



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.

14 September 2008

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

Dear Editor:

Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY) blames language barriers for his failure to pay the appropriate amount of taxes ("Going After Charlie Rangel," September 14). I empathize. I speak English, but the U.S. Tax Code and its accompanying regulations are written in Bureaucratisse. At first glance, this language resembles English. But when examined it is

revealed to be a language all its own - a language whose vocabulary, grammar, and syntax make it impenetrable to those of us untrained in Bureaucratisse.

Truly, it is unjust to expect Rep. Rangel and the rest of us non-Bureaucratisse speakers to understand our tax obligations.

14 September 2008

Friends,

I can't recommend too highly my colleague Russ Roberts's newest book "The Price of Everything" (Princeton University

Press, 2008). Nor can George Will.

In his just-released latest Newsweek column, Will praises Russ's book and summarizes its lessons beautifully. Here's the free link to Will's column:

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/158752>

13 September 2008

Editor, New York Post

Dear Editor:

George Will's "Pension Perils" (September 13) exposes as mythical the claim that government takes a longer-run view than do private markets. If private firms behaved as do Vallejo, CA, and other municipalities that promise employees politically convenient but economically unsustainable pension benefits, their market values would plummet long before their debt obligations actually come due. Who wants to own part of a company likely to default on its debts?

The fall in market values today in anticipation of excessive payment obligations tomorrow signals current management to reform before it's too late and warns investors and suppliers (including workers) to tread with extra care when dealing with such firms.

12 September 2008

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

To the Editor:

Paul Krugman is correct: the McCain campaign's fabrications and half-truths say much about what a McCain administration would be like ("Blizzard of Lies," Sept. 12). But an Obama administration is unlikely to be any better. Sen. Obama eloquently proclaims platitudes. He gallivants around the country to perform for adoring crowds - masses of people stupidly stirred by his mere presence and cheering his empty bromides. Because it's true, as Mr. Krugman notes, that "how a politician campaigns tells you a lot about how he or she would govern," a President Obama would be chiefly a messianic cult leader, promising miracle cures and salvation-by-the-speech - and daily coming more and more to mistake his own charisma for character, and his own rhetoric for reality.

11 September 2008

Editor, ABA Journal

Dear Editor:

Kristin Choo's report of how (as your cover proclaims) "Global Warming Leads to Water

Wars" has not a single mention of water markets ("Gulp," September). How unfortunate.

A great deal of research shows that water markets replace fighting over access to water with peaceful, mutually advantageous allocation of water. As the great environmental economist Terry Anderson explains, "Where water prices signal the true scarcity value of water, people find innovative ways to conserve and trade; where prices do not reflect scarcity value, water is wasted and political battles rage.... The more that we reform legal institutions to lower the cost of water transfers from one use to another, the more we can adapt to changing demands and supplies regardless of what is causing those changes." [Terry Anderson, "Fightin' or Drinkin'," (PERC Reports, June 2007):<http://www.perc.org/articles/article885.php>]

11 September 2008

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

To the Editor:

David Perel offers good reasons why today "Everything About Politicians Is Fair Game" (September 11, 2008).

But Mr. Perel overlooks what is surely the fundamental reason: tit-for-tat. Because everything about private citizens has become fair game for politicians - everything from our retirement planning to what we ingest and even to the size of our toilet tanks - it is not surprising that citizens eagerly pry into the intimate lives of politicians.

Those who raise busy-bodyness into a guiding principle of public policy can hardly complain when their officious Frankenstein monster turns on them.

9 September 2008

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

To the Editor:

Coming as it does during the crisis involving Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Bob Herbert's unconditional praise of Medicare and Medicaid is curious ("Hold Your Heads Up," September 9).

Fannie's and Freddie's troubles are textbook examples of what happens when gain is privatized while risks and losses are socialized: private decision makers are led by an invisible hand to screw things up. The same underlying dysfunctionality that created America's housing-market troubles is needlessly driving up health-care costs: Medicare and Medicaid privatize the benefits of health care (medical attention for patients and handsome fees for physicians) while socializing the costs. Spending other people's money leads patients and doctors to overuse, and to use inefficiently, health-care resources - and, thus, to unnecessarily drive up health-care costs.

9 September 2008

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

To the Editor:

Bob Herbert's paean to modern "liberals" - that is, to those who view government as being necessary to protect us from our own stupidity and from others' cupidity - contains several errors ("Hold Your Heads Up," September 9). Here's one. Contrary to Mr. Herbert's assertion, unemployment insurance is not the gift of "liberals." Such insurance was introduced by private insurance firms about 100 years ago, against the resistance of state governments. A fatal blow was dealt to these commercial efforts by none other than FDR who, as governor of New York, vetoed a bill to allow private companies to expand the number and kinds of workers covered by this private insurance.

8 September 2008

Manager, WRVA Radio
Richmond, VA

Dear Sir or Madam:

A caller this afternoon lamented that modern society "yanks us from our roots, from our sacred attachment, to the land. We are no longer rooted to the land."

This caller should learn history. Human beings became "rooted" - or, more accurately, slavishly strapped by the necessity of survival or by feudal customs or by both - to the land only about 10,000 years ago. Depending on how you date humans' emergence as a distinct species, this fact means that we were "rooted" to the land for at most a mere 20 percent of our species' existence.

Our true roots are as hunter-gatherers. If your caller really believes that "the essence" that "nature instilled" in us is most reliably revealed by our past ways of life, she should insist that we reject as "unnatural" not only the factory but also the furrowed field. What we really ought to embrace, according to this woman's logic, is the rock, the spear,

and the loin cloth. We should, by the way, also reject science and education, for such "artificial" finery emerged only very recently in our existence, long after our "roots" took shape.

8 September 2008

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

Dear Editor:

Sebastian Mallaby wisely argues that reducing Uncle Sam's budget deficit is desirable, but he unwisely supposes that the only means of doing so is raising taxes ("McCain's Convenient Untruth," September 8). Not once in his column does he plead for reduced spending.

If Mr. Mallaby's brother-in-law persistently lived beyond his means by borrowing money to buy lots of flat-screen TVs, luxury automobiles, and vacations in Tahiti, would Mr. Mallaby scold his brother-in-law only for earning too little income? Would Mr. Mallaby's advice be limited to "Earn more money!"? Would he not also recommend that his brother-in-law spend less?

Clearly, the most straightforward way for his brother-in-law to avoid bankruptcy is for him to reduce his expenditures. And while advising him also to earn more income is generally a good idea, such advice would be irresponsible and downright anti-social if the brother-in-law's chief source of income is robbery (that is, taking money by force from productive people).