



Comment on the Commentary of the Day

by

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Disclaimer: The following "Letters to the Editor" were sent to the respective publications on the dates indicated. Some were printed but many were not. The original articles that are being commented on may or may not be available on the internet and may require registration or subscription to access if they are. Some of the original articles are syndicated and therefore may have appeared in other publications also.

11 May 2008

Friends,

Just as my senior colleagues Jim Buchanan, Gordon Tullock, and Dick Wagner are pioneers in helping us to understand the behaviors and institutions of what the late Mancur Olson called "stationary bandits" (that is, government), my junior colleague Pete Leeson is a pioneer in helping us to understand the behaviors and institutions of floating bandits -- namely, pirates.

This story in today's Boston Globe presents Pete's argument:

http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/05/11/everyone_in_favor_say_yargh/

11 May 2008

Editor, Washington Post
1150 15th St., NW
Washington, DC 20071

Dear Editor:

The Post's dean of political analysts, David Broder, today unwittingly reveals two malignancies of politics ("The Price of Delay," May 11). First, politicians are cowards. Broder notes that dozens of Democratic Senators "desperately" want their party's primary race finally to end, but still refuse publicly to endorse Barack Obama. Broder quotes Majority Whip Dick Durbin for an explanation:

"They want to avoid hard votes."

Second, successful politicians must behave duplicitously. Here's Broader: "Since McCain effectively cinched his nomination in February and mostly fell out of the news, he has accomplished a lot. He has targeted potential constituencies with appearances and messages tailored for them, knowing that other voters probably are not paying attention." Broder casually adds that "Obama needs to do similar work."

Please tell me why should I accord more respect to politics than I accord to any other form of con-artistry?

10 May 2008

The Editor, The Economist
25 St James's Street
London SW1A 1HG
United Kingdom

SIR:

Exploring how governments in emerging-market countries might tamp down inflation, you write that one option "is to do nothing apart from slapping on some temporary price controls, and hope that inflation pressures will soon ease"

("Economic focus: A tale of two worlds," May 10).

Trying to control inflation in this way makes no more sense than trying to control the temperature of a room by rigging thermometers so that they never record readings above 72 degrees Fahrenheit.

9 May 2008

The Editor, New York Times
229 West 43rd St.
New York, NY 10036

To the Editor:

Praising Tory leader David Cameron for shifting away from the apparently quaint Thatcherite focus on individual freedom and personal responsibility, David Brooks is pleased that Cameron emphasizes "environmental issues, civility, assimilation and the moral climate" ("The Conservative Revival," May 9). Brooks continues: "Some of his ideas would not sit well with American conservatives. He wants to create 4,200 more health visitors, who would come into the homes of new parents and help them manage day-to-day stress."

Well, I'm no conservative, but I damn sure do not want government

bureaucrats milling about my home offering their help in raising my family. Such officiousness would stress me out past the point of madness.

8 May 2008

The Editor, New York Times
229 West 43rd St.
New York, NY 10036

To the Editor:

Nicholas Kristof writes that "One of the reasons that Mrs. Clinton is resolved to keep fighting is, I think, a resentment that she and many of her followers feel over sexism in the campaign. On that issue, she has a point" ("The Too-Long Goodbye," May 8).

This accusation is far too facile. Sexism hardly explains why Mrs. Clinton's strongest supporters are retirees and blue-collar workers. Nor does it explain how Mrs. Clinton soundly bested the likes of Joe Biden, Christopher Dodd, and Bill Richardson.

8 May 2008

Friends,

In today's edition of the New York Times, my colleague Bryan Caplan explains why a gas-tax holiday is a fine idea -- although for reasons very different than those offered by Clinton and McCain:

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/08/opinion/08caplan.html?_r=1&ref=opinion&oref=slogin

7 May 2008

The Editor, New York Times
229 West 43rd St.
New York, NY 10036

To the Editor:

After listing a few cases of alleged corporate spying on private individuals, Eric Schlosser draws a big conclusion: "The Bill of Rights was adopted to protect Americans from the abusive power of their government. I've come to believe that we now need a similar set of restrictions to defend against irresponsible corporate power" ("Burger With a Side of Spies," May 7).

Government has the legal authority to imprison and kill people - an authority

that, throughout history, it has used with notable zealousness. Government also has a territorial monopoly on this force; it's nearly impossible for people to take their business elsewhere. Corporations, in contrast, cannot (without government help) compel persons to work for them or to buy their wares. So while the laws of property, trespass, and privacy should of course be applied to corporations, the notion of a Bill of Rights to "protect" citizens from corporations makes no sense. All people need for such protection are competitive markets. And the key to such markets is to reduce, rather than expand, government's role in the economy.

6 May 2008

Editor, USA Today

Dear Editor:

You ask government to regulate the terms that credit-card issuers offer to borrowers ("Our view on consumer protection: Feds take overdue first step to curb credit card abuses," May 6). Your unstated belief is that politicians or bureaucrats know better than consumers what is best for consumers. This

belief, alas, is shop-worn. In "Defence of Usury" (1787), Jeremy Bentham noted that each borrower is someone "who has every motive and every means for forming a right judgment [about the offered terms]; who has every motive and every means for informing himself of the circumstances, upon which rectitude of judgment, in the case in question, depends."

Bentham continued: "The legislator, who knows nothing, nor can know any thing, of any one of all these circumstances, who knows nothing at all about the matter, comes and says to him - 'It signifies nothing; you shall not have the money: for it would be doing you a mischief to let you borrow it upon such terms.' - And this out of prudence and loving-kindness! - There may be worse cruelty: but can there be greater folly?"

<http://www.econlib.org/LIBRARY/Bentham/bnthUs.html>

5 May 2008

Friends,

The good folks at Reason magazine asked me to share my thoughts on the current economic

downturn. I did so. You can find my little gem by clicking on the link below and scrolling down. But if the prospect of reading my pedestrian prose on this topic isn't sufficient inspiration to click on this link (and, really, why should it be?), be assured that persons far wiser than me also contribute their thoughts -- persons such as Bob Higgs and Megan McArdle:

<http://reason.com/news/show/126021.html>

5 May 2008

The Editor, New York
Times Book Review
229 West 43rd St.
New York, NY 10036

To the Editor:

Diego Von Vacano complains that "The more we believe success is derived from information rather than the mixing of our hands and labor with concrete things, the more we distance ourselves from the very essence of what it is to be human" (Letters, May 4).

Funny, given that ants, beavers, and many other species mix their labor with concrete things, I thought that the essence of what it is to be human lies in our

ability to reason and to share our complex thoughts verbally or in writing with others - much as Mr. Von Vacano does in his letter and, more generally, in his job as a professor of political science.