



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.

30 November 2008

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

To the Editor:

Reviewing Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, David Leonhardt favorably quotes the author: "We look at the young Bill Gates and marvel that our world allowed that 13-year-old to become a fabulously successful entrepreneur.... But that's the wrong lesson. Our world only allowed one 13-year-old unlimited access to a time-sharing terminal in 1968. If a million teenagers had

been given the same opportunity, how many more Microsofts would we have today?" ("Chance and Circumstance," November 30).

True. But Gladwell misses the larger point. In a world of many Microsofts, Bill Gates would be no outlier. But that world would still have its own outliers - individuals succeeding well beyond the average.

Although our economy isn't perfect, it does give unprecedented opportunities to such a large number of people that our economy overflows with successes that would be outliers in

less productive economies. Alas, we overlook that which is common. The successful clothing retailer, sheet-metal producer, flower importer, medical-device inventor, window-blind merchant, local radio personality - the immense productivity of these and countless other persons like them, and the standard of living they achieve, appear to us to be unexceptional because we take for granted the extraordinary productivity and accompanying standard of living that today's economy makes possible as a matter of routine.

29 November 2008

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

Dear Editor:

In Peter Funt's otherwise sensible op-ed, he off-handedly mentions that Barack Obama was elected to "run the country" ("Tapped Out," November 29). This familiar phrase is nonsensical.

No one "runs the country." No one could POSSIBLY "run the country." No president or Congress tells us when to awaken in the morning, what jobs to take, how hard to work, how to fix the porch swing, when to marry or divorce. No Great Leader decides when we have children, what we eat for dinner, what music we put on our iPods, or what books we read. Every decision we make in life is individual, our own. These decisions are affected in part, of course, by taxes and regulations, but mostly they are guided by forces thankfully beyond the reach of pompous meddlers - forces such as cultural norms, market prices, and each of our own unique needs and dreams.

The President of the United States runs only one branch of one government in America. That official no more "runs" the country than does the President of Ralston-Purina or the bouncer at a local bar.

28 November 2008

Editor, USA Today

Dear Editor:

Your editorial headlined "Our view on Black Friday: Is your cashier cranky? Big Brother may be watching" (Nov. 28) caused me to think that government is using private retailers to snoop on citizens. But no: you're referring simply to the fact that private retailers gather information electronically about how quickly their cashiers serve customers.

I have no idea whether such monitoring is a good or bad business practice. More to the point, despite your self-confident pronouncement to the contrary, nor do you. A great beauty of economic competition is that it DISCOVERS what consumers like and don't like. And it discovers this reality far more reliably than editor's-chair theorizing - or politicians'-chair theorizing - can ever

do. Unlike the real Big Brother who relentlessly spies to make The People serve him, information gathering by private enterprises not only is easily avoided, but is done to enable private enterprises to better serve The People.

25 November 2008

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

To the Editor:

Arthur Bowring is correct that pirates raise costs to consumers ("The Price of Piracy," November 25). Having to confront predators possessing the brute force to seize their cargoes and persons, merchants naturally cut back on their commercial activities and demand premium payments for whatever services they continue to perform.

But it's no stretch to arrrgggggue that pirates share much in common the stationary bandits we call "governments." Governments, too, routinely threaten to seize persons' assets and persons if those persons don't pay the ransom called "taxes." And like pirate

activity, government regulations and taxes increase the risks and costs of doing business - expenses ultimately passed on to consumers.

The chief difference between the two sorts of bandits is that, unlike governments, pirates don't insult the intelligence of

their victims with assurances that the pirates' predations are for the victims' own good.