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THE LIBYA INTERVENTION
THE EDITORS • GARY YOUNGE

AT SCHOOL WITH OBAMA’S SISTER
SASHA ABRAMSKY

TAKING AIM AT THE PENTAGON BUDGET
ROBERT DREYFUSS

APRIL 11, 2011
THENATION.COM
Letters

Get Mad as Hell!

Tehachapi, Calif.

After reading “Indignez-vous!” by Stéphane Hessel [March 7/14], I was compelled to order his French original online. Looking at his photograph, I would never have guessed at his incredible depth and understanding of the world’s unceasing shortcomings. He looks embittered and hardened by his life’s experiences. Obviously, looks are deceiving. His life’s experiences have propelled the man to surpass himself time and time again. The “fight” has not gone out of him at the ripe old age of 93, which makes him practically a superhero. He should be the kind of man youth read about in comic books, admirable in his very tenacity to continue the fight for the universally oppressed. Thank you for making me aware that hope is still alive.

Maxine de Villefranche

Mayville, Mich.

I was happy for, and envious of, the French, who have a person with the stature of Stéphane Hessel to call for outrage over the present course of government and to hark back to the Resistance and its members’ vision for society. Where are the American statesmen—in government and public service—who truly have the common good as their vision? Where are the large figures who will denounce our elected officials who serve the corporations and banks? Our middle-class and poorer citizens are bearing the brunt of taxes; who is there to represent us? Where are our statesmen who will sound the cry “No taxation without representation”? It certainly applies today as much if not more than 235 years ago.

John R. Wyskiel

We Shall Overcome

Mount Pleasant, S.C.

Contrary to Gary Younge’s “Selling History Short in Mississippi,” the fiftieth anniversary reunion of the Freedom Riders is neither about Governor Haley Barbour nor about people with similar mindsets—those who would rewrite history, losing the truth in the editing [“Beneath the Radar,” March 7/14]. It is about a group of people and their supporters who set in motion, against all odds, a movement that changed the country. When the Freedom Rides began in 1961, Ross Barnett was the governor of Mississippi and John Patterson, the governor of Alabama. Both championed an oppressive way of life for people of color; we confronted them directly on their turf.

Freedom Riders (the term was used interchangeably with “Freedom Fighters” by locals) were divided into two groups—those who rode the buses and the citizens of Alabama, New Orleans, Mississippi and other places who supported, trained and protected the riders. It was the latter group who did whatever they could to assist the riders viciously beaten in Birmingham and Montgomery. People by the hundreds faced angry mobs in Montgomery the night before and the day the riders left for Jackson. It was this latter group who sent riders from Nashville and New Orleans to join the rides in Montgomery. It was this latter group, in New Orleans, who provided training and support for about 40 percent of the riders who went to jail in Jackson. In addition to celebrating the event, the reunion of the Freedom Riders should also be about telling the whole story of the Freedom Rides.

I understand why people might not agree to attend a reception sponsored by Mississippi’s Governor Barbour; however, I do think we should celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Freedom Rides in Jackson. We need to bring the focus back to Mississippi and let the local people who played a role in the Freedom Rides (and their children) speak.

Our actions in 1961 motivated further actions that exposed and brought down many racial barriers and promoted the emergence of new leaders; they also resulted in great suffering and the deaths of many, such as...
The Libya Intervention

In a grim coincidence of history, Operation Odyssey Dawn, the UN-approved but American-led military campaign to establish a no-fly zone over Libya, began on March 19, exactly eight years after George W. Bush began his “shock and awe” war against Iraq.

There are many lessons to be learned from the debacle in Iraq, but one of the most important is that it was a blatant violation of international law, an unjustified, unprovoked war of aggression. The Iraqi people have paid a tragic price for the Bush administration’s disregard of global opinion, and America’s reputation was deeply tarnished. Indeed, President Obama was elected in 2008 in part to restore the country’s moral standing in the world.

In many respects, Obama seems to have learned this lesson. He resisted calls from right and left for unilateral US intervention in Libya. Instead, the White House favored a series of UN Security Council–mandated measures to weaken Muammar el-Qaddafi’s hold on power and prevent him from slaughtering his own people. It wasn’t until it was clear that those actions would fail—and the potential for a massacre of civilians had increased—that the administration began to consider military action.

Moreover, the president did what Bush did not do in 2003: he insisted there would be no US military action without Security Council approval and regional involvement, in particular from members of the Arab League. Obama also took steps to try to limit America’s military footprint and ruled out sending ground troops into Libya—indeed, the Security Council resolution explicitly forbids foreign occupation forces. The resolution also makes clear that its goal is the protection of civilians rather than regime change. Thus, the administration’s decision to support the UN action is an important defense of a multipolar world that operates according to international law.

But there is a second set of lessons from the Iraq War, relating to the costs and benefits of military action, that should raise serious concerns about the White House’s decision. First, like the Iraq War, the Libya intervention is a war of choice, undertaken by an executive acting without Congressional authorization. This is a continuation of a dangerous—and unconstitutional—precedent, one that President Obama himself opposed when he was a senator. “The president does not have power under the Constitution to unilaterally authorize a military attack in a situation that does not involve stopping an actual or imminent threat to the nation,” Obama said in December 2007.

Furthermore, as we should have learned from the Iraq War, the use of military force can have all kinds of unintended consequences. We may be going to war to prevent civilian casualties, but even the most prudent use of air power is incapable of doing that. The likelihood of US or coalition forces killing civilians will only increase if Qaddafi’s troops solidify their hold on Tripoli and other cities; urban warfare is notoriously messy. The UN resolution forbids foreign occupation, so what will we do if Qaddafi hangs on and the conflict settles into a grinding civil war, with all its attendant chaos and bloodshed? Mission creep seems to be an inevitable feature of this kind of intervention.

The dilemmas abound. The UN resolution calls for a cease-fire; yet rebel forces insist they will not observe it, even if Qaddafi decides to. Does this mean allied forces will be obliged to attack the rebels? The resolution also calls for an arms embargo, without excluding

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Obama ♥ Nukes

Grant this much to President Obama: he does not pander to mass opinion. In his first year in office, he stood with Wall Street even after its reckless greed produced an economic collapse that left most Americans calling for bankers’ heads. Now, even as the Fukushima power station threatens to unleash the greatest nuclear catastrophe since Chernobyl, Obama continues to champion an expansion of nuclear power in the United States.

On day five of the Fukushima disaster, the Obama administration reminded Congress that it wanted to triple the amount of taxpayer-funded loan guarantees for new nuclear power plants—and this is after having reduced renewable energy loan guarantees by half last autumn.

If anything demonstrates the blind spots in Obama’s oft-stated support for clean energy—and the nation’s need for a bold alternative vision—it is his response to the Fukushima crisis, which at press time had made tap water in Tokyo, nearly 200 miles away, unsafe for infants to drink. The Fukushima disaster has led such previously firm proponents as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the government of China to announce that they will halt or pause planned expansions of nuclear power; but it’s full speed ahead for Barack Obama.

Testifying to Congress on March 16, when partial melt-downs were reportedly under way at three of the six reactors at Fukushima, Energy Secretary Steven Chu said that US nuclear power plants are safe and that the president wants to build more of them. Indeed, Chu added, the administration is proposing $36 billion in taxpayer-guaranteed loans to entice private industry to do just that. What’s more, this $36 billion would be over and above the existing $18.5 billion in loan guarantees by half last autumn.

the opposition from that stipulation. And yet leaders and pundits among the allies are talking about supplying arms to them. The resolution does not mention regime change, and yet that is the Obama administration’s policy; how will the administration square White House policy with its UN obligations?

Perhaps most troubling of all is the flagrant hypocrisy of US pursuit of yet another Middle East military campaign, ostensibly with humanitarian goals, even as it gives weapons and diplomatic support to the corrupt royal families of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the other tin-pot tyrants of the Persian Gulf, who have banded together in savage repression of their own democratic oppositions. Consistency—never a notable virtue of US Mideast policy—would seem to demand, at the very least, an end to the Gulf arms pipeline, and diplomatic support for the people of Bahrain against the thugs of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Military “solutions” to grave humanitarian crises are tempting, but history shows that they rarely solve anything. They usually lead to more problems, deeper tragedy. Given our massive budget deficits and bloated Pentagon spending (see Robert Dreyfuss, page 22), never has there been a better time for America to end its role as global policeman in favor of diplomatic and economic multilateralism.
THE SACKING OF PROFESSOR PROTESS:
On March 17, Eric Caine was freed from a maximum-security prison after spending twenty-five years behind bars for a double murder he did not commit. Caine's release came after Northwestern University journalism professor David Protess, director of the Medill Innocence Project, and his students uncovered evidence that Caine had been brutally beaten by a detective into confessing. Caine was the twelfth wrongly convicted prisoner that Protess and his students have helped free, including five from death row.

Yet the same week he should have been celebrating, Protess received some very bad news. John Lavine, dean of the Medill School of Journalism, curtly informed him that he would not be teaching his world-renowned investigative journalism class in the spring quarter. After thirty years of teaching, his career at Northwestern was seemingly over—with no explanation.

For nearly three years Protess has been locked in a battle with Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez over an unprecedented subpoena demanding all the records of Protess and his students concerning the case of Anthony McKinney, who Protess alleges has been behind bars for nearly thirty-five years for a murder he did not commit. After initially defending Protess, Northwestern turned against him last fall, siding with prosecutors on the subpoena.

I took Protess's class at Northwestern and worked on McKinney's case. Watching this drama unfold, I'm deeply disturbed by how prosecutors in Chicago, with an assist from my alma mater, have attacked our reporting and attempted to undermine our work. The wrongful imprisonment of McKinney, which nine successive teams of students at Medill helped to uncover, has been tragically ignored amid the media sideshow.

Protess's suspension raises disturbing questions about the future of one of the country's foremost journalism schools. Recently, Lavine, whose specialty is media marketing, successfully pushed to change the school's name to the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications. Protess has become a casualty of a regime that now cares more about marketing than investigative journalism. "The direction of the school and the direction of the work I'm doing are moving on opposite tracks," he says. ARI BERMAN

REMEMBERING BOB FITCH: My old friend Robert Fitch, a brilliant and prolific radical journalist and troublemaker, died on March 4 at 72. Sadly, too few people know what a loss that is. I first met Bob in the late 1980s. I'd just read "Planning New York," his fantastic essay about the 1929 plan for New York City, drawn up by the Regional Plan Association, which outlined an auto-centered metropolitan region, including the highway system that would later be attributed to Robert Moses. One's casual impression of the city is that it's unplanned and chaotic, but Bob's essay detailed just how much the physical and social evolution of New York City has been precisely planned by elites.

Much of the friendship that followed was conducted on the phone. We talked endlessly about the role of Wall Street and the real estate elite in planning the city (themes of his 1996 book, The Assassination of New York). So much of what's attributed to anonymous global forces—like the deindustrialization of the city and its transformation into a global postindustrial metropolis—were consciously guided by bankers, developers and their hired hands. They used all the instruments of state power—subsidies, zoning laws, eminent domain—to get their way.

Normally, progressives blame Republicans for this sort of thing. But New York was, until recently, a Democratic town. And on the stuff that really mattered, like budgets and land use, they were always loyal servants of their corporate masters. Today people bemoan the rule of billionaire Mayor Mike Bloomberg, but it's unlikely that a Democrat would have done anything different. I doubt I'd understand that had I not spent so much time talking with Bob.

It wasn't all analysis, though. Bob tried several times to put together groups of intellectuals and activists to devise an alternative economic strategy for New York. I worked with him on several of those efforts, but we could never get it off the ground. There was no funding, no institutional base and too few willing to risk alienating the Democrats or the unions by signing on.

To my regret, I'd fallen out of touch with Bob in recent years, and had just resolved to reverse that. I missed his mind—and, though he could be a prickly character, his warmth. Rest in peace, Bob. They don't make many like you. DOUG HENWOOD

MICHIGAN MONARCH: In the summer of 1776, Thomas Jefferson outlined the most egregious acts of King George III. "For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments: For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever," Jefferson argued in the Declaration of Independence, the king was engaged in "the Establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States."

Well, imagine the surprise of Michiganers when they woke up 235 years into the American experiment to find that their governor was claiming the authority to declare a financial emergency and replace elected local officials with "emergency financial managers." Under a law passed in mid-March by the Republican-controlled legislature, Governor Rick Snyder essentially has financial martial-law powers. If he determines that a city or school district is experiencing financial difficulties—and what community in Michigan isn't these days?—he can replace its elected officials with managers who are permitted under the law to assume all their powers.

These "emergency financial managers" can be private individuals allied with the governor or even corporations with "consulting" contracts. They can cancel local labor contracts, cut or eliminate social services, and even begin processes of dissolving existing units of government and forcing mergers of cities and school districts.

Many in Michigan hope that the courts will reject Snyder's power grab as unconstitutional. But no matter what happens, the governor has tried to assume the powers of a monarch, precisely the powers that the founders saw as necessitating revolution. But Michigan's revolution can be a peaceful and democratic one, as its state constitution allows for Snyder's recall, with the process beginning as soon as July.

JOHN NICHOLS
guarantees approved under the Bush administration.

As health, education and other social services are being sacrificed on the false altar of deficit reduction, $54.5 billion is a massive amount of money. Worse, Obama is shoveling money at nuclear at the very time he has diverted funds from renewable energy. As ABC News revealed in November, the Obama administration last year “quietly drained” more than half of a $6 billion fund intended to provide loan guarantees for cutting-edge wind, solar and other renewable energy projects. Instead, the funds helped to finance the “Cash for Clunkers” program and an unrelated education initiative.

An internal White House memo, obtained by ABC, warned that green-energy supporters would be “upset” by the diversion. Actually, “livid” is the word chosen by Richard Graves, who volunteered for candidate Obama in 2008 and now blogs for the youth-run website It’s Getting Hot in Here. Calling Obama and Chu “tone deaf,” Graves pointed out that they are allocating many times more money for nuclear than for renewable energy. “Are they just trying to piss us off and lose the next election?” Graves asked on behalf of young climate activists. “Because, they are doing a heckuva job.”

“The administration’s [clean] energy…. policy is not about picking one energy source over another, in fact it is about setting a bold but achievable clean energy goal, and providing industry the flexibility on how best to increase their clean energy [production],” responded Clark Stevens, a White House spokesman. Separately, the administration has claimed that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, passed in February 2009, made “the single largest investment in clean energy in U.S. history,” funding more than 7,000 projects and leveraging $21 billion in private and federal investments.

Obama’s nuclear boosterism is part of a larger meta-narrative dominating discussion of the Fukushima disaster here in the United States. Yes, Fukushima is scary, the narrative goes, but it is far away, our own nuclear plants pose little danger and, besides, neither our economy nor the fight against climate change can succeed without more nukes. Even the usually sensible nonprofit journalism enterprise ProPublica is publishing articles implying that anything less than a Chernobyl-scale disaster amounts to only “limited” impact.

The supreme tragedy here is that more nuclear power is not only unnecessary but downright unhelpful to securing America’s, and the world’s, economic and environmental future. Countless studies have shown that the enormous financial cost and long construction times of nuclear power plants make them the costliest, slowest way to supply electricity and reduce greenhouse gas emissions (which is exactly why investors demand loan guarantees rather than risk their own money to build new nukes). From society’s point of view, it is far more effective to invest in energy efficiency in the short to medium term while accelerating the development and mass deployment of solar, wind, biomass, geothermal and other truly green energy sources. Authoritative studies commissioned by the World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace International have shown that the United States and the world could leave both fossil fuels and nuclear power behind and shift to a green energy foundation by 2050 if the right mix of government policies were adopted.

But such tactical choices raise a larger political question: can we establish energy policies that serve society as a whole and not merely corporate and bureaucratic interests? At Fukushima, the corporate mindset led the plant’s operator to delay at least fourteen hours before pumping seawater onto the overheating reactors, and even then it did so only after a direct command from the Japanese prime minister, according to the Wall Street Journal. Seawater, after all, would permanently ruin the reactors and thus render the company’s assets worthless. Instead, the seawater delay encouraged a disaster that has blackened, yet again, nuclear’s reputation, as well as the odds of its renaissance. Nevertheless, nuclear boosters are right: something must take nuclear’s place. Let’s make sure that something is truly green.  

Mark Hertsgaard, The Nation’s environment correspondent, is the author of, among other books, Nuclear Inc.: The Men and Money Behind Nuclear Energy and HOT: Living Through the Next Fifty Years on Earth.

NFL Lockout!

Beyond all the self-pity and spin coming from the offices of National Football League commissioner Roger Goodell, here is the naked truth: we face a lockout and the prospect of no pro football in 2011 because the union made a three-word demand that would not have cost the owners a dime—open your books.

DeMaurice Smith and the NFL Players Association wanted access to ten years of financial audits so they could see why the most successful sports league on earth was claiming to be financially embattled. They wanted to know why the owners could feel justified in asking for 18 percent cuts in player compensation. They wanted to know why—despite all we now know about the brutal hazards of the sport—the owners could insist on adding two more regular-season games. But the owners refused to open the books, offering instead, as the NFLPA described it, “a single sheet of paper with two numbers on it.” This single sheet would be available to the union only after being vetted by an independent third party.

It’s unclear why the owners have made a deal-breaking fetish of financial secrecy. We can only assume that the books would not be flattered by the light of day. We don’t know if

Calvin Trillin, Deadline Poet

A Brief Summary of Military Intervention in Libya

We’re in. And now we mean to pulverize that lout. And meanwhile try to think of some way to get out.
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their private ledgers would provoke the IRS into giving them something less pleasant than a body cavity search. We don’t know if the audits would demonstrate that owners leveraged their franchises and then took a bath in the 2008 economic crash. We don’t know if individual NFL owners—like their Major League Baseball counterparts—lied to local governments so they could get more taxpayer cash for stadiums. Given the financial state of baseball’s New York Mets, whose owners flushed their liquidity by partnering up with Bernie Madoff, we should be forgiven for fearing the worst.

The NFLPA also offered to consider various benefit cuts in return for an ownership stake in the teams. The owners responded as if the players had arrived at negotiations wearing white after Labor Day. NFL outside counsel Bob Batterman reportedly responded, “My clients aren’t interested in being partners with your guys.” It’s this kind of plutocratic contempt that’s poisoned the well.

The Players Association, feeling derided and disrespected, has now decertified the union so it can sue the league and fore-stall the owners from shutting down the sport. As a certified union, NFLPA is forbidden from suing the league and owners are shielded from labor law violations. But as a decertified trade association, it can bring lawsuits on everything from the lockout to the legality of the NFL draft. Litigation isn’t pretty, but going to the courts means the NFLPA can get an injunction and stop the lockout.

Fans, labor activists and progressives should stand proudly with the players. It’s a lockout, not a strike. The NFLPA has said repeatedly that its members will play under the existing contract until a new agreement is reached.

A March lockout might mean little to fans, but for players it constitutes a direct threat to their health: an off-season lockout means they will have no access to team trainers, doctors or physical therapists. Remember, this is a league with a 100 percent injury rate. A March lockout also means that healthcare for players and their families is officially cut off. One player’s pregnant wife had her delivery induced before the lockout deadline so it would be covered by the NFL’s health plan.

A common accusation in this dispute, as in most pro sports labor wars, is that this is just “billionaires versus millionaires.” That is a ridiculous assertion of moral, not to mention economic, equivalency. Here’s the reality: you have some of the richest people in the United States—people with generational wealth, people whose children’s children make Tucker Carlson look like Big Bill Haywood—going against a workforce with careers that last just 3.6 years on average.

It’s a workforce that draws almost exclusively from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds. It’s a workforce that will die some twenty years earlier than the typical American male. As Jaclyn Fujita, wife of NFL player Scott Fujita, wrote, “I don’t know that we were fully aware of the ultimate reality of the National Football League. We learned the hard way that he would work his ass into the ground, playing every defensive down and special teams, and would be the lowest paid man on the roster. That he would experience multiple concussions, but remain on the field. That he would suffer full ligament tears and shouldn’t have been walking, but team doctors would tell him it was a ‘minor sprain’ and should still play. That even though you have given your heart and soul to a team, they can easily replace you with a rookie who has never played in the NFL before” [see Zirin, “Wish of an NFL Wife,” TheNation.com].

Last I checked, no one except the seriously maladjusted goes to games to eyeball the owners’ box, no matter what megalomanics like Jerry Jones think. The players are the game, but they are being treated like pieces of equipment.

Players are demanding to see the owners’ financial ledgers, to choose their own doctors and, for the first time in NFL history, to be treated like grown men. It’s remarkable that these twenty-first-century gladiators are praised by the media when they show so-called “manhood” on the field by playing through pain but are derided when they refuse to be treated like children.

This is happening for one reason and one reason only. The owners want to show the players who’s boss. But it won’t just be the players who get hurt. Every stadium concession worker, every restaurant worker, every last person who, in these dyspeptic times, depends on the stadium to eke out a living will be affected.

The NFL Players Association understands that it needs solidarity from working people to win. That’s why it has issued statements supporting everyone from the public sector workers in Wisconsin to the trade unionists of Egypt. The players know what side they’re on. We should too. DAVE ZIRIN

Dave Zirin, The Nation’s sports columnist, is co-author of the forthcoming book The John Carlos Story.
Take a step back from contemporary American political debate and it’s not hard to conclude that our political class has gone insane. Tax giveaways to the wealthiest Americans as the deficit rages out of control. Attacks on underpaid and overworked teachers, caregivers and firefighters as alleged fat cats. Insults flung at scientists seeking to save us from the consequences of global warming as House committees vote to strip the EPA of its regulatory power. One could go on indefinitely, of course, but searching for a perfect symbol of how and why our priorities have grown so indefensibly askew, one need look no further than a recent issue of The Hollywood Reporter, which featured eighteen tributes from assorted business and entertainment luminaries to media mogul Rupert Murdoch on his eightieth birthday.

None of the tributes come from people identified as conservatives. Quite a few, including Ted Turner, Peter Chernin and Gary Ginsberg, are well-known liberals. Yet almost all appear to embrace the ethos of the quite liberal former head of Viacom, Tom Freston, who congratulates Murdoch for being the “driving force at News Corp.” and thinks we should all admire his savvy, “regardless of what you think of his political agenda.” The same disclaimer appears almost verbatim in a recent Fortune magazine story by Allan Sloan on Murdoch’s nepotistic business practices: “Whatever you think of News Corp.’s politics—which isn’t today’s subject—you have to admire and respect what Murdoch has accomplished on the business front.”

Remember, none of these people who are members of Murdoch’s family and only a few work for News Corp., even indirectly. None of them need to mouth this nonsense to keep food on the table, or even their golf pros on permanent retainer. But all of them are apparently ready to put aside not only Murdoch’s political agenda but the manner in which he and his underlings pursue it in order to pay tribute to a man who, perhaps more than any other alive, has corrupted American politics by promoting ignorance, intolerance and the continuing class war of the wealthy against the rest of us.

Leave aside the purely corrupt aspects of his business practices: the nepotism; the bribery in the form of millions offered to News of the World to influence judicial decisions; the millions offered to senior executive of banks in exchange for favorable coverage; the millions offered to university presidents and their foundations to lure them to his media properties; the millions offered to overzealous tax investigators in order to protect Rudy Giuliani? As mayor, Giuliani had pressured Time Warner Cable after it initially declined to include Fox News on its menu of channels. And is it really so amazing that the British staff of Murdoch’s News of the World were widely engaged in criminal wiretapping to try to scoop their competition? When you consider all this, you almost want to give ex–New York Post gossip columnist Richard Johnson a Pulitzer Prize. All he did was regularly accept cash bribes in exchange for using his column to promote the properties of those handing over the cash. (Johnson was not publicly disciplined when this corruption was revealed.)

If Murdoch is judged as “first and foremost a journalist,” the inevitable conclusion is that he is an enabler and purveyor of lies, hatred and criminal activity in the service of his ideological, financial and personal interests. A man like this deserves to be shunned, à la Bernie Madoff or Mel Gibson. That he is celebrated as some sort of hero by people who need not worry about their reputations tells you almost all you need to know about the insanity that grips our benighted political culture.
In the first flush of the occupation of Iraq, shortly after the statues were pulled down, Thomas Friedman wrote, “Whether you were for or against this war…you have to feel good that right has triumphed over wrong. America did the right thing here. It toppled one of the most evil regimes on the face of the earth, and I don’t think we know even a fraction of how deep that evil went.”

Flash forward eight years, and the Financial Times’s Gideon Rachman writes, “For all the justified anxiety about the Libyan conflict, it is important to remember the potential gains. The first goal is humanitarian. The Qaddafi regime is extremely brutal and would have extracted a horrible revenge on the people and cities involved in the rebellion. If things go well, intervening in Libya might also help to turn the tide against the gathering forces of reaction in the Middle East. A democratic Middle East remains in the long-term interests of its people, and of the rest of the world.”

The innocence of the liberal hawk is one of the few truly renewable resources America seems to have in abundance. Liberal hawks treasure their innocence but are also very careless with it, for they keep on losing it. And each time they misplace it, they manage to find it again just in time for the next bad idea.

Libya is not Iraq. This particular spate of bombing comes with United Nations approval; the United States did not lead the charge but followed with initial reluctance. And the invitation to attack did come from a credible resistance movement within Libya.

And yet, although the contexts are different, the flaws in logic, strategy and morality remain broadly the same. In the line famously attributed to Mark Twain, “History doesn’t repeat itself. At best it sometimes rhymes.” Particularly familiar is the way a certain strand of liberal opinion is rallying to the cause of American militarism.

The call from Libyan rebels for a no-fly zone matters. Those who are resisting Qaddafi deserve our support. But they don’t single-handedly determine the nature of it. Solidarity is not a process by which you unquestioningly forfeit responsibility for your own actions to another; it involves an assessment of what is prudent and what is possible. The left should not be in denial that nonintervention could have meant defeat for the Libyan revolution. If the balance of forces on the ground could not sustain the resistance on their own, this may well have been a consequence.

The spontaneous, organic nature of these uprisings over the past few months has shown that democratic revolutions are a messy, unpredictable and complex process whereby shifts in collective popular confidence can translate into rifts between political, military and state establishments.

But neither should we be browbeaten with accusations that by opposing military intervention, we are in effect supporting Qaddafi—particularly not by supporters of states who were until recently arming him. Because arguments against Qaddafi are not the same as arguments for bombing. Since the allied forces insist that neither regime change nor occupation is the goal, it is difficult to fathom what the goal is. If Qaddafi remains, the country will be split. If the bombing stops, Qaddafi, all the more dangerous for being depleted, will likely finish the job. If Qaddafi goes, we have no idea what ethnic and regional rifts will emerge. What victory looks like under these circumstances is anybody’s guess.

Far from being a knee-jerk response to Western military action, opposition to the bombing marks a considered reflection on the West’s knee-jerk impulse to mistake war for foreign policy. This impulse follows a well-worn circular logic in three parts: (1) Something must be done now. (2) This is something. (3) So we must do it. And that something invariably involves bombing.

Such sophistry treats “now” as its own abstract point in time: a moment that bears no legacy and carries no consequences. Amnesia and ignorance are the privileges of the powerful. But the powerless, who live with the ramifications, do not have the luxury of forgetting. They do not forget Shatila, Falluja, Abu Ghraib or Jenin—to name but a few horrific war crimes in which the West was complicit.

This time around, however, there is no need for historical references, because the hypocrisy is playing out in real time. When protests started in Tunisia in January, the French foreign minister offered the Tunisian police training to “restore calm.” The day before Libya was attacked, dozens of protesters were shot dead in Yemen. Less than a week before, Saudi forces invaded Bahrain, where many protesters have been killed. These are American allies.

So while the West clearly has the power to intervene, given its history of colonialism and imperialism, it has no more credibility to do so on humanitarian grounds in this region than Iran would to bomb Bahrain in defense of the Shiites who are currently being killed there.

The question of whether the West should be involved in this region is moot. It has been intervening for several decades, arming despots (including Qaddafi), propping up dictators and ignoring human rights abuses. The question is how it intervenes and in whose interests. If Western governments really want to stop human rights abuses, why not start with Gaza, where people under a forty-four-year occupation are regularly being bombed?

Libya is not Iraq. In some ways it is worse. Because the tragedy of Iraq is still unfolding, and thus we should know better; and because Arabs have shown us how to democratize the Arab world, and it did not involve our bombing them. They’ve demonstrated that revolutions that bring greater freedom and democracy come from below. They are not imposed by foreigners from 50,000 feet above.
When Charles Ferguson received an Oscar for his documentary on the financial crisis, *Inside Job*, he reminded the audience that “not a single financial executive has gone to jail, and that’s wrong.” Given the abundant evidence of massive fraud, Americans everywhere have asked the same question: Why haven’t any of those bankers gone to jail? If federal investigators could not establish criminal intent for any top-flight executives, didn’t they have enough evidence to prosecute banks or financial houses as law-breaking corporations?

Evidently not. Except for occasional civil complaints by the Securities and Exchange Commission, the nation is left to face a disturbing spectacle: crime without punishment. Massive injuries were done to millions of people by reckless bankers, and vast wealth was destroyed by elaborate financial deceptions. Yet there are no culprits to be held responsible.

Former Senator Ted Kaufman was especially upset by this. Kaufman was appointed in 2008 to fill out the remaining two years of Vice President Biden’s term as senator from Delaware. With no ambition to stay in politics, he was free to speak his mind. He made unpunished bankers his special cause.

“People know that if they rob a bank they will go to jail,” Kaufman declared in an early speech. “Bankers should know that if they rob people, they will go to jail too.” Serving on the Senate Judiciary Committee, he helped get expanded funding and manpower for investigative agencies. In hearings, he politely prodded the Justice Department, the SEC and the FBI to be more aggressive.

“At the end of the day,” Senator Kaufman warned, “this is a test of whether we have one justice system in this country or two. If we do not treat a Wall Street firm that defrauded investors of millions of dollars the same way we treat someone who stole $500 from a cash register, then how can we expect our citizens to have any faith in the rule of law?”

Kaufman, now retired, sounded slightly embarrassed when I reminded him of his question. “When you look at what we got, it ain’t very much,” he conceded. “I’m genuinely concerned there are a lot of guys walking around Wall Street, the bad apples, saying, ‘Hey, man, we got away with it. We’re going to do it again.’”

If the legal system cannot locate the villains in this story, then “the law is a ass—a idiot,” as Charles Dickens put it. The technical difficulties in making a case for criminal prosecutions are real enough, given the complexities of modern finance. But the government’s lack of response to enormous wrongdoing reflects a deeper conflict of values. Will society’s sense of right and wrong prevail, or will corporate capitalism’s amoral need to maximize profit? So far, the marketplace appears to be winning.

The government’s ambivalence about prosecuting the largest corporate interests could be heard in the president’s comments. “Nothing will be gained by spending our time and energy laying blame for the past,” Barack Obama said in a different context (crimes of torture and unlawful detention committed under the Bush administration). Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner bluntly dismissed the “public desire for Old Testament justice.” That might be morally satisfying, he said, but it would be “dramatically damaging” to economic recovery.

No one had to tell federal prosecutors to go easy. They can read the newspapers. The Treasury’s inspector general called the financial system “a target-rich environment” for financial
fraud. But the government at the same time expended a vast fortune in public funds to rescue and restore the biggest banks and brokerages. Criminal indictments would not be good for investor confidence.

The economic argument dilutes, even checks, law enforcement. This occurred in government policy long before the financial crisis erupted, with its revelations of widespread fraud. During the past decade, the government demonstrated a similar reluctance to act aggressively against corporations. The Justice Department instead adopted a softer, more forgiving approach, at least for major companies. The intention was to limit the economic damage that can result from vigorous prosecution.

Instead of “Old Testament justice,” federal prosecutors seek “authentic cooperation” from corporations in trouble, urging them to come forward voluntarily and reveal their illegalities. In exchange, prosecutors will offer a deal. If companies pay the fine set by the prosecutor and submit to probationary terms for good behavior, perhaps an outside monitor, then government will defer prosecution indefinitely or even drop it entirely. The corporation thus avoids the stigma of a criminal trial and the bad headlines that depress stock prices. More to the point, illegal behavior. As a practical matter, the option is reserved for the larger companies represented by the leading law firms. They have the skill and clout to negotiate a tolerable settlement.

Russell Mokhiber, longtime editor of the Corporate Crime Reporter, describes deferred prosecutions as another chapter in the long-running degradation of corporate law. “Over the past twenty-five years,” Mokhiber says, “the corporate lobbies have watered down the corporate criminal justice system and starved the prosecutorial agencies. Young prosecutors dare not overstep their bounds for fear of jeopardizing the cash prize at the end of the rainbow—partnership in the big corporate defense law firms after they leave public service. The result—if there are criminal prosecutions, they now end in deferred or nonprosecution agreements—instead of guilty pleas. If executives are criminally prosecuted, they tend to be low-level executives.”

Deferring prosecution was made standard practice by George W. Bush’s Justice Department, which over eight years deferred or canceled some 108 prosecutions. The Los Angeles law firm Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher took the lead in promoting the new policy and has negotiated numerous agreements. A lawyer in a rival firm wisecracked that Gibson, Dunn had become “the West Coast branch of the Bush Justice Department.”

During Obama’s first two years, Justice deferred action on fifty-three corporate defendants. None of those cases stemmed from the financial crisis. In a recent article Gibson, Dunn’s leading lawyers dubbed deferred prosecution “the new normal for handling corporate misconduct.” The Justice Department does still indict hundreds of business entities every year for crimes ranging from routine price-fixing to environmental destruction. Some major corporations still plead guilty as charged, especially drug companies, but prosecutions are overwhelmingly aimed at garden-variety fraud and crimes of smaller enterprises. As Gibson, Dunn lawyers put it, negotiated settlements “are now the primary tool in DoJ’s efforts to combat corporate crime.” The statistics in this account are unofficial, drawn from Gibson, Dunn’s periodic reports to clients on deferred prosecutions.

Important corporations that have settled without a public trial include Boeing, AIG, AOL, Halliburton, BP, Health South, Daimler Chrysler, Wachovia, Merrill Lynch, Pfizer, UBS and Barclays Bank. The crimes ranged from healthcare fraud to cheating the government on military contracts, bribing foreign governments, money laundering, tax evasion and violating trade sanctions.

“Too big to prosecute” has generated controversy in legal circles but very little in politics. William Lerach, the notorious trial lawyer who has won huge investor lawsuits against Enron and many other corporations, describes deferred prosecutions as “sham guilt. They create a thin veneer of responsibility, but nothing really happens.” (Lerach is not a neutral or untarnished expert, having gone to prison himself for illegally recruiting plaintiffs.) “I call them headline fines—they make for good reading, but that’s all,” Lerach says. “The companies can pay them in a heartbeat. You know what it is to them? A cost of
Have you ever said to yourself “I’d love to get a computer, if only I could figure out how to use it.” Well, you’re not alone. Computers were supposed to make our lives simpler, but they’ve gotten so complicated that they are not worth the trouble. With all of the “pointing and clicking” and “dragging and dropping” you’re lucky if you can figure out where you are. Plus, you are constantly worrying about viruses, spam and freeze-ups. If this sounds familiar, we have great news for you. There is finally a computer that’s designed for simplicity and ease of use. It’s the WOW Computer, and it was designed with you in mind.

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Lerach argues that negotiated settlements of corporate cases serve a different purpose: they shield the company’s top officers and directors, who could be held personally liable for crimes. “It shifts the blame to the corporate entity—the fictional person—rather than the individuals who engaged in the misconduct and really gained financially from it,” Lerach charges.

“The actual law says you are not allowed to indemnify a corporate officer or board member from prosecution for deliberate dishonest acts, i.e., criminal behavior,” he explains. “The way they get around this is a misuse of these agreements. They settle with the government on what is a criminal charge, and the shareholders end up paying. They use corporate guilt to pay off the prosecutor.”

Some of the penalties are huge—Pfizer paid $2.3 billion for marketing drugs in violation of labeling restrictions—but many fines seem trivial alongside a company’s ill-gotten gains.

“I call them headline fines. The companies can pay them in a heartbeat...a cost of doing business, that’s all.’ —William Lerach, trial lawyer

A series of federal judges have accused Justice and SEC lawyers of letting defendants off too easy. “A facade of enforcement,” New York Judge Jed Rakoff complained when he objected to a $33 million SEC settlement with Bank of America. The bank subsequently agreed to pay $150 million.

Judge Emmet Sullivan in Washington, DC, hammered Justice Department lawyers for giving “a free ride” to Barclays, which was accused of evading US sanctions on Iran and Cuba. Evidence made clear that its officers knew they were breaking the law, but none of them were indicted. “You know what?” Judge Sullivan told the government lawyers. “If other banks saw the law, but none of them were indicted. “You know what?”


Some of the penalties are huge—Pfizer paid $2.3 billion for marketing drugs in violation of labeling restrictions—but many fines seem trivial alongside a company’s ill-gotten gains.

This amoral economic logic epitomizes the deep conflict over values our society is gradually losing. Corporate leaders may protest my characterization of business values, but Greenfield points out that during the past generation this bloodless market logic has become mainstream thinking among legal scholars. A rough version of the same thinking has crept into law enforcement. Oft-cited legal scholars Frank Easterbrook and Daniel Fischel argue, as Greenfield summarizes, that “corporations should, with some exceptions, seek to maximize profits even when they must break the law to do so....As long as the expected penalties from illegality are less than the expected profits, the corporation should act illegally.”

As Easterbrook and Fischel write: “Managers have no general obligation to avoid violating regulatory laws, when violations are profitable to the firm.” They even argue that “managers not only may but also should violate the rules when it is profitable to do so.”

The confusion of values starts with the fictitious premise that the corporation is a person, for purposes of law. The Supreme Court has awarded it many of the constitutional rights that a person possesses—free speech, the right to due process. But corporations are not mortal beings, of course, and unlike people, they can live forever. The language of “corporate personhood” is really a slick way of saying property rights come before people’s rights.

Government says it is acceptable to execute people for their crimes, then turns around and tries to eliminate the death penalty for corporations. When an actual person is sentenced to prison, the court does not pause to weigh the unfortunate collateral consequences for his children. “How many individuals do you know who get a deferred prosecution agreement?” Lerach asks. “They get marched into court and put in the clink.”

Lerach is sympathetic to the “death penalty” argument, because he has seen the negative consequences for people whose firms collapsed. “But you can’t have it both ways,” he says. “You can’t say you won’t indict the corporation because it will injure a lot of innocent people and have catastrophic impact. OK, but then you don’t indict the individuals who were responsible. And you let them use corporate money to pay the fine. That’s just a big game. There’s no accountability there.”

Restoring justice thus has two parts—establishing individual responsibility within the company and redefining criminal
liability for the corporation in ways that have real impact on corporate behavior. Both require reforms that are fiendishly difficult to achieve, given the corporate dominance of politics. Prosecuting individuals is complicated, as Greenfield says, because responsibility is diffused within the corporation.

“It is hard to find the one individual who had a proper mental state that satisfies criminal intent, because everyone has a part of it,” Greenfield says. “The purpose of limited liability is to protect people from being responsible. If we put the assumptions about how we organize business in other areas of our lives and politics, people would be aghast.”

In other words, restoring individual responsibility requires big changes in the corporation itself—anti-trust legislation to make the big boys get smaller, and internal governance reforms that give voice and influence to other stakeholders, like employees and small shareholders, who now suffer most from recklessness at the top. People throughout the firm need incentives to take responsibility for its acts.

Corporations do not experience human guilt, since they exist only as artificial entities constructed from law. It is intolerable that these organizations wield so much power over society, but for many years people have been led to believe that corporate good fortune is synonymous with general prosperity. As broadly shared prosperity is steadily withdrawn, people may rise up and demand serious reforms.

Lerach thinks any reform is hopeless for now, but he nonetheless has lots of ideas about what it might look like. “Corporations are too big, too powerful,” he says. “The prosecutors are completely outgunned by the law firms, setting aside the fact that a young prosecutor is probably thinking about a job someday in a private firm. Corporate executives are not only greedy; they tend to be pretty smart. They surround themselves with professionals who tell them what they’re doing is reasonable. That creates a structural shield against prosecution.”

Yet Lerach thinks criminal penalties “can be created for corporations that wouldn’t amount to the death penalty for them but are still painful. So you wouldn’t put the prosecutor in that terrible bind where indictment might cost innocent people their jobs but would still put pressure on the company.”

If a company is convicted, law could prescribe a rising scale of mandatory measures depending on the severity of the crime: forcing the company to sell off subsidiaries, drop lines of business, surrender government licenses and contracts. This would be the equivalent of “three strikes, you’re out” for the mammoth corporations. The courts could also punish executives past and present, break up the company or put the entire enterprise up for sale at depressed prices. These actions are harsh—in some cases, fatal—but not really worse than what happens routinely to smaller businesses in the marketplace. Business failure gets punished unsentimentally. Criminal behavior should be clearly defined as business failure.

What will give political momentum to these ideas? Continuation of the status quo. Nobody went to jail, so eventually the corporate crooks will do it again. Next time, the rebellion won’t be aimed at government.
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Maya’s Vision

Like her brother, the president, Maya Soetoro-Ng has bold ideas about education reform.

by SASHA ABRAMSKY

Maya Soetoro-Ng pulls up to the pastel-painted Children’s Discovery Center, a science and culture space one block off the ocean in downtown Honolulu. The bumper on her beat-up red Mazda hatchback is festooned with political slogans, including a frayed Women for Obama sticker; the back seat is occupied by Maya’s two young daughters. The younger is Savita, a feisty 2-year-old. The older is Suhaila, 6 and tall for her age; she’s wearing a Girl Scout uniform, with a rainbow-colored peace symbol ironed onto the blue vest. The 40-year-old Maya is wearing jeans and an untucked blue shirt; her long black hair hangs loose. She looks every bit the earth mother.

Maya and the girls go into the center and head off to a side area on the ground floor, under banners adorned with the words Explore! Discover! Imagine! Dream!, to a recently opened exhibit on refugee children around the world. Maya, who has sat on the community advisory council of the center for the past few years, and her colleagues worked hard to put this exhibit and its accompanying workshops together, and they hope the hands-on activities will inspire a sense of empathy in the young visitors.

Kids can build makeshift hovels with wood and canvas; they can pretend to cook over an unlit fireplace; they can even play with toys that refugee children have built out of scraps of paper, plastic bottles and twigs. The girls chant an adapted version of the Scouts’ pledge in which the line about “following authority” has been replaced by one about “seeking truth and justice.”

Today one of the other mothers, whose parents fled from Pol Pot’s Cambodia, is going to talk for a few minutes. But first Maya introduces the notions of courage and bravery. She asks the girls what images come to mind when they think of these things. “Fighting a dragon,” one answers. Maya laughs and effortlessly segues into a conversation about war, droughts, exile.

After the Cambodian mother’s presentation, the group goes over to a world map showing refugee hot spots. Maya talks about the Middle East, Afghanistan, Iraq; she veers into a wide-ranging conversation about colonialism that touches on resource wars, battles for imperial dominance and the 500-year-old Treaty of Tordesillas, which divided the New World between the Spaniards and the Portuguese.

It’s a startlingly ambitious discussion to have with 6-year-olds. But Maya gets away with it by continually drawing in her little charges with questions. She speaks about complex topics, but she doesn’t talk down to the girls. Instead, she takes them along with her, seeing how far they’ll go, probing to get them to ask—and answer—increasingly tough questions. She is, it soon becomes apparent, a natural educator. Her voice would be identifiable in any crowd; it is gentle yet powerful, very husky. Friends and colleagues routinely mention it as one of her signature traits.

To the wider world, Maya Soetoro-Ng is better known as President Barack Obama’s sister. A modest, private person, she has been thrust into the spotlight by the whirlwind of events that put her older brother in the White House. And though she did not seek out fame, she is making use of it to promote her educational values. These days, Maya explains, “I have more of an opportunity to use my voice.”

Like her brother, Maya has a strong sense of timing and a powerful ability to blend her personal story into a larger narrative in a way that inspires audiences to get involved. Despite her initial reticence, she is seizing the podium in hopes that others will share her aspirations for revamping school systems and broadening test-oriented curriculums.

In April Candlewick Press is publishing her first book, Ladder to the Moon, a hope-filled children’s story in which Maya’s deceased mother, Stanley Ann Dunham, takes Suhaila on a journey to the moon, where she learns to help others and embrace diversity. The illustrations, by Yuyi Morales, are gorgeous, almost Chagall-like in their dreamy defiance of gravity. The numbers are impressive, too: an initial print run of 200,000 and a $250,000 marketing budget, according to the publicity materials. Maya’s book tour will take her to ten major cities around the country, where she plans to launch discussions about not only the book and its themes but also new visions for what education can and should be.

Sasha Abramsky writes regularly for The Nation. His most recent books are Breadline USA: The Hidden Scandal of American Hunger and How to Fix It and Inside Obama’s Brain. He lives in Sacramento.
By any measure, Maya is one of Hawaii’s most innovative educators, with an ambition to transform the state’s troubled school system into a world leader. In federal education rankings, Hawaii’s primary and middle schoolers consistently score lower than the national average. (At the height of the recent financial collapse, Hawaii went to a four-day school week for several months, leaving working parents to scramble for childcare and generating a rolling series of protests.) But Maya aspires to do far more than improve test scores. She envisions a network of schools that produce students who don’t just test well but also interact well with one another and with their community.

The hands-on pedagogical methods that animate this vision, on full display at the Children’s Discovery Center, have informed Maya’s work since she began teaching in the 1990s. School curriculums, Maya believes, should be broadened to emphasize not just test scores but also social skills and community service.

Her first post, after completing a master’s degree in secondary education at New York University, was at The Learning Project, an experimental school on New York City’s Lower East Side. “We did things like take the kids to museums on Saturdays,” Maya says. “I took them to Museo del Barrio, the New-York Historical Society, the Asia Society, the Museum of Natural History, the Guggenheim, the Frick gallery. What worked best is, it was a real community school. The idea is to restore schools to their communities. The school ought to be considered a cornerstone, a pillar of the community. Instead it’s become very peripheral. There’s no reason why it has to be.”

Maya took this conviction to heart, becoming a mentor and visible presence in the community. On weekends she performed slam poetry at the fabled Nuyorican Cafe and hung out at Dojo’s and the other cheap restaurants catering to the Village’s young crowd. And she helped students on their “lots and lots” project, converting abandoned neighborhood real estate into community gardens.

“There was more compassion and whole child learning than in most places,” she recalls of The Learning Project. “The school probably should have fought for higher academic expectations. But it was a very kind place, a very sweet space.”

After Maya moved back to Honolulu—to complete a PhD and care for her and Barack’s aging grandmother, Madelyn (known to Barack as Toot and to Maya as Tutu), as well as to experience, once again, the tropical Pacific environs she loves—The Learning Project closed down. But, she feels, she took its best methods home with her. And almost a decade later, she is implementing its vision in numerous educational and community projects around the lush island of Oahu.

Until recently, Maya earned her living as a high school teacher at La Pietra, a girls’ school, where she would give her graduating students trees to plant, a gentle reminder of their place within the wider web of life. A few years ago, however, she joined the faculty of the East-West Center, which is affiliated with, though institutionally separate from, the University of Hawaii; she also began working at the university. In addition to teaching, she has been developing far-ranging peace studies and climate change curriculums. She has helped organize large conferences and workshops at which high-ranking climate change scientists and teachers have met to discuss strategies for sparking young children’s interest in this pressing environmental issue. And she has traveled extensively—to Japan, China and elsewhere—promoting global peace studies.

Maya’s colleague Carole Petersen, who runs the Matsunaga Institute (a peace studies institute at the university, created in honor of the late Hawaii Senator Spark Matsunaga), says the goal of this curriculum work is to produce “globally engaged students,” meaning those who “are not just thinking about their own personal problems or even local problems” after they graduate.

Another colleague, Kerrie Urosevich, argues that the peace studies curriculum encourages a holistic approach to problem solving. It broadens into discussions of public health and economic issues, she explains, “putting peace into action, making sure it’s something that shifts systems. You have to go deep; it has to be collaborative.”

In the curriculums Maya develops, students are taught about traditions regarding land use, sustainability and healthy eating. (Hawaii, which has the highest per capita consumption of Spam in the United States, is bedeviled by high obesity rates among its low-income populations.) They are encouraged to develop community service projects and to enact them in Honolulu and the surrounding towns and villages.

A lettered work is only part of Maya’s commitment to education reform. Building on the experimental Learning Project’s legacy from her Big Apple days, she recently co-founded a group called Our Public School to get children more involved in community work and local residents more involved in the schools. Kids explore farms in the hills outside Honolulu; they work with the elderly, lead environmental cleanups and so on.

Mark Wolf, a young video producer who works with Our Public School filming innovative schooling methods around Hawaii, says the program is designed to create a virtuous circle in which students’ involvement in community projects serves as an incentive to keep them in school until they graduate.

Sitting in a funky old restaurant several blocks inland from the fabled Waikiki Beach, eating a traditional Hawaiian lunch of poi, shredded pork, soup and salmon salsa, Wolf details Maya’s commitment to a package of educational reforms that the organization originally called the Twenty-One Pillars for Quality Education—a possibly inadvertent nod to T.E. Lawrence’s Seven Pillars of Wisdom or, more prosaically, a marketing ploy intended to highlight a new educational philosophy for the twenty-first century. Among the more interesting pillars are pillar one, “global cultural and geographic literacy” (translation: know one’s place in the world); pillar six, em-
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phasize “both the universal and the unique”; pillar thirteen, “provide tools for pursuing peace, conflict resolution, and mediation”; pillar eighteen, nurture “democratic skills and expectations”; and pillar twenty, encourage the teaching of sustainable agricultural practices and food security.

More recently, Our Public School has replaced the pillars with the state’s “general learner outcome” guidelines for students in its publicity materials. But the original pillars still provide the group with a pedagogical frame on which to build.

“Even if you’re going to be firmly entrenched in your perspective,” Maya announces, “let that be only after you have heard a lot of different perspectives.” Students, in her vision of education, should have to defend their particular understanding of the truth rather than simply parroting received wisdom. She mentions the Indonesian phrase *cuci mata*, which roughly translates as “to wash the eyes.” It means, she explains, that you should try to see things from a fresh point of view.

As if that’s not enough, Maya is also involved with an after-school program for middle-schoolers called After-School All-Stars, a branch of which recently opened in Honolulu. “We found with all these cuts in the public school system, a lot of our arts and physical education and music programs were being cut,” explains executive director Dawn Dunbar. The All-Stars program “helps to fill the void.” In addition to academic work, the youngsters are also coaxed toward more community engagement. “We had a group go to the Shriners hospital and visit the kids. The kids we serve come from very underprivileged, low-income areas; and to see them interact with their community and give back is very rewarding.”

At heart, Wolf says, Maya is a facilitator—someone who “organizes well and works with public causes and connects people to each other. She’s connecting the dots.” Carole Petersen at the Matsunaga Institute describes her in similar terms, calling her a “connector,” someone who gives “that little extra push to make things happen.”

As a result, Wolf adds, even though his friend and mentor does not revel in all the attention strangers lavish on her these days, she is “instinctually a public presence.”

And yet, unlike many presidential siblings—Jimmy Carter’s ne’er-do-well brother, Billy, for example, or Richard Nixon’s brother Donald, who took dubious loans from politically connected businessmen—Maya isn’t trying to cash in on the fact that her brother is in the White House. She doesn’t readily name-drop or pull rank. When strangers stop her in restaurants to talk about Obama or the state of the country, to ask if she can garner a presidential autograph for them or to snap a photo with her, she grows visibly uncomfortable, although she makes a point to be generous with her time. (Friends have observed her being accosted by groupies, people who figure that the closest they’ll ever get to Barack Obama is through a photograph with the commander in chief’s sister.) She laughs when she tells of how long-lost Indonesian acquaintances or people who once worked with her mother in rural Indonesia contact her and ask for money, assuming she lives in a palace or owns vast tracts of land or numerous factories. In fact, much of her work is with poor, disempow-

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ered communities, and she and her husband, Conrad, recently decided to sell some stocks she inherited in part to help pay the dental bills for a root canal.

There’s something quintessentially democratic about the normality of her living situation, a reaffirmation that power is not supposed to reside in bloodlines in America. “She’s one degree away from the president of the United States,” observes her friend Patricia Halagao. “Yet she just seems so normal and grounded.” When Maya visits friends with children, she often brings bags of hand-me-downs to share among the kids.

Another friend, University of Hawaii professor Robert Perkinson, goes one step further. In some ways, he says, Maya is financially worse off because of her newfound fame; now she has to keep up with people who have all their life’s needs catered to. “You’re playing at this world-class level where people have drivers and expense accounts,” Perkinson explains. “But you don’t have any of these resources.”

Maya’s family lives in a small apartment building behind a gas station off one of Honolulu’s main freeways, not far from Punahou, the premier school that she and her brother attended after the family returned from Indonesia. There is no obvious White House paraphernalia in her home—no photos, no gaudy mementos. There isn’t even a snapshot in the living room of Maya and Barack, or a casual portrait of the two children with their mother or grandparents. Tucked away inside a kitchen cupboard is a glass vase with an inscription letting viewers know it dates to the 2009 inauguration—but that’s about the sum of it.

“I’m proud of him,” Maya explains. “I love him and have a bunch of T-shirts. My friend takes old muumuus and turns them into other things, so I gave her a whole bunch of Obama T-shirts and said, ‘Make me an Obama pillow that’s really comfortable, and we can sit on it on the floor.’” Maya says she loves some of the art that emerged from the campaign, “but it’s not like I have an enormous space” to put it on display. Besides, she adds, “I prefer to fill my apartment with things that remind me of my childhood, or places that I can no longer visit. I see my brother on a regular basis, so I don’t have the need for photos.”

Instead, she says, she fills her walls with paintings (such as the Balinese landscape that dominates one living room wall, acquired by her grandmother on her travels to visit Stanley Ann abroad) and decorates her mantelpiece with sculptures—including one of the Hindu monkey-king Hanuman—and other artwork she has picked up on her global wanderings. In a corner of her dining room lies a cloth bag emblazoned with a Thomas Jefferson quote: “I cannot live without books.”

When she speaks on the phone with Barack these days, they have an unspoken agreement: she won’t press him on policy matters or even tell him whether she agrees or disagrees with specific decisions—though he will sometimes ask her about her views on education issues. But if he wants to vent about his hard day’s work, she’ll lend an ear to her exhausted brother. After all, she says, her eyes suddenly teary as she contemplates the public criticism that her brother faces every day, “he’s a good man, and I believe in him. It [the presidency] is a much harder job than I realized on some level. And to try to think about your constituency, the people you’re trying to serve—you’re not allowed to be yourself in some way. You can’t just
think about what you believe. I think it’d be dreadful.”

Though Maya and her brother are clearly very different, her home offers a glimpse of the world from which the president emerged. Shaped by their mother’s powerful moral vision of what a worthy life looks like, Maya and Barack both embarked on careers in their 20s that put them on the ground, helping to reshape and empower communities. In her low-key way, Maya, like the president, is putting herself center stage. She is always on the go, always juggling commitments. And as a result, she is frequently late for meetings—“like a herd of turtles in a cloud of peanut butter,” as their mother used to say when they were kids.

It’s a tiring life, but one that suits Maya’s personality well. She has always had a yen to make an impact, and she’s doing just that. “I like the idea of energizing critical thinking, getting students to wrestle with really challenging ideas and to confront their own simplistic assumptions about the world,” she says. “That’s the way you grow. You build a muscle by tearing it. The idea is to get us to challenge our assumptions, and to be startled by our own revelations and reflections. We use education as a tool for thinking about identity, our place in the world and community. I like education for service, getting children to think about how they can use hearts and minds and hands to engage and improve their community.”

Taking Aim at the Pentagon Budget

Economic crisis, deficit mania and war weariness have created political space for large cuts.

by ROBERT DREYFUSS

For the first time since the end of the cold war, there’s a real possibility that the post-9/11 fever that sent US military spending shooting upward will break and that the Pentagon’s budget will fall sharply. But it won’t be easy.

On the surface, it might not seem as if cuts are in the offing. After thirteen consecutive years of growth, between 1998 and 2011, spending on the military has reached an all-time high, and for 2012 Defense Secretary Robert Gates is asking Congress to authorize yet another increase, seeking $553 billion, plus an additional $118 billion for Iraq and Afghanistan, for a total of $671 billion. Not only is the White House seeking more money; Congress—even with the deficit-obsessed Tea Party/Republican majority in the House—has so far refused to wield the budget ax against the Defense Department.

Yet longtime analysts say a confluence of events has emerged that will change that. “Five years from now, we’ll turn around and the defense budget will be a lot lower than we thought it was going to be five years ago, and we’ll look back and say, Wow,” says Gordon Adams, a Stimson Center fellow and American University professor who’s been analyzing military spending for four decades.

That’s not because the military-industrial complex is ready for cuts. The so-called Iron Triangle, the powerful nexus that includes the Pentagon, military contractors and lobbyists, and hawks on the Congressional armed services committees, will resist cuts every step of the way. “If you leave it to the Iron Triangle, it won’t come down,” says Adams. “But it will come down, and what will drive it are the outside variables, which create a tidal wave that hits defense spending.” What’s creating that wave, say Adams and other experts, are two intersecting currents. A politics of debt and deficit reduction has taken hold in Washington, tied to an economic crisis that has convinced many that the United States can no longer afford an oversized Pentagon. And for the public, the decade-long trauma of 9/11, which fueled the “war on terror,” has finally begun to ease. War-weary Americans have turned decisively against the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and, according to polls, voters support cuts in military spending. All that creates space on Capitol Hill to take on the Iron Triangle.

Winslow Wheeler, director of the Straus Military Reform Project at the liberal Center for Defense Information and editor of the new book *The Pentagon Labyrinth*, points to major studies by think tanks and task forces calling for sweeping military cuts as a sign that things are changing. “We’re in a period of a shift in tectonic plates when it comes to the defense budget,” he says.

In 2010 a series of high-powered reports called for big cuts in military spending, with each projecting reductions of 15–20 percent of the Pentagon budget. In June the Sustainable Defense Task Force, organized by Representatives Barney Frank and Ron Paul, outlined a plan to cut $960 billion between 2011 and 2020, including cuts in the nuclear arsenal, troop deployments in Europe and Asia, the size of the Navy, a wide range of costly weapons systems and reforms in military pay scales and the Pentagon’s healthcare system. In September the libertarian Cato Institute published a report, “Budgetary Savings From Military Restraint,” that outlined $1.2 trillion in cuts over ten years, including a one-third reduction in the troop strength of the Army and Marines. In November a debt-reduction task force organized by the centrist, establishment-oriented Bipartisan Policy Center released a plan, “Restoring America’s Future,” that proposed a five-year freeze in Defense Department spending at current levels and then a cap on future

Robert Dreyfuss is a Nation contributing editor.
growth, which would save $1.1 trillion over a decade.

But the most startling report of all was released in December by the bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, created by President Obama and chaired by former Republican Senator Alan Simpson and Democrat Erskine Bowles, who served as President Clinton’s White House chief of staff. Though it fudged the numbers a bit, making it hard to pin down how far its proposed cuts would go, the panel’s reductions in military spending could amount to as much as $650 billion to $1 trillion over ten years. “The Simpson-Bowles commission came up with nearly a trillion dollars in cuts, and nobody blinked an eye,” says Wheeler.

Well, almost nobody. A coalition of hawkish think tanks—led by the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation and the Foreign Policy Initiative, a neocolonial outfit led by William Kristol of The Weekly Standard—lambasted the Simpson-Bowles report as a mortal threat. The coalition, Defending Defense, has trotted out claims about China’s military power, the threat of radical Islam and the need to maintain US hegemony worldwide in its effort to rally support for the military establishment. They’re alarmed at the sudden erosion of support for the Pentagon in the Republican Party—not only among libertarian, often isolationist Tea Party types but among traditional Republicans, too.

According to Capitol Hill lobbyists and think-tank military analysts, a contingent of Republican stalwarts—including Senators Tom Coburn and Mike Crapo, both of whom served on the Simpson-Bowles panel, along with two senators from Georgia, Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson—are open to arguments about hefty military cuts. And GOP Senator Jeff Sessions, an ultraconservative who serves on the Budget Committee, cited what he calls the debt “crisis” to suggest that it’s time to hack away at Pentagon outlays. “I’m saying the message is clear that we need to do some things now, and the Defense Department can’t be absolved from those challenges,” he said in early March. On the outside, a passel of conservative activists, including Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform and David Keene of the American Conservative Union, co-wrote a letter urging Congress not to exempt the Pentagon when looking to save money [see Dreyfuss, “GOP Fires at the Pentagon,” February 14].

Despite their bravado, Kristol et al. may realize that, increasingly, defending defense is a hopeless task. The Pentagon budget has grown so apocalyptically that an emerging coalition of deficit hawks, liberals who back an expanded social safety net and stimulus spending for job-creating projects, antiwar activists and traditional conservatives who revere the neoconservative über-hawks ought to be able to force reductions.

According to figures Wheeler compiled for The Pentagon Labyrinth, the military’s base budget of $549 billion in 2011 is just the starting point for calculating military dollars. Adding in war spending ($159 billion), homeland defense ($44 billion), Veterans Affairs ($122 billion), interest on defense-related debt ($48 billion) and other items pushes the total to more than $1 trillion a year. In constant dollars, adjusted for inflation, the regular military budget, not including the add-ons, has doubled from a low of about $360 billion in 1998 to more than $739 billion in 2011. It’s so much money that, as the Bipartisan Policy report points out, by 2009 US spending on military research and development alone, about $80 billion, surpassed China’s entire military budget by more than $10 billion. The budget for the US Special Forces alone is greater than the total military spending of nearly 100 countries; overall, the United States spends about as much on defense as the rest of the world combined.

Proposals to cut the military always start with personnel. Although many assume that the Pentagon spends most of its money on wars and war matériel, from jet fighters to aircraft carriers, the biggest chunk of the budget is for administration, overhead, salaries and benefits, which make up about 42 percent. So bringing down costs can’t be done without massive cuts in the number of troops. The Bipartisan Policy Center calls for a reduction of 275,000, including 92,000 in the Army and Marines added during the buildup, 80,000 from deployments in Europe and Asia and 100,000 more from noncombat, infra-

When asked to choose between reducing military spending and shredding the social safety net, the public chooses cutting the Pentagon.

According to estimates from the Frank/Paul task force, over the next decade the United States could save $347 billion by reducing its military presence in Europe and Asia by one-third ($80 billion), rolling back the amount of ground forces ($147 billion), reforming the military pay structure, reforming Tricare (the generous healthcare program for military retirees) and reducing money for recruiting ($120 billion). Another $217 billion could be saved between 2011 and 2020 by reducing the Navy fleet from 286 ships to 230 ($127 billion), retiring two aircraft carriers and two naval air wings ($50 billion), reducing procurement of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and retiring two Air Force tactical fighter wings ($40 billion). Another $22 billion could be saved by canceling or delaying purchases of the MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft and the KC-X aerial refueling tanker.

Broadly speaking, public opinion no longer favors military spending. Support for the war in Afghanistan, which absorbs $10 billion a month, has dropped off a cliff, with two-thirds of Americans saying the war is no longer worth fighting. Other polling shows that when asked to choose between cuts in Pentagon spending and undermining the social safety net, the public chooses cutting the Pentagon. A March poll revealed that 51 percent favor reductions in military spending versus just 28 percent who would cut Medicare and Medicaid and 18 percent who’d cut Social Security. And those numbers ignore the fact that for the most part, as Wheeler argues, the public is blissfully unaware of how enormous the Pentagon budget is. He cites other poll-
If Democrats want to rally military industry workers in support of Pentagon cuts, they’d do well to propose defense conversion plans.

Propose defense conversion plans, says Miriam Pemberton of the Institute for Policy Studies, who co-wrote a report last year called “The Green Dividend.” In it, she suggests steering Defense Department money into green technology, especially in the energy field. In the 1990s, Pemberton points out, more than 2.5 million jobs were lost as the military was downsized after the cold war, but the vast bulk of the savings was channeled into deficit reduction, not reinvestment.

The last time military spending dropped significantly was during that period, from 1989 through 1998. According to the Bipartisan Policy report, “national defense spending fell 28 percent in constant dollars, the active force shrank by more than 700,000, the force structure was consolidated, the defense civilian workforce dropped by over 300,000, and procurement budgets fell in excess of 50 percent.”

Could such a reduction happen now? William Hartung, director of the Arms and Security Initiative at the New America Foundation and the author of a book about Lockheed Martin, Prophecies of War, says there’s no reason the Iron Triangle can’t be defeated now, just as it was in the 1990s. “The military-industrial complex is not all-powerful,” he says. “There’s a sense that they always get what they want. But they don’t win every battle.”

Hartung points out that although the Obama administration hasn’t yet cut deeply into the Pentagon’s wallet, it has already cut, canceled or delayed a number of expensive, unneeded or redundant weapons systems like the F-22 fighter and the Marine Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, along with the alternate engine for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. “It’s kind of a salvage operation, trying to hold off real cuts,” says Hartung, who believes pressure to cut military spending will begin to be felt in the fall.

If a reduction does happen, it won’t come all at once. “Defense is like a big aircraft carrier, and you can’t turn it around right away,” says Lawrence Korb, a military analyst at the liberal Center for American Progress, himself a former Pentagon official. Korb says few if any cuts will come before the 2015 budget cycle. The fight will have to start right away, but it will take a while. “If you start now, you can take out $100 billion a year by 2015. That’s realistic.” Charles Knight, co-director of the Project on Defense Alternatives, which has produced its own detailed plan for restraining spending, agrees. “Defense budgets rarely get cut in presidential election years, and I don’t expect much in 2012 or 2013,” he says. Beyond that, however, he anticipates reductions. According to Knight, even within the armed services there’s a creeping awareness that the gravy train is slowing down, and they’re coming to realize that counterinsurgency wars like the ones in Iraq and Afghanistan are far too costly to wage in the future. “There’s a growing sense in the military that if we continue to fight these kinds of wars, there won’t be money available for what they want in terms of hardware,” he says. “So I think the military is going to be ready to bargain on reducing their end strength in order to preserve modernization. There are lots of people in the military who are very critical of the counterinsurgency doctrine.”

So far there have been rumblings in Congress about cutting the military, but little to show for it. During the long-running effort by House Republicans to force big cuts in so-called “nondefense discretionary spending”—that one-sixth of the budget that doesn’t include the military, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid or interest on the debt—there were scattered votes to cut the military, too. All but one failed. The one that passed, canceling production of an alternate engine for the F-35, was something of an exception. “In that case, the president, the defense secretary and the secretary of the Air Force were against it, and you had two companies, General Electric and Pratt & Whitney, fighting over it, so you could cancel out the corporate lobbying,” says Peace Action’s Martin.

Still, in analyzing the series of votes to cut bits and pieces of the Pentagon’s cash in February and March, Martin says it is apparent that there is a healthy contingent of three dozen GOP House members and up to 120 Democrats who are consistently voting against the military. Although it’s too early to say if it’s a trend, and though the total from both parties in the House is far short of the 218 needed to enact legislation, it is a signal that for the first time since the late 1990s there’s potential on Capitol Hill for real pushback against the Pentagon. “The votes so far show a change in direction,” says Laura Peterson, senior policy analyst for Taxpayers for Common Sense. “We’re going around, talking to members, meeting with staffers. I will optimistically predict that more and more people will come out later this year when these appropriations bills start being taken up.”

Indeed, as the uprising in Wisconsin showed, it’s possible that over the next few months the political dynamic will shift unpredictably against the military in the debate over the 2012
appropriations, especially if there’s resistance by Democrats to a GOP campaign to force massive budget cuts.

As the legislative calendar moves forward, there will be chances to lay down markers. The first is the overall budget resolution, which could contain language challenging Gates’s request for $671 billion, perhaps even proposing a five-year freeze in military spending at 2010, or even 2008, levels. The second will be enactment of a law increasing the debt ceiling, which might include significant reductions in military outlays.

David Berteau, a senior adviser at the conservative Center for Strategic and International Studies who served at the Pentagon under four defense secretaries, suggested at a recent forum on Capitol Hill that because Congress will have to raise the debt ceiling by $3 trillion by 2012, members of Congress might do it in four stages, every six months, and that in each one they could require $50 billion in military cuts, spread out over five or ten years. Chopping it up into small increments like that would be a lot easier than doing it all at once, he said. “At DoD, $50 billion isn’t even real money.”

Even if cuts are made, Congress is unlikely to propose a sweeping new approach to the Pentagon’s mission. Unlike, say, the plans put forward by the Frank/Paul task force and the Cato Institute, which ask why we need such a large military budget, Congress is apt to tackle it piecemeal. “Conceptualizing on Capitol Hill is an oxymoron. There is nobody on Capitol Hill doing that,” says Adams. “That’s why [cuts] will be incremental, salami-sliced. They’ll be hunting around for targets of opportunity, looking to stretch out this or that weapons system.”

Adams compares it to trench warfare. “Each year is a trench, and slowly the secretary and the armed services back up, back up, back up, and each year they take a little less.” The first skirmishes were in 2009, and they’ve gathered momentum ever since, he says, even though they haven’t translated yet into tangible reductions. Referring to the string of failed amendments to reduce outlays during the votes on “continuing resolutions” to avert a government shutdown in March, Adams says, “The thing that’s interesting in 2011 isn’t that slew of amendments on defense but that House Republicans’ first instinct was to support a continuing resolution freezing spending at 2010 levels.”

It’s unfortunate that Congressional Democrats (aside from Frank’s task force) have shied away from rethinking defense. Failure to do so could leave the party stuck in the deficit-reduction box, in which cuts in Pentagon spending will have to be matched or exceeded by cuts in nonmilitary programs, including education, the environment, healthcare and entitlements. A comprehensive approach by Democratic leaders could mobilize the public’s unhappiness with military spending.

Naturally, it’s foolish to underestimate the power of the Iron Triangle. To make sure the thirteen Republican freshmen on the House Armed Services Committee didn’t get any ideas about wielding Tea Party budget axes against the Pentagon, the committee’s chair, Buck McKeon, organized a lucrative fundraiser for what he called the “Lucky 13,” inviting them to meet check-bearing lobbyists from a range of military contractors.

And even programs like Tricare are proving exceedingly difficult to rein in. For several years, Secretary Gates has been try-
ing to raise premiums for it. Tricare absorbs about one-tenth of all Pentagon spending, and its costs have skyrocketed, from $19 billion ten years ago to $53 billion today. Despite repeated efforts, however, Gates has failed. John Spratt, a retired Democrat who represented South Carolina’s 5th Congressional District from 1983 through 2010, tells the story of a town hall meeting back home. “In the back of the room, an old veteran stands up,” recalled Spratt. “And he says, ‘Congressman, have you ever crawled through the sands of North Africa and used a piece of piano wire to strangle a kraut?’ And I said, ‘No.’ And he said, ‘Well, I have. And no one better get between me and my healthcare benefits.’”

Somewhere, possibly at a plant in South Carolina, the military-industrial complex is producing lots of piano wire.

Letters

(continued from page 2)

Medgar Evers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Mickey Schwerner and George Raymond, to name a few. I owe it to them to return to Mississippi for this reunion. I owe it to many whose names your readers will recognize who continued the struggle— Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine, Victoria Gray, Amzie Moore, C.C. Bryant, the Rev. Clinton Collier, C.O. Chinn, the Castles of New Orleans, again to name a few.

More than that, I owe it to all those people and their children and grandchildren in Mississippi, Alabama and New Orleans who provided support and protection to those who continued the work in Mississippi through the 1964 Freedom Summer and continue the work to this day. I owe it to these people to go back to Mississippi to say to their families, Thank you. I need to let them and the world know that there would not have been a successful Freedom Ride or a successful Freedom Summer without their support and sacrifice. I also want to stand with them and say to the world that the fight is not over. We fought it yesterday, we are fighting it today and we will fight it tomorrow. Failing to support the fiftieth anniversary reunion of Freedom Riders in Mississippi and giving the local people their place in history would most certainly be “Selling History Short in Mississippi”!

Dave Dennis
(See ms50thfreedomridersreunion.org)

A Friend to Public Sector Workers

Las Vegas

Jane McAlevey’s “Labor’s Last Stand” [March 7/14] misrepresents my actions as former Clark County [Nevada] manager and my sentiments toward public sector unions. Specifically, she states that in 2003, I “aligned with the Chamber of Commerce and the Nevada Taxpayers Union” to blast “public workers for earning more than their private sector counterparts. With a Democrat as the messenger, liberals were confused.” Here are the facts:

I never endorsed any report by the Chamber or the Taxpayers Union, and I never “blasted” public employees for making more than the private sector or questioned their collective-bargaining rights. Rather, my position was that by refusing to compromise on wages and benefits when Clark County’s population and service needs were increasing sharply, union leaders jeopardized the county’s ability to fulfill its core mandate: delivering essential services.

In 2003 our employees were receiving pay increases double the rate of inflation and far ahead of growth in the CPI, making them among the highest paid in the nation, though we ranked at the bottom in number of public employees per capita. We were falling below acceptable levels for critical services. Since labor made up most of our spending, and we lacked authority to raise revenues, payroll reductions were unavoidable. But the unions’ unwillingness to make any concessions led to service cutbacks and, ultimately, to layoffs.

I believe the majority of unionized public sector employees understand the need to compromise. Their leaders, unfortunately, are often less practical even when revenues are down, debt is up and demand for services is unrelenting. This hardened tack puts their own membership and vulnerable populations at risk and has cost the unions the broad public support they used to enjoy. Rather than dig in their heels, I would suggest—as I have for years—that they learn to be more flexible.

Thom Reilly

McAlevey Replies

New York City

Thom Reilly’s “facts” don’t add up. When I arrived in Nevada in early 2004, the Democratic county manager was almost daily attacking the wages of the workers. In the many news articles from that time in which Reilly is quoted blasting public employeewages for being out of line with those of the private sector, he never chose to distance himself from the attacks officially launched by the Chamber of Commerce, the Nevada Taxpayers Union or the bruising Review Journal cartoons that ridiculed the Clark County workers.

In the April 5, 2005, issue of In Business Las Vegas, Reilly states, “There isn’t any justification for government workers getting higher cost-of-living increases than what everyone else gets out there.” In the May 12, 2004, coverage of the county executive making his case to gut workers’ wages and benefits, the reporter states, “Reilly and Finance Director George Stevens returned to well-traveled ground while describing the long-term financial situation of the county to the commission. The pair have argued that the growth in rank-and-file salaries has exceeded the wage growth in the private sector and inflation, and has undermined the ability to create new positions to serve the rapidly growing county population.”

Reilly’s letter to the editor underscores many of the points I make in my article about the attack on government workers. Far from jeopardizing the county’s “ability to deliver essential services,” as Reilly claims, the government workers in Nevada in fact offered up many ideas of ways to alter the revenue stream and dedicated hundreds of thousands of dollars to defend against potentially devastating cuts to needed government services. Perhaps most insidious, Reilly raises the false choice of “needed services versus workers.” The problem with Reilly’s narrative, then and now, is that liberals have accepted this antiworker logic rather than outright rejecting the idea that we have only two choices: either destroy some of the few remaining decent middle-class jobs left in America—especially for African-Americans and women, who hold a disproportionately high number of government jobs—or defend needed services. It’s a choice invented by corporate America and its neoliberal allies, who seek to distract us from the many real choices we have as a nation—starting with taxing the rich and corporations.

Jane McAlevey
**Books & the Arts.**

**Possible Humans**

by **LORNA SCOTT FOX**

Juan José Saer died in 2005, at the age of 67, in Paris—where better, for an Argentine intellectual? The author of twelve novels and four volumes of stories, as well as several books of critical essays and a poetry collection mischievously called *The Art of Narrative*, Saer was hailed by his friend and compatriot Ricardo Piglia as “one of the best writers of today in any language.” An obituary in the *Independent* defined him as “the most important Argentine writer since Borges,” making Saer’s virtual absence from the literary radar, even within Latin America, remarkable. It’s hard to uncover anything about his life. Personally modest and contemptuous of consumer culture (and hence of the Latin American “boom,” which he considered stereotyped and market-driven, as banal as Philip Roth or Martin Amis), Saer was content to remain an “ayatollah of literature,” as one friend called him, with a reputation for high seriousness and long sentences.

But while some of those sentences are long enough to rival Proust’s, they are infused with a palpitating sensuality, their breathing equally crafted. A cerebral explorer of the problems of narrative in the wake of Joyce and Woolf, of Borges, Rulfo and Arlt, Saer is also a stunning poet of place. From Faulkner he took, along with nested streams of consciousness, the device of placing his fictions in one intimately known region, and turning it into a mythic space. Saer’s Yoknapatawpha is the Paraná River and its multiple lagoons, tributaries and meanders skinned around the city of Santa Fé in the midst of the pampas.

He was born near there in 1937, the son of Syrian immigrants (a committed European, he doesn’t seem to have taken much interest in the Middle Eastern side of his heritage). He studied and taught in Santa Fé, and also lived for some years east of what he calls “the city,” in rural Colastiné, amid the islands of the waterways of the same name, the location of his most unforgettable landscapes. Or, rather, unforgotten, because Saer began to write in earnest only after moving to Paris in 1968, following the accession of the military dictator Juan Carlos Onganía and his attack on Argentina’s universities.

Here’s how the exiled author describes a storm approaching the little house on the beach, modeled on his own, where *Nobody Nothing Never* (1980) is set:

His movements are slow, regular, exterior in the darkened air, his entire silhouette outlined by a glittering gray nimbus against the lowering, smoke-colored sky. A flash of lightning blanches, for a fraction of a second, the dark air. From somewhere, two birds, chasing each other with irregular darts and thrusts, always at the same distance as though they were the fixed parts of an unmodifiable set and being made to shift places by a single mechanism, cross the sky before Tilty’s eyes, which follow their trajectory as they vanish in the trees that bend down over the lateral wall of the white house, disappearing amid the leaves.

This passage contains several hallmarks of Saer’s style: a measured pace, an obsession with light, the observation of observers, a stifled romanticism behind the detailing of a cosmic mechanics, and the search for estrangement rather than recognition or identification.

*El limonero real*, published in 1974, was the first work of Saer’s to attract attention in Argentina. *Nobody Nothing Never* is his fifth novel. (An English translation was published in 1993 by Serpent’s Tail, which has also brought out translations of *The Witness*, from 1983; *The Event*, from 1988; and *The Investigation*, from 1994.) *Nobody Nothing Never* plunges us into the spellbound, sun-drenched lethargy of a weekend in the mid-1970s at a beach house, where Cat Garay is joined by his married lover, Elisa. Horses are being mysteriously killed in the area, prompting a friend, Tilty, to hide his precious beast in their yard. While the violence of Argentina’s “dirty war” is shown at the end to have been concealed in the symbol of the horse, the stuff of the text is a mesmerizing experience of broken-down, repeated, rewound perception. It reflects the influence on Saer of the French *nouveau roman* and cinematic techniques of zoom and slow motion. Having taught film studies in Santa Fé...
Fé, Saer admitted in 2002 that he’d lost interest in that form since the “postmodern regression” and the decline of the auteur (in France he taught literature). As a kind of valediction in Nobody Nothing Never, cinema’s analysis of visual phenomena is saluted and then surpassed by language’s ability to select and refine what is seen. Two movements dominate. One is the minute decomposition of time and space: “Their voices, whose tone has been almost confessional, except for that of the man in the straw hat, which is slightly higher in pitch than that of the others, linger as if echoing in the air, less as voices than as sounds to which the heavy, sultry air offers an excessive resistance”; the other movement is repetition, at different

Cortázar’s title Around the Day in Eighty Worlds would be a neat summary of Saer’s method.

speeds or from different angles, not to suggest subjective relativism, in the manner of Kurosawa’s film Rashomon, but rather an ecstatic response to the inexhaustible possibilities of reality and the infinite ways to communicate it.

Yet that richness might just be a trick of description. Each new approach to a single scene or gesture regales us with a new per

ception of it, and yet difference is always threatened with collapse into sameness. Sex embodies this tension throughout Saer’s œuvre. “Folds and folds, and then other folds, and still more folds. And so on, ad

infinum. ‘You’ll see now what’s going to happen,’ I said to her again…. But nothing, again: the same moans, the same mutual convulsion, without getting anywhere.” The slightly fated Borgesian circularity, running on the spot and dreams within dreams, begins to feel positively plastic, or elastic: the expansion-compression of consciousness and time as the novel’s antinarrative stamps the same ground over and over like the hoofs of the anxious horse. At the end something changes, thankfully, with the murder of a police chief. Yet the achievement of this work, next to the sensuousness, is its creation of an all-engulfing present.

Nobody Nothing Never contains an elaborate example of another insistent vision: the fragility of systems such as form, language or meaning, which are nightmarishly apt to dissolve into chaos at any second. A beach at-
The “historical” novels stand doubly apart because, though set in the familiar ambience of the Litoral region, they lack the other consistent feature of Saer’s novels and stories, which is the recurrence of characters—a device also used by Piglia—to create depth and resonance while highlighting artificiality. There’s Cat Garay and his twin brother, Pigeon, who like the author moved to Paris; there’s Tomatis, the witty, jaundiced journo; Elisa and her painter husband, Héctor; Botón, the bigmouth, and Washington Noriega, the sagacious mentor (an older ex-leftie turned academic, writing a treatise on the very Colastiné Indians invented in *The Witness*), among assorted pals and hangers-on. In contrast to the prose-poetry of minutely charted sensation, Saer’s dialogue records scraps of banter in colloquial santafesino rhythms. This is the world of *The Sixty-Five Years of Washington* (1985), henceforth *Sixty-Five*. (The title does no favors to Steve Dolph’s translation, which is full of elegant, resourceful solutions to a most difficult text yet splotched by basic errors. Why not simply “Washington’s Sixty-Fifth,” as the phrase refers to a birthday?)

Each Saer novel fascinates with its unique machinery: *Sixty-Five* is wholly discursive. Someone must be speaking the text, because he keeps saying things like “as yours truly was saying, no?” But because this nameless someone knows what everyone thinks and remembers as well as says, he must be a personified omniscient narrator—that is, conventional third-person narrative dressed up as a literal “voice.” Within this oral frame people are said to speak, or to report the words of others, or to claim to report what others claimed that yet others said or did, in a maddening feedback of echoes and distortions proposed as realism. The Spanish title is *Glosa*, meaning commentary, or variation on a theme: every utterance is provisional, a gloss on a gloss. As in Plato’s *Symposium*, events reach us fourth- or fifth-hand—but here it’s through layers of misapprehension, wishful thinking, false memory or bad faith. There is no lofty absolute Being, only Becoming.

It’s 1960, or ’61, “what's the difference”? Ángel Leto, a scruffy young intellectual in a stew about his parents, decides to skip work and runs into an acquaintance, a re-splendent rationalist just back from Europe known as the Mathematician. Uneasy with each other, they somehow stick together for a walk of more than a dozen blocks. As they inch along this grid—a hymn to Argentina’s ruled streets and beveled intersections—the cats can see ghosts.

**Cats Can**

You’re feeling silly, but someone said that cats can see ghosts.

So you go to the door with a saucer of milk, and just then the ghost wakes up from a deep sleep and bleeds a little into the sink.

Or not the sink, but a bed, or rather a head now held up by a bed. Or whatever. It doesn’t matter.

Choosing your words carefully makes no difference to a cat or a ghost.

Look at your backyard. Does the grass care what the frost heave thinks? Contour is all,

even when hidden.
The loose overburden covering a buried cavity is delicately balanced. When runoff-storage ponds seep into the folds of the brain, the additional weight can trigger a collapse called a sinkhole, where ghosts bleed into the cracks. Cats can see it.
text billows out in clouds and fractals of consciousness. The intermittent conversation concerns Washington’s sixty-fifth birthday party, which neither man attended, but the Mathematician had heard all about it from Botón on a ferry and shares the juicy details with Leto. Since both agree on Botón’s stupidity, one suspects that the Mathematician is largely making it up, but again, what’s the difference? For Leto,

Washington’s birthday, the mosquitoes, Noca’s horse, the table set under the imaginary pavilion, at once persistent and inconstant, clicking along in a unique, complex order, now make up a carousel of memories more intense, significant, but nevertheless more enigmatic, you could say, than many others which, originating in his own experience, ought to be stronger and more immediately present in his memory.

The spiraling sentences and overabundance of ideas—punctured by the flippant tone—make this novel a tough read. Twice it leaps forward seventeen years, and both times the prose becomes transparent and the reader can breathe, as though surfacing from deep water. But only in retrospect did I realize how funny and touching Sixty-Five really is. Saer, of all people, would understand if I stick to the poignant bits that stand out in my memory.

Condemned to operate in a fog of conjecture, Leto and the Mathematician are constantly misreading each other’s body language, or angsting over how some remark might have been taken. They are typical of the insecure males in Saer’s fiction, who live in terror of losing face. Early in Sixty-Five, the Mathematician—outwardly a confident upper-class achiever—recalls what he has tried to pack away under the label “The Incident” (though even now, years later, the emotions and feelings of humiliation and rage form several black-bordered, jagged holes” inside his head). A big-shot poet from Buenos Aires was in town; the Mathematician had been corresponding with him over a matter of versification, and he tried to pack away under the label “The Mathematician’s gaze pauses anxiously on the thin spaces between the bumpers”—again the terrifying multiplicities surrounded by thin spaces—“and then turns toward his own pants. His pants, Leto thinks, following each phase of the Mathematician’s desolation, The risk of staining his pants.” Pretending kindly not to have noticed (of course, the other is mortified by knowing that he did), Leto steers him through the threat and out the other side. Then he indulges in some well-earned class resentment: “They would give humanity everything, just not their pants…. They’re gentle as lambs except when their pants are in danger. They are not to be trusted, even when they’ve given up everything and claim that they’ve kept only their pants.”

The final pages, told in a clipped future tense, impart what will happen to each character after General Videla takes over in 1976. It’s a jolt to anyone who’s read Nobody Nothing Never to learn that Cat and Elisa will be “disappeared” without a trace, what must be days after that novel ended on an optimistic note. The handsome, déclassé Mathematician falls in love with an ugly guerillas, going underground and becoming ever more dulled and drained until he is cornered by soldiers and can bite the suicide pill that has become his reason for living. A dispiriting snapshot of the resistance, perhaps, but Saer never let his leftist distort his commitment to philosophical doubt.

The future section includes a sighting of Tomatis in the swamps of depression, presumably induced by the political situation. It’s a relief to find him jaunty again in The Investigation, published in 1994 but set in the mid-1980s, after the democratic restoration. The structure interlaces Paris and Santa Fé, winter and summer, a whodunit and a whowroteit: neither mystery will, of course, be solved. Saer too is back in top form here, building intellectual labyrinths with splendidly carnal language. The novel opens in Paris, where the honest-loner cop, Morvan, is searching for a sadistic killer of old ladies. Evidence mounts that he might himself be the author of the crimes. All the conventions of detective fiction are rolled out, and we accept them unthinkingly—until it turns out, much later, that it’s Pigeon, down from France on a visit, who is preposterously relating all this as a true story to Tomatis over a beer. Beyond the game with oral and literary conventions, The Investigation dramatizes the epistemological questions posed in Sixty-Five. Says who? How do they know? Does it matter?

In parallel, an unattributed “dactylogram,” or typescript, has been found among the late Washington’s papers, and his disciples would like to remove the material—literally, an unstructured chunk of fiction—for forensic and literary analysis. Pigeon is already sure it’s not by Washington, though after the trap of the detective story, we could believe anything. This text, In the Greek Tents, is alleged to tackle the question of veracity from the perspective of one soldier who’s been bogged down outside Troy for years, set against that of another, fresh from Sparta, who knows much more about every detail of the siege. Presence, Saer reminds us again, is no guarantee of truth.

It isn’t even a guarantee of experience, as Pigeon discovers when this passionately anticipated trip home leaves him unmoved. In a bleak and beautiful passage, the exile “is at last an adult,” who understands that it is not in one’s native land that one has been born, but in a larger, more neutral place, neither friend nor enemy, unknown, which no one could call his own and which does not give rise to affection but, rather, to strangeness, a home that is not spatial or geographical, or even verbal, but rather, and insofar as those words can continue to mean something, physical, chemical, biological, cosmic, and of which the invisible and the visible, from one’s fingertips to the starry universe, or what can ultimately be known about the invisible and the visible, form a part, and that that whole which includes even the very limits of the inconceivable, is not in reality his homeland but his prison, itself abandoned and locked from the outside—the boundless darkness that wanders, at once glacial and igneous, beyond the reach not only of the senses, but also of emotion, of nostalgia and of thought.

Though The Investigation may be about elusive authorship, this passage could only have been written by Juan José Saer.
SHelf LiFe

by BARRY SCHWABSKY

“IF YOU TRY TO DERIVE A STRICTLY
literary ancestry for New York poetry,” James
Schuyler once wrote, “the main connection
gets missed.” The connection he had in
mind was the inspiration taken from art—in
particular, painting. It’s what made the poets
of the New York School, as Frank O’Hara
thought, “non-academic and indeed non-
literary.” The secret and not-so-secret
sharing between poets and painters has
always been intense, but rarely in
such a lively way as in Manhattan in
the 1950s and ’60s. Painters & Poets,
by Douglas Crase and Jenni Quilter
($40), is the catalog for an exhibition
the Tibor de Nagy Gallery recently
mounted as a sixtieth-anniversary
celebration of itself. It’s well-known
that Tibor de Nagy (named after the
Hungarian émigré banker who co-
founded the gallery with John Ber-
ard Myers) fostered the poets of the
New York School, publishing their
first chapbooks and fomenting their
 collaborations with artists.

The catalog is more than a stroll
down memory lane. Crase’s con-
tribution is called “A Hidden History
of the Avant-Garde,” and his re-
search has brought to light consid-
erable new information on the early
days of the gallery. But what’s curious
is how little this avant-garde—David
Lehman once claimed it was the
last one—behaved like an avant-garde, at
least according to the way the avant-garde
has been theorized by Renato Poggioli or
Peter Bürger. There is no evident political
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TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY, NEW YORK

to ‘make it new’ was old enough to distrust
treat as a fetishism.” Their own sense
of the new, and of the politics of daily life,
gradually parted company with that of the
mainstream of the art world. What made
the New York School avant-garde, and
what distinguishes its way of embodying
the avant-garde idea from others before
and since, remains an unsolved mystery.

One clue: Crase points out that Ashbery
drew from Freilicher a lesson in the aes-
thetics of the “tentative.” To understand
this art and poetry, we may have to come
to terms with the paradoxical possibility
of a radical modesty, perhaps akin to what
Ashbery, in his poem “Soonest Mended,”
called “a kind of fence-sitting/Raised to the
level of an esthetic ideal.”

WILLIAM CORBETT IS NOT AND
never has been a New York poet.
Boston is his territory. But he might
be thought of as a first cousin, if only
because he has edited Schuyler’s let-
ters. And Corbett, too, has a “main
connection” to art. Some of his art
writings were gathered in his 2001
collection All Prose. More recently,
through his imprint Pressed Wafer,
he released Albert York ($17.50), a
small monograph on the reclusive
painter who died in 2009, “known
for the little we know about him” but
something of a cult figure among artists,
especially but not only those of a broadly
traditional bent. York’s subjects are con-
ventional—trees, flowers, birds and such,
although the sometimes exotic or inexplic-
ably allegorical figures he places in some
of his landscapes embody a more evident
eccentricity—and his manner of painting
seemingly straightforward, yet one feels in
his paintings a reserve as profound as his
work’s aura. I suspect no one ever will.
The Three Faces of Steve

by DAVID SCHIFF

*Finishing the Hat*, the first of two long-awaited volumes of Stephen Sondheim’s lyrics, wit and wisdom, reminds me of another exacting exercise in self-re-evaluation: the New York Edition of the fiction of Henry James. In the eighteen prefaces he wrote for the twenty-four-volume set, James revealed the sparks that found ready kindling in his imagination, and shared his many struggles to coax them into stories and novels. James could detect a spark in something as fleeting as casual conversation: “A mere floating particle in the stream of talk.” Because the Broadway musical is a collaborative effort, many of Sondheim’s shows have been set alight by other people’s sparks; but regarding *Pacific Overtures* (1976), for one, Sondheim shares a truly Jamesian moment of inspiration. He recalls coming upon a Japanese screen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: “It was like a sudden explosion; it seemed to grow as I looked at it.” The screen, Sondheim suggests, was not just a piece of japonaiserie; rather, it was an aesthetic commandment to honor the principle of “less is more,” not as an abstract idea but as an emotional imperative.

Spanning the first three decades of Sondheim’s career, and revealing more of his creative process than James’s prefaces did of his own, *Finishing the Hat* includes rejects, rewrites and substitutes of lyrics from thirteen shows that together illuminate the dark, devious road leading to Broadway hits and flops. Like James, Sondheim transformed a popular genre often aimed at the young into the pre-eminent lyricists”) and Noël Coward (“the Master of Blather”).

Since winning the 1994 Tony for best original score for *Merrily We Roll Along*, critics—champions of Sondheim as well as skeptics—have often oversimplified the shows on the assumption that Sondheim is a perniciously clever kid rather than a stern ethicist. John Lahr, for one, described him as peddling “boulevard nihilism” in *Sweeney Todd*. It’s not hard to find a character in the shows who sees the world through the eyes of Holden Caulfield—life sucks, everyone’s a phony, we die alone—but that view is part of the story, not an op-ed published under Sondheim’s byline. One could just as easily accuse Sondheim of dabbling in “boulevard idealism” in *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), which tracks the relation of innocence and experience in reverse chronology, ending with a bright-eyed affirmation of youthful idealism as corny as Kansas in August.

With an initial run of just sixteen performances, *Merrily* ranks among Sondheim’s most humiliating flops, even though it boasts fewer than three of the greatest “showbiz” numbers of all time (“It’s a Hit!” “Franklin Shepard, Inc.” and “Opening Doors”) and one classic ballad (“Not a Day Goes By”). Unfortunately, but perhaps understandably, *Finishing the Hat* does not shed much light on the show’s failure other than to say that its faults were remedied by casting older actors and the several rounds of rewriting suggested by Sondheim’s current collaborator, James Lapine. Sondheim explains that the show, like several of its predecessors, re-enacted the moral fable of *Allegro*, the notorious flop by Sondheim’s mentor Oscar Hammerstein (the 17-year-old Sondheim served as Hammerstein’s assistant on the show). In *Allegro*, a precursor of the “concept musical,” a doctor repeatedly attempts to escape the moral compromises of bourgeois existence, and eventually succeeds. *Merrily*, based on a 1934 play by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, tells the story backward, beginning in 1981 and ending in 1957, and spotlights not a doctor but a songwriter and movie producer, Franklin Shepard, whose moral compromises, never redeemed, leave a trail of broken marriages and soured friendships. The theme of art versus life would return in Sondheim’s work with *Sunday in the Park With George*, but there, at least, the audience has the assurance of knowing that the George of the first act is the painter Georges Seurat, whose *La Grande Jatte* attained masterpiece status, thereby, or so many critics assumed, justifying the artist’s thorny life.

Art isn’t easy, as Sondheim wrote, especially art based on a highly self-conscious aesthetic; and over the years Sondheim has taken on projects whose difficulties would terrify most composer/lyricists, let alone their financial backers. A Japanese musical (*Pacific Over-
Sondheim, again like James, has always written strong, complicated female characters, from Momma Rose of Gypsy to Fosca of Passion. His songs have inspired great performers: Ethel Merman, Angela Lansbury, Elaine Stritch, Barbara Cook, Bernadette Peters and Donna Murphy. Although many critics have linked the emphasis on the feminine in James’s and Sondheim’s work to homosexuality, a subject James could never explicitly address, and that Sondheim avoided depicting onstage until late in his career (in Bounce, from 2003), it could also be viewed as a reaction to the rise of feminism, a movement James portrayed with a mixture of admiration and satire in The Bostonians. As in James, most men in Sondheim are running scared from women, and yet they are still in charge. Robert, the unmarried protagonist of Company, seems understandably perplexed by the opportunities and traps that surround him. The final song, “Being Alive,” offers him the same advice that James put in the mouth of Lambert Strether, the unmarried protagonist of The Ambassadors: “Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to.”

If art isn’t easy in a feminist age, love is hell. The relationship between the sexes festers like an open wound in many of Sondheim’s shows, and sometimes even his defenders have chosen to ignore the pain. Frank Rich’s rave review in the New York Times of Sunday in the Park With George, which surely helped earn Sondheim a Pulitzer, described only one facet of the show—the George part. Rich termed it “a contemplative modernist musical,” as if it were a Robert Wilson play. The show celebrated Seurat’s “methodical intellectual precision,” which, Rich wrote, Sondheim happened to share. (Sondheim often takes critics to task for identifying him with his characters, but to no avail.) Minimalist cool had moseyed uptown, from SoHo to Times Square, and Rich’s review congratulated all concerned for their impeccable good taste.

The central action of the show, Sondheim realized, took place within Shepard’s mind, and exploring it demanded empathy, not irony. No wonder the show was hard to write, and harder to stage. Rescuing it from disaster required a ruthless reappraisal of the original, a new script, new characters, new songs and no distracting anthem, however pretty. Most of all, it required a sharper definition of the lead characters and their motivations: aren’t both Charley and Mary, the two creative partners Frank betrays on his way to the top, in love with him? I’m not convinced that every problem was solved, or is solvable, but I find the revised version (which can be heard on an imported Jay/TER CD) a far richer backstage drama, dramatically and musically, than even A Chorus Line. Sometimes ambition trumps perfection.
he finishes the painting, which the world will posthumously call a masterpiece, and she leaves for America carrying his child. Although the second act offers an anodyne, it’s-all-good resolution with the song “Children and Art,” the show offers more questions than answers.

Sondheim’s first romantic period piece, *A Little Night Music* (1973), set in Sweden at the turn of the twentieth century, may have seemed an anomaly when it appeared on the heels of *Company* and *Follies*, but it augured the emergence of Sondheim’s romantic side, a noir version but romantic nevertheless. In his prefaces James called attention to the interplay of romanticism and reality in his fiction, noting that romanticism, manifesting in the fairy-tale plots of some of his novels, opens the door to “disconnected and uncontrolled experience—uncontrolled by our general sense of ‘the way things happen.’” Despite critics’ preoccupation with the influence of *Allegro* on Sondheim, romanticism is his true inheritance from Hammerstein, who got his start working as a lyricist for operettas like *The Desert Song* and *Rose-Marie*. Beginning with *Show Boat*, Hammerstein achieved a synthesis of musical comedy and operetta that lifted the musical into a symbolic realm of representation. The Indian Territory in *Oklahoma!*, and Down East Maine in *Carousel* are less realistic settings than imaginary locales, geographically distant but emotionally magnified, where Hammerstein could explore contemporary political and psychological issues more powerfully than he did in the apparently realistic setting of *Allegro*.

Sondheim’s musicals can mostly be divided into two categories: modern-dress musical comedies (*Company*, *Follies*, *Merrily We Roll Along*) and exotic neo-operettas (*A Little Night Music*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Into the Woods*, *Passion*). While *Company* established Sondheim as a savvy portraitist of contemporary life, I think operetta, turned inside out and upside down, to be sure, is his true calling. There’s no better proof than a quartet of shows that may become the Sondheim “Ring”: *Sweeney Todd, Sunday in the Park With George, Into the Woods* and *Passion*. Even realistic shows like *Company* and *Follies* feature songs—“Getting Married Today,” “The Ladies Who Lunch,” “I’m Still Here”—that are romantic in the Jamesian sense, not love songs but moments of such detailed interiority that each one could be a one-act play. Sondheim credits this type of song to Rodgers and Hammerstein, but he has so enhanced the art of the story-song that many of his have taken on a second life as cabaret standards.

With *Sweeney Todd* Sondheim transcended the conflicting claims of realism and romanticism by placing the entire action within an unreal framework created through staging, writing style and, most important, continuous music that does not interrupt the action but is the action. Sondheim turned the Victorian device of a returning choral ballad into a rhythmic engine that churns throughout the show, powering Sweeney’s unrelenting thirst for revenge. I hope the second volume of *Finishing the Hat* will illuminate how Sondheim and Lapine further extended this technique in *Sunday in the Park With George* and *Into the Woods*. In these shows the romantic realm of song breaks free of its usual boundaries. *Into the Woods* jump-cuts between the multiple plotlines and chops their respective songs into recurring fragments, creating a show that feels at once fast-paced and monumental. Although I don’t think Sondheim’s shows are—or need to be—operas, anyone writing opera would benefit from studying the speed with which these shows delineate character and plot. Even the most successful recent operas, such as John Adams’s *Nixon in China*, feel clunky by comparison.

For all its revelations, *Finishing the Hat* leaves many questions unanswered. Sondheim talks a lot about lyrics, less about music, even though he has said he enjoys composing more than writing. Fortunately Mark Eden Horowitz, senior music specialist at the Library of Congress, which houses Sondheim’s papers, knows the music cold, and in the interviews collected in *Sondheim on Music* he serves Sondheim as a gracious yet provocative inquisitor, often asking questions about tiny notations in his sketches. Sondheim’s answers reveal much about his working process. Horowitz treats us to Sondheim the composer, who strikes a different figure from the cocky, combative lyricist. Sondheim is as self-conscious about his compositional technique as he is about his lyrical craft, and he clearly learned much from his studies with Milton Babbitt about generating music out of short motifs containing just a few notes, like the subject of a Bach fugue. But there’s also an ad hoc feeling to Sondheim’s musical affinities that comes as a surprise.

Regarding *Pacific Overtures*, for instance, Sondheim talks about the influence of John Cage and the early Broadway composer Jerome Kern, whose hits included “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” and “The Way You Look Tonight.”

Maybe the second volume of *Finishing the Hat* will say more about Sondheim the author, a question as tricky in the collaborative world of musical theater as it is in the movies (though not, of course, in fiction). Writing about Sondheim is marred by the tendency to blame the collaborators for a show’s every plot misstep or false note, as if Sondheim had phoned in the songs or enjoyed a godlike immunity from criticism; conversely, writers treat every detail of a show as clues about Sondheim’s childhood, love life and politics, as though he had written, produced and directed every note of music, every scrap of lyric and every line of dialogue. Volume one slyly encourages this approach, taking its title from a song in *Sunday in the Park With George* that celebrates the intense, internal process of artistic creation, which binds the artist to his subject and alienates him from other people. As a credo the song is a cross between Rilke’s “The Panther” and Frank Sinatra’s “My Way.” It is well suited to *Sunday’s* George, who paints in splendid isolation even when other people are in his atelier, but it distorts the creative process of the Broadway musical. It takes a team to put the hat on the stage.

Sondheim started out working with co-creators like Leonard Bernstein and Jerome Robbins, who were his elders and, at the time,
A Parade of Arrogance

by GEORGE SCIALABBA

In 1937, as part of its assault on China, the Japanese Imperial Army began bombing Chinese cities. The world erupted in protest, led by the United States. In September of that year, the State Department declared that “any general bombing of an extensive area wherein there resides a large population engaged in peaceful pursuits is unwarranted and contrary to principles of law and humanity.” The next month, in his well-known “Quarantine Speech,” Franklin Roosevelt also condemned the Japanese assault, charging that “civilians, including vast numbers of women and children, are being ruthlessly murdered with bombs from the air.” In June of the following year, referring to both the Japanese in China and the Germans in Spain, the State Department denounced the “inhuman bombing of civilian populations.”

When war broke out in Europe in September 1939, Roosevelt immediately dispatched an impassioned public letter to the belligerents, calling on them to refrain from “inhuman barbarism” of this kind. “The ruthless bombing from the air of civilians in unfortified centers of population…during the past few years, which has resulted in the maiming and in the death of thousands of defenseless men, women, and children, has sickened the hearts of every civilized man and woman, and has profoundly shaken the conscience of humanity.” Britain soon joined the protest. In 1939, after the Germans bombed Warsaw, the Foreign Office denounced “these inhuman methods” and promised never to indulge in them: “His Majesty’s Government have made it clear that it is no part of their policy to bomb nonmilitary objectives, no matter what the policy of the German Government may be.” Even Churchill claimed to agree, calling the bombing of cities “a new and odious form of attack.” Roosevelt returned to the subject in 1940, recalling with pride that “the United States consistently has taken the lead in urging that this inhuman practice be prohibited.”

These eloquent words and earnest promises counted for very little. As John Dower observes in War Without Mercy (1986), his magnificent study of World War II in the Pacific, by 1942 the Royal Air Force and U.S. Army Air Forces became the apostles of strategic bombing and proceeded to perfect the techniques of massive urban destruction with incendiary bombs.… British and American planners had, in fact, secretly agreed on the desirability of bombing enemy cities many months before Pearl Harbor, and in the summer of 1942 the Royal Air Force began to repay Germany…for the bombings [of London and Coventry] by destroying Hamburg with the newest weapon in the airborne arsenal: incendiaries that created uncontrollable fire storms. From an early date, British leaders supported dense “area” bombing in Germany to destroy civilian morale…and after Pearl Harbor Churchill frequently turned his gift for the vivid image to anticipation of grinding the Japanese to powder, razing their cities, or laying their urban areas in ashes.… [Even] before Pearl Harbor, General George C. Marshall, the chief of staff, instructed his aides to develop contingency plans for “general incendiary attacks to burn up the wood and paper structures of the densely populated Japanese cities.”

Dower writes, “Following the Quebec Conference of August 1943, the British minister of information reported that the Allies intended to ‘bomb, burn, and ruthlessly destroy’ both Germany and Japan, and subsequent developments proved him to be a forthright and accurate spokesman.” The toll of British and American “strategic” bombing, as this form of warfare was antiseptically called, was indeed gruesome. A half-million German civilians were killed and 7.5 million rendered homeless. At least 400,000 Japanese civilians were killed (including the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki), and sixty-six Japanese cities were destroyed. Most of this bombing was not strictly necessary—it occurred after the military tide had turned and an Allied victory was no longer in doubt. Nor was there any pretense, at least internally, that the primary targets of the bombing were military—soldiers, matériel or weapons factories. The acknowledged purpose was to hasten the end of the war by “breaking the morale” of the civilian population. The word for this strategy is “terror.”

Naturally, officials disliked that word. When the Associated Press reported that the Allies had decided “to adopt deliberate terror bombing of German population centers as a ruthless expedient to hasten Hitler’s doom,” British officials objected and the report was suppressed. Churchill sent a memo to his generals asking whether the “bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed”—not for humanitarian reasons, of course, but because “we shall not, for instance, be able to get housing materials out of Germany for our own needs.” He meekly proposed “more precise concentration upon military objectives…rather than on mere acts of terror and wanton destruction, however impressive.” The generals were annoyed by the prime minister’s momentary lapse into candor, however secret, so he obligingly withdrew his memo. (If a forerunner of WikiLeaks had published this memo, might we have been spared a great deal of misplaced reverence for Churchill, as well as a great deal of Western self-righteousness about “terrorism”?)

Why did Allied decision-makers disregard their frequently and (for the most part) sincerely professed beliefs about terror bombing? And why, sixty years after Japan launched its disastrous war of choice against the United States with a surprise attack, did the United States respond to another surprise attack by launching its own disas—

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tuous war of choice in Iraq? As a historian of the Pacific War and the postwar occupation (his book about the latter, *Embracing Defeat*, from 1999, won the Pulitzer and Bancroft prizes and the National Book Award) and a citizen appalled by the Iraq War, Dower could not help thinking comparatively about the two episodes. The result is *Cultures of War*, an extraordinarily rich and insightful study of “some of the broader dynamics and morbidities of our times and our modern and contemporary wars.”

Perhaps the most salient feature of the culture of war is chauvinism, or irrational belief in the superiority of one’s own group. *War Without Mercy* is a stark, graphically illustrated, often stomach-turning record of American and Japanese race hatred during World War II. Apparently something was learned from that ugly history, and Muslim-hatred in the United States after 9/11 was far more muted—none of the swagger about “killing Japs” or the cartoon portraits of Japanese as apes or insects that polluted American newspapers and magazines after Pearl Harbor. But Dower finds correspondences nonetheless. The savage air assault on Japanese cities and the catastrophic UN (essentially US) sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s would not, Dower suggests, have been perpetrated against whites.

Race prejudice had more subtle effects as well. The United States had a great deal of evidence that the Japanese were planning to open hostilities with a surprise attack, and many indications pointed to Pearl Harbor. Postwar Congressional inquiries unearthed the usual interdepartmental turf battles and unwillingness to share information. But there was something else. Despite a clear warning from Washington ten days before Pearl Harbor that an attack somewhere in the Pacific was imminent, virtually the entire US fleet was left in port, riding peacefully at anchor. Pressed afterward about this, the commanding admiral admitted, “All right…I’ll give you your answer—I never thought those little yellow sons of bitches could pull off such an attack, so far from Japan.”

What Dower calls “the ‘little yellow men’ mindset” operated in the months leading up to 9/11 as well. Despite nearly forty warnings that an attack by Al Qaeda somewhere in the United States was being planned, policymakers could not believe, according to the CIA’s chief bin Laden watcher, that “a polyglot bunch of Arabs wearing robes, sporting scraggly beards, and squatting around campfires in Afghan deserts and mountains could pose a mortal threat to the United States.” Dower says comparatively little about the

Vietnam War, but it too would seem to exemplify “the ‘little yellow men’ mindset,” with the accompanying “psychological unpreparedness, prejudices and preconceptions, gross underestimation of intentions and capabilities,” as well as horrendous violence against nonwhite populations, of a kind that one cannot imagine being loosed on people more like us.

Three generations; three humiliating and costly miscalculations; three waves of mass death inflicted in retribution on non-Western civilians, including—perhaps even mostly—women and children. There is evidently something distinctive about the American culture of war. The inability to imagine the sufferings of others is not a uniquely American failing, however; and anyway, there was another dynamic at work in these cases. Dower calls it “the irresistible logic of mass destruction.” In a riveting analysis of the decision to drop the atomic bomb, he shows how, whether militarily necessary or not (the official justification—that fanatical Japanese resistance would have forced an even more costly invasion—is widely contested), use of the bomb was bureaucratically inevitable. The arguments against—simple decency and setting an example of restraint for the postwar world—hardly outweighed the powerful incentives in favor, a number of which Dower catalogs as follows:

1. The sheer exhilaration and aestheticism of unrestrained violence, phenomena not peculiar to modern times but peculiarly compelling in an age of spectacular destructiveness;
2. The pressure to conform, the drive toward unity of purpose and belief. In emergencies, all governments suppress dissent among their citizens and all bureaucracies discourage independent thinking among their members. This tendency toward groupthink is a leitmotif of *Cultures of War*. Japan’s decision to make war on the richer, more populous United States appears, in retrospect, to have been suicidal. But once the decision was made, the emperor and the se-
nior militarists relentlessly promoted an almost mystical cult of national unity. In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, the factious doctrine of the “unitary executive” was employed to cloak what was essentially, according to Secretary of State Powell’s chief of staff, “a cabal between the vice president of the United States, Richard Cheney, and the secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld.” The unconvinced were marginalized (like Powell) or forced out like Army chief Eric Shinseki.

The Japanese military could not, or at any rate did not, think realistically about the prospect of protracted war with the more powerful United States. The Cheney-Rumsfeld “cabal” did not, and perhaps could not, think realistically about the aftermath of defeating Saddam. With a dazzling show of historical incomprehension, they invoked the democratization of Japan under the post–World War II occupation as a precedent for “liberated” Iraq, while at the same time emphatically disavowing the “nation-building” methods used in the earlier occupation. As Dower shows in a detailed comparison of the two episodes, the occupation of Iraq was a disaster not merely because, as nearly everyone outside the cabal recognized, Iraq was a much less integrated society than Japan but also because the complex interagency coordination during the former occupation was hardly possible for an administration that distrusted government agencies in principle and outsourced basic functions to unaccountable private contractors.

On the last page of *Cultures of War*, having brought before us a long, disheartening parade of arrogance, prejudice and misjudgment, and vividly portrayed their lethal consequences for millions of innocent people over the past eighty years or so, Dower quotes a sentence that sounds like an epitaph for this sorry history: “The system filters out the thoughtful and replaces them with the faithful.” In fact, that judgment, though it exactly fits the cultures of war Dower has analyzed so painstakingly, was uttered in and about a different culture. Unexpectedly, Dower devotes the last few pages of his book to the culture of the financial system that collapsed late in the previous decade, and the quoted sentence comes from an anonymous financial analyst explaining in *The Economist* what made that catastrophe inevitable.

It is a fine narrative stroke: not only to show in a few pages how the two apparently unrelated calamities that have brought this seemingly invincible superpower low were produced by the same dysfunction but also to have found a sentence that describes that dysfunction perfectly: “The system filters out the thoughtful and replaces them with the faithful. It has to: in war and business, whenever conflict and competition are fierce, dissent is costly and inefficient.

And this, finally, allows for a tragic perspective on what had seemed only a moral and intellectual disgrace. For it is the nature of a “system” to isolate and disable challenges to its fundamental assumptions. When the machine is racing furiously, doubts are just so much sand in the gears. Faith and thought; fervor and detachment; loyalty and criticism; united hearts and independent minds: can any system accommodate both? And yet, wars must be won; and wars, like all other vast undertakings, require vast systems to carry them out.

It is, Dower concludes stoically, “highly uncertain” whether this paradox can be resolved, whether humankind can ever “truly control and transcend” its “deeper psychological and institutional pathologies.” The truth will make us free, Jesus said. But what if, as Jack Nicholson’s character informed the rest of us at the end of *A Few Good Men*, we can’t handle the truth?
Puzzle No. 1625

FRANK W. LEWIS

ACROSS

1, 6 and 13 General position before April of a piece written for the paper. (10,4,5)
10 Lead, but not quietly, and it might cause you some pain. (7)
11 They used to do it to babies with an awkward walk, after a point. (7)
12 One of the things the sun does assigns some value about returning help. (8)
13 See 1 across
15 Stone-throwing attack? (5)
17 Sounded contented with the boy about to be pointedly encouraged. (7,2)
19 Exemplary elocution implied, by way of explanation. (2,2,5)
21 A timely break in the circuit’s direction. (5)
23 Where in Latin you have large numbers about to describe the shape of things. (5)
24 Cheerfully encourage brew or softer beverage. (4,4)
27 There’s a small measure employed in getting charged. (7)
28 One isn’t likely to be fighting on home territory. (7)
29 School of reflected importance. (4)
30 Unplugged’s an unusual way to describe such a cozy position! (8,2)

DOWN

1 and 14 Each goes so, to describe a far from fruitful pursuit. (4,5,5)
2 Uncle looks for gold, perhaps—typical of eastern craft. (7)
3 Those from old Mesopotamia? (5)
4 Valid and invalid state of discernment. (4,5)
5 Nothing on its present condition should be so welcome to some travelers. (5)
7 Asked for, or just told? (7)
8 Work of 24 down must be exercising the mind. (3,7)
9 Something soothing spoken of a royal castle? (8)
14 See 1 down
16 Try a fixed number of bottles—it might establish a precedent. (4,4)
18 Witless, as they used to say? (9)
20 An early navigator coming up with a small company to deal with what they brought back from America. (7)
22 Argued in 16, possibly. (7)
24 What they put to slow down the reaction of one responsible for 8. (5)
25 Cube velocity, to show such a slope. (5)
26 Support essential to older planes. (4)

From the March 27, 1976, issue. Be sure to vote in our contest to pick the new Nation puzzlemeister! (thenation.com/article/159126/five-vie-puzzlers-mantle)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 1624

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BACKWARDSUNID
LIKEETAEI
INSERTPROTESTS
COOBETTT
PROFILESEVOKE
ESASON
INSETCARESSED
PTXRKTRITT
SUREASENIMBLE
WANGMSGAN
ICINGILLCHOSEN
CNTTUTSI
HITTHEHIGHLIGHTS

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