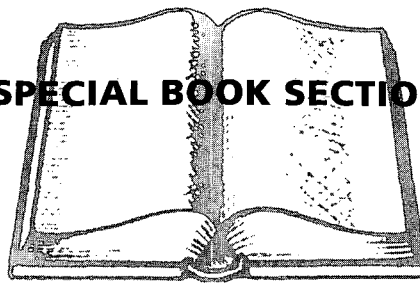


SPECIAL BOOK SECTION



Computer Downloads By Nick Gillespie

**Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Superhighway, by Clifford Stoll,
New York: Doubleday, 247 pages, \$22.00**

**The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age, by Sven Birkerts,
Boston: Faber and Faber, 231 pages, \$22.95**

**War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the High-Tech Assault on Reality, by Mark Slouka,
New York: Basic Books, 185 pages, \$20.00**

Subj: Computers and community

Date: 95-10-25

From: NGilles123@aol.com

To: skeptic@ubu.edu

Yes, by all means, let's keep talking about how technology in general and computers in particular affect our world today—and will influence our world tomorrow. But first, a pop quiz: Of the four following quotations, can you tell which one is written by the Unabomber?

1. "Few of society's major losses happen during sudden hurricanes or earthquakes....[T]he big time disasters creep up on us; by the time we notice something missing, it's already been wasted. Our cities weren't destroyed by atomic bombs or bubonic plague....The telephone eroded the art of writing letters. Television cut into neighborhood cinemas. MTV and superstars weakened amateur musicians and hometown bands. The car destroyed urban trolley systems; interstate highways devastated passenger rail service; and airliners wiped out passenger ships."

2. "The primary human relations—to space, time, nature, and to other people—have been subjected to a warping pressure that is something new under the sun. Those who argue that the very nature of history is change—that change is constant—are missing the point. Our era has seen an escalation of the rate of change so

drastic that all possibilities of evolutionary accommodation have been short-circuited....[W]e have stepped...out of an ancient and familiar solitude and into an enormous web of imponderable linkages. We have created the technology that not only enables us to change our basic nature, but that is making such change all but inevitable....None of this, I'm afraid, will seem very obvious to the citizen of the late twentieth century. If it did, there would be more outcry."

3. "Before 1900, daily life for the majority of individuals was agrarian, static, local—in other words, not that different from what it had been for centuries. The twentieth century, however, altered the pace and pattern of daily life forever. ...What started us on the road to unreality? Though the catalog reads like a shopping list of many of the century's most dramatic trends—urbanization, consumerism, increasing mobility, loss of regionality, growing alienation from the landscape and so on—technology...was the real force behind our journey toward abstraction....Let me state my case as directly as possible: [I]t is possible to see, in a number of technologies spawned by recent developments in the computer world, an attack on reality as human beings have always known it."

4. "There is good reason to believe that primitive man suffered from less stress

and frustration and was better satisfied with his way of life than modern man is....Among the abnormal conditions present in modern industrial society are excessive density of population, isolation of man from nature, excessive rapidity of social change and the breakdown of natural small-scale communities such as the extended family, the village or the tribe. ...In the modern world it is human society that dominates nature rather than the other way around, and modern society changes very rapidly owing to technological change....[T]here is no stable framework."

Time's up. It's number four, but it isn't obvious, is it? The other passages are from, respectively, Clifford Stoll's *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway*, Sven Birkerts's *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, and Mark Slouka's *War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the High-Tech Assault on Reality*. All three books, in slightly different ways and with slightly different emphases, take on computers and related issues. But as you can tell from the lines quoted above, their contempt for computers is part of a larger critique of Technology writ large. Like the Unabomber, Stoll, Birkerts, and Slouka characterize technology—a term that refers to everything from stone axes to particle accelerators—as disruptive and dis-

TROY THOMAS

SPECIAL BOOK SECTION

combobulating, never enabling or enriching.

For them, it's as if technology is flinging humanity through time and space at such a step that the g-force is making our skin pull away from our eyes and our lips flap away from our gums; we're being crushed by such dizzying speed. Rub your eyes and poof! Horses are out, autos are in. Blink again: Books are extinct, hyper-text is cock of the spacewalk. As the Unabomber would put it, there is no "stable framework," no way to make sense of what man hath wrought, no way to evaluate change before it's too late.

Such sentiments appeal to a very basic conservative part of human nature: Stick with what you know, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, anything new is worth waiting for. Who can't relate to Miniver Cheevy who "loved the days of old," or the Wild West outlaw who, after 30 years in jail, is released into a strange new 20th-century world of moving pictures and flying machines?

But such notions grossly misrepresent both the pace and nature of technological change. Things change over time and unevenly: I know plenty of people who only write letters longhand, others who only type on typewriters, others who only use e-mail, and still others who use a combination of all three media. Technology is not a self-starting perpetual motion machine that runs on human bodies. The inventions that stick—especially in a market order based on voluntary exchange and association—are the ones that serve people's needs and allow them to realize their desires.

Slouka, a lecturer in literature and culture at the University of California at San Diego, is correct to suggest that, for many people throughout most of history, life was static and predictable. That is to say, they could expect a life of disease, discomfort, and deprivation. (At least it was short.) No doubt about it, a bird in the hand is indeed worth two in the bush—but what do you do when you need five birds, 10 birds, 15 birds to feed your family?

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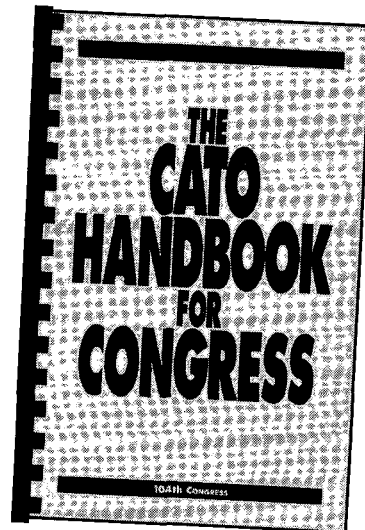
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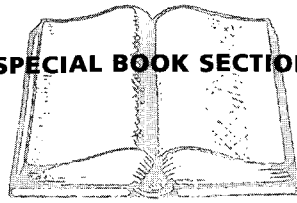
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SPECIAL BOOK SECTION



That was, no doubt, the question all four of my grandparents pondered as they crossed the Atlantic on steamships during the 1910s. All were born before the Wright Brothers got off the ground at Kitty Hawk and three of four watched a man land on the moon because their lives had been “artificially” extended by surgery, drugs, and medical devices—not to mention the fertilizers, farming techniques, and transportation technology that helped put food on the table.

After watching *Roots*, I remember asking my Irish grandmother why she left the old sod, a place from which people have been fleeing en masse ever since they could tie logs together to make rafts, and why she had never gone back. She answered both questions with the same matter-of-fact reply: “Because there was nothing there for me.” In the late ’70s, after more than 50 years of self-induced exile, my Italian grandparents finally made it back to their hometown, a tiny village a few hours outside Naples. They knew better than anyone that the world had changed 1,000 times over in the interim. “We left on a boat to find work,” my grandfather told me. “We went back on a plane for vacation.” The steps in between seemed to make sense to him.

Subj: Computer complaints

Date: 95-10-27

From: NGilles123@aol.com

To: skepti@ubu.edu

In a message dated 95-10-26 16:13 EDT, you write:

<<Okay, so Stoll, Birkerts, and Slouka spin out a larger critique of technology. But what about computers specifically?>>

Fair enough. Stoll, Birkerts, and Slouka confess at various points to Luddite tendencies even as they all go out of their way to say that they aren’t calling for a return to caveman days. One thing that clearly gets under their skin is the exuberance of telecomputer boosters such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation’s John Perry Barlow, who is fond of saying the move into cyberspace is “the most transforming technological event since the cap-

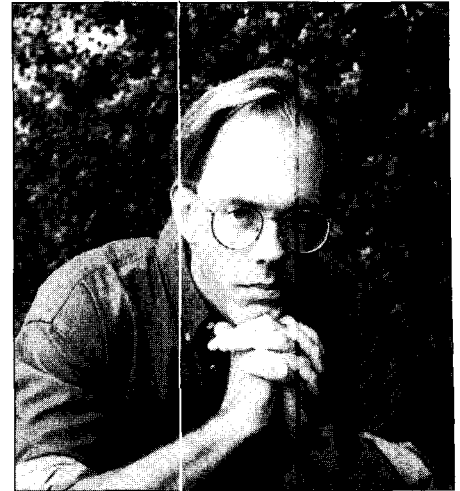
ture of fire.”

In a *Harper’s* forum featuring Birkerts, Slouka, Barlow, and *Wired* magazine’s Kevin Kelly, Slouka and Birkerts—who has compared *Wired* to a porno mag—bristle at “the theme of inevitability,” the idea that the computer revolution is a totally done deal, even as they accept the fact that the train of technological development has left the station. “Computers themselves don’t bother me, it’s the culture in which they’re enshrined,” writes Stoll in *Silicon Snake Oil*. “The medium is being oversold, our expectations have become bloated.”

There’s more than a grain of truth to such discontent. While computers are here for good—or at least the foreseeable future—it’s unclear what exactly that means. And Stoll is right that going online is oversold—although he, Birkerts, and Slouka should recognize that as a good thing. While being on the Internet has added some things to my life and subtracted little or nothing, it sure as hell hasn’t been a revolution.

Not surprisingly, Stoll is more willing than Birkerts and Slouka to grant the general usefulness of computer technology, if only as an introduction to his larger condemnation of the burgeoning Republic of Cyberspace. Stoll is, after all, an astronomer, a longtime devoted computer and Internet user, and the author of the delightful *The Cuckoo’s Egg*, which details his role in catching a gang of hackers who broke into a computer system at the University of California at Berkeley. (*Silicon Snake Oil* is not only more engaged with its subject matter; because it’s written with wit and self-conscious irony and packed with cold data and interesting anecdotes, it engages the reader more than either *The Gutenberg Elegies* or *War of the Worlds*.)

But all three authors contend that computers (and, as important, computer networks) attack the “real” world by luring



Mark Slouka: For many people throughout most of history, life was static and predictable.

us away from such time-honored activities as reading, writing (in longhand or on typewriters), spending time with friends and family, hiking, and puddle-jumping. Instead, we while away our days at an electronic coffeehouse, answering gratuitous e-mail messages, engaging in gossip chit-chat about *Star Trek* and *The X-Files*, and sampling various pornographic cyberthrills.

Computer networks, says Stoll, “isolate us from one another and cheapen the meaning of actual experience. They work against literacy and creativity. They will undercut our schools and libraries.” Birkerts sings the same dirge with slightly different lyrics. He certainly agrees with Stoll that computers—all things electronic, really—undermine the solitude and quiet necessary for deep readings of books and mankind alike.

But computers don’t so much isolate us as destroy us, says Birkerts. For him, going online means nothing less than dissolving your subjectivity—your sense of self—into electrical impulses scattered out into space. “[B]eing on-line and having the subjective experience of depth, of existential coherence, are mutually exclusive situations,” he writes. We have destroyed “duration...deep time, time experienced without the awareness of time passing.” His “core fear” is that we are becoming as shallow and flattened out as the TV and computer screens we use to

SPECIAL BOOK SECTION

communicate. "We are experiencing the gradual but steady erosion of human presence, both of the authority of the individual and, in ways impossible to prove, of the species itself," frets Birkerts.

Slouka, too, worries about the individual. "For just as surely as [the interstate highway system] had helped homogenize the American landscape," he writes, "replacing the distinctive color and lingo of regional culture with the ubiquitous ugliness of the corporate strip, [the information superhighway] would make us blander still, sacrificing a *different* kind of regionality—the 'regionality' of race and gender and age and opinion—to the needs of the all-blurring, eternally inoffensive Netsoul."

The damage is all the greater, says Slouka, because the Internet allows us to escape our physical surroundings. Reacting to a positive assessment of cyberspace, Slouka writes, "The problem...was *not* that Cyberspace would usurp reality as we know it, or that we would all disappear into some virtual world. The problem, simply put, was that Cyberspace would distract us from the job at hand; ...we'd forget that most of the human race was more immediately interested in survival than transcendence."

As can be gleaned from the quotes above, Stoll, Birkerts, and Slouka invent and then inhabit a stuffing-or-potatoes universe: Here's the blue-plate special and absolutely no substitutions are allowed. Given their anti-computer stances, it's ironic that they adopt such a binary logical system. They essentially banish the connector *and* from their vocabularies; they refuse to entertain the notion that computers can supplement—as opposed to *supplant*—existing technologies, relationships, and communities.

At times they pursue their logic to ridiculous extremes, as when Stoll writes, "A computer network is, indeed, a community. But what an impoverished community! One without a church, café, art gallery, theater, or tavern. Plenty of human contact, but no humanity. Cybersex, cybersluts, and cybersleaze, but no genu-

ine, lusty, roll-in-the-hay sex. And no birds sing."

Slouka beats a similar cyberdrum: "Instead of exploring a local farm pond (or catching praying mantises in the park), today's eight-year-old can explore on her computer....Instead of visiting real animals at a zoo (itself already a kind of simulation), she can visit the dodo and the

passenger pigeon (and others sure to follow in their path without our very real intervention) on the computer." Well, there it is: You can either roll in literal hay or scroll over your onscreen lover's body, you can either go to the City Zoo or go to your room.

Birkerts explicitly sees "the situation in Faustian terms, as an either/or." You can,

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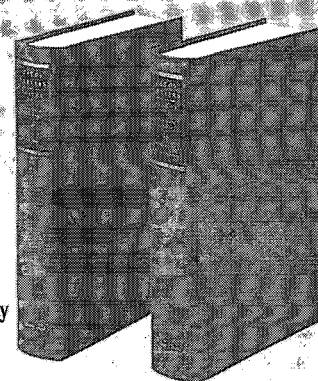
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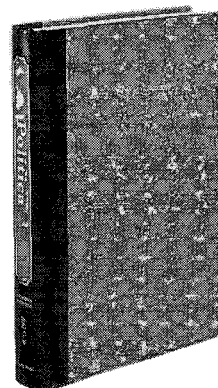
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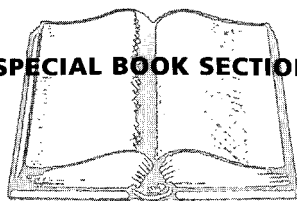
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SPECIAL BOOK SECTION



he says, either read “deep” the way he suggests or else you “move across surfaces, skimming, hastening from one site to the next without allowing the words to resonate inwardly. The inscription is light but it covers vast territories: quantity is elevated over quality.” He thinks in terms of a “face-off, a struggle, a war.”

The either/or is so central to such formulations that it is meaningless to engage them on their own terms. How exactly do computer networks erode community? Essentially by letting us make or stay in touch with distant friends so that our attention is trained away from our immediate surroundings. As Stoll accurately observes, e-mail is far from perfect, but the medium’s relative ease and convenience allows me to write more letters in the same amount of time. This doesn’t mean I spend less time living in the “real” world. And why would someone suppose, as does Slouka, that the curiosity of a kid who views animals on screen would be fully satisfied by the experience? There is no sense here that appetites can grow and expand. After PBS ran Ken Burns’s *Civil War* series, for instance, attendance at battlefields boomed because people wanted to see the places for “real.” History books became hot, too, as people sought out more information.

Indeed, rather than Birkerts’s “face-off,” his Phillips curve of technology and “soul,” it makes more sense to think of computers as adding to our ability to interact with one another, to locate ourselves in time and place, to fashion ourselves as both deep readers and “skim-mers.” I’ve had a computer of some sort for about 10 years now—starting with a Commodore tape-drive behemoth that took five minutes to save files—and I’ve been online for five; neither of these facts has taken away from my ability or my willingness to become absorbed in the sort of literature Birkerts champions. Computers have, however, made it easier for me to discuss such books by making it easier to contact and stay in touch with people who have similar interests.

In the *Harper’s* forum, *Wired’s* Kelly

suggests that on-line reality will “be an auxiliary space,” one that adds to existing possibilities rather than obliterating them. Yes, old ways will be modified, but the process will happen over time and moderately, and there will be various ways to opt out or modify its impact if you so choose.

This dynamic, of course, has nothing to do with computers specifically, but it’s important to understand that it generally leaves us with more options, not fewer. Consider the federal interstate system, which is a controlling metaphor for cyberspace enthusiasts and detractors alike.

All three authors contend that computers attack the “real” world by luring us from such time-honored activities as reading, writing (in longhand or on typewriters), spending time with friends, hiking, and puddle-jumping.

“Thanks to the interstate highway system, it’s possible to travel across the country without seeing anything,” Stoll quotes retired CBS News correspondent Charles Kuralt. “I wonder if the information superhighway will offer a corollary—a dulling impact on our cerebral cortex.”

So speaketh Charles Kuralt, sage of the nation’s blue highways, who made a name for himself by going “on the road” 20 years ago in an RV that no doubt carried all the pleasures of home and hearth. But Kuralt misses the point: Thanks to the interstate system, it’s possible to drive across the country in a few days *and* take a more circuitous route.

No doubt, the trip was more scenic from the buckboard of a Conestoga wagon when folks had to worry about Indians, bandits, and bad weather. But the Donner Party, we can assume, would have appreciated a six-lane divided highway with

rest stops and picnic areas (or, at the very least, Kuralt’s pleasure cruiser). A few years ago, my wife and I drove across the country on our honeymoon. We took highways and byways and saw a hell of a lot of the country, some of it just off interstates, some of it just off unpaved roads.

Far from dulling our cerebral cortices, if the information superhighway is at all like the interstate system, it will stimulate them all the more.

Subj: On-line overstimulation

Date: 95-10-29

From: NGilles123@aol.com

To: skeptic@ubu.edu

In a message dated 95-10-28 20:12:10 EDT, you write:

<<Isn’t too much stimulation precisely one of the problems with an on-line society? Doesn’t the constant hum, whirr, and buzz of electronically processed information drive us insane?>>

Some of us, maybe. In any case, the fear of too much information undergirds the cybercritiques of Stoll, Birkerts, and Slouka. In fact, even their disdain for technology and computers is, at rock bottom, a dislike of unfettered, decontextualized information. Where many of us welcome an increase in information as a (potential) increase in knowledge, possibilities, and self-fulfillment, they employ a Tower of Babel model in which static unity transmogrifies into dynamic chaos. Consider:

“Anyone can post messages to the net. Practically everyone does. The resulting cacophony drowns out serious discussion....[T]he valuable gets lost in the dross. There are no pointers to the good stuff—you don’t know which messages are worth reading,” writes Stoll.

“One of the advantages of the net is that everybody can publish: it’s a free medium....You can cut out the middleman—the publisher and agent and everybody else. But when you open the floodgates entirely, you don’t get egalitarianism. You get babble. My shopping list becomes as valuable as Cormac McCarthy’s latest book,” Slouka told *Harper’s*.

SPECIAL BOOK SECTION

"The explosion of data—along with general societal secularization of what the theorists call the 'master narratives' (Christian, Marxist, Freudian, humanist...)—has all but destroyed the premise of understandability. Inundated by perspectives, by lateral vistas of information that stretch endlessly in every direction, we no longer accept the possibility of assembling a complete picture," says Birkerts.

There is no question, of course, that our society, both online and off, is awash in information, good, bad, and ugly. We are up to our necks in the stuff and the tide's still coming in: TV and radio broadcasts, newspapers, magazines, databases, web sites, conversations. But the currents are surprisingly easy to navigate. Contrary to Stoll and Slouka, there are all sorts of pointers and middlemen who nudge you in one direction or another, who sift through material and send it your way. Some of these are formal services—Nexis, say; others are informal—friends who flag something for you. And no one, it is safe to say, will mistake Slouka's shopping list for a novel. But to the degree they do, that's their choice.

Birkerts rightly characterizes the dilemma as an epistemological one: Without a master narrative to make us slaves, how do we pick among competing choices? Given the funereal air of *The Gutenberg Elegies*, it is hardly surprising that he can only lament a proliferation of options: "Our postmodern culture is a vast fabric of competing isms; we are leaderless and subject to the terrors, masked as the freedoms, of an absolute relativism."

But do you know anyone who is an absolute relativist, or even a *relative* relativist? Yes, ideas of the good life, of the proper life, of the righteous life compete with one another—at least when they are allowed to. Where is the terror in that, unless you have lost your own faith?

There is a sense, implicit in Birkerts and explicit in Slouka, that individuals ultimately can't be trusted to their own devices. We are too easily duped, too gullible, too dumb: "We live," writes Slouka, "in an increasingly visual age, consumers,

not of life, but of representations of life; of movies, videos, and commercials; of media events and reenactments....[T]his, to put it bluntly, makes us vulnerable. With nearly 50 percent of us functionally illiterate, and 90 percent of us listing television as our primary source of news, we're ripe for the picking. Or the manipulating, as the case may be."

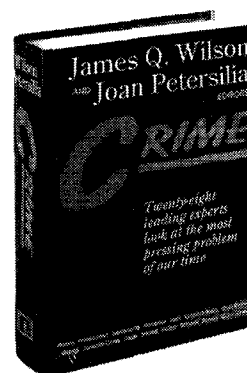
So what's the alternative, especially in a semi-free society? Stoll, Birkerts, and Slouka don't travel the road to its end, but the signposts clearly indicate less choice, less information, less individualism. Reading through *Silicon Snake Oil*, *The Gutenberg Elegies*, and *War of the Worlds*, I was reminded of an Eastern European friend of mine from grad school. He came over to study shortly before the Berlin Wall fell and he knew firsthand the terror of living with a master narrative.

Still, it was easier for him to leave central Europe behind than it was to give up certain elements of communist thought. We would go out drinking and he would joke with me about the "so-called" free market and how the problem with America was that there was too much of everything: news, books, clothing, schools of thought. "I spend half an hour picking out a brand of toothpaste. How does anyone decide anything?" he would ask me, "How do you know what's important and what's not?" It depends on the individual, I would tell him, what they value and what they want. Where's the harm?

"That's just incredibly inefficient, that's no way to run a society," he would say, launching into a discussion of his model community: the medieval Roman Catholic Church. "Everybody had a definite place—the clergy, the lay people, the peasants," he would explain. "The world had a certain certainty about it." Information was distributed on a strict need-to-know basis.

What about people who wanted to know more than they were told, or who didn't agree with the church, I would query. What about people who didn't want to "run" with the plan? What about heretics and apostates—was it good to get

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rid of them?

"No, probably not," my friend would grant. "But at least everyone knew what they stood for. They knew what they lived for and what they died for."

Such a "stable framework" is, at best,

arguable theology. And the predictable horror it inspires far outstrips the pain of deciding among disparate choices. ♦

Nick Gillespie (ngilles123@aol.com) is assistant editor of REASON.

Shooting Gallery

By Jacob Sullum

The Politics of Gun Control, by Robert J. Spitzer, Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House, 210 pages, \$25.00/\$17.95 paper

Gun Control: Threat to Liberty or Defense Against Anarchy?, by Wilbur Edel, Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 186 pages, \$45.00

Gun Control and the Constitution: Sources and Explorations on the Second Amendment, edited by Robert J. Cottrol, New York: Garland Publishing, 430 pages, \$18.95 paper

Guns and the Constitution: The Myth of Second Amendment Protection for Firearms in America, by Dennis E. Henigan, E. Bruce Nicholson, and David Hemenway, Northampton, Mass.: Aletheia Press, 76 pages, \$12.00 paper

To Keep and Bear Arms: The Origins of an Anglo-American Right, by Joyce Lee Malcolm, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 232 pages, \$32.50

Guns: Who Should Have Them?, edited by David B. Kopel, Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 475 pages, \$25.95

Broadly speaking, the debate over gun control deals with two questions: 1) Does it work? and 2) Is it constitutional? If we assume that the latter issue hinges on the intent of the Second Amendment, these are both empirical questions. Furthermore, they can be answered independently. After examining the relevant evidence, you could conclude that the Framers wanted to protect an individual's right to keep a pistol in his home *and* that banning private possession of handguns would reduce homicides. Conversely, you could decide that the Second Amendment has no bearing on modern gun control laws *and* that firearm restrictions have no effect on crime.

But such combinations are rare. In general, people who support the Second Amendment dismiss gun control as inef-

fective, while people who support gun control dismiss the Second Amendment as obsolete. This pattern suggests that many of us arrive at a position on gun control (for moral, philosophical, political, emotional, aesthetic, or other reasons) and then interpret evidence in light of it. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. In fact, a vigorous public debate depends on highly motivated, ideologically committed people to dig up evidence and present arguments. But given the strong feelings on both sides of this controversy, we should be wary of sweeping claims, especially when the source pretends to be objective.

Both Robert J. Spitzer's *The Politics of Gun Control* and Wilbur Edel's *Gun Control: Threat to Liberty or Protection Against Anarchy?* are ostensibly neutral,

scholarly examinations of the topic. Spitzer, a professor of political science at the State University of New York College at Cortland, who "was trained to let arguments and facts speak for themselves," is puzzled by the "almost frantic yet very conscious penchant of a few writers on the gun issue to embrace ideological labels." He announces in his preface that he is a member of both Handgun Control Inc. and the National Rifle Association.

Edel, professor emeritus of political science at the City University of New York's Lehman College, likewise seems anxious to be evenhanded. "In the United States," he writes, "much of the literature on gun control has been written to prove that laws governing the manufacture, sale and/or possession of firearms are either unconstitutional or constitutional, ineffective or essential to public safety, un-American or vital to the protection of a democratic society. Each side has its enthusiasts and its prophets of doom. Those who insist on strict control see the alternative as breeding a society in which the law of the jungle will prevail. Advocates of a free trade in weapons warn that government interference will undermine the constitutional guarantees of personal freedom and, ultimately, lead to dictatorship."

Thus Spitzer and Edel lead the reader to expect balanced, dispassionate analysis. But while neither book has a polemical tone, it is soon clear where the authors' sympathies lie. In their discussion of the Second Amendment, both Spitzer and Edel give short shrift to an impressive body of scholarship, including some 50 law-review articles and several books, that supports an individualist understanding of the right to keep and bear arms. Endorsing the familiar argument that the Framers' sole intent was to preserve state militias against the threat of federal domination, they create the impression that the Second Amendment's irrelevance to gun control has been established beyond any reasonable doubt. Edel calls the contrary view "fraudulent" and a "misstatement of fact," while Spitzer dubs its proponents "constitutional contortionists." The idea that the Constitution protects an indi-