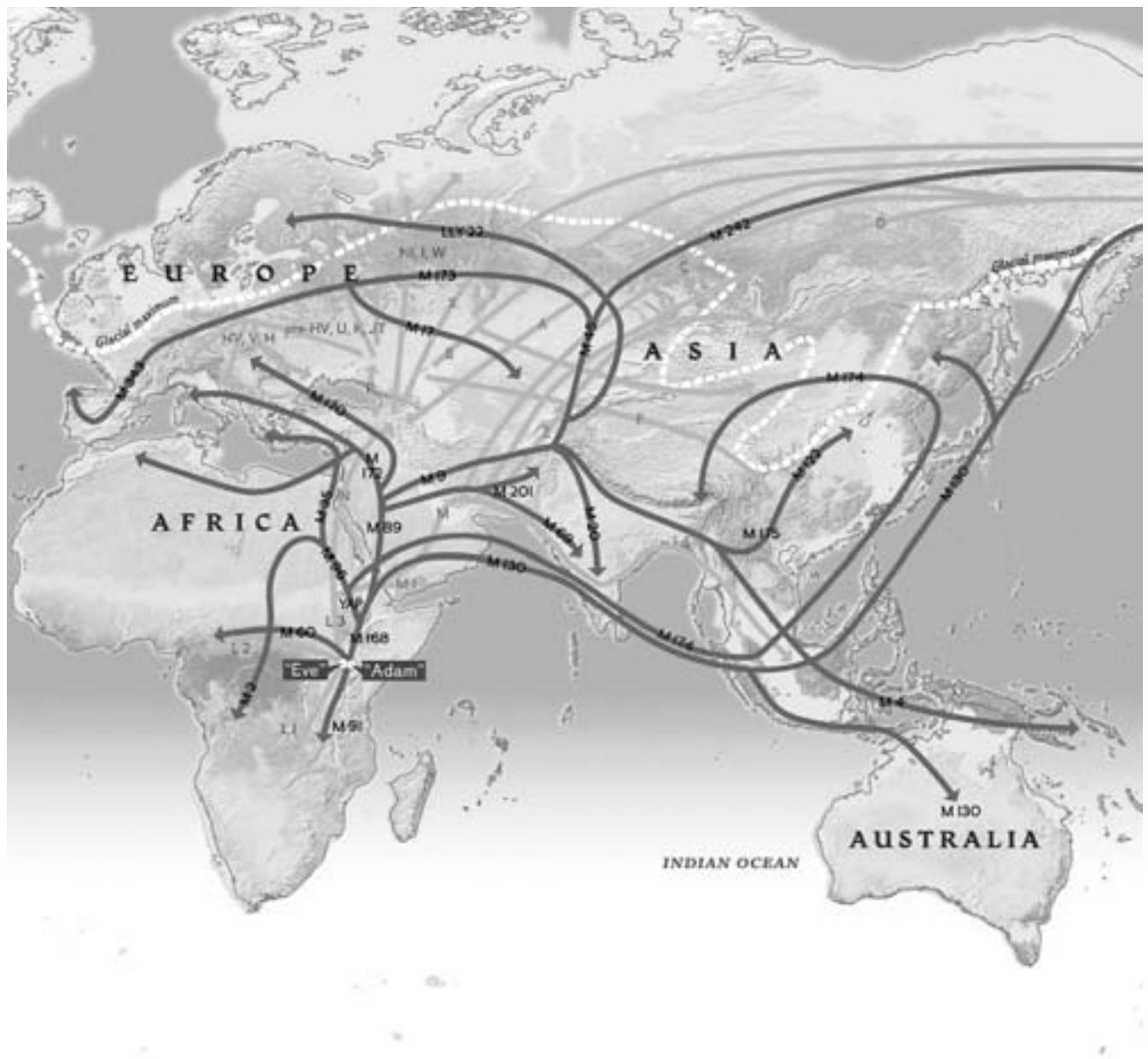
We're not so different, you and me: Despite humans' superficial differences, 99.5 percent of our DNA is the same. Research on human genomes is revealing intimate and sometimes surprising ancestral connections that may change the way we conceive of ourselves.

these discoveries will not come without perils.

Probing our differences, even innocuous ones such as variations in the sense of smell, may resurrect old ideas about genetic determinism—the false belief that our traits and behaviors are determined solely by our genes. This idea gained currency in the latter half of the 19th century, after Charles Darwin's publication of *Origin of Species* in 1859. Sir Francis Galton, Darwin's cousin, argued in his 1865 essay "Hereditary Talent and Character" that each individual's abilities are determined by genetic inheritance, helping to lay the groundwork for the eugenics movement

and its ill-fated efforts to breed better humans.

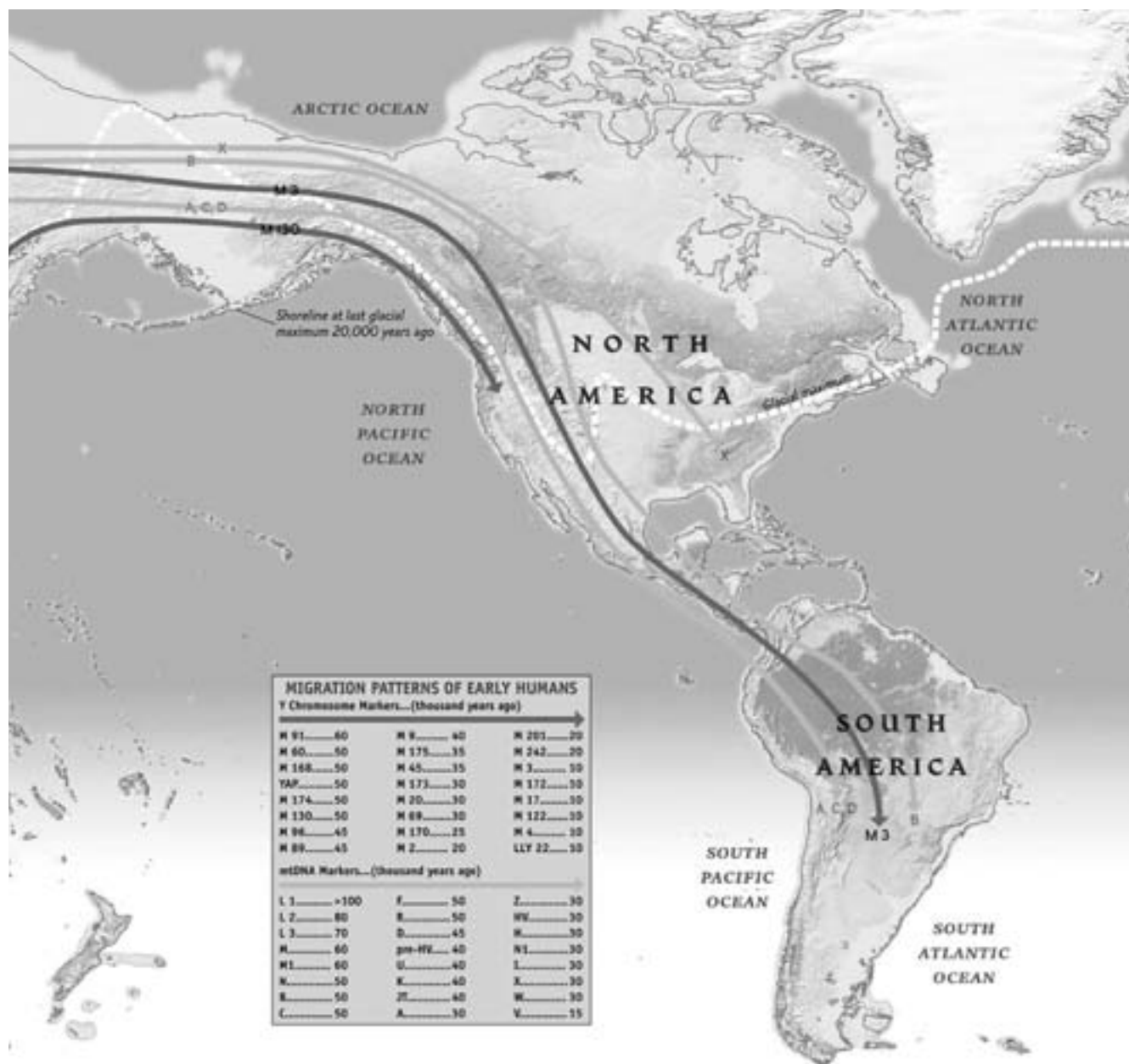
The eugenics movement did not survive World War II, but genetic determinism still has enthusiasts. A few advocates for the death penalty have focused on the so-called warrior gene, a variation of the gene important in regulating the levels of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine, to argue that some criminals are predisposed to violence and thus incapable of rehabilitation. Others have sought to capitalize on genetic determinism to reduce their own marginalization. In the mid-1990s, activist scientists searched for a "gay gene" that might win greater



social acceptance for homosexuality. But the notion that there is an all-controlling gay gene or warrior gene is flawed. While genes alone are responsible for a few rare disorders such as cystic fibrosis and Huntington's disease, they are not the last word on most human traits.

Yet we seem unable or unwilling to relinquish the old paradigms of Mendel's era. As we enter the post-genome world—a world in which we will have easy access to the

information contained in our and others' genomes—we still tend to believe that variation in one or a few genes is responsible for traits such as kindness or a propensity to develop diabetes. But as we have known for many years, environment plays a major role in our development, and even traits thought to be primarily genetic aren't likely to correspond to a single gene. In just the past few years, studies have shown how dizzyingly complex this business of the



genome is, suggesting that common diseases are caused by vast networks of genes that interact with one another and with the environment in ways we don't fully understand.

In 2001, the publicly funded Human Genome Project, along with Craig Venter and his colleagues at the private-sector company Celera

Population geneticists are using mutations in DNA to trace the migration of the species since humans first left sub-Saharan Africa some 50,000 years ago. By studying DNA markers in Y chromosomes (passed down paternally) and mitochondrial DNA (passed down maternally), they have plotted who went where and when.

Genomics, announced that they had sequenced a “rough draft” of an entire human genome. (The Human Genome Project published the first com-

plete sequence of the human genome in 2003.) These genomes were composites of DNA from numerous donors and were meant for use only as reference maps. They told us a lot about how the genome is organized, but nothing about human variation. To study that, you need to compare information from the genome sequences of many individuals.

Six years after the first human genome was sequenced, only a handful of individual genomes have been fully sequenced, including those of two Caucasian males, a Chinese male, a Nigerian male, and a Korean male. This past winter, a draft of a genome sequence from a Neanderthal male was announced. There are more genomes on the way (including, finally, a woman's). An ambitious international consortium known as the 1,000 Genomes Project plans to sequence the genomes of 1,200 people from around the world. While the Human Genome Project spent more than a decade and nearly \$3 billion to sequence the first complete human genome, several years from now anyone will be able to receive a genome sequence within a week for less than the price of a good used car.

The human genome contains around 25,000 genes, but that is not all it consists of. In fact, 98 percent of the genome does not contain any genes. This part is often referred to as “junk” DNA. Of course, it's not junk. We simply don't yet understand its function. Much of our junk DNA consists of repetitive sequences and bits of viruses, legacies of infections that our ancestors survived. The junk DNA probably plays an important role in turning genes on and off and also serves as a structural scaffold. Genes are interspersed throughout the genome—sort of like towns along a highway. Some genes are in clusters. Others are separated by great spans of junk.

Over the past few years, scientists have been systematically cataloging all of the common points in the genome that can differ from one person or population to the next. These points are called single nucleotide polymorphisms, or SNPs (pronounced “snips”) for short. The building blocks of DNA, called nucleotides or bases, are denoted by the letters A, T, C, and G. A SNP occurs when a base pair—which

runs together with other pairs to form a sequence—differs between one person and the next.

One SNP familiar to scientists, for example, is associated with Alzheimer's disease. All of us have a gene ApoE that produces a protein whose function is to transport cholesterol and other fats in the bloodstream. Some of us have a SNP in this gene that produces a protein that slightly differs from the “normal” protein. This altered protein does not cause Alzheimer's, but it significantly increases the likelihood that a person will develop the disease.

SNPs can occur anywhere in the genome, both in our genes and in the so-called junk DNA. Geneticists often focus on the SNPs found within genes because it's easier to understand and test their functional significance. But because genes occupy such a small part of the genome “highway,” most SNPs are found outside of genes. These SNPs may play important roles in regulating genes, but the function of most of them remains unclear.

Much of the sequencing work done today is SNP analysis, which is less costly and time consuming than sequencing an entire genome. But many scientists, including Venter, believe that focusing on SNPs is misguided since we don't yet know which parts of the genome are medically relevant. A test that finds a few SNPs that could indicate an increased risk for developing a particular disease may not uncover other genes that reduce the risk. Furthermore, SNPs are just one type of sequence variation in the genome. Certain individuals have more copies of a gene—for example, people with high-starch diets, such as the Japanese, have several extra copies of a gene that helps them digest starch. Other types of variation include insertions, deletions, and inversions of genome sequences.

Compare any two human genomes and you will find that they are 99.5 percent similar. In other words, only 0.5 percent of the genome varies from person to person. You might expect that the farther away a person lives from you, the more different that person's genome is from yours. But the vast majority of genetic variation among people—around 90 percent—is found within continental populations around the world (e.g., Africa, Europe, and South America). That means if you pick a spot on the

genome where your DNA could potentially differ from someone else's, 90 percent of the time it's as likely to differ from your next door neighbor's as from someone living on the other side of the globe.

Only about 10 percent of genetic variation separates population groups. About half occurs between groups within a larger, commonly defined racial group—for example, between Koreans and Japanese, both of whom fall in the broad category of “Asian.” The other half occurs between what we think of as typical geographic races such as Africans and Caucasians. Most variation doesn't predominate in any particular group, and genetic boundaries between groups are generally indistinct.

Until around 50,000 years ago, humans evolved in Africa more or less as a group, and variation spread evenly through the population. Today, there is more diversity within Africans as a group than within populations whose ancestors migrated from the continent millennia ago. If you compare two random Italian genomes, for example, they will show less variability than two Kenyan genomes. On the whole, humans are much less genetically diverse than one of our closest primate relatives—the chimpanzees. Compare any two chimpanzees from the same troop, and you'll discover far greater genetic variation than between any two humans. Chimpanzees have been evolving as a species much longer than humans.

The genomics revolution allows us to harness this variation among people to help identify genes that are involved in common diseases or that shape behaviors. A common method for identifying these factors is the genome-wide association study. More than 100 such studies have been conducted so far. The basic idea is to take a group of healthy individuals and compare them to patients suffering from a particular disease. By examining a set of commonly occurring genetic variants, scientists attempt to iden-

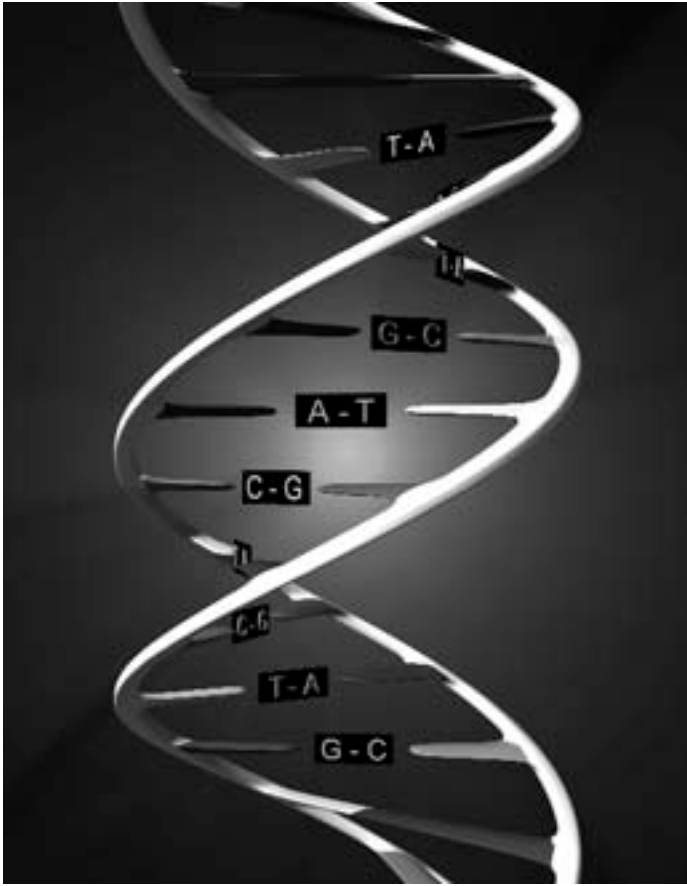
tify ones that appear more frequently in either the disease group or the healthy group. Similar studies can be used to identify the genetic basis of different behaviors. You could, for example, take a group of men who persistently cheat on their wives and compare them to a group who do not. Identify variants in either group, map them to a location on the

ON THE WHOLE, HUMANS are much less genetically diverse than one of our closest primate relatives—the chimpanzees.

genome, and reveal genes that may play a role in determining faithfulness or infidelity.

Ideally, for identification purposes a single mutation in a single gene is the cause of the disease. But this scenario plays out for only a very small number of rare diseases. Most studies of common diseases uncover a large number of relevant genes, each of which makes only minor contributions to the overall disease. Take diabetes, for example. Researchers have so far identified 19 genetic variants associated with type II, or adult-onset, diabetes, and they estimate that they may eventually find anywhere from 100 to 800. The genetic determinants of many common diseases are more numerous and complex than was initially thought. For other diseases, a few extremely rare and difficult-to-detect mutations are the culprits. This past spring, *The New England Journal of Medicine* published a series of articles by well-known geneticists who expressed frustration and disappointment at their inability to hit upon a one-size-fits-all genetic explanation for common diseases, which had seemed within their grasp only a few years ago.

If understanding the role of genetic variation in common diseases is not easy, imagine trying to carry out the same kind of genomic analysis with a complex and difficult behavior that is not easy to define,



The human genome has approximately three billion DNA base pairs, or “letters.” Genome sequencers look for places where the letters vary from person to person.

such as compassion. Unlike diabetes, compassion is difficult to “diagnose” precisely. Once you have defined compassion in some manner and have scanned the genomes of people you believe are compassionate, you will likely identify many variants spread across the entire genome. The vast majority will be rare and produce very subtle effects. And most likely the majority will fall somewhere in the junk DNA, making it even more difficult to understand their function. As you compare the genomes of those presumed to be compassionate to those of the control group, only a tiny fraction of these variants will appear more frequently in one group or the other. Most of the variants will appear with equal frequency in both groups.

Given our current state of knowledge, it will be nearly impossible to pin down the effects and func-

tions of the few variants that may be significant because they are specific to one group or the other. All that we would really be able to say is that in some people, whom we’ve identified as being compassionate using a very vague (and controversial) metric for compassion, we’ve found a genetic variant in the genome that appears with slightly greater frequency (a whopping 11 percent, say) in the group of people we think are compassionate. But we can’t isolate and test the function of that gene because we don’t yet have a method for testing compassion in the lab. Still, don’t be surprised when you open the newspaper and find a headline that announces, “Gene for Compassion Identified in French but not Americans.” Most likely, an overzealous (French) reporter will have homed in on one rare variant and co-opted it to make a sweeping generalization.

There are, of course, examples of one or a few genes that produce dramatic group-specific phenotypes such as skin color or lactose tolerance (a trait common among northern Europeans but much less common among southern Europeans). Recently, a variant of a gene that controls responses to nerve

signals was discovered to be more prevalent in African Americans than in Caucasians. This finding helped solve a long-standing puzzle: African Americans and Caucasians respond differently to beta-blockers, a class of drugs used to treat heart disease and hypertension.

But most human traits, and certainly most complex behaviors, are not the product of one gene but of many. Interactions among many genes make the study of individual differences more difficult. For most traits, extreme and easily observable differences between groups likely would require variation among many genes. Since human migration out of Africa was relatively recent, there hasn’t been enough time for groups to acquire the tens or hundreds of variants that, when combined, produce the types of “diagnostic” differences that would distinguish them from other groups.

Although differences between groups account for only a fraction of the total variability among humans, it is nevertheless possible to accurately classify humans into populations based solely on information contained in the genome. Just last year, scientists showed that by looking at a “bar code” of 500,000 variants in the genome, they could determine with surprising accuracy the geographic origin of people in Europe. Using only this DNA bar code as a guide, they were able to place 50 percent of Europeans within 192 miles of their homes and 90 percent within 434 miles. The variants used for this type of analysis are not functional and do not affect the appearance or behavior of people in the group. But these studies do illustrate that if enough carefully selected variants are considered—and many are needed—group differences can emerge.

In the future, researchers will discover differences in complex traits, such as intelligence, among groups. But because intelligence is shaped by a vast network of genes, variations among different groups will necessarily be subtle and exist along a continuum. If the biological component of intelligence were controlled by a single gene, then the story might be different. But most genetic variation in intelligence—like human variation in general—will be within a particular group, not between groups.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the post-genome world is the ability to trace genetic ancestry. In 1987, using DNA sequences from the mitochondria—structures within the cell that supply energy—New Zealand biologist Allan Wilson and his graduate students traced the human lineage back to a common female ancestor who lived in Africa 170,000 years ago. This mother of all humans came to be known as “Mitochondrial Eve.” More recently, by analyzing variation in the male Y chromosome, researchers were able

to trace human ancestry back to a roughly common male ancestor. This person is known as “Y-Chromosome Adam.” That’s not to say that Mitochondrial Eve and Y-Chromosome Adam were the only humans living during their time, or that they were the first couple (they lived more than 50,000 years apart). In the case of Mitochondrial Eve, she is the ancestor in whom our

USING ONLY THE VARIANTS in the genome, scientists can determine with surprising accuracy the geographic origin of people in Europe.

female lineages eventually converge, so that we can say that everyone living today is derived from that common mother. Likewise, Y-Chromosome Adam is where our male lineages converge.

As humans began leaving Africa around 50,000 years ago, they spread out. One group journeyed into Europe, another into Asia, and so on. As they entered new environments, they evolved. They also divided themselves up into different racial, religious, and geographic groups. As these social constructions became more pronounced, they created new barriers to gene mixing.

Race and ancestry are often confused. Individual ancestry is a far more valuable predictor of human traits than characteristics such as race. For example, variation in the gene for hemoglobin that can produce sickle cell anemia is common among West Africans, and people usually associate sickle cell disease with being black. But the same variant that produces sickle cell anemia also protects individuals from malaria, so it appears among various groups whose ancestors lived in areas where malaria was common, including Middle Eastern and Indian populations. Many blacks whose ancestors didn’t live in malaria-ridden areas do not carry the sickle cell variant. A person might call himself white, but if he has one great-grandparent who carried a sickle cell mutation, he has a one in eight chance of inheriting that mutation. Thus, a person’s ancestral history—whether or not his or her fore-

bears lived in an area of high malaria prevalence—is a better predictor than race of whether or not that individual will have the hemoglobin variant.

As scientists mine the information of our genomes and develop better tools for tracing human ancestry, our notions about the constitution and boundaries of different groups will become increasingly blurred—and conceptions about the size and number of those groups will change as well. The genomic revolution is highlighting the limitations of our current classification systems. For example, Henry Louis Gates Jr., the well-known Harvard cultural critic, made an unexpected

stopped by to talk about his research. He had recently published a scientific article that was picked up by the popular press—an experience most scientists never have in their entire careers. Lahn and his colleagues had shown that two genes that correlate with brain size were undergoing rapid positive selection. They found certain variants that were more common in Eurasians than in Africans, and hypothesized that these variations in genes important for brain development were related to the migration out of Africa millennia ago. No one disputes the science. However, many members of the

scientific community have criticized the political implications embedded in Lahn's report—that these differences contribute to racial differences in brain size and perhaps IQ. *The Wall Street Journal* ran a front-page article that

interpreted Lahn's research to mean that he had found a gene that makes certain racial groups more intelligent than others.

After the lecture my Chinese colleagues and I returned to the lab, where we debated whether research on genetically based differences in intelligence should be pursued. Most of them felt strongly that it should. They presumed that once we started comparing genomes, we would discover that the Chinese enjoy superior intelligence—and, living in a relatively homogeneous society, they saw little problem with that. While I agreed with them that we need to understand the biological basis for intelligence, we differed on how to pursue that research so that the results won't be misinterpreted.

So how should we deal with the challenging ethical issues of a post-genome world? Instead of trying to regulate genomic research, we should be working harder to open it up. While we must pay close attention to the impact of genetic discoveries, perhaps the best solution is not more oversight by ethics boards but, rather, investment in training scientists from around the world—particularly the developing world. Today, most genomic research is done by sci-

**INSTEAD OF TRYING to regulate
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discovery when he began researching his genetic history a few years ago. Though he identifies as African American, he found that his ancestry can be traced back not only to Nigeria but also to a fifth-century Irish king, Niall of the Nine Hostages. As much as half of his genetic ancestry is European.

These kinds of genetic revelations will become increasingly common in the post-genome world. A 2004 study found that Europeans are more genetically similar to Asians than they are to other Europeans 38 percent of the time. Several studies of African Americans have revealed up to 80 percent European ancestry. Unexpected relationships won't just be revealed among different racial groups. In the 15th and 16th centuries, Christian armies in Spain converted thousands of Jews and Muslims to Christianity. Genomic sequencing of Christians living in Spain and Portugal today revealed that 20 percent of the people on the Iberian Peninsula have Jewish ancestry and 11 percent have Moorish forebears.

Several years ago, I worked in a stem cell lab in China. One day Bruce Lahn, a Chinese scientist currently at the University of Chicago,

entists working in the United States, Europe, and Japan. Countries such as China, India, and the Persian Gulf states are beginning to take part, but their contributions are still relatively few. The vast majority of the world's populations are not represented in this increasingly global lab. They lack the resources or training.

We must ensure that they have it. Scientists from other cultures will ask questions we don't. And they may come up with answers we don't like—just as, at times, our research produces answers they don't like. Imagine geneticists from Nigeria poking around Birmingham, Alabama, collecting samples for a study on the genetic differences between white southerners and white New Englanders. That scenario is being played out, in reverse, in Africa right now. Only when people from around the world participate in genomics will we get a complete picture of human variation and its role in determining our complex traits.

We know already that we are not inherently equal. We see innate differences among our friends, family, and colleagues every day. For the survival of our species, inherent genetic equality would have been fatal. Our differences are the critical variations that allow our vast human network to adapt to unexpected stresses such as climate change. Someday we will have the ability to visualize this network, perhaps through a genetic version of Facebook. And the new and unexpected relationships that are revealed may well overshadow the differences—now revealed at a genetic level—that we all knew were there anyway.

There will be voices of alarm that genetic information will be co-opted for a 21st-century eugenics agenda. Groups will be discriminated against based on their genetic sequences, easily obtained from a cheek swab or blood sample, the critics will warn. Perhaps. But race, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, geography, and sexual preference have been, and will continue to be, stronger bases for discrimination than genetic distinctions. While genetic information may provide ammunition for those who want to divide groups, its more profound long-term

effect may be to blur and confuse our notions of group affiliation.

In the future, efforts to sequence complete individual genomes—rather than a subset of common variants within the genome—will be critical for creating a complete collage of human ancestry. With the full picture, we'll probably come to see that everyone is both a genetic winner and a genetic loser. While you may have some highly desirable genetic traits, you will also discover some you wish you didn't. Furthermore, what's beneficial today might not be beneficial tomorrow. For example, northern Europeans have acquired a mutation in a key receptor for HIV that disrupts the ability of the virus to enter the cell. As many as 20 percent of northern Europeans have this mutation. In other groups, such as Africans and Asians, the mutation is extremely rare. There's no question that, in the midst of today's global HIV epidemic, this mutation is beneficial. But tomorrow it might be detrimental. The mutation, while protecting against HIV, ablates the ability of the receptor to function normally. At some point, humans might find a crucial need for this receptor, and those who have it will benefit.

In today's globalized world, where technology is breaking down geographic barriers, people from different groups are mixing with one another more than perhaps at any time since humans first migrated out of Africa. As variants in our genes shuffle around the globe, the genetic differences between groups will diminish. Perhaps, one day, all humans will again be a single race—as they existed many thousands of years ago, before they left Africa.

The world is really a vast genetic network of 6.7 billion people. As more genetic sequences of individuals become available, we'll discover new relationships and relatedness. Many of these genetic relationships will be unexpected. Our definition of race may change. Questionnaires that sequester race into the simplistic categories of Caucasian, Asian, Hispanic, and African will feel confining and outdated. While some undoubtedly will try to discriminate against groups based on genetic information, they will not be able to erase the overwhelming amount of shared ancestral history that the post-genome world will allow us to see. ■

This Is Not a Map

Maps are not always works of dutiful representation. Sometimes they are tickets to flights of the imagination.

BY MAX BYRD

IN THE MELANCHOLY YEAR 1882, ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON was 31 years old and in poor health. Though he had published by then, as he modestly said, “little books and little essays”—including *Travels With a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879), the immortal tale of his tour through central France—his burning ambition was to write and publish a novel. He had actually begun a great many novels, from the age of 15 on, but none were ever finished. They all seemed to go along for a while, he observed, then suddenly quit, “like a schoolboy’s watch.” Meanwhile, his essays and books earned him not quite £200 in a good year, which was far from enough to support a family. That summer, he and his wife were forced to go and live with Stevenson’s parents in the mountains above Pitlochry, Scotland.

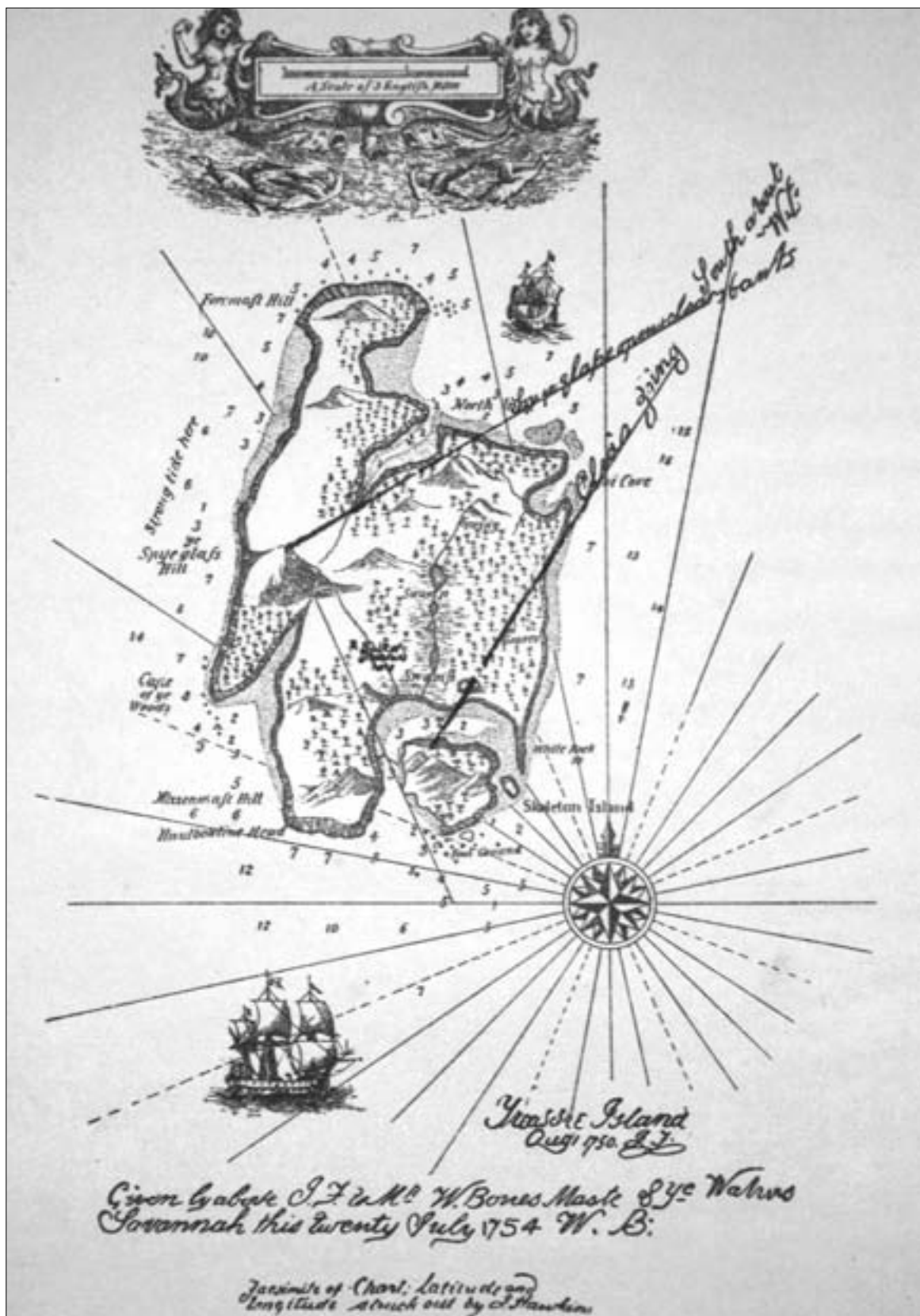
Then his bad health drove him farther north, to a retreat at Braemar. And there, as an escape from the Highland rain, he passed a great deal of time indoors as friendly companion to a local schoolboy, home for the holidays, who had a passion, not for literature, but for watercolors. Some days the two of them would spend whole afternoons standing side by side painting together. Soon enough, doubtless in a fit of jealousy, the Muse of Fiction looked down and took a hand. “On one of these occasions,” Stevenson recorded in the most charming

possible understatement, “I made the map of an island.” Few readers will need to be told what happened next. The shape of the map, he said, “took my fancy beyond expression; it contained harbours that pleased me like sonnets; and with the unconsciousness of the predestined, I ticketed my performance *Treasure Island*.”

Stevenson is the only novelist I know of who was inspired by imaginary inlets and hills and harbors to begin a book. He wrote the story, as he cheerfully confessed, “up to the map. The map was the chief part of my plot.” But he is hardly the only novelist to have drawn a map of his fictional creation. William Faulkner drew at least two maps of Yoknapatawpha County, one for the first edition of *Absalom, Absalom!* published in 1936, and a slightly different one 10 years later for *The Portable Faulkner*. J. R. R. Tolkien sketched several maps of Middle Earth for *The Hobbit* (1937); his son Christopher made the ones for the subsequent *Lord of the Rings* volumes. James Michener is said to have painted a map of the setting of each of his many novels. And if you had read Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* (1878) as a magazine serial first, then later picked up the three-volume novel version, you might have been surprised to find opposite the title page a very somber-appearing “Sketch Map of the Scene of the Story,” drawn by the very somber author himself.

Hardy may have had several reasons for adding the

MAX BYRD is a contributing editor of *The Wilson Quarterly* and the author of nine novels, including *Shooting the Sun* (2004).



In 1882, Robert Louis Stevenson sketched the map that inspired his classic tale. But the drawing reproduced in the book's many editions is not the original, which was lost after he mailed it to his publisher. Stevenson reconstructed the map, but mourned, "Somehow it was never Treasure Island to me."



Thomas Hardy, above right, set his gloomy 1878 tale *Return of the Native* in a “vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath,” of which he made a painstaking map. The setting, he explained in a preface, was a composite of at least a dozen real heaths.



themes. But surely at bottom was the motive that underlies all such fictional maps: the drive for realism, verisimilitude, mimesis—the nearly perfect representation of reality that makes a fiction seem to be true.

We trust a map. It describes the known physical world, the most certain knowledge we have, and in such detail that we can easily check its accuracy. If a map sometimes reveals things we didn't know—for example, that Italy, as seen from above, is the shape of a boot—that only increases its air of authority. Some part of our mind is probably always aware that the map is not the real thing itself, or even always truthful—certain Soviet maps used to omit from the city plan of Moscow the streets where the KGB was headquartered. But usually, staring with studious

map. For one thing, he was proud of having observed a classical unity of place, confining the whole story to a single setting, the fictional Egdon Heath. For another, the novel itself concerns characters so psychologically disoriented and lost—adultery, mother-son estrangement, and two drownings figure in the plot—that he may have been projecting for the reader a kind of graphic key to its

frown at the folded squares of paper or the colored grid on our dashboard screen, we assume the map to be an authentic, reliable guide to reality. And if you are making up a story that you want people to believe, even if just for a moment, you take all the reality you can get.

Something like this was certainly in Daniel Defoe's mind when he included a map of the world in the fourth

edition of *Robinson Crusoe* (it was published nine times in 1719), with dotted lines inked in by the novelist himself to show where Crusoe had voyaged. And a desire for verisimilitude undoubtedly led Jonathan Swift to include five quite plausible maps in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), including one that tacked the fictitious land of Brobdingnag on to the actual coast of northern California. These are maps to persuade readers of what mere, unreliable text has already described: This story is true. It happened *here*.

Such authenticity, many novelists believe, is so important that it can be felt, like the submerged nine-tenths of an iceberg, even when it isn't seen. Though there was no map in the finished book and no one was likely to check, James Joyce wrote the "Wandering Rocks" chapter of *Ulysses*, his friend Frank Budgen said, "with a map of Dublin open before him on which were traced in red ink the paths of the Earl of Dudley and Father Conmee. He calculated to a minute the time necessary for his characters to cover a given distance of the city." Even so romantic and mythopoeic a novelist as Herman Melville tried to anchor his fiction in an invisible but not irrelevant reality: Using a naval sea-chart that showed the migratory patterns of the sperm whale in the Pacific, he worked out exactly when and where in his story Ahab and Moby-Dick might plausibly meet.

II

Now let me contradict myself. Deep down, we recognize that a map is not to be confused with reality. A map is not a mirror. Even where there is no intent to deceive, as there was in the Soviet maps of Moscow, every map ever drawn is incomplete, and incompletely truthful. On any map, some things must be included, and most things must be left out. The *principle* of selection will vary, depending upon the purposes of the mapmaker—roads and towns will be

shown for a gas station foldout, but not necessarily elevation or topography. Like novels, maps have points of view (literally "orientation"). Their details are selected for a particular effect or use, like the details a novelist chooses in describing, say, Crusoe's island. Even purportedly truthful maps can be embellished with imagi-

FICTIONAL MAPS, like the one of Brobdingnag in *Gulliver's Travels*, are intended to persuade readers that a story is true. It happened *here*.

nary details. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, for example, maps often showed the location of Eden off to the east, or sea serpents, or fire-breathing dragons and a caption: "Here Be Monsters." Robert Louis Stevenson understood instinctively that a map is a setting. A map is a fiction.

Indeed, when it is not a fiction, the result is so completely realistic as to be absurd, unimaginable. In the story "A Universal History of Infamy," Jorge Luis Borges describes a map of the "Empire" that is constantly being revised and enlarged by a team of mapmakers for precision and accuracy. With each revision, it grows larger and yet more accurate, down to the least rock and tree and tuft of grass, until at last the map becomes precisely and exactly the size of the Empire itself.

To complicate the matter, we can add that quite often novels contain maps that are obviously not "real" maps at all and contribute nothing whatsoever to verisimilitude. This is true, for example, of that very large category of maps that appear in fantasy novels such as *The Lord of the Rings* or Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), depicting lands (sometimes drawn by the author, sometimes supplied by the publisher) that the reader knows from the start are perfectly nonexistent. Maps in many science-fiction novels likewise superimpose a fiction upon a fiction, or occasionally a fiction upon a reality—for his Red Planet stories, Edgar Rice Burroughs drew maps that showed cities and

canals on Mars, and for Tarzan and Jane he located the land of Pal-ul-Don, with its striped lions and hairy-tailed men, in the present-day Republic of Zaire.

There is yet another category of unreal maps, more suggestive if less imaginative. The earliest map in a novel of which I am aware appears in Madeleine de Scudéry's 10-volume romantic tale *Clélie* (1654)—her “Carte de Tendre” (Map of Tenderness) shows, among many other topographical features, the Lake of Indifference, the River of Inclination, and the Dangerous Sea, which evidently borders the Unknown Land of Matrimony. This, one may object, is not really a map, but simply a diagram or a chart meant to help us understand the story—stripped of allegorical labels, it would resemble something like that staple of genteel detective novels, the bare schematic rooms in an English country house where Hercule Poirot has come to solve a crime.

But landscape and allegory have a strong affinity. In a different vein, many editions of *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) contain maps very like Scudéry's chart. And these maps not only show the moral world of the story but also summarize its narrated action: In my own copy, Christian, the everyman protagonist, begins on the bottom far-right-hand side of one page at the City of Destruction and proceeds through Vanity Fair and the Slough of Despond all the way to the Delectable Mountains and the Place of Deliverance, on the top of the facing page.

Carrying this idea to its logical extreme, there are maps that tell a story but do away with the written text altogether. They consist only of geographical features, names, and captions. An 1868 single-sheet evangelical handbill published in St. Louis, “Two Roads From the Cradle to Eternity,” has no more than a few exhortative quotations from Scripture and two diverging paths heading toward the “Sweet Fields of Everlasting Green” or, alas, the “Deep Gulf of Fire and Brimstone.” The quite wonderful 1908 “Gospel Temperance Map” has no quotations or exhortations at all, only railroad tracks that rise to the Beulah Land of Sobriety, or else drop like a stone through “Rum Jug Lake” and “Broken Home” in a pretty straight line toward “Suicide Tunnel.” Here, we may think, we have reached the ultimate point—two meanings of “plot” have simply folded into each other: The plot of ground or space where the story happens has become, without any intervening narrative words, the

plot or action that is the very story itself. The map stands alone.

III

I have left two obvious questions for last. First, after he had finished his drawing of a map and stepped back to admire it, what exactly did Robert Louis Stevenson *do then*?

I don't mean the question literally, for we have Stevenson's testimony as to that:

As I paused upon my map of Treasure Island, the future characters of the book began to appear there visibly among the imaginary woods; and their brown faces and bright weapons peeped out upon me from unexpected quarters, as they passed to and fro, fighting and hunting treasure, on these few square inches of a flat projection. The next thing I knew I had some papers before me and was writing out a list of chapters.

And we have further amplification in the text of *Treasure Island* itself, for the boy Jim Hawkins is clearly a version of Stevenson himself, and his thought processes are exactly like those of his author. In the story, as in real life, the map simply appears one day, full-blown, like Athena springing from Zeus's head: Jim opens an old sea-chest—and there the island is, depicted complete “with latitude and longitude, sounds, names of hills, and bays, and inlets. . . . It was about nine miles long and five across, shaped, you might say, like a fat dragon standing up.” As Jim broods over the map, he too begins to populate it with men and creatures:

Sitting by the fire in the housekeeper's room, I approached that island, in my fancy, from every possible direction; I explored every acre of its surface; I climbed a thousand times to that tall hill they call the Spyglass, and from the top enjoyed the most wonderful and changing prospects. Sometimes the isle was thick with savages with whom we fought; sometimes full of dangerous animals that hunted us.

There are doubtless a number of ways to understand how a map turns into a story. The novelist John Gardner, for example, observed that literature really has only two basic plots: someone goes on a journey, or (the other point of view) a stranger comes to town. In either case a map, seen or unseen, underlies the plot: the dotted lines over the ocean that lead Robinson Crusoe to his island, the labyrinthian tangles of London streets into which a wide-eyed young David Copperfield enters. In our mind's eye, a map is a static space across which a story—my trip, your arrival—moves in time.

To put it another way, even more than nature itself, human nature abhors a vacuum. When we see a blank space, we give it a name such as Spyglass Hill or Victoria or Lake of Indifference, and the name suggests associations and meanings—that is why allegory and landscape have an affinity—and one way or another, we start writing a list of chapters. It may be a map of a real place or an imaginary one. What matters is that we cannot explain a map by a map. Almost at once, like Stevenson standing back from his drawing, we transform its spaces into something human, and everything human has a story.

The German philosopher Ernst Cassirer suggested that the categories by which we first organize our knowledge of the world are spatial—that is, whether things are close together or far apart, above or below each other. To this insight Jean Piaget and other students of psychology add that children in their development follow a clear progression in their early lives from spatial ideas such as proximity and distance to ideas of separation—one's self separate from other shapes—then to mental images in which space is organized, visualized, represented.

It may be, however, that even in these theories the visual element in imaginative literature is still not sufficiently recognized. The very word "imagination" has at its core the idea of image. To imagine something is to compose a picture in one's mind. Ford Madox Ford used to advise the novice to write as if the action of the novel were taking place directly in front of him or her, on a brightly lit stage. But most readers will recognize that this is also precisely what happens to us when we pick up a story. We see it take place before us, as if on a stage—or on a map.

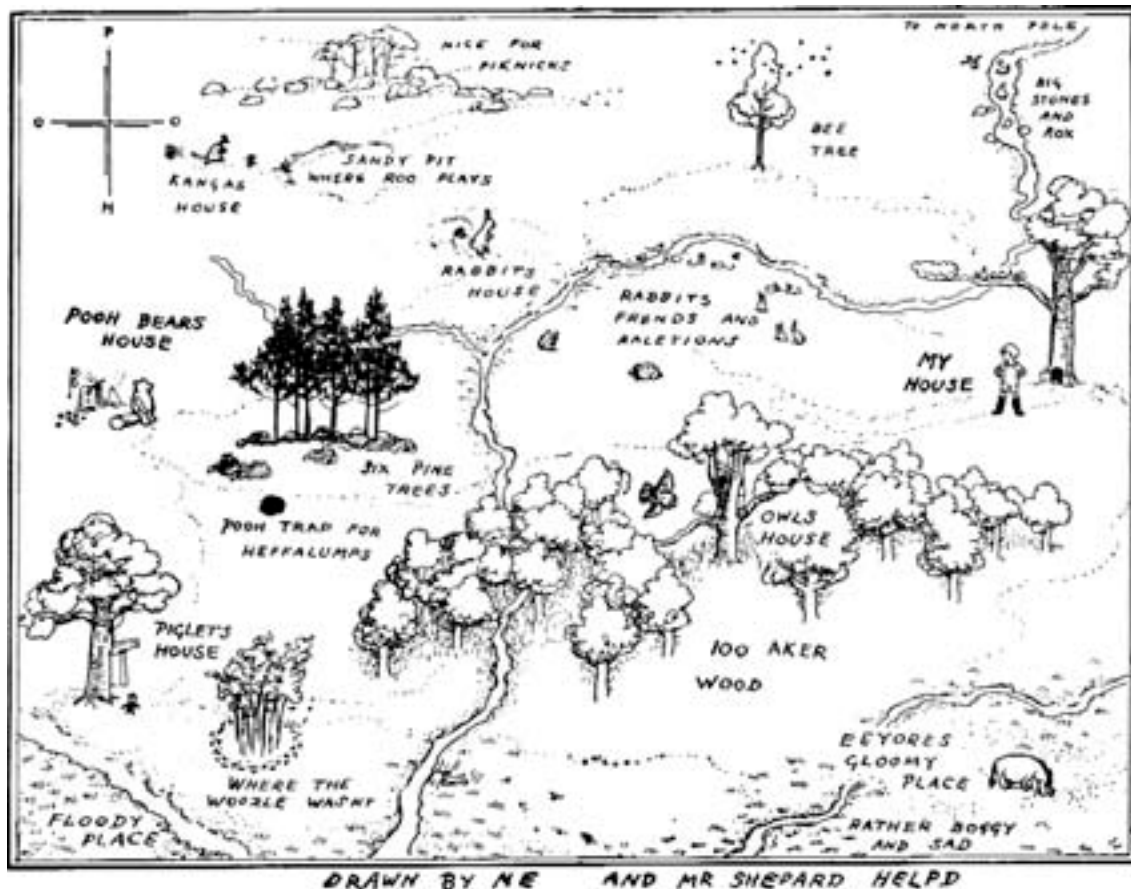
The narrator Marlowe describes the effect in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth." I very much doubt that so careful a writer as Conrad was unaware of the irony of "losing oneself" in a map. (We also "lose ourselves" in a book.) Nor was he careless in dating the storyteller Mar-

STORYTELLERS KNOW there is a powerful connection between a child's imagination and the blank spaces of the earth.

lowe's passion for maps from childhood, for though children have no monopoly on making maps—or stories—there is surely a deep and powerful connection between a child's imagination and the blank spaces of the earth.

We may think, for example, of *islands*—the remarkable frequency with which children draw them or take pleasure in seeing them. The fascinating *Atlas of Fantasy* (1973), by J. B. Post, a compilation of maps of imaginary places, gives perhaps a third of its pages over to island maps that appear in children's books, a category that includes *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels* as well as Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* (1930) and Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island* (1874). Nor is this at all surprising. What a map of an island shows is really an entire world, set apart and comprehensible, reduced in size like the child's world, but complete. We can take it in at a glance, from above, like a god. A child's eye and imagination can control it.

This sense of control is all the more striking when we consider how the islands children draw and read about are linked to other microcosms they play with—model trains, miniature towns, dollhouses. A child's sense of weakness and helplessness is overcome, for a moment at least, when he or she can maneuver powerful engines with one small hand or lift up a toy roof and rearrange the tiny world beneath it. Perhaps the most poignant of all maps of imaginary places was drawn by William Blake to illustrate the land of "Allestone," an amazingly complete and com-



Generations of children and adults have threaded their imaginations through the 100 Aker Wood, hoping for a glimpse of Piglet and Pooh.

plex world invented by a friend's son named Thomas Williams Malkin, who died at the age of seven after a long and difficult illness and whose imagined country must have been an alternative and a compensation for the painful one he lived in. Surely he lost himself in it.

With that sad word "painful" we are back with Stevenson in the cold, wet Scottish Highlands, and my final question: Where did that map of *Treasure Island* come from in the first place? To answer, we need only remember that Stevenson was 31 years old, but forced by poverty to live again with his parents, like a child. That he was ill. And that he was spending his melancholy days inside, with a schoolboy, drawing pictures. His map came from the same deep source as Thomas Malkin's *Allestone*—it represented an escape from that gray, dreary Scotland where he had regressed; it showed a world over which his imagination, at least, had power.

I cannot leave him there on that steep Freudian decline,

however. The *Atlas of Fantasy* lies open on my desk to pages 66 and 67, which show one of the luminous and abiding images from my own childhood—the great map of Christopher Robin's neighborhood that accompanies the episode "In Which Pooh and Piglet Go Hunting and Nearly Catch a Woozle." It is a map of a world, complete and satisfactory as an island. It locates Christopher Robin's House and Pooh Bear's House, the "100 Aker Wood," and even Eeyore grazing in his "Gloomy Place." The feeling it gives is not one of control or escape or verisimilitude. The feeling it gives is joy—the same feeling that leaps off the page as Stevenson describes, not his retreat to childhood weakness and dependence, but his delight at having, so unexpectedly and freely, produced from his own mind a living place. Mimesis and creation are really only different sides of the same bright coin. I should not be at all surprised if, before beginning his six days' work, the great Artist himself had first stood before his easel, smiling, and made a map. ■

Rediscovering Central Asia

It was once the “land of a thousand cities” and home to some of the world’s most renowned scientists, poets, and philosophers. Today it is seen mostly as a harsh backwater. To imagine Central Asia’s future, we must journey into its remarkable past.

BY S. FREDERICK STARR

IN AD 998, TWO YOUNG MEN LIVING NEARLY 200 miles apart, in present-day Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, entered into a correspondence. With verbal jousting that would not sound out of place in a 21st-century laboratory, they debated 18 questions, several of which resonate strongly even today.

Are there other solar systems out among the stars, they asked, or are we alone in the universe? In Europe, this question was to remain open for another 500 years, but to these two men it seemed clear that we are not alone. They also asked if the earth had been created whole and complete, or if it had evolved over time. Time, they agreed, is a continuum with no beginning or end. In other words, they rejected creationism and anticipated evolutionary geology and even Darwinism by nearly a millennium. This was all as heretical to the

Muslim faith they professed as it was to medieval Christianity.

Few exchanges in the history of science have so boldly leapt into the future as this one, which occurred a thousand years ago in a region now regarded as a backwater. We know of it because a few copies of it survived in manuscript and were published almost a millennium later. Twenty-six-year-old Abu al-Rayhan al-Biruni, or al-Biruni (973–1048), hailed from near the Aral Sea and went on to distinguish himself in geography, mathematics, trigonometry, comparative religion, astronomy, physics, geology, psychology, mineralogy, and pharmacology. His counterpart, Abu Ali Sina, or Ibn Sina (ca. 980–1037), was from the stately city of Bukhara, the great seat of learning in what is now Uzbekistan. He made his mark in medicine, philosophy, physics, chemistry, astronomy, theology, clinical pharmacology, physiology, ethics, and even music. When eventually Ibn Sina’s great *Canon of Medicine* was translated into Latin, it triggered the start of modern medicine in the West. Together, the two are regarded as among the greatest scientific minds between antiquity and the Renaissance.

S. FREDERICK STARR is chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies. He was the founding chairman of the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Kennan Institute and president of Oberlin College and the Aspen Institute. He began his career doing archaeological work in Turkey and teaching intellectual history at Princeton and has picked up those threads in the present article, which is based on a book he is writing.

Most today know these argumentative geniuses, if at all, as Arabs. This is understandable, since both wrote in Arabic (as well as Persian). But just as a Japanese writing in English is not an Englishman, a Central Asian writing in Arabic is not an Arab. In fact, both men were part of a huge constellation of ethnically Persian or Turkic geniuses in

while Britain turned Afghanistan into a buffer to protect its Indian colonies from Russia. China eventually absorbed a big chunk to the east, now known as Xinjiang, the “New Territory.” Ancient traditions of learning had long since died out, and while the Soviets revived literacy, they suppressed free thought in both the secular and religious spheres. A new day for the region began with the creation of five independent states after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and with the establishment of a new and more modern government in Afghanistan after 9/11.

**MANY OF THE “ARAB” GENIUSES
who lived between 800 and 1100 were in
fact Persian or Turkic and hailed from
Central Asia.**

mathematics, astronomy, medicine, geology, linguistics, political science, poetry, architecture, and practical technology—all of whom were from what today we call Central Asia. Between 800 and 1100 this pleiad of Central Asian scientists, artists, and thinkers made their region the intellectual epicenter of the world. Their influence was felt from East Asia and India to Europe and the Middle East.

Today, this is hard to imagine. This vast region of irrigated deserts, mountains, and steppes between China, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and the Caspian Sea is easily dismissed as a peripheral zone, the “backyard” of one or another great power. In impoverished Afghanistan, traditionally considered the heart of Central Asia, U.S. forces are fighting a backward-looking and ignorant Taliban. The main news in America from the rest of Central Asia is that the Pentagon is looking for bases there from which to provision the Afghan campaign. In China, the region is seen chiefly as a semi-colonial source of oil, natural gas, gold, aluminum, copper, and uranium. The Russian narrative, meanwhile, dwells on Moscow’s geopolitical competition there with the West and, increasingly, China. By and large, most people abroad ignore the land of Ibn Sina and al-Biruni, dismissing it as an inconvenient territory to be crossed while getting somewhere else.

Given the dismal plight of these lands in the modern era, who can be surprised at this? Beginning a century and a half ago, Russia colonized much of the region,

Eighteen years on, all of the new states have preserved their sovereignty and Afghanistan is clinging to life. But several of the region’s countries remain destitute, and even the most successful ones are riddled with corruption and still dependent on authoritarian forms of rule. As William Faulkner reminded us in his speech accepting the Nobel Prize in 1950, there is a big difference between *surviving* and *prevailing*. Is the best hope of these lands merely to work their way back up to zero? Or can they possibly reclaim some of the luster of their glorious past, and prevail?

And glorious it was. It is hard to know where to begin in enumerating the intellectual achievements of Central Asians a millennium ago. In mathematics, it was Central Asians who first accepted irrational numbers, identified the different forms of cubic equations, invented trigonometry, and adapted and disseminated the decimal system and Hindu numerals (called “Arabic” numbers in the West). In astronomy, they estimated the earth’s diameter to a degree of precision unmatched until recent centuries and built several of the largest observatories before modern times, using them to prepare remarkably precise astronomical tables.

In chemistry, Central Asians were the first to reverse reactions, to use crystallization as a means of purification, and to measure specific gravity and use it to group elements in a manner anticipating Dmitri Mendeleev’s periodic table of 1871. They compiled and added to ancient medical knowledge, hugely



Central Asia from 800 to 1100 was a wealthy trading region and a renowned intellectual center, boasting mathematicians, chemists, astronomers, philosophers, and musicians. The circle describes the extent of the ancient region, while the borders delineate present-day countries.

broadened pharmacology, and passed it all to the West and to India. And in technology, they invented windmills and hydraulic machinery for lifting water that subsequently spread westward to the Middle East and Europe and eastward to China.

But wasn't this the great age of Arab science and learning centered at the Caliphate in Baghdad? True enough. There were brilliant Arab scientists such as the polymath and founder of ophthalmology Ibn al-Haytham (ca. 965–1040). But as the Leipzig scholar Heinrich Suter first showed a century ago, many, if not most, of those "Arab" scientists were in fact either Persian or Turkic and hailed originally from Central Asia. This is true of the mathematician and astronomer Mukhammad ibn Musa al-Khorezmi (ca. AD 780–850), who was from the same Khorezm

region of the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan border area as al-Biruni, hence "al-Khorezmi." Algorithms, one of his many discoveries, still bear his name in distorted form, while our term "algebra" comes directly from the title of his celebrated book on mathematics. Similarly, Abu Nasr al-Farabi (ca. AD 872–961), known in the West as Alfarabius, whose innovative analyses of the ethics of Aristotle surpassed all those of Western thinkers except Thomas Aquinas, was a Turk from what is now Kazakhstan, not an Arab.

The extraordinarily important role of Central Asian intellectuals in Baghdad is less surprising when one bears in mind that the Abbassid Caliphate was actually founded by Central Asians. True, the caliphs themselves were Arabs who had settled in the East, but in the process they had "gone native" and

embraced the Persian and Turkic world in which they found themselves. One caliph, al-Ma'mun, refused for years after his appointment in AD 818 to leave Central Asia, ruling the Muslim world instead from the splendid oasis city of Merv in what is now Turkmenistan. When he eventually moved to Baghdad he brought with him, along with his Turkic soldiers, the more open and ecumenical values of Central Asia, with their blend of influences from the Persian and Turkic cultures.

The movement from Central Asia to the Middle East recalls the ancient brain drain from the centers of Greek learning to Rome. The difference is that even as some Central Asian scientists and scholars were moving to Baghdad, Arab intellectuals were also being attracted to the great centers in Central Asia. In a kind of reverse brain drain, the extraordinarily enlightened city of Gurganj (where al-Biruni lived), in what is now Turkmenistan, became a magnet for Arab scientists, as did the well-financed and opulent court at Ghazni in eastern Afghanistan. Nor did all Central Asians who had been lured to Baghdad choose to stay there.

What territories should we include in this "Central Asia" that produced such a flowering of genius? Certainly all of the five "stans" that gained independence in 1991: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. No less central to this flowering of the intellect were the great cities of what is now Afghanistan: Balkh, Herat, and others. Add also modern Iran's northeastern province of Khorasan, whose capital city, Nishapur, produced long ranks of innovators during those bounteous years. The boundaries of this "zone of genius" also extend across what is now the western border of China to embrace the ancient city of Kash-

gar and several other great centers that have always fallen within the cultural orbit of Central Asia.

It is one thing to draw a circle on the map, but quite another to explain why this region, call it Greater Central Asia, should have produced such a cultural flowering. Booming cities provided the setting for cultural life. A traveling Arab marveled at what he called the "land of a thousand cities" in what is now Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The

ruins of mighty Balkh, once the capital of this region, still spread for miles and miles across the plain west of modern Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan. In its heyday Balkh was larger than Paris, Rome, Beijing, or Delhi. Like all the great regional centers, it had running water, baths, and majestic palaces—and solidly built homes of sun-dried brick for non-palace dwellers.

It was also richer, thanks to continental trade. Merchants from Balkh and other Central Asian commercial centers journeyed to the Middle East, Europe, China, and deep into India. Traders from those lands brought goods to the sprawling commercial entrepôts in Greater Central Asia. Since slavery thrived throughout the Muslim world and beyond, the bazaars also included large slave markets. Gold, silver, and bronze currency from these thriving hubs of commerce traveled all the way to Gotland in Sweden and to Korea and Sri Lanka.

Central Asia lay at the junction of all the routes connecting the great cultures of the Eurasian land-mass. This network of routes, today often called the "Silk Road," in its heyday transported a huge variety of goods in every direction. Glass blowing spread from the Middle East to China via Central Asia, while papermaking and sericulture (the production of silk) went from China westward. But the Central Asians



were not passive transmitters. For half a millennium, Middle Easterners and Europeans esteemed Samarqand paper as the best anywhere, while the treasures of more than one medieval cathedral in Europe consist of silk manufactured in the Fergana Valley of what is now mainly Uzbekistan.

Traders also carried religions. Greek settlers in the

depicting the Buddha in sculpture. About the same time, Jewish communities were formed, Syrian Christian bishoprics established, and Manichean communities founded across the region. In a stratum beneath all these religions lay the region's core faith, Zoroastrianism, with its emphasis on the struggle of good and evil, redemption, and heaven and hell. Zoroaster,

who probably lived in the sixth or seventh century BC, came from the region of Balkh, but his religion spread westward, eventually to Babylon, where Jews encountered it and fell under its influence. From Judaism its concepts spread first to Christianity and then to Islam.

So when Islam arrived with the Arab armies in the late seventh century, it encountered a population that was expert in what we might today call comparative religion and philosophical analysis. Many Central Asians converted, but others did not, at least not until after the period of cultural effervescence had passed. Muslim or not, they were expert codifiers, and one of them, Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari (AD 810–70), brought together and analyzed the hadiths (sayings) of Muhammad, the compilation becoming regarded as Islam's second most holy book after the Qur'an. Secular ideas also wafted back and forth across the region. The astronomer al-Khorezmi wrote a book comparing the utility of Indian numerals (and the concept of zero) with all other contenders, while others mined Indian geometry, astron-

omy, and even calendar systems for good ideas. Earlier Central Asians had tested various alphabets, including ones from Syria and India. Several local languages opted for an alphabet deriving from Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. It is hard to imagine a more intellectually open region anywhere.



The great polymath Abu Ali Sina (facing page) hailed from the city of Bukhara, in what is now Uzbekistan. Above is a leaf from his most famous work, the *Canon of Medicine*.

wake of Alexander the Great (356–23 BC) brought the cults of Athena, Hercules, and Aphrodite to their new cities in Afghanistan. Then Buddhism found fertile soil across the region, and spread from there to China, Japan, and Korea. Along the way, Buddhist artists picked up from immigrant Greeks the idea of

What distinguished Central Asians from both the Arabs and the Chinese is that they were polyglots. They considered it normal to live amid a bewildering profusion of languages and alphabets, and managed

guide religion, not vice versa, and certainly not be constrained by it. Still others were outright skeptics who dismissed religion as fine for the mass of society but a farce for intellectuals. This was the view of Omar Khayyám

(1048–1123), the brilliant mathematician who is known today mainly for his poetry, a collection of which was introduced to the West in the 19th century as the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*.

All this adds up to the possibility that intellectual boldness owed less to what religion did than to

MOST OF THE THINKERS of Central Asia's golden age were full-time scientists, scholars, and intellectuals, or at least aspired to be.

somehow to master whichever ones they needed at the time. Thus, when the Arab armies arrived bearing a new religion, it was natural that at least some officials and intellectuals would learn the Arabs' strange language to see what it offered. Traders soon thereafter began arriving with writings newly translated from classical Greek. Often the work of Christian Arabs, these translations suddenly opened challenging new ideas in philosophy and science to Central Asians. In due course, they were to master and even go beyond their ancient Greek mentors.

The flowering of Greater Central Asia was thus a product of "location, location, location," both with respect to the trade-based prosperity that it generated and to the welter of religions and ideas that came on the back of that trade. But trade alone would not have given rise to the intellectual awakening that occurred, for not all trade unleashes genius. Perhaps it is best to think of trade as a necessary condition for intellectual takeoff, but not a sufficient one.

How important was religion to this explosion of creativity? For many, Islam was the crucial factor. When al-Bukhari embarked on his life-work of scholarship he was doubtless moved by deep piety, as were scores of other great thinkers. Al-Farabi never doubted that his research into the basis of ethics would strengthen formal religion. Others agreed with al-Farabi but insisted that free inquiry and research should

what it did not do. This is important, given the struggle that existed at times between religion and science in the West. But one senses that someone like al-Farabi, who tossed off a major study on musical theory in addition to all his other works, needed neither permission nor encouragement to treat the whole world as his oyster.

Pinpointing the causes of Central Asia's golden age is all the more difficult because the great minds who gave the age its brilliance were such a diverse lot. A few came from wealthy landed families and could live off their estates, while others, such as Ibn Sina and al-Biruni, won appointments to lucrative high offices. But they were exceptions. Most of the thinkers were full-time scientists, scholars, and intellectuals, or at least aspired to be. With no universities or academies of science to support them, this was no easy undertaking. Even if they assembled a few paying students, the resulting income never provided enough to sustain them. And so, by default, they relied on the patronage of rulers.

Here was one of Central Asia's great strengths. To be sure, a would-be scientist could strike out for Baghdad in hopes of joining the House of Wisdom, an academy of sciences established by the Central Asia-born caliph al-Ma'mun. But there were many local rulers and courts throughout the region, just as there were also in Persia to the west. All gave a respectful nod to Baghdad but considered themselves functionally independent. Each of these rulers was a kind



This miniature painting, which shows Abolqasem Ferdowsi meeting other literary men of the court of Mahmud of Ghazna (971–1030), appeared in the poet's famed *Shahnameh*. With an empire that stretched from Iran to India, Mahmud was notoriously ruthless, yet even he felt compelled to patronize the arts and sciences.

of caliph in his own right, ruling in a thoroughly authoritarian manner and defending his territory with a large army of Turks. But they also promoted trade, collected taxes, built splendid capitals, and, significantly, spent fortunes on the arts and sciences. One such court was at Gurganj, where al-Biruni worked. Another was at the already-ancient walled city of Samargand, where between 850 and 1000 the Samanid dynasty maintained a magnificent library,

intense salons where savants discussed the Great Questions, and a lively social world centered on music and poetry.

There was nothing kind and gentle about some of these rulers; nor were all of them sophisticated as patrons of the arts and sciences. From his capital in eastern Afghanistan, Mahmud of Ghazna (971–1030) ruled an empire stretching from India to the heart of modern Iran. Mahmud was ruthless and viewed culture more as an adornment than a necessity. Yet he successfully engaged al-Biruni, who proceeded to author the first comprehensive study of India and Hinduism in any language. Mahmud also patronized the great poet Abolqasem Ferdowsi, whose grand panorama of pre-Muslim Persia, the *Shahnameh* (ca. 1000), influenced troubadours as far away as France and remains a classic of world literature.

The last great explosion of cultural energy in

Central Asia occurred under the Seljuk Turks beginning about 1037 and continuing for more than a century. From their eastern capitals at Merv in modern Turkmenistan and Nishapur near the present-day Iranian-Afghan border, they encouraged innovators in many fields. Among their achievements was the invention of a way to cover large spaces with double domes. One of their earliest efforts can still be seen rising from the desolation of their ruined capital at



Once a thriving commercial capital, the city of Balkh, in northeastern Afghanistan, never regained its influence after Mongols destroyed it in 1220.

Merv. Following a circuitous route that led through Filippo Brunelleschi's dome at the Cathedral of Florence to St. Nicholas's Cathedral in St. Petersburg, this innovation eventually defined the cupola of the U.S. Capitol in Washington.

Why did the great age of Central Asia fade? The most common explanation blames the waning of the intellectual whirlwind on the Mongol invasion, which Ghenghis Khan launched from the Mongolian heartland in 1218. It is true that the Mongol invaders sacked most of the magnificent cities of Central Asia, but three objections undermine this thesis. First, all but a few of the cities quickly revived, thanks to trade and commerce. Second, far from isolating the region, the Mongol conquest increased contacts between Greater Central Asia and both Europe and the rest of Asia. This happened because the conquering Mongols abolished borders and tariffs within their vast empire. When Marco Polo passed through Afghanistan en route to China in the 13th century, he did so with a single "patent," or visa. To

the extent that cross-cultural contact was an essential ingredient of intellectual vitality, it flourished under the Mongols.

Third, even if the Mongols had set out to suppress free thought in 1221 (they did not), there would have been no need for them to do so. A full century earlier, much of the cultural energy that had crackled across the length and breadth of Central Asia for hundreds of years had dissipated. True, at Merv in the 12th century there were still a dozen libraries, one of them with 12,000 volumes, and there were more than 50 doctors in Bukhara. But as early as 1100, the focus of intellectual life had shifted from bold sallies into vast and unknown territories to the preparation of compendiums of earlier studies and careful treatises on safer, more limited subjects. A sure sign that the formerly bright flame had diminished is the fact that most of the surviving manuscripts from this period are either copies of earlier writings or commentaries on them, not original works.

If the "Whodunit?" question does not point to the Mongols, what caused the decline? Most of Central Asia's great ancient cities today present a picture of gaunt ruins baking silently in the desert sun, the bleak-

ness relieved only by occasional tufts of sage. Viewing them, one is tempted to blame the cultural downturn on climate change or some other ecological shift. But most studies of the region's ecological history conclude that the climate during the boom years was nearly identical to what it is today, and that the main change was the decay of the irrigation systems that were once the region's glory.

Looking beyond the Mongols and ecology, at least four factors contributed to the region's decline. First, and perhaps foremost, nothing endures forever. The golden age of classical Athens lasted barely a century before the city slipped into a lesser silver age. Few of the Renaissance cities remained at a peak of cultural creativity for more than a century and a half. It is natural and inevitable that decline should set in after a high point.

In the case of Central Asia, even more than with the Arabs to the West, the mighty stimulus for original thinking had been the challenge of mastering and assimilating vast and unfamiliar bodies of thought, from ancient Greece, the Middle East, and India. By 1100 this had been accomplished, and no comparably huge body of new learning presented itself thereafter. The European Renaissance should have provided such a stimulus, of course, but by that time the great trade routes that had connected civilizations had seen better days and Central Asia's isolation and decline was becoming entrenched.

Second, religions, like the cultures of which they are a part, go through cycles, beginning in dynamism, self-confidence, and experimentation and then hardening into orthodoxy. In Central Asia, this had already occurred with both Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. In the case of Islam, the greatest flowering of creative thought started early, between 800 and 1100. The hardening into orthodoxy also began early, but did not reach its apex until around 1100. Even then, there remained a few isolated outposts that stayed intellectually vital for another century or so. But in Persian and Turkic Central Asia, as in the Arab heartland and in Persia proper, the demands of a steadily rigidifying Muslim orthodoxy gradually narrowed the sphere in which free thought and humanism could be exercised.

Beyond these "morphological" realities that contributed to the withering of free intellectual life in Greater Central Asia, a third and much more specific factor was at work: the Sunni-Shia split within the Muslim faith. This

fundamental division dates to the first generation after Muhammad's death in AD 632. By the time of the rise of the first Caliphate in Damascus, the Sunnis were firmly in charge throughout the Muslim world except in Egypt, where the Fatimids, a Shiite dynasty, flourished from 968 to 1171. But even before the fall of the Fatimids the Shiite faithful were being hounded eastward, shifting the core zone of confessional conflict to Persia and Central Asia. As this occurred, the reigning Sunni rulers across the region tightened their grip on all who might be suspected of schismatic leanings. Many of the great innovators, such as Ibn Sina, had come from Shiite families. Now anyone like him was suspect.

Needless to say, the change hit the freethinkers particularly hard, but it affected no less the mainline Sunnis. Two figures from the town of Tus on the western fringe of Central Asia in what is now eastern Iran epitomized this new direction. The first, Nizam al-Mulk (1018–92), was a highly gifted administrator and also one of the best political scientists of the era. Al-Mulk's teachers had introduced him to works by the best minds of the Central Asian renaissance. But by the time he was appointed vizier of the Seljuk Empire, the battle against Shiite dissidence was at full tilt. Fearing deviance on every side, al-Mulk proposed to establish a network of schools, or madrasas, that would instill orthodox Sunni Islam and turn young men into well-informed loyalists of the faith. Graduates would reject not only the Shiite schism but any other forms of thought that might be suspected of deviance from orthodoxy.

The second transformative figure, Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111), a philosopher and theologian, launched a frontal attack on the dangers posed by the unrestrained exercise of reason. The title of his most famous work tells it all: *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (i.e., scientists). Like the Grand Inquisitor in Feodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, al-Ghazali intimately knew his enemy, in this case Aristotelian empiricism, which had attracted the best minds of the region. Attacking Aristotle, he attacked all contemporary rationalists, and to devastating effect.

Together, al-Mulk and al-Ghazali lowered the curtain on independent thought that had been raised in Central Asia for three centuries. Yet Central Asians responded with their typical creativity. With outer forms of the faith hardened and rigidified, they evinced a fresh interest in indi-

vidual spirituality. Their highly personal system for achieving a mystical experience of God required neither books, hierarchies, nor mosques, and was called Sufism. Central Asians had ready at hand many forms of such mystical and private worship, thanks to their contacts with Hindu India and their rich local traditions of Buddhism, Syrian Christianity, and even Judaism, which had thrived in the region's trade centers. How mystical currents within these

ceased to be central to the high culture of all Eurasia and sank into the status of a remote and dusty boondocks.

From this descent into obscurity it was an easy step to Dan Rather's coverage of Afghanistan and the region in the immediate wake of 9/11. Donning a bush jacket and filming at dawn and dusk, he presented the region as inaccessible, backward, exotic, marginal, and

threatening—in short, the end of the world. Ibn Sina, al-Biruni, and scores of other world-class geniuses from the region might just as well never have lived.

Even though the Central Asia of Rather's depiction was and is an evocative image, it carries some bothersome implications.

On the one hand, it con-

SOMEWHERE IN THE DNA of the peoples of Central Asia is the capacity to become a link and bridge between civilizations.

faiths contributed to Sufism is much debated, but one thing is clear: Even though the first Sufis had been Arabs, Central Asia became Sufism's heartland. Several of the first and greatest Sufi movements arose there and spread thence throughout the Muslim world. Today Sufi poems by Rumi, Attar, and others have gained a New Age following, but in their own era they represented a turning inward and away from the civic realm.

Central Asia by no means disappeared from the world's view after 1100. In the 14th century, Timur, known in the West as Tamerlane, conquered the world from Delhi to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and then assembled learned scientists and writers in his rebuilt capital of Samarqand. A century later, Babur sprang from the Fergana Valley and went on to found the Mughal dynasty in India. A gifted writer, Babur followed the old Central Asian practice of gathering creative talent to his court.

Yet Central Asia never regained the intellectual luster it had possessed in the centuries between 800 and 1100. High local tariffs killed the golden goose that had given birth to prosperity and inter-cultural contact. Religious orthodoxy stifled the region's most original thinkers. As the decline set in, Central Asia gradually

conjures up a place where the best the United States and the world community can hope for is to limit the damage arising from it. This means destroying whatever threatens us and then getting out. The problem is that the thinking behind such an approach can then become self-fulfilling: A place we judged to be hopeless becomes truly so, and even more threatening than before. The fact that Central Asia and Afghanistan are situated between four—and possibly soon five—nuclear powers does not help matters.

Fortunately, this prevailing image of backwardness is not the whole story. Since the region emerged from Soviet and Taliban rule, the ancient continental trade routes have begun to revive. Indians and Koreans flying to Europe stop off there. Half a dozen countries and as many international financial institutions are busily building a network of highways that will eventually link Europe, China, India, and the Middle East. The fact that this is occurring without central direction means that its extent has largely gone unnoticed. But the road building has now reached the level of an unstoppable force. The opening of routes between Europe and China and across Afghanistan toward the Arabian Sea, India, and Southeast Asia and linking the Middle East, China, and India will, in the coming decade, transform the entire Eurasian land-mass. Little that is emerging is absolutely new. Indeed,

anyone interested in knowing what the new transport configuration will look like might start by examining the trade routes of the golden era.

Similarly, the opening of Central Asia between 1991 and 2001 is beginning to transform the region intellectually. Tens of thousands of the region's students have gone to study at the best universities abroad. In an act of enlightenment worthy of their predecessors a millennium ago, the governments of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have paid for these young people to acquire the most modern knowledge and bring it back home. They return with a passion for reconnecting their region with the global world of ideas. Within the next decade, these young men and women will assume leadership roles in their societies and in the region as a whole. It is hard to imagine that they will consider the prevailing corruption to be normal, or accept Soviet-style controls over their ideas. Even in Afghanistan the National University, the recently established American University, and thousands of lower schools are opening new prospects to the rising generation.

These young people quite reasonably ask, "Who are we?" Answers pour in from every side. Many in the Middle East and even in the West, from the White House down, tell them they are Muslims, defined mainly by the faith in which they were raised. Alternatively, some experts smugly invoke the notions of tribal or clan heritage to explain what they consider the region's hopelessly retrograde politics. Meanwhile, local patriots hail their various national ethnic identities—Kyrgyz, Tajik, or Uzbek—each of which, they insist, is absolutely unique and like no other.

These proposed identities may have some basis in reality. But all run the risk of narrowing the horizons of the emerging generation and limiting their expectations of themselves. The attraction of some young people to fundamentalist religious organizations or narrowly nationalistic groups is also a cause for concern. But Central Asians have ready at hand a meaningful past that lifts up the individual, defines each person in terms of reason and wisdom, and places that person in the mainstream of global developments. This is the great tradition that for 300 years made their region the center of the world of intellect. Why shouldn't Central Asians and their friends abroad place this remarkable heritage, rather than some narrowly religious or national ideology, as the lodestone of their policies today?

This means focusing more of our support and theirs on reopening the great continental transport routes, instituting freer borders, lowering tariffs, and reducing meddling from the governments. Free trade must also extend to the world of ideas. This means creating the unfettered intellectual space that enabled Ibn Sina and al-Biruni to hypothesize on evolution rather than creationism and even to contemplate the existence of other worlds. Though they each lived under a different government, nobody intercepted their mail and nobody censured their heretical thoughts. In fact, rulers competed to become their patrons and to support their work.

Would this happen today in Central Asia? Several governments in the region are glad to talk of unfettered continental trade but bridle at the prospect of an unfettered exchange of ideas. Yet in every country in the region, there are distinguished champions of the kind of intellectual openness that will give rise to modern Ibn Sinas and al-Birunis. With the emergence of the new generation, increasing numbers of these people are in government. The idea of a fresh flowering of Central Asia may seem a distant prospect, but it is not impossible, especially if Central Asians become more familiar with their rich heritage and draw from it relevant lessons for the present.

If this is the challenge to inhabitants of the region today, the challenge to their international partners is to treat the regional states as sovereign countries, not as culturally inert objects to be shoved around on a chessboard. It is not enough to view them simply as a "zone of [our] special interest," as Vladimir Putin's government does; as a source of raw materials, as the Chinese do; or as a fueling stop en route to Kabul, as the United States does. The better alternative is to acknowledge that somewhere in the DNA of these peoples is the capacity to manage great empires and even greater trading zones, to interact as equals with the other centers of world culture, and to use their unique geographical position to become a link and bridge between civilizations. Such an awareness will raise expectations on all sides, and encourage the region's international partners to view it as more than the object of a geopolitical game.

This, too, won't be easy, but acquiring a deeper knowledge of Central Asia's past is an essential place to begin. ■

Divided By

In a world so saturated in connectivity that every last oddball can find a poll, a pie chart, or an online pal to confirm that he's not alone, there are still some gaps that can't be bridged.

BY JAMES MORRIS



LET WALT WHITMAN PROVIDE THE EPIGRAPH: "I am large," the poet declared, "I contain multitudes." Ah, Walt, these days who doesn't? And there's not a moment when multitudinous we aren't sounding off about something, a nation of self-anointed experts and bloggers with a toxic addiction to sharing. It doesn't help that there's not a moment when we aren't being *encouraged* to sound off. We're under siege by outlets and divvied up to suit a rampant array of survey and poll criteria: age, income, geography, mood, ailment, enthusiasm (culinary, political, sexual, aesthetic, athletic). We're peered at through the right end of the telescope and the wrong, and mined in the course of a lifetime for all the various *us-es* we become.

There's no longer a survey so implausible that it might not be genuine: "A new Starbucks/Golds Gym poll shows that 68 percent of people who stop for caffeinated coffee at a Starbucks on their way to a Golds Gym have to interrupt their workout sessions for a bathroom break (the percentage is lower for decaf)." That one's fake, but this one's real: "Half of all Americans would prefer to live elsewhere, study reveals." I watched that statement scroll across the bottom of a TV screen while the upper portion gave an update on eight babies

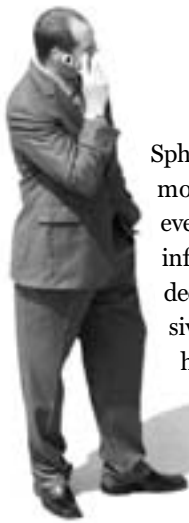
JAMES MORRIS is an editor at large of *The Wilson Quarterly* and a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center.



born to an embryo junkie. Did the study show that half of all Americans would prefer to live in a bigger house, or six blocks away in a better neighborhood, or in Manitoba or Flanders? Who did the study? A realtors' association? But the ticker had moved on, leaving in its wake the collateral damage of frustration and ambiguity that attends communicating with one-liners, wordlets, and odd acronyms, our thoughts adjusted to the dimensions of our vade mecum screens.

We exist from demographic segment to demographic segment. Those of us itching to live elsewhere might be counted among the restless or the aspirant or the delusional. The categories multiply and break like a struck drop of mercury. We can be the loved or the lonely, for example, though loneliness is not what it used to be once you're assigned to a group called the lonely. We're voters or not, TV watchers or not, readers or not, male or female or not, parents or not, believers or not, consumers or . . . wait. We're consumers or we don't exist, even now that the wheel of relentless acquisition has flattened from round to oval to right angled. Consumer preferences and aversions are the mother's milk of demarcation. Selves used to be fewer and larger. Three were enough for Oedipus, who was as quick as a *Jeopardy* champ to solve the riddle put to him by the





Sphinx: "What creature goes on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?" A human being, said Oedipus, from infancy through adulthood to cane-propped decline. Shakespeare's Jaques was more expansive. A man plays many parts in his time, said he, "his acts being seven ages": mewling infant, whining schoolboy, lover, soldier, the justice ("full of wise saws and modern instances"), the "slipper-per pantaloan" (=tiresome old fool) with "shrunk shank . . . his big manly voice turning again toward childish treble."

Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Not quite everything. Today's shriveled and depleted child might still be a data source, drooling out a response to a TV reporter's inquiry: "How does it feel to be a useless lump?"

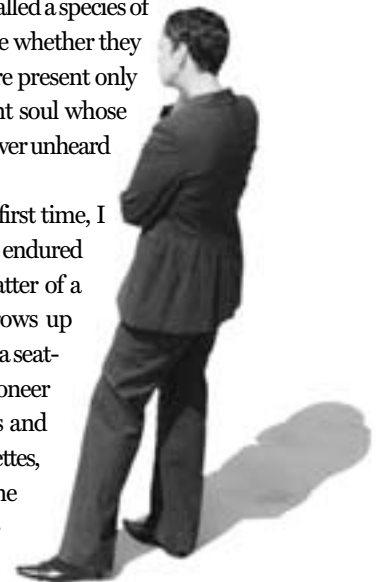
I change my mind from day to day about the relative importance of the bottomless list of opportunities for division our age serves up. But which of that teeming



number actually matter? I can think of two, for starters, that matter to me. The first is peculiar to our time; the second would have been old hat to Oedipus and Jaques.

I'm struck by the new divide between those of us who still hoard our privacy as shrewd nations once hoarded gold and those who've erased the boundary separating their private and public lives, who've decided, apparently, that there's nothing so private it can't be, shouldn't be, shared in public. These folks have roughed up reticence and mugged shame, and there's no isolating them by age or class or profession. Consider those who prattle on in a phone booth big as all outdoors. They might be called a species of exhibitionist, but they don't care whether they have an audience or not. They're present only to themselves and to the distant soul whose half of the conversation goes forever unheard at this end.

When I'm asked about my first time, I say that it occurred on Amtrak. I endured the protracted, unbalanced chatter of a guy across the aisle and two rows up who I assumed was speaking to a seat-mate both reticent and short. Pioneer cell phoners like him, on trains and sidewalks and restaurant banquettes, were canaries sent early into the mine of unmediated public revelation. The canaries should



have been dead pigeons, but through the miracle of cultural evolution, they—we—adjusted to the mine's bad air. How innocent and how distant the proto-cell phone age now seems in the light of all that's come after. We've fleshed out the phones' mere auditory revelations with the full-body scans of TV and the Internet. Reality TV, of course, is already fossilized and has to keep raising the ante—the prizes, the embarrassment—to keep audiences attentive. Yet these many shows that trade in exposure and mortification never lack for participants missing the screw that might have kept their self-respect attached.

Even otherwise sober folk have felt the need to put themselves out there, if not on TV then on social networking sites in the spaceless space of the Internet—Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter. I've always taken the urgency of E. M. Forster's wishful-thinking imperative "Only connect!" to be fundamentally philosophical. But what a motto it makes for the hard-line onliners whose goal is fundamentally numerical: With how many friends, pals, associates, contacts, fans, objects, institutions, life forms, can they claim connection? Who except a teenager (or a politician) needs hundreds of friends, or two dozen even, if lucky enough to have six of the to-the-death, flesh-and-blood sort? To accumulate hundreds in air is to traffic in subprime liaisons. These are friends to keep on a tally sheet, not in one's heart, connections to be broken not with scenes of anger and recrimination but with a keystroke.

When so much is noise, and insubstantial, could any name be more appropriate than Twitter for one of these social networking sites? The first dictionary meaning of the noun is "the light chirping sound made by certain birds," but dictionaries will soon have to reference the electronic chirping sound made by certain humans. The Twitter twist is that communications are restricted to 140 characters. Not words, characters. The result is a kind of autobiographical haiku. These are the wan journals of our clickety Boswells: "Approaching toll plaza. Wish I had EZ Pass. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight cars and a van ahead of me. Seven cars now. Six. Five."

Face it: The machines have won. And they did so not by growing Terminator-big and -mean but by going all Lilliputian on us. They became as companionable as puppies, as essential as house keys. They rest on our laps and lodge in our pockets. Even the language of lust borrows from electronics: "Let's hook up!" The machines are emblems of our new freedom. We can order pizza in traffic, porn in

church. We can work anywhere now, and network there too. Yet how eerie an airport waiting area seems when full of mute travelers intent on their bright screens—paragons of productivity, Kissins of their keyboards.

The machines record our whims and needs and passions and movements, click by click, choice by choice. They assemble and store our lives and ready them for retrieval by . . . whom? Who knows anymore? We've put our private selves up for grabs, and what we risk surrendering or having taken from us seems more than we care to imagine. We traffick in airy impulses and boast of emancipation while trailing invisible, adamantine shackles. Not that it will matter for long. Soon enough everyone will have died who remembers a time when the machines and their proliferating capabilities did not set the parameters of our lives, when we could drop from the grid and be untraceable.

The second great divide that I think is important is the one between youth and age. I'd say youth lasts for however many decades you embrace possibility without a second thought and say "Of course" to every dare. Age begins the day you say, "Uh, well, maybe not." Other signs come shuffling after—a tamping down of enthusiasm, a diminution of curiosity, a sense that you've seen everything already, and too much of it more than once. The background din that had always been a soundtrack to the foreground action of your life, cradling and indulging it, suddenly claims your whole attention. Minutiae nip and sting. You linger in the drugstore aisles you never expected to visit.

Those of us who still watch the major TV networks' evening newscasts know for sure that we've parted company with the 18-to-49-year-old consumer segment so dear to America's hucksters. But the hucksters have plans for us, too. The commercials that interrupt the newscasts' predictable narrative of national failings tell their own chilling tale of personal failings: "Listen up, you dozy lot, at least those of you who can still hear. The warranty is running out on every part in your bodies. Those blurry sightings in your rearview mirror are bodily functions. Your bones are crumbling, joints detaching, skin crimping up, organs hosting the agents of their own undoing, arteries turning solid as bridge cables. Your minds are developing minds of their own." (Under the circumstances, the promise of erectile dysfunction is a blessing.)

Old age plays out on a stage strewn with trapdoors,

and there's no knowing from day to day which of them will be sprung. They release singly or in teams, but the free fall to what lies beneath, so frightening the first few times, eventually loses its power to alarm or even surprise. Sometimes you suffer the hard landing of illness, and sometimes you endure the soft landing of reminiscence, when all of now is automatically measured against all of then, and disappoints. Most days you assume the fallback position of routine, over which Samuel Beckett pronounced a benediction: "The air is full of our cries. But habit is a great deadener."

Still, those trapdoors sometimes make you doubt whether each new day deserves a welcome. A certain reluctance intrudes. It's a counterpart to the reluctance with which the young sometimes face the day. For them, the day is one of thousands yet to come, and their assumption of endless recurrence is reason enough to hide beneath the bedclothes. For the old, there's no endless prospect, only an edge toward which movement quickens or slows but does not stop. Each new used-up day subtracts one from a finite store, leaving who knows how many remaining. The young are apprehensive because so much undefined life lies ahead of them, the old because so little. The difference is that the old are better placed to shed their apprehension, or rather to experience the gradual morphing of the word from its meaning of dread to its promise of understanding.

Once asked Herman Wells, the near-legendary president and chancellor of Indiana University, how he was feeling. Wells was then in his eighties and in visibly poor health. "I feel like a very young boy," he said, and paused, and added, "who just doesn't feel very well." (He lived to be almost 98.) I failed at the time to appreciate how much wisdom there was in that wistful linking of the last part of life to the first, vaulting the middle. Near the end, the most vivid memories are increasingly of the beginning. Distant trivial events have more clarity than the defining moments of later decades, or of last week. However clouded or presbyopic, the old man's eyes that see the world are indeed the same eyes that belonged to the boy—and belong

still to the boy—though the eyes through which the world sees the old boy invite alarmed inquiries after his health.

The practical reality, of course, is that youth and age mostly keep to themselves, and why not? I was reminded of that during a recent visit to the Kennedy Center to attend a concert. I arrived just as a busload of eager high schoolers on a class trip began their surge toward the parted doors of the building and its red-carpeted Speerian expanse. I surged right along with them. No choice. They wore jeans and wires, and over the short distance from curb to corridor they bumped and jostled and touched one another, bonding

and separating like amoebas. Once they were inside, the liveliness of the group was tamed briefly by a head-on encounter with a second group, who were exiting.

The departing group appeared to be on a class trip of sorts as well, perhaps as residents of the same assisted living facility or retirement community. Some held hands; others took hold of arms or elbows to support or be supported; a few were steadied by canes. They said

nothing at all and looked warily at the vocal teens (or maybe at the gray interloper among them). They were dressed in what passes for senior chic these days, practicality trumping dignity—pants for all, the ladies' secured by forgiving elastic, the men's belted and vivid enough to be seen far off on a golf course or in a crosswalk. They moved on enough sneakers to have caused a spike in Foot Locker earnings. And just like that my memory erased 60 intervening years, and I recalled being told by an omniscient nun who channeled Martha Stewart before Martha's time never to wear sneakers—or galoshes, for that matter—indoors, at the risk of blindness.

The frail phalanx bent away from the boisterous young who skirted their flank. The faces of the teenagers were distinct and individual, while the faces of the old seemed chiseled into a sameness—indeed, into the likenesses of an alarmingly extended family. The physical juxtaposition of the two groups was over in less than a minute, but I thought that it could be spun into eternity. I disengaged from my accidental entourage, looked back at the receding seniors, and wanted them to know that my train was, in fact, on their track. ■



"If you can hear me, give me a sign."

A Helping Hand for the Printed Word

We don't need to tell you that the printed word is under siege. Newspapers are disappearing and book publishers are shrinking. The whole world of print is being compressed.

It's not just a matter of paper and ink versus digital media, it's a question of how ideas and information are presented and assessed—of how we *think*.

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THRIFT

The Double-Edged Virtue

For decades, Americans piled on debts like they were splendid canapés at a cocktail party—credit card balances, car notes, payday loans, and mortgages in all their infinite variety. Wall Street built empires in the air on a foundation of more exotic morsels. Now that another bubble has burst, Americans face a future of heavy financial obligations. The party is over. Yet while the return of a certain amount of economic self-restraint may be long overdue, it is not without hazards of its own. In the global economy, one nation's thrift can be another's ruin.



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Saving Yourself

America's enduring love affair with big spending is fetching up against some unromantic realities. But a lifelong saver assures us that there are worse fates than socking it away for a rainy day.

BY DANIEL AKST

REMEMBER JACK BENNY? CHEAPNESS WAS HIS shtick; on his radio and television shows he occasionally made hilarious subterranean visits to his money, which was protected by locks, alligators, and an ancient security guard who, from the look of him, had last seen action at the Second Battle of Bull Run. “Your money or your life,” to the rest of us, is Hobson’s choice; to Benny, it was an existential crisis.

Ah, those were the days—a halcyon time when, the Depression still a fresh memory, Americans enjoyed both affluence and restraint. Willy Loman’s refrigerator payments notwithstanding, consumer indebtedness at mid-century now looks like a mere flyspeck, at least from the towering mountain of debt atop which we sit.

We have managed since Benny’s heyday to get a little carried away. Alan Greenspan and the Chinese gave us too much credit, unfettered bankers chose greed over sobriety, and consumers snapped up McMansions financed by loans they could never repay. In 1980, American household debt stood at what must have seemed the enormous sum of \$1.4 trillion. Last year the figure was 10 times as large, only 24 percent of us were debt free, and more than half of college students carried at least four credit cards. Is it any wonder there were more than a million con-

sumer bankruptcy filings last year? Or that the nation’s banking system came close to collapse? The result of all this excess is a people hung-over from its recent intoxication with spending and flabbergasted by the bill from the wine merchant.

So thrift, supposedly, is back, implying, as the dictionary tells us, “using money and other resources carefully and not wastefully.” (The word’s etymological connection to “thrive” may come as a shock to some big spenders, but not to the truly thrifty.) Personally, I’m not certain that the resurrection of thrift—heralded on the covers of *Time* and *BusinessWeek*, among other places—is anything more than temporary. But as a lifelong cheapskate, I’m grateful that at least thrift no longer carries quite the musty and ungenerous connotations it once did. If we skinflints are the last ones to step out of the closet, it only means we can appreciate all the more heartily how nice it is to escape the smell of mothballs.

I’m talking here about real thrift, which for the most part involves *not spending money*. It’s not to be confused with the smug species of faux thrift that’s been in vogue for a while. You see it in shelter magazines and newspaper home sections, where rich people boast of furnishing their multimillion-dollar homes with zany castoffs and repurposed industrial *objets*. Or how about the children of one Joan Asher? *The Wall Street Journal* reports that after

DANIEL AKST writes for a living—which enforces thrift—in New York’s Hudson Valley. He is a contributing editor of *The Wilson Quarterly*.



In this 1920s poster, money in the bank is its own reward. But penny-pinching satisfaction was no match for the feverish consumption that gripped America before the Depression.

three had inpatient nose jobs—attended by a private nurse each time—the fourth had to suffer through an outpatient procedure after which she was nursed at home by mom.

Real thrift, the skeptical, calculating kind that can make a difference between being solvent and not, is not a matter of cut-rate rhinoplasty. The quotidian penny-pinching I'm talking about used to have a bad name indeed, in much the same way as "spinster" and "cardigan,"

as we know very well from Jack Benny. Like his preening insistence that he was always 39—or that he was an accomplished violinist—Benny's pretend niggardliness was funny but also geriatric, unsexy, and possibly even emasculating. Men do in fact make passes at women who wear glasses, but do women melt for men who hoard gelt?

Evolutionary biologists, who seem to know everything about everything, suggest otherwise. The males of many species, including our own, evolved to attract females by means of costly displays—for example, the tail of the peacock, which he drags around to demonstrate his vitality to peahens. Lacking such plumage, human males resort to exotic European automobiles, pricey dinners, vulgar wristwatches, and other forms of showiness. (Human females are supposed to be seeking signs in such ostentation that a mate will spend on them and their offspring. In the modern world, of course, women themselves earn and spend plenty, often supposedly in answer to their own evolutionary imperative to look young and beautiful.)

Spending and sex thus are inextricably connected. "Easy come, easy go" might well have been our motto on both fronts until relatively recently. During the boom, people spent freely and were implored to do so on every side by purveyors of every conceivable thing, in

terms designed to penetrate directly to the unrestrained limbic brain. Sex, after all, sells, and thrift is the opposite of sexy. Kooky Scotsmen are thrifty. Flinty New England farmers are thrifty. Elderly pensioners are thrifty. Brad Pitt isn't thrifty.

This lack of sex appeal is one reason modern life has produced no great constituency for saving. Like dentists and Jews, saving has often found itself the subject of neg-

ative stereotyping in popular culture. In *McTeague* (1899), the novelist Frank Norris tars all three with the same broad brush in a melodramatic portrait of greed and its tragic consequences. *McTeague* is a good example of how, in literature, the prudently thrifty (who are perhaps inherently too boring for drama) tend to be overshadowed by the fanatically miserly. From Shylock through Silas Marner

uneasily whether it was by sheer chance that Jack Benny—né Benjamin Kubelsky—chose a penny-pinching stage persona for himself. The man was by all accounts as generous in his private life as he was tightfisted on screen.

There was a time, of course, when thrift was in favor. It was practically a matter of life and death for the Puritans and a cornerstone of their work ethic, along with temper-

ance, diligence, and piety. They excelled at deferring gratification, and it is one of the great ironies of American history that their preternatural self-discipline and industry launched us on the path to such unimaginable riches that thrift would be forgotten in the stampede to the mall. (On the other hand, if you have to be a victim of something, it might as well be your own success.)

Benjamin Franklin, who was hardly puritanical in any modern sense of the term, nonetheless embraced thrift and famously reminded us that “a penny saved is a penny earned” even before the advent of income taxes (which have made a penny saved worth *even more* than a penny earned). A relentless self-improver, Franklin as a young man “con-

ceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection,” and as an aid in this venture developed a kind of moral spreadsheet, writing the days of the week across the top and listing 13 virtues along the side, so he could plot his failings by date and category in a grid. Frugality (“waste nothing”) was number five on the list.

Thrift was so important to Samuel Smiles, the great 19th-century Scottish self-help guru, that in 1875 he published an entire book devoted to it. Smiles’s *Thrift* was a sequel to his earlier bestseller, *Self-Help*, which appeared in the landmark literary year of 1859 (when readers first encountered John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* and Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*). Smiles’s oeuvre, which also included *Duty* and *Character*, made the case for the overriding Victorian virtue of self-control, a characteristic then associated not with the timid but the strong. For in those days, people understood the connection between money and virtue. “No man can be free who is in debt,” Smiles tells us in *Thrift*. “The inevitable effect of debt is not only to injure personal independence, but, in the long-run, to inflict moral degradation.”

We have self-help gurus today, of course, and some of



In 1951, the Diners' Club took a permanent bite out of America's pocketbooks when it introduced the modern credit card. Initially, the “card” was a paper booklet stamped with the holder's information and containing a list of restaurants that accepted club credit.

and Ebenezer Scrooge right up to Mr. Potter (*It's a Wonderful Life*), Fred C. Dobbs (*Treasure of the Sierra Madre*) and C. Montgomery Burns (*The Simpsons*), it's clear that writers have always taken seriously St. Paul's assertion that the love of money is the root of all evil. Financial profligacy, it would seem, is nothing compared with being a greedy skinflint.

To the extent that thrift produces wealth, it breeds envy. The thrift, future-mindedness, and sobriety of the Jews have fueled prodigious achievements and equally prodigious anti-Semitism, and the association of thrift with a despised minority probably didn't do any good for the trait's public image. Shylock was far from the last money-grubbing Jew to besmirch popular culture; a coarse and monied Jewish stock manipulator is at the center of Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875), and lesser such figures flitted in and out of books and movies well into the 20th century. Before Harold Lloyd finds himself hanging from the hands of a clock high above the sidewalk in the silent classic *Safety Last* (1923), he encounters such a character practically salivating with greed behind the counter of a jewelry store. One wonders

them (the ubiquitous Suze Orman, for example) even stress the connection between money and morals, but that's not why they are known or attended. We simply want the advantages of financial security and a higher standard of living. The reward for good financial management is a big house, a nice car—all the things that come from bad financial management, without the debt.

How did we get here? The transformation of thrift from a virtue into something verging on a social disorder occurred sometime between the 1880s and 1920s, when America transformed itself from a nation of want into one of, well, *wants*. Unbridled economic growth (fueled by decades of self-restraint and invested savings) undermined the Protestant ethos of self-denial and reticence, while the rising merchant class did its best to change the country's long-ingrained aversion to luxury. Consumer credit became more widely available, and religious denominations laid off the hellfire

and brimstone in favor of a therapeutic approach to happiness in the present. Vast new big-city “department stores” leveled the full force of their merchandising grandeur at women, who understandably preferred to purchase items they had once laboriously made. Catalyzed by mass communications (which made possible the stimulation of mass desire through advertising) and the rise of an urbanized middle class, consumerism exploded.

The loud noise caught the attention of two important social theorists, one of them famous and the other largely forgotten. It's yet another irony in the saga of America's love/hate relationship with thrift that we live by the precepts of the thinker whose name hardly anyone remembers.

First, the one you know about. Thorstein Veblen, the peripatetic Norwegian-American economist (he died in 1929, shortly before the great crash that might have brought him grim satisfaction), is best known today for his theory of conspicuous consumption, which argued that a lot of spending is just a wasteful attempt to impress. In effect, Veblen explained consumerism in terms of status and display, bringing evolutionary ideas to bear on eco-

nomics and consumer behavior to powerful effect. Reading Veblen is a little like reading Freud or Darwin, albeit on a smaller scale: Do so and you'll never look at the world in quite the same way again.

As you might imagine, the iconoclastic Veblen took a dim view of all the conspicuous consumption around him, regarding it as a species of giant potlatch in which competitive waste had run amok. You might call Veblen's the voice of thrift, and it is still heard today from leftist intellectuals who, from their tenured pulpits and Arts and Crafts homes, reliably denounce the spending of others. The truth is that nobody listens to these people, except to submit to their periodic floggings as a kind of penance for sins we have no intention of ceasing.

But there was another voice heard back when thrift was in its death throes—that of Simon Patten (1852–1922),

AMERICA TRANSFORMED itself from a nation of want into one of, well, *wants*.

like Veblen a maladjusted economist who had strong ideas about spending. Patten can seem naive and even crass to us today, for he used his pulpit at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School to advocate the very thing that Marx feared: that business and consumer spending should sweep away all the old arrangements and remake the world according to the doctrine of plenty. And he imagined a large role for economists in the running of it.

Unlike Veblen, Patten came on the scene not to praise thrift but to bury it. The old values that “inculcated a spirit of resignation” and “emphasized the repression of wants” must be abandoned, Patten argued, adding, “The principle of sacrifice continues to be exalted by moralists at the very time when the social structure is being changed by the slow submergence of the primeval world, and the appearance of a land of unmeasured resources with a hoard of mobilized wealth.”

Patten was hugely influential in his time, especially in helping liberals to see that something like Adam Smith's “universal opulence” should be a goal and not a cause for shame. His genius was in recognizing capitalism's poten-

tial for realizing something like a modern Cockaigne, the mythical land of plenty that beguiled the suffering masses in the Middle Ages. Patten's thinking opened the door to such later fulfillment-oriented intellectuals as Abraham Maslow and Herbert Marcuse, who implicitly (or explicitly) disparaged the idea of deferring gratification—a notion that would come to seem as pointlessly self-

which Americans saved roughly a quarter of their income), nobody was too focused on thrift, and I can't say I blame them. Besides, spending stimulated the economy, which was something like a patriotic duty. In his 1954 study *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*, David M. Potter said of the contemporary American that "society expects him to consume his quota

of goods—of automobiles, of whiskey, of television sets—by maintaining a certain standard of living, and it regards him as a 'good guy' for absorbing his share, while it snickers at the prudent, self-denying, abstemious thrift that an earlier generation would have respected." Or as William H. Whyte put it in *The*

MODERN AMERICA has foisted on the world those four horsemen of the financial apocalypse: the automobile, the television, the credit card, and the shopping cart.

sacrificial as postponing happiness until the afterlife.

In important ways Patten and Veblen were both right about consumerism, but of the two Patten was the true radical. Beside his starry-eyed utopianism Veblen's sour conservatism is plain to see. As things turned out, it's Patten's world we live in, even if we use the language of Veblen to understand it.

Patten and Veblen both died in the 1920s, a decade when affluence, technology, and changing social mores joined forces to drive a stake through the heart of pecuniary restraint. Since then, modern America has effectively banished thrift by foisting on the world those four horsemen of the financial apocalypse: the automobile, the television, the credit card, and the shopping cart. Besides costing money to buy and operate, cars opened up the landscape so that more Americans could have bigger houses on bigger lots. To fill them up, people enjoyed the dubious guidance of television, which helped them figure out what they should want. Credit cards enabled us to conjure money on the spot to pay for stuff. And the shopping cart, unthinkable in traditional department stores but indispensable in their demotic successors—Wal-Mart and Target—gave Americans a way to get all that booty out to the automobile, which they could use to drive it home.

After the hardships of the Great Depression and the rationing and other deprivations of World War II (during

Organization Man (1956), "Thrift is becoming a little un-American."

Unfortunately, for a people who love money, we've become very good at making it disappear, a task to which we've brought characteristic ingenuity and verve. Reckless overspending was until recently a course open to practically every American, just like reckless investing. And suddenly we were all Emma Bovary, bent on financial suicide. "It is because she feels that society is fettering her imagination, her body, her dreams, her appetites," Mario Vargas Llosa once wrote, "that Emma suffers, commits adultery, lies, steals, and in the end kills herself."

He might well have been describing America, circa 2007. Four-dollar coffee drinks? Fourteen-dollar cocktails? Bottled water from Fiji, priced higher than gasoline? You've got to be kidding. Now that it's safe to come clean, I will confess to having been a bit of a refusenik about all this for most of my, er, 39 years on this earth. Every stick of furniture in my house is secondhand, as are many of my family's clothes, computers, bicycles, books, pieces of art, and other items. We've mostly had used cars, and we still have the new ones we bought in a single mad burst in 2001. The funny thing is, it's amazing what a nice life you can have with a middle-class income and Jack Benny's attitude about money.

More people are waking up to this particular old-time



Now that thrift is cool, secondhand goods have a whole new life.

religion. Since early 2008 personal saving has crept back up a few percentage points above zero (much to the consternation of stimulus-minded economists), and some long-term trends are likely to reinforce today's renewed interest in controlling spending.

It helps that conspicuous consumption, like tobacco, has fallen into social disrepute, a change that removes some of the pressure felt by many families to keep up with the Joneses (who may well have been foreclosed by now). Veblen was right that much spending is meant to be conspicuous, and if the display incentives surrounding consumption have changed, so will consumption.

Rising environmental consciousness ought to be a further spur to thrift, for what could possibly be greener—or more demonstrative of piety—than eschewing wasteful consumption? Although cutting global greenhouse emissions by building new power plants and the like can be expensive, many of the ways individuals can make a difference will actually put money in your pocket: eating less red meat, driving a fuel-efficient car, and taking fewer planet-warming plane trips, to name a few. The same goes for buying less stuff; making do with what you have or going secondhand uses fewer resources and of course reduces spending as well. A rising scavenger subculture threatens to erase the stigma that was associated with “garbage picking” when I was a kid, transforming shame into virtue. Like so many other things, this

“freecycling” is abetted by Craigslist.

You'll need to consider garbage picking now and then because in the years ahead we'll have to pay not only for our individual and collective overspending in the boom years, but also for our gigantic national outlays during the ensuing crash to bail out banks, insurers, and automakers and stimulate the economy to stave off a depression. We've been paying for all this by borrowing, so expect to pay higher taxes to retire

these debts. Speaking of retirement, have I mentioned Social Security and Medicare? Maybe I shouldn't.

So do our straitened circumstances give Jack Benny any more sex appeal? It's hard to believe he could make it on *American Idol*, but we might learn something from him nonetheless, for as any behavioral economist can tell you, there was method in his money-storing madness. From whom, after all, was he protecting his savings if not himself? Self-protective “commitment devices” like Benny's moats and alligators are already being used here and there—deposits to your retirement account are defended by hungry tax collectors, after all—and if we're smart, we'll use them even more in the future.

Fortunately, thrift is far from the worst thing we can have thrust upon us. To be thrifty, after all, is to save, and to save is not only to keep but to rescue. Thrift is thus a way to redeem yourself not just from the unsexy bondage of indebtedness but also from subjugation to people and efforts that are meaningless to you, or worse. Debt means staying in a pointless job, failing to support needy people or worthwhile causes, accepting the strings that come with dependence, and gritting your teeth when your boss asks you to do something unethical (instead of saying “drop dead”). Ultimately, thrift delivers not just freedom but salvation—which makes it a bargain even Jack Benny could love. ■

The Global Savings Tsunamis

The global economic crisis has some surprising causes, but who would have guessed that overzealous saving was one of them?

BY ROBERT Z. ALIBER

RENOWNED ECONOMIST JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES explained the crisis of the Great Depression in terms of the “paradox of thrift”: Individual saving is a private virtue, but when many individuals rapidly increase their savings at the same time, the demand for goods and services will drop and the unemployment rate will rise. In the last 30 years, as national financial markets have become increasingly integrated, some countries with exceptionally high savings rates—Singapore, Japan, China—have made an end run around Keynes’s paradox and exported some of their excess savings to their trading partners, in particular, the United States.

The huge global pool of savings that has accumulated in this way over the last few decades, now amounting to trillions of dollars, has been the source of four successive tsunamis that have first uplifted, then flattened, some of the world’s leading economies. The first tsunami struck Mexico, Brazil, and other developing countries in the 1970s; the second hit Japan and three Nordic countries in the late 1980s; another swamped Thailand, Malaysia, Russia, and eventually Argentina in the mid-1990s. We

are now living in the aftermath of the fourth tsunami.

The pattern has been similar each time. The tsunami brings a deluge of money into a country, causing its currency to appreciate and prices of real estate and of stocks to rise. Its economy booms. Rational exuberance morphs into irrational exuberance—a bubble develops. But eventually the inflows decline and the national currency often crashes, with disastrous consequences. The party ends abruptly and painfully. In the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, stock market indexes plunged throughout the region and unemployment in Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand soared. On Wall Street and in other global finance centers, banks and other big institutions trembled, and some collapsed. The crisis in Russia in 1998, for example, delivered the coup de grâce to the U.S. hedge fund Long-Term Capital Management.

The tsunamis are an indirect consequence of a dramatic change in international money flows that began around 1980. Until then, the United States had been far and away the world’s largest creditor and source of investment money. American savings began to flow abroad during World War I, initially when the United States helped the British and French finance their war efforts, and then in the 1920s as more dollars poured into private investments and government bonds. By the early 1940s, the United States was the world’s largest foreign investor. By 1980, its net for-

ROBERT Z. ALIBER, a former Woodrow Wilson Center fellow, is professor emeritus of international economics and finance at the Graduate School of Business of the University of Chicago. He is the author of *The Multinational Paradigm* (1993) and *The New International Money Game* (rev. ed. 2000), and brought out the fifth edition of Charles P. Kindleberger’s classic *Manias, Panics, and Crashes: A History of Financial Crises* in 2005.



The global savings pool, now amounting to trillions of dollars, is the source of the four tsunamis that have devastated some of the world's leading economies.

ign assets (assets minus liabilities) were larger than those of all other creditor countries combined.

But the next 20 years brought a reversal of unprecedented proportions. By 2000, America's net foreign liabilities had become larger than those of all other debtor countries combined, and its liabilities were still growing rapidly as foreign savings surged into Treasury bills and other dollar-denominated securities. The shift was amazingly rapid. Britain was the world's largest net creditor before the United States took its place nearly 100 years ago, and despite the extraordinary costs of two world wars, the island nation remained an international creditor until just a few years ago.

The change in America's international investment position did not occur because the U.S. Treasury or major American corporations borrowed money in yen or yuan. Foreign savings "crowded in" to the United States, and the U.S. economy adjusted to accommodate the inflow: Interest rates fell, so Americans saved less and consumed more.

In the 1980s and '90s, more of these savings came from

Japan than from any other country. As its economy matured and its growth slowed after the post-World War II recovery, Japan's domestic investment declined, and the excess savings flowed abroad. The Japanese invested most of that money in dollar securities, where it would be safe and liquid. Other Asian countries—Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and most recently China—have followed the same path. As of April, China held \$764 billion in U.S. Treasury securities—more than any other country—and many billions more in other dollar investments.

This is not the first time that excess domestic savings have entered the international economy. Countries that grow rapidly almost always generate extra cash as their economies mature and their domestic investment declines—it is as if it takes time for households to realize their good fortune and increase their consumption. In the 17th century, the Dutch generated enormous savings to finance the draining and development of their lowlands, and as that

work was completed they continued to save at high levels and began to invest overseas. They were succeeded as the major exporter of savings by the British in the 19th century and the Americans in the 20th.

Two factors distinguish the savings tsunamis of the past 35 years from earlier experiences. One is that the volume of savings in various Asian countries has been extraordinary—as high as 40 or 50 percent of their gross domestic products. This Herculean thrift is not only the product of personal virtue. A variety of government policies, from low interest rates to mandatory savings laws, keep ordinary people as well as corporations socking large quantities of money away.

The second crucial difference lies in how the savings have been invested. In the past, the United States and other creditors acquired longer-term overseas investments, such as foreign companies, stocks, and bonds. But Japan and other creditor countries today keep a very high proportion of their foreign holdings in short-term assets (securities that are essentially liquid or, at most, mature in a few months' time), such as Treasury bills and bank deposits—potential “hot money” that can be moved quickly to anywhere in the world.

The big international banks that take short-term dollar deposits from the Bank of Japan, the People's Bank of China, and other central banks are always seeking profitable ways to invest this money. And in many countries where they do business, they can often make loans at interest rates significantly below those offered by their domestic banks. In the 1970s, when the deposits came from Saudi Arabia and other oil exporters, the banks engaged in “petrodollar recycling”—lending generously to governments and government-owned firms in Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and other developing countries. Amid surging commodity prices for their products, the Latin American economies were booming, the demand for new roads, bridges, and other infrastructure was high, and it seemed the good times would never end. “Countries don't go bankrupt,” one of the world's leading bankers declared. The Latin American debt crisis, which was triggered by the Mexican government's default in the middle of 1982 and resulted in years of economic and political pain throughout the region, proved him wrong, but the lesson never seems to sink in.

Recently, China has begun to question the dollar's

role as the world's dominant reserve currency. But no one obliged China to buy hundreds of billions of dollars of U.S. Treasury bills and bonds. Its central bank could have bought securities denominated in the Albanian lek or the Zambian kwacha. Beijing buys dollars primarily because the low value of the yuan enables the Chinese to sell vast quantities of goods to the United States. China's leaders depend on exports to create the tens of millions of manufacturing jobs in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Xiamen they need to keep the social peace.

It would be a great boon to American manufacturing firms if China were to end its currency protectionism. The yuan would appreciate sharply, reducing China's exports. America's trade deficit would shrink. But Beijing is not likely to let market forces determine the value of its currency. And if it were to begin buying many more yen or euros instead of dollars, as it sometimes suggests it will, politicians from Tokyo to Paris would go ballistic. They would accuse the Chinese of following a classic “beggar-thy-neighbor” policy, keeping the value of the yuan artificially low and thus increasing China's exports to their countries. So China's leaders will continue to buy dollars, even as they complain loudly that the United States' trade and fiscal deficits are too large.

Over the next few years, the global savings glut will become even larger. Sluggish economic growth around the world will expand the pool of global savings, and most of the money will be used to buy dollar-denominated securities, for the simple reason that they remain the most attractive investment. That means that governments in the United States and Europe are likely to find it relatively easy to finance the enormous fiscal deficits that lie before them. It also means that inflation rates in these countries are likely to remain low.

But another, less comforting implication of continued growth in global savings is that more money will flow to countries outside the United States and Europe. Some will see their currencies appreciate, and before long they will experience “irrational exuberance.” Then will come the collapse—a shock both to these countries and to the global economic system. We have seen the pattern before. The question is, where will the next tsunami strike: India? Brazil? South Korea? ■

What Makes Mr. Zhang Save?

Why are the Chinese such legendary savers? The answers shed light on why that habit is about to change.

BY MICHAEL PETTIS

IN THE ANNALS OF THRIFT, FEW FEATS RIVAL THE accomplishments of China, Japan, and other East Asian nations during the past 30 years. China's workers and institutions now bank some \$2.5 trillion a year, just over half their total income, while their Asian counterparts put away nearly as much, creating a vast pool of savings that has transformed the global economy. While the sons and daughters of the middle class and the rich throng China's many malls to window-shop, their poorer peers, as well as their parents and grandparents, still salt away a large share of their weekly paychecks.

The easiest and probably most widely accepted explanation for what looks like extraordinary self-discipline is the power of Confucian culture. That explanation makes a certain sense—East Asian immigrants in the United States are also famously thrifty—yet there is not as much to it as one might think. For much of China's history, the Confucian culture was actually considered inimical to both the accrual of savings and rapid economic growth. As far back as the fifth century BC, critics bewailed the laziness and spendthrift ways of the

Confucians. The philosopher Mozi (ca. 470–ca. 391 BC) complained that the Confucian

turns his back on what is basic by refusing to work, and contents himself with laziness and arrogance. . . . In the summer he begs for grain, but once the harvest is in, he goes chasing after big funerals. All his children follow him there, to eat and drink their fill. If he can manage a few of these, it will be enough to get by. . . . When a wealthy family requires a funeral, he is delighted. "Here," he says gleefully, "is the spring from which food and clothing flow!"

Two and a half millennia later, in the 1950s and early '60s, many Western sociologists and economists agreed with Mozi. The puzzle then was to explain East Asia's desperate and seemingly invincible poverty. Drawing on Max Weber's portrait of the building blocks of capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), they confidently explained that Confucian notions of family, morality, and prestige made the systematic creation of wealth through business and technological inno-

MICHAEL PETTIS is a finance professor at Peking University and a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

vation almost impossible in East Asia. Confucian spending patterns, especially the expensive rites and burial customs associated with ancestor worship, also made it difficult for Chinese households to accumulate enough wealth to fund capitalist enterprises.

Yet by the 1980s, when Japan and the Asian

rapid growth has not been in household savings but in corporate savings.)

Demographic trends are another more-or-less intractable influence on savings. Since the mid-1970s, China's working-age population has grown at a much faster pace than its population as a whole. In effect, this at least partially explains why production has increased

faster than Chinese society's ability to absorb what it produces. The result: The savings rate has increased. But this demographic trend will reverse in the next four or five years, as the smaller cohorts created by China's one-child policy come to the fore and the country's

IN THE UNITED STATES, people tend to save less when interest rates are low, but in China and many other Asian countries, the opposite is true.

Tigers were suddenly riding high, analysts had no difficulty arguing that it was precisely the Confucian characteristics of these societies that explained their success. Confucian ideals of harmony between government and business interests and Confucian concerns with honesty, probity, and responsibility—like Quaker beliefs in 18th-century England—had created the foundation for a thriving business culture. Then came the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis. The old arguments about the handicaps of Confucian culture, especially the contention that “harmony” is often little more than a euphemism for corruption, made a temporary comeback.

Confucianism, in other words, is too flexible an explanation for Asian development if it can account for poverty as easily as it explains wealth. And it is very clear that other factors play a major role in making the Chinese and other East Asians such prodigious savers. Some of these factors are beyond the direct influence of policymakers. It is an established pattern in most poor countries that begin experiencing rapid economic growth that spending on furniture, clothing, motorbikes, televisions, and other consumer goods rarely grows as quickly as income. The surplus goes into savings. That is precisely what has happened in China, where savings have risen from 20 percent of the gross domestic product in 1981 to more than 50 percent today. (In recent years, the most

working-age population begins to contract much more rapidly than the total population. As this happens, Chinese consumption should begin to catch up with and perhaps even outpace Chinese production.

It is also often said that the Chinese save so much because a big bank account is the only insurance they have against medical disasters, periods of unemployment, and retirement needs. The government has publicly stated its urgent desire to provide a medical safety net, but for now Chinese families are on their own when it comes to covering medical bills, and the popular press is full of horror stories of bedridden patients forced to leave hospitals when their payment accounts, which patients typically must open at hospitals before being admitted, run out of money. But there are limits to this explanation. Many other developing countries with spindly social safety nets have low savings rates, while Japan in the 1980s had strong supports and very high savings rates at the same time. Although China's leaders claim to be eager to create a social safety net, even if they succeed it will be many years before ordinary people trust the system enough to reduce their savings commensurately.

In addition to all these difficult-to-control factors that influence thrift, there are significant policies that governments in East Asia have explicitly or implicitly designed to constrain consumption and boost savings. These policies, many of them directly or indirectly

related to industry and trade, have probably had a much bigger impact on savings than many observers recognize. This is because any policy that causes production to grow faster than consumption must necessarily also boost the trade surplus and the domestic savings rate.

For example, the People's Bank of China, whose responsibilities include setting base lending and deposit rates for all the institutions in the banking system, has kept interest rates much lower than what we would normally expect of countries at China's stage of development. The goal has been to provide cheap capital for investment in domestic manufacturing, and the government has succeeded so well that, not surprisingly, it has fostered the misallocation of capital on a huge scale. China's banks are weighed down with bad loans they never would have made if capital wasn't so abundant. The need to protect bank profits from these mistakes has given regulators strong incentives to guarantee those profits by keeping the rates available to depositors even lower than the low corporate lending rates.

As a result, China's Joe Sixpack—call him Mr. Zhang—earns tiny returns on his savings. Demand deposits are currently capped at 0.36 percent a year, while three-month CDs return a measly 1.71 percent. For the past several years rates have been at best just a few percentage points more, even as inflation peaked at more than eight percent.

In the United States, people tend to save less when interest rates are low. A decline in rates usually goes hand in hand with an upswing in real estate, stocks, and other



China's workers and institutions salt away more than half of their total income, some \$2.5 trillion a year.

investments, making Americans feel richer and less inclined to check off a hefty 401(k) paycheck deduction.

But in China and many other Asian countries, low rates seem to have the opposite effect. One reason is that few Chinese have the financial wherewithal to make stock or real estate investments (and the Chinese stock market is minuscule relative to the economy), and so most people must keep their savings in bank accounts, where they eke out meager gains. Low interest rates don't simply make Chinese savers feel poorer; given the large amount of bank savings, interest income is a significant fraction of total household income, so

low or even negative real interest rates (after the effect of inflation is deducted) make them poorer in fact. Thus, even as low-interest-rate policies slow consumption growth, they boost production by subsidizing loans to manufacturers. The result: a burgeoning trade surplus and soaring savings.

There are other trade- or industry-related policies that affect savings. China and many other East Asian countries are well known for keeping the value of their currencies low in order to promote exports, but these policies also have the effect of increasing savings. If the Chinese yuan is undervalued by 30 percent, as many economists believe, this has the same effect on prices as, for instance, increasing the cost of an \$89.99 Samsung mobile phone to \$119.99. No wonder Chinese consumers are wary of imports. The high cost of imported goods lowers the real value of household income and so reduces the incentive to buy consumer goods. It also boosts production by making exporters more profitable. As production outpaces consumption, the savings rate, which is the difference between the two, rises.

In general, we tend mistakenly to assume that only exchange-rate and tariff policies are trade-related policies, but in fact any policy that affects the gap between what is produced locally and what is consumed locally is implicitly a trade policy and also implicitly affects the savings rate. In that sense, the whole Asian development model can be seen as one whose policies are aimed directly at boosting savings and channeling them into investment.

This model is about to undergo serious change, and with it we can expect Asian savings rates to decline sharply. For the past 30 years, this model has been very successful in creating the conditions for rapid economic growth in the East Asian countries, but the consequences for the rest of the world have not been completely benign. It is a fact of economic life that when one part of the world produces more than it consumes, another part of the world must do the opposite. If this does not occur, the world must adjust, usually through a slowdown in growth. The high and rising savings rates that are encouraged in Asia, in other words, require that another part of the world experience low and declining savings rates.

For the past three decades, and especially since the turn of the 21st century, the United States has played the role of chief global consumer. American savings rates declined precipitously as those in Asia rose, and although economists argue ferociously about which change caused the other, no one doubts they are linked. That ineluctable connection is the reason why all of our assumptions about Asian savings rates are likely soon to be rendered obsolete.

One of the main causes of the current global economic crisis was the frenzied and unsustainable borrowing of Americans eager to continue their consumption binge. Now U.S. households must repair their tattered balance sheets. This they can do only by cutting back on consumption and saving more. But as American savings rates rise (which they have already done to a remarkable degree in just the past few months), there must be an offsetting adjustment elsewhere in the global economy. Americans simply are not going to be buying as many goodies as they once did.

That “elsewhere” is very likely to be Asia. In China and other Asian nations, savings will decrease as people either spend more of their money on goods and services or suffer a decline in income as industries that once exported goods to free-spending Americans shrink. The most likely outcome is a combination of the two. The streams of unemployed workers heading back to their home villages from the shuttered factories of Wenzhou and Guangzhou suggest that without an almost impossibly large boost in Chinese consumption, factories will stay closed for many more years.

No matter which path Asia follows over the longer term, the change in U.S. household behavior spells the end of the development model that has for several decades defined the policies of rapidly growing East Asian countries. If China makes the transition successfully, a decade from now we will be asking ourselves not why the Chinese save so much, but how people in such a poor country can afford the BMWs, fancy clothes, and Napa Valley wines they buy with such abandon. If China does not make a successful transition, Chinese consumers won’t be spending much, not because of their impossibly high savings rates but because of their country’s very slow economic growth. Either way, we are about to see a change in the legendary savings habit. ■

The New Normal

An era of debt-fueled consumption has come to an end, and with it the economic culture that created it. If government is going to fill in for consumers, it will need to be smart about how it spends.

BY MARTIN WALKER

THE ECONOMIST, HISTORIAN, AND DIPLOMAT John Kenneth Galbraith coined the phrase “private affluence and public squalor” in his 1958 book *The Affluent Society* to capture a paradox of contemporary American life. Throughout most periods of civilization, the greatest share of investment and adornment went into structures that served an essentially public purpose, from temples to palaces, government offices to banks, barracks to transport terminals. Most people, however, lived in considerably humbler and even squalid surroundings. The coming of the mass middle class and widespread prosperity began to change this pattern, particularly in the United States. The private home and its furnishings, the vacation home and its associated toys, became the focus of the great shift from public to private consumption.

In the 25 years from 1983 to 2008, this process entered a new and even extreme phase. For several decades after World War II, private consumption measured as a share of gross domestic product had remained within a range of 61 to 63 percent. But in 1983 consumption began a steady rise, peaking at 70 percent in 2007. Initially, this increase was fueled by the erosion of private savings, which declined from nine percent of GDP in 1982 to nearly zero in 2005. The rate change is

explained by the fact that homeowners were cashing in on the assumed increase in the value of their homes; by the end of the period, Americans were taking out some \$500 billion annually in home equity loans.

But the collapse of private savings was not the only distinguishing feature of this extraordinary period. Public investment, particularly in essential infrastructure, also declined. A report by the American Society of Civil Engineers puts the deficit in infrastructure investment at \$2.2 trillion this year, up from \$1.7 trillion in 2007. The report assigned a grade to each of 15 essential public services, including transit, bridges, and schools. The highest was a C plus, for solid waste disposal. Eleven of the 15 services rated a D, with drinking water, roads, inland waterways, and levees the worst, each graded D minus.

The United States in recent years has taken Galbraith's paradox of private affluence and public squalor not simply to an extreme, but almost to an absurdity. Like the grasshopper in Aesop's fable, who played as if the happy days would never end while the industrious ant prepared for the future, Americans stopped saving and stopped investing as they consumed on credit. The Great Recession has put an end to this. The personal savings rate has bounced back to almost six percent of GDP and personal consumption is declining, while President Barack Obama is committing more federal money to infrastructure and

MARTIN WALKER is a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center and senior director of A. T. Kearney's Global Business Policy Council. His latest novel, *Bruno, Chief of Police*, was published earlier this year by Knopf.

other public investments.

The decline in U.S. consumption is tough for everybody. It hurts American businesses and thus increases unemployment. It also hurts exporters from China and other countries who have grown accustomed to the ever-open maw of the American consumer, whose heroic appetite hauled the world economy out of the recessions of 1980–82, 1991–92, and 2001. One of the key questions hanging ominously over the global economy is whether Americans will

circle. At this point, Keynes maintained, the government should step in as the spender of last resort. The Obama administration, with its \$787 billion stimulus package, is following Keynes's advice.

But the stimulus is only part of what has been a massive increase in spending by the federal government, including loans and other bailout packages for the auto industry, banks, and other financial institutions. This year's federal budget deficit projection has climbed

to an unprecedented \$1.8 trillion. Big government is back, and bigger than ever, just 13 years after the last Democratic president, Bill Clinton, said its day was over.

This expanded role for the federal government is unlikely to shrink anytime

SAVING MONEY IS GOOD for individuals but grim for the economy when millions of others do the same thing.

permanently lower their consumption level toward the norm of other developed economies, which on average consume 60 to 63 percent of their GDP (basically, America's pre-1983 range).

Some key American business leaders believe that the change is permanent. Steve Ballmer of Microsoft says it represents "a fundamental economic reset," a theme echoed by Jeffrey Immelt of General Electric. "If you think this is only a cycle, you're just wrong. . . . There are going to be elements of the economy that will never be the same, ever," Immelt noted this year. "We're going to come out of this in a different world."

In cash terms, U.S. consumption in 2007 amounted to \$9.7 trillion—70 percent of the \$13.8 trillion GDP. At a rate only two percentage points lower, Americans would have spent \$300 billion less that year. At a "normal" rate of 63 percent, they would have spent \$1 *trillion* less. Enter "the paradox of thrift," a term coined by the economist John Maynard Keynes to describe the problem that follows when many individuals reduce their consumption and increase their savings. This may be good for their personal finances, but it can be grim for the economy as a whole when millions of others do the same thing, as companies reduce output and lay off workers, which reduces demand yet further in a vicious

soon. President Obama has made it clear that he intends to pursue his campaign pledges to impose new controls on greenhouse-gas emissions, spend more federal money on education and college grants, and enact health care reform. This year's federal budget is expected to amount to \$4 trillion, a post-World War II record 28 percent of America's GDP. In 2000, the government spent just 18 percent. State and local expenditures will bring total government spending up to 45 percent of GDP this year, which begins to approach the levels of the European welfare state, but then the total is projected to shrink back to 40 percent of GDP. That is still several points higher than the post-1945 average. If the recession is forcing American families to recall the virtues of thrift and frugality, their government is spending like never before except in times of total war. From Galbraith's private affluence and public squalor we have gone to private thrift and public largess.

While government is getting bigger, many of the other traditional pillars of the U.S. socioeconomic system are shrinking. Big Oil hardly deserves the title anymore, now that more than 80 percent of the world's known reserves are controlled by national oil corporations in countries such as Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela. Big Steel went long ago and Big Auto has followed suit. Big Media has been declining for years, with metropolitan newspapers collapsing and the three major televi-



In Lake Billy Chinook, Oregon, an entire community has gone off the grid, a harbinger of the thrift economy's transformation of American energy use.

sion networks losing their grip on the national audience to upstarts from Fox to YouTube. Big Pharma is under assault by smaller rivals and generic drug producers here and abroad. Big Banks have been dealt a body blow and some are still on government life support; they also face new competition. The old industrial economy with its familiar giants is ever more quickly transforming into a postindustrial system with new giants such as Microsoft and Google, Cisco and Amazon.

There is a measure of justice in the decline of these traditional big industries, because they bear a lot of responsibility for creating America's credit-fueled consumerism in the first place. For the auto industry, we can date this process precisely, to 1954, when industrial designer Brooks Stevens gave the first of what would become many lectures on his concept of "planned obsolescence." He defined this as "instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary." More cars, more credit, more debt—this was part of the formula that became the target of Vance Packard's 1960 bestseller *The Waste Makers*. Corporate America was engaged, Packard maintained, in "the systematic attempt of business to make us wasteful, debt-ridden, permanently discontented individuals."

The U.S. economic system of the past 50 years has been designed to destroy the culture of thrift by pro-

moting the culture of debt-enabled consumption. Banks and other financial institutions bombarded Americans with enticing offers for credit cards, home equity loans, and seductively easy mortgages that would permit them to buy the ever-larger houses with ever more bathrooms that became characteristic of the age. Big Media fattened itself on the advertising that promoted ever more consumption, ever more new models, and ever more "must-have" products.

It is not only the recession that has made clear how unsustainable this culture was. Before globalization, American consumerism at least meant an American manufacturing boom. After globalization, it meant an Asian manufacturing boom. But the shift from the old industrial system based on Big Auto to the new information economy based on Big Broadband encourages the revival of a thrift culture. It empowers individual consumers by giving them online access to price and product comparisons and the freedom to pay bills and shop from home rather than drive to bank branches and shopping malls. This makes price competition more intense, impelling retailers to find the cheapest possible wares, whether in China or Mexico. Technology and globalization enable the consumer to be thrifty, and the frugal consumer, price conscious and well informed, is becoming the new norm. And if that habit of frugality

persists, it will accelerate even further the systemic crisis now under way.

The clearest example of the direction in which we are heading is the transformation of our energy systems that is likely to occur over the next two decades, as we painfully make the transition to a carbon-light economy. One possible outcome of the change is that Big Utilities will be the next to go. Energy is going to be increasingly decentralized, with homes and buildings becoming producers as well as consumers. The growth of sustainable sources of energy such as solar and wind power can be overstated, but it is not far fetched to assume that within another decade, solar roof tiles, backyard windmills that generate electricity, and other small-scale technologies will be commonplace. And since buildings consume about 40 percent of energy in most developed societies, thorough insulation and home-produced energy can make an extraordinary difference in the total demand.

The United States is fortunate in its great size, which means that peak demand is staggered at different times across the country. With a “smart” national energy grid, “smart” appliances, and efficient long-distance energy transmission, the overall U.S. demand for energy can be dramatically reduced. But this won’t be easy. The national grid is structurally little changed since Thomas Edison’s day, although vastly bigger. It is a dumb system; for example, most utilities do not know where and when they have an outage until a customer calls to complain. A smart grid will change that, and by managing the shifting peak power use across regions will cut the need for excess generating capacity and thus reduce electricity bills.

Why should utilities invest in a future so unpromising for their revenues? That is where a smart federal government could step in. But there lies the problem. The Department of Energy’s publication *The Smart Grid: An Introduction* cites a study suggesting that the cost of building the grid would be around \$1.5 trillion over the next 20 years, or \$75 billion a year. But there is just \$4.5 billion for the Smart Grid Investment Program in President Obama’s \$787 billion stimulus package. Under a generous interpretation, the stimulus funds available for the smart grid system and related improvements come to a total of \$11 billion. That

is not even enough to make up for the decline in transmission investment over the last decade. Meanwhile, existing technology is aging. The average age of substation transformers in the United States is now 42 years, two years beyond their expected life span. Too much of the new federal money is likely to be spent fixing up the old rather than investing in the new.

It is the same with rail technology. The government recently designated 11 high-speed rail corridors for development. The maps look impressive. But the total funding is a puny \$8 billion, barely one percent of the overall stimulus package. This will hardly begin to make a difference. California voters last year authorized a bond issue for \$9 billion to help finance a 225 mph rail link between San Diego and San Francisco. But the full cost is estimated at \$45 billion.

In June, Vice President Joe Biden kicked off his well-publicized Road to Recovery tour in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where he hailed a new bridge being built with stimulus funds. He then went on to celebrate new highway projects in Kansas and Michigan. But roads and bridges combined got just \$27.5 billion of the stimulus package, about three percent of the funding. In fact, the largest item in the package was a \$116 billion tax cut (or credit) for individuals and the third largest was a \$70 billion adjustment to take some of the sting out of the alternative minimum tax. That’s \$186 billion of potential consumption. Despite the complaints about federal deficit spending and the debts piling up for the future, the sad fact is that the Obama administration is still underfunding the kinds of infrastructure—roads, rail, bridges, mass transit, and energy transmission—that the economy needs and that can pay for themselves over time.

Big Government is spending ever greater amounts, but it has barely begun to spend them intelligently. Thrift is becoming the new normal for the American consumer, at least until the debts are pared down. But lavish spending is becoming the new normal for the federal government, which remains wedded to the conviction that GDP growth must be promoted. If increasingly thrifty American consumers decline to open their wallets and go deeper into debt, their government is evidently ready and willing to do it for them. How long this can be sustained looks like the big political question looming ahead for the United States. ■

In ESSENCE

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FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

Goodbye to All That

THE SOURCE: "The King and Us" by David Ottaway, in *Foreign Affairs*, May–June 2009.

THE "SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP" between Saudi Arabia and the United States that began in 1945 died in the ashes of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, writes David Ottaway, senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center and author of *The King's Messenger: Prince Bandar bin Sultan and America's Tangled Relationship With Saudi Arabia* (2008). Today, Washington and Riyadh retreat into the special correctness of diplomatic-speak when they refer to their relationship. They call it a "strategic dialogue."

Fifteen of the 19 hijackers who carried out the 9/11 attacks were Saudis. Mastermind Osama bin Laden is the 17th son of one of the kingdom's most successful businessmen, and the largest contingent of "enemy combatants" scooped up on the battlefields of Afghanistan is of Saudi nationality.

Withering criticism of the Saudi royal family has caused it to almost entirely reverse its view of the United States since 9/11—from primary source of security to major cause of insecurity. King Abdullah shuns the role of "moderate ally" in the struggle against Iran, and is busy building ties to Europe, China, Russia, Pakistan, and Turkey.

Even before the attacks on the

World Trade Center, Crown Prince Abdullah, who became king in 2005, was angry over America's indifference to the Middle East peace process. In 2002 he proposed that the Arab world normalize relations with Israel in return for an independent Palestinian state and a return to the pre-1967 Israeli borders, but President George W. Bush "did nothing" until a belated and unsuccessful 2007 conference, Ottaway writes. Moreover, the American invasion of Iraq installed a Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad, tipping the balance of power in the Middle East toward



President Barack Obama and Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah met for the first time in April.

majority-Shiite Iran and away from Sunni Arab nations such as Saudi Arabia.

The traditional quid pro quo—American security guarantees for Saudi oil—no longer works for either side. It's been five years since Saudi Arabia could significantly influence oil prices. When Riyadh boosts production in an effort to lower prices, or pumps less oil to try to prevent a global price collapse, it fails. Another potential difficulty is the uncertainty of the nation's future leadership. Abdullah is 86 years old, and his designated successor is 85 and suffering from cancer. The king has established a council of his 35 half-brothers and their sons to select his heir, but the council is untested.

Even so, the United States and the kingdom retain common interests: Saudi Arabia has more oil than any other state, and America uses more. Both face threats from Al Qaeda and want to thwart Iran's nuclear and political ambitions. And the two nations expect each other to help solve the world's economic crisis. They manage to cooperate on counterterrorism, to hold joint military exercises, and to educate thousands of Saudis in American universities. They share the goal of stability in Pakistan and the Middle East, but the Saudis regard the buildup of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan as foolhardy.

The Obama administration, Ottaway writes, should seek cooperation where it can, and, in particular, strive for a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to restore Arab trust. The Saudis seek a quick U.S. economic recovery to

boost a depressed world economy and create a market for more oil. Putting their money where their mouth is, they have loyally supported the American dollar against pressure from other Arab states to calculate oil payments in other currencies. In this instance, their faith has been vindicated, Ottaway says. Other nations—even powerful China—have sought a safe harbor amid the economic crisis by buying more U.S. Treasury bonds.

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

Terror Intelligence

THE SOURCE: "The 9/11 Attacks—A Study of Al Qaeda's Use of Intelligence and Counterintelligence" by Gaetano Joe Ilardi, in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, March 2009.

FOR MANY AMERICANS, AL Qaeda's slaughter of nearly 3,000 innocent people on 9/11 epitomizes irrationality, fanaticism, and madness. But, in fact, the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington in 2001 were slowly and meticulously planned over five or more years, then trained for, practiced, tested, and subjected to modified dry runs, notes Gaetano Joe Ilardi, a police officer and postdoctoral researcher at Monash University in the Australian state of Victoria.

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, mastermind of the 9/11 plot, cultivated expertise in an array of terrorism techniques, from car and aircraft bombing to political assassination and reservoir poisoning. When he briefed Osama

bin Laden in mid-1996 on his scheme to crash planes into buildings in the United States, bin Laden was initially noncommittal, apparently because he thought the plan was too complicated. But two years later, he was sold.

Within months, Khalid began collecting intelligence, Ilardi writes. Initially, he scanned aviation magazines and airline timetables, acquired flight simulator software, and watched hijacking movie thrillers. Soon, newly recruited suicide operatives were taking a short course on how to conduct reconnaissance. They cased planes they intended to hijack, sitting in first class to observe the cockpit doors, to see whether the captain entered the cabin during the flights, and to record the movements of the crew. One hijacker tried to hitch a ride in a cockpit jump seat by claiming that he was about to go to work for Egypt Air. He was kicked out when the crew realized he was lying; he failed in a second attempt to get inside the cockpit on the pretext of needing to retrieve a pen he had left behind. Multiple tests convinced the hijackers that the cockpit doors would be opened between 10 and 15 minutes into each flight. That allowed terrorists on different planes to gain access to the cockpit at approximately the same time.

In a test of potential weapons to gain control of the airplanes, a hijacker carried a box cutter into the cabin in his toiletries bag, then observed that when he took it out of his hand luggage, nobody paid

Extensive intelligence gathering convinced the 9/11 hijackers that they were safe operating in the United States and that their plans had not been compromised.

any attention. This gave the hijackers confidence that box cutters would suffice to subdue the crews. The hijackers also conducted reconnaissance flights along both the Washington and New York corridors, observing how easy it was to spot the World Trade Center towers. Bin Laden was determined to attack the White House, Ilardi writes. But as testing and intelligence gathering stepped up, the Executive Mansion apparently fell off the list for “navigation reasons.”

The extensive surveillance and intelligence gathering convinced the hijackers that they were safe operating in the United States and that their plans had not been compromised. They moved around freely, getting stopped by the police for traffic violations, having their luggage randomly scanned, and complaining to the authorities about street crime. They could have done their training almost anywhere else in the world, but they chose the United States, their terrorist target. They spent months in the country because of their strong confidence in Al Qaeda’s intelligence-gathering and security measures.

An Islamic jihad handbook notes that U.S. intelligence was once considered so powerful that “if a mouse entered America or came out of it you should be able to find a report about it in the archives of the American intelligence services.” On 9/11, that myth was destroyed.

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

Winging It

THE SOURCE: “Flying High, Thinking Big” by Tom Ruby, in *The American Interest*, May–June 2009.

GEN. DAVID PETRAEUS MAY BE a towering figure to Army, Navy, and Marine Corps brass, but the Ph.D.-packing general’s views on the importance of higher education don’t seem to have penetrated the leadership of the Air Force, writes Tom Ruby, an Air Force colonel. The nation’s youngest military service has developed a culture of anti-intellectualism.

An Air Force general spelled it out to faculty at a service academy in 2007: Nothing is more important than “deploying,” the unnamed general announced, “certainly nothing we do here.” That view has consequences for the service’s best officers, warns Ruby, who is on the Headquarters Air Force staff and has served in combat and staff positions around the world. In recent promotion boards, officers who had taken time off to earn a doctorate fared poorly in comparison with those who hadn’t.

Experience is valuable but can be a “wasting asset” in the rapidly changing conditions of combat. Just because airpower worked in a par-

ticular way once doesn’t mean it will work the same way again, Ruby says. “Misapplying experience is perhaps the surest route to failure.”

Only 1.3 percent of the Air Force’s officer corps holds doctoral degrees, and many of them are in the hard sciences, critical to research and development. This leaves a paucity of top officials with degrees in other areas. And the Air Force doesn’t send enough of its best-educated officers into the field to raise the intellectual bar, nor does it send its most promotable and command-ready officers to teach at its staff and war colleges. “The Air Force places a greater value on a major who is about to graduate from a service school than on a lieutenant colonel graduate of the same school who stayed on as a faculty member,” Ruby says. The service sees the major as “potential,” the lieutenant colonel as someone who missed the boat.

The capacity for conceptualization that, ideally, is enhanced by higher education allows officers to deal with future threats outside the framework of their own experiences. During World War II, 31 of 35 U.S. Army corps commanders had taught at the service schools. Sophisticated military education helped them analyze the complexities they faced without relying solely on heroic leadership or experience, of which they had little to prepare them for such a conflict.

“They won a massive, two-front war in less than four years from a standing start,” Ruby says. “You don’t need a Ph.D. to see the lesson in that.”

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Eight-Year Itch

THE SOURCE: "Running Unopposed: Assessing the Impact of Term Limits on Competition in Florida and Maine" by Eric Prier and Kevin Wagner, in *Politics and Policy*, Feb. 2009.

NO JURISDICTION IN AMERICA embraced legislative term limits more ardently than Florida, where in 1992 a record 77 percent of voters agreed to a constitutional amendment that throws the bums out of the statehouse after eight years.

Long before the first hanging chad ever dangled from the punch hole of a butterfly ballot, the Sunshine State was receiving bad reviews on democratic practice from a number of political scientists. Prior to the "one person, one vote" Supreme Court decisions of the 1960s, for exam-

ple, Florida was so malapportioned that 13 percent of its voters elected a majority of the state legislature. But even after apportionment was modernized, the rate of statehouse turnover remained low.

Term limits became the reformers' dream: They would boost competition, remove the incumbency advantage and speed up turnover, even improve opportunities for women and minorities. Unfortunately, according to political scientists Eric Prier and Kevin Wagner of Florida Atlantic University, things got worse almost as soon as the term limits kicked in.

Term limits in Florida appear to have created what are in effect eight-year terms for incumbents,

with little incentive to be concerned about aggregate public opinion or voters during the length of the term, the authors say. Instead of running against a sitting legislator, a challenger can just wait out the officeholder's remaining four years.

Competition rose after the first eight-year period, but was not sustained. In the 2004 primaries for the Florida House of Representatives, not a single opponent appeared on the ballot in 71 percent of the races for 120 seats. Many members had no opposition in either the primary or general election. And because candidates with no official challengers are automatically elected without appearing on the ballot, 11 senators took their seats after the election without a single vote cast for or against them.

Maine had a similar experience after voters approved term limits in 1993. Before term limits, Maine averaged about 58 unopposed primary races for its lower

EXCERPT

Prison Education

Most prison guards I've encountered speak and act as though the men inside are of another, sub-human species. That's the nature of the institution. . . . Legal rights sail like clouds—visible, beautiful, beyond reach—above conditions on the ground inside America's prisons. If Rushmore [a pseudonym] is representative, American prisons can best be understood in their day-to-

day practice not as the last reach of the laws and the judicial system devolving from the Constitution and Bill of Rights, but as small cities of men under uneasy occupation: there are insurgents and law-abiding citizens; the occupiers are outnumbered and under such stress that they can only rarely afford to acknowledge the difference. The laws inside Rushmore are those practiced by the cadre of guards who control the 60 acres inside its wall.

—MAXWELL COTTO, a pen name
for a volunteer prison teacher, in
Salmagundi (Spring–Summer 2009)

legislative house. After term limits, the average increased to 127 out of 151 possible contests.

Term limits were supposed to draw in a large new group of candidates to vie for public office and create “a more democratic, open, and active electoral environment populated by citizen legislators.” So far, the authors conclude, that claim has proven “almost entirely false.”

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Money for Metros

THE SOURCE: “Miracle Mets” by Bruce Katz, Mark Muro, and Jennifer Bradley, in *Democracy*, Spring 2009.

HERE’S SOME ADVICE FOR Washington: To get the most out of each stimulus dollar, focus on the country’s top metropolitan areas and forget about the states.

The 100 largest metro areas are the engines of the U.S. economy, write Bruce Katz, Mark Muro, and Jennifer Bradley, of the Brookings Institution’s Metropolitan Policy Program. Though these urban centers occupy just 12 percent of the nation’s land area, they generate two-thirds of its jobs and three-quarters of its gross domestic product. California has the eighth-largest economy in the world, but most of the activity is concentrated in just four metro areas. Together, the economies of Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, and San Jose are larger than India’s.

The federal government sends the bulk of infrastructure funds to states, whose departments of transportation tend to favor build-

ing new roads across wide expanses of rural land. If that money were invested instead in urban areas, its effects would be far greater, the authors say. In dense locations, more people benefit from improved infrastructure.

But Washington is ill equipped to coordinate the multiple levels of government in metro areas, many of which extend into multiple municipalities and even states. As a result, programs dealing with housing and schooling or transportation and energy “remain largely divorced from one another, precluding integrated problem-solving.”

Nearly 70 years ago, the historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. wrote: “These urban provinces, new to the American scene . . . face grave difficulties in meeting the essential needs of the aggregate population. . . . It is clear that new and unanticipated strains are being placed on the federal system framed by the Fathers for a simple agricultural economy.” It’s long past time, the authors say, for a new approach.

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

\$43 Million for What?

THE SOURCE: “Superfund Follies, Part II” by Daniel K. Benjamin, in *PERC Reports*, March 2009.

THE U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL Protection Agency’s Superfund program was created to clean up the nation’s worst toxic waste sites and draw renters and buyers to once contaminated areas. Twenty-nine years

and \$35 billion later, Clemson University economist Daniel K. Benjamin writes, the program has produced an average economic benefit per site “likely quite close to zero.”

The law was passed after the Love Canal disaster captured headlines across the country. Chemicals buried in an abandoned canal in upstate New York had begun oozing into basements, turning trees and vegetation black, and pooling on lawns and on a local school grounds. Hundreds of families were evacuated, and the site was eventually cleaned up at a cost of millions of dollars.

Earlier studies of a small number of Superfund cleanups have found substantial benefits. But Superfund sites are hard to compare to average housing tracts because they are often located in poor rural areas. Economists Michael Greenstone of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Justin Gallagher of the University of California, Berkeley, investigated what happened to housing prices, rental rates, population movements, and overall demographics in roughly 400 areas cleaned up under the Superfund law compared with 290 similar sites that narrowly missed being included because of a lack of money. They noted that there may be health and aesthetic benefits that were not captured in their data, but the bottom line was clear: Superfund expenditures made no difference in rents, sales, or desirability of adjacent housing, either immediately or even 20 years after the cleanup.

Benjamin says it’s possible that the hazards at the sites were overestimated by the EPA, or that the toxic

waste areas weren't adequately cleaned up. But when the price tag for the average Superfund cleanup is \$43 million without producing measurable results, Benjamin contends, Americans should face a painful conclusion: The "Superfund program is failing and it is time to stop pretending otherwise."

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Higher-Ed Bubble

THE SOURCE: "Will Higher Education Be the Next Bubble to Burst?" by Joseph Marr Cronin and Howard E. Horton, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 22, 2009.

AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE dot.com and housing markets, will the next irrationally inflated bubble to burst be higher education?

Educators Joseph Marr Cronin and Howard E. Horton think it might. With tuition, fees, and room

and board at dozens of private institutions now topping \$50,000 a year, some parents are questioning whether it is worth \$1,000 a week to send their kids to college. The middle class has traditionally paid for higher education through loans, but home equity has withered and jobs are at risk. Congress recently raised the Pell grant limit from \$4,731 to \$5,350 a year. Potentially a big deal for the federal budget, the increase doesn't even cover an extra week at some private universities.

College tuition and fees have increased 440 percent over the last quarter-century, more than four times the rate of inflation. And even demographics are conspiring against the current college finance model. The "baby-boom echo" that flooded so many colleges over the past few years crested with this year's high school senior class. From here on, enrollment is downhill for the foreseeable future. The state of Vermont expects to turn out 20 per-

cent fewer potential college freshmen by 2020, report Cronin, former Massachusetts secretary of educational affairs, and Horton, president of New England College of Business and Finance.

Cheaper alternatives to traditional higher education are increasingly available. The University of Phoenix now teaches upward of 300,000 students a year, half of them online. Applications to community colleges and other public institutions have already risen dramatically. Some former college presidents are proposing year-round school so that expensive facilities get used 52 weeks a year, instead of only about 30, and others are calling for three-year degrees.

Critics have highlighted the mounting costs of higher education for 30 years without having much impact. Maybe, the authors say, the economy is now in dire enough shape that the warnings will take.

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

Broadband Hype?

THE SOURCE: "The Internet and Local Wages: Convergence or Divergence?" by Chris Forman, Avi Goldfarb, and Shane Greenstein, and "The Broadband Bonus: Accounting for Broadband Internet's Impact on U.S. GDP" by Shane Greenstein and Ryan McDevitt, summarized in the *NBER Digest*, April 2009.

IT SEEMED INTUITIVELY OBVIOUS: If you made high-speed access to the Internet available in

sparsely populated areas, rural America would enjoy the same sort of economic boost that urban America did when broadband largely replaced slower dial-up Internet access during the last 10 years. Notably, it seemed obvious to President Barack Obama, whose \$789 billion economic stimulus bill

enacted by Congress in February included up to \$7.2 billion in grants and loans to expand high-speed access in remote corners of the country. A strong economy, Obama said, "means expanding broadband lines across America, so that a small business in a rural town can connect and compete with their counterparts anywhere in the world."

But as is sometimes the case, what seems obvious may in fact be wrong. Chris Forman, Avi Goldfarb, and Shane Greenstein, of the Georgia Institute of Technology, the University of Toronto, and

Northwestern University, respectively, found in a survey comparing economic performance in 1995 and 2000 in 2,743 counties that the introduction of advanced Internet services spelled wage gains mainly in areas that already enjoyed high wages.

Despite the theory that broadband would reduce the natural advantages of cities, Forman and colleagues find “little evidence that the Internet had much impact in rural areas,” and conclude that their results “do not support the use of subsidies to build infrastructure to lower that gap.” Many rural areas lack the highly skilled workforces necessary to capitalize on broadband.

In a separate paper, Greenstein and Ryan McDevitt, also of Northwestern, explore the economic growth generated by the switch to broadband. In September 2001, only 10 million American households had broadband Internet access, compared with 45 million that relied on slower dial-up. By March 2006, broadband had overtaken dial-up—47 million households to 34 million.

Certainly, surfing the Internet is more enjoyable when it's fast, but did the economy benefit from the switch to broadband? Greenstein and McDevitt say that payments for Internet access generated \$39 billion in 2006 with \$28 billion of the total coming from broadband.

The figures aren't pocket change, Greenstein and McDevitt say, but at less than 0.3 percent of gross domestic product they fall

far short of the “oversized” figures batted around Washington by policy analysts and lobbyists.

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

The Economists' Bailout

THE SOURCES: “Missing Links: An Intellectual Bailout” by Moisés Naím, in *Foreign Policy*, Jan.–Feb. 2009, “Goodbye, Homo Economicus” by Anatole Kaletsky, in *Prospect*, April 2009, and “A Question for the Economists” by Harvey Mansfield, in *The Weekly Standard*, April 13, 2009.

EARLY ON, AMERICANS BLAMED rapacious bankers, reckless borrowers, lax regulators, compromised politicians, and greedy CEOs for the financial crisis. Now, with the recession midway through its second year, the onus is spreading to economists. The financial crisis has destroyed the fiction that economics is a science, contends Moisés Naím, editor in chief of *Foreign Policy*. The profession needs an intellectual bailout.

First to go should be the pernicious concepts of “rational” investors and “efficient” markets, says economist Anatole Kaletsky, editor at large of the London-based *Times*. On the backs of these two adjectives, “academic economists erected an enor-

mous scaffolding of theoretical models, regulatory prescriptions, and computer simulations which allowed the practical bankers and politicians to build the towers of bad debt and bad policy” that have come thundering down. While it was always known that not every market was perfectly efficient, failures were chalked up to such problems as a lack of competition or tax distortions. Absent proof of collusion, fraud, tax distortions, or other anomalies, it was taken as axiomatic that competitive markets would deliver rational and efficient results.

The scandal of modern economics, according to Kaletsky, is that false theories developed a stranglehold on academia. The rational expectations hypothesis asserted that a market economy should be viewed as a mechanical system governed by clearly defined economic laws, immutable and universally understood. It allowed the construction of precise mathematical models for economic behavior. The efficient market hypothesis explained that financial markets, because they were populated by a multitude of rational and competitive players, would always reflect available information in the most accurate possible way. Such theories flourished because they “justified whatever outcomes the markets happened to decree—laissez-faire ideology, big salaries for top executives, and billions in bonuses for traders.”

Kaletsky argues that economics must be revolutionized or abandoned as an academic discipline. Instead of using oversimplified assumptions to create mathematical

According to one economist, the problem with his discipline is that false theories developed a stranglehold on academia.



Economists resume business as usual in the wake of economic devastation they failed to predict.

models that purport to reach precise numerical conclusions, economics must return to its roots in the all-too-human imprecision of the real world.

Economic giants such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and John Maynard Keynes could never land a university job today, he writes. They failed to produce precise econometric forecasts. Their analytical tools were mere words, not mathematics. They studied real human behavior in markets that actually existed and drew insights from history, psychology, and sociology.

Harvard political scientist Harvey Mansfield writes that while individual economists are generally sober and cautious, when they get together they give way to boyish, irrational exuberance over the accomplishments and prospects of their discipline. Yet they “failed to predict a crisis that has wiped out nearly half the wealth invested in the stock mar-

ket and elsewhere.”

Economics, like all sciences, perhaps, aims at the reduction and control of risk. Who among us, asks Mansfield, now believes that risk has been diminished and control over our lives vindicated by economics?

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

Speedy Spillovers

THE SOURCE: “Peers at Work” by Alexandre Mas and Enrico Moretti, in *American Economic Review*, March 2009.

WHEN A SPEEDY CASHIER steps up to a register in a row of supermarket checkout stations staffed by slower-moving clerks, a surprising “spillover effect” occurs, write Alexandre Mas and Enrico Moretti, economists at the University of California, Berkeley. The other cashiers who can see the faster worker speed up.

Mas and Moretti studied the

Placing even a single superworker among slower ones will boost the speed of the entire group.

productivity of 394 cashiers working for six stores in a national supermarket chain. They found that the introduction of a single superworker boosted the speed of the entire group by one percent. Such top achievers scanned and sometimes bagged 30 percent more items than their slowest counterparts. The slower cashiers apparently felt “peer pressure” to pick up the pace in the presence of the faster scanner to avoid shame, or even informal or formal “sanctions” for free riding, the authors conclude. And the closer a cashier was stationed to one of the speed demons, the more likely that cashier was to step it up. But the opposite did not happen. The faster workers seemed unaffected by the rate of their coworkers and didn’t flag. Once speedy, virtually always speedy, the authors found.

The sociology of the checkout world could save supermarket chains and other group production enterprises big money, Mas and Moretti write. Worker productivity is greater when high-skilled and low-skilled workers are scheduled on the same shift. For the firm they studied as a whole, achieving the optimum mix of workers could have saved 123,529 hours of labor annually. At current wages, this adds up to \$2.5 million every year.

SOCIETY

Is Sociology Dead?

THE SOURCE: "Exploring Genetics and Social Structure," a supplement to *American Journal of Sociology*, 2008.

THE FIRST LAW OF SOCIOLOGY, according to an old joke about the limits of social science, is "Some do, some don't." For more than a century, sociologists have been trying to tease out the answers to such questions as who votes, gets ahead, commits crimes, or goes to college. But while social scientists were producing complex narrative accounts of myriad causal factors, biologists decoded some three billion units of human DNA. Then geneticists released a tsunami of papers purporting to reveal a genetic basis for phenomena ranging from voting behavior to car wax preference. What's a sociologist to do if everything is inherited?

For nearly two decades, many of them have adopted a minimalist or even "know-nothing" mindset about genetic research. To write about something is to legitimate it, they have held, believing that the new focus on the genetics of behavior (particularly as it relates to race) might be a thinly veiled "return of the eugenicist project of the first half of the 20th century," writes Peter Bearman, a sociologist at Columbia University, who edited a special supplement to the *American Journal of Sociology* with sociologists Molly A. Martin of Pennsylvania State University and Sara Shostak of Brandeis University.

But "inattention" to genetics isn't likely to pass muster with the public or those who dole out research grants. Rather than try to debunk the role of genes in behavior, writes Northwestern sociologist Jeremy Freese, he is

willing to concede that "behavioral geneticists are (roughly) correct in concluding that virtually every outcome sociologists have cared to study about individuals is genetically 'heritable' to a nontrivial degree."

Consider, he suggests, early sexual activity among adolescents: If genetic differences are a partial cause of height, and height is a partial cause of attractiveness, and attractiveness is a partial cause of positive interactions with others, and positive interactions are a partial cause of self-esteem, and self-esteem is a partial cause of delayed first intercourse, then age at first intercourse is genetically influenced. The important point is that "sociological thinking is fundamental to explaining why."

In this dense, 316-page supplement to one of the nation's leading sociological journals, 29 scholars combined genetics and sociological research. Sociologist Bernice A. Pescosolido of Indiana University, Bloomington, with five collaborators, investigated the effects of a DNA variant present in some people called the GABRA2 gene,

EXCERPT

Too Much Visibility

The camera has created a culture of celebrity; the computer is creating a culture of connectivity. As the two technologies converge—broadband tipping the Web from text to image, social networking sites spreading the mesh of interconnection ever wider—the two cultures betray a common impulse. Celebrity and connectivity are both ways of becoming known.

This is what the contemporary self wants. It wants to be recognized, wants to be connected: It wants to be visible. . . . If the property that grounded the self, in Romanticism, was sincerity, and in modernism it was authenticity, then in postmodernism it is visibility.

So we live exclusively in relation to others, and what disappears from our lives is solitude. . . . But no real excellence, personal or social, artistic, philosophical, scientific, or moral, can arise without solitude.

—WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ, a literary critic and former Yale professor, in *The Chronicle Review* (Jan. 30, 2009)

which is associated with alcoholism. While there is strong evidence GABRA2 is linked to alcohol dependence, the gene doesn't automatically produce alcoholism the same way Gregor Mendel's pea plants reliably passed on traits. GABRA2 seems to have little or no effect on women, and the predisposition toward alcoholism of those with GABRA2 "virtually washes away" for men with supportive families, Pescosolido and colleagues found.

Guang Guo of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, studied the effect of the presence of the 9R/9R gene variant on the number of sexual partners young white men were likely to have. With two colleagues, he tracked the role of 9R/9R, which seems to be a kind of "good boy" marker associated with better grades, less binge drinking, and more seat belt

EXCERPT

Taste Test

[Since President Barack Obama's election] there's been a thick jam of optimism smeared on the burnt toast of my generation's apathy. Now we'll find out how the whole thing tastes.

—AKIVA FREIDLIN, a New York City writer, in *The Oxford American* (Spring 2009)

wearing, and which also appears to act as a kind of brake on sexual activity involving the dopamine transporter genes in the brain.

Although dopamine is not completely understood, its line of work has earned its label as "the feel-good chemical." Young male 9R/9R carriers (about six percent of the sample population) are less likely to engage in risky behaviors (such as having multi-

ple sexual partners) than similar young men with a different combination of genes—called the Any10R men. Guo and his colleagues, however, found that the "protective" effect of 9R/9R can easily be overwhelmed by environment. In schools where half or more of the 9R/9R group's fellow students have experienced sex by age 16, the "protective" effect of the 9R/9R gene vanished.

In fact, according to Guo, environment seems to play a bigger role in the sexual decision-making of 9R/9Rs than on their peers. When the 9R/9Rs were surrounded by other young men who had already become sexually active, their predicted number of partners more than tripled. For those without the 9R/9R genotype, peer pressure raised the number of partners by only a little more than 20 percent.

PRESS & MEDIA

The Web News Fallacy

THE SOURCE: "Print Is Still King: Only Three Percent of Newspaper Reading Happens Online" by Martin Langeveld, in Nieman Journalism Lab at www.niemanlab.org, April 13, 2009.

NEWSPAPERS ARE MIGRATING to the Web at a furious pace, and advertisers began fleeing there long ago. But one group has been left behind: readers. According to Mar-

tin Langeveld, a blogger at *News After Newspapers* and a former newspaper business executive, only three to four percent of newspaper reading occurs online.

The Newspaper Association of America estimates that newspapers have a daily print audience of 116.8 million. Each reader looks at 24 pages, about half the pages published in the average paper, and reads for

roughly 25 minutes. All this adds up to about 87 billion print page views per month. On the Web, the association says, Nielsen figures show that newspaper sites get 3.2 billion page views in an average month. Thus, the online share of newspaper readership is only 3.5 percent. All told, newspapers claim the attention of readers for a total of 99.5 billion minutes per month, with only three billion of those minutes spent in front of a computer screen, according to the Nieman Lab figures.

Langeveld's specific numbers have a back-of-the-envelope feel, but his general conclusion jibes with those of

Archive password: LECTURE

other writers who believe that the much-discussed tidal wave of newspaper readership moving from print to the Internet is more fantasy than fact. A British blogger has written that online sites account for only 17 percent of the page views by British newspaper readers. An important caveat is that total newspaper readership—including paper and electronic readers—has been sliding for 30 years. Circulation has dropped by more than 10 million since the late 1970s, reaching 48,408,000 last year. Many people are simply getting the news from other sources—or not at all.

Commenters on Langeveld's post questioned whether each newspaper copy is truly read by 2.128 readers, as the industry has long claimed, whether readers look at half of the pages in their papers every day, and whether they spend anything like 25 minutes at the task.

Langeveld maintains that the "pass-along" rate, showing that each paper copy is read by more than two people, is based on sound survey statistics. He acknowledges that his measures of pages read and time

spent are estimates. Even if they are cut in half, he says, they show that the overwhelming number of newspaper readers are still getting their fix from ink and dead trees.

PRESS & MEDIA

Cashiering the Critics

THE SOURCE: "Thinking on Film" by John Podhoretz, in *The Weekly Standard*, May 18, 2009.

THE NATION'S CADRE OF MOVIE reviewers has been shrinking so rapidly that by the end of the year only 10 to 15 American newspapers may still have their own film critics, writes John Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary* and movie critic for *The Weekly Standard*. The newspaper film critic may be well along the path of the ichthyosaurs, soon to be extinct.

It's a development much lamented . . . by movie critics, Podhoretz says. Readers, for the most part, don't care. Typical readers don't know the difference between a staff critic

and one who works for a wire service or moonlights as a reviewer after a day of, say, telemarketing. What the stereotypical Joe Reader wants, Podhoretz says, is not cinematically erudite film criticism but sports scores, stat boxes, TV schedules, and, especially, weather maps.

Although movie criticism has been around for a century, most of it has not been memorable, Podhoretz says. "One can count the standout critics throughout that time on maybe two hands."

Podhoretz isn't concerned over the supposed harm done to the "national cultural conversation" by the decline of salaried critics. That's because there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of nonprofessional critics reviewing feverishly on the Web. Amateurism may be the best thing that has happened to the field, he says. It will bring out some "very interesting work" by moviegoers who are seeking to "express themselves in relation to the work they're seeing" instead of cranking out 300 words per movie in return for a regular blip in their electronic deposit account at the bank.

HISTORY

Who Voted for Hitler?

THE SOURCE: "Ordinary Economic Voting Behavior in the Extraordinary Election of Adolf Hitler" by Gary King, Ori Rosen, Martin Tanner, and Alexander F. Wagner, in *The Journal of Economic History*, Dec. 2008.

NO QUESTION OF VOTING BEHAVIOR has been studied more extensively than how the Germans

managed to elect a party that destroyed democracy in their country and left Europe ravaged. The conclusion has generally been that the Nazi victory was a "unique historical case." Now an international team of interdisciplinary researchers has

compared voting results in six German elections between 1924 and 1933 with what is known about economic voting behavior in other countries. They find nothing unique about the Nazis' rise to power. Germans, like many other nationalities at many other times, voted according to what they perceived as their economic self-interest.

Harvard political scientist Gary King, University of Texas, El Paso mathematician Ori Rosen,

Northwestern University statistician Martin Tanner, and University of Zurich finance professor Alexander F. Wagner say that most previous analyses of German electoral results of the early 1930s were flawed. The “catch-all” theory—which describes the National Socialist Party as a protest organization that attracted people dissatisfied with other non-mainstream alternatives—doesn’t say anything useful about the Nazi election since it “applies to most groups and almost all big or growing parties in almost all countries.”

“Mass society” theory, which holds that citizens—primarily nonvoters—on the “social periphery” feel the strongest response to extremist parties, has rarely been tested against hard voting data, the authors say. “Class theory,” which suggests that various social groups were radicalized in different ways, has foundered because researchers disagreed on who precisely was radicalized to vote for the Nazis. Sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset wrote that the typical Nazi voter was a middle-class self-employed Protestant who lived on a farm or in a small community. By contrast, sociologist Richard F. Hamilton concluded that the upper classes (white-collar and self-employed Germans) were the bedrock of Nazi electoral support.

Germany suffered from hyperinflation in the 1920s and began sliding into economic depression in



Workers trudge ahead in the popular 1932 poster *Our Last Hope: Hitler*.

1927. The gross national product of the Weimar Republic contracted by a quarter; unemployment soared and incomes fell dramatically. Support for the Nazi Party, less than three percent of eligible voters in 1924, rose to 31 percent in July 1932, 27 percent in November 1932, and 39 percent in March 1933.

The new statistical analyses by King and his coauthors show that the two groups most affected by the Depression followed separate political paths. The unemployed turned primarily to the Communist party, which catered to them with a program calling for community property. The working poor, including independent artisans, shopkeepers, small farmers, lawyers, domestic workers, and family members of the working poor, disproportionately

supported the Nazis. These groups responded positively to Hitler’s denunciations of big business and government, promises of intensive development of Germany’s own economic resources, support of private property, and plans for expropriation of land from Jewish real estate owners and resettlement of the landless in eastern Germany. Hitler’s support was higher in Protestant areas than in Catholic regions, in part because the Catholic church strongly encouraged the faithful not to vote for the Nazis, and in part because the church ran relatively well-financed social welfare programs.

In the years after World War II, some leading Westerners argued for limiting democracy to stop the masses from electing demagogues like Hitler. King and his fellow researchers say the best way to stop such unhappy repetitions of history is to implement successful economic policies.

HISTORY

Repeating History in Juárez

THE SOURCE: “Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez: 1928–1936” by Nicole Motter, in *Mexican Studies*, Winter 2009.

IN EARLY MARCH MEXICAN soldiers rolled into Ciudad Juárez, which lies just across the border from El Paso, to stop a murder campaign

by rival narcotics gangs that was killing an average of four people a day. From an American vantage point the military operation seemed extraordinary. But Nicole Mottier, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Chicago, writes that from 1928 to 1936, long before the modern Juárez Cartel began terrorizing residents, Ciudad Juárez was already wracked by violence between competing drug kingpins.

During the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), the state of Chihuahua, where Juárez is located, was devastated by fighting and an ensuing economic depression. The state legislature was unable to meet between 1913 and 1920, and no governor managed to complete his term between 1920 and 1929. Agriculture, mining, and smaller industries in the state were ruined. Then the United States handed Mexican entrepreneurs a lucrative opportunity: Prohibition.

When Prohibition shuttered nightlife in El Paso in 1920, action hopped across the Rio Grande to Juárez. Gambling establishments flourished, and alcohol revenues were augmented by sales of drugs. At first,

The violence now wracking Ciudad Juárez has a long history.

the narcotics industry was run by Enrique Fernández, the popular “king of morphine,” who financed rural schools and paid for the funerals of paupers. Fernández contented himself with placing members of his drug gang in municipal offices and on the police force, while making strategic loans and payments to state and local officials, Mottier says. But in early 1931, he refused a loan request from the governor of Chihuahua. That turned out to be a serious miscalculation. The governor promptly “discovered” that Fernández was the “narcotic king of Ciudad Juárez” and stripped him of a profitable casino concession. Fernández was assassinated on a Mexico City street corner in 1934.

Meanwhile, the Quevedo family was rising to political power in Chihuahua. Rodrigo Quevedo, who had fought in the Revolution, became governor. His brothers, Jesús and

José, who ran drug operations that competed against the gangs of Fernández, according to Mottier, held various official posts, including such offices as *presidente municipal*, tax collector, state legislator, city councilor, and mayor. After Fernández was shot, the evidence he was carrying in his coat pocket against the Quevedo family disappeared. The Quevedo brothers won the drug war and the rival gangs merged.

The repeal of Prohibition in December 1933 nearly wiped out Juárez tourism for a time, and the Quevedo family lost wealth and influence. José Quevedo was eventually ousted from the municipal presidency, but only with the aid of federal troops.

HISTORY

The First Rule of Holes

THE SOURCE: “The American Colonies” by Stanley Weintraub, in *Dissent*, Winter 2009.

ARE THERE LESSONS FOR America in its own revolution that can be applied to Iraq and Afghan-

EXCERPT

Immodest Abe

In the end, it is not Lincoln the dreamer who is interesting, or Lincoln the poet, or Lincoln the lover, or Lincoln the backwoodsman, or Lincoln the autodidact, or even Lincoln the idealist. It is Lincoln the greatly intelligent—not Honest Old Abe but Shrewd

Old Abe. His ability to combine ambition with an innate ethicism, high idealism with Machiavellian craftiness, has perhaps never been matched. So far from being humble, as his image seemed to imply, he was supremely confident. As John Hay stated, “It is absurd to call him a modest man. No great man was ever modest.”

—**BROOKE ALLEN**, author of *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers* (2006) and other books, in *The Hudson Review* (Spring 2009)

istan? In a *Dissent* symposium on exit strategies, historian Stanley Weintraub, author of *Iron Tears: America's Battle for Freedom, Britain's Quagmire: 1775-1783* (2005), says he has found a few.

In the 1760s, Britain, fresh from defeating the French in North America, saw “only profit and prestige ahead” in its colonies. First, though, it was deemed necessary to rebuild the British economy, which had been pinched by fighting a seven-year war 3,000 miles from home. To Parliament, it made perfect sense to tax those who had benefited most from the war. But the colonists saw things differently, objecting to their lack of representation in Parliament, among many other grievances. British observers, such as Samuel Johnson, grumbled that the colonists were no less politically excluded than inhabitants of some of the teeming districts of London. Americans, he said, were “a race of convicts, and ought to be thankful for any thing we allow them short of hanging.”

Johnson's contempt was matched by that of many royal supremacists. In the 1770s, few of them recognized that “the sprawling overseas colonies, more than 1,800 miles north to south, would become more populous than the mother country and would be impossible to subdue.”

EXCERPT

A Second Life for Stalin

Wherever one looks, whether on boxes of chocolates to be found in Sheremetyevo Airport's duty-free shops, matchbook covers dedicated to “Political Placards of the (sic) Stalin's Epoch,” the mastheads of nationalistic newspapers, the recent reversion to the name Stalingrad for the city of Volgograd, statues in the Park of Monuments in Moscow, in the endless stream of books published monthly to be found in all bookshops, the reintroduction of the old Soviet national anthem, or the textbook of Soviet history approved by Vladimir Putin, it is clear that Josef Stalin, though removed from the Lenin mausoleum, is returning to the central place in the Russian national consciousness.

—JONATHAN BRENT, former editorial director of Yale University Press and author of *Inside the Stalin Archives* (2008), in *The New Criterion* (May 2009)

Yet as early as 1775, when hostilities broke out, Benjamin Franklin was able to do the math. “Britain, at the expence of three millions, has killed 150 Yankees this campaign, which is [£]20,000 a head. . . . During the same time 60,000 children have been born in America.” It was easy enough to “calculate the time and expence necessary to kill us all, and conquer our whole territory.” The Yankee war effort didn't have to be brilliant, just protracted.

King George III helped matters by dispatching a series of disastrous commanders, “ambitious careerists, with promotions, titles, and parliamentary gratuities dancing in their heads.” As these commanders of noble birth fumbled in the colonies,

a London newspaper jeeringly remarked on the contrast with the rebel generals: “a boat builder, a servant, a milkman, a jockey, a clerk.”

In 1776, London dispatched an armada to take New York City and Long Island that would not be surpassed in numbers until D-Day. But the British never managed to wipe out the rebels, while attrition gradually sapped the redcoats' ranks and spirit. Parliament took to hiring Hessians and other mercenaries. By February 1781, almost six years after the first shot was fired, a member of the House of Commons moved to end “this mad war,” but the measure failed by a single vote. The game finally

ended at Yorktown in October, with French intervention tipping the balance: “Third forces are often crucial,” Weintraub notes.

The real failing of the British, he writes, is that they “had no exit strategy other than victory.” Only after defeat did King George III recognize “the first rule of holes: When you realize you're in one, stop digging.” A lesson learned, but seldom followed. Weintraub adds, “Future governments would pour vast resources into subjugating, yet failing to assimilate . . . the subcontinent of India” as well as large parts of Africa, “all at staggering cost to the home islands. It was always foolhardy to be tempted to stay, and always too late to get out.”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Saint Chávez

THE SOURCE: "The Shah of Venezuela" by Enrique Krauze, in *The New Republic*, April 1, 2009.

IN LATIN AMERICA, FEW CATHOLICS take their religion straight, preferring to filter it through local patron saints or other intermediaries. Things are a little different in Venezuela, writes Enrique Krauze, the editor of the Mexican magazine *Letras Libres*. There, Catholicism is not as deeply ingrained as it is elsewhere in the region, and the intermediary is a secular hero, Simón Bolívar, "the Liberator." And it is to the national cult of Bolívar that Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chávez owes much of his popularity.

In the 1810s and '20s, Bolívar (1783–1830) and others led a series of military campaigns that freed Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Panama, Bolivia, and his native Venezuela from Spanish rule. But Bolívar's attempts to meld the newly independent states into a single country failed, and in 1830, having contemplated going into exile in Europe, he died of tuberculosis. In Venezuelan national mythology, reverence for the Liberator mingles with shame at having failed him—"treason," as the cardinal of Caracas described it in 1980—creating what Krauze calls a "Bolivarian passion story."

No Venezuelan has been more passionate in his adoration of the Liberator or more adept at appropriating the national obsession than Hugo Chávez. After his failed coup attempt in 1992, Chávez explained that "Bolívar and I want the country to change." At meetings during his subsequent rise as a political figure, Chávez would set an empty chair for Bolívar at the head of the table; in Chávez's "delirious universe," ac-



Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez has attached himself like glue to the nation's secular saint, Simón Bolívar.

cording to Krauze, "only he could hear the voice of his invisible guest." Chávez set himself up as the "High Priest" of the Bolivarian cult, and in his inaugural address after being elected president in 1998 spoke of the Liberator's resurrection. (He has since been reelected twice.) Chávez's followers have responded enthusiastically. "Bolívar lives, Bolívar is alive!" the crowds chant.

Chávez's other great influence has been Georgi V. Plekhanov, the "father of Russian Marxism" and the

author of *The Role of the Individual in History* (1898), which Chávez read as an army officer in the 1970s. In what Krauze calls an "idiosyncratic" reading of the book, Chávez interpreted it to mean that history "is the product of the collective being" and that he himself was an instrument of the collective—and thus essentially above judgment. (Chávez has said he is not a Marxist, which is a good thing, since Marx's writing on Bolívar drips with contempt.)

"Chávez does not act like the president of Venezuela; he acts like its owner," Krauze writes. His Sunday television show runs for a minimum of five hours and is filled with tall tales, dancing, and prayers.

For all the gaudiness of Chávez's self-conception, however, his rule rests on material pillars, and they are imperiled. The country's all-important oil export revenues may drop this year to less than one-third their 2008 level. The political opposition remains strong, and Venezuela has a deeply rooted civil society. Abroad, Chávez could find himself isolated if U.S.-Cuban relations warm under the Obama administration. But Chávez's greatest weakness is his own exaggerated sense of himself. Krauze fears that he will tighten his dictatorial grip and look to Iran for support, adapting the template of his idol in Cuba, Fidel Castro. "And then Venezuela, as so many times in its history, will be plunged into blood."

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Lessons of Babel

THE SOURCE: "Joseph (Smith) in Egypt: Babel, Hieroglyphs, and the Pure Language of Eden" by Samuel Brown, in *Church History*, March 2009.

OF ALL THE LESSONS OF GENESIS, few were taken more seriously by Joseph Smith (1805–44), the 19th-century prophet of the Mormon Church, than the account of the Tower of Babel. Mankind's effort to build a tower that would "reach unto heaven," according to the Bible, caused an angry God to "confound" the world's single original language and scattered people to the corners of the earth.

Smith, the leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, believed that the destruction of the universal language of the Israelites led to a confusion of meaning, dissonance, and religious sectarianism that plagued society even into the 1830s, writes Samuel Brown, a physician who is pursuing postresidency training at the University of Utah.

Smith's concern was part of a broad intellectual belief, wide-

Was the Tower of Babel a metaphor for the "infinite multiplications of opinion," errors, and strife within the Christian world?

spread in his time, that the corruption of language had led to the "infinite multiplications of opinion," errors, and strife within the Christian world. Philosopher-critic Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) thought the problem was not confined to religion. "The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language," he wrote. Methodist, Unitarian, and Congregationalist writers worried that language had become so degraded that it was impossible to convey religious truth.

Joseph Smith believed that ancient languages, particularly the one expressed in Egyptian hieroglyphs, provided a key to recovering the language of the Garden of Eden. This made it logical for Smith and his followers to purchase four mummies

and their papyruses from an entrepreneur who appeared at the temporary Mormon capital of Kirtland, Ohio, in 1835. They paid \$2,400, the equivalent of five years' income for an average farming family.

Only a few years earlier, Smith had miraculously translated the ancient Book of Mormon, the religion's founding text, from a language known as "Reformed Egyptian." It told the story of America's "first settlement by a colony that came from the Tower of Babel, at the confusion of languages," Brown writes. The papyruses Smith acquired in 1835 added details to that account, and enabled Smith and his followers to compile what they described as hieroglyphic grammar that would help guide Mormons toward understanding and, in time, speaking God's original language.

When the Millennium arrived, Brown writes, believers would stand with the original Adam near the primordial Garden of Eden. They would constitute "a human family united by language and mutual awareness, one whose members called each other by sacred and ancient names."

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Farming for Real

THE SOURCE: "Spoiled: Organic and Local Is So 2008" by Paul Roberts, in *Mother Jones*, March–April 2009.

THE \$4 HEIRLOOM TOMATO IS not going to save the world, writes Paul Roberts, author of *The End of*

Food (2008). Organic farming, locally grown vegetables, and vertical pea patches won't feed 6.7 billion people. Achieving truly sustainable farming will require more than merely sparing the herbicides and patronizing the local farmers' market. The expensive

agricultural techniques that have beguiled food activists may have passed their expiration dates.

Organic agriculture supplies less than three percent of America's food, Roberts writes, and ramping up acreage free of synthetic fertilizers to a global level is a chimera. Vaclav Smil, an environmental scientist at the University of Manitoba, says that such an expansion would "require complete elimination of all tropical rainforests, conversion of a



"Living Tower" is one of several vertical farm proposals, but critics say futuristic schemes and rigid insistence on organic methods undermine farmers' efforts to gradually improve agriculture.

large part of tropical and subtropical grasslands to cropland, and the return of a substantial share of the labor force to field farming."

Another greatest hit on the sustainable farming activist checklist is the concept of local food. But most eaters now live in cities, far from the producers. Close-in farmland either is economically prohibitive or requires farmers to concentrate on high-margin products—heirloom tomatoes and mache spring to mind—to survive. Moreover, rural communities can't sustain themselves economically by selling locally. One farmer in Oregon can grow more pears on a few hundred acres than the entire state can eat in a season, according to Roberts.

Dickson Despommier, a Columbia University professor and visionary champion of vertical farming, claims that a 30-story glass skyscraper using nonsoil farming could produce enough food on a single city block to feed 50,000 people. But his farm would cost \$200 mil-

lion to build. Other seers are promoting more modest vertical schemes, such as Sky Vegetables, which would use grocery store rooftops—for example, the four acres atop a typical Wal-Mart superstore.

But if sustainable food is to mean anything for more than the affluent few, long-distance transportation cannot be eliminated, Roberts argues. Parts of Asia and Africa are rapidly running out of water and arable land. And some things simply grow better in certain places.

The quest for the perfect sustainable system cannot be allowed to block the many pathways toward better food practice, Roberts says. Farmers who vastly reduce their use of synthetic fertilizer should not be treated as pariahs because they still use herbicides. The principle of reducing "food miles" might be advanced by curtailing fresh-raspberry airlifts from Mexico, but it shouldn't be used to undermine the efficient bulk-delivery systems supermarkets already have in place.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Medicine Meets the Computer

THE SOURCE: "Use of Electronic Health Records in U.S. Hospitals" by Ashish K. Jha et al., "No Small Change for the Health Information Economy" by Kenneth D. Mandl and Isaac S. Kohane, and "Stimulating the Adoption of Health Information Technology" by David Blumenthal, in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, April 16, March 26, and April 9, 2009.

THE ENDLESS MANILA FOLDERS that hold the medical history of most Americans seem curiously antiquated in a world of routine in vitro fertilization. So the Obama administration's \$19 billion effort to goad the medical establishment into computerizing medical records sounds like an easy part of the huge economic stimulus package. But there are monumental challenges in installing adaptable systems that will truly improve patient care and cut costs.

Only 1.5 percent of U.S. hospitals have electronic records systems covering all their clinical units; an additional 7.6 percent have systems in at least one such hospital division, writes Ashish K. Jha, M.D., who collaborated with seven colleagues at Harvard and one at George Washington University on a survey of 3,000 hospitals. Fewer than one in five doctors uses any kind of electronic records system.

Hospital officials attribute the delay to a lack of capital for the initial purchase and subsequent costs, as well as physician resistance and concerns over whether computerization would cost more than it would save. Privacy concerns, which loom large in the public discussion, were not among the most commonly cited barriers to implementation.

The Obama administration has offered extra Medicare payments of up to \$44,000 per doctor for “meaningful use” of a “certified” electronic health-record system and \$2 million bonuses to hospitals.

But in a world where technology changes at warp speed, will the newly named coordinator of the program, David Blumenthal, M.D., certify technology that is flexible and innovative enough to keep up with fast-changing medical and information systems?

Current technologies, write Kenneth D. Mandl, M.D., of Children’s Hospital in Boston and Isaac S. Kohane, M.D., of Harvard Medical School, can be expensive and rigid. Big decisions need to be made up front to prevent hospitals and doctors’ offices from buying the medical equivalent of VHS video-tape technology in a world that eventually might go Blu-ray.

“Ideally, system components should be not only interoperable but also substitutable,” Mandl and Kohane say. They cite as a model the

Computerized health care records may seem like a worthy goal, but will technology be flexible and innovative enough to keep up with quickly evolving medical and information systems?

Apple iPhone, which has a software platform that allows users to download new applications and toss out old ones. And information should have “liquidity” and “substitutability”—at least at the level of an ATM—so that a doctor could use billing software from one vendor, a prescription-writing program from another, and a laboratory information system from a third. Competition and innovation might flourish if vendors could specialize.

To prevent physicians from becoming “scribes,” regulations must ensure that new electronic systems exhibit a “realistic respect” for physi-

cians’ time, Mandl and Kohane write. A RAND Corporation study in 2005 estimated that electronic health records could save up to \$77 billion annually through reduced hospital stays, avoidance of duplicate or useless tests, better drug utilization, and other efficiencies. But physicians also must see a direct benefit from mastering the new technology if they are to be motivated to use it to the fullest.

Blumenthal outlines “huge challenges,” in an article that appeared only five days after he was named to the program coordinator position. He says that many of the electronic records systems that have already been certified are neither user friendly nor likely to improve quality and efficiency in the health care system. Tightening the certification process is a “critical early challenge,” he says, but if the requirements are set too high, doctors will lobby to change the law or just forgo the bonus and hunker down to accept the penalties.

ARTS & LETTERS

Gilded Vestibules

THE SOURCE: “Rolling Out the Unwelcome Mat for Visitor Centers” by Martin Filler, in *Architectural Record*, March 2009.

THE OPENING OF THE \$621 million subterranean Capitol Visitor Center in Washington luckily passed almost unremarked last December. Otherwise, writes archi-

tecture critic Martin Filler, this star-spangled boondoggle might have received star billing in the *Guinness Book of Pork*.

Designed to protect lawmakers in the wake of the shooting deaths of two Capitol policemen in 1998, the 580,000-square-foot underground lobby, security checkpoint,

history gallery, and food service complex purports to ease public access to the Capitol building. Actually, writes Filler, a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books* and other publications, it does just the opposite. The opportunity for visiting families to roam the halls and spot a lawmaker they recognize from C-SPAN is a thing of the past. Most visitors’ Capitol experiences are now confined to the annex, where they wait in line for their tours and eat in the cafeteria. Extensive exhibits, also located in the annex,



Washington's cavernous new Capitol Visitor Center is three-quarters as big as the Capitol itself.

show the building of the Capitol and illustrate the workings of the government with contemporaneous letters and other documents.

Ten times the size of the White House, the new visitor center is part of a trend toward "interpretive" interventions in historic precincts. "Visitor centers subvert credibility through the extra degree of separation they impose between viewer and artifact," Filler contends. The Liberty Bell Center in Philadelphia, he says, makes the authentic Liberty Bell look fake. George Washington's pristine Mount Vernon estate suffers from the "dreadful impositions" of the new Ford Orientation Center and the Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center. The Mark Twain House in Hartford, Connecticut, which Samuel Clemens lost through foolhardy investments, is threatened with being lost again as a result of spending on an "overinflated" and "misproportioned" annex. Money is now being raised in a misguided effort to build a visitor center at Washington, D.C.'s elegantly evocative Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Enough, says Filler. Visitor centers are a "pointless, wasteful building type we'd be well rid of."

ARTS & LETTERS

The Grammarians Have No Clothes

THE SOURCE: "Fifty Years of Stupid Grammar Advice" by Geoffrey K. Pullum, in *The Chronicle Review*, April 17, 2009.

AFTER 50 YEARS, THE INFLUENCE of William Strunk and E. B. White's *Elements of Style* is not to be denied by us.

If that sentence makes you cringe, you are either a well-grounded grammarian or, more likely, part of the legion of college graduates who regard Strunk and White's slim volume as the essential guide to English usage. In Geoffrey K. Pullum's opinion, the book does not deserve its enormous esteem. Not only has it "not improved American students' grasp of English grammar; it has significantly degraded it."

William Strunk Jr. taught Eng-

lish at Cornell University in the early 20th century, and privately published the first edition of *Elements of Style* in 1918. Many years later, when Strunk's student, E. B. White, wrote a nostalgic piece about his former professor for *The New Yorker*, he was invited to revise and expand the style guide for commercial publication. As Pullum reports, "It took off like a rocket (in 1959) and has sold millions." But Pullum, coauthor of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002) and head of linguistics and English language at the University of Edinburgh, says the book's popularity was unfortunate, "because both authors were grammatical incompetents. Strunk had very little analytical understanding of syntax, White even less," even though, as Pullum acknowledges, White was a skilled writer, author of, among other books, the much-admired *Charlotte's Web* (1952).

Proof of Strunk's and White's shortcomings as grammarians can be found throughout *Elements of Style*, Pullum says. "Use the active voice," the authors command in one of the book's most familiar sections, even as they admit that the passive voice is "frequently convenient and sometimes necessary." But Pullum finds it troubling that the bias against the passive "is being retailed by a pair of authors so grammatically clueless that they don't know what is a passive construction and what isn't." Three of the four examples used to illustrate its evils are *not* passive constructions. (In "The reason that he left college was that his health became impaired," *impaired* is "fingered as passive"

though “it’s an adjective here.” Bonus grammar tip: The presence of the verb “became” makes a following passive clause impossible.)

Pullum says the book “is so misguided that the authors appear not to notice their own egregious flouting of its own rules.” Strunk and White urge students to “write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs.” This edict is followed *in the next sentence* by a clause with three adjectives wrapped around a negative passive: “The adjective hasn’t been built that can pull a weak or inac-

curate noun out of a tight place.” (Pullum awards this prose pearl a fourth strike for violating another commandment: “Keep related words together.”)

Pullum believes that Strunk and White based “their grammar claims on intuition and prejudice rather than established literary usage.” He tests one instruction—“With *none*, use the singular verb when the word means ‘no one’ or ‘not one’”—by searching the texts of Oscar Wilde’s *Importance of Being Earnest*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and Lucy Maud Montgomery’s

Anne of Avonlea. All contain examples of plural agreement with “none.” The example from Wilde’s play seems particularly apt: “None of us are perfect.”

“The uninformed bossiness of Strunk and White,” Pullum says, has bred ignorance and needless anxiety. “English syntax is a deep and interesting subject . . . much too important to be reduced to a bunch of trivial don’t-do-this prescriptions by a pair of idiosyncratic bumbler who can’t even tell when they’ve broken their own misbegotten rules.”

OTHER NATIONS

Africa’s Orphans

THE SOURCE: “The Politics of Intercountry Adoption: Explaining Variation in the Legal Requirements of Sub-Saharan African Countries” by Marijke Breuning and John Ishiyama, in *Perspectives on Politics*, March 2009.

TO GRASP THE MAGNITUDE OF the African AIDS crisis, imagine that all 11.6 million children living in the coastal states from Florida to Virginia had been orphaned by AIDS. In sub-Saharan Africa, this calamity is not hypothetical, it’s fact. And the HIV/AIDS crisis that affects more than 30 percent of the population in some of the nations of that region is beginning to deplete the “once seemingly limitless network of extended-family” members able to raise parentless children. Foreign adoptions are only beginning to take up the slack. Although

American adoptions from Africa have become much more common since the 1990s, the number of children adopted in 2006 from the leading source country, Ethiopia, reached only 732.

Many African countries make it difficult for outsiders to adopt orphans. Openness to adoption is not determined by the severity of the orphan crisis, the prevalence of AIDS, or the level of democracy in

Clamping down on foreign adoptions seems to many African leaders like a relatively cost-free way to stand up to Uncle Sam.

the orphans’ homeland, write political scientists Marijke Breuning and John Ishiyama of the University of North Texas.

Government officials are more likely to base their decisions on domestic politics, the authors say, and, because so many Africans fear “baby buying,” restrictions are easy to tighten. America accounts for about half of all intercountry adoptions worldwide. Clamping down on adoption seems to many leaders like a relatively cheap way to stand up to Uncle Sam. Frustrated with the meager benefits they net from globalization, African leaders are tempted to “frame intercountry adoption in terms of exploitation and to restrict or prohibit it.”

Malawi, with 12 percent of its adult population suffering from HIV/AIDS and an estimated 560,000 AIDS orphans, requires prospective parents (singer-actress Madonna excepted) to foster a child for two years in the country before

adoption may occur. Other countries require in-country waiting periods of six months, or have no official agency responsible for approving legal procedures, or refuse to allow groups devoted to placing orphans overseas to operate on their territory.

The more closely an African nation is connected to the global economy (measured by the level of foreign investment), the more likely its government is to see the potential benefits of having some orphans find homes abroad. Such adoptions may cause adoptive parents to advocate and provide resources for improved social services in their child's birth country. Thus, policy is driven by the expectation not only that orphans will find homes, but that they and their adoptive parents will become informal and unsuspecting "ambassadors of goodwill" between countries.

OTHER NATIONS

No Double Beds for Boris

THE SOURCE: "Whose Right to Rest? Contesting the Family Vacation in the Post-war Soviet Union" by Diane P. Koenker, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, April 2009.

AS IS WIDELY APPRECIATED, the Russians have raised the bar very high for achievement in literature, music, ballet, and battle. Less well known, writes Diane P. Koenker, a historian at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, is that during the Soviet era they made a revolutionary contribution to leisure. In 1922, well in advance of

other industrialized nations, the Soviet Union stipulated that all workers were entitled to a two-week annual paid vacation.

Unfortunately, the visionary Soviet concept of worker vacations got entangled in communism's indifference to the role of the family and its cluelessness about sex. The Soviet vacation evolved into a solitary medical rest period, a model

from which it suffered throughout its 74-year history.

The Soviets devised vacations as a "medically necessary antidote to the harsh conditions of industrial labor," according to Koenker. They built monumental (and expensive) health spas offering suntanning, mineral water and seawater baths, massages, diets, and an obligatory "dead hour" for naps. Recreation consisted of vol-



Workers soak up sun-ray treatment in a health spa, Soviet planners' preferred mode of vacationing.

leyball, lectures, slide shows, and “lots and lots of dancing.” To try to meet demand, state officials built simpler facilities—rest homes and tent camps with cots and a central area for do-it-yourself meals.

Access to a vacation required possession of a voucher passed from central trade union authorities to local union organizations to local enterprise committees. Some vouchers were awarded for meritorious service or given to workers in great need, and the others were sold for a percentage of their face value. There were never enough to go around, and it was virtually impossible for a couple to get two vouchers to the same place at the same time. Children were forbidden at most spas and rest homes.

After World War II, construction of vacation facilities, which had ceased during the war, recommenced and expanded, and in 1963 the health spa planning agency commissioned its first and only market research survey to determine how Soviet citizens wished to vacation. A completely unexpected 72 percent said they would like to travel from one place to another, not sit in one spa. Some 45 percent wished to vacation with their families, and 41 percent with friends or coworkers; only 15 percent said they preferred being with strangers.

Even so, tourism officials still called for building expensive spas and rest homes that shut out children, claiming that expansion of family facilities would require “huge preparatory work,” a phrase Koenker describes as “code for foot-dragging.”

The earliest Soviets had harbored utopian dreams of the withering

away of the family (along with the state). But both the family and, especially, the state refused to comply. Nonetheless, tourism officials remained addicted to building spas even as the public clamored for swing sets. Soviet leaders never did come to grips with family life and sexuality. To the end, Koenker writes, the beds in Soviet hotels were always single and narrow.

OTHER NATIONS

Corruption's Hidden Benefit

THE SOURCE: “Buying Peace? Oil Wealth, Corruption, and Civil War, 1985–99” by Hanne Fjelde, in *Journal of Peace Research*, March 2009.

NO PEACE RESEARCHER WOULD be caught dead endorsing corruption, but Hanne Fjelde, a Ph.D. candidate at Uppsala University in Sweden, proposes a “more nuanced” view of the role of political payoffs in oil-rich countries. It has long been thought that oil wealth raises the likelihood of civil war as surely as heat rises from a fire. But a high level of corruption in an oil-producing economy has a countervailing effect. Corrupt leaders can use their oil wealth to buy off potential opponents, and the chances of armed conflict appear to diminish as the corruption gets worse.

Public corruption prolongs poverty and worsens economic inequality. It hampers economic growth and siphons money from projects that benefit all. But it can also co-opt restive groups and give them an economic stake in maintaining the status quo. Gabon,

Libya, and Saudi Arabia illustrate how doling out oil largess has been used to buy stability, according to Fjelde. Gabon buys off the middle class through public expenditures, for example. Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi has staved off opposition to his rule for long periods by paying off political competition, and Saudi Arabia has made military staffing decisions a key route to personal enrichment. Cameroon has used its oil-export wealth to pacify restive ethnic groups.

Patronage allows the “ruler to selectively target supporters, while expending as little of the pie as possible,” says Fjelde. Several corrupt countries that have been plagued by civil war lack oil wealth that can be doled out to regime opponents—Haiti, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Uganda among them.

Although oil-based economies are especially conducive to corruption because of the extraordinary wealth that’s available, oil is not the only source of such bonanzas. Civil war was largely kept at bay in Zaire until the foreign aid with which Mobutu Sese Seko bribed his opponents was withdrawn in the 1990s.

Rather than dismiss political corruption as nothing but a terrible scourge of dysfunctional oil-rich nations, policymakers should consider whether corruption is a “default option for soliciting support where state institutions are weak.” If the international community wants a warning signal of civil war, Fjelde writes, its leaders should monitor the social consequences in countries when the money runs out to pay the bribes.

Also in this
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Paul Maliszewski on
Henry Ford's lost
city

Nick Schulz on the
economy's animal
spirits

G. Pascal Zachary
on corruption in
Kenya

Martin Walker on
Islam and the
modern world

Steven Lagerfeld on
Luther Burbank

Edward Tenner on
the good life

Jeffrey Burton
Russell on the
evolution of God

F. S. Naiden on love
in ancient Greece

Renuka Rayasam
on television
cooking shows

CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

Frustrated Spy Catchers

Reviewed by John Prados

THE TWO AMERICANS WHO TOOK PART in writing *Spies* pose the essential question in the first sentence of their preface: "Is there anything new to be learned about Soviet espionage in America?" They answer in the affirmative, of course. But the question needs qualification, because John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Russian coauthor Alexander Vassiliev write only about the earliest part of the story, primarily before the Cold War, with some brief coverage of the late 1940s. This era has been endlessly picked over already, not least by the authors themselves. There *is* a huge story, yet to be told in a coherent fashion, of Soviet espionage during the Cold War. It is a story of secrets purloined, agents recruited—not just Americans but Western Europeans and others—and of Moscow's spy chieftains, their aims, their management of field officers, and their role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. *Spies* is not that story. Rather, the authors delve into the pre-World War II and wartime exploits of the Soviet spymasters assisted by members of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA).

This terrain is all too familiar. Some of the episodes, such as the debate over the alleged treason of State Department official Alger

Hiss, or the "atomic spy" cases epitomized by that of Julius Rosenberg, became political litmus tests for generations of Americans. Ideological camps formed over guilt or innocence.

Political careers were built on the investigations. Naming names of alleged or real spies became the stuff of parlor games—and witch-hunts. Indeed, the exercise added the term "redbaiting" to the American lexicon. Soviet spymasters must have enjoyed this spectacle of the capitalist dog eating its tail. It was probably their greatest achievement.

To understand how *Spies'* authors could claim to bring new information to the table requires some discussion of evidence. There are three main veins of material on this subject. One, the "old" evidence, consists of contemporary accounts from the era, including media coverage, the memoirs of confessed agents and a few Soviet defectors, the testimony and conclusions of congressional hearings and certain trials and investigations—most notably those of Hiss and J. Robert Oppenheimer—and scholarly studies of the

SPIES:

The Rise and Fall of
the KGB in America.

By John Earl Haynes,
Harvey Klehr, and
Alexander Vassiliev.
Yale Univ. Press.
650 pp. \$35



Alexander Vassiliev, a former KGB officer turned journalist, recorded his research in Russian intelligence archives in the mid-1990s in eight notebooks. The page above sketches the KGB's 1945 scientific and technical agent network and describes Julius Rosenberg's espionage circle.

CPUSA. This vein has been mined deeply since at least 1955, when David J. Dallin published his (still useful) work *Soviet Espionage*.

The second vein dates from the mid-1990s, when the National Security Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency began the release of several thousand Soviet messages, bearing the code name "Venona," that had been intercepted and fully or partially decrypted by U.S. intelligence. The most recent of these messages dates from 1948, and the bulk were sent during World War II. In addition, a range of FBI documents on the Soviet spy cases

have been declassified. These materials fueled numerous studies, including ones by Haynes, a historian at the Library of Congress, and Klehr, a politics and history professor at Emory University.

The third vein of material is based on internal records of the Soviet civilian intelligence service, which has had various names but—following the authors' own convention—will here be called the KGB. These records were made available from early 1994 to early 1996 to Alexander Vassiliev, a former KGB officer turned journalist, through an arrangement with American publishers. Vassiliev teamed with American historian Allen Weinstein to write *The Haunted Wood*, published in 1999. As the dates indicate, Vassiliev and Weinstein already had access to the Venona material. The symbiosis between the KGB records and the Venona material gave *The Haunted Wood* much of its impact.

The clear comparison is thus between that book and Vassiliev's new work in conjunction with Haynes and Klehr.

It is important to understand that the three veins of material, however rich, are inherently limited. In the case of the KGB records, Vassiliev was only permitted to take notes, not reproduce documents, at a location remote from the KGB archives, using materials selected by Russian intelligence officials. The officers who headed the post-Soviet intelligence service (SVR) directorates for "illegals"—that is, undercover officers—and scien-

tific spying denied all requests. Vassiliev and Weinstein could ask for things, but the Russians could deny them at whim—and in the middle of this collaboration, an incident that embarrassed the Russians involving a document unearthed by a researcher at a different archive, plus generally deteriorating U.S.-Russian relations, halted the entire process. Access to the KGB records was never renewed.

These facts raise a number of questions regarding the source material, which we will simply assume was itself authentic. The SVR managed the access; it presumably had motives and a certain image it wished to convey. The KGB filing system was inconsistent—which, Vassiliev writes in *Spies*, sometimes played in his favor—but there is no telling what was missed thereby. The SVR specifically denied him the files on spy recruiter Julius Rosenberg and New Deal Treasury Department official Harry Dexter White—two of the major characters in this story—limiting Vassiliev to what he could cull from cross-references in other files, rich as they might be. Note taking, as opposed to photocopying, meant that only those aspects that appeared significant to Vassiliev at the moment, as he hurried through the documents, were captured, and termination of access meant that no one could go back to check or extend the research. Klehr and Haynes note additional limitations in their preface to *Spies*. They conclude, correctly, that the Vassiliev material is nevertheless the largest available compilation of KGB material. Still, historians' cautious attitude toward this evidence is understandable.

The key difference, we are told, between the new book and the earlier Weinstein-Vassiliev collaboration is that the authors now have available the full Vassiliev notebooks rather than extracts that Vassiliev took with him when he moved from Russia to England in 1996. Fearful that his notebooks would be confiscated at the airport, he left them behind but has since retrieved them. This access is certainly an improvement, but it does not escape the limitations of the original research.

Meanwhile, the use of FBI files is hampered by widespread and often extensive deletions. As a source, Venona has its own imperfections, starting

with the limited number of messages intercepted and its restricted time frame. In those messages the KGB referred to individuals, places, and subjects by code name (cryptonym). This spawned a guessing game about who is who and what is what among intelligence officials and, since the declassification of Venona, among historians and other observers. Haynes has been a notable contributor to this cottage industry. Haynes and Klehr published a book on Soviet intelligence in the United States based on Venona at the same time Weinstein and Vassiliev brought out *The Haunted Wood*. In that book, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*, they contrived to identify 349 agents for the Soviets.

Which brings the discussion to *Spies*. The book opens with a chapter that seeks to prove beyond doubt that Hiss was a Soviet spy, adding the Vassiliev notebooks to previous evidence. That was also the contention of *The Haunted Wood*. In the decade since the earlier book's publication, arguments have raged about Hiss, with disputes over cryptonyms said to refer to him, complicated by the fact that Hiss is said to have spied for Soviet military intelligence, not the KGB. The argumentation approaches the minute detail of Talmudic scholarship, a level that persists through this long work.

Spies goes on to cover a great deal of ground, including spying efforts related to the atomic bomb project, Soviet recruitment of journalists, spies who infiltrated the U.S. government, agents recruited from the American wartime intelligence organization (the Office of Strategic Services [OSS]), scientific and technical espionage, support personnel (read CPUSA), and celebrity spies such as businessman Victor Hammer. Among the highlights are claims that the journalist I. F. Stone did indeed work for the Soviets in the 1930s; the identification of a (minor) new atomic spy, engineer Russell McNutt; a concession that Oppenheimer (whatever his sympathies may have been) was not a spy but merely an object of KGB desires; and an assertion that Ernest Hemingway "toyed with Soviet intelligence." The book ends by raising the ante on the

number of Soviet spies: There may have been in excess of 500.

Despite all this detail, the story that really emerges is one of KGB failure. Consider the case of the OSS: This American intelligence agency created the foundation for what is now the CIA. The authors argue that the KGB developed “an astounding number of sources” within the OSS—they identify a dozen. By this standard, the CIA ought to have been riddled with Soviet spies from its inception in 1947. Yet it was the 1960s before the agency was afflicted by a mole hunt for KGB agents—now thought to have been spurious—and the 1980s until significant KGB penetrations of the CIA were actually uncovered. Similarly, the signal KGB success of World War II—uncovering American atomic secrets—was not matched by any consequential espionage presence in the United States’ Cold War-era nuclear programs. For all the naming of names, the Soviets took home no secrets they had not gained in World War II or before it. The balance of power in the Cold War remained exactly what it had been then.

During the 1930s, when the Soviet social enterprise still seemed attractive, the democracies appeared to be threatened by fascism, and the impending conflict was epitomized, for many, by the Spanish Civil War, recruits for the Soviet

spymasters were legion. Most of the relationships detailed in *Spies* date from that period. Joseph Stalin’s purges, which also cut deeply into the KGB, affected management of its American networks. His 1939 deal with Adolf Hitler soured the pot. The rising disaffection and Soviet paranoia led the KGB, before the end of World War II, to actively work to cut the CPUSA out of its spy operations. A series of spy cases that began in 1945 with the defection of a KGB operative in Canada and the surrender of a CPUSA cutout to the FBI completed the destruction. The controversial Hiss and Oppenheimer cases took their public toll at a moment when KGB espionage in the United States was near its nadir.

These observations are not so new. And the interpretations of individuals’ roles in *Spies* are different mostly in nuance from what has appeared already. Material on the actual Soviet intelligence gains from all this espionage remains sparse, with the exception of the activities of the atomic spies. So I wonder about the value of this book. The number of spies has swelled from 349 to 500? This is angels on the heads of pins. It is time to stop bogging down in the Stalinist era and move on into the Cold War.

JOHN PRADOS is a senior fellow of the National Security Archive. His most recent book is *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975*, published earlier this year.

Rubber Baron

Reviewed by Paul Maliszewski

IN JULY 1925, HARVEY FIRESTONE, THE founder of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, traveled to Dearborn, Michigan, to have lunch with his friend Henry Ford. Firestone wanted the automaker to ally with him against the European rubber monopoly. Winston Churchill, then secretary of state for Great Britain’s colonies, had established a cartel to control production and sustain a higher price. Rubber was running \$1.21 per pound in the

United States, up from 20 cents three years before. But Ford, then in his early sixties and independent to the point of being isolated, saw no benefit in a partnership with Firestone. After their meal, he instructed his personal secretary, “Find out where is the best place to grow rubber.”

FORDLANDIA:
The Rise and Fall
of Henry Ford’s
Forgotten
Jungle City.

By Greg Grandin.
Metropolitan.
416 pp. \$27.50

Ford's decision launched his company on a 20-year, \$20 million misadventure. While Firestone started a successful plantation in Liberia, Ford acted on his secretary's advice and turned his attention to the jungles surrounding the lower Amazon. Until the late 19th century, Brazil had held a monopoly on rubber production. That was when Henry Wickham, a British citizen, stole 70,000 rubber-plant seeds from Brazil and handed them over to the Royal Botanic Gardens, where scientists nurtured seedlings that became the basis for a burgeoning rubber market in the British colonies of Southeast Asia. Wickham, who perhaps exaggerated the derring-do required to smuggle the seeds, nonetheless earned a knighthood and doomed the rubber trade in South America.

Ford wanted to accomplish more in the Amazon than just establish an affordable source of rubber. He was driven to carve his plantation out of the jungle by two beliefs: that the traditional American way of life could and should be exported to less developed countries, and that this same way of life was coming undone at home. He was, at once, a utopian dreamer and an embittered critic. His ill-advised foray in Brazil is detailed in Greg Grandin's *Fordlandia*, an engaging and passionately written history that takes its title from the name Brazilians called Ford's first settlement. Grandin is alert to the tragedy and the unexpected moments of comedy in the story, which is at times reminiscent of both Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Though Grandin, a professor of Latin American history at New York University, occasionally muddles his tale with repetition and confusing chronology, he appears to have read every relevant document in the archives at the Benson Ford Research Center, the repository for Henry Ford's papers and his company's corporate records.

Fordlandia grew from the discarded blueprints of Ford's 1922 plan to build on the banks of the Tennessee River a city as narrow as Manhattan but 75 miles long. Residents of the proposed city in northwestern Alabama would never be far from hills and farmland. Ford would offer low-interest mortgages, pay high wages, build schools, and construct a shop-

lined road running from one end to the other. A magazine called it an "All Main Street" city. Ford just needed a land concession and the federal government's approval. Since the recession of 1920, which would prove to be a harbinger of the Great Depression, Ford had devoted some of his time and wealth to a "village industry" program, an attempt to generate year-round employment in rural communities and, as Grandin writes, "reconcile farm and factory work." The irony of Ford's

industrial pastoralism is that the automobile played a not inconsiderable role in fracturing those communities to which Ford felt an increasingly sentimental attachment.

Congressional deadlock shattered his dream. George W. Norris, a Republican senator from Nebraska and a committed progressive, argued that Ford's proposal should be undertaken not by private interests but by the government. Republicans were different animals then.

In the Amazon, Ford need brook no interference from the U.S. government. In 1927, the magnate sent a University of Michigan botanist to Brazil, where he selected a parcel of land bordering the Tapajós River that he thought ideal. It was 80 miles to the nearest city and six days by boat to the Amazon's mouth. With only vague instructions from headquarters, Grandin writes, two other advance men—a lawyer and a middle manager—asked Brazilian officials for everything: "the right to exploit the land's lumber and mineral reserves, the right to build railroads and airfields, to erect any kind of building without government supervision, establish banks, organize a private police force, run schools, draw power from waterfalls, and 'dam up the river in any way we needed to.'" And they secured an exemption from export taxes on rubber, latex, and anything else the plantation shipped abroad. The state government offered 2.5 million acres, a million less than requested. "That acreage," a *Harper's* reporter wrote, "was about five-sixths the size of Connecticut, but when compared to the colossal Amazon basin it was a mere garden patch."

Henry Ford wanted to export to the Amazon a traditional American way of life that he believed was coming undone at home.



A factory building on Fordlandia, Henry Ford's rubber plantation in the Amazon, stands as an overrun relic of his ill-conceived experiment.

Ford agreed to plant rubber on a thousand acres of his garden within the year and pay \$125,000 for half of the land, as it was privately held. The other half, public land, he received gratis.

Ford's vision for his outpost was grand: a town complete with schools and Cape Cod-style houses as well as high wages and health care for all, both the American managers and the Brazilians attracted by word that the company was hiring people by the thousands. Ford would encourage workers to grow flowers and vegetables and eat only whole-wheat bread and unpolished rice. He would bring electricity to the jungle, and with it, telephones, washing machines, record players, and refrigerators. Some of his goals seemed quaint, such as staging poetry recitations and promoting ballroom dancing, with square dances on weekends. Others were downright peculiar, such as his intention to have nurseries feed soymilk to babies because, after growing up on a farm, he despised cows. Ford wanted to create American towns, Grandin writes, that just happened to be in the Amazon, with "central squares, sidewalks, indoor plumbing, hospitals, manicured lawns, movie theaters, swimming pools, golf courses, and, of course, Model Ts and As rolling down their paved streets."

Expectations, fueled by company press releases, ran high. *The Christian Science Monitor* reported

Ford would plant five million acres. *The Washington Post* had Ford's plantation ("Bigger Than New Jersey" read the headline) yielding enough rubber to make tires for two million cars every year. *The New York Times* predicted Ford's land would one day produce six billion pounds of rubber a year, an extraordinary feat of hypothetical productivity.

Problems arose immediately. The first ships, carrying much needed supplies, arrived in September 1928, during the dry season, when the river is low, and so couldn't reach the settlement for several months. Workers started clearing the jungle during the wet season, when felled trees won't burn. Soil erosion and leaf blight dogged the rubber plantings, and rifts among the workers bedeviled the operation. Ford's principal manager felt he was inadequately compensated, and so siphoned cash from the plantation's coffers. Later, when waiters in the dining hall were replaced with cafeteria-style service, Brazilian skilled craftsmen protested. They didn't want to queue up for food with common laborers. A riot ensued, leaving Fordlandia in ruins. Many expected Ford to close the plantation, but he decided to rebuild, increasing his investment in the model city.

The central problem, though, was a culture of obstinacy fed by a track record of success. Ford, the company and the man, always knew best, even though Ford himself never once visited Brazil. Thatched roofs, the thinking went, indicated that civilization had yet to deliver its infinite blessings,

and so Ford built homes with metal roofs lined with asbestos. Intended to reflect the heat, the houses retained it, like Cape Cod-style ovens. A priest there described them as “hotter than the gates of hell.” Company managers, he added, “never really figured out what country they were in.”

Four years into the arduous work at Fordlandia, only an accountant thought to ask if it was “fair to assume that seeds which grew up in a forest will do as well when planted in a totally denuded area under a hot tropical sun.” Soon after, the plantation manager wrote Dearborn, “We are entering a gigantic proposition. . . . It would be well to have the opinion of the highest expert on rubber planting.” The expert wasn’t optimistic. After attempting to address the many problems, he recommended abandoning the settlement and transferring operations downriver, where the ground was flatter and the soil richer. With six years and \$7 million invested, the company all but shuttered Fordlandia, shifting its interests to Belterra, the proposed site. In Portuguese the name means “beautiful land,” but blight followed, as did swarms of caterpillars. In 1942, Belterra yielded just 750 tons of latex. “It wasn’t high-quality rubber,” Grandin writes, nor would it offset Ford’s yearly need for 25,000 tons.

In 1945, shortly after being named company president, Henry Ford II turned the plantations over to the Brazilian government. Estimates placed

their value at \$8 million, considerably less than the company had invested. Ford parted with the land for \$244,200, enough to cover the severance pay owed remaining workers. While his grandfather’s vision never became real, the towns did look as Ford had imagined them, golf courses and all. But they were not towns for the people who lived there.

Grandin cautions against seeing Fordlandia as a parable about the folly of arrogance. Ford’s dream, he says, was fueled not by hubris but by a utopian urge. The arrogance, Grandin writes, “is not that Henry Ford thought he could tame the Amazon but that he believed that the forces of capitalism, once released, could still be contained.” In the jungle, far from government, industry could thrive, and “solve whatever social problems arose from progress’s advance.” Looked at another way, Fordlandia illustrates the determination of business to seek its own profit, unfettered and unbothered—until profits prove elusive. What’s more, Ford’s principles were situational, if not ad hoc. He was staunchly in favor of privatized gains but wouldn’t refuse socialized risks. In this year of massive bailouts for banks and automotive manufacturers, the contradictions at the heart of Fordlandia are laid bare again.

PAUL MALISZEWSKI is the author of *Fakers: Hoaxers, Con Artists, Counterfeiters, and Other Great Pretenders*, published earlier this year, and *Prayer and Parable*, a forthcoming short story collection.

Oh, Behave!

Reviewed by Nick Schulz

BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS IS THE HOTTEST thing in the dismal science. A parade of books and magazine articles in the last few years has informed us of its implications for business, politics, and public policy. The free-market orthodoxy that took hold in the West with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher has been tried and found wanting, or so the thinking goes. It’s time to bury homo economicus, invisible hands and all, in a shallow Scottish grave next to Adam

Smith, and to restore government to its rightful role in managing economic affairs.

Arguments about the merits of free enterprise and the merits of government intervention in the marketplace are hardly novel. So what new wrinkle explains the recent flood of writing on the

ANIMAL SPIRITS:

How Human Psychology Drives the Economy, and Why It Matters for Global Capitalism.

By George A. Akerlof and Robert J. Shiller.
Princeton Univ. Press.
230 pp. \$24.95

subject? Modern science, of course.

Behavioral economics looks at the role that emotion, social dynamics, psychology, and other factors can play in individual decision-making. Modern social and laboratory science is illuminating with clinical clarity the ways in which individuals do not behave like rational economic actors. Humans have biases—for

Animal Spirits, which attempts to leverage the insights of behavioral economics to reanimate the vision of John Maynard Keynes, is perfectly timed for the present moment.

example, we tend to interpret new information in a manner that confirms our preconceived notions—that are difficult to overcome, and we are prone to enthusiasms, panics, and a host of emotions that cloud our judgment. Economists in the past

didn't deny that, but they had no way of gauging it or factoring it into their models—and frequently had no desire to do so.

George Akerlof and Robert Shiller, acclaimed economists at the University of California, Berkeley, and Yale University, respectively, have made their careers studying how and why individuals make all sorts of foolhardy economic decisions. Akerlof, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2001, is famous for his 1970 paper "The Market for Lemons," which explained how markets such as those for used cars malfunction because buyers and sellers possess differing degrees of information about the product ("asymmetric information" in econo-speak). Shiller is best known for an earlier book, *Irrational Exuberance* (2000), on speculative asset bubbles, as well as for a widely followed housing price index that bears his name and that of fellow economist Karl Case.

In *Animal Spirits*, the authors leverage the insights of behavioral economics to reanimate the vision of John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946), the most influential economist of the 20th century. He introduced several key concepts, such as aggregate demand, that

illuminate how economies function and that are still used today. Keynes famously argued in favor of deficit spending during economic slumps as a way to ensure full employment, advice that clashed with the common assumption that governments should maintain balanced budgets, and is still the subject of debate today.

To be sure, Keynes acknowledged that most economic activity is the result of rational economic calculations. But, the authors write, he also argued that "much economic activity is governed by *animal spirits*. People have non-economic motives. And they are not always rational in the pursuit of their economic interests. In Keynes's view these animal spirits are the main cause for why the economy fluctuates as it does. They are also the main cause of involuntary unemployment."

The authors are taking some liberties here. Keynes referred to "animal spirits" when describing entrepreneurs who take great risk under conditions of extreme uncertainty. Animal spirits explain how entrepreneurs can innovate even when conventional economic analysis suggests that their gambles are unwise. This entrepreneurial impulse yields new businesses, technologies, and innovations that can put people out of a job (as, for example, when carriage makers started producing automobiles and buggy-whip manufacturers went out of business).

Animal spirits were never all that central to Keynes's theories, however. Indeed, entrepreneurs motivated by animal spirits were far more important to the economic vision of Keynes's contemporary Joseph Schumpeter, who gave us the idea of "creative destruction," and to subsequent theorists of economic growth. That said, Akerlof and Shiller's desire to resurrect and elevate "animal spirits" to improve our understanding of economic change is most welcome. But the implications of this idea sometimes appear to escape them.

The book is perfectly timed for the present moment. Keynes biographer Robert Skidelsky recently trumpeted the economist's return to favor in the pages of the British journal *Prospect*.

Economists across the spectrum, from the conservative Gregory Mankiw to the liberal Paul Krugman, have heralded Keynes's insights in making sense of the current economic mess. Last year in *The New York Times*, Mankiw wrote that Keynes's "diagnosis of recessions and depressions remains the foundation of modern macroeconomics," and Krugman observed that Keynes showed that "there were situations in which monetary policy could do no more," and as a result that fiscal measures of the kind Keynes advocated—deficit spending, for example—were relevant now.

As we embrace modern behavioral economics, Shiller and Akerlof believe we are prepared to see how correct Keynes was—he was a man of immense imaginative power and intuition and was far ahead of the scientific knowledge of the day. "With the advantage of over 70 years of research in the social sciences, we can develop the role of animal spirits in macroeconomics in a way that the early Keynesians could not," they write.

So what's the upshot? Government should act like a good parent, the proper role of which is to "set the limits so that the child does not overindulge her animal spirits" while allowing her the "independence to learn and to be creative." Two other highly regarded academics with a keen interest in behavioral economics, Cass Sunstein, a University of Chicago law professor now working for the Obama administration, and Richard Thaler, a professor of behavioral science and economics, also at the University of Chicago, take this view as well in *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (2008). In their estimation, government should act as a kind of nudger in chief. Do you want people to save more for their retirement? Make them opt out of their employer's 401(k) plan if they don't want to participate, rather than require all who want to establish one to opt in. The result: a vast increase in the number of people with 401(k)s. Shiller and Akerlof shy away from making many specific policy proposals. They point to the ways in which

animal spirits shape phenomena such as unemployment and real estate markets, but leave it to economists and policymakers to devise new approaches.

All of this is a far cry from Ronald Reagan's assertion that "in this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." Indeed, the federal government now owns an insurance firm and has a significant stake in a number of banks, not to mention General Motors. President Barack Obama has called for a new era of oversight, remarking earlier this year that "we can no longer sustain 21st-century markets with 20th-century regulations."

Yet there is still a reason to be doubtful that the government limit-setting advocated by Shiller, Akerlof, and others will yield the beneficial outcomes they foresee. To understand why, it's helpful to look at the book's most striking anecdote, which concerns Andrew Cuomo. As the attorney general of New York, Cuomo has been busily attacking Wall Street bankers and insurers for their role in the financial crisis. Most of *Animal Spirits* was written before he decided to take on this new policing role.

In a chapter on real estate markets, the authors point out all the factors that helped to create the recent bubble. Given the past performance of real estate assets, "there is no *rational* reason to expect real estate to be a generally good investment." But people believe real estate values will always rise, and institutions such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the government-sponsored enterprises Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac strongly shaped the housing market—and its illusions.

Allegations that minority groups were being left out of this nascent boom "led to an almost immediate, and uncritical, government reaction." As HUD secretary in the 1990s, the authors write, Cuomo "aggressively" increased the mandated lending by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac "to underserved communities," even if that meant lowering credit standards and loosening the requirements for documentation from borrow-

ers. As a political appointee, he was concerned not with future financial risks but with economic justice for minorities. So the government heedlessly helped further inflate the housing bubble.

And this is the rub. The authors seem oblivious to the limits their own analysis ascribes to the ability of government to alleviate problems. Behavioral economists are right that individuals in the marketplace don't always act rationally. But these same forces are at work in the minds and hearts of policymakers, regulators, and legislators—folks like Andrew Cuomo. They may be well meaning, but they are prey to a kind of animal spirits, too. They may be blinkered in a quest for justice or fairness, or their own political advancement. Biases may distort their percep-

tions of the relative risks and rewards of regulations and policies.

Another school of economics, called public choice theory, tries to unpack the implications of this dynamic for public policy. The thrust of this approach is that we should (at a minimum) harbor skepticism that wise bureaucrats can decide an individual's own best interest better than the individual can. The public choice school has produced its own eminent Nobelists, such as James M. Buchanan Jr. But in this book, Shiller and Akerlof do not wrestle seriously with it or with the challenge it poses to their hopes for a renaissance of Keynesian, technocratic policy.

NICK SCHULZ is DeWitt Wallace Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and editor of *The American*. He is coauthor of the forthcoming book *From Poverty to Prosperity: Intangible Assets, Hidden Liabilities, and the Lasting Triumph Over Scarcity*.

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

The Wages of Corruption

Reviewed by G. Pascal Zachary

ARE NATIONS POOR BECAUSE their governments are corrupt, or does a nation's poverty corrupt its officials? Traditional scholars of economic development hold that once a nation achieves a sufficient level of prosperity, corruption naturally withers as the incentives to cheat diminish. But in recent years, the continuing poverty in countries in Africa, Latin America, and the former Soviet bloc spurred revisions to that way of thinking that place much of the blame for continuing poverty on corruption. International donors, such as the World Bank, and activist groups, such as the corruption-monitoring organization Transparency International, promote the idea that if only governments in poor coun-

IT'S OUR TURN TO EAT:

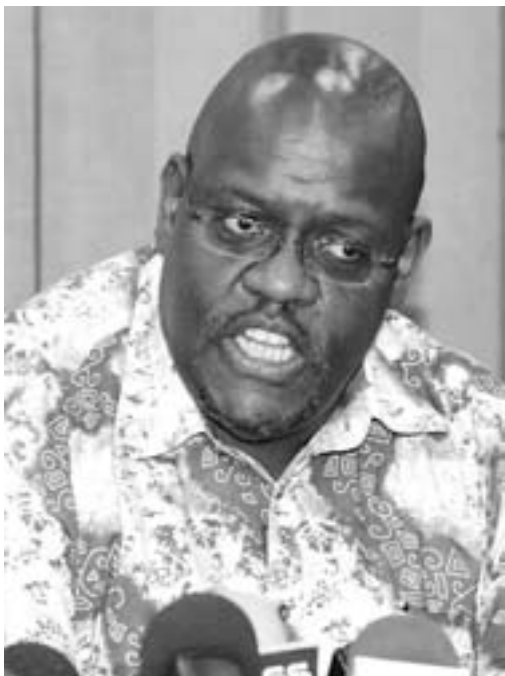
The Story of a Kenyan Whistleblower.

By Michela Wrong.
Harper.
354 pp. \$25.99

tries were honest, their citizens would be much wealthier.

The debate suffers from a paucity of data, especially case studies. British journalist Michela Wrong, a former Nairobi-based correspondent for *The Financial Times*, tries to close this gap by shining a light on the frontlines of official corruption—the theft of money by politicians and their cronies. Her book, *It's Our Turn to Eat*, neatly comports with the consensus view: the greater the corruption, the less the economic growth, and the worse the poverty. To illustrate, she tells the story of a single anti-corruption activist in Kenya, an East African country burdened by decades of government theft and malfeasance.

John Githongo, the son of a successful businessman, worked as a reporter before taking a job in Nairobi with Transparency International. Then, in 2002, members of the Kikuyu ethnic group to which he belongs took power in Kenya, promising reform. The new president, Mwai Kibaki, chose Githongo as his anti-corruption czar. Githongo met frequently with the president but grew disenchanted when he uncovered a massive scam, appar-



John Githongo blew the whistle on graft in Kenya—then became a well-paid international consultant on corruption.

ently managed by Kibaki himself, to steal at least \$750 million in government revenues—one-and-a-half times the amount Kenya received annually in aid from foreign donors. After secretly taping high Kenyan officials discussing the scheme, Githongo fled the country for the relative safety of Britain, where he blew the whistle on his colleagues.

Wrong aptly views Githongo as prescient. “Long before most of his Kenyan contemporaries, he recognized graft’s awesome potential to destabilize and destroy a society,” she writes. Civil strife in the country in early 2008 reinforced the idea that “government corruption, far from being a detail of history, really does matter.” Yet Githongo is a flawed hero, partly because his acts of whistleblowing, while admirable, led to no concrete changes in Kenya’s government. (Wrong’s characterization of the episode as “Africa’s Watergate” is an exaggerated comparison perhaps meant to make a British-centric book more relevant to Americans.) Kibaki not only

survived the scandal, but managed to win office again in 2007 and remains Kenya’s president.

The lesson here is that the whistleblower approach to fighting corruption pays few dividends. Without mass support, Githongo was easily isolated, and his protest came to be viewed by many as a means of self-aggrandizement. He’s become a well-paid international consultant on corruption, wooed by Westerners who, Wrong writes, are “hungry for heroes” and possess “a limitless appetite for the rare voices of support coming from Africa” for the West’s reform agenda. The Kibaki government, meanwhile, has allowed Githongo to return home, hoping his presence in Kenya will go some way toward restoring the country’s tarnished reputation.

In a sad epilogue, Wrong perceptively contrasts Githongo’s cheerful fate with the outcome for a lowly civil servant who 10 years earlier blew the whistle on an equally massive instance of government corruption. That whistleblower, David Munyakei, was fired, publicly humiliated, and forced to take a new identity. He died penniless, of pneumonia, in 2006. Compared to Githongo, Munyakei was “far more typical of most African whistleblowers,” Wrong observes.

In Wrong’s unusual tale of intrigue inside the shadowy world of elite Africans, the continent’s real problem—a lack of democratic participation at all levels of society—remains unexplored. Corruption surely hurts African countries—morally, politically, and economically. But respect for law, and the courage to act against rogue leaders, cannot be imposed from the outside. Nor can a saintly reformer—whether Githongo or Nelson Mandela—clean up a dirty government alone. The battle against official corruption will achieve lasting success only when elites join with the majority of a body politic on a common project of reform.

G. PASCAL ZACHARY is the author of the memoir *Married to Africa* (2008).

A Modern Problem

Reviewed by Martin Walker

LIKE MANY OTHER DISAPPOINTED politicians, Ali Allawi turned to the consolations of philosophy and religion. The result is a remarkably thoughtful and engaging assessment of the current state and future prospects of the world of Islam. Allawi is the nephew of the Iraqi exile leader Ahmed Chalabi, who was briefly the darling of Washington's neoconservatives. When Chalabi returned to Iraq upon the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Allawi followed, leaving his life as an Oxford don to serve as minister of trade and defense and then as minister of finance in the first transition governments.

Chastened and disillusioned by the experience, Allawi is now a visiting fellow at Princeton. His 2007 book *The Occupation of Iraq* is by far the best descriptive analysis of the disasters that unfolded when American hopes met Iraqi realities. His new book joins the increasingly crowded debate over the fundamental question of whether Islam can be reconciled with the modern capitalist world.

His answer is a cautious and conditional "yes." He believes that the capitalist West is being forced to change as its citizens recognize that environmental constraints have foreclosed the era of limitless material growth, and that personal ambition should operate within the broader context of the common good. "The rugged, autonomous individual so beloved by liberal philosophers and by Hollywood movies simply cannot exist outside the virtuous community," he writes. "And Islam would add that neither the individual nor the society can be whole if they are not infused with the sense of the transcendent."

But Islam has yet to reconcile with the better aspects of the post-Renaissance and post-Enlightenment West: intellectual freedom,

THE CRISIS OF ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION.

By Ali A. Allawi.
Yale Univ. Press.
304 pp. \$27.50

the questioning of tradition, a commitment to education and the scientific method. Islam's attempts to embrace modernity have taken false and essentially political paths, Allawi argues, whether through Arab nationalism, state socialism, the crazed jihadism of 9/11, or what he condemns as the "legal trickery" of so much modern Islamic finance (which allows some religious figures to line their pockets by certifying that particular investments comply with Islamic law). Allawi has little respect for "the Gulf countries' exuberant embrace of a frantic hypermodernity only scantily garbed in Islamic idioms," and even less for the anti-intellectual Wahhabism he blames for the implosion of Islamic cultural life and creativity.

Allawi overstates the deleterious effect of Wahhabism, which came along centuries after the Mongols and Tamerlane crushed the first great flowering of Islamic civilization. But he is right to point out disparities between what the Islamic world once was and what it is today. "The creative output of the 20 or 30 million Muslims of the Abbassid era [AD 750 to 1258] dwarfs the output of the nearly one-and-a-half billion Muslims of the modern era," he comments sourly. The Muslim countries of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, a 57-member voting bloc in the United Nations, "have 8.5 scientists and technicians per 1,000 population, compared to a world average of 40.7 and a developed-world figure of 139.3."

Allawi devotes much of the book to the intellectual civil war within Islamic theology, asking whether "a modern society, with all its complexities, institutions, and tensions, [can] be built on a vision of the divine." He finds a possible answer in the work of Syed Naquib al-Attas. Born in 1931 in Java, al-Attas attended Sandhurst, the British military academy, and served as an officer in the Malay regiment before becoming a philosopher and teacher. He sought to create an institution to breed "the complete man, . . . a Muslim scholar who is universal in

his outlook and is authoritative in several branches of related knowledge.” In Malaysia in 1987, he founded the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, which taught in English and quickly became an important center for a generation of Islamic scholars who questioned the traditional Arab dominance of Muslim thought.

But in 2004 al-Attas was forced to retire, and his school was merged into an Islamic university dominated by Saudi-funded rivals. Allawi sees al-Attas as a victim “of an ongoing war, within the world of higher education in Malaysia and the wider Muslim world, around the issue of the meaning of the Islamization of knowledge and of the functions and purposes of an Islamic university.” Behind the conflict lies the relentless drive of Wahhabists with unlimited funds who seek to dominate Islamic intellectual life with their tradition-based puritan approach. For Allawi, their mission represents “the closing of the Islamic mind.” Wahhabism’s triumph is not final, he concludes, but for the moment its success means that “the much-heralded Islamic ‘awakening’ of recent times will not be a prelude to the rebirth of an Islamic civilization; it will be another episode in its decline.”

MARTIN WALKER is a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center and senior director of A. T. Kearney’s Global Business Policy Council.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Green Thumb and Then Some

Reviewed by Steven Lagerfeld

IT’S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE now to imagine an America in which a plant breeder could become a national celebrity and idol of millions. But that’s precisely the story of Luther Burbank (1849–1926), “the Wizard of Santa Rosa,” as he

THE GARDEN OF INVENTION:

Luther Burbank and the Business of Breeding Plants.

By Jane S. Smith.
Penguin.
354 pp. \$25.95

was styled in countless magazine articles.

Helen Keller, the king of Belgium, and football star Red Grange made pilgrimages to his home in California’s Sonoma Valley. A photo from 1915 shows Burbank sitting on the steps of his house in genial conversation with the two men who were most nearly his peers, Thomas Edison and Henry Ford.

In *The Garden of Invention*, Jane S. Smith, a former academic and the author of a book on the history of the polio vaccine, blows the dust of a million ancient textbooks off Burbank’s remarkable story. “No matter what kind of hero you wanted,” Smith writes, “it seemed Luther Burbank was a leading candidate”—scientist, sage, guardian of nature, steward of New England virtues, herald of the California dream.

The association with Edison and Ford is telling. Born into comfortable circumstances in Lancaster, Massachusetts (near the birthplace of Johnny Appleseed), Burbank was inspired by Charles Darwin’s *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication*

“No matter what kind of hero you wanted,” writes biographer Jane S. Smith, “it seemed Luther Burbank was a leading candidate.”

(1869) to see that he could use his love of nature to join the ranks of the era’s heroic inventor/entrepreneurs. Reading Darwin’s meticulous documentation of how plants evolved in response to environmental changes, Burbank realized that a shrewd and energetic Yankee could speed up the process by “perturbing” nature and bending it to human needs.

Even before he lit out for California in 1875, Burbank created the blight-resistant Russet Burbank potato, still one of the world’s most widely grown varieties. Settling in Santa Rosa and later establishing his experimental farm in nearby Sebastopol, Burbank arrived just as California was being transformed from a raw frontier of cattle ranches and wheat farms into a new Eden, yielding fruits, vegetables, and nuts, and he would play a leading role in this



During his lifetime, horticulturalist Luther Burbank, shown in 1924, was an American hero. Today most people have never heard his name.

transformation, creating more than 800 varieties, including everything from the Satsuma plum to the Shasta daisy, as well as more exotic offerings such as white blackberries and a tomato-potato cross. Most breeders pursued slow improvements of existing varieties; Burbank aggressively used techniques such as crossbreeding and grafting to create entirely new varieties.

Burbank himself was an exotic hybrid. Fanatically hard-working and a shameless self-promoter, he nevertheless exuded an easygoing charm and an almost contagious serenity. In the California sun, the nature-loving boy weaned on the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau ripened into something of a West Coast guru. In 1907, divorced and childless after a disastrous six-year marriage (his adoring mother and sister kept house for him until he remarried at 67), he published a popular child-rearing guide in which he opposed formal schooling before age 10 and expounded on the value of exposing the young to nature. He called it *The Training of the Human Plant*.

Burbank's pioneering hybridization of the New England and California sensibilities is

one of several subjects Smith could have analyzed more deeply in her fine (and admirably concise) biography. Another is the change in the status of science that Burbank's story illustrates.

The late 19th century brought the rise of agricultural science, and its leading lights were eager to bring the legendary plant breeder into the fold. In 1904, the Carnegie Institution awarded Burbank an open-ended grant of a then-astounding \$10,000 per year; that same year, Stanford University named him to its faculty. Yet by 1910, both the grant and the appointment were with-

drawn. Burbank had begun his work before Mendelian genetics that revealed the mechanism of inheritance became widely accepted, and he rejected some of its sterner dictates (in some cases correctly, Smith notes). There were other problems, such as Burbank's haphazard records of his experiments, but it was his mysticism that probably made a break inevitable. Not only did he talk to his plants, he believed that all organisms are connected to one another by larger forces that he variously described as electrical or magnetic, or simply as "vibrations." There was no room for such talk in the new science.

Burbank never grew very rich from his creations. Plants did not enjoy protection under U.S. patent law until 1930, so he was forced to sell each new variety to commercial growers with no hope of royalties. Today's bioengineered crops—including the Bt Russet Burbank potato—do enjoy such protection. What they and their very un-Burbank-like creators do not enjoy is the rapturous admiration of a public that believes in the unalloyed goodness of science.

STEVEN LAGERFELD is editor of *The Wilson Quarterly*.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

What's It All About?

Reviewed by Edward Tenner

AMID THE GRAND EVENTS of politics and warfare, the powerful trends of economics and demography, and the spread of religious and philosophical ideas, there is a more elusive aspect of history: the search for a meaningful life, the pursuit of common happiness. It takes an exceptional scholar, drawing on years of reading in original sources as well as today's social science, to do the subject justice. Fortunately, Keith Thomas's intimate knowledge of English life in the years between the Reformation and the American Revolution makes *The Ends of Life* the rare historical work that is as absorbing as it is deep.

The book begins with a paradox of early modern English thought. On the one hand, a consensus of the powerful and learned called for maintaining people in their stations and their immediate districts. Yet the same John Milton who, while advocating universal free education, appeared to oppose social and geographic mobility, elsewhere defended "the civil rights and advancements of every person according to his merit." An undercurrent of individualism and ambition, fed by the constant movement of younger sons of nobility into the professions and business, could hardly be contained. The new grammar schools seated pupils by academic merit, not social rank.

The gentry's status was changing on the battlefield as well as in the classroom. The early 17th century was still an age of "quasi-chivalric" glory, when officers vied for recognition through conspicuous feats of arms. The rise of gunpowder did not end the upper class's identification with martial valor—even George II was a field commander—but it

THE ENDS OF LIFE:

Roads to Fulfillment in Early Modern England.

By Keith Thomas.
Oxford Univ. Press.
393 pp. \$34.95

replaced knights with a professional officer corps of more diverse origins. "Civilianization of the population" exempted most adult males from military service and left martial prowess to specialists. After the English Civil Wars (1642–51), the nobility and gentry abandoned the fortified castle and soldierly exploits for a civilian existence. By the late 17th century, English intellectuals saw their country as a securely defensible island power no longer in need of a great army like those maintained by countries on the Continent.

England's elites invoked theological and social reasons for keeping the laboring classes at work as long and as hard as possible, and gave little thought to how satisfied these men and women might be with their lives. Yet artisans and tradesmen found meaning in their work more often than might be supposed. Derbyshire lead miners styled themselves "the ancient and skilful miners," and, according to the diarist John Evelyn, proud English workmen rebuffed employers' criticisms with expressions such as "Sir, I do not come hither to be taught my trade." Today's workers may well bristle at Thomas's conclusion that "most of the modern British population have a more instrumental attitude to work," emerging from the anonymity of the shop floor or the cubicle to find meaning as "ballroom dancers or bungee jumpers or builders of Salisbury Cathedral in matchsticks."

In the early modern period, Thomas suggests, a taste for what would later be called conspicuous consumption united the great and the humble. The highborn were censured by their peers when their thrift defied norms of aristocratic largesse, and the working class sacrificed necessities to have at least one set of clothing for special occasions. Competitive display, within one's own rank in society, was a source of honor and esteem. And this worldly pride, so often condemned by clerics and other moralists, came to be seen by early political economists, including Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith, as a positive force for the com-

munity's prosperity. Preserving honor and acquiring luxuries fed a sense of self-worth that crossed class lines. Thomas reaches no conclusion about the continuing power of belief in heaven and hell in shaping belief and behavior. But he does illustrate how concern with renown in the here and now came to supplant the hope of posthumous glory evident in the often grandiose funeral monuments erected by earlier generations of the rich.

The Ends of Life is one of those rare history books that let us appreciate both the strangeness of early modern people and our own roots in their emerging individualism and consumerism. The author has an appealingly pragmatic outlook and a penchant for sardonic humor—he compares theologians' visions of the damned being tormented by the glory of heaven to economy-class passengers glimpsing the Champagne and hot towels of first class. If Thomas never really explains how values were transformed from Sir Philip Sidney to Adam Smith, neither has any other historian, social scientist, or philosopher. Since Americans share the Elizabethan heritage even as we pursue happiness in the 18th-century tradition, our cultural ancestors' quest for life satisfaction can be at once amusing, poignant, and inspiring.

EDWARD TENNER, a contributing editor of *The Wilson Quarterly*, is the author of *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences* (1996) and *Our Own Devices: How Technology Remakes Humanity* (2003). He is currently at work on a book about positive unintended consequences.

A God of the Times

Reviewed by Jeffrey Burton Russell

THE EVOLUTION OF GOD IS not an account of how God himself evolved (though a few theologians find that not impossible). Instead, Robert Wright's personable, often witty, and occasionally persuasive book traces human perceptions of the divine from "primi-

tive" religions through the three monotheistic faiths. Traditional Jews, Christians, and Muslims will find their beliefs challenged on virtually every page. Yet Wright is not one of the currently fashionable antitheists. It may well be, he avers, that there *is* an overarching metaphysical Purpose for (or of) the cosmos, though he will only go so far as to allow that "there might be a kind of god that is real."

Still, Wright, author of *Nonzero* (2000) and *The Moral Animal* (1994), does not take religious ideas seriously in themselves. He concedes that they may serve the social function of promoting cohesion, but he proposes that they exist only as "memes" (an unfortunate term coined by Richard Dawkins). Much as genes mutate and develop through biological time, memes are hypothesized to mutate and develop through the history of human culture. Hence the "evolution" of God. Perhaps. But, as is so often the case, Wright's beguiling rhetoric sweeps him along from "this might have been the case" to "this was so."

Materialism supplies the assumptions and the arguments of the book. Wright mainly draws on soft Marxism, neo-Darwinist evolutionary psychology, anthropological functionalism, and the current fashion to consider *power* the motor of history. He offers no comfort to antitheists such as Christopher Hitchens who want to blame the world's ills on religion, for he argues that religions develop mainly in response to political and economic events, and so can hardly be their main cause.

Wright predicates his argument on the assumption that "history" creates progress, and here is one of the many instances in which his rhetorical powers lead him to skate on thin ice. Historians will assure him that "history" doesn't *do* anything. So let's take his repeated references to "history" as metonymy for the development of human thought. Certainly human thought changes, but whether it develops in any particular direction is doubt-

THE EVOLUTION OF GOD.

By Robert Wright.
Little, Brown.
554 pp. \$25.99

ful. Progress with a capital P is the great superstition of our age. Scanning the last hundred years, it is hard to accept that overall progress has occurred in the course of the genocides, the Holocaust, the wars, the development of atomic weaponry—brutality generalized to a degree unimaginable in 1909. Only in one sphere of human endeavor can progress sensibly be argued: technology. Wright believes that technology, which has paved the way for globalization, will make people more humane as we come to understand and respect one another more. But technology is value neutral, enhancing the human power for both good and evil by a staggeringly vast amount.

Wright believes that religion begins with animism (the belief that everything in nature has a spirit). He offers a history of humanity's procession from polytheism to monolatry (worship of only one god among many) to monotheism to (he hopes) a more loving religion. In this he is faithful to the ideas of Auguste Comte and the anthropologist Edward Tylor; he even shares some thinking with the Scottish social anthropologist James Frazer, Saint Augustine, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. No one since Frazer has made "primitive" religion as colorful as Wright does. Wright argues that the Israelites' monotheism became fully fixed only from the time of the Babylonian Exile (the banishment of most of the Jewish people to Babylonia during 586–538 BC). Most Jewish and Christian scholars would agree, though they hold that the change was brought about more through revelation and theological reflection than politics and economics.

Wright flatly denies that any scriptures—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—are inspired. This stance is inevitable in a materialist take on the subject, but Wright tends to subscribe to radical reinterpretations of history, suggesting, for example, that there was no Moses. Wright's treatment of Jesus is particularly weak. He relies exclusively on the theories of the "historical Jesus" tradition, which

contrasts a putative "real" Jesus—a relatively obscure prophet who was executed by the Romans for being a public nuisance—with a mythical Christ that emerged sometime around the end of the first century through an anonymous and mainly oral tradition. The thousands of scholars who subscribe to this hypothesis pay little attention to critics such as Richard Bauckham, who has argued that the Gospels most likely grew from eyewitness accounts. It turns out that the "historical Jesus" is, *on the historical evidence*, more like the Jesus of the New Testament and the early church than he is like the Jesus of Robert Wright.

The Evolution of God is peppered with intriguing ideas. It is worth reading, with a skeptical eye peeled.

JEFFREY BURTON RUSSELL is emeritus professor of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is the author of 17 books and numerous articles on history, religion, and philosophy. His most recent book is *Paradise Misland: How We Lost Heaven and How We Can Regain It* (2006).

HISTORY

Ancient Passions

Reviewed by F. S. Naiden

THE GREEKS AND GREEK LOVE is less ambitious than its title.

One kind of Greek love, love of god, does not figure in these pages. Neither does another, patriotism. Nor does a third kind, love of argument, for though Davidson has a thesis,

he expatiates rather than argues. By "love" James Davidson means only "Greek homosexuality," on which he has written a lengthy survey that ranges over Greek culture and society from the Archaic Period, beginning around 700 BC, to the Hellenistic Period, which terminated with the conquest of Greece by the Romans in 146 BC.

For nearly 2,000 years, Greek homosexuality was a neglected topic. Classical scholars knew of customary homosexual relations between older

THE GREEKS AND GREEK LOVE:

A Bold New
Exploration of the
Ancient World.

By James Davidson.
Random House.
789 pp. \$45

and younger Greek male citizens. In his *Symposium*, Plato wrote of the relationship between the elderly Socrates and the young Alcibiades, an Athenian general and politician. Homosexual ties among soldiers were another identifiable Greek custom. The sexual abuse of slaves did not exclude homosexual abuse, and scholars knew this too, although they ignored it, just as they ignored other aspects of Greek slavery. Yet Greek male homosexuality made less of an impression than the lesbianism of Sappho, a Romantic household name. Only scholars doubted her love poems showed that she was homosexual. The male version of these noble, Sapphic sentiments was chaste friendship (but not homosexuality), especially friendship of a philosophical turn: Socrates and Alcibiades again. This image of Greek men owed more to the canonized torsos of Classical sculpture than to pedestrian historical sources.

Then, in the 1970s, as Davidson writes in his fourth—and best—chapter, Sir Kenneth Dover led the way in drawing a new picture: a homosexuality of acts, not poses, with the frequent rape of less powerful partners by more powerful ones. Davidson says that Dover and others have made too much of homosexual acts and too little of homosexual bonding, pointing out that Greek homosexuals courted as well as raped each other. And he claims that Dover overemphasized the distinction between more and less powerful participants. In courtship, power took diverse forms, and so the older citizen male, for example, did not always control his younger lover.

Davidson's critique has the merit of scholarly common sense. As careful readers of Greek literature have always known, many Greek homosexual relations were asexual, or centered on intercrural,

not anal or oral, sex. Whatever these relations were, sexual conduct was one thing, erotic life was another, and the way that power affected either one of them was yet another. To see power and nothing else is the mistake that Lenin, in writing about politics, called economism (and that plagued leftwing writers down through Stalin and beyond).

Davidson, though, thinks this mistake is anti-gay, not anti-intellectual. He is something of a dinner-party crusader on behalf of Greek gay courtship and even Greek gay marriage. Spartan lesbians, he says, were “married,” which in ancient Greece would mean joined as husband and wife.

There is no evidence for this conclusion. Davidson also says that Achilles, the warrior hero of *The Iliad*, may have been married to his comrade Patroclus. He forgets that a Greek bride was almost always younger than her spouse. Since Achilles was younger than Patroclus, he would have to have been the bride. Yet there is nothing bridal about Achilles—nothing at all. In both of these instances, Davidson sees marriage as a

kind of companionship. This, too, is wrong. Greek marriages were bargains struck by the bride's father with the groom. The one gave her to the other for the purpose of bearing legitimate children. If she did not bear legitimate children, the groom could get them by impregnating a mistress.

Davidson made his point about Dover in an earlier book, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (1998), which is only half as long. Caveat emptor. Weigh before you pay.

F. S. NAIDEN is an assistant professor of ancient history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.



A fifth-century BC Greek cup depicts Achilles dressing the wounds of Patroclus. Scholars have long argued over whether theirs was a friendship with benefits.

Feeding the World

Reviewed by Samuel Loewenberg

FAMINE IS ON THE DECLINE, even as less-severe food emergencies are more frequent. In *Famine: A Short History*, Cormac Ó Gráda explores why that is so. This far-ranging work of synthesis examines the course of famine throughout the last 5,000 years. Ó Gráda, an economics professor at University College Dublin who has published several books on the 19th-century Irish potato famine, argues against the common assumption that a famine is a simple case of more mouths to feed than food to fill them.

Though famine sometimes results from poverty or acts of nature, he writes, particularly in the last century human actions have been the primary factor—a conclusion that aligns with the findings of Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen. Historically, wars, dictators, and corruption usually have made famines worse, if they didn't cause them outright. Ó Gráda cites Hitler's blockade of Leningrad during World War II, the totalitarian regimes of Stalin and Mao that "greatly exacerbated" the food shortages in their countries, and the starvation that ravaged Tanzania after food stocks were grabbed first by the German and then the British empires.

If Ó Gráda's project sounds broad, it is. He appears to be trying to create an economic historiography of famine, concerned as much with showing how food crises were perceived and documented as with drawing conclusions about their causes from the evidence. His treatment of the Niger food crisis in 2005, in which three million people—many of them children—were at risk of severe malnutrition, highlights the complexity of modern famines even as it demonstrates the limitations of his approach. Ó Gráda writes that a week after vivid pictures of starving children ran on the BBC and then were picked up by other media outlets, an Irish nongovernmental organization chartered a plane to deliver food to Niger. "Today long-distance movements of food-

FAMINE: A Short History.

By Cormac Ó Gráda.
Princeton Univ. Press.
327 pp. \$27.95

stuffs during famines, by air and fast ships, are routine," he concludes.

But the value of fast new transportation is not the first lesson to draw from Niger's experience. The event was largely seen as a failure of the international community, which for months ignored warnings about the crisis. Further, food shipments generally aren't the best response to a hunger crisis. The United States is one of only a few countries in the world that still ship food, a practice that congressional analysts say wastes 50 percent of funds allocated to hunger relief and takes months, as compared with the far more efficient method of sending money to NGOs that purchase from local food supplies. But the Bush administration's efforts to reform this system over the last several years were stymied by members of Congress beholden to powerful American agricultural and shipping interests.

Ó Gráda's analysis is strongest when he discusses a case in depth. Looking at the food crisis in British-administered Bengal during World War II, which took two million lives, Ó Gráda delves into wartime correspondence between colonial administrators and the war chiefs in London. He concludes that the huge toll of the famine was avoidable. Contrary to the widely held belief that the food shortage was the result of hoarding, he blames it on the decision by British officials to focus food and transportation resources on the war effort. "The two million and more who perished in Bengal were mainly unwitting, colonial casualties of a struggle not of their making—that against fascism."

In his conclusion, Ó Gráda notes that increased food production, improved agricul-

Cormac Ó Gráda appears to be trying to create an economic historiography of famine, concerned as much with showing how food crises were perceived and documented as with drawing conclusions about their causes.

tural and medical technologies, and better governance (the despots Hitler, Mao, and Stalin “have left no important heirs”) have reduced the prevalence of wide-scale famines of the sort that were so devastating in the past. But chronic malnutrition is still widespread, a direct result of income inequalities in many societies between a small group of the very rich and a large mass of the very poor. It’s an issue Ó Gráda fails to seriously delve into. Sometimes, more focus and less scope can lead to richer findings.

SAMUEL LOEWENBERG is a journalist whose writing on malnutrition and global public-health issues has appeared in *The Economist*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Lancet*.

ARTS & LETTERS

Changing Tunes

Reviewed by Grant Alden

INVENTORS RAN WILD DURING the years bracketing the turn of the 20th century, creating technology that repeatedly transformed the ways people heard and consumed music. It happened again a hundred years later, which makes David Suisman’s lucid account of the emergence and consolidation of the music industry particularly welcome.

Before the Industrial Revolution worked its magic, music was mostly an amateur (or at best semipro) affair, something one played and listened to in parlors, at dances and marches, in concert settings, and in vaudeville halls. Songs had been sold as sheet music throughout the 19th century, but the publishers—printers, really—were small, scattered businesses. That slowly changed, and by the 1890s sheet music publishers were competing fiercely for market share—for “hits”—paying song pluggers (the term survives) to sing and place songs with performers in every conceivable setting, from department stores to prisons. Thus began the process of injecting popular music into our daily lives, converting songs

into commodities that were “unapologetically commercial and distinctively American.”

Naturally, such investments had to be protected, but not until the landmark Copyright Act of 1909 did U.S. law recognize something as intangible as a song as property. Suisman, an assistant professor of history at the University of Delaware (and a DJ on freeform independent radio station WFMU in Jersey City), does a first-rate job of sketching the publishers’ role in drafting that legislation. But he does not entirely sympathize with the impulses behind the law, which he views as “fetishizing the composer and the composition” rather than the performance, and granting preferred status to composed music over interpreted forms, such as traditional folk or jazz.

He describes the boom and bust of the industry that developed around the player piano, the most successful mechanical playback device (many variations on the music box were experimented with) to emerge before and compete with the phonograph. And he details the emergence of the Victor Talking Machine Company, founded in 1901, which produced both 78 rpm discs (burying Thomas Edison’s recorded cylinders) and the majority of the devices that made it possible for ordinary people to hear, say, the superstar tenor Enrico Caruso. Finally, in a curious counterpoint to Victor’s story, he traces the rise and fall of the African-American-owned Black Swan label, which sought to prosper while serving as an instrument of social change and artistic expression.

These stories, all well and carefully told, expand upon Suisman’s 2003 prize-winning doctoral dissertation. As there are few documents to analyze and no survivors to interview, he was obliged to rely on trade journal puffery, the papers of key figures such as gramophone inventor Emile Berliner, and, when discussing publishing firms, the songwriting manuals of the time. Throughout *Selling Sounds* there wafts a faint odor of disapproval, as if Suisman wishes things had gone differently. “On the one hand,” he

SELLING SOUNDS:

The Commercial Revolution in American Music.

By David Suisman.
Harvard Univ. Press.
356 pp. \$29.95

writes, “the recording industry’s vast offerings could seem like a Whitmanesque celebration of the great plurality of talent in American life. On the other hand, fundamental to the industry’s development was the exploitation and reinforcement of cultural hierarchy.” What he means by that, exactly, never quite gets said, and that’s a pity, for it might well have led to a fine argument on both sides.

Suisman writes extensively about Victor’s aggressive and trendsetting marketing campaigns (the record company was the largest advertiser in the United States in 1923), and its highly effective efforts simultaneously to brand Caruso (signed to an exclusive contract in 1904) and its label. Only in passing does Suisman note that Victor’s elite Red Seal imprint was considerably outsold by its more pedestrian labels—whose catalogues included Tin Pan Alley’s plentiful offerings—and that Caruso made most of his fortune singing to the public, not recording for it.

As new technology makes the possession of songs ever more transitory, not to mention functionally free, working musicians are turning again to live performance as their principal income source. And consumers—some of whom have owned Beatles songs on 45s, eight-tracks, LPs, and CDs, and now as MP3 files and cell phone ringtones—are still mulling the costs and benefits of technology in delivering music to their ears.

GRANT ALDEN was the founding coeditor and the art director of *No Depression* magazine.

Food for the Eye

Reviewed by Renuka Rayasam

EVEN IN HIGH SCHOOL, I was a cooking show devotee. My brother and I spent our summer vacations in a state of delicious torture, watching programs such as *Death by Chocolate*, salivating over decadent desserts we never made ourselves. Today, flipping

through the pantheon of cable television offerings, I have more choices than ever to satisfy my appetite. And judging from Kathleen Collins’s *Watching What We Eat*, I am not the only one mesmerized by chefs who dice and sauté. Few cooking show enthusiasts prepare the meals they watch being made, Collins writes, but “these shows prevail because everyone eats, knows something about food, and can relate to the endeavor.”

Television cooking shows have their roots in earlier, widely distributed radio programs in which actresses playing homemaker personalities such as Betty Crocker disseminated recipes and kitchen tips. The advent of television in the 1940s, which allowed for glorious visuals of what was prepared, brought food shows new popularity. Revered cookbook author James Beard hosted the first program, *I Love to Eat*, which began airing in 1946, but Julia Child dominated the art form from her debut in 1962 with *The French Chef* series. For decades she was a fixture on public television, cheerfully educating viewers about French cooking.

Now food shows run all day long on their own cable channel, the Food Network, which claims to reach 98 million homes. The shows themselves have evolved beyond simple recipe instruction to cooking competitions, travel programs, and other mouthwatering forms of entertainment. The reality television show *Ace of Cakes* takes viewers behind the scenes of a Baltimore bakery, and *Secrets of a Restaurant Chef* features a vivacious host who demonstrates how to translate restaurant dishes into home-cooked recipes.

Collins, reared on food television and educated in library science, brings to the table a wealth of personal experience and research. She mined television and print archives to uncover fascinating gems about television cooking-show pioneers. On the set, Beard invented modern elements of food styling still common in food photography, using ink to emphasize the veins in Roquefort cheese and substituting mashed potatoes for ice cream. The producer of *The Galloping Gourmet*, which first aired in 1969, was host Graham Kerr’s wife, Treena. Completely uninter-

**WATCHING
WHAT WE EAT:**
The Evolution
of Television
Cooking Shows.

By Kathleen Collins.
Continuum.
278 pp. \$24.95

ested in food, she jazzed up the standard recipe-instruction format, adding a live audience and sometimes booby-trapping the set.

Unfortunately, there is little to bind the ingredients of this book, which lurches from food show descriptions to interviews with producers, hosts, and cultural critics, to distracting personal anecdotes. Collins can't seem to decide whether she's writing a scholarly work or a personal ode to food culture. For example, in noting the rise of cooking as a leisure activity—a topic that warrants a book of its own—she suggests that, in the post-Betty Friedan world, women came to see their activity in the kitchen as a form of self-expression. Rather than develop this idea, she simply quotes the tag line from a Burger King ad, “Have it your way.”

Collins's ultimate goal is to explain why we watch food television even if we don't make the recipes the hosts theatrically whip up. It's a good question, but she never hits upon a satisfactory answer. Her devotion to the form leads her to argue that it's because food television is unique in its ability to keep pace with decades of social trends. But as someone who also whiles away hours watching chefs sous-vide beef and fill ravioli dough, I think the reason may be simpler: We watch food shows because, like all good television, whether house makeovers or sitcoms, they tell a story. In the case of food programs, the drama is in the transformation of raw sundries into edible creations.

RENUKA RAYASAM has written about celebrity chefs for *U.S. News & World Report* and *Condé Nast Portfolio*, among other publications.

The Camera Speaks

Reviewed by Andrew Starnier

WALKER EVANS'S IMAGE OF Allie Mae Burroughs, a sharecropper's wife whose tautly drawn lips attest to the torments of the Great Depression, is perhaps more famous than the 1941 book in which it appears. A collaboration between Evans and writer James



Walker Evans's photograph of Allie Mae Burroughs, a sharecropper's wife, became a powerful icon of the Great Depression.

Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* documented the lives of Alabama sharecroppers at a critical national moment. But Evans's photographs are not simply textual illustrations; indeed, Agee later admitted that he felt he was providing a book-length commentary on Evans's photographs. As a powerful work of art, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* transcends its subjects and their story to become something more than a strict documentary.

The photograph of Allie Mae Burroughs is one of the more than 90 beautiful images that appear in *Photography and Literature*, a theoretical study by François Brunet, a professor of American art and literature at Paris Diderot University. From the moment of photography's inception in the 1830s, Brunet argues, the medium's scientific, technological capabilities were in tension with its experiential, artistic potential. As Brunet skillfully negotiates more than 150 years of photographic history, he offers a coherent argument for the emergence of photography as a kind of writing, with possibilities for narrative and fiction that exceed

PHOTOGRAPHY AND LITERATURE.

By François Brunet.
Reaktion.
173 pp. \$29.95

its promise to capture the world as it is.

As a subject, the relationship of photography and fiction is hardly new. As early as 1840, Frenchman Hippolyte Bayard experimented with artifice in his *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man*. (Bayard was cheated of recognition by the inventor of the daguerreotype, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, who publicly announced his method of photographic reproduction after Bayard was persuaded to hold off on unveiling a rival process.) Bayard posed as if dead, and wrote in an inscription on the back of the photograph: “The Government, which has been only too generous to Monsieur Daguerre, has said it can do nothing for Monsieur Bayard, and the poor wretch has drowned himself.”

While the 19th-century realist novel, like the photograph, is a product of that period’s investment in capturing life as it appears, writers and artists have increasingly used photography to blur the line between fiction and reality. In Brunet’s account, artists such as Cindy Sherman use photography not for its documentary fidelity but for its malleability. Her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80) is a series

of self-portraits in which she depicts herself as an anonymous movie star, a seeming contradiction in terms that suggests the instability of identity. Novelists including the late W. G. Sebald have used photographs to interrupt and complicate their texts, creating a hybrid form. In *Austerlitz* (2001), which is punctuated by melancholic photographs, Sebald attempts to reconstruct a personal past and a larger history of the Holocaust with a blend of fiction and autobiography.

Reproduced on the cover of Brunet’s book is a 1978 photo by Bernard Faucon titled *The Banquet*. It’s a meticulously crafted scene of a catastrophic fire staged with life-size and life-like mannequins of children, which appear in postures of terror or delight at the flames that threaten to engulf an elaborately set table, though their faces are inscrutable. The photograph has a startling eloquence, and tells a truth that belies its constructedness. This ghastly photo-fiction might be the only way to speak to the unspeakable events of the most photographed century.

ANDREW STARNER is a graduate student in theater and performance studies at Brown University.

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PORTRAIT



Southern Lights

Two giants of Southern literature met in 1962 when Eudora Welty presented the Gold Medal for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters to William Faulkner. Fearing she would drop the medal during the ceremony, Welty slipped Faulkner his award beforehand. At the podium all she held was an empty box. This photo, taken sometime that evening, is one of more than 60 portraits of writers and artists by New York photographers Sidney and Abraham Wainrob that are on display through mid-August at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden, in Staten Island, N.Y.



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