



Comment on the Commentary of the Day

by

Donald J. Boudreaux
Chairman, Department of Economics
George Mason University
dboudrea@gmu.edu
<http://www.cafehayek.com>

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.

25 May 2008

Editor, New York Post

Dear Editor:

R.B. Bernstein is indisputably correct that "It's hard to say what it takes to be president, but it's easy to figure out one thing you don't need: Shame" ("Groveling for Office," May 25).

H.L. Mencken summarized the preposterous essence of politics when he wrote that "The saddest life is that of a political aspirant under democracy. His failure is ignominious and his success is disgraceful." [H.L. Mencken, A Mencken

Chrestomathy (New York: Vintage, 1982 [1949]), p. 153]

24 May 2008

Editor, The Wall Street Journal
200 Liberty Street
New York, NY 10281

To the Editor:

Jeff Reava repeats the claim that the QWERTY keyboard is a "humble reminder of convention's triumph against progress" (Letters, May 24). Not so. After studying the matter empirically, economists Stan Liebowitz and Stephen Margolis labeled this claim "the fable of the keys."

[<http://www.utdallas.edu/~li^eebowitz/keys1.html>]

The evidence shows that trained QWERTY typists type no more slowly than do typists trained on the Dvorak Simplified Keyboard - the keyboard that conventional wisdom mistakenly but stubbornly holds to allow for faster typing. QWERTY is not an example of we modern folks being 'locked-in' by convention to an inefficient technique.

23 May 2008

Editor, Baltimore Sun

Dear Editor:

George Wedgworth makes several erroneous claims in his letter defending Uncle Sam's sugar policy (Letters, May 23). Here's just one: he asserts that the cost to taxpayers of this sugar policy is insignificant "because sugar farmers don't get crop subsidies."

True, they get no subsidies. But these farmers do get substantial protection from foreign competitors - protection that artificially raises the prices they charge and, hence, the prices that every American pays for sugar, sweeteners, and for products containing sugar or sweeteners. (The Cato Institute's Chris Edwards estimates these costs to

consumers at about \$2 billion annually.

[<http://www.freetrade.org/node/694>] Mr.

Wedgworth's allegation that the program is practically costless is special-interest sophistry that leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

22 May 2008

Friends,

Russ Roberts, my GMU colleague and co-blogger at Cafe Hayek, has a new book coming out on August 4th. It's entitled "The Price of Everything: A Parable of Possibility and Prosperity" (Princeton University Press, 2008).

Like all of Russ's writings, this book presents economic insights in crystal-clear and compelling language. Order your advance copies here:

http://www.amazon.com/Price-Everything-Parable-Possibility-Prosperity/dp/0691135096/ref=sr_1_4?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1211468041&sr=1-4

22 May 2008

Editor, The Wall Street Journal
200 Liberty Street

New York, NY 10281

To the Editor:

Bjorn Lomborg clearly details how efforts to "solve" the problem of global warming deny us numerous opportunities to deal with other problems in ways that would yield far greater benefit than we're getting from today's single-minded attempts to reduce carbon emissions ("How to Think About the World's Problems," May 22).

Thomas Sowell summarized the general point when he wrote that "there are no 'solutions'... but only trade-offs." [Thomas Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed* (Basic Books, 1995), p. 113] He's correct. Math problems have solutions; resource-use problems present us only with trade-offs. For example, turning crops into fuel means a greater scarcity of food. If voters would start thinking in terms of trade-offs rather than of solutions, many of the harmful choices that governments are making today might be avoided.

21 May 2008

Editor, USA Today

Dear Editor:

Alan Webber applauds the idea of the so-called "social business" - one that "has a social cause, not just a financial goal" ("Giving the poor the business," May 21). Webber tells us to "Think of it as capitalism with a human face."

I don't here question Mr. Webber's uncritical assumption that "social businesses" will work. I do, however, question his hackneyed suggestion that the face of for-profit capitalism is inhuman. No other economic system but capitalism has lifted billions of people so decisively out of poverty. The great economist Joseph Schumpeter noted this fact in 1942: "Electric lighting is no great boon to anyone who has money enough to buy a sufficient number of candles and to pay servants to attend them. It is the cheap cloth, the cheap cotton and rayon fabric, boots, motorcars and so on that are the typical achievements of capitalist production, and not as a rule improvements that would mean much to a rich man. Queen Elizabeth owned silk stockings. The capitalist achievement does not typically consist in providing more silk stockings for queens but in bringing them within the reach of factory girls in

return for steadily decreasing amounts of effort." [Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1942), p. 67.]

20 May 2008

Editor,
WashingtonPost.com

Dear Editor:

Let's get this straight. Hillary Clinton now complains that she is a victim of sexism ("Sen. Clinton Discusses 'Sexist' Treatment," video at Washingtonpost.com, May 20). Forget that she graduated from Wellesley and Yale – that she handily won two terms to the U.S. Senate – that she earned millions of dollars during her adult lifetime – that she gathered many more Democratic primary votes than did John Edwards, Joe Biden, and other middle-aged white guys running for this year's Democratic nomination.

Instead, focus on this fact: If Mrs. Clinton's failure to win her party's nomination is due to sexism, surely her claim that she's the strongest candidate to run against John McCain is mistaken on its face - unless it's the case that

many Republicans and independent voters are less prone to sexism than are committed Democrats.

20 May 2008

Editor, Baltimore Sun

Dear Editor:

You applaud the prospect of Congress giving the FDA control over tobacco products, and wish only that this control were more complete ("Discomforting compromise," May 20). Be careful what you wish for. As government moves ever-closer to outlawing tobacco, consumer demands for tobacco will be met more and more by black-marketeers - suppliers against whom consumers will have virtually no legal recourse. Even worse, black-market suppliers - to minimize their risks of detection - will pack greater nicotine punch into each centimeter of cigarette. The unintended result of this steady move toward tighter government control of the tobacco market will be less consumer information, weaker legal protections for consumers, and more potent and much more dangerous tobacco products.

19 May 2008

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

Dear Editor:

Sebastian Mallaby rightly excoriates western governments for their agricultural policies, many of which artificially drive up the cost of food for people in developing countries ("Rice and Baloney," May 19).

And while he also (and also rightly) criticizes poor-country governments for their recent imposition of export restrictions on food, Mr. Mallaby ignores one of the worst and longest-standing policy offenses that keep food artificially costly for citizens of poor countries: their own government's IMPORT restrictions.

Barriers on agricultural imports average 33.6 percent throughout sub-Saharan Africa, the highest of any region in the world. In addition, as explained by Nigeria's Thompson Ayodele, "import tariffs have put fertilizer out of many people's reach - leading to low yields and hard manual labour."

[\[http://www.thisdayonline.com/nview.php?id=111893\]](http://www.thisdayonline.com/nview.php?id=111893)

More reliable and less-

costly food supplies will never become a reality for peoples in developing countries as long as their governments restrict trade so aggressively.

19 May 2008

Editor, The Wall Street Journal
200 Liberty Street
New York, NY 10281

To the Editor:

Jeremy Haft finds a silver lining around the deathly dark cloud of China's earthquake: more American exports ("Another China Trade Opportunity," May 19).

While opportunities to integrate economically with greater numbers of people should always be welcomed - for such integration increases total output by deepening the division of labor - the benefit to Americans is never America's exports. The benefits are the larger numbers of imports that our exports enable us to buy. In an ideal world, useful goods and services would, like sunshine and gravity, be supplied to us free of charge. Alas, our world is no paradise; we must produce and give in order to prosper and get. The value to us of foreign

trade is found not in how much we export, but in how much we import.

So insofar as the earthquake diminished China's capacity to produce, not only are the Chinese made poorer by this catastrophe, so, too, are all people who trade with the Chinese, including us.