

Letters

New Bucks

While I'm tentatively partial to Stephanie Mencimer's discarded "pat male-fantasy" theory ("Violent Femmes," September 2001), I flat-out disagree with her contention that "studs on steroids" are passé. We need only turn to a slightly different medium and observe the gape-mouthed 18-35 demographic permanently tuned into "Smack-down," "Raw is War," "Monday Nitro," and the rest of the professional wrestling genre on network and cable television seven nights a week. These muscle-fests feature oversized brutes accompanied by their busty, buff, and scantily-clad sidekicks, allowing viewers to have their (beef/cheese) cake and eat it too. And the growing number of Vince McMahon's minions' cinematic appearances bodes poorly for Ms. Mencimer's argument. The newest generation of moviegoers has been raised on this tripe, and we underestimate its effect on our cultural perception of gender at our folly.

DAVE SLOAN
Washington, D.C.

Transfer Credits

Thad Hall's article faulting George W. Bush's education plan for not excluding mobile students from the scoring system was a curiously timid step in the right direction ("Student Movement," September 2001). Certainly teachers and principals should not be held accountable for the test performance of students who arrived in their schools only a few days, or weeks, before the tests. The principals and teachers in such disadvantaged schools should also not be judged by comparing their test scores with those of other schools. Instead, they should be judged on how well each of their students has progressed during the school year—that is, to what extent did each student advance from start to finish of the year.

Surely a teacher who advances a classroom of disadvantaged kids by more than one grade level in a year is doing well, even if the class ends the year some-

what below its suburban siblings in end-of-year scores. A principal who runs a school that does this year after year in most classes should be recognized as a hero, even if the 12th-grade scores are only "average" for the city, county, or state. Such "longitudinal tracking" of the progress of individual students should proceed, not just during each school year, but from year to year and from school to school. If such longitudinal tracking were to become common practice, we might have a better chance of not leaving as many children behind.

GENE PORTER
Nashua, N.H.

Hard Bargain

"Withering Rights" (September 2001), by Julie Wakefield, accurately observes that a patients' bill of rights will be of little value because the right to sue is subject to waiver and replacement by arbitration—even if the arbitration provision is in small print and not negotiable. But Wakefield errs in stating that unions "mostly keep mandatory arbitration clauses out" of contracts. Rather, virtually every collective bargaining agreement in the United States over the last 50 years has provided for final and binding arbitration of worker grievances. Indeed, the inclusion of such grievance arbitration provisions was a key goal and a major triumph for organized labor.

The experience of organized labor with arbitration does not provide a perfect analogy to the likely experience of patients, consumers and individual workers, but it does merit serious consideration. Quite apart from the quality of decisions and their fairness, labor arbitration is low-cost—and frequently does not involve attorneys as either representatives of the parties or as arbitrators.

STEPHEN K. HUBER
Houston, Texas

Life Logic

How did a review as full of illogic and irrelevance as Gregg Easterbrook's ("We're All Darwinians Now," September 2001) slip past your editorial vigilance? Easterbrook argued that religion and evolution are coming to a *modus vivendi* as scientists realize that some questions haven't yet been explained in

Darwinian terms.

Easterbrook assumes that the longer some phenomenon remains unexplained by science, the higher the probability that it will never be explained. This is simply fallacious. The continued absence of a phenomenon establishes nothing about the probability of its eventual existence.

Logical errors aside, however, the question Easterbrook spends so much time pondering doesn't need an entire article to answer, much less an entire book by a professor of philosophy. It can be answered in a few sentences. Of course a Darwinian can be a Christian, since there is nothing in the Christian faith that demands a belief in the "intelligent design" of life forms. Easterbrook says it himself: "[W]hy shouldn't God employ compounds with natural properties?" Why indeed? Why shouldn't God go further, and limit Her effort of creation to the instant of the Big Bang, thereafter leaving the universe free to follow its natural, not supernatural, course? In this case, there is no conflict between Darwin and Christianity, unless all Christians are required to accept every word of the Bible as the literal truth. I doubt that Easterbrook would go that far.

DAVID J. ZIMNY
Oakland, Calif.

Gregg Easterbrook replies:

Mr. Zimny employs the common cheap-shot technique of attributing to me something I did not say, then objecting to his own invention. My review never says that "the longer some phenomenon remains unexplained by science, the higher the probability that it will never be explained" or expresses any similar sentiment. Rather, I said that "until such time" as a wholly natural origin of life may be found, "higher influences cannot be dismissed." I hope Mr. Zimny's letter is not an example of the evolution of discourse!

School Daze

Thank you for your excellent article on U.S. colleges and universities ("Broken Ranks," September 2001). As past president of state and city boards of education and president of a foundation largely devoted to pre-college education, it has troubled me that, unlike K-12 schools, colleges and universities offer no information as to the job they are doing in educating undergraduates. In addition to

U.S. News, pressure for such information could be exerted by congress (a condition for receiving federal loans and grants) and/or state commissions of higher education, which could require it.

As to your excellent point on "time on task," you might have noted how the college school year has shrunk. A study a few years ago found that the average number of instructional days at the top colleges had fallen from 192 in the 1960s to 168 today. K-12 public schools in Maryland are required to be open 180 days.

ROBERT EMBRY, JR.
*President, The Abell Foundation
Baltimore, Md.*

Quacks Like A Duck

I read your article "Scorin' with Orrin" (September 2001) and, while I agree with your sentiments, I also believe that you should have been even more critical of the Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act (DSHEA). George Orwell would have loved the name of this piece of legislation. It is not an educational act. Instead, it is an "Encouragement of Fraud and Quackery Act." I believe that most of the public is under the illusion that dietary supplements are regulated by the Food and Drug Association (FDA). After all, they probably can't believe that the government would allow the sale of products that are potentially harmful. But that is what this legislation does. There is absolutely no quality control or oversight of these products. Consumers have absolutely no idea what they are buying. The reality is that if the herbal industry were held to the same high standards as the pharmaceutical industry, it would go out of business very quickly.

STEVEN CERIER
Forest Hills, N.Y.

Viagra Kills

The article "Scorin' with Orrin," (September 2001) by Stephanie Mencimer is distorted and inaccurate. Painting the FDA as the supreme authority in charge of our safety is absurd. Viagra alone is linked to well over 100 deaths. DSHEA needs to be fully enacted before it can be faulted. Without full implementation of DSHEA, we will never know if the law really works. The American Herbal Products Association (AHPA) has submitted a

formal request to FDA to complete one significant but to date unimplemented aspect of DSHEA by establishing Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs) for dietary supplements. This trade group of American manufacturers welcomes the passage of GMPs for the herb industry.

In the year leading up to the passage of DSHEA, FDA received letters from hundreds of thousands of American citizens wanting to preserve their freedom and right to access dietary supplements. In the end, it was not Orrin Hatch, but the people of America who passed DSHEA.

DAVID BUNTING
via Internet

The Bad War

I was looking forward to buying David Halberstam's new book until I read Nicholas Thompson's review ("Besting the Brightest," September 2001). Both Halberstam and Thompson seem to think that Kosovo was a triumph, rather than what it was: an embarrassment with ominous overtones for the future. We intervened on the wrong side: the Kosovo Albanians not only were responsible for the vast majority of the prewar cease-fire violations, but they exterminated the Kosovar Jews with more enthusiasm than the Nazis. And it was our double-cross of the Russians—promising them a role in the peacekeeping if they pressured Milosevic to give in and then denying them a place at the table—which ended the war, not high-tech wizardry. That last betrayal cost Boris Yeltsin his office, giving rise to Vladimir Putin, who may be an improvement for the Russians, but who is a far less reliable ally of the West.

But of all the negative implications of the Kosovo bombing campaign, none was more disturbing than to see a completely intact Yugoslavian army march out of Kosovo with virtually no damage. After throwing billions of dollars of fancy weaponry at this army, we really ought to be asking how a primitive army like the Yugos managed to fool the whiz kids, rather than writing valentines to Raytheon.

THOMAS F. BERNER
New York, N.Y.

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Liberal or Conservative?

"I am an intellectual chap,
And I think of things that would astonish you.
I often think it's comical
How Nature always does contrive
That every boy and every gal
That's born into the world alive
Is either a little Liberal
Or else a little Conservative!"
—Private Willis on sentry duty at Palace of Westminster
(W.S. Gilbert, "Iolanthe," 1882)

More recently, we were interested to see the comments of "60 Minutes" creator and executive producer Don Hewitt on this liberal-conservative business, which seems to so preoccupy Washington's political classes and the media who report on them. In his delightful book "Tell Me A Story," he writes:

"Don't you find, as I do, that the words 'liberal' and 'conservative' have ceased to have much meaning? Why, for instance, is it 'liberal' to endorse a strict adherence to the First Amendment and 'conservative' to feel the same about the Second Amendment? Still, since people apparently have to be one thing or another, I guess I'm both—a liberal and a conservative."

Hewitt's view is one probably shared by most news people. Those we know in the "liberal media," for instance, are often quite conservative in their personal views. And vice versa.

Labeling people's views, we find, is a tricky business at best, and we don't much care for the practice. We do recommend Hewitt's book, however. He obviously enjoys life and his book is a joyful newsman's romp through the last half century.

John Adams Associates Inc.

public affairs consultants
Washington DC



Tilting at Windmills

BY CHARLES PETERS

The Big Story • The Handful of Marshals • The Actor's Wife

Fleeing to the Hamptons • A Smart Tax Cut • And a Dumb One

ONE OF THE WAYS I PREPARE to write this column is by collecting clippings of newspaper and magazine articles that I found interesting during the preceding month. Then, the day before I start writing, I sort the clips, discarding those that on reflection don't seem so fascinating after all. This month, as I sat down to do the sorting, I found that my stack of clips was much larger than usual, and as I did the sorting, the number discarded was much less. This, I believe, reflects a media that has, since September 11, become vastly more relevant. Newspaper and television news, and even talk shows, have offered a steady diet of interesting information. At long last, we have a "Big Story" that really is a big story. Mindless gossip about the sex lives of public figures has taken a backseat where it belongs.

One hopes that this reform is genuine and that what the media decides are big stories continue to be about genuinely important subjects. It's hard to be optimistic, however, when *The New York Times* reported that fewer than two weeks after September 11, "Carol Wallace, the managing editor of *People* magazine, spent Friday morning with staff members, discussing how to move with sensitivity back into the celebrity grind."

"When a publicist called her last week," reports Alex Kuczynski of *The New York Times*, "pitching a story that might have flown three weeks ago, about the wife of a famous actor and her battle with irritable bowel syndrome, Ms. Wallace turned the story

down. 'We're going to hold off on stories like that,' she said. 'We'll ease back into it.'"

All this is not to say that gossip isn't fun. Of course it is. For years our "Who's Who" column has been largely devoted to it. But, and it seems to me this is the important point to remember, "Who's Who" takes up about one-thirtieth of this magazine's content, which is just about its rightful share.

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I SHARE THE NATION'S ADMIRATION for the way New Yorkers responded to September 11. But the reaction of some of the city's wealthy reminds me that the rich are different. Take Suzanne Schiffman who, writes Abby Goodnough of *The New York Times*, "fled New York City and signed [her two] girls up for school in the Hamptons, where their summer home has become a semi-permanent refuge from the chaos of lower Manhattan." Schiffmann explains, "The public school they were attending in Battery Park City was pretty exclusive, and the ones they'd have to transfer to, I would never send them there."

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OF ALL THE ECONOMIC STIMULUS proposals, the one we favor the most is the rebate of payroll taxes, something we first proposed last March. Back then the idea got nowhere. But its time seems to have come. Just as we were going to press, *The Washington Times*, which has excellent sources in the GOP, reported that congressional Republicans "appear willing to back a Democratic proposal" for

such a rebate. The reason we're for it is that it puts money into the hands of the people who need it most because they do not earn enough money to pay income taxes. They are likely to spend what they get, and spending is what the economy needs right now. On the whole, however, I would like to see the spending come not from individuals but from the government, not only for the prevention of terrorism, but also for other widely beneficial public purposes such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure rebuilding of sewers, bridges, and roads. So I'm against more tax cuts for the affluent.

Most of all, I oppose slicing the capital gains tax. Warren Buffett opposes the capital gains tax cut, as does Paul Krugman, and here's what former treasury secretary Robert Rubin has to say on the subject: "A capital gains tax cut, according to a 1998 Congressional Budget Office study, would have nearly zero effect on the economy in the short term. I think the effect could actually be negative in that the capital gains tax cut could induce increased stock sales."

What Rubin means is that if you've been holding onto stocks because you didn't want to pay the current capital gains tax on them, you'll be tempted to sell when the tax is reduced. Selling stocks makes the market go down, not up.

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YOU MAY WONDER HOW RICH New Yorkers are coping with the long security lines at commercial airports. "But how are we going to get to Vail?" one woman asked at