

potential successors. First and foremost among them are his nephews. The term 'nepotism' comes from the Italian *nepote* —'nephew.' Mr. Chalabi has nephews galore." Nor is Chalabi overlooking the private sector. As *Newsweek* reported, "Today his extensive network of cousins and nephews runs almost every major bank."

In the Middle East, the popularity of cousin marriage turbocharges the nepotistic urge to shove relatives into government jobs, since nephews are often also sons-in-laws. Last year, Ann Marlowe visited Baghdad and reported:

I was fascinated with an article that claimed as many as half of Iraqi marriages were between first or second cousins, and that this made democracy difficult. On my first day there, I'd gone to see Ahmed Chalabi to see if he would discuss it for an interview. 'By fostering intense family loyalties and strong nepotistic urges, inbreeding makes the development of civil society more difficult,' Steve Sailer wrote in *The American Conservative*. 'The clannishness, corruption, and coups frequently observed in countries such as Iraq appear to be tied into the high rates of inbreeding.'

Marlowe continued: "When I asked Ahmed his view of this theory, he snorted: 'The Jews have had cousin marriages galore, and it hasn't hurt them.'" I would argue that I have had the last laugh in this debate, except that the Chalabi family appears to be crying all the way to the bank.

Iraq's new prime minister-designate, Iyad Allawi, is the cousin of the defense minister Ali Allawi, who is Chalabi's nephew. Whether Iyad and Ahmed will be clannish colleagues or relative rivals is impossible for me to predict, but clearly the regime we are creating will

be rife with dynastic intrigues.

American intellectuals have a terrible time understanding the political significance of crime families like the Chalabis because they pay so little attention to their own extended families. In parts of the world less blessed by honest administration of justice, however, maintaining close bonds to distant relatives offers the surest security and advancement.

Paradoxically, the neoconservatives should be able to grasp the importance of clan connections better than other Western elites since they are increasingly linked to each other by marriage and blood. Longtime *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz, for instance, is the father of columnist John Pod-

horetz, the father-in-law of Elliot Abrams (President Bush's senior adviser on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), and the grandfather of four young Israelis. Further, the key neocon institutions of the *Weekly Standard* and the American Enterprise Institute are connected by the Kristols, father and son. Lynne Cheney, a senior fellow at AEI, is the wife of Vice President Dick Cheney, who in turn chose AEI fellows for war-making roles in the administration.

As the neocons meld into one big happy family, their new solidarity makes them brutally effective at bureaucratic infighting but also disinclines them to debunk harshly each other's delusions. Thus, they dragged all of us into Chalabi's charade. ■

Untalented Tenth

Texas' affirmative-action substitute flunks out.

By Robert Stacy McCain

THREE WEEKS BEFORE the 2000 presidential election, University of Texas President Larry R. Faulkner offered newspaper editors an op-ed column titled, "The 'Top 10 Percent Law' Is Working for Texas."

Faulkner sang the praises of the 1997 law, which guaranteed that Texas students who graduated in the top 10 percent of their high-school classes would be admitted to the state university of their choice, a supposed alternative to explicit racial preferences in admissions.

The law "enabled us to diversify enrollment at UT Austin with talented students who succeed," Faulkner wrote. Under its provisions, "minority students earned higher grade point averages last

year ... and have higher retention rates. ... So, the law is helping us to create a more representative student body and enroll students who perform well academically."

Faulkner's column implied that, unlike explicitly race-based affirmative-action programs, the Texas plan achieved these wonders without discrimination. After all, Faulkner pointed out, "more than half the spaces in the freshman class remain available to non-top-10-percent graduates. Furthermore, because the freshman class has increased in size to more than 7,600, there are about as many spaces for non-top 10 percent graduates as in past years."

After years of legal and political battles over affirmative action, a reader

might conclude that Texas had found the perfect solution. That Faulkner made these declarations just before a presidential election in which Texas Gov. George W. Bush was a candidate—well, only a cynic would find this suspicious.

But like much else that Americans were told about the Texas education miracle during the 2000 campaign, praise for the state's top 10-percent plan has proven too good to be true. Both Faulkner and Bush's successor, Republican Gov. Rick Perry, said as much last month.

"We're admitting far too high a fraction of the freshman class on the basis of one criterion," Faulkner told the *Austin-American Statesman*. "And that's not healthy for Texas or this university."

The governor was equally critical. "I clearly think it is a problem," Perry told the paper, explaining that "highly qualified" students were "leaving the state ... because they can't get into the University of Texas. ... I really don't see how it has worked the way people projected it would work. And I think, across the board, Texans see it as a problem." Why, just four years after such effusive praise, have Faulkner and Perry turned against the 10-percent plan?

It is important to remember that the plan was passed a year after the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals struck down Texas's previous university affirmative-action programs in the 1996 *Hopwood* case. With the usual systems of racial preferences outlawed, the top 10-percent scheme was an improvisation by the Texas legislature. But last year, the Supreme Court upheld the University of Michigan Law School's affirmative-action program, with Justice Sandra Day O'Connor explicitly recognizing "a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body." Texas officials apparently see that as a green light to

return to explicit racial preferences. "The recent Supreme Court ruling has freed universities to use race as a factor in admissions," said Robert Black, a spokesman for the governor. As a result, he said, the top 10-percent plan may be "obsolete."

University of Texas officials certainly hope so. A university task force on "enrollment strategy" recommended last month that "race and ethnicity be among the criteria considered in the holistic review of applicants for admission to the university." Chairwoman Isabella Cunningham declared, "it is essential that the university be a diverse and united community to foster the social growth of all its members."

Another reason the top 10-percent plan is on the chopping block is that it has been, perhaps, too successful in promoting "diversity." The freshman class

Looking at the numbers, it's easy to see that the phenomenal success of Asian students under the top 10-percent plan has created a political volcano. Unlike blacks and Hispanics, who constitute a near-majority of Democratic voters in Texas, Asians are not a powerful political constituency. While whites sink to record lows of enrollment at UT—no doubt spurring resentment among those of Perry's Republican constituents whose kids are denied admission—there are also fewer entrance slots for the blacks and Hispanics who were supposed to win under the plan.

Of course, nobody in Texas is saying any of that—at least not plainly—though Gov. Perry's spokesman says that after visiting classrooms in West Texas the governor was dismayed to learn that many promising Hispanic students were planning to attend college

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that entered UT last fall was the most diverse ever. For the first time, whites constituted less than 60 percent of UT freshmen. (About 52 percent of Texans are non-Hispanic whites.) Meanwhile, Asians—less than 3 percent of the Texas population—constituted some 18 percent. But the preference pie can only be sliced so many ways. More than 40 percent of Texans are either black (11 percent) or Hispanic (32 percent), but they comprise a combined 21 percent of UT freshmen.

"We have a lot of minority students who are unable to get into our top-tier universities because of the top 10-percent rule," said the governor's spokesman. "That was an unintended consequence."

out of state after failing to qualify under the top 10-percent rule. "Certainly everybody thought [the top 10-percent plan] was a good idea, but we didn't foresee what was going to happen," the spokesman said. Asked why those West Texas Hispanic students don't enroll in second-tier state schools like Prairie View A&M and Sam Houston State, Black changes the subject. And he evades questions about why "diversity" is so vital in higher education.

Those who don't know much about affirmative action tend to assume that it involves relatively minor preferences in favor of black and Hispanic applicants. In fact, when calculated by comparing test scores and grade-point averages, such preferences are overwhelming. At

leading public universities with competitive admissions processes the quest for “diversity” generally results in the admission of black and Hispanic freshmen with SAT scores about 200 points lower than their white and Asian peers.

Because the admissions advantage accorded to black and Hispanic students is preposterously large, universities do all in their power to keep the public in the dark. (In 1991, a white student was prosecuted by Georgetown Law School for revealing data about the huge gap between the qualifications of the university’s white and black students.) Although state universities are funded by taxpayers—and private universities, by accepting federal tuition aid, are beneficiaries of taxpayer largesse—quantitative information on affirmative-action programs is carefully concealed. It is only through lawsuits challenging racial preferences that such data are usually disclosed.

It was the *Hopwood* case that brought to light the extent of racial preferences in Texas. Cheryl Hopwood, a white student, had been denied admission to UT Law. Her lawsuit revealed that the law school’s admissions process was essentially two separate—and extremely unequal—processes. Applications were divided so that one admissions committee evaluated whites and “non-preferred minorities” (Asians), while another screened “preferred minority” (black and Hispanic) applicants. Each applicant was given a Texas Index (TI) score to reflect a weighted combination of his undergraduate GPA and his LSAT score. Based on TI scores, applications were divided into three categories: “presumptive admit” amounted to a more or less automatic admission; “presumptive deny” was an almost certain rejection; and a “discretionary zone” of applications with intermediate scores, which were then evaluated on factors beyond GPA or LSAT scores. The “presumptive

admit” minimum for whites and Asians was 199; for blacks and Hispanics, it was 189. Furthermore, the “discretionary zone” for blacks and Hispanics was nearly twice as large so that their “presumptive deny” score was 179, while it was 192 for whites and Asians.

As a result, a white or Asian student with a TI score of 191 was automatically denied admission, while a black or Hispanic with a 189 TI was automatically granted admission. Furthermore, the difference in the discretionary zone meant that “preferred minorities” could in some circumstances be admitted with a TI as low as 179, while no white or Asian applicant was considered for admission with a score that low.

This blatantly discriminatory practice was struck down, and in its place Texas implemented the 10-percent plan. Now that plan is failing—exposing as a joke yet another aspect of the “education miracle” that in 2000 Republicans said made Bush “a reformer with results.”

Last year, the *Washington Post* reported that Houston’s public education system, praised as the best urban school district in the country and key to landing superintendent Rod Paige his current job as Secretary of Education, was in fact a Potempkin village. Under Paige, Houston schools reported significant decreases in their dropout rates and increases in standardized test scores, while the “achievement gap” between white and minority students shrank dramatically.

One Houston high school’s reported dropout rate fell from 14.4 percent to 0.3 percent but a city school board member called that claim “baloney.” Another school reported zero dropouts until a local TV station located a teenager who was supposedly enrolled full-time but was actually working at Wendy’s. It was discovered that someone had fudged school paperwork to make 30 dropouts disappear from district records.

As for the supposed improvement in achievement scores, it appears that Houston educators arranged for poor-performing students to avoid taking the tests. Since the high-school tests were administered to 10th-graders, many students were held back in 9th grade an extra year or two, then skipped up to 11th grade. In one Houston high school in 2001, there were 1,160 9th-graders and 281 10th-graders. One former student told the *Post* that she spent three years in 9th grade before being skipped to 11th grade. A former Houston school official explained, “The secret of doing well in the 10th-grade tests is not to let the problem kids get to the 10th grade.”

This is more than a local scandal because the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act—the \$23-billion-a-year education bill Bush pushed through Congress in 2002—is in large part modeled on the policies implemented in Texas while he was governor. “We improved our schools dramatically, for children of every accent, of every background,” he proclaimed at the 2000 Republican convention.

But the Texas “miracle” was an illusion and the federal legislation it inspired is unlikely to have any magical effect nationally. Already there are political rumbles against NCLB. The administration has granted waivers on some of the law’s provisions. Governors and legislators are complaining that NCLB amounts to a massive unfunded mandate. And, as columnist Robert Novak recently reported, Republican congressional candidates are facing heat from grassroots conservatives who hate NCLB.

In time, Bush’s national education policy is doomed to end up like his Texas “miracle”—discredited and discarded. ■

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Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Napoleon Dynamite* and *Maria Full of Grace*]

Of Mormons and Mules

By Steve Sailer

NOT EVERY MOVIE this summer will be a blockbuster sequel boasting computer wizardry and butt-kicking babes in bustiers. Perhaps the most promising small film on the horizon is August's "Bright Young Things," Stephen Fry's adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*. In the meantime, two quite different low-budget movies about intriguing teenagers, "Napoleon Dynamite" and "Maria Full of Grace," will debut.

"Napoleon Dynamite," a \$400,000 comedy that was snatched up at the Sundance Festival for \$3 million by Fox Searchlight, is the first feature written by two Brigham Young University graduates, 24-year-old director Jared Hess and his pregnant wife Jerusha. The director says, "The characters are inspired largely by people I grew up with in Idaho, especially by my five younger brothers."

At the screening I attended, Hollywood's Bright Young Mormons were out in force as the theatre resounded with the lovely laughter of wholesome-looking starlets from the Great Basin. The twenty-something crowd found the small-town misadventures and eventual triumph of an ornery high-school geek (voted "Most Likely to Find Sasquatch")

a cartoonish but redolent delight. This mild, PG-rated film is now rolling out to 1,200 theatres.

Personally, I didn't find the movie terribly funny, and it made me feel downright wizened to realize that I'm too over-the-hill to get the jokes that are slaying all the Mormon hipsters.

Also, I was embarrassed by how much our el dorko hero—as played by a tall BYU student named Jon Heder with a blondish afro, thick glasses, perpetually peeved expression, and a brown polyester three-piece suit—looked like me, circa 1977. The production designer, another BYU grad, described the mish-mash "retro-ugly" aesthetic of Preston, Idaho's inhabitants like this: "We had this sense of people who lived in a world where all the styles that got left behind were just piled up on top of one another."

One of the less remarked demographic trends is that the makers of "Napoleon Dynamite" represent the future. As coastal sophisticates fail to reproduce themselves, an ever-increasing percentage of young white people come from conservative, religious backgrounds. Mormon Utah has by far the highest birthrate, of course, but in the 2000 election, the 19 states with the highest white fertility all voted for Bush, while nine of the ten states at the bottom of the white birthrate list voted for Gore.

"Napoleon Dynamite" consists mostly of disjointed skits, and doesn't develop a plot until halfway through when Napoleon decides to help his only friend, a Mexican immigrant, defeat the snooty blonde beauty for class president. In contrast, "Maria Full of Grace," the story of a 17-year-old Colombian girl who transports 62 golf-ball-sized drug pellets to New York in her digestive track, is nothing but a freight train of a plot.

Coming in July, the R-rated "Maria" is, oddly enough, a Spanish-language film written and directed by a young American named Joshua Marston, whose father had grown up in Colombia. Marston is devoted to cinematic realism, so he researched the lives of drug mules intimately. His key question became why some Colombians become criminals while others don't.

The director ran into an analogous conundrum on the national scale when the endemic violence in Colombia grew so threatening that he had to shift his production at the last minute to neighboring Ecuador. Why has Colombia long been notorious for people chopping each other up with chainsaws, "Scarface"-style, while Ecuador clings to respectability?

Pretty young Maria is employed de-thorning rose stems in Colombia's honest export industry. It's boring work—although there are plenty of other jobs that smell worse. But it's not good enough for Maria. Nor is her boring boyfriend's dutiful offer of marriage when she announces she's pregnant. Maria then wonders if she can trick an expensively-dressed young man with a fast motorcycle into thinking the baby is his, only to discover that this recruiter for the cartel merely wants to get into her gastrointestinal tract.

Marston's unsentimental approach works well, until the "happy ending," when Maria decides to stay here as an illegal alien. Her fatherless baby will be born a U.S. citizen, making her alarmingly hard to deport. The movie assumes that she's escaping the turmoil in her native land, but we Americans can be forgiven for worrying whether this single teen mother with a taste for trouble isn't just bringing some of it with her. ■