



## 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.**

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6 September 2009

Editor, New Orleans  
Times-Picayune

Dear Editor:

Several - maybe most - of the objections to President Obama's upcoming speech to schoolchildren are poorly expressed ("Some fear address will be lesson carrying a political message," Sept. 4). But perhaps they reflect the same sound instinct against government-led conformity that resonates throughout Pink Floyd's 1979 mega-hit.

Although some Americans are stirred by the (always

sufficiently vague) prospect of 'uniting together' for this or that 'national' achievement, many of us are mightily put off by anything that smacks of treating each of us individuals as being just "another brick in the wall" of an edifice erected to promote our collective 'advance' or salvation.

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5 September 2009

Editor, Los Angeles Times

Dear Editor:

Tim Rutten misses the point of the widespread opposition to President Obama's planned speech to schoolchildren ("Calls to

boycott Obama's speech to kids offer a disturbing lesson in paranoia," September 5). While it's true that many conservative pundits, such as Michelle Malkin, have overreacted to this upcoming speech, the legitimate reason for opposing it is that ours is not a country dependent upon any Great Leader. Suggesting that students be asked to ponder how they "can help President Obama" tells students that 'leaders' deserve help simply because they are 'leaders.' Even worse, it evokes the catastrophic collectivist notion that society's progress depends upon the successful

carrying out of a 'leader's' program.

Like almost all parents, my wife and I are perfectly capable of imparting to our child an understanding of the importance of education. We are offended that a political celebrity pretends that he possesses some unique wisdom or special authority on this front.

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4 September 2009

Editor, The New York Times  
620 Eighth Avenue  
New York, NY 10018

To the Editor:

Supporting greater government control over health-care supply, Nicholas Kristof repeats the potted history of firefighting in the U.S., asserting that "Until the mid-19th century, firefighting was left mostly to a mishmash of volunteer crews and private fire insurance companies. In New York City, according to accounts in The New York Times in the 1850s and 1860s, firefighting often descended into chaos, with drunkenness and looting" ("Health Care That Works," September 4).

Research by Northwestern University's Fred McChesney, among others, reveals this history to be bunk. First, as McChesney points out, volunteer firefighters "still are the principal fire-fighting force in most smaller cities and towns." Second, government takeover of firefighting had little to do with public-spirited urges to improve fire-fighting - it's unclear

that volunteers performed poorly - and much to do with city bosses' quest for control over patronage. Here's McChesney: "But with the rise of municipal machines after the Civil War, city politicians discovered in volunteer fire companies a ready source of patronage appointments who thereafter were reliable voters... volunteer companies were legislated out of existence in favor of public fire-fighting units." [Fred S. McChesney, "Smoke and Errors," EconLib, 2002: <http://www.econlib.org/library/Columns/Mcchesneyfire.html>]

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4 September 2009

Editor, The Boston Herald

Dear Editor:

First, Massachusetts state Rep. Michael Rodrigues voted for a hefty hike in sales taxes. A predictable consequence of this higher tax is that, as you report, "Authorities have ... cracked down at the border, targeting Bay Staters seeking to avoid paying state taxes by crossing into New Hampshire to shop" ("Pol nabbed on New Hampshire booze run," September 4).

Next, Rep. Rodriques "was spotted brazenly piling booze in his car - adorned with his State House license plate - in the parking lot of a tax-free New Hampshire liquor store." When asked about his actions, Rep. Rodriques snapped "Mind your own business."

The irony is intoxicating. Mr. Rodriques votes for higher taxes enforced in part by border searches of private citizens' automobiles. And then he has the gall to get offended when his own private, out-of-state liquor purchases are questioned. What a hypocrite!

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4 September 2009

Editor, The Washington Examiner

Dear Editor:

You report that GOP electoral prospects are improving for 2010 ("House Democrats face tough prospects in 2010," September 4).

While more-intense competition among power-seekers is good, changing the identity of those who hold power is unlikely to rein government in. As long as voters shamelessly demand taxpayer-funded

goodies and cheap regulatory tricks from Congress, little will change. As H.L. Mencken said, believing that the remedy for excess government is to fill the legislature with new representatives is akin to believing "that the remedy for prostitution is to fill the bawdy-houses with virgins." [H.L. Mencken, *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Knopf, 1995), p. 32]

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3 September 2009

Editor, The Atlantic

Dear Editor:

In "How Moldova Escaped the Crisis" (July/August 2009), Jeffrey Tayler writes admiringly that Moldova - "Europe's poorest (and only Communist) country" - is unaffected by the west's economic woes.

What's to admire? Just as a family subsisting on an isolated farm and refusing contact with other persons will not suffer from the outside economy's recessions, so too will any country that isolates itself from the global economy be unaffected by global economic downturns. Of course, the price that both the family and the country pay for immunizing themselves from the

outside world's economic downturns is a resulting inability to profit from the outside world's economic growth - the benefits of which far exceed the accompanying costs.

To praise Moldova for having "escaped" the economic crisis is like praising someone who committed suicide for having escaped the future prospect of illness.

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3 September 2009

Editor, The New York Times  
620 Eighth Avenue  
New York, NY 10018

To the Editor:

Your report on what you call the "unusual" creation of affordable private burial insurance for poor immigrants to America is timely, if a bit weak on history ("Insurance, Here, for Burial Back in Colombia," September 3).

Prior to the rise of the welfare state in the U.S., poor Americans - especially poor immigrants - routinely joined mutual-aid societies. These societies charged small fees and supplied unemployment, sickness, life, and burial insurance. So historically, there's

nothing at all unusual about persons acting voluntarily - that is, not commanded by government - to provide such important services to those in need. [See, for example, the very important book by historian David Beito, FROM MUTUAL AID TO THE WELFARE STATE (University of North Carolina Press, 1999)]

This fact, in turn, is weighty evidence against politicians and pundits who today insist that markets neither cater to the poor nor are capable of adequately supplying insurance against life's surprises and misfortunes.

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3 September 2009

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

To the Editor:

Lawrence Graham is not quite correct to argue that the quota that Uncle Sam imposes on sugar imports should be raised (Letters, Sept. 3). This quota should be abolished.

The 'correct' amount of sugar for Americans to import can be, and should be, determined only by

American consumers' willingness to buy such imports. The fact that U.S. sugar growers insist that there is plenty enough sugar available under the existing quota is economically (and ethically) preposterous - as preposterous as would be, say, the opposition of newspaper publishers pleading with government to restrict the number of words consumers can buy annually from competing news outlets on grounds that consumers already get plenty enough news from newspapers.

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2 September 2009

Editor, The New York Times  
620 Eighth Avenue  
New York, NY 10018

To the Editor:

You report on a new study whose authors claim to find that "low-wage workers are often cheated" ("Low-Wage Workers Are Often Cheated," Sept. 2). Among the ways that these workers allegedly are cheated is that they "are routinely denied proper overtime pay and are often paid less than the minimum wage."

Being paid wages lower than what government

stipulates is not being "cheated." An important reason, no doubt, that low-wage workers often are paid less than what they are legislatively obliged to contract for is that their implicit agreement to go along with being "cheated" in such ways is a means for them to remain employed.

Because no one puts a gun to these workers' heads and commands them to work at the jobs they hold, what you describe as "cheating" is better described as private initiative in getting around the obnoxious barriers imposed by politicians and bureaucrats.

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2 September 2009

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

To the Editor:

American Postal Workers Union president William Burrus complains that "It is deeply troubling that Journal editors advocate ending the Postal Service's exclusive right to sort and deliver mail. The Postal Service must remain a public service if we are to honor our nation's commitment to serve every

American community - large or small, rich or poor, urban or rural - at affordable, uniform rates" (Letters, Sept. 2).

Apart from disingenuously describing monopoly as a "public service," Mr. Burrus makes two unfounded assumptions. The first is that private, competitive firms won't supply everyone willing to pay. Small-town America brims with competitive private firms operating the likes of affordable supermarkets, motels, satellite t.v., restaurants, and clothing stores - oh, and also express overnight mail delivery!

Mr. Burrus's second wrongheaded assumption is that it's good that postal rates be uniform. How can it make sense that the price of mailing a letter from Manhattan to Brooklyn be the same as the price of mailing a letter from Manhattan to Point Barrow? But if such enforced "uniformity" DOES make sense, then why doesn't the USPS pay all of its workers "uniform" wages? Why aren't newly hired clerks paid the same salaries received by thirty-year veteran mail carriers?

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1 September 2009

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

To the Editor:

Allan Meltzer argues convincingly that today's economic woes aren't as awful as were those of the 1930s, and that recovery from today's woes won't be due to stimulus spending ("What Happened to the 'Depression'?", September 1). Especially valuable is his reminder that "Keynesian economists always fail to recognize the powerful regenerative forces of the market economy."

Mr. Meltzer, however, does make one small error. He suggests that, because so many stimulus dollars are still waiting to be spent, the stimulus plan cannot explain recent economic buoyancy.

But Keynesianism, which justifies stimulus spending, doesn't predict that recovery happens only when government actually spends more money. Keynesian economists can say that, according to their theory, the legitimate ANTICIPATION that government will soon

spend lots more money is sufficient at least to start a recovery.

Like Mr. Meltzer, I find little merit in Keynesian economics. But the theoretical case for stimulus spending is not undermined by signs of recovery coming on the heels of an announced stimulus plan that has yet to be carried out.

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31 August 2009

Here's a comment that I just posted at Paul Krugman's blog:

David Lentini asserts that "fear and greed" are the "great drivers of laissez faire economics." This assertion seems wildly incorrect.

Is it really true that the more frightened people become, the less likely they are to turn to government for protection (however illusory such protection is in reality)?

And is it true that greed uniquely drives free markets? While markets are often accused of making people greedy (or of uncorking the greed that looms within us all), it's evident to me that majoritarian democracy - certainly as much as

markets, and arguably much MORE so - is driven by greed. What is it if not greed that prompts retirees to vote to tax working people so that these retirees' public pensions remain funded? What is it if not greed that motivates domestic corporations and their workers to lobby government for protection from foreign competition?

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31 August 2009

Editor, Los Angeles Times

Dear Editor:

You join legions of others in describing Ted Kennedy as having been "compassionate" ("Ted Kennedy, America's conscience," August 30). Aware that I'll come across as low-brow - as unable to appreciate the transformative magic of politics - I must ask: What's compassionate about spending other people's money and minding other people's business?

Suppose Mr. Kennedy were my neighbor. One day he arrives at my door with a handful of other neighbors (all carrying concealed weapons) and demands some of my money and tells me that he'll regulate what I eat, drink, and smoke. "And I'll

stop your teenage son from being employed if no employer offers him a wage at least as high as one that my friends here and I determine is appropriate."

I gaze at him aghast. "Oh, don't worry. Because my undying dream is to help others, I'll spend the money that I take from you in ways that will help you. But I'll also spend much of it helping people on the other side of the tracks. And any restrictions that I impose on your behavior are ones that, you can be sure, spring only from my compassion for you and others."

Should I regard neighbor Kennedy as great and compassionate - as a gallant champion of the interests of others? Or should I regard him as an arrogant bully, as fraudulent as he is dangerous?