



# TILTING *at windmills*

By Charles Peters

## In good hands

As we celebrate the *Monthly's* forty years, I want to express my gratitude to my successor, Paul Glastris, for the job he has done guiding the magazine during the last eight years. He has demonstrated two gifts that are essential for an editor: a knack for picking talented people to do the reporting and for helping them produce articles that not only illuminate important issues but, when necessary, inspire people to reexamine their assumptions. The only serious disagreement we have had was on the Iraq War, which Paul originally favored and I opposed. And even there, I admired the intense patriotism behind his stand. From the moment we met, when he came to our conference on neoliberalism in 1983 as a very young man, I sensed something special in Paul. Now, after twenty-six years of friendship and working together, I am sure of it.

## Oblivious youth

By now, practically everyone agrees that the Obama administration misread history in thinking that the lesson to be learned from the failure of Clinton's health care bill was not to create its own bill. The reason the Clinton plan failed was not because it originated in the White House but because it was too complicated to explain.

The greatest casualty of Obama's failure to introduce his own bill in order to make clear from the beginning the specifics of his program has been the loss of support among senior citizens. Numerous early reports that "savings would come from Medicare" and the lack of information—or the misinformation—about the various bills have combined to make seniors anxious. Even my wife, a certifiable Obamaniac, has fretted about what's going to happen to her Medicare. And polls show a dangerous loss of support for health care reform from older Americans. The White House was insensitive to this

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danger for far too long, perhaps because there's not a single prominent graybeard on the White House staff.

## The Ivy obsession

One of the most depressing trends over the last few decades has been the increasing tendency to deem an Ivy League education as essential to success and the resulting desperate pressure parents exert on their children, even preschoolers, to do everything necessary to gain admission to one of these institutions. I am therefore delighted to see a column by the *Washing-*

*ton Post's* Jay Mathews listing individual after individual in field after field who has achieved conspicuous success without an Ivy League degree.

The alumni of this magazine are well known for doing well in their subsequent careers. Many of them are Ivies, but many others are not. Here are some of the colleges the latter group attended: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Augustana College, Occidental College, University of Michigan, Colorado College, Northwestern University, Johns Hopkins University, Marymount College, Vanderbilt University, Boston

University, University of the South, Bowdoin College, and the United States Naval Academy. Among the publications that chose to employ the non-Ivy *Monthly* alumni: the *New Yorker*, *Time*, the *Washington Post*, the

*Philadelphia Inquirer*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Slate*, and *Harper's*. Two went on to the *New Republic*; two others are now at the *New York Times*, and one is the editor of *Newsweek*. Of our two Pulitzer winners, one, Kate Boo, is an Ivy. But Taylor Branch attended North Carolina—on a football scholarship.

## Yale's New Haven line not selling as well, for some reason

I have long suspected that snobbery rather than educational merit motivates much of the obsession with the Ivy

League. Confirmation of my suspicion was recently provided by Harvard University, which has agreed to endorse a line of preppy clothing. It will appear in February under the name Harvard Yard.

### Policy by Obama, execution by Kafka

My wife recently received a letter from a friend who had been trying to get her mortgage modified under the Obama administration program to help those threatened with foreclosure. After five attempts to submit her information to the mortgage servicer she finally received an acknowledgment that her material had been received and it would take forty-five to sixty days to process. Then the great day arrived. Her application was approved! The only catch was that her monthly payment remained the same. When my wife's friend called to protest she was told a mistake had

of story is one "that other bankruptcy judges are hearing over and over again." Obama should expose banks like Wells Fargo that we bailed out when they were in trouble, but now drag their feet on helping those of us who need a break. And Congress should stop caving in to the lobbyists and give bankruptcy judges the right to modify mortgage debt just as they can other debt.

### Neocons and neolibis: Why they differ

Although I've been called the godfather of neoliberalism, I was always fond of Irving Kristol, the godfather of neoconservatism, who died recently. We had many things in common. In the 1940s, we even lived within a block or two of each other on the West Side of New York City. More significantly, we both became critics of conventional liberalism. The difference between

us was that seeing what was wrong with liberalism made him into a conservative, while I wanted to use the criticism to make liberalism better.

Over the years, I have speculated about what explained the different conclusions we had reached. One

experience stands out. We had served in the Army during World War II, but what happened to me strengthened my belief in democracy while his experience produced the opposite result. He suffered abuse from most of his fellow soldiers because he was a Jew. I, on the other hand, found myself not only liking but also respecting most of the men I was thrown together with. Bad apples existed, but they were a minority. Once, when one of them stole my fountain pen, fifteen one-dollar bills (which more than represented its value) were deposited on my bunk by the soldiers who shared my hut. And, incredibly, when I occupied a hospital room with a white Alabama farmer and a black Mississippi farmer

we not only got along, we had a lot of fun. I'm sure chance played a part in making our experiences so different, but given what happened it's not hard to understand how the liberalism of Charlie Peters and the conservatism of Irving Kristol came to be.

### The Office of Personnel Management Management

If you were looking for expertise in the realm of government personnel, you would think the Office of Personnel Management would be the place to find it. But according to the *Washington Post's* Joe Davidson, it seems the OPM is looking to contract outside experts to "provide comprehensive staffing and placement services covering a variety of occupations/series/grade levels . . . in both the competitive and excepted services." If OPM employees don't provide these services, what do they do?

### The greediest generation

In the neoliberal manifesto published here in May 1983, I worried about the tendency of liberals to "pull up the ladder," a syndrome perfectly captured by the title of the British film *I'm All Right Jack*, meaning I've got mine so I don't care if you get yours. For the American labor movement, it meant wage and benefit packages that in some cases were so generous that they threatened a company's prospects for future growth, sometimes even its survival, and thus its ability to hire new workers. The ladder had been pulled up.

I see a similar syndrome in today's seniors. They have their Medicare and they are so desperate to keep it untouchable that they have stopped caring what happens to people who don't have health insurance. I've criticized the Obama administration for its failure to foresee this problem, but the seniors themselves deserve blame. For instance, even sensible senators like Florida's Bill Nelson have been pressured by older constituents into supporting the program known as Medicare Advantage, which provides a

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been made but, alas, she would still have to resubmit all her paperwork. When she had done just that, she was told the time limit had expired!

I found the story hard to believe, even though my wife swore her friend is a totally credible person—but then I found a story headlined "Judges' Frustration Grows With Mortgage Servicers" by John Collins Rudolf in the *New York Times*. The judge was frustrated by Wells Fargo's failure to respond to a woman after she had submitted the necessary paperwork three times. "Each time she called to check on the request," reports the *Times*, "she was told to send her paperwork again."

So the friend's story is not unusual. Indeed, according to the judge, this kind

few additional benefits to some of its participants but is mainly a source of a huge and wasteful government subsidy to insurance companies.

### What would we ever need brakes for?

A front-page story in the *Wall Street Journal* reports that revenue-starved states are slashing services. The *Washington Post* reports an example from the District of Columbia, which ended its safety inspection of most private cars on October 1. The move will save \$400,000 a year, but cars will no longer be checked for eighty-one defects, including broken head- and taillights, worn-out brakes, and treadless tires.

It seems to me that the city has failed to make an important distinction. Cars of recent vintage may not need inspection, but how about all the clunkers that didn't get traded in—such as cars driven for 100,000 miles? And shouldn't brakes and tires be checked after 30,000?

### Terror at zero feet

It was nearly eleven years ago that planeloads of Northwest Airlines passengers were left stranded on the tarmac for as long as nine hours at the Detroit airport. In 2006, another planeload, this time of American Airlines passengers, found itself marooned at the Austin, Texas, airport for more than nine hours. In 2007, JetBlue passengers were left alone on their plane for eleven hours during an ice storm.

"Through July this year," reports Scott McCartney of the *Wall Street Journal*, "777 flights were stuck sitting for three hours or more."

So what has the FAA done about the problem? The answer is nothing. In late September of this year, there was a conference to discuss possible solutions to the problem. Nothing better illustrates the spinelessness of the FAA.

But if you want another example, consider the recent crash of a private plane and a helicopter over the Hudson

River. There have been scores of near misses in recent years in the airspace surrounding Manhattan. But the only action taken by the FAA was to limit flights over the East River, and that step was taken only after a private plane smashed into an Upper East Side apartment building.

The problem with the Federal Aviation Administration, which I pray Obama and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood will confront, is that it constantly caves before pressure from the airlines and the private pilots because of their influence over the congressional committees that oversee it and provide its funding. The media must also play a role in exposing the danger in public safety by this three-corner relationship between the lobbyists, Congress, and FAA bureaucrats.

For too long, the White House was insensitive to seniors' concerns about what health care reform would mean for Medicare, perhaps because there's not a single prominent graybeard on the White House staff.

### Smokejumpers on the Potomac

The U.S. Forest Service has awarded \$2.8 million in forest-fire-fighting money to Washington, D.C., reports Stephen Dinan of the *Washington Times*. To be sure, we probably have more trees than most other cities, but the fact remains that Washington is a very humid place, much of it having been built over a swamp. You would think that bone-dry areas like Southern California need that \$2.8 million a lot more than we do.

### A donut hole filled with drug-industry pork

I smelled a rat when Obama proudly announced in June that the drug industry had agreed to help Medicare patients fill the donut hole between the \$2,700 ceiling that currently exists on the cost of drugs subsidized by Medicare and \$6,153, which is now the threshold at which the subsidy kicks in again. The rat turned out to be that, in

return for that concession, Obama had agreed not to have Medicare bargain for drug price reduction as the Veterans Administration has done at such great savings to the taxpayer.

Now it appears there is still another rat. According to a Congressional Budget Office study reported by Duff Wilson of the *New York Times*, the "concession" would end up costing Medicare an additional \$17.4 billion over ten years. The reason is that plugging the donut hole will keep seniors on brand-name drugs instead of encouraging them to switch to generics when the \$2,700 is reached.

Now they'll still be buying the brand names when they reach the other side of the hole. And when they get there, the subsidy rises to 95 percent, which means more costs to Medicare and more profit for the drug industry.

### First Amendment, Inc.

In the case just argued in the Supreme Court involving a corporate-sponsored film attacking Hillary Clinton, the issue is whether a corporation enjoys the right of free speech. The argument that it does have such a right is based on the concept that the corporation is a "person," which it clearly is not. This absurd concept found its way into the law with the 1886 Supreme Court decision in *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Company*. Since then, corporations have tried to expand the reasonable point that corporations should have some rights enjoyed by an individual—to sue and be sued, for example—to justify rights like a corporate right to free-



dom of speech that make no sense at all. A constitutional scholar, Garrett Epps, who attended the recent Supreme Court hearings, tells me that John Roberts and Antonin Scalia actually seemed to feel that the corporation enjoys more rights than the individual.

## K Street blues

We have seen the power of industry lobbyists demonstrated again and again in the last year not just on mortgage reform, but on health reform and airline safety. It also threatens any real reform of the regulation of Wall Street.

The power of lobbyists over Congress has grown dramatically during my

fluenced by the access provided to those who do the contributing or arrange it. This, I fear—along with the manipulation of congressional districts to provide safe seats, which has left the Republican Party prisoner to its deranged extreme right wing—accounts for much of the tough going reform has faced this year. Another factor that cannot be overstated is the increasing sophistication corporations have displayed in the selection of individuals to do the lobbying. They hire people like Tom Daschle, who are regarded with respect and affection by those they are hired to influence. If you're an official, you often find that they're your pals. They live next door

and their kids play with your kids. They often have similar views on public issues. Some have even fought as your comrades in the same political battles. All this is what makes them so seductive, their advice so hard to resist even when you should know better.

But the seniors themselves deserve blame—too many of them are so desperate to keep their Medicare untouchable that they have stopped caring what happens to the uninsured.

forty-eight years in Washington. What's happened is, the reforms made during the Kennedy-Johnson administration and by Democratic Congresses in the early years of the Nixon administration frightened the nation's big shots. In the 1970s, they moved their trade associations to Washington, hired lobbyists, and brought about an explosion of new office buildings on the K Street-Connecticut Avenue axis. The number of outright lobbyists and the number of lawyers, who are mainly lobbyists, has also exploded. And as we all now know, they learned a great secret—that they could do indirectly through campaign contributions what they could not do with outright direct payments to officials.

Officials who would never dream of accepting an outright bribe will gratefully accept campaign contributions and, consciously or unconsciously, be in-

## Intelligence made to order

Suspicious that most of us have had about the CIA under George W. Bush are confirmed by a recent study by the Brookings Institution. It finds that analysts at the CIA were rewarded for having their reports included in the President's Daily Brief and that their findings were more likely to make it into the brief if they were perceived to be of the sort that attracted presidential interest, meaning in Bush's case items like "evidence" that Iraq had WMDs. One carefully worded Brookings conclusion, as reported by Walter Pincus of the *Washington Post*: "Focusing on producing PDB items that would draw favorable comment from Bush could have skewed 'topic selection and treatment in the analytic community.'" Translated from

Brookingspeak, this means they gave Bush what he wanted to hear.

## The revolt against the generals

I am getting fed up with the generals and politicians who urge committing large numbers of new troops to Afghanistan. Generals don't get killed, neither do politicians. But thousands of soldiers have lost their lives and many thousands more have suffered terrible wounds in Iraq or Afghanistan. There is a fact that I have stated several times in this column to little effect, but when I state it to strangers they are astonished. That fact is this: most enlisted men had to serve a total of only one year in Vietnam, many officers only six months. Please share this fact with all your friends. I dream of seeing an uprising against all the generals and politicians who blithely offer more soldiers to the meat grinder of their third, fourth, or fifth combat tours, some lasting as long as eighteen months.

My worst fear is that this is another example of pulling up the ladder. More than 90 percent of Americans do not serve in the military. They are no more likely to be killed than the generals and the politicians. I am very much afraid that they don't care as much as they should about this terrible problem.

## Checkup, Aisle 3

Here's some good news, for a change. Those walk-in medical clinics you see at Wal-Mart, Walgreens, CVS, and other stores, according to a study by the RAND Corporation reported by the *Washington Post*'s Margaret Shapiro, "provide care for routine illnesses that is as good as, and costs less than, similar care offered in doctors' offices, hospital emergency rooms and urgent care centers." This is especially important news with regard to emergency rooms, where so many health care dollars are squandered providing gold-plated care for minor ailments. Shapiro calls the cost savings in the case of these emergency rooms "quite dramatic." WM

Charles Peters is the founding editor of the *Washington Monthly*.

# TEN MILES SQUARE

*"...such( District (not exceeding ten Miles square) ...[shall] become the Seat of the Government of the United States"*  
THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES

## Glenn Beck's Book Club

What the far right is reading.

By David Weigel

At the first antitax Tea Parties in February, some of the conservative malcontents who took to their city parks and traffic intersections to protest President Barack Obama's policies waved placards they'd designed that morning: "Atlas is Shrugging" and "Who is John Galt?" They were making reference to *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand's 1957 novel, in which productive members of society rebel and retreat from the economy, leaving the "looters" to reap what their high taxes and regulation had sown. The signs were there, literally, from the get-go: the conservative reaction to Democratic rule was rooted in apocalyptic visions of a state gone mad, between two covers.

In subsequent months, the right-wing revolt against Obama has continued to seek inspiration from printed manifestos. While the old guard, the Sean Hannitys and Bill O'Reillys, can still sell books, the titles that appear more prominently in Amazon rankings and on folding tables at marches are a mix of newer stars and unlikely ur-texts. They have adopted an old

guide for the left because they think liberals used it to plot their political takeover. They've latched onto other books that promise to reveal how so many of their fellow Americans have been lulled into supporting Europe-style socialism. The movement's most popular books have loftier aspirations, providing activists with new ammunition—from the Founders, economists, the conservative media—to rebel against the president.

***Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*, by Saul Alinsky (1971).** John McCain's too-late attempt to tar Obama with his connections to New Left veterans like Bill Ayers didn't amount to much at the polls. Ironically, that failure convinced many conservatives that Obama's wild-eyed pals and mentors had been on to something, and this 1971 tract by famed community organizer Saul Alinsky, long a mainstay of the activist left, is now required reading on the right as well. New employees of Dick Armey's FreedomWorks get copies at the door; James O'Keefe III, the cheeky twenty-five-year-

old who planned the hidden-camera sting of ACORN, said he was inspired by Alinsky's call for lefty radicals to "make the enemy live up to their own book of rules."

Alinsky's recommendation to mock political opponents has been even more influential. "It is almost impossible to counterattack ridicule," he writes. "Also it infuriates the opposition, who then react to your advantage." For evidence of how that works, ask Susan Roesgen, a CNN reporter who grew enraged by a Tea Party sign comparing Obama to Hitler, snapped at a protester, and lost her job.

***The 5000 Year Leap: A Miracle That Changed the World*, by W. Cleon Skousen (1981).** During his lifetime, W. Cleon Skousen—Mormon theologian, historian, and New World Order conspiracist—was regarded by most mainstream conservatives as a kook. In many bookstores it would've been hard to find a copy of his 1981 book *The 5000 Year Leap*, in which Skousen—who died in 2006—argued that the Founders were divinely inspired when they drafted the Constitution, and were convinced that "without religion the government of a free people cannot be maintained."

Fortunately for Skousen's publishers, the historian has found a posthumous disciple in Glenn Beck, who wrote the forward to the new edition of *The 5000 Year Leap* and has called the book "essential to understanding why our Founders built this Republic the way they did." The book