

Tilting at Windmills

BY CHARLES PETERS



Merry Moms • Lieberman's Sex Appeal • Howell's Reign

Deep Doo-Doo in Baghdad • Buckley's Swimming Pool

APPEARING ON TIM RUSSERT'S "Meet the Press" some months ago, Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.) did not display a command of the information a president should know. Was this just a bad day for the senator? We hope so, but a story recently told to me by a reliable source is less than reassuring.

One evening while he was campaigning for the Senate in North Carolina, Edwards was faced with a choice of several events he might attend. An advance man suggested, "Maybe we ought to go to the reception for Leah Rabin." Edwards responded, "Who's she?" "Yitzhak Rabin's widow," replied the aide. "Who was he?" asked Edwards.

AS MY WIFE AND I WERE WATCHING a congressional hearing on C-SPAN a few nights ago, she remarked, "Why is it that the women sitting behind the senators are almost always good looking?" I explained that members of Congress are noted for their devotion to affirmative action for physically attractive females.

SPEAKING OF AFFIRMATIVE action, I was delighted to see that last month *The New York Times* devoted a front-page story to school integration by income. This is a cause championed by the *Monthly* in several articles over the years by The Century Foundation's Richard Kahlenberg. Economic class, not race, should be the standard for affirmative action. Why give a rich black kid a leg up over a poor white one? Economic affirmative action would aid the blacks

who need help the most, those who are held back by poverty. Of course, there is a kind of economic affirmative action now widely used in American higher education—only it works the wrong way, in favor of the privileged and well-connected. Back in 1989, the *Monthly* revealed the big advantage given to legacies by Harvard and other schools. Since then, the situation appears to have become worse. Where the legacies were 20 percent of Middlebury's entering class in 1990, according to *The New York Times'* Jacques Steinberg, by 2002 they made up 45 percent.

HAVE WOMEN BECOME TOO LIBERATED? We would, of course, be the last to say so. But we must note that at Ohio University, "Moms' Weekend" seems to be departing from the customary standards of maternal behavior. Alcohol sales exceed those at Halloween and Homecoming, according to the *Athens (Ohio) Post*. Paul Shugar, a columnist for the school paper, writes:

"The weekend is really nothing more than a recipe for disaster. Take a group of males 18-25 years old in their sexual prime, add women 35-50 years old and in their sexual prime, stir in some alcohol and then let them bake together in a tightly confined Athens bar, next thing students know, they wake up wondering not where they are but where their mom is."

WHEN THIS MAGAZINE'S JOSHUA Green and *Newsweek's* Jonathan Alter broke the story about Bill Bennett's expensive gambling habit

(see page 8), William Kristol of the *Weekly Standard* came to Bennett's defense: "It would be different if he had written anti-gambling screeds..."

I can't help pointing out that I don't recall Bill Clinton writing screeds against fooling around. Yet Kristol never hesitated to slam him.

If, by the way, you doubt the seriousness of the habit Bennett was encouraging by his behavior, NBC Nightly News reports that in recent years, gambling among senior citizens has grown from 20 percent to 50 percent. Of them, 6 percent will become "problem" or "pathological" gamblers. NBC interviewed two, a man and a woman, who had completely squandered their savings.

THERE ARE 575 EMPLOYEES OF the District of Columbia who are paid \$100,000 or more per year. In Baltimore, a city of similar size, only 34 of the city's employees make that much, reports *The Washington Times*. Even Chicago, a city nearly six times larger than Washington, has 156 fewer employees making \$100,000 or more. Yet no one in his right mind would contend that the District of Columbia is more competently governed than Baltimore or Chicago.

ONE PROBLEM CAUSED BY OVERPAYING local employees is that the money for their salaries has to come from somewhere, and it often comes from cutting back needed programs. Montgomery County, Md., reports *The Wash-*

ington Post, is "locked into costly labor agreements negotiated during boom times" and now "faces a \$300 million-plus budget gap." One result is that there are 1,000 children in the county, according to another *Post* story by Brigid Schulte, whose parents can't afford to send them to private school and "there's not enough room for them in Head Start."

SPEAKING OF HEAD START, I applaud the Bush administration's efforts to inject some educational standards into the program. Head Start's enormous potential has too often been sabotaged by a bureaucratic culture that has treated it less as an educationally enriching experience and more as custodial daycare for the children and a jobs program for the teachers. But, just as with the rest of his education program, Bush continues to leave too many children behind because his standards are not accompanied by the money to implement them in underfunded schools.

BEN BRADLEE ONCE SAID THAT if you put all the Watergate data into a computer you could figure out who Deep Throat is. A journalism professor at the University of Illinois named Bill Gaines had his students do just that, and the computer answered that Deep Throat is Fred Fielding. Veteran readers know that he's been our number one suspect for more than 20 years. He was a notorious leaker. And as deputy White House counsel throughout the scandal, he knew more than any of the other suspects. He is also a thoroughly engaging man, whom prosecutors and reporters would be strongly inclined to protect if they possibly could. I once attended a small party at Bradlee's at which all the guests fit the profile of big shots from the *Post* and from the world of politics. Kay Graham and Bob Woodward were among them. Only two didn't fit the profiling: I was one, Fielding

the other. And I'm not Deep Throat.

SLATE'S TIM NOAH REMINDS me of the colorful past of Rep. Barbara Cubin (R-Wyo.), who recently came to public attention by making what appeared to be a racist remark. Her problem in earlier years was not so much racial as sexual. While a member of the Wyoming legislature she distributed cookies to fellow members that were baked in the shape of penises. During the Florida recount in 2000, she complained

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to her Republican colleagues, "We're bending over and taking it from the Democrats." When a colleague objected to this formulation, she said, "Quiet down or you'll get a spanking."

I OFTEN TELL REPORTERS THAT they can learn how to understand other institutions by observing their own. The Jayson Blair story is a classic example of the disasters that can be produced by bosses who press for results without showing equal concern for how the results are achieved. In their zeal for "hot and fast, high-metabolism" journalism, Howell Raines and Gerald Boyd assigned a young reporter about whom there were many doubts to a big story, the Beltway sniper case, without telling his immediate supervisors of the doubts. Then, when he filed stories that relied heavily on anonymous sources, they put the stories on the front page without inquiring about the identity of the

sources. Bill Kovach, the highly respected former Washington bureau chief of the *Times*, tells me that he always insisted on knowing who "anonymous" was.

What will happen to Raines and Boyd? Will they be held accountable? And will the one hero of this sorry tale, Metro editor Jonathan Landman, be rewarded for blowing the whistle?

In this respect, what happened at *The Washington Post* after Janet Cooke's unmasking does not inspire optimism. Milton Coleman, the man who protected Cooke until the very end, was rewarded by being made Metro editor, a job he held for more than a decade before having his eye for talent sanctified by being elevated to the position he now holds, deputy managing editor for personnel. On this basis, Gerald Boyd, Blair's principal enabler at the *Times*, can look forward to a long and distinguished career. Boyd's main ally, Howell Raines, cannot rise any higher, since he is already executive editor. Unless of course—watch out, Arthur ...

As for the people who blew the whistle on Cooke, Courtland Milloy has done well. He now has a regular column in the Metro section. But Landman should worry about the fate of Vivian Aplin-Brownlee, who was more persistent than Milloy in pointing out Cooke's tendency to be creative with the facts. Her byline disappeared from the *Post* long ago.

IN THE EARLY 1990S, REPORTS *The Seattle Times*, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms developed guidelines or "red flags" that alerted the agency to dealers who might be trafficking in guns. These red flags include "guns stolen from inventory, missing federal sales records needed by police to solve crimes, having 10 weapons a year traced to crimes, frequently selling multiple guns

to individual buyers, short times between gun sales and their involvement in crimes." Every one of these red flags has been found, not in just one year, but for several years at Bull's Eye Shooter Supply, the Tacoma, Wash., gun store where John Muhammad acquired the Bushmaster XM15 that was used in the Beltway sniper killings.

Why wasn't Bull's Eye closed down? The Firearm Owners' Protection Act signed by Ronald Reagan in 1986 forbade the ATF to take away any dealer's license unless it could prove the dealer "willfully" violated gun laws.

If these facts from the April 29 *Seattle Times* sound vaguely familiar to you, it might be because most of them appeared in an article by Brent Kendall in the January-February issue of this magazine.

"SINKING REVENUE ALARMS Charities," read a recent headline in *The Washington Post*. There are a number of explanations for the downturn. But one certainly has to be the United Way scandal and the disillusioning impact it had on potential contributors. And now comes the *Post's* exposé of the Nature Conservancy, which we all thought was composed of good guys who used the contributions they received to acquire and set aside land that needed to be protected for environmental reasons. Now we learn that land it acquired in places like the Hampsons and Martha's Vineyard was not fully protected, but resold to members of its own board and their family members for "Gatsby-esque" vacation estates.

THE NEW HEAD OF THE SEC recently told reporters, "I am surprised at how prevalent [wrong-doing] is in our economy. I'm surprised at the day-in and day-out, steady level of malfeasance that comes in under the radar."

There is much in recent news that he could have been referring to. But my favorite example is the attempt by Enron and MCI to get a tax refund on the basis that they have paid too much in taxes because of their lies to investors about their profits.

Close to it in outrageousness is the news that Goldman Sachs actually tried to hire Jack Grubman after insiders knew he was hyping stocks to get investment banking business for Solomon

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Smith Barney. In fact, his advocates at Solomon, reports *The New York Times*, argued that Grubman should be hired precisely because his stock recommendations could be relied on to bring in lots of investment banking business.

BOTH A FACTOR IN THE NATURE Conservancy scandal and an Achilles heel of the environmental movement is the fact that the movement is often used by the wealthy to protect their neighborhood or view. The environmentalists' fight to keep another Disneyland from intruding on the pastoral splendor of the Middleburg Hunt Country was, for example, largely funded by the

fellows who hunt the foxes and own the estates. Now comes another revealing story, this time with Disney on the environmentalists' side: a tax break for electric golf carts used in Disney's model Florida community, Celebration. The tax break is environmentally correct, since the carts are nonpolluting. But it benefits a community whose household income is twice the Florida average. In other words, poor Floridians will subsidize Celebration's clean air.

THE PENTAGON IS PLANNING A major revision of its personnel system. Liberal congressmen and the public employees' unions are hostile to the plan. Unquestionably, there is abundant reason to suspect bad motives on the part of the Bush administration. However, I caution readers to take a fair look. There may be problems with the Pentagon proposal, but major reform is needed. As Paul Light of the Brookings Institution points out:

"Two in five [Pentagon] workers say there are too many layers between themselves and top management, and on average they estimate that one in five of their colleagues in not doing his or her job well. Asked to explain the poor performers, two-fifths say the department does not ask enough of its employees, and another quarter complain that the poor performers are simply not qualified for their jobs."

WHAT IS THE WORST CAR IN America? According to a survey by J.D. Power and Associates, that distinction goes to the Hummer. The \$50,000 H2 has 225 problems per 100 vehicles, compared to 76 for the Lexus, and an industry average of 133. Those who remember that I once wrote that the Hummer "looks like it has a license to kill" will know how delighted I am by this news.

BECAUSE STATE GOVERNMENT IS so thoroughly ignored by most of the media, few people know anything about one major state program: workers' compensation. In many states, the program is in trouble because of a combination of rising medical costs and underfunding by corporations. Lots of companies get away with not paying their share. Ignorance of the program is so widespread that the West Virginia legislature may enact a bill that would tax workers to make up much of the deficit. Why shouldn't they tax workers, you ask? Because the basic idea of the program is that workers give up their right to sue in return for employers promising to provide guaranteed, if modest, compensation for workers' injuries. The workers having surrendered their right to sue, the corporations should live up to their part of the bargain and pay for the program.

LIKE MOST OBSERVERS, I thought that Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) and Rep. Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.) came off best in the South Carolina debate. I like Gephardt's emphasis on health care and his distaste for the Bush tax cut. He also had a more forceful presence than we have become accustomed to. Lieberman is too conservative for me, but I have to admit he has a nice sense of humor. Recently, on David Letterman's show, he gave 10 reasons why he would make a great president. The last was: "Look at me. Do you honestly think there'll be a sex scandal?"

LEE BOLLINGER, COLUMBIA University's new president, has given a hopeful sign of the kind of reform he wants to make in his graduate school of journalism by naming Nicholas Lemann as dean. Still, Bollinger's plan to improve the school has drawn criticism from the *New York Observer* and the *Washington Post's* Robert Samuel-

son, who seem to want to keep the school as it is. They are dead wrong. It has become far too much of a trade school with journalism courses that, like many courses in teachers' colleges, emphasize technique at the expense of substance.

Samuelson acknowledges that Lemann, a former *Monthly* editor, is "a brilliant writer, an exhaustive reporter, a gifted thinker." Doesn't that describe exactly what a graduate school of journalism should aspire to produce? Samuelson says no: "A recent Columbia graduate I know covers high school sports for a small suburban paper." One could reply that that's all Columbia prepares him to do. But that would be unfair to some good teachers and some outstanding graduates. Nevertheless, Columbia should aim more toward turning out Nick Lemann's than high school sports reporters. The Nick Lemann's may cover high school sports along the way—and enjoy doing it—but they will have the ability to meet the more difficult challenge of producing explanatory journalism characterized by fresh thinking and facts that you don't find elsewhere. For example, see Lemann's article about Karl Rove in the May 12 *New Yorker*.

Samuelson, a former president of the *Harvard Crimson* passing himself off as Joe Six Pack, says this is too elitist. But that ignores the fact that Lemann's prose is always accessible. The average person can understand and learn from it if he can find it in the newspapers and magazines he reads. Improving Columbia will mean that he can find it in more places, which means more people—average and otherwise—will be able to learn what they need to know to be good citizens of this republic.

CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY IS ONE of my favorite writers. A staple of this column has been excerpts from his *New Yorker* piece about the schedule for a conservative radio

network that began: "6:30 a.m. Habla Espanol: How to Communicate With Your Servants." My fondness for this piece is motivated by my admiration for his ability to make fun of his own class. In his recent *Washington Schlep*ped Here, however, he momentarily reveals that his background is definitely not blue collar. He is explaining the difficulty of getting something built on the National Mall. Seeking a comparison that everyone will understand, he writes, "If you think that getting a zoning variance for your swimming pool is hard ..."

I'M GLAD THAT SADDAM HUSSEIN has been removed from power. Does that mean I regret opposing Bush's rush to war? Not at all. I thought that not only were there higher priorities for this country, but that there would be dismaying consequences to victory that the administration did not appear to anticipate.

I have listed the higher priorities in previous issues. As for the consequences, no one more accurately predicted the grief that victory would bring us than James Fallows, another former *Monthly* editor, in his *Atlantic* article, "The Fifty-First State?," that just won a National Magazine Award.

In Iraq, this country is already mired in what Bush the First liked to refer to as "deep doo-doo." And liberals are entitled to say, "We told you so." But instead of wallowing in self-congratulation, we should participate in trying to figure out how to best handle the imperial responsibilities Bush II has assumed on our nation's behalf. We don't want to behave like the Republicans did when it became clear in 1994 that the Clinton health-care plan was not going to pass. Instead of joining in an effort to find a constructive compromise, they gleefully let Hillary twist slowly in the wind. We must do better this time.

The Bookie of Virtue

*William J. Bennett has made millions lecturing people on morality
—and blown it on gambling.*

BY JOSHUA GREEN

*We should know that too much of anything, even a good thing, may prove
to be our undoing...[We] need ... to set definite boundaries on our appetites.*

—The Book of Virtues, by William J. Bennett

NO PERSON CAN BE MORE RIGHTLY credited with making morality and personal responsibility an integral part of the political debate than William J. Bennett. For more than 20 years, as a writer, speaker, government official, and political operative, Bennett has been a commanding general in the culture wars. As Ronald Reagan's chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, he was the scourge of academic permissiveness. Later, as Reagan's secretary of education, he excoriated schools and students for failing to set and meet high standards. As drug czar under George H.W. Bush, he applied a get-tough approach to drug use, arguing that individuals have a moral responsibility to own up to their addiction. Upon leaving public office, Bennett wrote *The Book of Virtues*, a compendium of parables snatched up by millions of parents and teachers across the political spectrum. Bennett's crusading ideals have been adopted by politicians of both parties, and implemented in such programs as character education classes in public schools—a testament to his impact.

But Bennett, a devout Catholic, has always been more Old Testament than New. Even many who

sympathize with his concerns find his combative style haughty and unforgiving. Democrats in particular object to his partisan sermonizing, which portrays liberals as inherently less moral than conservatives, more given to excusing personal weaknesses, and unwilling to confront the vices that destroy families. During the impeachment of Bill Clinton, Bennett was among the president's most unrelenting detractors. His book, *The Death of Outrage*, decried, among other things, the public's failure to take Clinton's sins more seriously.

His relentless effort to push Americans to do good has enabled Bennett to do extremely well. His best-selling *The Book of Virtues* spawned an entire cottage industry, from children's books to merchandizing tie-ins to a PBS cartoon series. Bennett commands \$50,000 per appearance on the lecture circuit and has received hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants from such conservative benefactors as the Scaife and John M. Olin foundations.

Few vices have escaped Bennett's withering scorn. He has opined on everything from drinking to "homosexual unions" to "The Ricki Lake Show" to wife-swapping. There is one, however, that has largely escaped Bennett's wrath: gambling. This is a notable omission, since on this issue morality and public policy are deeply intertwined. During Bennett's years as a public figure, casinos, once restricted to Nevada and New Jersey, have expanded to 28 states, and the number continues to grow. In Maryland, where Ben-

JOSHUA GREEN is an editor of *The Washington Monthly*. This article originally appeared on May 2 at www.washingtonmonthly.com. On May 5, William Bennett announced, "My gambling days are over."