

Letters

Pass ...

The article by Georgia Alexakis about the Massachusetts testing program ("Test Prep," March 2001) was the best treatment that I have read of this controversy. My compliments to the author.

DIANE RAVITCH
New York, N.Y.

... Fail

When I read "Test Prep" (March 2001) I wondered if Georgia N. Alexakis could possibly have seen the same MCAS 2000 test that I did. Take this one from the Science & Technology test for fourth graders:

Monique is taking a train to Boston. Her train is stopped at the station. She is facing the direction the train will be moving. All she can see from her window is the train next to her. That train is also going to Boston and leaves first. As the other train leaves, it seems to Monique as if:

- A. she is moving forward
- B. she is moving backward
- C. the other train is moving backward
- D. the train station is moving.

My Ph.D. physicist husband confirms my outrage at this question. There is no understanding of scientific principle on which a fourth-grader can draw to answer this question.

What Alexakis fails to report is that scholars have determined that the fourth-grade reading texts on the MCAS average a seventh-grade level of difficulty. So what does fourth grade "failure" on the test actually mean?

It does *The Washington Monthly* no credit to join the chorus line of those touting high-stakes tests. You quote Boston superintendent Thomas Payzant's support of the test. Why didn't you quote the letter he sent to teachers, demanding that a student's grades reflect his or her test performance? Payzant insists that a teacher must not give a passing grade in the course if the student didn't pass a state

MCAS test unrelated to the curriculum. So a student's work counts for nothing; a teacher's judgment counts for nothing. MCAS rules. And, as observed above, a Boston fourth grader reading on grade level may well fail the test and, according to Payzant's edict, must fail the grade. Shame on him. Shame on you.

SUSAN OHANIAN
Charlotte, Vt.

I'll Take Aspirin

Andrew Webb's article, "Silence = Relief" (March 2001), misses the boat. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue, Don't Harass" (DADTDPDH) undermines our national security. Forcing gay, lesbian, and bisexual service members to hide, lie, evade, and deceive their commanders, subordinates, peers, families, and friends breaks the bonds of trust among service members essential to unit cohesion. Forcing commanders to discharge mission-tested, valued members of their team because of who they are impairs mission readiness. Enforcing a law that treats an entire group of Americans as second-class citizens undercuts the very liberties and freedoms our military members fight to protect.

We believe the days of DADTDPDH are numbered. Contrary to what Webb reports, 70 percent of the American public supports gays in the military according to the latest Gallup polls.

Contrary to what Webb reports, experience shows that lifting a gay ban is easy. None of the 23 foreign militaries that have lifted their gay bans, nor the CIA, FBI, National Security Agency, or Secret Service, nor the scores of American police and fire departments that lifted their bans, have reported a decrease in performance. Senior British Ministry of Defense officials say that the policy change was a "non-event."

Even Charles Moskos, the author of DADTDPDH, backed away from the position that lifting the gay ban would undermine the military in a recent interview in *Lingua Franca*.

To suggest that the majority of gay, lesbian, and bisexual service members do not yearn for the same liber-

ty and freedom as their heterosexual counterparts in uniform is folly. To suggest that "pragmatism" requires that the bigotry of a few trump the liberty of others defies everything that is basic, fair, and decent about being an American.

C. DIXON OSBURN,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Servicemembers Legal Defense Network

AARON BELKIN,
DIRECTOR
Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military

The editors reply:

As we wrote in March's "Tilting at Windmills," this magazine supports gays serving openly in the military, but we agree with Webb that many may want to stay in the closet.

Bench Marked

I want to commend Jamin Raskin for his article "Bandits in Black Robes" in the March issue of *The Washington Monthly*. My lone criticism of the article is that it does not go far enough.

Even after the *Bush v. Gore* decision, I suspect that most people would consider the judiciary easily the most respected branch of the federal government. To some degree, this respect has been earned by the relative civility with which the court conducts itself, at least in comparison with the other branches of government. Part of this perceived civility, however, is a product of the traditional secrecy with which the court has gone about its business. While the media regularly trumpets the indiscretions of elected officials in Congress or the executive branch, one almost never encounters such a piece about Supreme Court justices.

I have come to the conclusion that the main reason that the court is rarely criticized is because it is too important and delicate.

It basically serves as the foundation upon which the stability of our society is built. People are so afraid of an environment in which the public does not respect the court that they will not criticize it in any meaningful way. This is unfortunate. As the third branch of our government, it should

be just as prone to criticism as the other branches. Yet for instance, when it decides, as it has done recently, to take fewer cases, and issue more opinions for each case it takes, hardly anyone looks askance.

It is bogus to assume that the court is not a political beast; so it likewise is bogus that the media does not treat it as one. Articles like Raskin's are welcome but far too infrequent. Yes, the court plays a vital role in ensuring that the foundation of society is stable. But I would trade disingenuous stability for an honest volatility any day. As Jefferson said, a little revolution now and then is a good thing.

THAD MCBRIDE
Washington, D.C.

Have a Lil' Faith

I am writing with regard to your March 2001 "Tilting at Windmills" about religious organizations receiving funds from the federal government. I am a former chair of our local Catholic Charities and a CPA. Catholic Charities, along with many other "faith-based institutions," currently receives operating money from the feds. It comes in the form of service contracts for a variety of social-service activities. We also receive federal funds for low-income housing projects. This has been going on for years, but suddenly our new president has had an epiphany. This is not new. It just sounds like an idea to move more off the federal plate. The problem is that private charities don't have the capacity for a significant increase in services nor do they have the financial capability to deal with a shift in the political wind. If this supportive idea were suddenly reversed, it would be a disaster, financially and programmatically.

As to the property-tax exemption, all 501(c)(3) organizations, at least in Oregon, are exempt, not just churches. Universities, hospitals, Planned Parenthood, etc., are free of property tax. In addition, if they are renting property, the landlord can get that property exempted and pass the savings on to the charity in the form of lower rent.

But you're right that no exempt organization would be happy about

paying property tax. Yet it seems to me that the exemption is an appropriate public subsidy for the work those organizations perform. They help the entire community, if not directly, at least indirectly, so I think it's good public policy.

BOB WYNHAUSEN
Portland, Or.

Megalomedia

I'm writing to applaud Jonathan Rowe's article, "Reassigning Tim Russert" (March 2001). Rowe suggests that the media should routinely mention how much a representative, senator or other legislator received from industry and lobbyists. Clearly, the Washington press corps has a double standard: Former President Clinton is automatically guilty of "scandal" for anything tied to campaign or library funds, while current legislators are automatically benign of being influenced by free-spending lobbyists.

At least writers like Rowe are getting wise to the multimillionaire media mouths and their sense of entitlement.

LAWRENCE BROH-KAHN
via e-mail

He Who Throws Stones

There is plenty wrong with Washington reporting, but please spare it from Jonathan Rowe and his editors. The overall theme of your March cover story is that daily newspapers and television news shows should be just like the *Monthly*. What we need is not more of the same, but better of the same. Rowe would have major outlets "have professionals on call to dissect studies." They already do. They are called reporters. They report what has been printed in journals already reviewed by other scientists for accuracy and meaning. Rowe's own credibility suffers in the space of three lines where he misspells "vocal chords" and misuses "with regards to." On the same page, Matthew Cooper tells us that "we're often mislead (sic) by our prior experiences." Like using a dictionary?

IRA R. ALLEN
Bethesda, Md.

The Washington Monthly

Editor in Chief Charles Peters

Publisher Tara Mansbridge

Editors Stephanie Mencimer, Nicholas Thompson

Contributing Editors Jonathan Alter, Thomas N. Bethell, Tom Bethell, Katherine Boo, Taylor Branch, Matthew Cooper, Michelle Cottle, Gregg Easterbrook, James Fallows, Paul Glastis, Mickey Kaus, Phil Keisling, Michael Kinsley, Nicholas Lemann, Suzannah Lessard, Arthur Levine, Jon Meacham, Matthew Miller, Timothy Noah, Joseph Nocera, Leonard Reed, John Rothchild, Jonathan Rowe, David Segal, Walter Shapiro, Joshua Wolf Shenk, Scott Shuger, Steven Waldman, Robert Worth

Editorial Advisory Board Charles W. Bailey, Russell Baker, James David Barber, Edgar Cahn, David Halberstam, Richard Reeves, Hugh Sidey

Associate Publisher Christina Larson

Assistant to the Editor in Chief Corine Hegland

Interns Catherine Dolinski, Corine Hegland, Abigail Roberts

Fact-checker Timothy Dickinson

Proofreaders Sally Cutler, Joe Dempsey, Igor San Juan

Subscription rates: U.S. and possessions: one year, \$44.95; two years, \$79.95; three years, \$109.95. For Canadian and foreign subscriptions, add \$10 for surface delivery; air mail delivery add \$32. Back issues, \$5. Send correspondence concerning subscriptions, undelivered copies, and address changes to 1611 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20009, (202) 462-0128. For address changes, provide six weeks' notice and include old address label. Send subscription complaints to Charles Peters, *The Washington Monthly*, 1611 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20009. *The Washington Monthly* is indexed in the Book Review Index, Political Science Abstracts, Public Affairs Information Service, the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature, and Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory and may be obtained on microfilm from University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. For reprint rights call Tara Mansbridge at (202) 462-0128. Published monthly except combined Jan./Feb. and July/Aug. issues by The Washington Monthly Co., 1611 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20009. Printed in U.S.A. © 2001 The Washington Monthly Co. All rights reserved. Reproduction without permission is prohibited. ISSN 0043-0633. Postmaster: Send change of address to *The Washington Monthly*, 1611 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20009. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, D.C. and at additional mailing offices. Unsolicited manuscripts must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Send manuscripts and letters to: Editors, 1611 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20009 or e-mail to: editors@washingtonmonthly.com.

The Washington Monthly Online:
www.washingtonmonthly.com

Tilting at Windmills

BY CHARLES PETERS



*Red Light Runners • Ivy Singles • Lady Lawyers
Suspicious Surpluses • Corona and Verona • The Buckley Conflict*

TREASURY SECRETARY PAUL O'Neill made a speech on March 31, suggesting that the government "should be able to close down businesses that do not meet a mandated level of workplace safety" reported *The Washington Post*. Apparently, O'Neill had not read another *Post* story that week which began, "The Bush administration yesterday ordered the suspension of a Clinton rule that would have significantly strengthened the government's ability to deny contracts to companies that have violated workplace safety, environmental, and other federal laws." This appears to be another case, like EPA's Christie Whitman and global warming, where the subordinate is right and the White House is wrong. Maybe we'd be better off with a Bush administration in which the inmates run the asylum.

.....

MY FEAR THAT GOVERNMENT IS attracting less than the ablest young people has been confirmed by Seth Stern in an article for the *Christian Science Monitor*. Less than a third of the graduates of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy are entering the federal service. And the same is true of slightly more than a third of the graduates of Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz School of Public Policy and Management. The situation is sufficiently dire that Harvard's Kennedy School of government is forgiving loans to students who agree to serve as Presidential Management Interns and giving free tuition to some students who commit to three years of public service after graduation.

.....

IF JASON DEPARLE'S *New York Times*' articles on welfare didn't convince you that getting a job doesn't end the problems of welfare recipi-

ents, be sure to read Katherine Boo's "Does Welfare Make You a Better Mother?" in the April 9 *New Yorker*. Boo describes a single mother whose departure from welfare has in many ways been a success story. She's a policewoman, holds another part-time security job, and supports her family of four. But even with a good heart and the best intentions in the world, she doesn't have enough time for children. One incident after another tellingly described by Boo makes clear what her children are missing and the pathetically inadequate array of resources available to help her, the most miserable of which are the DC. public schools (including, by the way, the charter schools that were supposed to save us).

The great irony is that the biggest backers of making welfare mothers work are the same conservatives who urge middle-class mothers to stay home. Why is it good for welfare mothers to work, and not for middle-class mothers? I remember making this point to my friend Mickey Kaus just as he launched his on-the-whole-admirable campaign to get liberals to face the need for welfare reform. But Mickey brushed it off, saying it was more important for the welfare children to have the example of a working adult. A good point, but it didn't and still doesn't answer their need for a mother. Liberals also find the news difficult to face because they are so anxious to defend the right of mothers to work that they don't want to acknowledge any downside that can't be cured by quality day care.

The Peters solution for welfare mothers with small children: part-time work which would satisfy Mickey's point and high-quality day care while that work is being done,

which should make my fellow liberals happy.

The only problem with the Peters solution is that, although I planted its flag a decade ago, I definitely do not see an army, or even a few stragglers, when I look behind me.

.....

IRS EMPLOYEES GIVE THE WRONG advice on tax questions about half the time. Investigators from the Treasury Department's Inspector General's Office posing as taxpayers were given incorrect answers to 47 percent of the questions they asked IRS employees who answered the agency's toll-free help line. Thirty-seven percent of the calls didn't go through.

What's the explanation? For the wrong answers, I suspect the grotesquely complicated internal revenue code that Congress has created is a major culprit. When the income tax was begun in 1913, the instructions took only one page. Today, only a genius in both law and accounting could be expected to answer all the questions. But 47 percent wrong is high enough to suggest that the IRS needs better people. And it needs more of them. The unanswered questions demonstrate that the IRS doesn't have enough people to do the job.

Since 1992, as the number of tax payers has grown by 10 percent, the number of IRS employees has declined from 115,000 to 97,000. Audits are the best way of catching cheaters, but the audit rate has fallen by two-thirds just since 1995.

.....

SPEAKING OF INEPTITUDE, THE District of Columbia's government is, of course, the undisputed champion. The latest evidence comes from the 862 traffic tickets given to city agencies whose cars were caught by a