

Letters

T.V. Diplomacy

It is difficult to believe that Mr. Peters and I heard the same Fox News interview with the former ambassador to Mauretania, Edward Peck ("Tilting at Windmills," October 2001). Instead of the mentioned contempt exhibited by David Asman, the interviewer, I felt that Mr. Peck was treated with admirable restraint, considering that his views could be considered highly inimical to the U.S., particularly in the aftermath of the atrocities at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Mr. Peck blamed the U.S. for perceived transgressions against Iraq. His claim that the U.S. constantly violates Iraqi territory by monitoring flights over that nation ignores the conditions of the agreement that ended the Persian Gulf conflict allowing such overflights.

Certainly Mr. Peck did not hold a prestigious ambassadorship. He served in Mauretania, not exactly at the hub of the Arab or Muslim world by its location in northwest Africa, and having a population of about two million. His other lower-level postings included Egypt from 1974 to 1977 and 1980 to 1982 and Iraq from 1977 to 1980, with his 1982 posting essentially closing out his career. His present position as a business consultant for foreign interests reflects a too-frequent career path for retired diplomats in which the interests of the nation to which they were posted become more important than those of the United States to the detriment of the foreign policy of our government.

NELSON MARANS
Silver Spring, Md.

Carr Talk

What is David Carr's gripe with Amtrak ("Slower Than a Speeding Bullet," October 2001)? His article is a snide mix of inaccuracies and slurs not befitting your magazine. Is he bothered by the lack of stewardesses serving free lobster salad sandwiches or the cell-phone user? On my Acela trip, I sat in the cell-free car available for the choosing, and

when an illiterate disobeyed the message and prattled away, the genial conductor marched himself down the aisle on my behalf and stilled the offender. There's service!

Carr's inattention to environmental issues is also striking. Automobiles cause sprawl, pollution, contribute 30 percent to global warming, and planes are even more deadly to the stratosphere. And then there is national security. In the midst of a chance to fund Amtrak, the \$15 billion bailout to airlines with nothing yet to rail is putting all our transportation eggs in one fragile basket. Alas, this article is not only laughable and suspect in itself, but a depressing commentary on *The Washington Monthly* under a new regime. Where are you, Charlie Peters, when we need you?

JANE HOLTZ KAY
via email

Editing Nonsense

The most recent issue of *The Washington Monthly* is perhaps the best edited in a long time. By that I mean much obvious nonsense has been eliminated and both author and editor have much better anticipated questions that readers might ask. Mr. Peters's column is the best in a long time. Mr. Coates's article on how President Bush could attract black voters was a delight. I was rolling on the floor while Mr. Coates made his rather serious points. Whatever was done, keep it up.

FRED GREF
Concord, N.H.

Stormin' Norman

Current efforts to romanticize the life of Norman Rockwell, and thereby make him into an "artist," should not surprise anyone with a serious interest in art ("Reconstructing Rockwell," October 2001). Although Rockwell was delighted to be called an "illustrator," that word in a serious art context has unfortunately always been a pejorative.

Precisely for that reason, Thomas Krens of the Guggenheim Museum and others who relentlessly pursue a policy of trivializing art (having already done homages to the Armani rag trade and Harley Hawg Heaven) have chosen Rockwell for the next level. Art has never

had to worry about the Philistines at the gates. The dangerous ones are on the inside. Let us look forward to a retrospective of Walter Keane and Co., the painter of the big-eyed children from the tie-dyed past.

ROBERT J. SINDELIR
Miami, Fla.

Nutter Butter

What I find most interesting [about "The Wisdom of Ann Coulter," October 2001] is the range of outlets providing your quotes and the time span they cover. If the purpose of the article was to say, "Hey! She's a Nutter!," then why did all of these paragons of journalistic integrity choose to use her again and again and again? Could it be because they didn't give a damn about what she was saying as long as it was controversial? Could it be, as she is quoted as saying that her looks do indeed have something to do with it?

This is particularly disturbing coming from an organization that touts: "Ever since editor-in-chief Charlie Peters founded the magazine in 1969, the *Monthly* has dissected the Beltway establishment to identify what's wrong with Washington and how we can fix it." Just talking about what she said is not dissecting, it is not fixing the problem. You are focusing on her, the symptom, rather than the disease that is slowly destroying the credibility of news organizations. If these organizations want to entertain us, fine; just stop pretending it's news or newsworthy, or even commentary.

JEFF BELIVEAU
Via Email

Center of Gravity

I picked up *The Washington Monthly* for the first time at my local library without knowing your orientation. As I read Mr. Green's article about North Carolina Sen. John Edwards ("A Trial Lawyer for President," October 2001), it was enlightening (I didn't know about him either), and I kept looking for a slant, a hint of denigration or praise that would have given a clue to the political persuasion of your target audience. I feel that I have learned something about Edwards and the political meaning of being a trial lawyer, but still don't know

anything about your magazine's politics. I don't even know where the writer would vote for him. Congratulations, this is journalism.

AL RODBELL
San Diego, Calif.

Corps Conservatives

I just recently read the AmeriCorps article by Senator John McCain ("Putting the National in National Service," October 2001) and I found it to be quite positive as well as somewhat ironic for a "conservative" representative to not only be supporting but also requesting the expansion of AmeriCorps. I was a member of the first "class" of AmeriCorps' NCCC program in 1994. At the time, Newt Gingrich and many other congressional Republicans associated the program with President Clinton and, therefore, wanted to stop the funding for the program altogether. Interestingly enough, the AmeriCorps legislation was originally signed under President George H. W. Bush's administration with bipartisan congressional support.

Another criticism of our program was that it promoted "paid" volunteerism, although this ignores the history of current government service programs, such as VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), which pays people equivalent to what is at or below the poverty level for the region in which they are serving. A final piece of clarification: While the City Year program is now an AmeriCorps program, the original City Year program started in Boston years before the AmeriCorps legislation was ever written and served as a model for the AmeriCorps structure.

Thanks for providing articles that support and present positive images of our youth and the good things that are happening in the realm of service.

SHANNON M. SULLIVAN
Austin, Texas

Blowing Bubbles

The productivity conclusions reached by Karen Kornbluh in her article ("Disconnect: How Bush and Michael Powell Are Killing the New Economy and How to Turn it Around," October 2001) are questionable. Although the overall economy is faltering, it is not clear

that productivity is falling. In fact, quite the opposite may be true. At the tops of bubbles, people with less marketable skills become employed, lowering productivity. These same people are often the first to lose their jobs when the economy turns south, but these losses can actually improve productivity, since these workers generally have the lowest individual productivity.

STEVE SCHEAR
Via Email

Med Pub Crawl

Your article, "Publisher Perish" (October 2001), by Nicholas Thompson, has appeal, and I am grateful for the balance that Thompson sought to bring to the article. Regardless of how appealing the idea of putting all of the information into a single PubMed Central database might be, there are still several major flaws in it.

First, you don't need a single physical database to bring things together. While the federal government's FirstGov Internet site is still working out some kinks, the fact is that you can get access to millions of federal and state websites through this single portal with its amazing search engine.

Second, PMC has the wrong business model. You don't take things that are working well in the private sector and turn them over to the government to administer. And the information that we are talking about is not necessarily public property. Under the guidelines discussed by the PMC, authors or someone else would be expected to pay the publishing cost and then turn it over for free to the PMC. Now, the costs are covered by journal fees. The PMC approach would discourage the publication of scientific information.

Finally, virtually all scholarly scientific journals are immediately available on the Internet to their members when published, and after a period of six months to a year, they are available to anyone for free. There is no need for a government-sponsored initiative in this area, and the National Institutes of Health itself doesn't seem to be pushing it any longer.

WALLACE O. KEENE
Derwood, Md.

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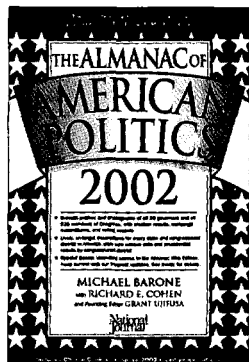
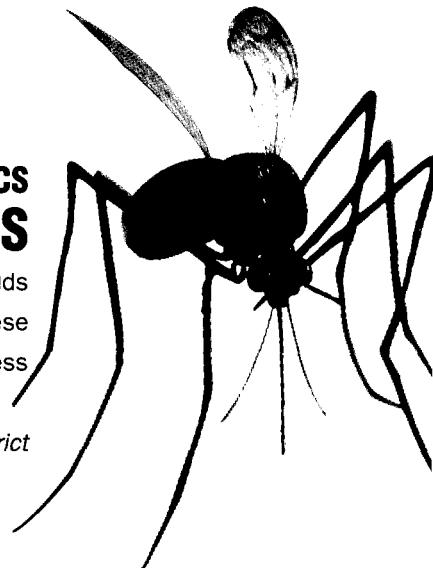
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Tilting at Windmills

BY CHARLES PETERS

*Lacy Underthings • The Big Number • Terrorism: The Marriage Solution
Competition for the CIA • Clientitis in Pakistan*

"MARRIAGE INHIBITS ANTISOCIAL behavior among young adult males. Crime rates, for example, are highly correlated with a high percentage of unmarried young males in the population," reports the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University. This same appears to be true of terrorists, almost all of whom are single. I'm not nearly knowledgeable enough about Islamic culture to know why at least some of them have unusually large numbers of young, single males, but it seems clear that figuring out what can be done about this problem should rank high in our national priorities. Solving it might do more good than bombing rubble.

The Washington Post RECENTLY published the floor plan for the George H. W. Bush Strategic Information Operations Center at the FBI. I noticed that about one-sixth of the total space is devoted to briefing rooms. One of them, the Executive Briefing Room, looks like a small theater. This reflects the fact that in the federal government nothing is valued higher than briefing skills. If you're a star with the pointer and the flip chart (or these days, with PowerPoint), your prospects are unlimited in both the civilian and military bureaucracies. You can even survive a name like Stufflebeem.

JUST AFTER WE WENT TO PRESS with this column's warning about the hazard of private planes being used by terrorists, along came two news stories illustrating the danger. From Preston, Idaho, the Associated Press reported "a man stole a single-engine plane ... and dropped a homemade pipe bomb that did not

explode." And from Jackson, Mississippi, *The Washington Post* reported, "Emergency management officials took samples from a Mississippi tug boat and a pleasure craft after a low-flying crop-duster sprayed them with an unknown substance." In both these cases no harm was done. But they do show how easily harm could be inflicted if these planes fell into competent hands.

IN THE MEANTIME, THE DANGER from commercial planes continued through September, October and well into November, because the House and Senate were unable to agree on an airport security plan. Finally, after a series of horror stories about Argenbright Security, Inc. — "Just seven knives and a stun-gun? Let him through." — culminating in the news that Southwest, United, and AmericaWest airlines had just hired Argenbright to provide security at the Baltimore-Washington International Airport, the Senate finally won on Nov. 16 when both chambers passed a bill federalizing airport security.

The House bill should not be forgotten, for it was notable in its radical departure from the GOP's customary antipathy towards regulation. Republicans argued that tough regulation of private business was the best solution to threats to airline passengers' safety. Democrats should remind their colleagues of this argument the next time a health and safety issue comes up.

Another important thing to remember about the new bill is a lesson about government that this magazine has long sought to teach: However laudable a bill may be, it means nothing unless it is effective-

ly implemented.

In the past, Congress has told the FAA to make safety reforms with only the slightest perceptible result. In 1990, 1996, and 2000, bills were passed requiring background checks for airport security workers, but the airline lobby—which even hired former FBI and CIA director William Webster—either killed or watered down these efforts, sometimes aided and abetted by Congress itself.

So it is essential that the media follow the implementation of this bill closely to make sure the reforms are actually made. For example, will the secretary of transportation really use the unusually broad discretion the bill gives him in hiring and firing screeners to hire the able and get rid of the incompetent? If Norman Mineta uses this authority skillfully, it will have important implications for the rest of government where the need for better people is not as extreme as in the case of airport screeners but is still an unhappy reality.

A RECENT BROOKINGS SURVEY OF 1,051 civil servants throughout the federal government shows that on average they believe 23.5 percent of their fellow employees are not up to par. "We've got a very good federal work force," says Brookings' Paul Light, who conducted the survey and reported it in *Government Executive* magazine. "But we have a substantial number of poor performers." For me, the two greatest needs of the public service are more power to get rid of bad apples, and much more emphasis on attracting high-quality new hires.

Smart people can help by applying for government jobs. Here's a