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Letters

Moneybags to Middle Class: Drop Dead

SAN FRANCISCO
There is only one element missing from William Greider’s stellar analysis of the state of American capitalism, “The End of New Deal Liberalism” [Jan. 24]. The capitalist class has figured out that it no longer needs demand from our middle class to sustain production or profits. It is more profitable to produce overseas and then, with the cheap dollar, sell the products to the burgeoning middle classes of India, China, even the Middle East. Customers here number only 200 to 300 million. Customers there number 500 million or more, and growing.

Whatever motive impelled Henry Ford to pay a living wage or others of his status to tolerate government subsidies of middle-class life (the GI bill, mortgage deductions, college tuition aid, union protection), it’s gone now. We’ve all thought such subsidy is what America is about. Not. It was about maintaining demand for extraordinary productive capacity. Don’t need that demand anymore. The policies that enabled its growth are nothing but a diversion of profit to the undeserving.

I hope Mr. Greider will write in his inimitable way on this consequence of globalization for civilized life (here, that is).

LUCY JOHNS

FLAME Out

ACCORD, N.Y.
I strongly object to The Nation’s regular inclusion of the FLAME advertisement. Is this an attempt to be ironic?

STEVEN LANCE FORMAL

NEW YORK CITY
I fail to understand by what logic you find it reasonable to run the biased FLAME ad in your otherwise respectable publication. If your magazine is so desperate for money that you accept ads from an organization that misconstrues “facts” and blatantly promotes the violent right-wing Israeli state, then you might as well give up publishing. I’d rather see ads from porn sites. In fact, cancel my subscription.

RACHEL SIGNER

ESCONDIDO, CALIF.
The latest FLAME joke, in the January 24 edition, almost produced a fit of apoplexy. A few years ago I canceled my subscription to The New Republic because of its clear pro-Israel bias, which negated any claim it might have had to journalistic integrity. I was tempted to cancel over the FLAME ad in The Nation a couple of months ago. I forwarded a copy of my letter to you about the ad to Gerardo Joffe, the president of FLAME. He had the effrontery to call me and inquire whether I was an anti-Semite. I laughed at him and suggested he was nothing more than another Abe Foxman.

After reading his latest screed, I calmed down slightly when I noted you had placed it on the last page. I suggest you not only place the ad on the last page but that you perforate the page along its edge so it can be easily detached and taken to the lavatory to be used appropriately.

JACK LOVE

Brace yourselves for the FLAME ad appearing on page 23 of this issue. As our readers know, very few American publications challenge Israel’s policies and its treatment of the Palestinian people as The Nation does. We often publish articles that controvert the distorted rhetoric in FLAME ads. However, we accept advertising not to further our views but to defray the costs of publishing. The Nation’s advertising policy (TheNation .com/node/33589) starts with the presumption that “we will accept advertising even if the views expressed are repugnant to the editors.”

We do impose limits on commercial ads, barring, for example, the lurid, patently fraudulent, illegal or libelous. But ads that present a political point of view fall under our editorial commitment to freedom of speech, so we grant them the same latitude we claim for our own views. We do reserve the right to denounce the content of such ads, which we frequently do.

—The Editors (continued on page 26)
For Democracy in Egypt

The popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, which have sent reverberations throughout the Arab world, reveal some uncomfortable truths about US foreign policy. The contortions of the Obama administration, caught between its desire to stand by a dictator in Cairo who has been a loyal ally and its desire to channel a revolution that could define the future of the region, are replays we have seen over and over. Rhetorically, America trumpets democracy and human rights. In reality, we ally ourselves with repressive dictatorships: Cuba’s Batista, Nicaragua’s Somoza, Chile’s Pinochet, South Africa’s apartheid regime, Iran’s shah, Indonesia’s Suharto and many more. When the people finally revolt, Washington flounders, usually concerned more about shoring up the regime than about supporting democracy.

Worse, because foreign policy is dominated by our military and intelligence agencies, our ties with these regimes tend to involve deep complicity with the security services that torture and kill domestically. We are widely—and accurately—viewed in much of the third world not as neutral or distant supporters of freedom but as the bulwark of dictatorships. We train their police, arm their militaries, base our troops on their soil. American people and culture are widely admired abroad, but our government is just as widely despised.

This dismal pattern leaves us clueless when democratic movements arise. As we scramble to identify new leaders, we face understandable suspicion of our motives. Despite our ritual celebration of civil society, we underinvest in the civilian side of aid. In Egypt, US officials lacked contacts with many of the grassroots groups leading the revolt. It should not be surprising that our call now for an orderly transition is widely viewed in Egypt as an attempt to buy time in the hope that the demonstrations will die out.

The whole world is watching what America does now, as the Mubarak regime, buttressed by $1.3 billion in annual US military aid, struggles to counter the most inspiring democratic upsurge in decades. The Obama administration can follow Washington tradition by undermining the democratic movement in the interest of “stability.” Or it can practice what Obama preached so eloquently in Cairo in June 2009 and support the will of the Egyptian people—as expressed by the hundreds of thousands courageously taking to the streets in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and other cities—to finally be rid of Mubarak and his cronies, the three-decade state of emergency, the brutal security establishment and replace them with a new Constitution and free and fair elections. If Washington were to do this—and if it were to help sustain a democratic transition by marshaling international support for economic recovery—America would win the praise of millions throughout the Arab world. And that simple act of justice and decency would likely do more to stanch support for extremist Islam than a thousand Special Forces operations.

The uprisings in the Middle East expose the utter folly of the neocorporative doctrine, championed by George W. Bush, that democracy can be imposed through a gun barrel. Bush’s catastrophic Iraq War unleashed sectarian struggles that debilitating Iraqi society to this day. And Obama’s escalation of Bush’s Afghan war has us propping up a regime so corrupt and incompetent that it has revived the hated Taliban. To be sure, popular uprisings offer no guarantees. They can end badly, as we learned in Iran. But the alternatives—presuming to impose democracy through military force, or stand—
ing in its way by supporting dictatorship—are unacceptable.

We desperately need new national security thinking, and a new global strategy. We would do better to spend far less time strengthening militaries—at home and abroad—and far more time supporting democratic governance, civil society and economic development. We should understand that to be effective, our foreign policy must complement reforms at home, ones that improve democracy, enhance human security and spur economic opportunity. America is exceptional not because we are rich but because we were founded on a revolutionary ideal: that people have the right to govern themselves. And yet we have become a status quo nation, too often invested in maintaining oppressive power. The revolution sweeping the Middle East suggests we had better think very hard about that contradiction.

In Liberation Square

Walk south along the Nile in Cairo’s febrile downtown, past austere, colonial-vintage government buildings and stately luxury hotels, cross into Tahrir Square, and you’ll pass from one authority to another. Outside, tanks and armored personnel carriers guard Egypt’s besieged and malign ignored nation; inside the square, in the heart of the city, hundreds of thousands of protesters and revolutionaries hold jurisdiction, establishing a parallel capital where dictator Hosni Mubarak has little control. Those who for years lived in fear under Mubarak’s regime openly taunt police. Impromptu lectures and debates erupt on the curbside, near the Ministry of Information, no less. “I see the world with new eyes,” one protester told me.

The demonstrations, which started on January 25, were called by a small group of longtime activists, including the loose-knit Kefaya movement, the Revolutionary Socialists, supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, and offered a number of concessions, including a pledge from Mubarak’s regime openly taunt police. Impromptu lectures and debates erupted on the curbside, near the Ministry of Information, no less. “I see the world with new eyes,” one protester told me.

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MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS: Less than a decade ago, on the eve of the Iraq invasion, MSNBC dumped Phil Donahue because he was too liberal for major media. Oh, how times have changed. Suddenly, progressives are hot properties. On February 7, Internet services giant AOL bought The Huffington Post for $315 million in a bid to reposition itself as a content provider. HuffPo co-founder Arianna Huffington, a former conservative turned progressive icon, was installed as the president of a new AOL company with multiple sites and a domestic audience of 117 million.

One day later, Al Gore and Joel Hyatt recruited Keith Olbermann—who proved that MSNBC could be liberal and successful, before signing off in January—as Current TV’s “chief news officer,” with a nightly program of his own and a charge to build a fresh news and public affairs cable network. Olbermann is now an equity stakeholder in Current, which is controlled by Gore and Hyatt but primarily owned by NBC’s parent company, Comcast.

So within days, two of progressive media’s best-known figures have become potentially definitional players in “big media.” Why is this happening now? Today’s savvier cable and digital media CEOs recognize that there is money to be made by appealing to niche audiences. Like conservatives, progressives is money to be made by appealing to niche audiences. Like conservatives, progressives have changed. Suddenly, progressives are hot too liberal for major media. Oh, how times have changed. Because he was dumped MSNBC a decade ago, on the eve of the Iraq invasion, progressive audiences, makes business sense.

Under the leadership of former Congressional aide Al From, the DLC grew quickly in the 1980s and early 90s as aspiring Democratic politicians—most notably, Bill Clinton—gravitated to the organization, which existed to break the power of liberal interest groups inside the Democratic Party and attract support from the business community. Under DLC cover, New Democrats were able to shed the “tax and spend” stigma of the McGovern/Mondale years, raise big dollars from corporate America and pick up establishment media support. As president, Clinton largely followed the DLC program of balanced budgets, free trade and financial deregulation, relying on DLC aides like Bruce Reed, William Galston and Elaine Kamarck. A top aide to Jesse Jackson groused of the Clinton-era Democratic Party, “The DLC has taken it over.”

But the DLC’s influence began to wane in the Bush years as its accommodationist instincts came to be viewed by many rank-and-file Democrats as doing more harm than good. For example, at a Rose Garden ceremony announcing the Congressional resolution to authorize the war in Iraq, current and former DLC chairs Evan Bayh, Joe Lieberman and Dick Gephardt flanked George W. Bush. New leaders and groups like Howard Dean and MoveOn.org emerged to challenge the DLC, and even former New Democratic stalwarts, like Kamarck and New Democrat Network president Simon Rosenberg, began to distance themselves from the DLC’s harsh attacks on liberals. The group's support for Lieberman in the 2004 primary and fierce opposition to Dean, in particular, backfired spectacularly.

The DLC suffered additional blows during Lieberman’s independent Senate candidacy in 2006 and DLC chair Harold Ford Jr.’s quixotic and short-lived bid for the Senate in New York. What was left of the New Democrat base gravitated toward the new group Third Way, which boasts ties to centrist members of Congress. When From retired in 2009, the DLC’s state and local chapters began to disappear.

To be fair, the DLC was also a victim of its own success. Former DLC CEO Reed ran the Obama administration’s deficit commission and is now Joe Biden’s chief of staff. Former White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel was a devotee of the group, as are many members of Obama’s economic team. Obama, though never close to the DLC, nonetheless appears to share the group’s pro-corporate inclinations and philosophy of compromise. “DLC is not out of business,” blogger Max Sawicky tweeted upon hearing the news. “HQ has moved to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.”

GET YOUR GOVERNMENT HANDS...

According to a recent report in Perspectives on Politics, Americans are largely ignorant of the government benefits they receive. Of the more than 40 million retirees and survivors who receive Social Security benefit payments every year, a whopping 44.1 percent responded in a government survey that they had “not used a government social program.” For other programs, the numbers are even higher. Of the 35 million taking advantage of the Home Mortgage Interest Deduction, 60 percent were unaware that it is a government-sponsored program. Even programs like Pell Grants (43.1 percent), Medicaid (27.8 percent) and food stamps (25.4 percent) have high rates of misrecognition.

The article, by political scientist Suzanne Mettler, argues that the problem is the government’s tendency to create “submerged” social programs. “These are welfare programs that are either administered through private agencies or through the tax system. As a result, they’re not as visible,” explains Mettler.

In February 2009, President Obama passed tax credits worth $288 billion. But a year later, only 12 percent of those polled believed they were paying lower taxes. “The politics of the submerged state allows Americans to be deluded about the role of government,” Mettler says. “It makes a lot of people have anti-government attitudes even though they’re often beneficiaries of generous government programs.”
I’ll admit I’ve now watched Glenn Beck’s infamous rant about “the coming insurrection” at least half a dozen times. If you haven’t seen it, on Monday, January 31, Beck stood before two blackboards with chalk drawings of maps of Europe and the Middle East and proceeded to slap little fire icons haphazardly on any and all countries within view—Italy! France! Algeria! All On Fire!—while weaving a disturbed vision of a New World Order in which the Weather Underground and the Muslim Brotherhood conspire to usher in a caliphate while China… well, you get the picture.

“You don’t know the truth!” Beck told his audience. “America, you’re not getting any useful information at all from the media…. They’re not giving you anything! They’re showing you pictures of people who are rioting. You feel bad for them, as you should because they’re being played. You look at the angry dictator and say that guy’s gotta go, as you should. But why was he our friend?”

This tour de force of paranoid ignorance earned Beck some criticism from Bill Kristol and others on the right who seem to have finally awakened to the fact that Beck is a clownish embarrassment. But I think there was more than a little method to the madness: anyone watching the spontaneous, exuberant assertion...
of democratic rights by Egypt's protesters, and the thuggish violence the state directed toward them in response, can't help hoping that the anti-Mubarak forces prevail. Gallup reports that 82 percent of Americans are “sympathetic” to the protesters. But Beck doesn’t share that outlook, and it was his job to explain to his viewers why they shouldn’t be rooting for democracy.

It's no small task. For years and years conservatives and much of the centrist establishment have been telling Americans that the US mission is to bring democracy to the world, to liberate people from tyranny, to upset the established order of despotism. That was the great gift we gave the Iraqi people! Yet here's democracy arising organically with no need for our bombs, and suddenly members of the political class don’t seem so sure it's a good idea. Charles Krauthammer says the closest thing the protest movement has to a spokesman, Mohamed ElBaradei, “would be a disaster,” and that “only a child can believe that a democratic outcome is inevitable. And only a blinkered optimist can believe that it is even the most likely outcome.” Meanwhile, Jonah Goldberg and Mike Huckabee fret about the Muslim Brotherhood and Israel's security, and Dick Cheney calls Hosni Mubarak “a good man.”

Conservative opinion on Egypt is by no means uniform, but it's not surprising to find right-wingers attacking the pro-democracy protesters and ElBaradei. After all, the foundational thinker of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke, was terrified by the anarchic forces that popular revolt can unleash. After the storming of the Bastille in the summer of 1789, Burke wrote in a letter that the French “are not fit for Liberty, and must have a Strong hand like that of their former masters to coerce them.” In 1790 he took to Parliament to denounce the French revolutionaries for having “pulled down to the ground their monarchy; their church; their nobility; their law; their revenue; their army; their navy; their commerce; their arts; and their manufactures” and warned that the door was open to “an irrational, unprincipled, proscribing, confiscating, plundering, ferocious, bloody and tyrannical democracy.”

Few conservatives would see much of Burke in our current occupant of the White House, but there is a certain core affinity. In 2005, when David Brooks first met the young Senator Obama, they reportedly spent much of the time discussing and debating the finer points of Burke's philosophy. The cardinal principle of Obamism is that incremental change at the margins is always and everywhere preferable to both the status quo and radical upheaval. In 2004, before he was the presidential candidate of hope and change, the newly elected senator wrote a congratulatory e-mail to his supporters in which he revealingly defined his mission as “making sure that the world we leave our children is just a little bit better than the one we inhabit today.”

But sometimes “just a little bit better” is not better enough. There are some status quos that are intolerable, some regimes so morally bankrupt that radical change is the only remedy. And this is what the Egyptian people in the streets have so courageously called for.

At first, the White House seemed to signal that it endorsed, tentatively, diplomatically, this simple truth. But it has since backtracked. Our envoy Frank Wisner, a former diplomat and current attorney whose firm has represented the Egyptian government, said Mubarak “must stay in office in order to steer [democratic] changes through.” Hillary Clinton was forced to distance herself from the remark but not, it appears, from the underlying logic. At a recent conference in Munich the secretary of state expressed the administration's wariness of a democratic revolution “hijacked” by authoritarian forces, a more sober version of Glenn Beck’s fear. The result of the public US message, the New York Times reported, “has been to feed a perception, on the streets of Cairo and elsewhere, that the United States, for now at least, is putting stability ahead of democratic ideals.”

“We got caught in a trap,” says Steve Clemons, who runs the American Strategy Program at the New America Foundation. “What the people wanted is regime-change and we became advocates of regime-adjustment.” In concrete terms “regime-adjustment” appears to mean that Omar Suleiman, torture supervisor and Mubarak loyalist, will preside over the transition to elections in the fall while Mubarak stays in power; the thirty-year “emergency law” endures; and the monstrous security apparatus, which Suleiman oversees, remains intact. To Egypt's democratic movement this must sound a lot like “No you can’t.”

After all the neoconservative talk of “democracy promotion,” the situation in Egypt is a rare opportunity to support democracy in a nonmilitary, nonimperialist way. Cairo journalist Issandr El Amrani (aka The Arabist) suggested on Twitter that the United States suspend its massive aid payments to Egypt unless and until a civilian government is formed. Other than that, he says, America should butt out.

Given President Obama’s disposition and the history of revolutions worldwide, I can understand the preference for stability, continuity, small change over big change. The French Revolution did end in the guillotine, and Burke was justifiably horrified. But we’ve spent decades lecturing the world about the imperatives of democracy, pledging to bring it to the Middle East by hook or by crook (or by bomb). Now that the genuine article presents itself—with all the messy complications that revolution entails—is our Republic, founded by revolutionaries, going to conspire with the king so he can keep his crown?

CHRISTOPHER HAYES

When Fiction Becomes Fact

Vale of Tears, Congressman Peter King’s 2004 thriller about Islamic terrorism in New York, is an execrable novel. But in light of the Congressional hearings King is holding on radicalism within the American Muslim community, it is a fascinating book.

Ever since the 9/11 attacks, there’s been a growing hostility between King and American Muslims. According to a recent Washington Post profile, King was infuriated by Muslims in his own area of Long Island who initially doubted Al Qaeda’s responsibility for the attacks. He’s become convinced that the Muslim community is harboring terrorists and shutting out law enforcement; he often claims that extremists run some 85 percent of American mosques, a number he apparently picked up from a
1999 statement by Sufi leader Hisham Kabbani, who has never revealed the source of his figure. “We have too many mosques in this country,” he said in 2007. “There’s too many people sympathetic to radical Islam. We should be looking at them more carefully. We should be finding out how we can infiltrate.”

Now chair of the Homeland Security Committee, King is holding hearings on American Muslim disloyalty. Naturally, this has alarmed the Muslim community. It has also started a discussion about King’s hypocrisy; no Congressman has ever been more closely aligned with a terrorist group than King, who heartily backed the Irish Republican Army while it was engaged in a campaign of anti-British assassinations and bombings that often targeted civilians. As Ed Moloney reported in the New York Sun in 2005, “During his visits to Ireland, Mr. King would often stay with well-known leaders of the IRA, and he socialized in IRA drinking haunts. At one of such clubs, the Felons, membership was limited to IRA veterans who had served time in jail.” A regular speaker at events for Noraid, the IRA’s fundraising arm, he was unapologetic in his justification of IRA tactics. “The IRA’s violence is only a reaction to violence started by the British government,” he said in 1985.

If Vale of Tears is any guide, King’s attitude toward American Muslims and his past support for political violence are intimately linked. Knowing that the IRA had significant support in the Irish-American community, he’s projecting a similar level of support for Al Qaeda onto American Muslims. Defensive about his long-term involvement with a group our government designated a terrorist organization, he’s eager to pose as terrorism’s greatest foe. And in love with political skulduggery, he relishes putting himself at the center of events.

King has made it no secret that Sean Cross, the hero of Vale of Tears, is a stand-in for himself. Cross, like King, is a gruff Republican Congressman from Long Island with longstanding IRA connections. In an author’s note at the beginning of the book, King writes that the chapters dealing with the events surrounding September 11 are “based on fact” and that he means the novel as a warning about “how vulnerable we can become if we lower our guard—for even the slightest moment—and if we fail to recognize that our terrorist foes comprise a worldwide network with operatives active within our borders.”

In the novel, which starts on September 11, Cross has a dawning realization that although Bush has gone out of his way not to demonize American Muslims, they don’t deserve his magnanimity. “It was becoming more and more clear to Cross that brotherhood, love, and solidarity were going one way—toward the Muslims—with very little being returned,” King writes.

Years go by, and political correctness prevents necessary surveillance. Then terrorists strike again—and this time the targets include Long Island. Realizing that something has to be done, Cross confronts members of the local Muslim community, eventually prodding them to give up information about a pending dirty-bomb attack on the New York docks. Using this intelligence, coupled with crucial leads gained from his old IRA contacts, Cross saves the day.

In some of the most stilted and didactic dialogue ever committed to page, Cross discusses the Muslim threat with an old friend, Tom Barfield, who owns a private security company.

“The Muslim community is the most radical and terrorist of any immigrant group that’s ever come to this country,” Barfield tells him. Cross responds, “But didn’t they say the same about the Irish? Let’s be honest. You and I know quite a few IRA types in Queens and the Bronx.” To which Barfield answers, “To me there’s no comparison between Al Qaeda and the IRA…. The bottom line is that the IRA never worked against the United States. And most of the micks over here who supported the IRA considered themselves 100 percent pro-American, and believe me these Muslims don’t.” Concludes Cross, “September 11th proved that.”

But there’s a complication. It turns out that Fiona Larkin, a former member of a violent breakaway IRA faction, the Real IRA, is helping the terrorists. If King were a remotely empathic writer, his sympathy for the Irish community, which clearly can’t be blamed for its most radical extremists, might have extended to American Muslims as well. Instead, though, the Larkin character simply exists to show the difference between the mainstream IRA and its fringe, and to demonstrate how the Irish, unlike the Muslims, come forward of their own volition when they have information about a possible attack on America.

King didn’t dream up the Larkin subplot on his own: several British newspapers have run stories about suspected links between the Real IRA and Al Qaeda. “The global nature of terrorism ensures that at some point new connections between al Qaeda and the IRA will be uncovered, potentially unleashing a political firestorm for the IRA,” wrote Bill Roggio, managing editor of The Long War Journal, a publication of the neoconservative Foundation for Defense of Democracies. There may well be nothing to these rumors, but they’ve got to make King nervous. As he surely knows, the IRA itself had longstanding links to the PLO as well as with Muammar el-Qaddafi’s regime in Libya, which helped arm it. These are not groups that a hawkish Republican wants to be associated with, even tangentially.

So it is not surprising that King enjoys imagining himself as the hero of the global “war on terror.” Which would be fine, of course, if he kept his fantasies on the page. But now King has the power to act out this drama on the national stage. It doesn’t matter that, contrary to his statements, Muslims have come forward time and time again to turn in suspected terrorists. Last year, the FBI caught Farooque Ahmed—charged with planning an attack on the Washington Metro—in a sting operation after a source in the Muslim community reported he was trying to join a terrorist group. Mohamed Osman Mohamud, the 19-year-old Somali-American accused of planning an attack on Portland, Oregon, in November, was reportedly brought to the FBI’s attention by his own father, who worried that he was becoming too radical. In California, when a member of the Irvine Islamic Center started talking about violent jihad, others in the mosque turned him in to the FBI, only to learn that the man was an FBI informant. King’s contentions about American Muslims are, literally, based on a ridiculous fiction, one intruding into all our realities.

Dishonoring Reagan

It’s not a hard task, indeed it’s an agreeable one, to dishonor Ronald Reagan by listing his infamies on the centenary of his birth. But such simple iteration misses the weirdness of his malign vacuity, so inbuilt that today his sons cannot agree on whether he had Alzheimer’s in his second term. How could they tell?

Start with the 1981 onslaught on organized labor by his firing of the striking air-traffic controllers, whose union had endorsed him; continue with the onslaughts on welfare and the insistence that government was at all times a malign force. The attack on government took many concrete forms—including deregulation of the savings and loan industry, with subsequent meltdown of same in an orgy of pillage.

Reagan’s initial executives, James Watt at Interior and Anne Gorsuch at the EPA, assigned to ravish America’s landscapes and distribute public lands to mining conglomerates, timber companies and corporate concessionaires in the national parks, overplayed their hands, proposing giveaways so outrageous that environmentalists, led by the arch druid, David Brower, were able to beat them back. But long term, Reagan’s environmental appointees were able to set an agenda of destruction smoothly consummated by later presidents.

There wasn’t a torturer in Latin America who didn’t raise a cheer when Reagan was elected, even though Carter hadn’t particularly cranked their style. They were right to exult. In Guatemala, Rios Montt plunged into the darkest butcheries, with Reagan’s green light for the frightful bloodletting in which perhaps 200,000 Guatemalans died, most particularly Mayan campesinos. RENAMO perpetrated ghastly massacres in Mozambique, spurred on and backed by Reagan’s men, working in league with South Africa’s apartheid regime, much admired by Reagan. Fresh from honoring the SS men buried in Bitburg, Germany, he went two days later to Spain, where he declared that the Lincoln Brigade and the defenders of the Republic had fought on the wrong side in the Spanish Civil War.

Reagan presided over a carnival of corruption and greed at the Pentagon, especially the billion-dollar feeding trough of SDI. Today, hundreds of billions of dollars in R&D and procurement later, the scheme remains as absurd as ever. There was no border in Reagan’s mind between fantasy and fact. He told Yitzhak Shamir, then prime minister of Israel, that he had helped to liberate Auschwitz and returned to Hollywood with film footage of the awful scenes he had witnessed. It was all a lie.

The elite press institutions diligently fostered the cold war fantasies that powered Reagan’s 1980 campaign, such as Clare Sterling, Shirley Christian and Robert Moss’s imaginary Soviet “terror networks.” They lauded his leaden and childish oratory. Though the Tower Commission showed that Reagan was thoroughly apprised of the illegal activities in the “Contragate” conspiracy and had authorized them, commentators like Mark Shields made haste to affirm that the president had been the “victim of a bloodless coup in the White House,” which “he didn’t know about.”

Night after night, news anchors such as John Chancellor of NBC maintained that Reagan was guilty only of the crime of inattention, that “nobody wants him to fail.” Millions wanted him to fail. On March 9, 1987, in the aftermath of Contragate, Newsweek published a poll showing that more than half of Americans disapproved of the way he was doing his job, and less than half had confidence he would “do the right thing.” Another poll showed a majority deeming him a liar.

He was a vicious, ignorant man, snoozing over TV dinners with “Mommy” by his side, with a breezy indifference to suffering and the consequences of his decisions. He was surrounded by scoundrels large and small. Probably the worst was CIA chief William Casey. The people who did trust Reagan were mostly white men, the petit bourgeois, small-business owners, some (sometimes many) construction workers, many ordinary folk up and down the map who wanted a world much as it had been in the 1950s. Them, he betrayed. Reagan’s rhetoric was anti-government, but in fact he was pressing programmatically for a different use of government power, in which the major corporations would occupy a much stronger position. The Tea Party is a later chapter in this saga. The essence of Reaganism and its malign and enduring impact on our culture was anticipated by Daniel Boorstin in The Genius of American Politics (1953). “The character of our national heroes,” he wrote, “bears witness to our belief in ‘givenness,’ our preference for the man who seizes his God-given opportunities. … Perhaps never before has there been such a thorough identification of normality and virtue. A ‘red-blooded’ American must be a virtuous American… Paul Bunyan, the giant woodsman of the forest frontier (as James Stevens describes him), felt amazed beyond words that the simple fact of entering Real America and becoming a Real American could make him feel so exalted, so pure, so noble, so good. … He now felt that he could whip his weight in wildcats, that he could pull the clouds out of the sky, or chew up stones, or tell the whole world anything.”

This is the language acolytes like Peggy Noonan use constantly about Reagan—his directness, his manliness, his innate grace and a hundred other pieties. Reagan and his publicists tapped into the Bunyan myth, never forgetting that “a real American” would always be the sworn foe of treachery to “Real America,” whether it was nourished by communists in Hollywood or air-traffic controllers. He launched his 1966 California gubernatorial campaign by vowing to send “the welfare bums back to work” and “clean up the mess at Berkeley.” How he would have savored Glenn Beck’s demonization of Frances Fox Piven! He perfected the genre, just as he shaped a1 goodly slice of the fantasies destroying America.
Katha Pollitt

It Takes a Village, Not a Tiger

Are you a tiger mother, a soccer mom, a helicopter parent, an attachment mom, a permissive free spirit who just wants your child to be herself? Congratulations. Your kids have a good chance of turning out reasonably well. Not because you are a parenting genius who has hit on the perfect method but because you have the time and energy and cultural capital to give your child what he needs to be successful in today’s world no matter what child-raising method you choose. You are probably not, for example, poor, homeless, functionally illiterate, socially isolated, an addict, in prison, living in substandard housing, working three low-paid jobs—or unemployed for life. You have books in your house, and probably a computer too. You know enough to help your child with homework—and if not, you have the money or networks to find a tutor. You feel comfortable volunteering at your child’s school, being in the PTA, calling the principal, going to parent-teacher conferences. You can afford to take your child to the doctor and the dentist for regular care. If your child should happen to get arrested, as quite a few do—if he’s caught with pot, say, or spray-paints graffiti, or jumps a turnstile—there’s a good chance that the charges can be made to go away, or at least not become part of his permanent record. Your ex may have run off with your best friend, your apartment may be too small, you may hate your job—but you are still a white-collar, college-educated, middle-class person. And that makes all the difference for your children.

The biggest barrier to educational achievement today is not any of the things the media talk endlessly about: poorly prepared teachers, badly run schools, too many tests, low standards. It’s child poverty—which, like poverty in general, has just dropped out of the discourse. The Democrats don’t talk about it, except to wag the finger at deadbeat dads and teen moms, and the media don’t talk about it except in the context of crime or individual triumph. In fact, from the coverage you’d think our current crisis chiefly affected the middle classes—office managers, newly minted lawyers, college grads who have to move back in with their parents—when actually the unemployment rate for people with college degrees is 4.2 percent, which is where it was for all Americans before the recession. By contrast, for those with only a high school diploma unemployment is 9.4 percent; for high school dropouts it’s 14.2 percent. And those figures measure only those actively looking for work, not the millions who’ve given up or have never held a job (some 16.5 percent of black men over 20). Poor kids are more likely to be obese, to get insufficient exercise, to be diagnosed with ADHD or other learning disabilities and to have mothers who are in poor health themselves. No wonder they are less likely to be described by their parents as being in very good or excellent health (71 percent vs. 87 percent).

Poor children’s home lives are more precarious. Almost one in five children in poor or low-income families had moved in the last year, which means disrupted schooling and stress. In 2007, 1.7 million kids had a parent in prison, including one in fifteen black children. In 2008, around 460,000 children spent time in foster care. In 2009, 2.2 million were being raised by grandparents or other relatives.

Poor kids are more likely to be raised by single mothers and to have parents who didn’t finish high school or go to college. Even just living with other poor people seems to harm kids. Those who live in disadvantaged neighborhoods have lower reading scores; do low-income kids who go to schools where the student body is 75 percent or more minority. Most black and Latino kids attend such schools. By the age of 2, poorer children have fallen cognitively behind those from wealthier families.

We’re looking at millions of kids, disproportionately black and Latino, who face a wide range of serious difficulties: how can that not affect their ability to do well in school? Moreover, the number of poor and near poor children is growing. In 2009 more than 1.2 million children entered poverty, even as school budgets are being cut all over the country: classes are getting bigger, teachers are being laid off, extracurriculars are being cut. You can see why the schools say they can’t do it all.

The parenting wars look like they are about children, but really they are only about each parent’s own child. That’s why they serve such a useful social function. Without them we might have to think about the frightening place America is becoming for ever more millions of kids. Who knows? We might even feel that we should do something about it.
Last July, a group called the Coalition for Competition in Media wrote a letter to two key House subcommittee chairs on Capitol Hill, pleading for help in stopping the then-pending $30 billion megamerger of Comcast and NBC Universal. The group identified itself as “a coalition of public interest organizations, unions, small and minority media companies and independent programmers,” and said the merger was “fundamentally threatening to the public interest.” That may well have been a sound contention, and any reader might have thought the letter—part of an extensive PR and lobbying campaign—was distributed by a grassroots consumer organization. The letter was signed by the members of the coalition, including the media conglomerate Bloomberg LP. What the letter did not say is that Bloomberg LP was the driving force behind the PR campaign, and the Coalition for Competition in Media was conceived, funded and staffed by lobbyists for New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s $7 billion-per-year media company.

At the same time that Bloomberg, the politician, seeks a stage larger than City Hall—helping, for example, to found the political group “No Labels” late last year, and imploring national Democrats and Republicans to put aside party politics—his business empire continues to expand aggressively as well. Though Bloomberg doesn’t run the day-to-day affairs of Bloomberg LP, he still owns almost all the shares, handpicks the firm’s managers, talks with them as much as he feels he needs to, and therefore imposes his own will on the firm when he likes. (New York’s ineffective Conflicts of Interest Board limited but never fully defined the mayor’s role at the company he founded: the board allows him to “maintain the type of involvement that he believes is consistent with his being the majority shareholder.”) A spokesman for Mayor Bloomberg declined to comment for this article.

Given Bloomberg’s push for a national platform, any intersections between his corporation’s interests and the government warrant scrutiny. And Bloomberg LP runs an effective and sophisticated lobbying shop to promote the firm’s interests with federal agencies and Congress. It’s striking how, in a fully synergistic Bloomberg style, a news organization, a financial information company and a team of lobbyists often seem to be working in smooth concert.

This process was on vivid display as Bloomberg LP faced the prospect of the Comcast-NBCU merger. A postmortem of the company’s vigorous efforts to protect its interests in response to that challenge reveals the ease with which the Bloomberg empire navigates and manipulates Washington.

From the beginning, Bloomberg executives saw potential problems as well as exceptional opportunities in the Comcast-NBCU deal, a massive merger of a huge cable and Internet company with a TV network, which sought Federal Communications Commission approval. To understand the stakes for Bloomberg LP in this deal requires a quick behind-the-scenes glimpse at the company and how it functions.

Almost all of Bloomberg LP’s $7 billion yearly revenue still comes from the Bloomberg terminals—the desktop software with floods of financial data that is ubiquitous in Wall Street firms, despite its $20,000-a-year price tag. “Eight-seven percent of the company’s revenue is [Bloomberg] terminal revenue,” says Douglas Taylor, who follows the company and the financial data industry for Burton Taylor International Consulting.

But increasingly, the company has been extending its jour-
nalism enterprises. “There is an aggressive expansion going on in the consumer side of the Bloomberg operation,” according to Andrew Schwartzman, senior vice president of the Media Access Project. Consider the breadth of the Bloomberg journalism empire: the company bought BusinessWeek in 2009 as the magazine was losing money, and has transformed it into Bloomberg Businessweek. That comes in addition to the high-end glossy monthly business magazine Bloomberg Markets. At the same time, the company produces Bloomberg Radio on XM, Sirius and WBBR. It also distributes Bloomberg News as a wire service with local and national content on its website. Recently, the company hired ex–New York Times editor David Shipley and ex–State Department spokesman Jamie Rubin to oversee a new operation: Bloomberg View, where Michael Bloomberg’s political, philosophical and business opinions will be distilled in editorials that can be distributed across all his news platforms.

But the major play for Bloomberg LP, the potential crown jewel of the giant journalism enterprise, is Bloomberg Television, which airs on cable. The company hired Andy Lack, former president of NBC News, in 2008, in an effort to rejuvenate the channel. There was a massive purge, in which Bloomberg laid off 100 workers, but the studios were redesigned, new talent was hired, and it now appears to be on the upswing. Bloomberg executives dream they will one day compete directly with NBC’s influential CNBC. Right now the channel is barely watched, analysts say, but Bloomberg has been pouring money into it.

One oddity of the Bloomberg news empire is that without exception, all of its journalistic operations lose money, and they always have, according to sources with knowledge of the company. The news business at Bloomberg is heavily subsidized by the rest of the company—paid for by those terminals on the desks at Wall Street firms. It almost seems as if, for Michael Bloomberg, the profits don’t matter much in that sector. There are various possible explanations for this mindset. “I think Michael Bloomberg did something that was very shrewd and very intelligent,” explains Taylor. “I think his approach was, ‘I will accept losses in my media business,’ because he considers it advertising rather than a profit center.” Taylor’s theory is that Bloomberg’s news operations are a marketing effort rather than a core function of the overall business. “He saw it as a place to generate mind share,” Taylor says, “to generate advertising and recognition in the industry.” “Mind share” is the current term of art for brand awareness in the marketplace. If he is right, expanding mind share not only advances the company’s larger business interests but heightens Michael Bloomberg’s national profile.

Although for now the journalism side of the house remains subsidized by other operations, Bloomberg TV could one day churn a profit on its own. At first “it was always regarded as just sort of one of Mike’s vanity projects,” a company veteran told me, “and so it was sort of left alone.” But now some believe it could be a cash cow. “It could produce a quarter-billion dollars a year,” the source said, “if they could figure out how to get people to watch it!”

To influence the Comcast-NBCU deal, Bloomberg LP hired the big guns on K Street: Patton Boggs and Glover Park Group. Which brings us back to the Comcast-NBCU deal. Bloomberg was concerned about one thing: once Comcast purchased NBC Universal, would it favor CNBC over Bloomberg’s financial news channel? And what could that do to the expansion plans for Bloomberg TV? Bloomberg’s solution to the problem was “neighborhooding.” The concept involves grouping similar channels together so viewers with an interest can play with their remotes and find what they are looking for. A parallel is the way diamond shops can be found on Forty-seventh Street in Manhattan, or the way bail bondsmen are located next to one another near courthouses.

But that plan would work only if the FCC forced Comcast and NBCU to cooperate. If not, the executives at Bloomberg figured Comcast would try to punish independent channels by making them hard to find. And so Bloomberg’s lobbying of the FCC began.

The company’s tactical goal was to block the Comcast-NBCU deal unless the government required the merged company to put Bloomberg TV on a station next to CNBC. Schwartzman explains that it was an extremely “sophisticated” operation. (Greg Babyak, Bloomberg’s in-house lobbyist, referred The Nation’s call for information to Bloomberg’s new top PR official in Washington, Sarah Feinberg, who left the Obama administration to take the position in March 2010. The company declined to comment.)

One of the first moves Bloomberg LP made as it laid out its game plan against Comcast was to hire Kevin Martin, who retired as head of the FCC in 2009, as its lawyer for the issue. Martin, who works for the lobbying and legal powerhouse Patton Boggs, is not listed as lobbyist for Bloomberg because he performs legal work, but others at Patton Boggs were registered as lobbyists, and Bloomberg LP has paid those lobbyists $340,000 since last spring. Patton Boggs, of course, is one of the largest and most effective firms on K Street.

The other big gun in Bloomberg’s lobbying arsenal was Glover Park Group. This is a growing powerhouse in Washington, a Democratic shop on K Street with excellent contacts in the Obama administration and the Democratic establishment. Among its luminaries are Joe Lockhart and Dee Dee Myers. Glover Park was partially owned by Howard Wolfson, the Democratic political operative and former Hillary Clinton spokesman who helped Mayor Bloomberg win his historic 2009 third campaign for mayor in New York City. Wolfson, like other top campaign workers, was paid a $400,000 bonus by the

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grateful mayor after the vote, and a subsidiary of Wolfson’s firm made $490,000 in the campaign.

Then, once he was reinaugurated in January 2010, Bloomberg installed Wolfson as a deputy mayor. (The strategist was seen to be replacing Deputy Mayor Kevin Sheekey, a Bloomberg loyalist who was rotated out of City Hall and back to the private Bloomberg LP by then.) By the time Bloomberg LP hired Glover Park, Wolfson had sold his shares, he tells The Nation. “I divested fully when I entered city government,” Wolfson says. His financial disclosures reveal that his stake was worth more than half a million dollars.

To sum it up: seven months after Wolfson went to work for Mayor Bloomberg’s administration in New York, Wolfson’s former company, Glover Park Group, registered as a lobbyist for Bloomberg’s company in Washington.

And it was Glover Park Group that set up that Coalition for Competition in Media on Bloomberg’s behalf. Operating out of Glover Park Group’s office, the “coalition” had a website registered on a Portuguese island. (Glover Park says the domain was registered that way to protect against spammers.)

**Months after Howard Wolfson went to work for Mayor Bloomberg, his former company registered as a lobbyist for Bloomberg’s company.**

A diverse group of two dozen organizations, linked only by a shared interest in a democratic media, lent their names to the effort. Bloomberg LP was listed as just one of them, but it was the source of all the funds and its lobbyists did all the organizing and wrote the letters and press releases, which it would then run by coalition members for their input. The antifeminist group Concerned Women for America signed on, for example, as did its political nemesis, the National Organization for Women (NOW). The Sports Fans Coalition also joined up, alongside the Writers Guild of America. Some of the groups were obscure, and some were well-known.

Glover Park Group assigned powerful, politically connected talent to the Bloomberg effort. For example, Christina Reynolds had just left Obama’s White House, where she had been the director of media affairs for a just over a year. She quickly became one of the contacts for the coalition.

The group’s letters, all written by Glover Park Group, were plastered all around Washington. “As a diverse group of 24 public interest groups and private organizations,” the group wrote to President Obama, for example, “we urge your administration to ensure this unprecedented combination receives the scrutiny that it deserves.”

Coalition building is a normal feature of Washington’s influence efforts. Still, Lisa Graves, executive director of the Center for Media and Democracy, says this case stands out. “I would say that it is clever and somewhat deceptive because the assembly of the groups is mainly meant to further Bloomberg’s interest.” Strictly speaking, she points out, it is not a front group, but it is similar. “It is like a front group because the name of the group and the superficial appearance obscure the primary intent, which is to further this company’s corporate interest.”

In the jockeying over the Comcast-NBCU merger, Bloomberg corporate synergy also came into play. On October 19, Bloomberg Businessweek published a well-researched story exposing how Comcast had boosted its donations to politicians as it pushed for the merger. Reviewing Federal Election Commission records, Bloomberg reporters found that Comcast’s political action committee had increased its donations to politicians by more than $400,000, to a staggering $1.1 million.

Comcast’s massive lobbying and PR campaign to push for FCC approval stood in direct tension with Bloomberg LP’s own lobbying and PR campaign around the merger.

Bloomberg’s lobbyists quickly told the coalition members that it intended “to capitalize on the great Business Week/Bloomberg story this morning,” according to an e-mail obtained by The Nation from a member of the coalition. The lobbyists wrote, “We’d like to flag it for reporters with a quick quote and topper.”

The coalition’s press statement said of the article, “These donations…are part of a calculated attempt to buy approval for a merger that offers too many dangers for consumers and media organizations.”

There is no evidence that the Bloomberg reporters wrote the story as part of a company-wide strategy or were assigned the story because of corporate influence. A Bloomberg spokeswoman says there is an “impenetrable firewall” between editorial decisions and the other parts of the company. Still, it was a captivating confluence of forces: Glover Park Group, paid by Bloomberg LP, and acting with the coalition it had created on Bloomberg’s behalf, was on the warpath to distribute a news story Bloomberg Businessweek had written about the issue that was the most important pending matter in Washington for the Bloomberg brand.

Glover Park Group, for its part, readily concedes that it organized the coalition and that Bloomberg was its paying client but insists that the coalition was not technically a lobbying operation. “Any lobbying work that’s done is registered and fully disclosed,” a spokesman wrote in an e-mail to The Nation. “The Coalition never did any lobbying.” Here is the way to parse that: Senate lobbying definitions make it clear that lobbying includes “any oral or written communication” with White House or Congressional officials. But material “that is distributed and made available to the public” gets an exemption.

In a subsequent statement to The Nation after a request for clarification, a Glover Park spokesman said the coalition letters and other releases “are simply public communications.”

In January the FCC finally ruled on the Comcast-NBCU merger. The commissioners approved it, with a few conditions. Most of the public interest groups that battled the deal saw it as a loss. Free Press, a nonprofit group that works to reform the media and that also belonged to Glover Park’s coalition, called the FCC decision a “devastating loss.” NOW tells The Nation, “We do feel disappointed.”

But Bloomberg’s lobbying had paid off. The FCC ruled that
Comcast would have to “neighborhood” channels together, in the exact same language Bloomberg and its lobbyists had pushed for. “Whenever Comcast carries news channels near each other, it will have to include all independent news channels in all of these neighborhoods,” the FCC announced. “Bloomberg,” says the Media Access Project's Schwartzman, a member of Bloomberg’s coalition, “got what it wanted.” Bloomberg LP’s president, Daniel Doctoroff, who had worked as a deputy mayor in Bloomberg’s administration until late 2007, put out a press release in celebration: “The FCC has taken strong action to preserve independent news programming, and protect competitors against discrimination.” “Bloomberg TV a winner in Comcast-NBC deal” was the headline on Politico.

Corie Wright, policy counsel for Free Press, defended Bloomberg and the coalition in an interview with The Nation. “To say that Bloomberg got what it wanted at the expense of the interests of the other groups in the coalition, I don’t think that’s the case.” Still, the fact is that Bloomberg LP, the company that funded the “coalition,” scored in the end, and the other members didn’t.

Michael Bloomberg's company is now getting into federal policy in an even more powerful way: it has launched an information service about political influence that wealthy DC players must pay for. It is called simply Bloomberg Government, and it caters to lobbyists, government officials and federal contractors. “Finding the right path through Washington’s maze of regulations, legislation and spending trends can boost your business strategy,” according to the website. “Let Bloomberg Government be your guide.” It promises the inside dope for Beltway insiders who depend on it: “We give you the headlines, players, financials, spending and more, defining and clarifying the complex intersection of government and business.”

Backward, Christian Soldiers

Zealots are trying to turn the military into a religious army. Mikey Weinstein is fighting back.

by STEPHEN GLAIN

Late last summer, Mikey Weinstein broke up a fight between Crystal and Ginger, the guard dogs trained to protect him and his family from a violent reckoning with Christian zealots. For the 55-year-old civil rights activist committed to ridding the US military of religious intolerance, it was a refreshingly secular and evenly matched bout. Weinstein is, after all, famously combative, both pugnacious and profane, with the bearing and sensibility of a mastiff. In the end he prevailed and peace was restored, though at the price of some bad scratches on his arms and a hole in his right hand where a well-aimed canine had struck.

Only wags and heretics would suggest that such a stigmata-like wound places Weinstein in the company of another Jewish prophet who spoke truth to the legions of an imperial power. At the very least, however, his journey from corporate lawyer to patriarch of a tribe of persecuted minorities is worthy of an Old Testament morality play. For the past half-decade, the Air Force Academy alum has labored to reverse the currents of Pentecostalism that course through the US military in general and the Air Force in particular.

It is an asymmetrical struggle, an endless round of Whac-a-Mole with a network of fundamentalist groups that would otherwise level the wall separating church and state with the help of supine, if not complicit, Pentagon top brass. In the battle over the meaning and implications of the First Amendment, Weinstein has staked himself at the fault line between the free-exercise clause and the establishment clause, which simultaneously preclude Congress from legislating a state religion and guarantee freedom of worship.

“The free-exercise clause does not trump the establishment clause,” Weinstein says from the living room of his home, a tastefully designed adobe ranch house in Albuquerque. “Our Bill of Rights was specifically created not for the convenience of the majority but to protect the minority from the tyranny of the majority. From that perspective it is absolutely imperative.”

Since he established his watchdog group, Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF), in 2005, Weinstein has built a client base of more than 20,000 mostly Catholic and Protes-
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tant—as well as Jewish, Muslim, Wiccan, atheist, and gay and lesbian—members of the military. For them, Weinstein and MRFF are the only recourse for servicemen and -women who have been either punished for their faith or subjected to fundamentalist proselytizing in violation of military guidelines.

Consider, for example, the ferocity with which Weinstein and his undermanned crew of mostly volunteer staff reacted to the Air Force Academy’s recent invitation to Marine Lt. Clebe McClary, a controversial evangelical Christian, to speak at a prayer luncheon. In a January 22 letter to the academy, MRFF argued that McClary’s “intense, unreasoned and psychotic demonstration of unilateral and distorted Christian doctrine” would define the luncheon as “a revival meeting with the purpose of proselytizing and achieving Christian supremacy.” Weinstein then worked the media, landing notices about MRFF’s complaints in the Washington Post, The Raw Story and DailyKos. He urged groups such as the ACLU and Veterans for Common Sense to pile on and, on January 31, after the academy refused to budge, he filed a formal complaint in federal court demanding that the academy cancel its luncheon “on the grounds that it is a blatant violation of the plaintiffs’ Constitutional rights as guaranteed by the First Amendment.” (As The Nation went to press, a federal district court was set to hear MRFF’s request.)

A similar MRFF onslaught in October compelled its superintendent to release the classified results of a survey that revealed only partial success in its efforts to enhance religious tolerance. It was an important, albeit tactical, concession in what the Pentagon clearly regards as a war of attrition. One of Weinstein’s most recent cases concerns a Christian group at the Colorado Springs–based Air Force Academy that allegedly promotes fealty to God over temporal authority, disempowers women and encourages its members to intermarry. The academy leadership, Weinstein insists, has all but ignored the group and has stonewalled his demands for an investigation.

“They let Mikey throw blows, and they hope one day he’ll get tired and go away, but someone’s gotta be out there,” says Joe Wilson, the former US ambassador and an MRFF board director who famously confronted the national security establishment himself during the Iraq War. “There’s a need to take it to them, knock them back on their heels. Otherwise you lose.”

Asked for comment, a Pentagon spokesman said the Defense Department “places a high value on the rights of military members to observe the tenets of their respective religions and does not endorse any one religion or religious organization.” Under its equal opportunity policy, the spokesman said, of 1.4 million active-duty members of the US military, only fifteen filed formal complaints related to religious harassment and proselytizing in 2009.

The Christianizing of the armed forces, Weinstein believes, has implications for national security as well as for civil rights. In addition to ingrained anti-Semitism, his work reveals a simmering Islamophobia in the ranks that, when flushed to the surface by media exposure, has been leveraged by jihadi groups overseas for propaganda purposes.

Leading the Pentecostalist charge is a constellation of different groups, none more prominent than Military Ministry, an affiliate of Campus Crusade for Christ, a global outreach network with an estimated annual budget of nearly $500,000, raised largely from individual donors and congregations, according to the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability. Military Ministry maintains branch offices at the nation’s main Army bases, as well as overseas initiatives like Bible-study programs globally. The group’s mission statement, according to its website, is “To Win, Build, and Send in the power of the Holy Spirit and to establish movements of spiritual multiplication in the worldwide military community.” In a 2005 newsletter, Military Ministry’s executive director, retired Army Maj. Gen. Bob Dees, said the group “must pursue our...means for transforming the nation—through the military. And the military may be the most influential way to affect that spiritual superstructure.”

Military Ministry is particularly well represented at basic training installations like Fort Jackson in South Carolina, the Army’s largest boot camp. According to MRFF researcher Chris Rodda, the group instructs recruits through Bible-study programs that “when you join the military, you’ve joined the ministry,” and it ardently associates conquest on the battlefield with religious conversion. In a 2007 report, MRFF provides links to photos of Fort Jackson troops posing with rifles in one hand and Bibles—some with camouflage covers—in the other. A Bible-study outline distributed by Military Ministry cites Scripture to sanction killing in combat by “God’s servant, an angel of wrath,” to “punish those who do evil.”

Other groups affiliated with Military Ministry include Valor, which targets future officers on ROTC campuses and labor to “help them become disciple makers around the world at their future duty assignments.” There is also Military Gateways, which concentrates on training agencies like the Defense Language Institute, and through its own array of subdivisions like Sailors for Christ, institutions like the Great Lakes Recruit Training Command and Naval Service Training Command.

Another prominent group, The Navigators, commands “thousands of courageous men and women passionately following Christ, representing Him in advancing the Gospel through relationships where they live, work, train for war, and deploy.” It has a permanent staff presence at military academies and its directors, like their counterparts at Military Ministry, frequently refer publicly to US servicemen and -women as “Government-Paid Missionaries for Christ.” (Pastor Ted Haggard, whose New Life Church was located a few miles from the Air Force Academy, was a familiar figure on campus until 2006, when it was revealed that he had had relations with a male escort and

The Navigators, an evangelical group at military academies, refers to its members as ‘Government-Paid Missionaries for Christ.’
used illegal drugs.) The Navigators was founded in 1933 by Dawson Trotman, a mentor of Doug Coe, himself a prominent if low-key spiritual counselor to political elites in Washington. Coe is closely associated with C Street, an evangelical enclave for politicians and power brokers.

The revivalist subculture within the armed forces is as overt as Washington is loath to confront it. In late September Weinstein sent a letter to Defense Secretary Robert Gates on behalf of more than 100 Air Force Academy cadets who said they were obliged to falsely assume fundamentalist identities—leaving Bibles and Christian literature and music CDs on their bunks, for example—lest they be singled out for harassment by their commanding officers. Weinstein’s letter, like his previous appeals to the defense secretary, was ignored. Congress is equally reluctant to take on the issue, and even Democratic lawmakers have distanced themselves from MRFF. Board director Wilson said he tried to persuade senior aides to Carl Levin, chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, to open hearings on some of the outrages Weinstein has unearthed, but to no avail. “What Mikey needs is a political ally, someone to champion his fight on the Hill,” said Wilson from his office in Santa Fe. “But the Christian right is very powerful, and no one wants to wage that war.”

(A source from the Senate Armed Services Committee says there is no recollection among committee members of such a discussion with Wilson, adding that the committee serves in an oversight role when it comes to reports of discrimination and proselytizing in the military. “The way we work is, we ensure the Department of Defense is investigating these allegations as they come up,” the source says.)

Weinstein was born and raised in Albuquerque, the son of a Naval Academy graduate who ultimately became a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force. After graduating from the Air Force Academy in 1977, he became a judge advocate general and, after leaving the military in 1989, worked as a Washington-based corporate lawyer and counselor to the Reagan White House. Throughout the 1980s and ’90s, he and his wife, Bonnie, lived a comfortably affluent life in the northern Virginia suburbs, attending their two sons’ sporting events in the afternoons and mingling with other A-listers on the Washington social circuit at night.

That changed abruptly in summer 2004, when Weinstein visited his son Curtis on the eve of his second year at the academy. Over lunch, a clearly agitated Curtis described several occasions when cadets and officers had subjected him to anti-Semitic verbal abuse. His account chilled Weinstein, who as a cadet had twice been beaten unconscious in anti-Semitic attacks. Weinstein filed a complaint; the Air Force responded by launching an investigation that exposed a predatory, top-down evangelicalism at the academy.

Since then, the Weinsteins have burned through their savings and retirement funds and leveraged credit card debt to sustain MRFF as a lonely sanctuary for besieged secularists. (MRFF often provides spending money for clients who are no longer in the military and are struggling to get by.) Each day, the group is peppered with appeals for help. During an interview with The Nation, Weinstein paused to take a dozen calls and text messages from clients in places from Fort Hood in Texas to Afghanistan’s Helmand province, where automatic rifle fire could be heard in the background.

The MRFF e-mail log is packed with detailed accounts of senior officers subverting with impunity regulations against evangelizing. In one, an Army staff sergeant tells how he and his comrades were forced to endure a Baptist minister’s graphic sermon about a girl who was roasted alive in a car crash along with her soul because she had not been baptized, then encouraged to embrace Christ with the help of religious counselors waiting just outside the door. In another case, during an official briefing an officer at a missile air base was treated to a Christian prayer for divine “guidance and direction” when deciding when to launch the weapons under his responsibility.

A First Amendment vigilante, Weinstein is also on intimate terms with its abusers. His hate mail—mostly anonymous and unprintable grace notes from the bosom of white Christian America—casts him as everything from a troublemaking Jew to the Antichrist. (Among Weinstein’s many critics is his daughter-in-law’s father, who in a June 24 letter in the Colorado Springs Gazette derided him as a Christian-hating publicity hound. In response, Amanda Lee Weinstein, who graduated from the Air Force Academy in 2004, wrote a lengthy defense of her father-in-law in Veterans Today, as “the one that I call Dad.”)

Death threats against Weinstein and his family are routine. Vandals have shot through the windows of his home and painted swastikas on its walls. Firearm owners, however, are not Weinstein’s offensive weapon of choice. Armed with a hundred years of case law, he is most formidable in court. In 2004 MRFF was alerted by service members that chaplains embedded in combat units were handing out vernacular-language Bibles in Iraq and Afghanistan in violation of a Pentagon General Order that prohibits proselytizing of any kind. After MRFF took up the case, the Pentagon responded by confiscating and destroying
isolated caches of Bibles, although according to MRFF such evangelizing continues in both countries.

In January 2010 Weinstein exposed a private contractor who was supplying rifle scopes to the Defense Department imprinted with coded references to Christ-related biblical verses. After ABC News did a report on the “Jesus rifles,” as Weinstein called them, the Defense Department ordered that the scopes be sanitized of any subliminal content.

In April, in response to MRFF demands, the Pentagon withdrew an invitation to the Rev. Franklin Graham, known for his Islamophobic remarks, to speak at a National Day of Prayer Task Force service. In August Weinstein revealed that troops from Virginia’s Fort Eustis were confined to their barracks and assigned cleanup duty after they refused to obey their commanders’ orders to attend the performance of a Christian rock group. That same month MRFF publicized the mass baptism of twenty-nine marines at California’s Camp Pendleton before their deployment to Afghanistan. News accounts of the ceremony, part of a battalion commander-inspired operation called “Sword of the Spirit,” were republished by Ansar Al-Mujahideen, a leading jihadi website.

The number of Muslim service members seeking Weinstein’s help has grown geometrically since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the cruel odyssey of Zachari Klawonn is a particularly ripe narrative for the jihadi mill. The Fort Hood–based Army specialist, a model soldier with no reprimands on his record and some of the highest physical-fitness ratings in his unit, has alleged that he was subjected to regular abuse because of his Muslim faith. According to the half-Moroccan Klawonn, who enlisted two years ago at 18, his dream of being an Army careerist was challenged by a culture of Islamophobia from the day he put on his uniform. “With 9/11, Islamophobia in the military was born,” Klawonn said in an interview. “You can see it in the libraries, the Christian concerts. They look at me like I’m an outlaw.”

While marching in basic training, says Klawonn, troops would mockingly chant “hajji,” a term of respect in the Muslim world for those who make the annual hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. During a prisoner interrogation training exercise Klawonn was instructed by his drill sergeant to play the role of a suspected terrorist—not just for his own unit but for others throughout the day, depriving him of his own training interval. His requests to fast and pray were angrily denied, and his Koran was anonymously seized from his locker and torn to pieces.

The harassment continued at Fort Hood, where he was assigned in November 2008, and intensified a year later after Maj. Nidal Hasan went on a shooting spree at a base medical clinic, killing thirteen people and wounding thirty. After a threatening note appeared on his barracks door, Klawonn was advised by Fort Hood authorities to find quarters outside the base because his safety could not be guaranteed, but he was denied the standard stipend for off-post housing.

On April 27 Klawonn turned to Weinstein, who immediately retained a Dallas-based attorney to represent his new client. Within days, Klawonn was ordered to appear before the
second-highest commander at Fort Hood, who demanded to know why he was generating such negative publicity. “Clearly they were feeling the heat,” he says.

With MRFF gathering evidence and interviewing prospective witnesses in anticipation of a lawsuit, things have improved for Klawonn. He has started receiving his housing allowance, and a Muslim prayer room and imam have been made available on base. As the details of his treatment have slowly emerged in the media, the hostility toward him has subsided. Many of the 3,540 active-duty Muslims serving in the military—the actual figure is probably higher, as a considerable number of them are thought to be “closeted”—have expressed their support for Klawonn’s cause. His ambition to make officer grade has survived his ordeal, and he is even considering a career in politics. “We’re going to fix what’s going on at Fort Hood,” he says. “The only thing to do is to be productive and progressive and tackle the problem head on. You lead by example.”

Asked if harassment and discrimination against Muslim soldiers like the kind Klawonn received could have contributed to Hasan’s murderous rampage, Klawonn acknowledges the possibility that it was provoked. Nothing justifies murder, he says, but “the reality is that there was Islamophobia at Fort Hood. Could it have pushed an individual to a breaking point? Absolutely.”

Should Klawonn’s case come to trial, a key witness on his behalf will likely be another victim of religious discrimination at Fort Hood. Zachary Arenz, an Army specialist who turned to MRFF in June, was subjected to sustained abuse not because he is a Muslim but because he is a Jew.

From 2007, when he first reported for duty at Fort Hood, to his departure from the service in June, Arenz was singled out by both flag and noncommissioned officers for his faith. His request for kosher meals in the field was denied, and he was ordered by his platoon sergeant to find a fatigue-colored yarmulke so as “to restrict its visibility.” In his cot after a day of field-training exercises, Arenz was reading Hebrew Scripture; his platoon sergeant loudly demanded to know why the Jews killed Jesus. On another occasion, Arenz returned to his barracks to find a swastika scrawled on the parchment from his mezuzah. At one point, his battalion commander told him that “all Jews make bad soldiers” and that Judaism was “incompatible with military service.” He was even ordered to give his mother’s telephone number to Fort Hood authorities so they could confirm that he was, in fact, Jewish. Eventually Arenz was found guilty in a court-martial of what he says were trumped-up charges of having a cellphone in the field and not being at an appointed place of duty.

During his struggle with the Army bureaucracy, Arenz, a native of Huntsville, Alabama, petitioned his senators and Congressman for assistance, with no success. “I just want my day in court,” he says. “I want to face my tormentors and I want them relieved.”

In addition to his running skirmishes with religious discrimination, Weinstein can now add alleged predation to his casebook. In October he agreed to represent Jean Baas, who charged that directors of a nonprofit organization called Cadets for Christ prey on Air Force Academy cadets and manipulate them into marrying one another, a common cult practice known as “shepherding.” Baas based her accusations on her experience with her daughter, Lauren, who, she claims, was brainwashed into participating in CFC’s rituals, culminating in her September engagement to a fellow group member.

“They still dictate every move she makes,” Baas said by telephone from her Gulfport, Mississippi, home, where Lauren grew up. “It’s sickening to watch while the Air Force does nothing.”

According to her mother, Lauren was a strong-willed and devout Catholic who attended Mass regularly at Colorado Springs during her first year at the Air Force Academy. In August 2008 she was recruited by a friend and CFC member to participate in the group’s functions, which included weekend spiritual retreats, Wednesday night Bible study on the academy grounds and dinners at the home of group directors Donald and Anna Warrick. Soon, according to Baas, Lauren was disparaging her family members as irredeemable papists. During visits home for holidays and semester breaks, she was sullen and aloof, retreating deep into the fold of Scripture. By March 2009 she had forsaken her dream of becoming an Air Force pilot for the divinely inspired role of wife and mother. That Labor Day weekend, Lauren e-mailed her parents of her intention to marry a fellow CFC member, whom she knew only through Bible study meetings. (Lauren had already formally announced her engagement during a CFC gathering at the Warricks’ home.) In late June Lauren and her fiancé spent several days with her parents in Gulfport, poring over packages of materials provided by the Warricks that enumerated the spousal responsibilities of the “shepherd” and his “sheep.”

Reached by e-mail, Donald Warrick described Cadets for Christ as “a Bible-study group for interested cadets,” many of whom have received early promotions to flag rank. About a third of its members worship with the Warricks, he wrote, while the rest attend services elsewhere, and “all of them are free to come and go from our study as they choose.” The CFC board is aware of the allegations made by Jean Bass and Weinstein’s representation of her, according to Warrick, “and while their reality about what takes place and is taught in Cadets for Christ is far different from our own they are of course free to say what they want, and we wish them well.”

The Baases and their daughter, now stationed at Vandenberg Air Force Base, are completely estranged. “I’m not surprised...
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this kind of evangelicalism exists,” says Baas. “But I am surprised at where it takes place. This is no accident. Someone is allowing these people to operate there.”

A current MRFF client corroborates Baas’s account of Cadets for Christ and indications of at least passive academy support for the group. In an e-mail made available to The Nation on the understanding that its author will remain anonymous, the client says her daughter was recruited by the Warricks, whom she describes as “dangerous and destructive individuals.” Just as disturbing, she writes, “is how these folks are at the academy, recruiting some of the brightest and the best, to carry out their mission…right under the unsuspecting or maybe the knowing, leaders of the academy. Then when it is pointed out to them, it is denied. Is that denial out of ignorance or is it to protect? This is why I say that this issue may be much bigger and broader than what appears.”

Asked for comment, Air Force Academy spokesman Lt. Col. John Bryan said the allegations relating to Cadets for Christ are not substantiated. Bryan also stated that “the academy remains committed to protecting an individual’s right to practice any religion they choose, or no religion, provided their practices do not violate policy or law or impede mission accomplishment.”

When Baas petitioned the academy for help, she was told by a chaplain to write a letter to the superintendent but to betray “no feelings, so as not to sound like a crying mother.” In the fall, she came across MRFF during an Internet search and, frustrated with what she regarded as academy inertia, contacted Weinstein. With signature alacrity, he fired off e-mails to senior Air Force officers in Washington—including a former Air Force chief of staff—and the media, landing an exposé in Truthout, the online general news site. He publicly expressed outrage that academy officials would allow a private religious group to proselytize at a government institution, a charge he said was corroborated by statements from dozens of cadets. “We are now in a state of war with the academy,” he told the weekly Colorado Springs Independent in September. He was back in the ring, canines bared.

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**The Kids Are All Right**

As a mentoring program shows, the arc of a child’s life can be altered by a single stable adult.

by DAVID L. KIRP

As seasoned kindergarten teachers in downtrodden neighborhoods will tell you, in every class there are some 5-year-olds who can’t sit still and won’t follow directions, who fight with their classmates and even sometimes threaten suicide. And the teachers worry, with good reason, that these children are at greater risk of becoming pregnant or getting in trouble with the law when they’re teenagers. These kids may never have had the kind of secure relationship with an adult that psychologists regard as essential for normal development, but there’s not much kindergarten teachers can do to overcome that, with dozens of students on their hands.

The arc of a child’s life isn’t entirely predictable, of course, and the odds that children will succeed improve markedly if they can count on stable adult support. That’s what a mentoring organization called Friends of the Children has set out to achieve. The nonprofit’s strategy is simple to state and devilishly hard to pull off: start very early, in kindergarten; be steadfast; take all the time these kids need to connect with a caring adult; and stick with them—not for a year or two, like most mentoring initiatives, but until they graduate.

The good news is how well this approach works. As I crisscrossed the country, seeking initiatives with the power to change kids’ lives, Friends of the Children is the only program I found that breaks the generational cycle of poverty, crime and teenage parenthood, enabling kids who begin with the odds heavily stacked against them to become engaged and productive citizens.

Coming of age can be a fraught journey, especially when there is no teacher or coach, no neighbor or clergyman in a youngster’s life—someone who listens, who can give a nudge at just the right moment, who can pry open the right door or

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David L. Kirp is a professor of public policy at the University of California, Berkeley. This article is adapted from his forthcoming book, Kids First: Five Big Ideas for Transforming Children’s Lives and America’s Future (Public Affairs).
You deserve a factual look at . . .

Myths About Israel and the Middle East (2)

Should we re-examine endlessly repeated clichés?

In a previous installment in this series of clarifying messages about Israel and the Middle East, we examined certain myths which, by dint of constant repetition, had acquired currency and acceptance. We looked at the myth of “Palestinian nationhood,” the myth of Judea/Samaria (the “West Bank”) being “occupied territory,” the myth that Jewish settlements in these territories are “the greatest obstacle to peace,” and the myth that Israel is unwilling to “yield land for peace.” And we cleared up the greatest myth of all, namely that Israel’s administration of the territories, and not the unrelenting hatred of the Arabs against the Jews, is the root cause of the conflict between the Arabs and Israel. But those are not all the myths; there are more.

What are more of these myths?

Myth: The Arabs of Israel are a persecuted minority.

Reality: The over one million non-Jews (mostly Arabs) who are citizens of Israel have the same civil rights that Jews have. They vote, are members of the Knesset (parliament), and are part of Israel’s civil and diplomatic service, just as their Jewish fellow citizens. Arabs have complete religious freedom and full access to the Israeli legal, health and educational systems — including Arabic and Muslim universities. The only difference between the “rights” of Arabs and Jews is that Jewish young men must serve three years in the military and at least one month a year until age 50. Young Jewish women serve for two years. The Arabs have no such civic obligation. For them, military service is voluntary. Not too surprisingly, except for the Druze, very few avail themselves of the privilege.

Myth: Having (ill-advisedly) already given up control of the Gaza Strip, Israel should also give up the administration of Judea/Samaria (the “West Bank”) because strategic depth is meaningless in this age of missiles.

Reality: Israel is a mini-state — about half the size of San Bernardino county in California. If another, even smaller mini-state were carved out of it, Israel would be totally indefensible. That is the professional opinion of 100 retired U.S. generals and admirals. If the Arabs were to occupy whatever little strategic depth Israel has between the Jordan River and its populated coast, they would not need any missiles. Artillery and mortars would suffice, since Israel would be only nine miles wide at its waist. Those who urge such a course either do not understand the situation or have a death wish for Israel.

Myth: If Israel would allow a Palestinian state to arise in Judea and Samaria it would be a democratic state and would be totally demilitarized.

Reality: There is no prospect at all that anything resembling a democratic state could be created in the territories. There is not a single democratic Arab state – all of them are tyrannies of varying degrees. Even today, under partial Israeli administration, Hamas and other factions fight for supremacy and ruthlessly murder each other. Another Lebanon, with its incessant civil wars, is much more likely. The lawlessness and chaos that prevail in Gaza since Israel’s withdrawal is a good prospect of what would happen if Israel – foolishly and under the pressure of “world opinion” – were to abandon this territory. As for demilitarization, that is totally unlikely. Because – with Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, most of which are in a declared state of war with Israel, at its borders – an irresistible power vacuum would be created. Despite pious promises, the arms merchants of the world would find a great new market and the neighboring hostile Arab countries would be happy to supply anything else that might be needed.

Myth: Israel should make “confidence-building gestures” for the sake of peace.

Reality: What really is it that the world expects Israel to do for the sake of peace? Most of the 22 Arab countries consider themselves in a state of war with Israel and don’t even recognize its “existence.” That has been going on for over sixty years. Isn’t it about time that the Arabs made some kind of a “gesture?” Could they not for instance terminate the constant state of war? Could they not stop launching rockets into Israel from areas that Israel has abandoned for the sake of peace? Could they not for instance terminate the constant state of war? Could they not stop launching rockets into Israel from areas that Israel has abandoned for the sake of peace? Could they not stop the suicide bombings, which have killed hundreds of Israelis and which have made extreme security measures – such as the defensive fence and convoluted bypass roads – necessary? Any of these would create a climate of peace and would indeed be the “confidence-building gestures” that the world hopes for.

Countless “peace conferences” to settle this festering conflict have taken place. All have ended in failure because of the intransigence of the Arabs. President Clinton, toward the end of his presidency, convened a conference with the late unlamented Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak, the prime minister of Israel at that time. Mr. Barak offered virtually everything that Arafat had requested, except the partition of Jerusalem and the acceptance of the so-called refugees, their descendants having swarmed from the 650,000 who fled the nascent state of Israel during the War of Liberation, to an incredible 5 million. Arafat left in a huff and started his infamous intifada instead, a bloody war that has cost thousands of Palestinian and Israeli lives. Israel is America’s staunchest ally and certainly its only true friend in that area of the world. It is in our national interest that reality, not myths, govern our policy.
It’s essential to maintain the consistent involvement of an adult in a youngster’s life for several hours each week, week in and week out.

The United States is a nation of joiners, and there are thousands of mentoring organizations in this country. Although these groups have the best intentions, they sometimes fail to honor their commitments. The consequences are unfortunate: mentoring relationships that fall apart in less than six months can actually do kids harm. To secure positive results, the Big Brothers Big Sisters study showed, it’s essential to maintain the consistent involvement of an adult in a youngster’s life for several hours each week, week in and week out. Ample time is needed, writes psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, to form “a special bond of mutual commitment” and an “emotional character of respect, loyalty, and identification.”

It’s this bond that Friends of the Children is cementing. The program began in 1993 in Portland, Oregon, and now has affiliates in six cities from Boston to Seattle. It’s the dream of Duncan Campbell, a 2009 winner of the prestigious Purpose Prize, and his inspiration comes straight from his life story. Campbell’s parents were alcoholics, and he has memories of long nights in its inspiration comes straight from his life story. Campbell’s parents were alcoholics, and he has memories of long nights in the local bars, watching his mother and father toss down shots. “There were police and bill collectors at the house all the time. My father was sent to prison twice. We never had a conversation.” Campbell vowed that if he made enough money he’d do what he could to make sure that kids like himself got a better deal. After earning a fortune in timber investment, he set out to do whatever a knowledgeable uncle or godmother would do.

By second grade, the children and their Friends are starting to do things with others in the group. Adolescents often go on group outings, since at this point in their lives they’re more interested in hanging out with their buddies than spending the day with adults, no matter how cool the grown-ups might be.

Throughout the relationship the mentors’ responsibility isn’t simply to boost their charges’ reading and math scores or to get them into good schools or make sure their cavities get filled. It’s doing whatever it takes to build up these kids’ social capital, making sure they’re ready for college or good jobs and a responsible, care-for-others life—doing whatever a knowledgeable uncle or godmother would do.

The New York City affiliate in central Harlem opened its doors in 2001. Central Park is only three blocks away, but so constricted are the horizons of the families that live here that some of the 5-year-olds had never set foot in the park. Executive Director Bob Houck dreams of a Friends House that fills an entire brownstone, but for now there’s a cramped, if comfortably furnished, basement apartment in a rundown building. The kids can do their homework there, work on the computer, try their hand at baking cupcakes, grow tomatoes on a sliver of earth or shoot hoops on the cement court. No city in the world offers more enticements for youth than New York, and the program takes full advantage of those opportunities, with outings to the Museum of Natural History, Coney Island, the Staten Island ferry, Yankees games and the ballet. On these outings, the Friends are on the lookout for anything that evokes a spark. “I bargained with Joey,” says Pedro Resto, one of the staffers. “Let’s ride across Central Park, go to the museum and then get a pretzel afterward.” Resto, who grew up just a few blocks from the Friends House, is a prize-winning filmmaker who became a Friend because “I want to give something back.”

Youth-serving programs that report great results sometimes
cherry-pick the brightest youngsters or those who come from solid families. Friends of the Children does its cherry-picking in reverse, tackling the toughest cases. Among the youngsters in the New York program, 61 percent come from single-parent homes and 27.5 percent are in foster care or have no parent. Nearly half have a parent who is or has been in jail or prison, 25 percent were exposed to substance abuse, 18 percent have been abused and 20 percent are in special education classes.

The staff regularly gets together to share their highs and lows, and on the day I visit, Resto’s “low” is worrying. A second grader I’ll call Ramon has been a handful from the outset, and things are coming to a head. Four times since the start of the school year he has threatened to commit suicide. In the classroom he punches himself in the face, and he’s terrifying the other kids. “Your boy has Satan in him,” a neighbor told Ramon’s mother, who is raising her son on her own. She won’t consider medication, for she’s been told that it will turn Ramon into a zombie. Resto will try again to persuade Ramon’s mother that he should see a doctor; and he’ll push the school, which has laid all the responsibility on her, to devise an individualized education plan, as the law mandates. “This isn’t the toughest case I’ve had,” Resto reminds his colleagues. “I had a kid with bipolar disorder who was hospitalized for forty-five days and a second grader who threatened a girl with a knife. His dad had come home from prison, but then he went back. You’ve got to care for these kids, try to stay strong, but it’s devastating.”

New York’s statistics back up the success stories. Ninety-eight percent of the Friends students have been promoted every year (the only exceptions are a youngster who transferred to a charter school, where he was asked to repeat a grade, and a girl who lost a month because of family turmoil). The attendance record is 96.1 percent, better than the 91 percent citywide average; and the youngsters, many of them placed in the city’s best schools, have flourished. During the 2008-2009 school year, for the fifth straight time, their reading and math test scores were better than average in the schools they attended. All but one had stayed out of the juvenile justice system, and the only girl who had a child decided to put her baby up for adoption and stayed in school.

Friends of the Children’s progress in its home city of Portland, where the youth come from backgrounds similar to those of New York City youngsters, has been tracked the longest. The effects of the program there are mind-blowing: 85 percent of the kids have earned high school diplomas or GEDs—that’s at least 10 percent higher than the national average—and 60 percent have at least one parent who did not graduate. Forty percent go to college, also bettering the national average. While 60 percent have at least one parent who has been incarcerated, 95 percent stay out of the juvenile justice system. The best marker for teen pregnancy is being the child of a teen mother, but while 60 percent of these kids were born to a teen parent, 98 percent of the youth have avoided teen parenthood.

Last spring, the Harvard Business School Association of Oregon translated the Portland figures into the language of
economics. The report concludes that because of the program’s impact on youngsters’ educational achievement, crime rates and teen parenthood, every dollar spent generates a greater than sixfold return. Six to one: that is light-years better than Head Start or Job Corps. Its impact on children is even more impressive than most of the renowned social policy experiments of the past forty years, which have prompted policymakers to take kids’ concerns seriously. The National Institutes of Health is sponsoring a five-year evaluation of Friends of the Children, the first study of a long-term paid professional mentoring program. It’s too much to expect that the results will echo the initial findings, but given the long odds against these young people, Friends of the Children would be doing remarkably well, the return on investment still strikingly good, if just half of the kids’ lives were turned around.

National Executive Director Judy Stavisky hopes that the NIH study will prompt foundations and government agencies to take serious notice of the nonprofit. She knows the mentoring world well, since she previously had a large portfolio of mentoring programs at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; her connection is also intimate and personal, since for seventeen years she has mentored a young man who has recently started college. “Friends of the Children is a jewel,” she says, “and its promise is second to none.”

Bob Houck would like to see a Friends Place in every borough of New York City, a thousand children potentially saved from drowning. Duncan Campbell dreams bigger. “My vision is that every child in the country who needs a Friend would have one,” he says. But Friends of the Children currently enrolls just 700 youth in six cities, a teaspoonful in the ocean of need. The best estimate—prepared by MENTOR, a national nonprofit that oversees the field—is that 14.6 million youth aged 10 to 18 who most need mentoring lack the opportunity. Although other adults touch the lives of an uncounted number of youngsters, the estimate confirms the enormous gap between the existing pool of mentors and the potential need.

There will never be a sufficient number of volunteers; and volunteers can’t fill the gaps caused by inadequate medical care, bad schools and the like. As Marc Freedman, the guru in this field, argues, the mentoring movement “highlights an unmet need, goes part of the way toward redressing it, and calls out for reinforcements.”

Letters

(continued from page 2)

Point of Historical Fact

Southampton, N.Y.

I came to New York from Lisbon in May 1940 as a small child on the San Miguel, a small cargo ship. My mother and I shared the captain’s cabin; my father, the first mate’s. The ship, about the size of a Staten Island ferry, carried cork but no passengers on this two-week maiden voyage to New York. Of course, we all feared German submarines, but with a child’s belief in magic, I thought that if we were torpedoed, I would be able to save my parents by swimming to a big hunk of cork, pulling them up on it, and then floating to shore.

If the owner of the cargo ship line had not been a great fan of my father (a world-famous athlete), we would have been stuck in Lisbon even until the end of the war. As far as we knew, there was no more transportation out of Europe. Certainly not out of Lisbon. I wonder, therefore, where Maria, the wife of Gen. Francisco Aguilar González, Mexican ambassador to the Vichy government, found a steamer bound for New York from Lisbon—indeed, one with space for “twenty trunks of their belongings” [Dan Kaufman, “A Secret Archive,” Jan. 24]—in a time when hundreds, no, thousands and tens of thousands, of Europeans, especially Jewish refugees, were willing to pay any-

Kaufman Replies

Brooklyn, N.Y.

Maria Luisa Boysen de Aguilar, General Aguilar’s wife, traveled with the couple’s trunks from Lisbon to New York on the SS Drottningholm in the spring of 1942. Her voyage was confirmed by a telegram sent from the Mexican Embassy in Lisbon and received in Mexico City on June 9, 1942. I am extremely grateful to filmmaker Trisha Ziff for uncovering this detail and for providing me with much of the background on General Aguilar and the journey of the suitcase that appeared in my article. Ziff has recently completed La Maleta Mexicana (Mexican Suitcase), a documentary due out later this year, which explores the rediscovery of the lost negatives and the important, but often overlooked, role Mexico played in the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath.

Dan Kaufman

Beyond the Palin

Key West, Fla.

Sarah Palin followers should be known as “Palindrones”: they’re becoming increasingly monotonous, and they never could tell backward from forward.

Jim Stentzel

Shibboleth

Somers, Mont.


Franklin Schroeter, (pronounced Shray-ter)

Not a Member of the Club

Because of a fact-checking error in Frances Rich’s “The Thin Artifact: On Photography and Suffering” [Dec. 13], it was stated that James Nachtwey was a member of the Bang-Bang Club, a group of photographers who worked in South African townships in the 1990s. Although Nachtwey did photograph in South Africa, he is not considered to be one of the four members of the Bang-Bang Club.
Jennifer Homans’s *Apollo’s Angels* is a beautifully written and deeply felt history of ballet, told with an epic sweep and a sensitive, almost physical feel for detail. It is consistently engaging, and strikes a graceful balance between exploring the nuances of steps and surveying the larger landscape of art, ideas and politics (more important than one might think), from ballet’s beginnings in the Renaissance courts of Europe to its globalized present.

Homans touches on everything from fashion to court etiquette, the sexual politics of the opera house and the demographics of the ballet milieu, onstage and off, all the while offering unexpected pearls, such as a sensitive explication of the role of the foot in seventeenth-century France and a step-by-step description of barre exercises from the 1820s, that vividly bring the past back to life. *Apollo’s Angels* is a book for the balletomane and everyone else.

Ballet is a life-or-death matter to Homans. She was once a dancer, and in her poignant introduction she describes the profound experience of learning the vocabulary of ballet from Felia Doubrovska and Alexandra Danilova, instructors at the School of American Ballet and colleagues of the great choreographer George Balanchine, who trained in pre-Revolutionary St. Petersburg, made works for the Ballets Russes in the 1920s and co-founded New York City Ballet in 1948 with Lincoln Kirstein. Doubrovska and Danilova represented the “living, breathing evidence of a lost (to us) past—of what their dances were like but also of what they, as artists and people, believed in,” Homans writes. Their religion became hers, a faith in “an art of high ideals and self-control in which proportion and grace stand for an inner truth and elevated state of being.” Homans went on to dance with various companies, including the San Francisco Ballet and Pacific Northwest Ballet. She is only 50, but a dancer’s career is brief, so since retiring from the stage in the mid-1980s she has made a second life as a scholar of French history and a writer. She has been the dance critic of *The New Republic* for the past ten years, during which time she also researched and wrote *Apollo’s Angels*, combing through archives, interviewing scholars and critics across Europe and experimenting with different historical dance techniques in the studio. Her experience as a dancer can be felt in the evocations of choreography that are one of her book’s principal pleasures.

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**The Dying Swan**

by MARINA HARSS

Jennifer Homans’s *Apollo’s Angels* is a beautifully written and deeply felt history of ballet, told with an epic sweep and a sensitive, almost physical feel for detail. It is consistently engaging, and strikes a graceful balance between exploring the nuances of steps and surveying the larger landscape of art, ideas and politics (more important than one might think), from ballet’s beginnings in the Renaissance courts of Europe to its globalized present.

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primer on her vision of ballet’s guiding principles as well as the historical framework of Apollo’s Angels. In them, she argues that ballet’s aesthetic and philosophical roots lie in the seventeenth-century French court, and that ballet is a fundamentally aristocratic, ideological art, concerned with grace, proportion and civility. For her, the ballets of Balanchine represent the highest point in the art’s history, and since his death in 1983, ballet has been in a steep, deadly decline. Contemporary dancers and choreographers have lost the key to its codes, and so their performances lack inner life. Their technique and athleticism, when taken to a level Homans considers to be extreme, are a hindrance to expression.

All of this is true, up to a point. But the rigidity of Homans’s moral and aesthetic code, useful, even vital, to the critic, is confusing for the historian. A reader of Apollo’s Angels, for example, might think that because Homans doesn’t identify any important choreographic voices since Balanchine’s death, none exist. This is not the case. One example is William Forsythe, whose radical reconfiguration of ballet technique—in his own words, he has sought to manipulate “the language of ballet to see how far it can go before it becomes unrecognizable”—has profoundly influenced a generation of choreographers and dancers, for good or ill. The critic Roslyn Sulcas, who has been watching his work closely for more than twenty years, has written of her reaction the first time she saw one of his ballets, New Sleep, in 1988: “I can still remember my sensation of mixed shock and excitement…. Bravura pas de deux and counterpointed ensemble work flashed before my eyes, but in such a radically new context that I could scarcely believe what I was seeing: ballet without quotation marks around the word, as much a part of the contemporary world as film or architecture or quantum physics.” Forsythe is not for everyone. His choreography is aggressive, technically extreme, fragmented and even, one might say, ugly; he has a penchant for loud electronic music and using abrupt lighting effects or unexpected, jarring interruptions to disrupt the flow of movement. The curtain might descend in the middle of a solo or the dancers stomp offstage for no obvious reason. His experimentation with ballet has gone so far that he can be said to have left ballet behind (as he predicted he might). One doesn’t have to enjoy his approach, but given the extent of Forsythe’s influence on younger choreographers and the aesthetics of contemporary ballet, especially in Europe, he cannot be ignored.

Less monumental, perhaps, but more encouraging are two young choreographers whose vision of ballet’s future is staked on renewal more than rupture with the past: Christopher Wheeldon and Alexei Ratmansky. Wheeldon, a 37-year-old Brit who danced with the Royal Ballet, was resident choreographer at the New York City Ballet from 2001 to 2008, and briefly experimented with founding his own company, Morphoses. Ratmansky, who trained at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow and danced in Western Europe and Canada, went on to lead the Bolshoi for five years and is now choreographer-in-residence at American Ballet Theatre (see Harss, “Ratmansky Takes Manhattan,” October 12, 2009). Neither is Balanchine, but each is doing his part to stave off the corrosion of ballet’s moral and aesthetic universe, and to assure its survival as a living, breathing art. Neither questions ballet’s grounding in order, proportion and civility, but each also feels pressed by his imagination to test ballet’s boundaries and myths. They are not remaking Giselle or, as some contemporary choreographers have done, at least metaphorically, hacking it to pieces because it is “out of step” with modern life. Each is engaged in a dialogue with ballet’s history but also has his own ideas about movement, theatrical presentation and storytelling, which are manifested in ballets that are personal, original and innovative, to a certain degree, but also legible to the audience. Their work is an exception to Homans’s claim that “contemporary choreography veers aimlessly from unimaginative imitation to strident innovation.” Homans is familiar with the careers of both choreographers—she has spoken about Wheeldon with cautious praise in Apollo’s Angels, in 1988: “I can still remember my sensation of mixed shock and excitement…. Bravura pas de deux and counterpointed ensemble work flashed before my eyes, but in such a radically new context that I could scarcely believe what I was seeing: ballet without quotation marks around the word, as much a part of the contemporary world as film or architecture or quantum physics.” Forsythe is not for everyone. His choreography is aggressive, technically extreme, fragmented and even, one might say, ugly; he has a penchant for loud electronic music and using abrupt lighting effects or unexpected, jarring interruptions to disrupt the flow of movement. The curtain might descend in the middle of a solo or the dancers stomp offstage for no obvious reason. His experimentation with ballet has gone so far that he can be said to have left ballet behind (as he predicted he might). One doesn’t have to enjoy his approach, but given the extent of Forsythe’s influence on younger choreographers and the aesthetics of contemporary ballet, especially in Europe, he cannot be ignored.

George Balanchine haunts Apollo’s Angels like an earthly ideal. Homans invokes Apollo as the ultimate “physical presence” for dancers, who, she posits, “carry in their mind’s eye some Apollonian image or feeling of the grace, proportion, and ease they strive to achieve.” For Homans, Balanchine is the purest embodiment of Apollonian classicism and the heritage of Tchaikovsky and Marius Petipa. His ballet Apollo (or Apollo Musagète, as it was originally called), from 1928, is her touchstone, not only for her interpretation of his life’s work but also for her understanding of all ballet. It is the silver thread that connects the French seventeenth-century ballet de cour (Louis XIV was an excellent dancer, who enjoyed dressing up as the young god); the uplifting spirituality of Marie Taglioni’s dancing en pointe in the first real romantic ballet, La Sylphide, in 1832; the refined, courtly classicism of The Sleeping Beauty (in Homans’s words, Petipa’s “greatest work,” from 1890); and Balanchine’s most experimental creations like The Four Temperaments and Agon.

Apollo is Balanchine’s earliest surviving work, and one of only two ballets he made for Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes that are still with us. (It was also his first collaboration with Igor Stravinsky.) By his account, it marked a new beginning: “Apollo I look back on as the turning point of my life. In its discipline and restraint, in its sustained oneness of tone and feeling, the score was a revelation. It seemed to tell me that I could dare not to use everything, that I, too, could eliminate.” He revised the ballet many times during his life, adjusting its choreography, simplifying the costumes, pruning everything superfluous or excessive (some feel that in the end he may have cut too much). Homans vividly describes the work, noting its “jutting hips” and “concave backs,” and how the choreographer asked his Apollo to “slide like rubber” to create a desired effect. She celebrates its purity and nobility, emphasizing its lack of bravura steps, the ease and lyricism of its movement and the way it turns its back on Balanchine’s earlier experimentation with acrobatics (though, it must be said, some elements of acrobatics, including splits, interlacing poses and innovative lifts, remain). With Apollo, she writes, the choreographer had “eliminated” the hard edge of Soviet modernism, its erotic and gymnastic movements and mystical and millennial overtones, while retaining its “extreme plasticity and taste for spontaneity and freedom.”

Note the use of “acrobatic,” “erotic” and “gymnastic.” Those words recur regularly in Apollo’s Angels, along with “vulgar,” “extreme” and “kitsch,” all of them labels for artists whose work Homans does not approve of and who lie outside the margins of elegance, refinement and idealization that she holds to be ballet’s rightful realm. The late eighteenth-century dancer and technical innovator Auguste Vestris, who vastly extended and ornamented the repertory of male steps (to include the sort of tricks and jumps still used today), is deemed to have danced in a manner that was “exaggerated even to the point of contortion.” As Homans sees it, Balanchine’s early Russian choreography (“his dancers split their legs, bent into back-breaking bridges, and opened their mouths in Munch-like screams”) was eclipsed by the rigorous, ennobling Apollo. Homans discusses only one ballet—Parade, from 1917—by Léonide Massine, one of the Ballets Russes’ main choreographers, who, in addition to creating works in the 1930s...
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Ballet is always dying. It exists in time and leaves no record. Video captures only its shadow. contemporary choreographers, who we are told trade in “gymnastic or melodramatic excess” and “unthinking athleticism,” are no less categorical.

It’s revealing too that Homans passes over Prodigal Son, Balanchine’s only other surviving work from the Ballets Russes period. Created in 1929, one year after Apollo, it nonetheless drew upon the experimentation that occurred in Russia in the wake of the Revolution, when innovators like Kasyan Goleizovsky expanded the vocabulary of ballet by using extreme poses (splits, acrobatic lifts, interlocking limbs), popular dance forms like the tango and openly erotic imagery. Balanchine had been an enthusiastic participant in this movement, forming a group called the Young Ballet, which performed his experimental pieces (all of which have been lost) in small theaters and cabarets. Prodigal Son drew freely from this ferment, employing expressionistic gestures, mime, extremes of emotion, acrobatic feats (including a mock wrestling match, a human caterpillar and backbends) and brazen eroticism, in a wonderful pas de deux that is comically grotesque and explicitly sexual (the ballerina wraps her leg tightly around her partner’s waist and holds him there as he arches his back with pleasure). The ballet is also an eloquent illustration of Diaghilev’s collaborative aesthetic, which did so much to reinvigorate the art in the early twentieth century: Sergei Prokofiev was commissioned by Diaghilev to compose the score, the libretto was written by Diaghilev’s assistant Boris Kochno and the scenery and costumes were created by the French Fauvist painter Georges Rouault.

Because of its vivid theatricality and sentimentality—in the final two sections, the Prodigal does not dance at all but rather drags himself across the stage and into his father's arms—Prodigal Son is in some ways the antithesis of Apollo. But as with Apollo, its presence is palpable in Balanchine’s later works. Experimentation with nonclassical movement reappears in Modernist masterpieces like Agon; the use of interlocking bodies in partnering is a prominent feature of The Four Temperaments; the totemic presence of a powerful, almost frightening female figure is notable in The Unanswered Question and La Sonnambula; and the evocative use of gesture recurs often, as in the second pas de deux in Stravinsky Violin Concerto, from 1972, which quotes a hand gesture from Prodigal Son. Prodigal is still performed, with Rouault’s sets and costumes, by companies such as the New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, the Paris Opera Ballet, the Mariinsky (Kirov) Ballet and the Hamburg Ballet. It has been a rite of passage for many of the greatest male dancers of our time: Edward Villella, Nureyev, Baryshnikov, Herman Cornejo. It seems strange to exclude it from a comprehensive history, especially one written in Balanchine’s shadow. Perhaps its sharp angles do not fit snugly into the clean, Modernist mold Homans has cast for Balanchine: “an art of angels, of idealized and elevated human figures, beautiful, chivalric, and above all strictly formal.”

Balanchine was known to enjoy earthly pleasures like showy virtuosity, sentimentality and kitsch, and appreciated their usefulness in spicing up the rarefied atmosphere of classical dance. He encouraged his ballerinas to move with unseemly abandon—splitting their legs immodestly, raising their hips, against classical form, in order to get their feet up in the air into a 180-degree arabesque, eschewing “proper” form. Many found this immodest way of dancing displeasing, and Balanchine thumbed his nose at such priggishness; when a British critic fussed about his abuses of ballet decorum, he responded that in England, “if you are awake, it is already vulgar.” His ballets Bugaku, Slaughter on Tenth Avenue and Western Symphony constantly flirt with vulgarity, employing techniques drawn from sources as diverse as the chorus lines of Broadway (where Balanchine worked in the 1930s and ‘40s), popular dance forms and his own eroticized view of non-Western cultures. What could be more “extreme” than the partnering in Agon or the lightning-fast footwork in Ballo della Regina? Or more sentimental than the final waltz in Vienna Waltzes? Kitsch, too, has its place: think of the peppy cheerfulness of Stars and Stripes, all salutes, bumptious jumps and chorus-girl kicks, and the little waves and carefree, flirtatious bravura of Tarantella.

I don’t necessarily disagree with Homans’s core assertions about the nature of ballet. It is inarguably an elevated form, based on a highly refined and codified technique, and aspires to an ideal (at least most of the time) that is impossible to achieve and beyond expression in words. As the luminous former ballerina Violette Verdy said recently, “We have a responsibility to the audience to give them something transcendent.” But within this framework, variety and even transgression are possible. I can’t help wondering whether Homans’s portrait of ballet’s rise and development could have been richer if her view of ballet’s history wasn’t so rigid. There should be space for more variety, greater contradiction and a healthy clash of contrasts. This, too, has a place in ballet’s past and present. Consider the career of Alexei Ratmansky.

To the optimism and athleticism of social realist ballet—a mainstay of the Soviet ballet tradition that he absorbed at the Bolshoi—he has mixed in Massine’s love of gesture, added a sprinkle of postmodern irony and spun it into gold in ballets like The Bright Stream, Russian Seasons and Concerto DSCH. For his part, Christopher Wheeldon has taken the raw emotion of MacMillan, combined it with the fussiness of Frederick Ashton and the theatricality of Jerome Robbins (and the supple poise, the anti theater of Jerome Robbins) and aspires to an ideal (at least most of the time) that is impossible to achieve and beyond expression in words. As the luminous former ballerina Violette Verdy said recently, “We have a responsibility to the audience to give them something transcendent.” But within this framework, variety and even transgression are possible. I can’t help wondering whether Homans’s portrait of ballet’s rise and development could have been richer if her view of ballet’s history wasn’t so rigid. There should be space for more variety, greater contradiction and a healthy clash of contrasts. This, too, has a place in ballet’s past and present. Consider the career of Alexei Ratmansky. To the optimism and athleticism of social realist ballet—a mainstay of the Soviet ballet tradition that he absorbed at the Bolshoi—he has mixed in Massine’s love of gesture, added a sprinkle of postmodern irony and spun it into gold in ballets like The Bright Stream, Russian Seasons and Concerto DSCH. For his part, Christopher Wheeldon has taken the raw emotion of MacMillan, combined it with the fussiness of Frederick Ashton and the theatricality of Jerome Robbins (and the supple torso of modern dance), and produced ballets like After the Rain, The Nightingale and the Rose and Polyphony. With ballets like these, can one say that ballet is dying?

The best sections of Apollo’s Angels are those in which Homans feels less compelled to distinguish the good from the bad and instead gets down to the business of telling a rich, finely hued story. For example, her discussion of dance in the period after the French Revolution—with its public spectacles featuring gracefully moving crowds of young women dressed in white, forerunners of the corps de ballet—and the institutional and organizational innovations of the Napoleonic era, when the modern dance academy was invented, are especially revealing because they introduce a completely different way of thinking about the symbolism of dance and the role of ballet in public life. They also suggest that ballet is a constantly evolving form that to a certain degree re-
Crooked Sticks

by BRENDA WINEAPPLE

Nathaniel Hawthorne called him calm and gentle, a mystic innovator holy in aspect, but whenever he saw the apostolic Bronson Alcott approaching his house, he ducked out the back door. Conversation with Alcott was usually a one-sided affair, with the listener buttonholed for what seemed like hours.

Born in 1799, the father of four girls and a self-taught man from Wolcott, Connecticut, who had in his youth supported himself by peddling small goods, Alcott had become a progressive educator who deplored corporal punishment, detested rote learning and delighted in children’s talk. Yet after 1840 he would never again deign to teach. By then a member of the Transcendental Club and friends with men like Ralph Waldo Emerson, his de facto head, Alcott had lost his footing at the Temple School in Boston when, against his assistant’s better judgment, he published Conversations With Children on the Gospels. Its allusions to sex and birth scandalized proper Bostonians, who promptly withdrew their children from the school; to make matters worse, he had the temerity to admit a black child.

Not long after this debacle, Alcott, who believed in the perfectibility of the individual and of society, dragged his family to Harvard, Massachusetts, about fourteen miles from Concord, where the Alcotts had been living not far from the Emersons. At a farm inappropriately dubbed Fruitlands—there was no orchard on the ninety acres—they would improve themselves, and invite others to do so. They would create a new Garden of Eden by living off the fruit of the land, even if there was no fruit.

The Alcott season in heaven is the subject of Richard Francis’s new book, Fruitlands: The Alcott Family and Their Search for Utopia. Francis, a British author, has tackled the subject before, notably in his fine Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands and Walden, where he takes on the three most famous New England experiments in self-culture and social reform, including, as he puts it, Thoreau’s “community of one.” Now Francis delves solely into Fruitlands, which he calls “one of history’s most unsuccessful utopias ever.” True enough. He also adds that it was one of the most dramatic and significant. That’s debatable.

In the first place, the experiment lasted all of seven months, during which time nothing much happened except that Abigail Alcott, Bronson’s wife and usually the only grown woman at Fruitlands, was miserable, and the children were occasionally beset with radical indigestion because in utopia one ate only fruits and vegetables, mostly raw, and grain. Once, when a short-term Fruitlands convert (they were all short-term) confessed to eating a small piece of fish, she was so badly harangued—“know ye not, consumers of flesh meat, that ye are nourishing the wolf and tiger in your bosoms”—that the poor woman packed her bags and left.

Still, timing is everything. “We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform,” Emerson had written to Thomas Carlyle two years earlier. “Not a reading man but has the draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket.” In 1840, more than 500 Friends of Universal Reform had crowded into Boston to debate the woman question and damn the institution of slavery. Meantime, William Miller (better known as Father Miller) was preaching that the Second Coming would occur in the spring of 1843 and that those who followed him, the Millerites, who numbered some 50,000, would ascend to heaven a year later. And Sylvester Graham, a militant vegetarian who influenced Alcott, lectured about the brown bread made to his specifications (Graham crackers) as the means to salvation.

At least several dozen communities intending to remedy or escape the ills of industrial society were organized in the United States, including the Northampton Community for Association and Education in western Massachusetts and the Hopedale Community, also in the Bay State. West Roxbury, on the outskirts of Boston, was home to George and Sophia Ripley’s Brook...
The utopianism of Fruitlands collapsed under the weight of its own pretensions.

Francis tacks on another seven months to the Fruitlands foray since the enterprise actually began in the Alcott home before the purchase of the farm. He even goes so far as to declare that Concord was a sort of utopia. That too is debatable, for it excludes the farmers or villagers not of a transcendental cast of mind, who produced grapes, pencils, clocks and hats.

Why this particular time produced such an outcropping of utopias is not Francis’s subject except insofar as he trots out the familiar shibboleths like creeping industrialization. In Alcott’s case, one also wonders what motivated his pursuit of perfection and, ultimately, power. And though a transcendentalist of the most romantic cast, after which was not hard to be, Emerson as often as not recanted or excused Alcott, for instance, as a “magnificent dreamer.” Sometimes he even thought Alcott the real Orphic thing, though he noted that whatever Alcott’s revelation, it always ended with “give us much land and money.” And yes, Emerson obliged.

While in England, Alcott met Charles Lane, Greaves’s disciple (Greaves had died just before Alcott’s arrival). Lane was all Alcott could have hoped for. Another enthusiast of the spirit, a reformer and a former journalist, divorced and with one son, Lane too reveled in organic metaphors (particularly having to do with trees): how humankind begins in soil and aspires upward toward a nonsectarian heaven. He too was militant about diet, the royal road to salvation; animal products were taboo, as were alcohol, coffee, tea and cocoa, and fruit was to be grown without manure; life should spring from life, not death.

A good disciple of Greaves, Lane also argued that the family as a biological unit inhibits the development of a truly spiritual community; for all nature (including humans) is in an ongoing state of ecological development that should be devoid of passion. “Vegetables are not merely to be eaten,” notes Francis in deadpan style. “They are to be imitated.” Thus instead of a biological family, Lane proposed a “consociate family,” or group of like-minded individuals, and the best place to plant this family was America, so with his son, William, in tow (William was Louisa May Alcott’s age) and another acolyte, Lane went back to Concord with Alcott. Imagine how Abigail must have felt.

Although, as might be expected, Lane and Alcott did not entirely agree, particularly on the importance of sex, they seem to have ignored their differences, at least for a time, though the tension in the small Alcott cottage was so palpable that Abigail set up a mailbox in which the members of the household could submit their grievances. Yet Lane settled Bronson’s debts and put up the money for Fruitlands, and on June 1, 1843, the group trekked out to their new home, where the older Alcott girls slept in an unheated attic without a window, and Lane and his son and the men who joined them, like the nudist Samuel Bower, slept in the barn. At its peak, there were no more than thirteen Fruitlanders, so to Abigail fell all the women’s housework of cleaning, laundry, cooking (though there was little enough of that).

Like Lane, Francis lays the failure of Fruitlands at Abigail’s feet. “Mrs Alcott has no spontaneous inclination towards a larger family than her own natural one,” Lane complained. For Mrs. Alcott’s part, she confided to a brother after a few months at Fruitlands, “I am not dead yet, either to life or love.” A good sport, and devoted to Bronson, she tried to harden herself to the coming of winter by taking two icy cold shower-baths a day (the Fruitlanders wore only linen), but in the end she stood up to Lane. “Even our passions are heralds announcing a deep nature,” she declared.

That Abigail sensed what Francis calls, toward the end of his book, “some degree of homoerotic underpinning” between her husband and Lane almost goes without saying, except that Francis might have developed this idea earlier. Yet, to assert that their relationship “would explain Abigail’s anguish and resentment” does not tell the whole story. Fruitlands collapsed under the weight of its own pretensions, not to mention its growing debt, which Lane could no longer shoulder. Lane and Alcott were careless managers, poor farmers (they bolted during harvest time), weak thinkers and intolerant. They were, in other words, the “insane, well-meaning egotists” that Lydia Maria Child had called them—“well-meaning,” that is, as long you weren’t one of their children, who, after the morning’s immersion in cold water, did chores and studied all day only to be assailed before bedtime by such questions as “What is man?” Unsurprisingly, in her essay “Transcendental Wild Oats” Louisa May later satirized Fruitlanders as those benighted individuals who believed “plenteous orchards were soon to be evoked
from their inner consciousness."

Yet Francis grants a wide berth to Alcott, Greaves, Lane and, indeed, to the entire Fruitlands endeavor, which he describes as a "groping toward an ecological perspective." Perhaps so, though it does not necessarily follow that it's "an early attempt at determining a carbon footprint" or a prototype of "the science of ecology in their intuition that life is a single phenomenon and the world an organism needing delicate handling." Nor is Fruitlands the first hippie commune; the group is too rigidly puritanical for that. But Francis tells the tale of Alcott's folly—for what else is it?—with a healthy dollop of skepticism, quipping now and then about Bronson's self-serving exploitation of "Transcendentalism as trompe l'oeil."

After Fruitlands folded, Charles and William Lane joined the celibate Shakers, where Lane expected to find the asexual community he presumably yearned for; but he indentured William, and when he left the Shakers, disenchanted once again, Lane could not extract him. Again, Emerson rose to the occasion and influenced the Shakers to release the much-abused William, dragged hiter and yon in his father's quest for the ideal. Lane and son returned to Europe, where Charles married and sired five more children.

Alcott and his family returned to Concord, where he cultivated his own garden in the terraced land back of Hillside, which he planted with panache. Emerson commissioned him to build a summer house, Hawthorne continued to avoid him and Alcott continued to orate at length. He often charged admission for his Socratic Conversations, which is to say lectures; fortunately for the family, the talented Louisa May wrote prolifically, and for profit, and subsequently supported her holy father until his old age.

The temptation is maybe not to run but to glide past the works Creed is now showing at Hauser & Wirth London, Savile Row (through March 5), or the ones Gabriel Orozco is exhibiting in his midcareer retrospective at London's Tate Modern (through April 25), where it concludes a long tour that began at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in December 2009. Both artists, neo-Conceptualists in their 40s, make a point of reducing the artistic gesture to the smallest effective intervention into reality; even when the resulting objects are huge, they embody a simple perception, an almost nugatory transformation. Creed and Orozco are widely admired for their subtlety and lightness of touch. Isn't viewing their work a matter of viewing their work a matter of quickly registering an implicit idea, like a seed that can grow in one's mind in retrospect, rather than of the deep looking and extended contemplation one might accord great works of traditional painting and sculpture? To a large extent, yes, but be careful: you might be skating past the point of the work.

It would be impossible to walk by Orozco's La DS (1993), without at least stopping for a double take: the sculpture is an automobile, a Citroën DS, that has been sliced from bumper to bumper into thirds, with the middle slab removed and the remaining two pressed together. It's a bit like the mutant car images Peter Cain was painting around the same time, but right there in the flesh. However big and imposing Orozco's sculpture may be, once you start looking at it, its presence recedes. La DS is an object that seems to be trying to turn posing into an image. It's as if the act of looking at it, whereby you intellectually understand what it is that you're looking at and why it looks that way, can do nothing to convince some other, less conscious part of the brain that it's seeing what it's seeing. It's hard to stop looking, and the car becomes what Roland Barthes in Mythologies said a new Citroën was meant to be, "a purely magical object."

Something similar might be said of another of Orozco's best works, Black Kites (1997)—a human skull on which the artist has drawn a
Creed’s works don’t open up until you accept that what you see is all there is to them.

Reflections on the possible significance of such an object only follow from its innate fascination, which derives in turn from the perceptual ambiguities it generates. La DS and Black Kites are not the only double perspectives Orozco has devised, but a stroll through the retrospective suggests that they are too few, and perhaps getting rarer with time.

The process of its making recalls that of Black Kites: is also a brilliant twist on art history. In his 1533 painting The Ambassadors, Hans Holbein famously used anamorphic perspective to insert the image of a skull into a symbolic double portrait; Orozco uses the skull as a device to disfigure the supposedly rational structure of the grid.

Orozco, living there at the time, kept an eye on the streets of Berlin. The backstory is that one contributor, John O’Reilly, writes in the massive, recently published compendium Martin Creed: Works (Thames & Hudson; $65); in Creed’s Work No. 567 (2006), the phrase SMALL THINGS was lit up in ten-foot-tall neon letters. Paging through the more than 700 works illustrated in the book, dating from 1986 through 2009, one becomes aware that Creed’s numbering system is a way of asserting the equivalence of seemingly unrelated and differently valued kinds of things: a ballpoint pen scribble, some written words, a torn-up or crumpled sheet of paper—the Chihauhuas of art—are simply Works, no more and no less than a theatrical performance or a room-filling installation of balloons—the Irish wolfhounds.

Somewhere in between—basset hounds, maybe—are the paintings that seem to be occupying Creed more and more these days; they evoke a historically prestigious tradition but with simplicity and mostly on a modest scale. There are more than forty canvases at Hauser & Wirth, along with a few wall paintings. Like Creed’s other works, and in apparent contradiction to the title they all share, they don’t really look like they involved much work, and indeed they couldn’t have if the dates they’ve been given are accurate: all but one are dated 2011, which means Creed would have made several every day between New Year’s and the exhibition’s opening three weeks later. Each canvas represents a slightly different, always rather straightforward way of geometrically working through the structure of a rectangle: layers of horizontal lines, zigzag-like configurations of smaller rectangles within the overall one, sequences of X-shapes and so on; most are symmetrical, either with just two or three colors or many shades of a single color. All are very direct, immediate and concrete; there is always a clear additive structure but also (and their small size helps here) a sense of the singularity of the whole. The paintings, and also the bits of color that make them up, hold their own in space, neither imposing themselves nor receding. They’re good paintings, and all the better in comparison with those that Orozco, too, has lately been producing, in a style best called geometrical baroque. For all their intricacy Orozco’s paintings amount to banal decorations; their gold leaf is not that of icons but of nouveau riche bling.

Whether Creed can continue collapsing the distinction between small and enormous is an open question. His Work No. 1092 (2011) consists of MOTHERS spelled out in giant neon letters atop a steel beam that rotates at varying speeds 6 feet 8 inches above
the ground. It looks like it could kill you even though you know that Michael Jordan could stroll under it without getting scalped. It’s a sort of scary joke on the idea of being dominated by mom, or maybe not by mom herself, because the “mothers” are plural, but by some primeval powers “enthroned in solitude sublime,” as Goethe said—and very effective. It’s a bigger idea than Creed usually works with, yet for once he makes you wonder whether the piece hasn’t outgrown its idea. Still, I can’t deny that it held me there, observing it warily, a good long while. I didn’t race past.

Turning Oil Into Water

by FREDERICK DEKNATEL

A little-known fact about Saudi Arabia: it was until recently the world’s sixth-largest exporter of wheat. From 1980 to 2005, the Saudis spent some $85 billion, nearly 20 percent of the total oil revenue accumulated during the period, on subsidies for wheat farmers. In a country with a quarter of the world’s known oil reserves but no natural rivers or lakes, the environmental cost of cultivating wheat was extraordinary. The Ministry of Agriculture and Water had by the 1980s built some 200 dams, seeking to trap and redirect precious, finite water from oases and ancient underground aquifers. One economist estimated that the irrigation cost for Saudi wheat farms from 1980 to 2000—more than 300 billion cubic meters of water—was “the equivalent of six years’ flow of the Nile River.” An American delegation to the kingdom likened the “growing of cereals at an exorbitant cost in the desert” to “planting bananas under glass in Alaska.”

Another little-known, but more fantastic, fact about Saudi Arabia: in the late ’70s the Saudi government entertained the idea of wrapping a 100 million-ton iceberg in the Red Sea, where it would melt and provide precious water fresh for the country’s 28 million people. Today four cities are being built from scratch in the desert, hopeful future job hubs for the kingdom’s younger generation. Their names may be banal, but at least they reveal intent: King Abdullah Economic City, Knowledge Economic City, Prince Abdulaziz bin Mousaed Economic City, Jazan Economic City. Rather than invest in the crumbling, historic center of the port city of Jeddah, or the slums in the sprawling capital, Riyadh, the government has elected—in keeping with urban planning trends across the region—to build anew, on the desert periphery, in dry suburban tracts and glass towers that are thought to signal progress. The first coeducational university in the kingdom, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, or KAUST, recently opened on the Red Sea coast north of Jeddah, with an endowment of roughly $10 billion. The scale of development suggests that the Saudi government has solved its water crisis. Otherwise, how else could high-rise cities reliant on air-conditioning and potable water sprout in the desert?

The question hinges on a truism common to histories of Saudi Arabia: that oil has been a benevolent lubricant of progress, a gift that has brought highways and cities, and even gated American-style suburbs, to the harsh and empty desert. Thanks to oil, modernity has overtaken traditional society.

Robert Vitalis attacked this view in America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier (2007). He explained how in the 1930s and ’40s the conglomerate Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco), which had exclusive rights to drilling in the kingdom, imported to Saudi Arabia a Jim Crow–like system long established in the oil fields of Texas since Reconstruction. Vitalis extracted from company archives and personal diaries evidence of the informal but deliberate “laws” that Aramco imposed on its employees on the Saudi oil frontier. The new industrial city of Dhahran, Aramco’s capital on the oil-rich eastern coast, was home to gated compounds for American Aramco employees and their families. Nearby were the squallid living quarters of the Saudi oil workers, which were mostly hidden from the view of visiting dignitaries. Oil brought to Saudi Arabia “a system of privilege and inequality which we know as Jim Crow in the United States, as Apartheid in South Africa, and as racism more generally,” Vitalis wrote. The “color line” between American and Saudi compounds was strictly enforced: Saudis were forbidden to live with Americans; Aramco employees “who pursued contacts with nearby Arab families” were deported. The investment of oil profits into schools and technical training for Saudis was derided by the American oilmen of Aramco as either a waste of time or a potential future threat to their hegemony of expertise.

Vitalis’s study broke with the historiog-
raphy that defined the kingdom’s political dynamics through one of three factors: the strict Islam of its founders, a reductive view of tribal politics or a championing of oil enterprise. Aramco’s labor policies presaged the current exploitation of workers, many of them South Asian, who have built the skylines of Dubai, Abu Dhabi and other gulf cities—only to be sequestered in distant camps, paid a pittance and sent home. But America’s Kingdom also linked Saudi Arabian development and the pursuit of oil to the political culture of the United States. Vitalis even wrote that his book “is not about Saudi Arabia. It is about America. It just takes place and tells you more than others have about somewhere else.” The industrial myth of a “miracle-making” oil giant revealed the dynamics of the Saudi-American “special relationship” and the politics of oil extraction.

Jones’s Desert Kingdom is unquestionably about Saudi Arabia, specifically its eastern province, which, as the kingdom’s oil frontier, is the focus of America’s Kingdom. Jones’s research, however, is often more convincing than his analysis, which expresses surprise at the general nature of a state to use what natural resources it has to secure those it lacks. “Saudi Arabia’s citizens, many of whom continued to work the land for their livelihood late into the century, came to depend on the government for access to water, land, loans, and technology,” Jones writes. “This is just what the kingdom’s central authorities desired.” Saudi Arabia may be fragmented, but isn’t this what most state authorities want? Jones admits that control over land administration “has long been a basic instrument of domestic statecraft worldwide.” Yet he treats many examples of outsized Saudi engineering as exceptions to this very rule.

Still, Desert Kingdom is a much needed addition to the small shelf of Saudi Arabian histories based on archival research and political economy rather than caricatures of oil wealth and the desert. The connection of geography to political power is compelling, especially the idea of oil wealth being used as patronage, not only in the form of housing or allowance handouts but in well-irrigated farmland and freshwater. The Saudis paid for their conquest of nature with oil money, and in doing so expanded the borders of their political authority. Expensive engineering schemes overseen by foreign experts helped the Saudi state assert control over natural resources in Arabia, but development was a two-way street. The Saudis were not passive—being advised on how best to secure water and massively profitable oil reserves. The monarchy understood that a monopoly on resources, enabled by science, was necessary to maintain control. The state in the 1960s stressed the bonds of science, development, modernity and Islam to frame unchecked development as a threat to Islamic values. “Our crisis is a trilogy,” the late, exiled Saudi novelist Abdellahman Munif said: “oil, political Islam, and dictatorship.” Jones makes the case for a quartet.

Among the Saudi government’s costly and unsuccessful engineering schemes was a huge irrigation project in the oil-rich eastern province completed in 1971. The region, known as al-Hasa, is also home to a wealth of oases that are a verdant contrast to the sand and brown mountains of the Hijaz, in western Arabia, and the Najd, the central heartland of Ibn Saud and his followers. Before the discovery of oil, al-Hasa was more than a way station for caravans and desert travelers. It was a center of date agriculture and settled commerce near the shore where hundreds of thousands of mixed Sunni and Shi’ite farmers and merchants lived—a level of diversity not found anywhere else in Sunni Arabia. The Shi’ites were a slight majority but were mostly part of the working class of a sectarian hierarchy; many of the large farms with access to the best springs were owned by Sunnis.

The al-Hasa Irrigation and Drainage Project (IDP) was meant to redirect precious oasis water and maximize date farming. The IDP was a technical failure—the amount of arable land actually shrank—but it also further ostracized an already marginalized, mostly landless class of Shi’ite date farmers who blamed the government’s drainage scheme for their environmental plight. Though the completion of a huge oasis canal system in a land of deserts was touted by the international press and the government’s public relations machine, it enflamed the Shiites of al-Hasa. They directed their ire at the government and Aramco, the engineer of uneven economic development on the oil-boom coast. In 1979, the same year that hardline Sunni rebels led by Juhayman al-Utaybi took over the Grand Mosque in Mecca to challenge Saudi religious authority, which in their minds had been corrupted by oil wealth and close American ties, the Shiites in the eastern province rebelled. It was an uprising. Jones writes, “fuelled by a combination of revolutionary fervor, environmental activism, and anger at having been left behind in the age of great oil wealth.” An Aramco consultant had carried out the survey of al-Hasa that underpinned the drainage scheme, and it duly noted the sectarian tensions of the oasis. The consultant, Federico Vidal, was a member of the company’s Arabian Affairs Division, an intelligence arm of the oil giant modeled on the Cairo branch of the Office of Strategic Services, the precursor to the CIA. These foreign technical advisers, Jones writes, “lent themselves to the project of legitimizing Saudi political authority because of the claim that science and expertise were, in fact, apolitical.” With the IDP, the state was not only trying to secure needed water supplies but to control a restive religious minority that threatened its absolute, authoritarian rule.

After the unrest of 1979, however, the kingdom adopted a more outwardly religious mantle to justify political rule. The seizure of the Grand Mosque by Sunni rebels signaled a shift in internal Saudi opposition away from Pan-Arab nationalists who rejected Wahhabi rule in Arabia, and the Saudis responded accordingly. In 1986 King Fahd officially adopted the title “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques” to stake out his legitimacy against mounting Islamist critics. After all, the Arab nationalist opponents of the ’50s and ’60s had been replaced, in the words of historian Timothy Niblock, by “Wahhabi militants whose social base was in the Najdi heartland and whose fathers and grandfathers had formed the backbone of the Ikhwan who had fought for ‘Abd al-‘Aziz” in founding the modern state. With these critics seeing science and development as materialist threats to the kingdom’s Islamic values, the royal family has responded, as it did in the ’60s, by claiming to be “both the agent of progress and the custodian of tradition,” as Jones writes. “What is old is new again in Saudi Arabia.”

The ailing 86-year-old King Abdullah is overseeing that newness, which as always is underwritten by oil and water. But the extent of his much-touted reform agenda is limited to grand vanity projects, from cities and public transportation to KAUST. Overblown development precedes political rights and liberalization in Saudi Arabia, but at least there are signs of change. Soon after the opening of the coeducational university, a leading cleric, Abd al-Aziz al-Shethri, who was a member of the Council of Senior Ulama, the kingdom’s highest religious authority, said that gender mixing was forbidden and that the university was teaching alien ideologies, like evolution. Al-Shethri demanded that a committee ensure that teaching there would not violate Islamic law. King Abdullah responded by promptly dismissing him.
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FRANK W. LEWIS

ACROSS
1 and 5 What dress designers might be chasing, somewhat. (5,1,7)
10 Everything I put a label on the wrong way, otherwise it might end up as baggage, or a purse. (9)
11 Turn inside out, like a female racketeer. (5)
12 One might manage to be set out of position on the pullback. (7)
13 Where 5 and 23 down might be opening. (7)
14 This way the pad is made more interesting. (5)
16 By chance, lit in a particular science. (9)
18 and 25 down Someone evidently thought it a good time to take a stab at solving the country's problems. (3,4,2,5)
20 What we might be told is an old list of possible jurors. (5)
22 To depreciate a headache, a penicillin extraction is obviously the answer. (7)
24 Possibly the center or end of one climbing a pole, perhaps. (7)
26 Hot to catch a girl with nothing on? (5)
27 It might not be much good without stock attached to it, but it's often rifled. (3,6)
28 Hardly an agreeable way to behave. (7)
29 What one is supposed to view isn't stated, but agitation is obvious when something does. (6)

DOWN
2 and 15 Peers sent to make this might be in misleading disguise. (5,9)
3 March past, and you'll know it's time for Browning to like it here. (7)
4 Comes before a bet placed on such as 18-25. (9)
5 and 23 Leading sort of thing initially produced at 13. (5,5)
6 Where you might find Irish whiskey, though the grammar of the girl appeared to be crude. (7)
7 It may be out of place, but I'd clean it, just the same. (9)
8 and 9 Pro-environment crusades against man-made products? People have died this way! (7,6)
15 See 2
17 Hit on the golf course, as wrist-movement might reveal. (9)
18 A temporary change of direction preceded what the 24 did in defense, perhaps. (7)
19 One doesn’t like to do it, putting it mildly. (7)
20 No agent, however disguised, shows such capacity. (7)
21 Look, there’s absolutely nothing in it to be old and feeble! (6)
25 See 18 across

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