

Perhaps it's just as well. The way things are going, by the time the Christmas season actually does begin—on Dec. 25—most of us are sick to death of it and ready to move on. Besides, we need time to prepare spiritually for New Year's and Valentine's Day.

Some pious, dour Christians have started a countermovement, attempting to revive the original significance of Advent as a season of penance and prayer. Noting that in the early church people fasted three times a week throughout this season and treated it as a little Lent, these people refuse to throw holiday dinners before Dec. 24, skip office parties, and hold off on shopping and decorating their homes. They pile the kids into the minivan full of pro-life bumper stickers and take them to weekly Confession as a condition for attending those mid-December "holiday" festivities. They light their Advent wreaths in a darkened house.

This suits us curmudgeons just fine: we usually forget to decorate until it's too late—when trees just happen to be half-price. We've always gone shopping on Christmas Eve, usually in one stop at Barnes & Noble, which stays open till midnight and gift-wraps for free. We don't attend office parties either—the combination of free liquor, forced good cheer, randy co-workers, and thinly suppressed office politics make such events a great occasion for getting in a foolish fling or a fist-fight, then fired.

By insisting pedantically on the true meaning of Advent, you acquire a righteous excuse for skipping all this blather and playing Scrooge right up through Dec. 24—after which you can enjoy the holiday season all alone. Open a bottle of wine and unwrap those presents you bought yourself. A blessed Santa-claustide to one and all. ■

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### **Leading Syrian businessmen fear that impending UN sanctions will be followed by American military pressure on Damascus.**

The ultimate result will be the fall of Bashar Assad and a complete breakdown in authority. Sources in Damascus report that prominent Syrians have been surreptitiously transferring billions of dollars to Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the Gulf region, much of it moving in suitcases full of cash. The move reflects fears among knowledgeable Syrians that Assad's Ba'ath regime could collapse following the combined shocks of UN Resolution 1636 and the implementation of threatened U.S. air and special-forces attacks along the border. The UN resolution, calling for full Syrian co-operation with the UN team investigating the murder of Rafiq Hariri, could serve as a pretext for further action by the Pentagon. Rami Makhoul, a first cousin of Syrian President Assad and considered one of the richest men in Syria, is reportedly transferring his assets to the Gulf. Makhoul controls the country's mobile-phone network, SyriaTel, and he is the son of Adnan Makhoul, the former commander of the Syrian Republican Guard. The transfer of Syrian capital by such prominent figures who are closely linked to the government reflects two key judgments: first, that Assad will not survive international and U.S. pressure and, second, that a successor regime will not be a stable political and economic environment.



### **French sources report that terrorists aligned with al-Qaeda have procured SA-18 shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles from the former Soviet Union,**

suggesting a possible major escalation in attacks on U.S. aircraft in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Chechen mafia was the source for the missiles, which were smuggled into Turkey and then transported to terrorist cells in the Middle East. The French believe the al-Qaeda cells obtained the missiles for attacks against French airliners, but neither the report nor the targeting has been confirmed by other intelligence services. Last year the French were able to dismantle an Algerian-led terrorist cell plotting to use missiles to destroy passenger jets at Strasbourg's airport. The information on the Strasbourg missile plot came from Adnan Sadiq, an al-Qaeda associate who is currently imprisoned in Amman, Jordan. French investigators interrogated Sadiq, who said that the missiles were acquired from Georgia and transported to France. The missiles have not been recovered.



### **Argentine authorities have finally completed an 11-year inquiry into the 1994 suicide bombing of the Buenos Aires Jewish community center that killed 85.**

Both the investigation and inquiry were marked by incompetence, and the result may be more convenient than accurate. Hezbollah member Ibrahim Hussein Berro, 21 years old at the time of the attack and a native of Lebanon, has been credited with the bombing, which has long been blamed on Iran. The identification came through testimony of three eyewitnesses who provided varying accounts of what they saw, unsupported by scientific evidence. The intact head of the bomber was reportedly dumped into a garbage bin and no forensic information was gathered when the bomb site was cleared by the police.

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# Diminishing Returns

The standard GOP playbook no longer guarantees election-night victory.

By W. James Antle III

DEPENDING ON your partisan leanings, the 2005 elections were either a harbinger of a re-emerging Democratic majority or a mere blip on the political radar screen. Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean boasted that the New Jersey and Virginia gubernatorial elections “sent a powerful message that when Democrats stand up for what we believe in, we win.” Fred Barnes argued in *The Weekly Standard* that “there was no change, no earthquake. ... Ignore anyone who tells you otherwise.”

Off-year elections are not the most reliable indicator of broader political trends. The 1993 Republican sweep prefigured the historic 1994 elections, but the results in 2001—which looked much like this year’s—failed to predict the GOP’s gains in 2002. “They’re next to useless for predicting what’s going to happen,” says University of Virginia political scientist Larry Sabato.

But these elections do make useful test cases for specific campaign strategies. In Virginia, Republican Jerry Kilgore followed the GOP’s standard red-state playbook: he pounded his Democratic opponent Tim Kaine as a soft-on-crime, tax-raising liberal. Each charge had at least some basis in Kaine’s record. Kilgore lost by six percentage points. Does Virginia show that swing voters are starting to tune out the perennial Republican wedge issues?

Kilgore tried almost all of them. In fact, as his spring 10-point lead slowly evaporated, his campaign turned in increasing desperation to taxes, guns, gay rights, crime, and finally illegal

immigration in an effort to halt Kaine’s momentum. Kilgore’s strategists were sure they could beat Kaine’s education and transportation platform by painting the Democrat as too liberal for Virginia. They were wrong.

Perhaps the most famous example was the Kilgore campaign’s much-denounced death penalty ads. Relatives of murdered Virginians appeared in television spots denouncing Kaine for his opposition to capital punishment. One featured the wife of a slain policeman saying, “When Tim Kaine calls the death penalty murder, I find it offensive.” Another stated, “Tim Kaine says that Adolf Hitler doesn’t qualify for the death penalty.”

This line of attack didn’t seem as implausible at the time as it now appears in retrospect. The death penalty is supported by a strong majority in Virginia. Kaine had in the past called for a moratorium on executions and as a civil-rights lawyer had represented capital murder defendants. Law-and-order Republicans have beaten Democrats with much less.

Instead, even many capital-punishment supporters viewed the ads as a cheap shot. Kaine avoided playing to type in his response. He emphasized that his was a “faith-based opposition” to the death penalty, thus framing a liberal position in conservative religious terms, and that he would enforce the law. That’s a far cry from invoking the ACLU or coldly disputing the deterrent effect of executions in response to a hypothetical question about the murder of his wife.

As the race progressed, this became a familiar pattern. Kilgore would attack his Democratic rival from the right. On paper, Kaine should have been vulnerable. In practice, he was able to downplay his liberalism, play up his connection to popular Gov. Mark Warner, speak to religious voters about his Roman Catholic faith, and change the subject. After a while, Kilgore’s liberal-baiting began to look like an attempt to avoid talking about local issues.

Yet Kilgore had one issue at his disposal that mixed conservative ideological politics with local concerns—taxes. The GOP tax advantage stretches far beyond the red states. Since Michael Dukakis left office in 1991, Massachusetts has not had a single Democratic governor. Republicans represent only 13 percent of Massachusetts’s registered voters but they have elected three governors largely as a check against the Democratic legislature’s ability to raise taxes. No issue has driven as many upwardly mobile middle-class voters into Republican arms.

In 2004, Virginia enacted a record \$1.5 billion tax increase. The Democratic incumbent signed it into law. As lieutenant governor, Kaine supported the increase. As a candidate, he continued to praise the tax hike as a tough decision that balanced the budget and improved the state’s bond ratings. Kilgore opposed raising taxes. It’s hard to imagine an issue better designed both to rally the Republican base and win over swing voters.

Except Kilgore’s message seemed to be a flop where it might have done him