

was in deep mourning over some tragedy.

I tried to liven things up by speaking forcefully about the education crisis and the dependency crisis. No luck. I tried making provocative comments about young Americans. Ditto. About prime time. No response. There's something happening here. What it is ain't exactly clear. Finally, we got up, cooed over a woman executive's baby, and then went away in our separate cars. Beggars in Porsches, BMWs, and battered Acuras.

I met a friend for lunch in Beverly Hills. I was early, so I walked down Beverly Drive. It was only two weeks before Christmas, but the stores were empty. Many were boarded up. The whole town had a hollow look, as if someone somewhere was pumping out all the oxygen and no one, not even the tough, vicious women of Beverly Hills, can catch a breath.

In my wildest nightmares, I could not have imagined how this town would be flattened by the recession. One joke making the rounds is that in Los Angeles houses are like horses: you can buy them, but you can't sell them. Another: L.A. is Homeowner's Motel: buyers check in, but they don't check out.

Even at Morton's, where I had dinner, everyone was whining about the recession. The cheapest entrée is about \$20, a glass of wine is \$7, and people were wolfing it all down and crying at the same time. Kirk Kerkorian was sitting next to us. He looked worried. There were three studio heads around us. They all looked sad. Even here, there wasn't enough oxygen.

A., a TV producer and my host, said his studio wasn't paying its employees promptly. He had enough in the bank for now, but where would his next deal come from? "Surely," he said, "two guys as smart as us can figure out a way to scam this town."

"I don't want to think of a scam," I said. "I want a good night's sleep."

On my way out, a young waiter stopped me. "Maybe there's a way we could collaborate on a script," he said. "I have some great ideas, and we'd be a perfect team. You're at the twilight of your career and I'm just starting mine."

When I got home, I found a package from my agent. It was a script, and the note said I was wanted at Fox the next day to audition for the part of a toy designer who comes up with one of those realistic false piles of vomit, except his has wholesome modern vegetables like avocado in it instead of the usual peas and carrots. As an alternative, I could read for the part of the toy factory foreman who's about to be fired and is pleading for his job. □

PRESSWATCH



The Deep Six

by Terry Eastland

Time to review the bulging files of this presswatcher, and what do I find? Lots of stories that have been underplayed, misplayed, curiously played, or not played at all. The Big Six among them:

The Deficit

In his annual mid-year fiscal review in 1990, budget director Richard G. Darman projected that the deficit for Fiscal Year 1991 would be \$231 billion—the biggest ever, in dollar terms. In October, an administration urged on by the press (and Darman) cut a budget deal that would supposedly reduce the deficit by \$482 billion over five years. Instead, the opposite is occur-

ring: the deficit for FY 1991 came in at \$268.7 billion, and Darman's office projects the deficit for FY 1992 to roll in at \$348.3 billion. That's \$70 billion more than projected when President Bush signed the "deficit reduction" package; watch for a revised (upward) figure soon. The press has duly reported that the budget pact hasn't succeeded on its own terms and given the various explanations, such as the extra costs of public assistance and the S&L bailout.

But there's been no hue and cry in the press, as there was in 1990, over all the awful things the deficit is supposed to do to the economy ("Deficitology," "The Coming Budget Disaster," "Yes to Taxes," opined the *Washington Post* in 1990). Nor has the press paid much attention to the ill effects of the budget pact upon the economy; instead, the focus has often been on how the budget deal has too severely con-

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strained the spending appetite ("The Law That Ate the Future," editorialized the *New York Times*). Nor have reporters fed on Dick Darman (perhaps because they feed from him). John Sununu got front-page news for his travel, but Darman goes unnoticed despite an economic forecasting record unmatched for its sheer magnitude of error.

The word now is that Darman wants to hold another "bipartisan budget summit" in 1993. Assuming Darman—and Bush—are still around, expect the budget again to become a big deal in the press—so long as higher taxes are the likely outcome. But don't expect any follow-up on the damage new taxes will cause the economy.

Reregulation.

The press did a good job covering deregulation, begun during the Carter presidency and continued under Reagan, which by 1988 had cut the amount of annual rule-making by almost 40 percent from 1981 levels. Under Bush, however, the trend has been reversed. Rule-making in the Federal Register reached 67,000 pages in 1991, up from 55,000 in 1988. Darman is also part of the story, having allowed Congress to neutralize his Office of Information and

Regulatory Affairs, which during the Reagan years proved an effective check upon the regulatory tendencies of executive agencies by insisting on a cost-benefit analysis. It was the late Warren Brookes who first spotted the story of reregulation, but not until December 1991, when the *National Journal* made "The Regulatory President" a cover story, did a news organization devote substantial coverage to it. Maybe now the story will reach the daily press. If so, the impact of reregulation ought to lead the press to the unreported story of the zero-growth economy. We've had one for three years now, longer than any period since the Depression.

Acid Rain

In 1980 Congress created the National Acid Precipitation Assessment Program (NAPAP) to determine the truth about acid rain. In the fall of 1990, NAPAP reported its conclusion, namely that acid rain has caused far less damage to the nation's forests and lakes than was previously estimated. Although the NAPAP study involved 700 of the nation's leading scientists and cost \$500 million, its politically untenable findings explain why it got almost no notice in the press, apart from a segment on CBS's "60

Minutes." After all, for more than a decade all kinds of media have told us of the Apocalypse Awaiting: "Scourge from the Skies" (*Reader's Digest*), "Acid from the Skies" (*Time*), and "Rain of Terror" (*Field and Stream*).

In January 1991, reporting on the lack of reporting on the NAPAP study, Howard Kurtz, the *Washington Post's* press writer, asked *Post* environmental writer Michael Weisskopf why the paper had ignored it. A less aggressive understanding of journalism one cannot imagine: "He said many people involved in the acid rain debate told him it had little news value." Also of "little news value," apparently, was the effort by the Environmental Protection Agency to discredit the work of one of the principal contributors to the NAPAP study, a soil scientist named Edward Krug. In January the EPA put out word that Krug is "on the fringes of environmental science and policy making," and that he has "limited scientific credibility even in the limited area of surface water acidification." Not until the spring was the EPA questioned by anyone in the press about its campaign against Krug, whose work effectively calls into question certain provisions of the Clean Air Act. EPA Administrator William Reilly calls that law "the environmental flagship of this administration"; obviously, the flag on the flagship must be saluted.

Global Warming

The National Academy of Sciences issued two reports on this subject last year. The first, in April, said that there is no evidence that global warming is anything but the natural variability of the temperature cycles; that none of the climate models used to predict the greenhouse effect provides a "reliable forecast"; and that, "despite the great uncertainties, greenhouse warming is a potential threat sufficient to justify action now." This report was widely but badly covered, as the press ignored the first two points to emphasize the need for "action now." The second study, in September, observed that the economy could adapt and even benefit from a gradual warming. Big news, you would think, but only the Associated Press, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *New York Times* saw fit to cover it.

Dioxin

For years the chemical compound dioxin was Toxic Enemy No. 1, "the most potent carcinogen ever tested." Its deadly reputation derived from its ability, even in very small doses, to cause cancer in laboratory animals. In 1982, the federal government

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permanently evacuated all 2,240 residents of Times Beach, Missouri, whose soil showed traces of dioxin; the nearby Syntex Corporation was blamed, and in 1990 it agreed to spend as much as \$200 million over the next decade to clean up the mess. But last April, the government official who originally recommended the evacuation, Dr. Vernon Houk of the Centers for Disease Control, publicly acknowledged that the science he thought supported his conclusion was faulty. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported the news in a front-page story under a banner headline. ABC News gave it a mention, but that was about it—until August 15, when the *New York Times* published an excellent front-page story (with sidebar it came to sixty-five column inches) by Keith Schneider, "U.S. Officials Say Dangers of Dioxin Exaggerated." The piece reported that the EPA was reviewing the risks of dioxin, since exposure to the chemical was "now considered by some experts to be no more risky than spending a week sunbathing."

As the *Times* reported, "If Dr. Houk is right and dioxin is much less dangerous than had been determined, that could mean the Government's regulations for other compounds will need to be adjusted." Here is a story begging for big-time reporting—the bad science informing so many EPA regulations.

Race-Norming

On May 30, 1990, Robert Holland of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* became the first journalist I've come across to write about the Labor Department's practice of racially rigging the results of the General Aptitude Test Battery Examination (GATBE), a test taken by 600,000 people annually in thirty states. Holland did so on the editorial pages of his newspaper, after getting hold of the conversion tables by which a black applicant for a blue-collar job is awarded a percentile score of 87, a Hispanic 74, a white 47, and an Asian 47—four separate scores for the same number of right answers. Holland came across the story locally. The Virginia Employment Commission administered the race-normed GATBE to job seekers and reported results to would-be employers, many of whom were under legal pressures to hire and promote by race. The piece caused a public outcry throughout the state, leading the employment commission to drop the GATBE. Holland deserves a Pulitzer. His story also drew some national attention, as the "Today" show, NBC News, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* did pieces. Amazing, when you consider that race-norming had been around for ten years, having been set in

motion under Carter and implemented by the ostensibly anti-quota Reagan Administration. The round of news stories emboldened an administration publicly opposed to quotas to place the Labor policy under "review." When House Republicans early last year pushed to include a measure outlawing race-norming in the new "civil rights" bill, no Democrat dared defend the practice. The mix of Labor review and Democratic unwillingness to support race-norming caught the press unprepared. Only Peter Brown of Scripps Howard, author of *Minority Party: Why Democrats Face Defeat in 1992 and Beyond*, devoted much attention to the subject.

The lack of coverage illustrates not only how poorly the press covers the bureaucracy but also how incurious it is about the instrumentalities by which government makes employers count and hire by race. Most of all, however, noncoverage comes down to the journalistic profession's being in basic sympathy with employment preferences. This fall I was sent documents—evidently from a conservative whistleblower at the EPA—indicating the agency's efforts to hire and promote by quota. There are countless similar stories out there in governmentland. All they need is a Bob Holland or Peter Brown who would write them. □

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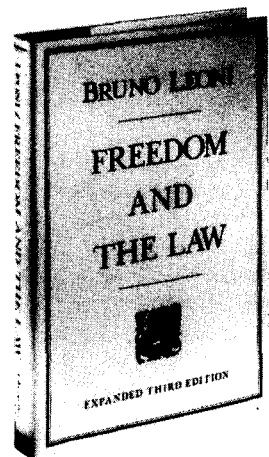
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Hard Times

by Cathy Young

On my very first night in Moscow (November 22), I turned on the television news to hear the anchors refer to "the republics of the former Soviet Union." My entry visa, which said "USSR," had been issued by a non-existent state for travel to a country with no name.

With private enterprise springing up in the wasteland that was the Soviet economy, Russia is now a textbook case of a society sharply divided into the very rich (often former *nomenklatura* men and their offspring) and the very poor (about 90 percent of the population, by the latest official estimates). In between is a tiny—though, one must hope, growing—middle class, with ties to the burgeoning private sector or a network of personal connections or one of the few remaining state-sector jobs that provide a decent livelihood.

Turn on the TV in Moscow, and in little time you will see a commercial, either for a Western product (such as Colgate toothpaste, though the purpose of such advertising is beyond me) or, more commonly, for a Russian financial firm. These maiden hymns to Russian capitalism are distinguished by an amateurish quality and a preternaturally majestic tone: against grainy footage of waves crashing against a rock, a voice sounding like that of il Commendatore in the final scene of *Don Giovanni* thunders, "In these turbulent times, find stability with XYZ Brokerage Company!"

Meanwhile, many state-run stores no longer bother to open, which is at least honest; the dimly lit, dingy, empty premises visible through the shop-windows are an eerie sight. An open dairy store on the Arbat, in the heart of Moscow, was so crowded I decided against making my way to the counter to see what was available. The ran-

cid smell did not bode any good. A drained-looking woman shopper said to no one in particular, "No, it's time to throw these new guys out, too."

In a foodstore a ten-minute metro ride away from the Kremlin, the shelves were quite bare except in the "commercial section," which has unregulated prices. A middle-aged woman in a worn coat stood for a while eyeing the kielbasa, then sighed wistfully, "Forty-five a kilo! Lord, it looks good." While I stood fingering the rubles in my purse and inwardly debating whether or not it was awkward to offer charity to a total stranger, she drifted off, looking lost.

This is *not* psychological resistance to market prices; after months of botched shock therapy, most people will gladly buy whatever they can afford. In the New Arbat supermarket, salami at 87 rubles a kilo drew an impressive line (in a city where 250 rubles a week is considered a pretty good salary), and a friend told me of seeing about 300 people queued up for butter at 50 a kilo. By now, that's below average. Some educated Russians like to snort that Americans talk about nothing but money, but snippets of conversations caught in the streets of Moscow these days are likely to be about prices or rationing coupons.

While headlines in some local papers are trumpeting nothing short of hunger in Moscow, even many of my Russian acquaintances, not at all optimism-prone, chafe at such sensationalism. One should not forget the stockpiles of food in people's apartments and the food packages distributed at work (some of the budding private employers advertising for help list food, along with medical care, among the fringe benefits). Still, the shortages are increasing. One of my hostesses, a music professor, moaned over two eggs dropped on the kitchen floor and did her best to scoop up the remains into a plastic bag. A leading journalist from the *Literary Gazette* commented as she served the butter, "Well, this is probably all the butter we'll have un-

til next spring." Minutes later, she inquired solicitously, "Why aren't you taking any butter?" (This is a very Russian story.)

For people with money, there seems to be more to buy than there was a year ago. Vending stalls offer such things as Chinese tea at 20 rubles for a pack of twenty teabags (the exchange rate went from 70 to 90 rubles per dollar in the eighteen days I was there); cigarettes at 25 rubles for a pack of Winstons and 50 for Marlboros; socks, underwear, and pantyhose at 40 to 60 rubles; condoms, Russian-made with an Austrian license, at 20 rubles a twelve-pack; and so forth.

And that's to say nothing of people who, by working for foreign companies or in other ways, have hard currency. The Irish House, a new hard-currency supermarket in central Moscow, generally overpriced but decently stocked, was filled with mostly quite unglamorous Russians; on a Saturday, there were enough of them to form lines. Some souvenir sellers on the Arbat pedestrian mall are still furtive about taking dollars, with plainclothesmen presumably lurking about. Yet numerous ads for goods and services such as the rental and sale of apartments, whether in the classified columns or in metro stations, matter-of-factly state, "for SKV," the Russian abbreviation for "freely convertible currency"; more tellingly yet, other ads specify, "for rubles." A woman living in midtown Moscow told me of a handwritten sign she saw in a dry-cleaning establishment: PLEASE DO NOT STUFF DOLLARS IN THE VENT—apparently a hiding place favored by Arbat peddlers, which had already provoked several fights.

Among the hottest items now sold on the Arbat are Communist memorabilia: large banners with such logos as THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE GREAT OCTOBER SOCIALIST REVOLUTION; *Distinguished Collective of Communist Labor* pennants (I bought one of those, with a Lenin profile and the inscription *Communist labor will triumph—V. I. Lenin*); and the

Cathy Young, our regular Soviet Press-watch columnist, is the author of Growing Up in Moscow (Ticknor & Fields).