

**50 ESSAYS REFLECTING A RECORD OF 'PRIOR CONVICTIONS'
COMPILED FROM A QUARTER CENTURY OF PETTY PUNDITRY**

Starving for attention

Whenever any segment of the population denied recognition, there's always that its members might indulge unseemly or even desperate acts in attempt to attain it.

A case in point is this country's sorry record of neglect and disdain toward one of its least visible and most misunderstood minority groups.

I'm talking, mind you, about human-beings routinely being held back from self-actualization by a combination of inheritance and the prejudices peculiar to our society. As a result, they are often

Continued on page

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One of the most intriguing revelations I ever remember having come up in a book I read some years ago was *A Modern Incarnation* by the Salem Witch by the new English historian Marion L. Starkey. After chronicling the hysteria that gripped the village of Salem when a group of young girls took to accusing various individuals of the occult, of witchcraft, for which a number of them were subsequently convicted and hanged, the author provided this anecdotal note, which proved to be the antidote:

Continued on page A12

**There's nothing like fear itself
to see us through fearful times**

Assuming office at the height of the Great Depression, at a time when it appeared that America's economic system might not survive, an ebullient

President Franklin D. Roosevelt buoyed up the nation by famously and fearlessly declaring that there was really “nothing to fear but fear itself.” But that was then. Today, as we contend with

another major economic crisis, albeit one not quite as severe (not yet, anyway), fear is nothing if not a palpable and pervasive presence forever keeping us

Continued on page 10

A30

Segregation of lawyers: it's no joke

who su
develo
cancer
ag
to sell
me in a
advisi
upon
learning that he
was a lawyer

Turns out the developer didn't want to sell to any lawyers who might subsequently threaten to sue him. Think that's another one of those lawyer jokes, do you? No, my friend, this story, which comes out of Bakersfield, Calif., is perfectly legit. In other words,

Continued on page

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INSIDE SECTIONS	THEORIES OF EVOLUTION	ANECDOTAL ANOMALIES	OBJECTS OF MY OBJECTION	WRITING WRONGS
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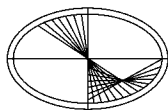
BILL BONVIE

REPEAT OFFENDERS

50 ESSAYS REFLECTING A RECORD
OF 'PRIOR CONVICTIONS'
COMPILED FROM A QUARTER CENTURY
OF PETTY PUNDITRY



BILL BONVIE



DIVERTIR
PUBLISHING

Salem, NH

REPEAT OFFENDERS

Bill Bonvie

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Dedication

*This book is dedicated to Linda,
my amazing little sister and secret weapon,
and to the memory of my mother, Pauline Comanor,
and my grandparents, Harry and Fanny Comanor.*

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BACKWORD*

When I first entered the newspaper business at the callow age of 21, the thing I found most appealing about it was the mantle of “objectivity” it provided, which for me afforded a kind of protection not unlike Harry Potter’s cloak of invisibility. In fact, it had the effect of making me feel a bit like some extraterrestrial being with no apparent opinions of my own on the various earthly issues and controversies I was assigned to cover. I was thus free to go about interviewing individuals of every stripe, including those I might ordinarily have regarded as repugnant (e.g., a “king kleagle” of the Ku Klux Klan), and do so with a straight face, never seeming to take sides, even when, from my unseasoned perspective, there was only one side with any legitimacy.

The problem was I did have opinions—and, like anything severely suppressed and muzzled, they were always on the verge of open rebellion (especially as I came to learn more and more about how the Real World operated). The chance for those bottled-up convictions to break free finally came in 1982 when I left the unyielding impartiality of the newsroom to work as a freelance copywriter for Connecticut advertising agencies. Rather than expressing them in a straightforward way, I tried a tongue-in-cheek approach, portraying then-President Ronald Reagan as a secret Soviet agent bent on discrediting capitalism (this incidentally, was well before his “comradeship” with Mikhail Gorbachev):

“It now appears that the much-maligned House Un-American Activities Committee of the 1950s was right all along when it tried to sound the alarm about the extent of the ideological menace within the show business community.”

I subsequently sold the piece to the op-ed page of *The Hartford Courant*, and thus became hooked on a life of petty punditry I have been more or less enmeshed in ever since.

REPEAT OFFENDERS

All 50 essays contained in this book are selected from a much larger assortment; all published over the past 25 years on the op-ed and commentary pages of various newspapers, with subsequent developments noted whenever it seemed appropriate to include them. During that time, more than a few readers seem to have been offended by the ideas I've expressed in such dissertations, judging from many of the letters to the editor they elicited. But that's as it should be, because if no one were riled by any of my views, they wouldn't be worth venting—let alone repeating. And while some of the issues I've addressed have been put to rest, I have no doubt what I've had to say about others may still be capable of re-offending, because the basic bones of contention somehow never quite managed to stay buried.

It goes without saying most pundits have some sort of an ideological ax to grind, causing opinion-page editors to attempt to “balance” the contributions they feature on any given day. (And, as you may have already ascertained, mine tend to be a left-handed ax, although on certain issues—especially cultural ones—I can become ambidextrous.) But if you want to know my opinion of what really drives the continuous compulsion to go on record with one's opinions—the thing anybody who does so on a professional basis really desires—I would venture it's the supreme satisfaction of being able to say “I told you so.” The down side of this, however, is the way it reveals how little influence contemporary pundits actually possess (including those sages who, unlike myself, are blessed with syndication), as opposed to those of years past who actually had the ability to sway policy decisions.

One example of what I'm talking about was an essay of mine that appeared in *The SandPaper*, (a weekly based in Long Beach Island, N.J. to which I have contributed commentary for more than two decades) back in 2005, which ran under the headline, “Florida Sets Perilous New Preemption Precedent”—one of many, for various reasons, I chose not to include in this book. The piece was one I opened discussing two then-current episodes in which seemingly “good people” had been implicated in fatal gun violence, including one reported in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* involving a man who was shot upon answering his doorbell by a former coworker whose apparent motive was the victim once told a joke that offended him (a case I noted was strikingly similar to a fictional scenario envisioned by author Kurt Vonnegut in his novel *Slaughterhouse Five*). I then went on to note that on the same day

that was being given prominent media coverage, “yet another news report made it clear when it comes to the act of deliberately shooting someone, a terrible precedent was indeed already being set.” I was referring to the passage of Florida’s “stand your ground” law, which I thought should cause “visitors to the Sunshine State (to) best beware of Floridians bearing arms. That’s because anything you say or do might in any way be perceived as threatening to a Florida resident could quite conceivably result in your quite legally being shot dead.”

After speculating on some of the circumstances that might lead to such a lethal encounter, I concluded the column by warning readers that:

“...if you have any current plans to go to Florida, you might want to consider whether to pack a pistol along with the cabana wear, perhaps after first taking some time to master the art of the quick draw. After all, you never know when someone might take offense at something you say (even jokingly), decide to make their day at your expense, or simply perceive you as a threat requiring personal preemptive action. And in this case, forewarned might quite literally be forearmed.”

Suffice it to say, more than eight years and some two dozen or so such state laws later—the dangers inherent in Florida’s original “stand your ground” statute has suddenly become the focus of the U.S. attorney general and just about every news and public-affairs program being aired in the country, following the acquittal of former neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman in the shooting death of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin. So much for the satisfaction of being able to say “I told you so” when (as I noted in a more recent column) “the thing that vindicates your views is some tragedy or calamity you could clearly see coming, yet with no power or influence to alter the course of events.” Or, put another way, “for those of us who practice the art of punditry, there’s only one thing worse than being proven wrong...and that’s being proved right.”

The following collection of “repeat offenders” is very much a mixed bag in terms of both tone and subject matter, ranging from the fanciful and satirical projections in the sections *Theories of Evolution* and *Trials and Errors*, to the somewhat more sober interpretations of worldly events offered in

REPEAT OFFENDERS

Observation Platforms. Some are intended to be slightly ridiculous (e.g., “Doing justice to the presidency”), while others readers may find somewhat revealing (e.g., the collusion between regulators and regulated suggested in the essay “Industry in the FDA’s corner”), reflecting the fact a reporter’s instinct is something one never quite loses. I trust those who read them, (or perhaps in some cases, re-read them), will be able to discern the difference.

I can only add in the unlikely event you still have a copy of a newspaper in which one of these first appeared (perhaps because you’re a candidate for the TV show “Hoarders”) and happen to notice slight variations in the current version, that’s because I have taken the liberty of revising or re-editing each one as I saw fit—for as anyone in the business of writing will tell you, there are inevitably things that end up on the printed page that he or she would like to have done differently. You should also know whenever possible, I tried my best to avoid committing “unoriginal sin”—an offense repeated far too often these days by dateline-plagued pundits and reporters alike.

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July 2014

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* You won’t find “Backword” in the dictionary so don’t bother looking. It’s a word I invented to mean the antithesis of “Foreword.”

ILLUSION INTRUSIONS

A CAREER NEARLY NIPPED IN THE BUD BY AN ENCOUNTER WITH 'MR. QUAKER'

(Originally published in The Philadelphia Inquirer, April 2004, and featured at the Poynter Institute's Romenesko website.)

Like anyone who has toiled in the verbal vineyards of print journalism, I couldn't help but empathize with the plight of the two reporters whose recordings of a speech by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia in Hattiesburg, Miss., were confiscated by a federal marshal.

I was particularly moved by how Antoinette Konz, a 25-year-old education reporter for the *Hattiesburg American*, described the experience to *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert: "I went back to the office, and I just felt absolutely—I just felt horrible."

It reminded me of how I felt as a budding journalist during a long-ago encounter of my own, which, like Konz's, also took place at a high school assembly down South.

Unlike Konz, however, I was not yet a professional—and had I not been able to muster sufficient aplomb to rise above the psychological trauma and humiliation of the incident, I might never have become one. I was just beginning to learn the fundamentals of my craft on that day in 1961 at Winter Park High School in Florida when my journalism instructor assigned me to cover an appearance by a distinguished visitor—an iconic figure probably far more recognizable to us than Justice Scalia may have been to the students of Hattiesburg's Presbyterian Christian High School.

It was none other than "Mr. Quaker"—the real-life, authentically garbed symbol of the Quaker Oats Company, looking exactly as if he had just stepped off of a box of Puffed Rice.

Having no recording device, I went to the occasion prepared with a notepad and pen. Like the two reporters assigned to cover the

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good justice's speech, I ensconced myself in the front row of the auditorium so as not to miss a nugget of Mr. Quaker's wisdom.

And, just as they did, I soon discovered that calling attention to myself in that manner was a big mistake.

No sooner had I begun taking notes on Mr. Quaker's quotes than he paused and, fixing me with a glare made all the more stern by his austere attire, announced for all to hear that this was neither the time nor place to be doing one's homework.

Having thus been transformed in an instant from neophyte newsman into the cynosure of scorn, I self-consciously put aside my writing tools and, notwithstanding my sense of ignominy, tried as best as I could to mentally record the rhetorical points made by Mr. Quaker. From the account I ended up turning in (albeit one lacking in precise, accurate quotations), his sermon was very much in keeping with the ideas that many ideologues of that Cold War period were eager to instill in us.

In essence, he told us that the time was rapidly approaching when the Free World would have to confront the growing menace of communism, and that it was the members of our generation who would ultimately be called on to go out and meet it head on. Having conveyed that chilling (and somewhat prescient) message, Mr. Quaker climaxed his oratory with a dramatic recitation of Edward Everett Hale's "The Man Without a Country."

It was fortunate for me that, just as we were being dismissed, I was able to again catch Mr. Quaker's attention long enough to let him know what I was really doing there.

He was naturally very apologetic for having rebuked me so openly and for keeping me from carrying out my assignment in a more precise manner. At least I would not have to go around feeling forever upbraided by a glimpse of his white-locked countenance on supermarket shelves, in television commercials, or on the breakfast table.

What I failed to mention to him, however, was that I had spent a year attending a Quaker-run boarding school in Pennsylvania, and that his bellicose message somehow just didn't seem to jibe with the decidedly pacifistic views held by the Quakers of my acquaintance.

It would be a while before I developed enough nerve to raise that kind of discrepancy with the subject of a story or interview.

But my experience that day, I now realize, would prove more valuable to my career than most of the conventional lessons I learned in either my high school or college journalism classes. What it taught me was to always maintain a certain amount of skepticism toward the trappings of authority. For example, to no more expect a black-robed Supreme Court justice to embrace the First Amendment than to assume a costumed corporate faker personifies the quintessential Quaker.

And it taught me, whenever possible, to avoid front-row seats.

Author's note: The countenance of Mr. Quaker continues to grace boxes of Quaker Oats products, but he has more recently been referred to in advertising as "The Quaker Man." However, in March 2012, it was announced that his image was being given a makeover, with shorter hair, his double chin removed and "the rolls and plumpness in his face and neck" smoothed out to better exemplify the "energy and healthy choices" associated with oatmeal. (The news story on this change, incidentally, also gave his name as "Larry," which was definitely not the first name of the "Mr. Quaker" whose appearance I wrote about in high school.)

STARVING FOR ATTENTION

*(Originally published in The Berkshire Eagle and
The SandPaper, February 1996)*

Whenever any segment of the population is denied recognition, there's always the risk that its members might indulge in unseemly or even desperate acts to attain it.

A case in point is this country's sorry record of neglect and disdain toward one of its least visible and most misunderstood minority groups.

I'm talking, mind you, about human beings routinely being held back from self-actualization by a combination of inheritance and the prejudices peculiar to our society. As a result, they are often stripped of self-respect, frustrated in their aspirations and even deprived of the chance to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

Indeed, the plight of America's affluent is nothing short of a national disgrace. To anyone with even an ounce of compassion, in fact, it should be obvious by now that, sequestered behind the walls of their elegant estates and penthouses, a good many of these "idle rich" are actually starving for attention.

That such appalling conditions need not exist has been amply demonstrated by other cultures that are more charitable and less mean-spirited toward those of means. In Britain, for instance, a simple title such as "Lord," "Lady," or "Sir" before one's name is usually sufficient to ensure that a wealthy person will be accorded a proper measure of esteem.

America, unfortunately, offers no such guarantees to individuals whom fortune has robbed of the right to otherwise distinguish themselves. Lacking any official acknowledgment of their nobility, such poor plutocratic souls have been too weighed down by wealth to rise to the challenge of daily survival so many others of us take for granted.

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Nor can they aspire to higher goals without having any potential accomplishment or position tainted in advance by suspicion of undue influence.

It's little wonder then, that the nation's well-heeled are having to resort to various indecorous—even bizarre—tactics in their determination to achieve some form of recognition.

A typical example is what American Express is currently offering to those crying-out-to-be-noticed members whose wealth permits them to accumulate 500,000 membership rewards—I'm talking about the once-in-a-lifetime chance to be seen in a “fashion creation by Academy Award Winner Lizzy Gardiner.”

Lizzy, the designer who, according to the company, “generated quite a charge” at last year's Oscar presentation with her “Gold Card Dress,” is now described as ready to turn those half-a-million points into “your own outfit that people will be talking about for years.” The offer includes a discussion with her of “your needs and ideas,” your approval of sketches based on them, and, finally, the chance to make “a grand, conversation-stopping entrance” in the resulting getup.

The whole idea, then, seems to be one aimed at getting one's circle of friends and associates to stop talking about whatever topics they were discussing and talk about you instead (assuming, that is, that you're the person who can afford to charge the requisite amount of money on your American Express card).

To achieve that desired end, however, United Airlines may have come up with an even better idea.

According to its consumer bulletin, Friendly Skies, all an extremely frequent flier need do is submit the highest bid of 150,000 miles or more in the airline's frequent-flier-mile auction to “actually appear in a walk-on role” in an episode of the popular sitcom “Seinfeld” (with United providing the first-class transportation to boot).

Missing from this description is just what kind of walk-on role might be involved. Would a successful bidder be the object of Jerry's sarcasm, unthinkingly insulted by Elaine, used in some devious manner by George, perhaps even accidentally knocked out by Kramer? Or might he or she be the butt of some off-color or downright vulgar

jest? It doesn't apparently matter—all that's really important is the importance that comes simply from making one's entrance on a top-rated show, being seen by millions, and becoming the resultant topic of discussion among one's social set.

Pathetic as they may appear, such promotions, which are no doubt the result of careful marketing research, represent the only real attempt to address the unfulfilled needs of America's elite—needs that can lead to ill-fated attempts at self-aggrandizement when society fails to take them seriously.

What better illustration of this can be given than one found on a 1987 postage stamp? The \$5 stamp in question, according to a newspaper account, was issued by the Caribbean nation of Antigua and Barbuda, and bears the likeness of one John E. du Pont, identified as the “Father of Triathlon in the Americas” on the accompanying sheet, which depicts him running in “Team Foxcatcher” athletic garb along with portrayals of a cyclist and swimmer.

It also bears the name of a place called Redonda, an island that is essentially uninhabited. But that small deficiency didn't keep this particular heir to the du Pont fortune from reportedly paying \$10,000 to be lionized by it on a stamp. So desperate was he for renown from any source.

No need to go into the rest of the sad saga of John E. du Pont, except to note that had he been living in a more enlightened and benevolent country, and accorded the honor of its stamp of approval and recognition—as “Lord Foxcatcher,” say—instead of vainly attempting to create one, perhaps his subsequent descent into madness and murder could have been averted.

The point is that a little compassion in the form of a little recognition could go a long way toward helping those disadvantaged by excessive advantages. Remember, this is America—where being rich is something that can happen to anyone.

HOW AN ITSY-BITSY INCONGRUITY CAN UNRAVEL A ‘GOSPEL TRUTH’

(Originally published in The SandPaper, November 2006)

As a veteran of the newspaper business, I’ve worn a variety of journalistic hats in the course of my somewhat haphazard career. In a couple of jobs, for instance, my headgear included that of people column editor on some nights and obituary page editor on others.

The people column could be fun, at least the way I liked to handle it, trying to come up with clever or humorous headlines and captions on various celebrity-related items. An example that comes to mind is a one-liner I devised for an interview with songwriter Randy Newman, in which he decried the fact that years after penning his song “Short People,” he was still getting flak from those who failed to grasp that it was actually a parody on prejudice. “Short on comprehension” was the way I summed up that particular item.

The obituary page was something else entirely. In addition to being a far more solemn responsibility, it could be quite tedious, involving having to confirm numerous facts or fill in missing bits and pieces of information—at least the way I did it, which some of my colleagues thought was a little too picky. But I steadfastly maintained that accuracy and thoroughness were nowhere more important.

So it was with both interest and incredulity that I recently chanced to read an Associated Press obituary for Paul Van Valkenburgh of Ormond Beach, Florida, whose particular claim to fame was having written the 1960s pop hit “Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini” under the name Paul Vance.

What most intrigued me about this particular obit, however, was what it had to say about the military service record of Valkenburgh, whose age was given as 68. According to his wife, he was a Navy

veteran of the Korean War—which, by my own calculations, would have made him no older than 15 at the time he allegedly served.

Perhaps he had lied about his age. But whatever the case, it was evident that someone at the AP had neglected to do their math homework before sending this story over the wires.

And sure enough, my suspicions that something was indeed amiss were confirmed a couple days later when I spotted a follow-up in, of all places, the people column. Only the misrepresentation involved turned out to be a lot more substantial than the discrepancy I had noticed.

It seems the late Mr. Valkenburgh had been merely pretending to be Paul Vance, who was actually alive and well and still receiving royalty payments for the song at his Coral Springs, Florida home.

Of course, had the writer of this off-base obituary (or the editor) taken the time to fact check the timeline of the Korean War (if he or she didn't already know it) and correlate it with the impostor's reported age, it might have given rise to other questions about its validity as well, and caused the entire fabric of this fabrication to unravel.

But the tendency to take things for granted and accept them at face value without even the most cursory examination seems to have become a component of our national character. We just assume that we're in possession of accurate information (once having assumed that it came from a reliable source)—then proceed on that assumption when, in fact, it may be a complete fallacy.

Think of all the faithful folks, for instance, who flocked to movie theaters a couple years ago to view the opus, *The Passion of the Christ*, not just for its agonizing reenactment for the Crucifixion, but on the apparent assumption that it somehow represented a repudiation of the much-despised Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

This controversial—and rather gruesome—simulation, in fact, was constantly hyped by religious conservatives, including many right-wing clergy, as the cinematic antidote to the anti-Bush, anti-Iraq War venom contained in the Moore documentary.

Just why it became such an article of faith that Moore's tragicomic examination of the administration's response to the events of 9/11 was somehow contradicted by Mel Gibson's celluloid "Passion play"

was never entirely clear. Perhaps it could be attributed to the belief that administration critics were just naturally “godless”—a holier-than-thou attitude on the part of many in the Bush camp that their born-again candidate’s claim to divine guidance made any such attack on his policies equivalent to a crown of thorns, and its perpetrators in effect the anti-Christ.

Whatever the explanation, the idea that *The Passion* was the unofficial theme movie of the Bush campaign (as *Fahrenheit* seemed to be for its opposition) soon became one of those truths held by both the public and the media to be self-evident. Given such a popular presumption, the idea that the blue-collar radical Moore and the admittedly conservative Gibson might have shared similar sentiments would have been nothing short of heresy—so nobody apparently bothered to inquire.

It was therefore rather intriguing to read—again, in the people column, only two days before the bogus “bikini” obituary—that such was indeed the case.

It seems that while promoting his latest movie, *Apocalypto*, at a Texas film festival, Gibson couldn’t resist comparing the present state of affairs with the collapse of the Mayan empire depicted in the film. “The precursors to a civilization that’s going under are the same time and again,” he said, adding, “What’s human sacrifice if not sending guys off to Iraq for no reason?”

What I also found interesting was that this apparently cold sober assessment elicited nothing like the kind of furor with which the media and public responded to Gibson’s drunken anti-Semitic harangue during a traffic stop. It didn’t even come up during a much-hyped subsequent recent interview he had with ABC’s Diane Sawyer, in which he attempted to reconcile his behavior while under the influence.

But then, Gibson himself had earlier acknowledged (also without a great deal of fanfare) that the idea he and Moore had made culturally and politically antithetical movies was in essence a hoax that had been perpetrated on the public. At the 31st Annual People’s Choice awards back in January of last year, he admitted that he had seen *Fahrenheit* and “liked it,” adding, “I feel a kind of strange kinship with Michael. I mean, they’re trying to pit us against each other in the press,

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but...they've really got nothing to do with one another. They were used as some kind of divisive left-right thing." Moore, it should be noted, reciprocated by calling *Passion* a "powerful piece of filmmaking."

All of which, in retrospect, would appear to neatly jibe with what former White House insider David Kuo, describes as an administration that exploited the evangelical movement while privately deriding it in his newly released account, *Tempting Faith*.

And which, on a broader scale, should serve to once again remind us (as if the war itself wasn't enough) of the importance of critically examining the assumptions we're handed rather than simply accepting them as gospel truths.

It needn't take much, after all, to uncover the fact that we're being conned—perhaps no more than some itchy bitsy teenie weenie discrepancy buried in the back pages or the people column of your local paper—to start unraveling the whole thing. But by failing to do so, we can rest assured that we'll continue to be caught short on comprehension.

NOTES FROM THE ANTI-CONDOIST UNDERGROUND

(Originally published in the Hartford and Valley Advocates, 1987)

A community with a name like Greenacres City, Florida hardly sounds like the sort of place that could not accommodate a solitary gardenia.

Yet, that appears to be the case set forth in a \$5,000 lawsuit filed against the Buttonwood Homeowners Association by a couple claiming that one of the association's officers deliberately ripped such a plant from their yard.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the plaintiffs allege that the association harassed them from the time they planted the gardenia in question and kept it under "surveillance."

Is it simply another one of those frivolous lawsuits? You might think so. But if you do, it's obvious that you've so far been spared the harsh realities of life under "Condoism."

As someone with first-hand knowledge of the tyrannies that this oppressive new system (which include so-called homeowners associations such as the aforementioned Buttonwood) is now spreading throughout the land, I can readily identify with the beleaguered plaintiffs in this matter.

Their experience, in fact, is reminiscent of one suffered by my own family a few years back, when a magnificent giant marigold that had been lovingly nurtured from a seedling beneath the window of our rented Connecticut condominium was unceremoniously cut down in the prime of life by one of the hired mercenaries who had become, in effect, a force of occupation (even while appearing to be occupied with a seemingly endless assortment of lawn and gardening tasks).

While the reported justification for the uprooting of the Greeacres City gardenia was that it stood in the way of mowers and sprinklers, no such excuse was even thought necessary for the extermination of

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our marigold. Its rationale, however, became evident enough only too soon in the form of a general communiqué from the head of the “garden committee” stressing said committee’s intent to ensure that a “uniform” exterior appearance was maintained as strictly as possible.

No matter what the official explanation offered for such abuses, however, these and similar episodes represent what is often the first bold step to be taken by Condoist oppressors in the systematic subjugation of their neighbors: the abolition of fundamental floral freedom. In Condoist society, people soon learn that that cultivation of the bloom of their choice is something they must practice in secret deep within the interior recesses of their own units.

And that’s only one of the numerous human-rights violations that routinely occur whenever Condoist governments successfully manage to usurp basic liberties.

Having lived in Condoist communities for several years as a “unit dweller” (more specifically, as a member of a subset of unit dwellers known as “renters,” whom Condoist officials tend to regard as undesirables in their midst), and having spent much of that time as a clandestine member of the anti-Condoist underground, I can readily attest to the existence of many of these repressive practices in everyday life there, including:

Suppression of individualism. If there’s anything that arouses the antipathy of a dedicated Condoist official, it’s evidence of individualist tendencies among those existing within his or her domain. That’s why Condoist governments will go to such unusual lengths to discourage activities reflecting individual initiative (e.g., the planting of nonconforming flowers) and to foster an image of “uniformity.”

Unrelenting surveillance. Under Condoist rule, it isn’t just something reserved for the likes of unauthorized gardenias. The chilling fact is that it’s almost impossible to reside in a Condoist community without having the uncomfortable sensation that almost all of one activities and movements are under careful scrutiny—as indeed they are.

Nor are Condoist authorities content to limit such surveillance merely to exteriors, where routine patrols are ever on the alert for rule violations, such as outlawed decorative objects and recreational equipment on

unit balconies and patios deemed part of the “common area.” Indeed, there have been instances of people being spied on inside the supposed privacy of their bedrooms—again by these same ubiquitous grounds keepers, whom residents have spotted standing just outside their windows by the dawn's early light.

Stifling of dissent. Like authoritarian regimes everywhere, the “boards” and “associations” that rule condominium collectives have little tolerance for anyone who dares to openly voice opposition to their policies or pronouncements. The most common measure employed to silence such dissenters is the threat of fines. Ostensibly intended to curb proscribed behavior and rule infractions, such fines in actuality represent a convenient means of cracking down on suspected subversives.

Served on targeted individuals without any semblance of due process, notices of fines are usually accompanied or followed by threats of liens and confiscation of property if said penalties are not promptly paid and supposed violations immediately desisted from. In the case of renters, fines may be used to apply pressure to landlords to have the offending unit dweller driven into permanent exile from the community.

An episode that recently occurred in a typical suburban condo complex provides a chilling illustration of the manner in which such measures are routinely utilized for purposes of intimidation and coercion. It involved a usually mild-mannered former reporter who had just ventured out of his rented condo unit for the purpose of taking the family dog for a midday walk (the canine in question, a valued toy poodle, always being scrupulously leashed when outdoors). Hearing shouts behind him, accompanied by a loud cracking noise, he turned around just in time to see a large tree come crashing to earth at a point both he and the dog had traversed only seconds before. The fallen sycamore had landed not only squarely across the sidewalk, but the street as well, thus blocking the only vehicular access to and egress from the complex itself.

Ascertaining that this close call had not been due to an act of god, but rather to that of a tree-cutting service, the ex-reporter politely attempted to make known his concern about the incident to the foreman,

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only to find himself rebuffed in the most unpleasant terms imaginable. Somewhat put off by this response, the near-victim spotted the individual in charge of performing maintenance duties, whom he proceeded to apprise of the incident. The maintenance supervisor replied that he, too, had had occasion to observe the carelessness of these particular tree cutters, and asked if the indignant renter would mind accompanying him to the upcoming “Board” meeting to relate what had occurred to those responsible for engaging their services.

Thus reinforced, the chagrined ex-reporter ventured the following night into the presence of the Board— a more forbidding and stern-visaged panel than ever he recalled having encountered in all his years of covering various governmental bodies—and, after providing his name and unit number, proceeded to give an account of what had taken place. Other than a perfunctory thank you, however, he received no immediate reply. He did, however, chance to bump into the maintenance supervisor the next day, only to learn that the latter had just been summarily relieved of his duties.

It took a bit longer for an official response of sorts to arrive from an officer of the Board, which while it made no direct reference to the tree-cutting complaint, did have a lot to say on the subject of “dog roaming.” According to the official, the unit dwellers residing at the renter’s address had been warned about dog roaming “many times.” Accompanying the notice was a rather unpleasant ultimatum from the renter’s corporate landlord.

Torture. The notion that, amid the apparent suburban tranquility of such an enlightened country as ours, people are actually being tortured may be an extremely difficult one for many Americans to accept. I might have had difficulty believing it myself were it not for my own personal knowledge of the fact that deep inside the confines of Condoist enclaves, specialists in the art of torture are routinely engaged to indiscriminately inflict it on men, women and children of all ages.

The method of torture most favored is the use of giant lawnmowers, multiple leaf blowers and other electrically powered gardening devices whose decibel emissions can be amplified to excruciatingly

painful levels for unbearably long periods of time. (It is especially apt to be employed whenever a unit dweller attempts to communicate with the outside world via long-distance telephone.)

Chemical warfare. The easiest way to maintain tight control of a resident population, Condoist officials have found, is to make sure they congregate only inside easily monitored enclosures such as swimming pools and clubhouses (the units themselves not being generally designed to accommodate gatherings of any size). They've therefore devised a terrifyingly effective technique for preventing outdoor gatherings during periods of ideal weather.

The tactic involves the deployment of teams of mercenaries armed with evil-looking devices and nozzles whose sole purpose is to disseminate toxic chemicals throughout the immediate environment. Caught off guard, I have witnessed panic-stricken mothers grab their baby carriages and make a frantic dash for safety before these fearful onslaughts of poison, the noxious fumes from which often linger in the atmosphere for days afterward.

Of course, the "official" explanation given for these shocking violations of civilized standards of decency are always the same: they are merely harmless strategies intended to defend lawns and shrubs against various undesirable insects and weeds.

With more and more families and retirees gravitating towards condominium communities in the mistaken belief that all they are surrendering is the burden of performing their own maintenance chores, the growing menace of Condoism is finding increasingly fertile ground in which to thrive and threaten the very foundations of our liberty. And should you be the least bit skeptical about the tyranny posed by this particular threat, just remember: every cherished freedom we consider to be part of our birthright as Americans, is to the Condoist mentality merely another gardenia standing in the way of mowers and sprinklers.

Author's note: In the years since this piece appeared, a far greater number of Americans have fallen under the domination of Condoism, which remains as repressive and unrepentant as ever.

MAKING A MONKEY BUSINESS CONNECTION

(Originally published in The SandPaper, May 2006)

Sometimes, you may think you know someone really well, only to wake up one morning and find out that they've been keeping an important part of their identity hidden from you.

Take my sister Linda, for example. She's probably the last person I'd ever have suspected of being a Republican. That's not just because she voted for the Democratic ticket in the last presidential election (or so I thought), but because I've never known her to be either involved in politics or to identify with typical GOP concerns.

So you can well imagine my surprise upon learning that she's actually among New Jersey's top Republican business leaders.

It was only because I chanced to take a phone call intended for her one morning last week while she was out walking the dog, in fact, that I became privy to this somewhat startling revelation, along with the news that she was being offered an honorary chairmanship of the National Republican Congressional Committee's Business Advisory Council. In keeping with this esteemed position, she would be regularly invited to attend dinner meetings with important decision makers in Washington, including President Bush himself, to help them in "cutting taxes and moving the president's small business agenda forward."

Even though all this may have come as something of a shock, I must admit I was quite impressed. So much so, in fact, that I may even have given the caller the impression I was Linda—not because I was attempting to arrogate her accolades, you understand, but simply because I was at that moment overwhelmed by curiosity (keeping in mind that any unwitting deception in which I may have engaged is probably due to the subliminal influence of people like Karl Rove and other key Republican figures of the past few years).

Naturally, the first thing I endeavored to ascertain was how she'd

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been chosen for such a distinction. While my caller was a bit vague on this point, I was able to gather that both “achievements” and “public records” figured significantly in the selection process.

Might there have been any connection, I wondered, to “Chunky Monkey LLC”?

That’s the name of a small business Linda recently registered under the “toys and games” classification to serve as a marketing venue for the original Chunky Monkey doll and related intellectual property that we had inherited from our mom, cartoonist Pauline Comanor. Nowhere that I know of, however, was any reference ever made in the filing (or on the chunkymonkey.com website) to Chunky Monkey’s being a political-party animal, let alone a Republican primate.

But before I could explore this any further with the person on the line, she switched me over to a short audio tape made by the head of the NRCC, Congressman Tom Reynolds (R-N.Y.), who talked a bit about how the government should be helping to free small businesses from the burden of oppressive taxes—an apparent goal of the Business Advisory Council. Once that message had concluded, a second person took over the call (which the woman to whom I originally spoke may admittedly have found a bit challenging).

After praising the worthiness of the objective cited on the tape by Rep. Reynolds, I remarked as to how I would certainly welcome a chance to have dinner with President Bush, having long hoped for the opportunity to ask him whether spending hundreds of billions of dollars on the war he chose to wage in Iraq might, in fact, not actually be inflating our oppressive tax burden. A good point, she replied, but we had to help the Iraqis with their democracy, too.

Then, apparently not the least bit put off by either my questioning of presidential priorities or by my unawareness of any Republican party affiliation on Linda’s part, she went on to ask whether her name could be added to the list of state chairmen to be featured in a full-page ad the NRCC was planning to run in *The Wall Street Journal* as a way of according formal recognition to its Business Advisory Council.

By this time, however, the real Linda had returned from her walk, so I handed the phone over to her with a brief explanation. She proceeded

to unceremoniously reject the offer of the honorary state chairmanship, along with the presidential dinner invitation, her name on the *Journal* ad, and the honorary gavel that is provided to each honorary chairman, as depicted on the Business Advisory Council's website. (In so doing, according to the same site, she also turned down the chance to participate in periodic strategy sessions and to help provide "the seed money needed to create the grassroots support that can finally lead to a breakthrough on health care reform, debt reduction, social security, tax and education reform, and sound economic policy that keeps this economy growing!")

I might have let the matter rest there, had I not had a nagging curiosity to find out what had prompted the NRCC to offer my sister this less-than-singular honor in the first place. So I started making some phone calls of my own, starting with the NRCC itself.

After acknowledging, "we probably made an error in assuming that she's a Republican at all," the representative with whom I spoke—a chap named Hank—also admitted he was at something of a loss to tell me exactly what the selection process entailed. He did suggest I talk to an executive of an Akron, Ohio-based organization called InfoCision, which is responsible for making the actual calls, and which bills itself as "THE highest quality call center company in the world."

I called InfoCision, only to be told the individual Hank suggested I confer with was out of town. The woman who assisted him, however, was of the opinion that to be considered for an honorary chairmanship, it would be necessary to have "shown some sort of interest in the Republican party"—perhaps via a conservative website. She then offered to have someone with more knowledge of the process call me back.

When a couple of days had passed and no one did, I once again took it upon myself to call InfoCision. It was almost closing time on Friday, but this time, I struck pay dirt by getting through to an account representative named John Zawaski. "We get lists of business owners throughout the country," was how he explained it. The company then evaluates such factors as the type of industry, the number of employees, and its sales volume, as well as looking at executive titles. "If they're an executive or a CEO, typically, those would be the people we contact.

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“What we’re doing is we’re prospecting for people who want to join our business council,” he added. “Typically, we’ve found from our research that certain business owners in certain industries tend to be Republicans.”

So there was the answer to my query: you need not be active in Republican business circles in order to be selected as an honorary chairman of the Business Advisory Council of the National Republican Congressional Committee. It only matters that you appear to fit the profile of an entrepreneur whose particular type of endeavor has what might be regarded as a Republican-sounding ring to it.

And who would seem a more likely candidate for a red-carpet reception into Republican Party ranks than someone who’s openly engaged in monkey business?

CHRISTMAS: THE WHOLE SCHMEAR

(Originally published in The Philadelphia Inquirer, December 2007)

About four decades ago, a comedy album called *Have a Jewish Christmas...?* offered a hilarious take on what it might be like if typical American Jews were to abandon their constraints on engaging in traditional Yuletide festivities.

We sure could use an album of that caliber today. Its depictions of things like two Jewish neighbors trying to outdo each other in outdoor decor, elderly Tanta Sophie reacting to seeing “Jewish people with Goyish trees” by remarking, “If mine husband would be alive, he would die,” and nocturnal visits from the “Hanukkah ghost,” might provide us with some welcome relief from Americans’ increasingly uptight attitudes toward their “beliefs.”

In fact, it's my belief that in most cases, such “beliefs” aren't really true beliefs in the sense of well-reasoned convictions, but rather unquestioned ideas associated with customs and traditions imbued in our psyches during childhood.

But should you believe that all Jews are compelled by their beliefs to spend December 25th in a self-imposed Chinese-restaurant exile, I'm here to tell you otherwise. There are those who are every bit as proficient as any gentile when it comes to decking the halls. I should know, because I'm one of them.

Yes, I do the whole schmeer: the tree, the cards, the last minute shopping, the caroling, the jing-a-linging, and the general jollifying.

Of course, considering my last name, you may suspect that my enthusiastic embrace of the occasion is due to having a non-Jewish parent. While it's true my stepfather introduced a Christmas tree to our household, it only served to complement a celebration that was already a well-entrenched family tradition.

For that, I can really thank my maternal grandparents, Harry and

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Fanny Comanor, who were moved by the Christmas spirit after arriving here from Russia about a century ago, as was a contemporary Russian Jewish compatriot of theirs named Israel Isidore Baline (to whom I shall return in just a moment).

But it isn't merely tradition that compels me to revel in this ritual every year. I'm also drawn to its nostalgic and aesthetic aspects—its ability to evoke some of my fondest childhood memories. A menorah, notwithstanding its symbolic significance, is simply no match for an artistically decorated, colorfully lit Christmas tree when it comes to brightening up and beautifying one's environment.

Likewise, I'm perennially enchanted by the season's magnificent music, and even play some of it on my beat-up guitar (although admittedly that Brooklyn-born Jewish bard, Neil Diamond, does a much better job). Should singing carols be reserved for true believers in the biblical account of the birth of the baby Jesus? Come now: Does singing "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" require a literal belief in the lyrics?

Then there's the view (supported by my dictionary) of the occasion as a stupendous secular festival to which no invitation is needed. I, therefore, see no reason not to attend, especially since it's ostensibly meant to honor a member of my own tribe (whether or not one chooses to believe he was a divinity).

To those who might feel affronted by such sentiments, I can only ask whether they take similar umbrage upon hearing that most popular of all songs, "White Christmas," which was written by the aforementioned Israel Isidore Baline after he disembarked on these shores and changed his name to Irving Berlin.

Still, most Jews would not feel comfortable joining in the festivities—even if they'd secretly love to (as I have no doubt many would). But Christmas is essentially an international holiday, an occasion of good cheer that people of all faiths (including those of little or no faith) are free to celebrate, if they so choose. Whether it's considered a holy day as well should also be purely a matter of individual choice.

So, to paraphrase a line from a famous editorial: Yes, Virginia, there is indeed such a thing as a Jewish Christmas.

Author's note: This article undoubtedly rates as the all-time biggest "offender" of any of those included in this collection. As the editor of the page noted in introducing a whole group of letters entirely devoted to it: "Bill Bonvie's Dec. 24 commentary, "Christmas: the whole schmear," about being Jewish and celebrating Christmas, brought strong reactions from readers." What follows are a few samples of those responses (which, incidentally, all came from members of 'the Tribe'):

"While I understand Bonvie's lament that a Christmas tree is more fun than a menorah, I believe that borrowing another's holiday without regard for its religious significance is disrespectful to those who fully observe that holiday. Furthermore, it is our job as Jewish parents to instill delight in our children for our customs, and build rituals and memories around them."

"To suggest that there is such a thing as a 'Jewish Christmas' is an insult to Christians everywhere, and a slap in the face to American Jews who struggle every day with their identities."

"'Oy vey'" is what I say to Bill Bonvie."

(All of which is further evidence of what I said at the beginning of this piece about needing relief from "Americans' increasingly uptight attitudes towards their 'beliefs'" —and that saying anything that might challenge those beliefs is still the most sure-fire way to give offense.)

ELEVATING THE ‘NANNY STATE’ TO SUPERNANNY NATION STATUS

(Originally published in *The SandPaper*, July 2008)

If there’s anything that tends to rankle red-blooded Americans, it’s the idea of being told what not to do by a so-called “nanny state.”

Such resentment, in fact, was the subject of a book published just last year, “Nanny State,” by conservative *Denver Post* columnist David Harsanyi, in which the author chronicles what, in his view, are numerous examples of meddlers, moralists, politicians, and “bone-headed bureaucrats” turning America into “a nation of children.”

While some may consider that assessment to be a bit overblown, its applicability to one governmental entity in particular would be hard to deny. For the fact remains that when it comes to treating us all like a throng of ten-year-olds, there’s nothing that can begin to match the authoritarian approach of the Bush Administration.

Remember, for instance, how back when you were a kid, any discussion of certain subjects was apt to be taboo? In similar fashion, the Decider and his deputies have determined that there are things in this world that you’re simply better off not knowing about—even if you’re now considered mature enough to attend an R-rated movie without being escorted by a parent or guardian.

One such delicate matter is that of the world’s changing climate.

It seems that an Environmental Protection Agency assessment that global warming could pose a danger to the public, made last December in the form of a 28-page report, was just not considered suitable for said public to peruse. And when members of Congress conducting a hearing on the role the White House played in EPA decision-making attempted to find out the reason from EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson, he simply declined to tell them, causing the hearing to be canceled.

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This may be a bit reminiscent of how your mother or father (or nanny, if they could afford one) might have responded to a similar question from you: “Because I said so, that’s why.”

But if you must have some inkling of a possible reason why the White House Budget Office would even refuse to open an e-mail containing the report, it may have something to do with the fact that last year, the Supreme Court ruled that any such conclusion would compel the EPA to regulate emissions of greenhouse gases from motor vehicles. And that, in turn, might have ending up causing you additional expense and inconvenience.

So, you see, it was quite likely for your own good that you and your fellow Americans were denied permission to view the report in question.

But that, as it turns out, isn’t the only thing those in charge of the EPA would rather you not read.

A couple years ago, for instance, it was decided that all the data on pesticides and other toxic chemicals contained in the agency’s research libraries should henceforth be off limits—not only to the public, but to the EPA’s own scientists as well. (Supposedly, it would all eventually be “digitized” at some undisclosed time—which is a bit like what I was told by a librarian upon requesting a certain book at the age of 12: “When you get older.”)

This, naturally, didn’t sit well with some of the researchers who used those facilities, and would now have to rely on the chemical industry for their information. They took their complaints to Congress, which agreed that perhaps the administration had gone a bit overboard in protecting them, and ordered the libraries reopened. But so far, only a fraction of what they contained has been made available, and in much smaller and less accessible quarters than before.

There has, however, been one new feature added—an official library overseer, whose responsibilities will include supervising all research and information requests and deciding what material ought to be dispensed with.

Then there was the recent report in *The Washington Post* of an attempt by political appointees at the Department of Labor to sneak

in a new rule making it more difficult to regulate workers' exposures to chemicals and toxins. According to the paper's account, the agency ignored a requirement that it disclose the plan in public notices filed in December and May, opting instead to publish it on the Office of Management and Budget's website in July using only a nine-word title.

Such goings-on can't help but call to mind the way our parents might have tried to keep certain topics from corrupting our childish innocence by postponing any discussion of them until after our bedtime—and then using only “code words” in case we might be eavesdropping at the top of the stairs.

At times, the administration's tendency to overprotect Americans, including government employees, might even remind us of how we were sometimes forbidden to see a particular movie, or to accompany a playmate on a visit to a certain unapproved locale or event.

An example was last week's huge public rally for presumptive Democratic Presidential nominee Barack Obama in Berlin, Germany, which U.S. State Department officials were given strict orders not to attend by Ambassador Robert Timken (an Ohio businessman who just happens to be a good buddy of President Bush).

According to another *Washington Post* article, the mandate was formulated by State Department Undersecretary for Management Patrick F. Kennedy, who said it was intended to ensure that foreign service officials remained unsullied by exposure to a “partisan political act.” (And while this edict may have struck the American Foreign Service Association as a wee bit excessive, its 11th-hour timing reportedly rendered the group's opposition moot.)

Considering such constraints on the conduct of the citizenry, the Bush Administration's enlisting the help of telecommunications companies to monitor our phone calls and e-mail—and even claiming the right to open our regular mail when it sees fit—becomes simply another manifestation of a much larger parental pattern.

That's why, when history stands in judgment of this regime's most notable achievements—a manufactured war, the arbitrary suspension of habeas corpus, the authorization of torture, the abduction of individuals to Third-World prisons, and the routine use of “signing statements”

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as a way of disregarding various provisions of new laws—I have no doubt that what is perhaps its greatest domestic contribution will be included in the assessment.

In essence, we must never be allowed to forget how this president and his associates have succeeded in expanding the traditional notion of a “nanny state” into the creation of an actual Supernanny Nation.

INDUSTRY IN THE FDA'S CORNER

(Originally published in The SandPaper, February 2011)

Regulation, or so goes the political rhetoric from some folks on the right, is anathema to industry. Cutting regulatory agencies down to size has thus become a primary objective of the smaller-government crowd that was voted into partial power in November, based on its belief that less oversight will give corporations more room to spread their wings.

The only problem with this idea is that a sizable part of the corporate sector itself seems to have embraced just the opposite philosophy, and is actually calling for a beefed-up regulatory presence.

You say you weren't aware of that? Well, quite frankly, neither was I until just the other day, when in the process of doing an Internet search for some unrelated piece of information, I chanced to stumble on the Web site of the "Alliance for a Stronger FDA."

This particular organization, created in 2006, based in Washington, D.C., and whose web address is www.strengthenFDA.org, purports to have two stated goals: to assure that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has sufficient resources to protect patients and consumers, and to maintain public confidence and trust in the FDA.

It also claims an impressive membership list, which includes seven former FDA commissioners, three former secretaries of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, some 86 nonprofit groups (mostly health-and-wellness-related), another 24 trade associations, 23 companies, and 14 law and consulting firms, as well as some 30 individual members.

But what I found really interesting was the identities of the trade associations and companies who are in favor of strengthening the FDA. The former run the gamut of industries falling under the purview of that agency, from the American Frozen Food Institute and the Grocery

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Manufacturers Association to the Society of the Plastics Industry and the Personal Care Products Institute. As for the latter, they read almost entirely like a Who's Who of the pharmaceutical industry (whose trade association is also on board, along with those of FDA-regulated medical manufacturing devices).

Curious as to why all these concerns would be so concerned about government regulators not having enough resources to adequately regulate them, I thought I'd pursue the question with one of its media contacts, and ended up having a pleasant and informative chat with Steve Grossman, the group's deputy executive director.

"All FDA stakeholders want a strong, consistent, predictable deadline-meeting FDA," explained Grossman, whose background includes having served as deputy assistant secretary for health under the Reagan Administration. "Everybody who is overseen by the FDA benefits when the agency is seen as strong and competent and a gold standard for the world."

While Grossman acknowledged that "on any given day, every one of these companies has a complaint about something the FDA is doing," still "they understand that their concerns won't be made better by the agency's having fewer resources," including staff. One reason, he noted, is that a regulatory body that lacks people qualified to "investigate the science and run the lab tests" is prone to "make the most conservative decisions because it doesn't want to do anything wrong." Another is that U.S. industries export a lot of products, which makes it especially important to have a "strong FDA that's recognized world-wide as being a leader in science and regulation."

So that, in a nutshell, is why some of the biggest names in the business of making things that consumers quite literally consume have allied themselves with (and even paid dues toward) the efforts of this "advocacy and educational organization" to make sure the FDA gets its fair share of the fiscal pie.

Just this month, for example, the group "responded with concern" to the House Appropriations Committee's announcement of proposed cuts in the agency's funding, with its president, Nancy Bradish Myers (who's also president of Catalyst Healthcare Consulting) noting in a

press release that “We certainly understand the need to reduce the federal budget, but want to be sure that Congress has a clear picture of how FDA contributes to economic growth and national security, as well as protecting our public health.”

But just how good a job does—or can—the FDA do of “protecting public health” when some of its top officials have themselves had prior affiliations with the industries it regulates? The current FDA commissioner, Margaret Hamburg, to cite just one example, participated in rule making on dental amalgams, which contain toxic mercury, after having served as director of Henry Schein Inc., the largest seller of amalgams.

Then there’s the case of Michael Taylor, who was named a year ago as the agency’s deputy commissioner for foods. Taylor, who was listed as a guest speaker at an Alliance membership meeting only last week and also met with the group last summer, used to be vice president for public policy at Monsanto, a position that merits only a cursory mention in the last sentence of the FDA’s announcement of his appointment.

Now Monsanto, as you may be aware, is the biotech giant that produces the genetically modified (or GM) seeds that now account for most of the nation’s soy, canola, field corn and cotton having become genetically modified crops, with the stage now set for alfalfa and sugar beets to go the same route. This has been an economic boon to the company both through its control of the seed market and in the fact that the main purpose of such bioengineered crops is to make them “Roundup Ready”—that is, able to withstand the effects of Monsanto’s glyphosate herbicide Roundup.

However, the technology involved—which is also one of our exports—has been strongly opposed by environmentalists, who point out that its safety was never established and that what tests have been performed on such “Frankenfoods” don’t bode well for consumers. And that’s not to mention the extensive use of glyphosate, which has also been quite controversial. But the reason the government has never performed safety testing on GM crops is that back in 1992 the FDA ruled it wasn’t needed—a policy that Taylor reportedly had a lead

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role in formulating while in a previous FDA post following an earlier stint at Monsanto. And while Monsanto is not listed as an Alliance member, the Biotechnology Industry Organization to which it belongs is.

So I put the 'revolving door' question directly to Grossman, who responded that the Alliance is narrowly focused on making sure the FDA isn't starved for funds and does not involve itself in staffing issues.

The Alliance's membership roster, however, was a source of some concern to Jim Turner, a long-time Washington, D.C. consumer advocate lawyer and author of "The Chemical Feast," the Nader Study Group report on food protection and the FDA, whom I contacted after speaking with Grossman. "It always makes me nervous," he responded, "when I see a private organization with influential former government officials as members working together with regulated companies to 'strengthen' the power of the regulating agency that controls their marketing rules."

Perhaps you find that a bit unsettling as well. Or then again, maybe you're among those who firmly believe that the less oversight capability a bureaucracy like the FDA possesses, the better it is for business. But before you accept that premise as a given, perhaps you really ought to find out if the particular business you have in mind concurs. You might be surprised to find the business is more inclined to think that to 'starve the regulatory beast' would be akin to killing the goose that lays the "gold standard" egg for American industry.

Author's note: Nearly a year after this article was published, a petition was circulated by MoveOn.org protesting President Obama's appointment of Michael Taylor as senior adviser to the commissioner of the FDA, which characterized allowing Monsanto "to have free rein in U.S. food policy" as "a nightmare scenario that is against the interest of all Americans and world citizens."

THEORIES OF EVOLUTION

TAKING CREDIT FOR AN IDEA THAT FLEW (AND COULD FLY A WHOLE LOT HIGHER)

(Originally published in *The SandPaper*, November 2007)

Ideas are funny things. There are occasions when they can hit you from out of the blue, and other times when they might be inspired by some item you read or hear about in the news.

An example of the latter is the idea I got for this column, which came to me after reading in *The Press of Atlantic City* about the two retired ad agency employees who were squabbling over which of them came up with the idea for the slogan, “Please don’t squeeze the Charmin.”

The dispute followed the death of Dick Wilson, the actor who played the part of Mr. Whipple, the grocery-store clerk identified with the famous line in TV commercials. It began after Norman Schaut of Ocean City said the phrase came to him while preparing a store display for the Madison Avenue firm of Benton & Bowles back in 1964.

No sooner had he made that claim, however, when John Chervokas of Ossining, N.Y., came forth to say that the line had, in fact, been his original creation while working at the same agency, and that he had never even heard of Shaut until the story came to his attention.

As it turned out, neither of the conflicting claims could be confirmed at this late date, with the managing editor of *Advertising Age* being quoted as observing how such feuds over who did what are all too common in a business where individuals are seldom credited for their creative efforts.

Having spent a sizable chunk of my own career in the ad biz, I can second that. In fact, it reminded me to some degree of the line—actually, a couple of lines—that I penned (yes, literally using a pen) back in 1983 while working as a copywriter at a medium-size, family-owned ad agency located in a suburb of Hartford, Connecticut.

On that particular morning, the agency’s entire creative staff had

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been ordered to attend a meeting that had been hastily convened in the conference room with a team of idea people (or so we were led to believe) from Pratt & Whitney, the giant aircraft-engine manufacturer whose plant was a few miles away.

As they explained it, the company was initiating an employee suggestion program, with cash bonuses, as well as personal recognition, to be awarded for any ideas that could save the company money or make its operations more efficient. Our job, which was to take priority over everything else we were doing at the moment, was to try to come up with an attention-getting name for this program.

Returning to my office following this momentous meeting, I took up a pen and yellow legal pad and briefly pondered the challenge at hand. In order to win this little competition, clearly I would have to come up with the kind of idea that would fly with both the agency brass and the Pratt & Whitney people...just like the ideas the program was aimed at eliciting. So there it was, my first idea, which I jotted down within about a minute or two of leaving the meeting: "Ideas That Fly," which just happened to have the added advantage of having a perfect tie-in with the company's products.

But I couldn't come to my superiors with just one idea, so in the next half hour or so, I came up with several more, which were somewhat less memorable, as I've now forgotten what they were. I then turned in my list, the two other copywriters submitted theirs, and we waited to see whose, if anyone's, ideas might fly.

As it turned out, we didn't have to wait long. Within a couple of days, the entire art department was busy designing prospective logos to go along with..."Ideas that Fly," one of which—a depiction of a jet taking off from what appeared to be a runway of yellow bars on a blue background—ultimately flew.

Somewhere during this agency-shaking process, it fell on me to create an accompanying slogan to be used primarily on "Ideas That Fly" cafeteria cards at the behemoth P&W plant. It didn't take long for one to hit me from out of the blue: "They can hit you from out of the blue."

But other than that indirect acknowledgment, I can't say I recall anyone giving me any particular recognition for coming up with the

“big idea” in the form of, say, a bonus or even being taken out to lunch. I did, however, get taken to lunch a few months later by the new creative director who had been hired away from another agency, and who used the occasion to ask me why I was no longer as dedicated as I had been when I first came aboard, as indicated by the fact I was no longer staying late without getting paid any overtime. I didn’t bother telling him that copywriting, unlike journalism, my other profession, was something I did strictly for the money.

The only comment I can recall being made to me, in fact, was from one of my copywriter colleagues. “I remember seeing that idea,” she said. “But I didn’t think it sounded high-tech enough.”

But that was how it was with the ad biz, with individual creative achievements invariably being assimilated into the “team effort” and the agency itself ultimately taking the credit.

I have no idea, in fact, whether anyone else involved ever claimed to have created “Ideas That Fly” (and you’ll simply have to take my word for it that I was its originator).

Not so the “Ideas That Fly” program itself, however, for which various P&W employees were accorded both accolades and monetary rewards. I know, because I still have a copy of the photo that appeared in *The Hartford Courant* showing a smiling worker named Rhonda Pease, framed by an American flag and a large poster featuring the “Ideas That Fly” title and logo along with the words “the New P&W Suggestion Program.” She had just gotten an \$8,500 award from the company for an idea that, in addition to simplifying her job, was reported to have saved her bosses a cool million that year.

And that brings me around to the idea that came to me for this column—not just for this column, actually, but for the entire country.

Most of us, I think, would readily acknowledge that America and its economy are in a pretty messed up state these days. And there are undoubtedly many private citizens out there with enough expertise, experience or just plain horse sense to provide workable ideas that could both make things run more efficiently and probably save taxpayers billions—but who currently have no viable vehicle available for conveying such proposals to the proper government agencies.

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What I therefore would like to propose is an official nationwide suggestion program along the lines of “Ideas That Fly,” complete with financial incentives and awards ceremonies. The prospect of being accorded both personal recognition and some extra bucks to boot, I feel reasonably certain, would be sufficient to spur such ingenious individuals to cultivate and submit ideas for streamlining government and perhaps even improving the lives of Americans in the process.

Moreover, once those ideas deemed most innovative were given prominent play in the media, it would be a lot harder for government to simply disregard or shelve them and go on with the business of wastefulness and inefficiency as usual.

Now there’s just one thing such a program would need—a clever, enticing title. And, no doubt, you think I’ve got a bunch of them in mind. But even if I did, or could come up with a likely winner in a minute, I wouldn’t offer it in a context such as this.

That’s because once you’ve been in the ad biz, you can’t help but be aware of how high a price clients are willing to pay for ideas of that sort. And the idea of getting recompensed for an idea is a far better incentive than the idea of simply getting recognized as its creator.

Author’s note: In the spring of 2013, I got a message via LinkedIn from Frank Sorano, who worked as a graphic artist at the above-mentioned ad agency and whom I had not seen or spoken with in nearly 30 years. When I asked Frank (who still lived in Connecticut) if he was the one who conceived the “Ideas That Fly” logo, he said it would be OK to mention him in this context as part of the four-person “team” that designed it. Such veracity is a refreshing contrast to the way certain noncreative players in the ad biz are all too ready to take credit for other people’s work.

A BRAVE NEW WORLD OF PHARMACOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

(Originally published in The Berkshire Eagle and The San Francisco Chronicle, February 1989)

Anyone who fears that our nation may be losing its nerve should be considerably heartened by the recent disclosure of a plan to chemically preserve America's long-held reputation as the home of the brave.

Believe it or not (depending on the amount of credibility you attach to a television network news report that appears to have otherwise received scant media attention), work is now underway on a "brave pill" in the research labs of Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

This possible harbinger of our very own "brave new world" would supposedly provide American soldiers in future conflicts with a "chemical suit of armor" designed to boost their courage by reducing their physiological reactions to the stresses of combat, according to the report.

While the idea of awarding medals based on medication may be the subject of some initial controversy, its eventual acceptance in military circles is probably inevitable (especially if our enemies start developing something along the same lines). At that point, it's only natural that civilian pharmaceutical firms will begin to express an interest, ultimately leading to the day when courage becomes an over-the-counter commodity readily available from your local druggist and pitched by Madison Avenue in the all-too-familiar manner:

Attractive single gal: I had a survival instinct this big—and it was keeping me from participating in so many enjoyable activities, like mountain climbing, sunbathing and casual sex. Life just wasn't any fun any more. Then a friend introduced me to VALORIUM.

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Announcer: With new maximum-strength VALORIUM, you get the benefit of not just one, but three battlefield-tested ingredients guaranteed to take the worry out of taking risks.

Attractive single gal (climbing Mount Everest): I had a survival instinct this big...but now it's gone. And thanks to VALORIUM, I couldn't care less if the same thing happens to me.

Before long, encouraged by the growing consumer demand for such products, pharmaceutical houses will become engaged in a high-powered competition to develop entire new lines of drugs aimed at promoting other attributes as well. And television viewers will find themselves being blitzed with such messages as:

(Scene: Oxford University campus)

Announcer: When 1,000 doctoral candidates were asked what they'd most prefer to have along if enrolled in a place like this, more than 70 percent chose ACUMEN over such intelligence boosters as IQ and COMPREHEND. ACUMEN...the smart way to make yourself appear a whole lot smarter.

Or:

Executive #1: Can't we postpone this meeting until some other time? (Yawns) I'm just not myself today.

Executive #2: You have been looking kind of tired, Phil. Having any trouble sleeping?

Executive #1: To tell the truth, I've been having a lot of trouble sleeping lately. In all the years Myrna and I have been married, I've never once cheated on her...that is, until this month when I started having an affair with my secretary. Now I'm tormented by this nagging guilt, and it's been keeping me awake night after night.

Executive #2: Why don't you try my SCRUPLES? It's the one indiscretion remedy I can always rely on to prevent me from doing things I might later regret. In fact, it's got the exact same active ingredient found in the prescription brand PROHIBITOL.

(One week later)

Executive #2: I have to hand it to you, Phil. The boss seemed really impressed with your presentation at today's meeting.

Executive #1: Well, I've got you to thank. Since you got me taking SCRUPLES, I've never slept better in my life.

Announcer: Just two little SCRUPLES...and in no time at all, you'll be sleeping with a clear conscience again.

And, ultimately, this:

Announcer: How do you spell "belief"?

Televangelist: The only way, the way I do—Z-E-A-L-A-I-D-S.

Announcer: Plagued by doubt, skepticism and uncertainty? Unable to find the one true path to spiritual salvation? Then it's time for you to put whatever remaining faith you have in ZEAL AIDS.

Ecstatic parishioner: I found ZEAL AIDS; now I'm a believer. (Puts \$10,000 check in collection plate.)

Announcer: Once you've swallowed a couple of ZEAL AIDS, you'll be able to swallow just about anything.

DOING JUSTICE TO THE PRESIDENCY

(Originally published in The Berkshire Eagle, March 1988)

It's almost that time again—that time when millions of Americans who are almost totally preoccupied with such mundane matters as trying to make a living, trying to make ends meet, trying to make their kids behave, trying to make themselves appear younger, trendier or sexier, or simply trying to make it through the day will also be asked to make a momentous decision.

Without being required to know anything in particular, or even in general, about the backgrounds, beliefs or qualifications of the individuals involved, they'll once again be charged with the elective task of electing a president.

This “popular mandate” approach to choosing a chief executive/commander-in-chief might have sounded like an enlightened enough idea when it was tried back in the 19th Century. But is it really appropriate to an age when the choice can have such profound repercussions and when the office itself is the only one in the nation that remains vested with the authority to order civilization blown out of the water?

I think not. It seems to me that the time for such a casual, slipshod evaluation of supreme leadership ability is long past, and that doing justice to the highest office in the land calls for the same standards of painstaking, objective scrutiny that we require in seeking justice under the law.

In short, I think it would be in society's best interest if we were to compel our presidential candidates to abandon the antiquated campaign trail in favor of a campaign *trial* instead. That is, rather than having them make appearances for the purpose of courting the electorate, they ought to be compelled to appear in court for a thorough assessment of their competency and the various charges brought against them by their rivals for the job.

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By insisting that all aspirants take the stand instead of the stump and take an oath to tell the whole truth so help them God prior to taking any oath of office, we could be more reasonably assured that whoever was selected out of the lineup would be getting what they deserved. We could also feel more secure in the knowledge that all pertinent evidence and testimony to that effect was being meticulously examined by a jury of our peers—one sequestered from both everyday distractions and such prejudicial influences as paid political ads, editorial comments, tabloid exposes and polls reflecting whose bandwagon was in the lead at any given time.

Jury selection, of course, would be of critical importance to the validity of such a tribunal. To make sure all interest groups were fairly represented, jurors would have to be carefully chosen so as to reflect the makeup of the population as closely as possible in terms of things like gender, ethnicity, party affiliation, geography and economic status. A typical presidential jury might thus include, for example, a Jewish grandmother from Miami Beach, a WASP banking executive from New England, a Hispanic autoworker, a wealthy Republican rancher from Wyoming and a black female college professor.

Once assembled in this fashion, the panel could initially be split along party lines for a preliminary (or primary) hearing phase of the proceedings. During this stage, jurors would be given several months in which to exhaustively review every last excruciating detail of the case for and against each declared candidate, ranging from “prior convictions” to questions of character raised by things like extra-marital affairs to evidence of precisely what an individual knew about any given situation and when he or she first knew it.

The entire jury could then be brought together for an extensive cross-examination of the two contenders found most competent to stand trial, each of whom would be given perhaps two hours tops to deliver their closing arguments. A final decision could then be rendered by simple majority vote.

One having heard the verdict, the presiding judge (perhaps a U.S. Supreme Court justice not appointed by an incumbent seeking re-election), following mandatory sentencing rules, would have no

choice but to order the person charged with responsibility for leading the nation to report on the following January 20th to the maximum-security facility located at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. in Washington, D.C., to begin serving a term of office not to exceed four years.

The advantages of such a system are obvious. Not only would it save the taxpayers untold millions of dollars currently wasted on campaign costs and related expenses, but it would keep any special interests from influencing the outcome of the race and give each hopeful a chance to be judged strictly on individual merit, rather than such superficial factors as name recognition, financial clout and organizational strength.

But best of all, it would relegate the selection of the nation's chief executive and top military commander to a group of people who could give the job the full attention it deserves—and allow the rest of us to devote ours to far less important things.

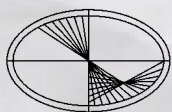
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Bonvie is a freelance writer whose experience includes having worked as a reporter and editor for various newspapers and as a copywriter for advertising agencies. The subject matter for this book has all been drawn from the numerous opinion and commentary pieces he has had published over the past three decades in such newspapers as *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Berkshire Eagle*, *The Orlando Sentinel*, and *The Record* of Bergen County, N.J., as well as in *The SandPaper*, a free weekly newsmagazine serving southern Ocean County, N.J. He has also co-authored both books and numerous magazine and newspaper articles on health and environmental topics in collaboration with his sister Linda Bonvie (including an article that led to more than 20 countries dropping the practice of spraying passengers on arriving flights with a toxic pesticide), and serves as editor of the Chemical-Free Kids Facebook page.

Warning: Many of this book's contents previously offended certain people when they were first published on the op-ed and commentary pages of various newspapers, and may still pose a threat to cherished credos and deeply entrenched beliefs. Those who come into contact with them may thus risk having their assumptions assaulted, opinions upended, and prejudices pummeled. Many readers, however, may be both entertained and enlightened by the challenge to conventional wisdom and platitude-plagued attitudes that this collection of essays offers. Who knew, for example, that the FDA is championed by the very industries it regulates, that a certain "Mr. Quaker" once was going around delivering a militaristic message to high-school assemblies, or that committing small, random acts of benevolence could land you in jail? But just keep in mind that these dissertations are still every bit as dangerous to various dogmas and delusions as they were when they first appeared in print – and are fully capable of offending again.



About the Author: Bill Bonvie is a veteran newspaper reporter and editor, advertising copywriter, and health and environmental writer whose opinion pieces, humorous essays, and tongue-lashings-in-check have been appearing on op-ed and commentary pages for more than three decades. He lives on the New Jersey coast, near the borough of Tuckerton, where he helps care for a neurotic bichon and a couple of spoiled cats.



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