

Letters

Mintzing Words

I have to agree with Morton Mintz that in general the media missed the story of the great GATT debate ("Stories the Media Miss," March), but I disagree on the specifics. After accusing the Big Four newspapers of parroting the pro-GATT views of multinationals and their government allies without doing any original reporting, he commits the same offense in favor of the anti-GATT side.

Mintz raises the tired argument, favored by the Buchananite wing of the GATT opposition, that the U.S. can be outvoted in the World Trade Organization by "rotten little dictatorships." This argument demonstrates ignorance of decades of GATT history. In certain limited cases, the WTO does provide for voting. But in actuality, decision-making in the GATT has been and will continue to be based on economic power, not on population or on one-country-one-vote. Nothing significant happens in the GATT if we do not want it to.

This anti-GATT argument "sunk in with the public" not because of "major nonfeasance by the mainstream press," as Mintz alleges, but because the arguments for the other side do not hold up when closely examined.

Despite the criticisms, Mintz is correct on other points. Quite often, the media did mindlessly repeat the arguments of the pro-GATT side, as it did occasionally with anti-GATT positions. Like Mintz, I wish the debate in the press had been more substantive. Unlike Mintz, I believe such a debate would have demonstrated the benefits of GATT.

John F. Gay
Arlington, VA

Gen-X History

Jon Meacham's article on "The Truth about Twentysomethings" (January/February) is only partially correct. As a graduate history student

and a twentysomething, I have found that not only twentysomethings, but the entire citizenry, seriously lack historical knowledge. I can offer, for those wary of drudging through history books, one document that will substantially increase historical awareness in a short time: the U.S. Constitution. This erudite yet commonsensical document explains more about the government than any book or magazine or talk show ever could, for it is the foundation of the government without journalistic or scholarly embellishment. By understanding this document, people can decide for themselves whether the federal government should be running a railroad or a television station or imposing racial quotas.

Finally, I take offense to those who believe the twentysomething generation is mediocre. Twentysomethings will believe that improvement is possible once they are given a larger dose of liberty, which can only come from less government. Only time will tell how this generation will turn out. It might have started on a discordant note, but its finale will be harmonious.

Art Hobbs
San Angelo, TX

Tilting at Nurses

In the January/February issue, Charles Peters took issue with a *New York Times* op-ed that I wrote with Ellen Baer. Unfortunately, Peters has misread our argument.

Baer and I never have, and never would, argue that the replacement of Registered Nurses with untrained aides is a narrow issue of licensure. The issue is not which initials come after the name of those caring for acutely ill patients in hospitals. The issue is education, morale, pay, and opportunities for advancement.

In hospitals today, untrained techs are being used to replace nurses, not to help them. Indeed, what we are seeing

today is a return to the hospital/company-owned school that treated pupil/nurses like indentured servants. Once again we are subsidizing the latest round of hospital growth—mergers and acquisitions, assembling of integrated networks, attempts to underbid other hospitals to lure managed care contracts, and so forth—with the ill-paid labor of women. The techs that Peters so valiantly tries to protect are, of course, not the problem.

The decimation of nursing is not a narrow, professional issue. It is an immensely complicated public health issue, a woman's issue, and a moral issue. Once again America is failing to account for what counts—caregiving—and to pay what it really costs to care.

Suzanne Gordon
Arlington, MA

We Fought the Law...

In his review of Philip Howard's book, "The Death of Common Sense" (January/February), Robert Nagel gives a good explanation of where respect for the law has gone too far. There is no doubt we suffer because of legalistic lemmings who have turned the law into a defense of selfish interests. But Nagel and Howard should have turned their focus toward identifying the proper role for law and for those creatures of the court we call lawyers. Otherwise, we run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

I worry that there are some who would take advantage of the legal mess we are in to supplant it with their own selfish priorities. One of the least appreciated Nazi offenses was their perversion of the law, but respect for the law was well understood by the odd band of liberals and conservatives who conspired to overthrow Hitler in July 1944. Respect for law was a focal point of the speech they planned to deliver had they succeeded.

"No human society can exist without law," it read. "No one, including the person who thinks that he despises law, can do without it."

Stephen H. Kaiser
Cambridge, MA

Pension Bombs

Gareth Cook's "The Pension Time Bomb" (January/February) simply regurgitates, in some instances without citation, the time-worn, flawed arguments of critics and detractors of federal workers and retirees. His refusal, even when invited, to interview those who would dispel many of the myths and half-baked truths he promotes speaks volumes about his true intent—to fuel the flames of public discontent with the hopes of a reprint in *Reader's Digest*.

For example, Cook cites a Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) study that shows a private sector worker "making \$35,000 and retiring at age 65 with 30 years of service can expect about \$10,800 a year in pension payments from his employer." But the same BLS study shows that the private sector retiree in his example will actually receive \$22,015 a year when Social Security is included. The Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS), which covers some 90 percent of current federal civilian retirees, provides no Social Security payments.

Regarding the "unfunded liability" of the federal retirement system, a Congressional Research Service report notes, "Governments are perpetual institutions that do not go out of business." Mr. Cook's treatment of the "unfunded liability" issue reveals his lack of understanding of how the civil service retirement trust fund operates.

Finally, all federal workers hired after 1983 are covered by a new system, the Federal Employee Retirement System (FERS). The Wyatt Company, a nationally recognized economic research firm, has stated, "The differences between FERS and CSRS satisfy several long-term policy goals, in addition to reducing the cost of retirement

benefits for federal employees." Now that is something to write about.

Al James Golato

Vice President

National Association of Retired
Federal Employees

The author responds: It is true that federal employees under the old system did not receive Social Security when they retired. But it is also true that they were exempt from the regressive Social Security tax—which everyone else must pay—for their entire civil service career. Second, Mr. Golato says I did not give NARFE a chance to present its side. In fact, I spoke with several people in his office; they all had my phone number. I even stopped by Golato's office, picked up a book NARFE publishes to "dispel myths," and read it through. Third, he claims I do not understand the meaning of "unfunded liabilities." But I never claimed that the government was about to "go out of business." I said it was irresponsible—and unfair—for future generations to pay for today's government services. Does he disagree? Finally, he says I should write about the FERS reform. That's on the last page of the article.

Big Whoop

James Fallows's well written review of *Race and Culture* glanced at a point so often missed in the *Bell Curve* discussion: IQ is measured by an IQ test, which tests the ability to test well.

If you are good at such analogies as "Brickbat is to antelope as (a) epithelium is to flotsam, (b) quark is to bleen, (c) I & II but not III, (d) II only, (e) none of the above," you are "brilliant." Big whoop.

In our country, "ability" so tested entitles one—or not—to higher education. In Europe, it is written and oral testing of an essay/discussion variety. Who cares if a race does well on the SAT? The tests measure nothing. Unfortunately, they control a lot.

Peter Munsing
Wyomissing, PA

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Tilting at Windmills

In the history of mass delusion, the conviction so firmly held by blacks—68 percent according to the latest poll—that O.J. Simpson is innocent will surely rank high. The latest example of the effect it is having is supplied by Kenneth Noble of *The New York Times* who reports that Simpson's attorney, Johnnie Cochran, Jr., at a recent social event was toasted by a leading black publisher as "our new Joe Louis." Even more unsettling than the number of blacks who think Simpson is innocent is the number who, according to the latest Harris poll, think he is guilty: Eight percent. Who do all the others think did it? Heidi Fleiss?...

At least seven Supreme Court justices and other federal court judges took free trips paid for by the West Publishing Company while cases involving the company were pending in the federal court system, according to the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*. West, the leading publishers of court decisions, has been trying to protect itself against potential competitors such as Lexis-Nexis. Among the current and retired justices who accepted the free travel were Sandra Day O'Connor, Anthony Kennedy, Antonin Scalia, John Paul Stevens, Lewis F. Powell, Byron White, and William J. Brennan. Powell used to suggest resorts such as Caneel Bay, "a place my wife Jo and I have always hoped to visit," and "the Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach—on the water, superior facilities, and affording many interesting things to do and places to see—particularly for our ladies."

During this period, Powell participated in three court actions involving West Publishing. In each instance, according to the *Star-Tribune*, the judges meeting behind close doors declined to overturn lower court rulings that favored the company. Will somebody explain to me the distinction between what Powell did and what Mike Espy was forced to resign for?...

We've pointed out in the past how Dwayne Andreas of Archer, Daniels, Midland is an infamous contributor to politicians of both parties. Now that he's funding MacNeil/Lehrer, can the other evening news programs be far behind?...

The closest to an endorsement I've been able to find for our term-limits-for-bureaucrats proposal comes from an article in the business section of *The New York Times*. Its author, Robert M. Tomasko, advocates term limits for corporate executives. The top man would be limited to eight or ten years, and those under him to shorter terms.

Tomasko puts no limit on how long the subordinates can work for organizations. In this, he differs from the *Monthly* proposal for government employees, which would require roughly half to leave the government when their time is up. There are three reasons for this: (1) It would bring a steady flow of new blood into government. (2) It would create a more sophisticated electorate by returning to private life citizens who have an understanding of government that comes from

having been there. (3) It would attract a more courageous, self-assured group of people to government service, people who would be confident that they would be able to find a job in the private sector when they have finished their government service.

For veteran readers who are beginning to suspect they've seen these points a good many times before, please hang in there as I'm going to tell you our new, simplified, term-limits proposal. Leave the Senate and half the civil service, as they are to provide continuity. Put the House of Representatives and the other half of the civil service under a system of four-year terms, with a maximum of three terms for a total possible tenure of twelve years. At the end of each four-year term, the civil servant could be let go—without having to go through the cumbersome and time-consuming firing procedures of the civil service—or the congressman could be defeated. If they don't perform, we can get rid of them. On the other hand, if they're good, we can keep them around for as long as twelve years. An incidental advantage of this proposal—veteran readers are well aware of this point, and can now skip to the next item—is that it is the only term limit proposal I've heard that has a real carrot for the congressmen. Instead of having to run every two years, which they hate more than anything other than having to attend fund-raisers, they can get twelve years with only three elections....

A couple of years ago, when