

mitted a murder during a drug deal this year, and it's entirely possible that some of them haven't done so for fear of reprisal—deterrence. What is clear, however, is that record numbers of people are stealing and dealing drugs, even though the threat of death has never been greater.

Maybe the city's drug dealers and enforcers think themselves invulnerable to the violence all around them. Maybe they think they'll die and don't particularly care. Maybe they care but can't extricate themselves from it. Whichever, it's hard to see how adding a legislative death penalty to the de facto one that rules the streets will induce new rectitude.

As a case in point, consider the short life of Darryl Murchison, who at age 23 was one of the District's more accomplished drug hoodlums. In March, a teenage associate chased him into an alley and executed him with a shotgun. Murchison must have known it was coming. For the past two years, according to Sari Horwitz of *The Washington Post*, he'd been a leader in a drug gang whose battle with

a rival operation had left 20 people dead. In 1987, he and 10 other young men were wounded by a spray of gunfire as they walked out of a go-go concert. (One of them died.) Six months later, he was shot again in an attack that killed a close friend as they sat in a car. While Murchison may not have feared the courts—he'd been arrested twice in the past year for selling coke and crack, and released pending trial—he had ample evidence that curbside death threats were credible.

In lobbying for the death penalty, Hankins told the talk-radio host that without it, "these kids . . . know there is no chance that they're gonna burn for what they're doing." On the contrary, had Darryl Murchison and his companions thought much about the future—not one of their favorite past-times, it seems—they would have surmised that the odds of being burned are pretty high. Supplementing the illegal executions with legal ones might make some of us feel better, but it's not likely to make my walk home any safer. □

## The Worst City Government

*So far, the contest for the Worst City Government remains a close race between New York City and Washington. Here are three reports from the front:*

New York City has a law requiring landlords to install window guards in apartments that house children, and 15 inspectors in the health department's Window Guard Unit ostensibly enforce it. An audit in July found that these inspectors routinely falsify their time sheets. In one week they reported working 142 hours when, in fact, they worked 99 hours—and that was when the auditors were *accompanying* them on their rounds.

In February the U.S. attorney indicted eight employees of the Queens Department of Motor Vehicles in a bribery scheme. Undercover cops paid as much as \$1,600 for a driver's license; drugs were an acceptable form of payment. The truly painful part is that the bribers were able to cut to the front of the lines. . . .

—James Ledbetter

Mayor Marion Barry claims the District of Columbia's program to combat infant mortality is "the most comprehensive on planet earth." In fact, the District's infant mortality rate is the worst of all major cities in the country. Here's what happens when a pregnant woman on Medicaid calls the District's Medicaid Information Service to find an ob/gyn in the city's largely black Southeast who accepts Medicaid payments: Of the four numbers listed in District files, two are wrong, one is disconnected, and one reaches a doctor who won't take Medicaid. A month after being informed of the problem, Medicaid Information continues to pass out wrong numbers. . . .

—Katherine Boo

"Washington, D.C. spends \$5,800 a year per student on public education, nearly 50 percent above the national rate. It pays its teachers at the second highest level in the nation,

close to a \$35,000 a year average. Yet its dropout rate (48 percent) is the worst in the nation and its SAT scores are third from the bottom.

"Washington's streets are among the worst-maintained in the nation. Yet Washington spends 43 percent more than all cities spend on road and street maintenance, and double or triple what is being spent in cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, or Boston. The city government employs 633 city workers for every 10,000 people. The national average for big cities is 224. Even if you accept that D.C. is more like a city-state than a city alone, its payroll level is 43 percent above the average for all state and local governments combined."

—Warren Brookes  
in *The Washington Times*

*Please send your nominations to:  
Worst City Government  
The Washington Monthly  
1611 Connecticut Ave. NW  
Washington, D.C. 20009.*

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# The Case Against Ted Koppel

*Like most reporters, the king of TV news doesn't  
understand economics*

by Matthew Miller

**I**t's not that circumcision, cremation, and baldness aren't important. Or killer bees, SATs, and cabbage-patch mania. It's not that we don't care whether astroturf or the selling of human organs should be outlawed, or social sanctions leveled against the pushy parents of 12-year-old stars. But did the early 1980s "cat craze" matter that much? And if we want to put Asian cockroaches into perspective, do we really need Ted Koppel's help?

Whether we needed it or not, we got it. Shows on these topics do more than showcase Koppel's well-advertised talent for, as the ABC ad men put it, "tackling the issues that others wouldn't touch." They point to his problem with priorities. Koppel's solid on the Mideast. He's incisive on Central America. He's on top of nuclear arms. But Ted Koppel has a blindspot, and it's one that many top journalists share: he doesn't do economics.

If you'd only been watching "Nightline" since 1981, you wouldn't be too concerned that the national debt had tripled. Gargantuan budget and trade deficits? A rollercoaster dollar? Sinking productivity? Don't look to "Nightline." "Financial stories really bore me," Koppel told *Newsweek* in 1987. "It's a function of my own ignorance."

And Koppel hasn't exactly cornered the market on neglectful economics reporting. True, if you like your economics spiced with metaphors from sports or crime, there's no shortage of pieces on budget "showdowns" or S&L "villains." But if you're looking to understand the economic stakes, the pickings are lean: Tom Brokaw announces with a straight face and no elaboration that the U.S. savings rate "soared" last year to 4 percent. Andrea Mitchell says "you can't overstep your bounds" on the Sunday chat shows to get answers on the debt. And Peter Kilborn, an economics correspondent for *The New York Times*, regularly suggests that budget deficits are either going away or don't matter anyway.

Partly it's just ignorance of economics. And apathy. Partly it's the unquestioned norms that govern what "the news" is and how it's reported. The result? While time bombs like the twin deficits and the S&L bankruptcies have ticked away, our leading news sources have been blowing the story.

## The MEGO factor

You can't blame anyone for expecting a lot from Ted Koppel. A decade ago he was an obscure State Department correspondent best known for his stint as a house-husband during his wife's first year in law school. Today he's made "Nightline" a media institution. What's refreshing about his ascent is that it's deserved. Koppel's suffer-no-fools demeanor, deft live-TV touch, and ambitious choice of subjects

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*Matthew Miller is a New York writer. Research assistance for this story was provided by Bill Rademakers, Barbara Frye, and Rosa Kim.*