



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.

25 April 2010

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

To the Editor:

Joseph Stiglitz's argues that the recently burst housing-price bubble was caused by artificially easy credit ("End the Dollar's Supremacy," April 25). He's correct. But he misidentifies the source of this easy credit as being foreigners desperate to hold dollar-denominated debt.

In fact, the source of this artificially easy credit was not a strong dollar – a

dollar widely in demand around the globe. Instead, the source was none other than monetary mismanagement by the Fed. Had that institution not pushed short-term interest rates so low that adjustable-rate mortgages became bewitchingly attractive there would not have been anywhere near the artificial stimulus to real-estate investment that we witnessed until 2007.

It's discouraging that a Nobel laureate economist blames a strong dollar for America's current economic weakness. The real culprit is an institution – the Fed – that did its best to make the dollar weaker.

25 April 2010

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

To the Editor:

The group Green My Parents prods children to scold adults into becoming more 'green' ("How to Green Your Parents," April 22). Allison Arieff approves. She croons that "GMP recognizes that young people are inherently attuned to their environment and understand the importance of protecting it."

Please.

Kids aren't inherently attuned to the environmental condition of even their own bedrooms - as a peak into a typical twelve-year-old's room will instantly prove. So it's asinine to think that children "inherently" care about the condition of Siberia or of Brazilian rainforests.

Today's prattling by young people about how awfully dirty the globe is reflects not kids' "inherent" tuning-in to the global environment but, instead, their indoctrination - performed by teachers and popular media - into the Church of Gaia.

25 April 2010

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

To the Editor:

Applauding efforts to instruct children on how to scold their parents into becoming more 'green,' Allison Arieff reports that families can save both money and the environment "By washing in cold water, walking or biking to school/work and kicking the bottled-water habit.... GMP's [Green My Parents'] founders suggest

that by taking simple steps like those, the average family could save over \$1,000 each year" ("How to Green Your Parents," April 22).

Wow! Who knew?!

Now that Sissy and Junior are enlightening mom'n'dad about how much money the family wastes on frivolous luxuries such as getting to work on time, the family will no doubt find yet other ways to save money while helping the environment. For example, by taking no more family vacations. These carbon-intensive excursions cost several thousands of dollars each year while inflicting great damage on mother earth. And for what? Nothing more noble than to satisfy silly and selfish desires such as to see grandma and grandpa face-to-face.

With parents' eyes finally opened to all the money they waste on perilous-to-the-planet indulgences like hot water, Americans can look forward to the day when every family boasts a bank account bursting with bucks and a lifestyle like that of pre-industrial peasants.

24 April 2010

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

Dear Editor:

Worried about America's "longstanding manufacturing-dominated trade deficits," Alan Tonelson asserts that "To pay for their current consumption of manufactured goods responsibly, and start paying down still dangerously high debts, Americans and their leaders must start caring about U.S. manufacturing output - and start generating much more of it" (Letters, April 24).

Forget that American manufacturing output, just prior to today's downturn, reached an all-time high. Forget Mr. Tonelson's mistaken belief that U.S. trade deficits necessarily increase Americans' indebtedness. Instead, focus on his assumption that the only way to pay for manufacturing imports "responsibly" is with manufacturing exports. No notion could be sillier.

Mr. Tonelson himself works in the service-sector. He manufactures nothing, yet he has ready access to manufactured goods. He

enjoys this access because he supplies valuable services that yield to him an income that, in turn, allows him to buy - without going into debt! - automobiles, cell phones, sofas, and countless other manufactured products.

If Mr. Tonelson loses no sleep at night over a mistaken worry that he owes some 'debt' to the manufactures from whom he buys, or over a worry that his future is doomed lest he find work in a factory, then why does he worry that other Americans - who act just as he does - condemn themselves to a future of poverty by working in the service-sector at jobs such as neurosurgery, banking, and newspaper reporting?

23 April 2010

Friends,

A few of you have written to me this morning to upbraid me for opposing the 'war on drugs.'

I stand by my defense of individual freedom, for that freedom is fraudulent that permits individuals to engage only in those peaceful actions that their betters judge to be appropriate.

But I have neither the smarts nor the eloquence of the late Milton Friedman to explain why all drugs should be legalized. This eight-minute video of Friedman is wonderful: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLsCC0LZxkY>

(Thanks to Reuvain Borchardt for finding it for me.)

23 April 2010

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

Dear Editor:

Annoyed by today's turbocharged nanny state, Michael Gerson observes that "Democrats in particular seem to be afflicted with Mary Poppins Syndrome: They will not rest until Americans are practically perfect in every way" ("With health-care reform, it's nag, nag, nag," April 23).

But by supporting the 'War on Drugs,' Mr. Gerson discards his ability to stand on principle against the state's nanny-ing intrusions. Even if Mr. Gerson is correct that drug legalization will result in more "addiction" than "robs people of liberty," why is it appropriate for government

to stop me from losing my 'liberty' to addictive substances but not appropriate for government to stop me from losing my life to sodium or to trans fats?

Adults should either be free to lead their lives in whatever peaceful ways they choose - regardless of the opinions of neighbors, elites, majorities, or 'leaders' - or they should not be free to do so. Mr. Gerson's refusal to allow Americans the right to consume whatever drugs they wish to consume means that he concedes to government the responsibility for protecting us from ourselves. So, alas, the restless nannying now sweeping the land is but the inevitable outcome of a role that Mr. Gerson himself pleads with government to play.

23 April 2010

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

Dear Editor:

Bill McKibben's pessimism about modern humanity is fully displayed in the opening line of his reflections on the past 40 years of Earth Days: "Forty years in, we're losing" ("On

Earth Day, the environmental movement needs repairs," April 23).

Losing? Forget facts such as that agricultural yields and proven reserves of petroleum are today at all-time highs. Instead, focus on one of the best single indicators of the state of the environment: life-expectancy.

Life-expectancy across the globe is rising. It's now higher than ever - and not just, or even especially, for rich westerners such as Americans (whose 78.1-years life-expectancy today is 7.3 years longer than it was 40 years ago). Indians today live, on average, 20.6 years longer than they did in 1970; South Koreans 16.9 years longer; Brazilians 12.1 years longer; and the Chinese 11.8 years longer.

In contrast, North Koreans' life-expectancy today of 63.8 years is only 1.8 years longer than it was in 1970, despite the fact that the commerce, industry, and division of labor that Mr. McKibben believes is toxic to mother nature and to humanity is, in that country, virtually non-existent.

22 April 2010

Mr. R_____

Dear _____:

For more than a year you've delighted in e-mailing me, always with the same message. I quote now from your note of three hours ago: "Professor Lazy Fairy [a charming name you've given me, BTW], You like to tell why the government should not regulate markets and help everyday people ... deal with the big corporations. You're against the president's plan to regulate Wall Street and his plan to give us better [health?] insurance. It's easy to criticize but you don't ever tell what you would do. At least the President is trying. If you can't offer something better, shut the f*&k up."

R____, I commend to you the writings of H.L. Mencken - in my opinion, the wisest and most insightful American ever to put pen to paper. On page 63 of his indispensable collection entitled "Minority Report," Mencken writes as if he had a premonition of your complaint:

"The fact that I have no remedy for all the sorrows of the world is no reason for my accepting yours. It simply supports the strong

probability that yours is a fake."

Ponder this insight, my man.

22 April 2010

Friends,

One of the clearest and most creative thinkers of the past half-century, Clemson University's and the Mercatus Center's Bruce Yandle, discusses in this wonderful podcast (with Jerry Brito) the history of regulation in the U.S. - and, in particular, the effect that network television has had on it:

<http://surprisinglyfree.com/2010/04/19/bruce-yandle-on-the-rise-of-national-tv-and-the-spread-of-social-regulation/>

22 April 2010

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

Dear Editor:

E.J. Dionne writes that "the financial reform bill that Democrats are pushing has the advantage of flowing with a public view devoutly critical of Wall Street, bankers and all their works" ("Obama pulls out his boxing gloves in Calif.," April 22).

Question: if we Americans are intelligent enough to be appropriately skeptical of Wall Street, then surely we're aware enough to not uncritically turn our money over to strangers promising sky-high returns with rock-bottom risks. So why does Mr. Dionne nevertheless suppose that our protection from Wall Street requires the intercession of Uncle Sam?

Alternatively, if we are, in fact, so gullible and uninformed that we cannot each watch carefully over our own money - if we're so ignorant and careless when it comes to our own investment decisions that we need government bureaucrats to protect us from glib financial predators - on what grounds does Mr. Dionne conclude that our support for financial 'reform' reflects something more profound than simply the same gullibility and ignorance that he believes government must protect us from?

21 April 2010

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

To the Editor:

Albert Foer wants Congress to cap credit-card interchange fees ("Our \$48 Billion Credit Card Bill," April 21). He thinks that these fees are too high because, while Visa and MasterCard "handle the transactions, they depend on banks to issue the cards to consumers. The result is that Visa and MasterCard compete to deliver the highest returns to the banks rather than offer the lowest prices to consumers." Wrong.

To see why Visa's and MasterCard's competition for banks to issue their cards does, in fact, keep credit-card companies attentive to consumers, ask what would happen if Visa raised its interchange fee from two percent to 52 percent. That is, for every dollar charged on a Visa card, merchants would get 48 cents and banks would collect 52 cents. How many merchants would accept Visa? None. So how many consumers would carry Visa? None. MasterCard, American Express, and other companies would get all of Visa's business. Competition would then oblige Visa to lower its fees.

Beyond pointing out that other countries cap interchange fees without completely ruining their credit-card industries, Mr. Foer offers no evidence that today's two-percent fee is uncompetitive or otherwise too high.

21 April 2010

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

To the Editor:

Demanding that Congress cap credit-card interchange fees, Albert Foer writes that "what almost no one realizes is that those [credit-card convenience] benefits are far outweighed by an implicit transaction fee" ("Our \$48 Billion Credit Card Bill," April 21).

The reason no one realizes the excessive burdensomeness of these fees is because it's a fiction conjured by Mr. Foer's imagination. The very fact that consumers voluntarily use credit cards and debit cards tens of millions of times daily is proof positive that the convenience benefits of these cards is NOT outweighed by the transaction fee.

21 April 2010

Editor, USA Today

Dear Editor:

On this Earth Day, Bjorn Lomborg scrubs with facts the noxious notions and emotions that pollute public discourse about the environment ("Earth Day: Smile, don't shudder," April 21). Especially useful is his point that the world's number one environmental killer remains the indoor air pollution suffered by persons in poor countries who burn wood, waste, and dung to cook their meals and to heat their homes.

As the historian Thomas Babington Macaulay reminded us, it wasn't until Europeans industrialized - or, as we say today, enlarged their 'carbon footprint' - that they were saved from that same filthy fate. Here's his description of the dwelling of a typical 17th-century Scottish highlander:

"His lodging would sometimes have been in a hut of which every nook would have swarmed with vermin. He would have inhaled an atmosphere thick with peat smoke, and foul with a hundred noisome exhalations.... His couch would have been the bare earth, dry or

wet as the weather might be; and from that couch he would have risen half poisoned with stench, half blind with the reek of turf, and half mad with the itch." [Thomas Babington Macaulay, The History of England, Vol. 3 (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Co., n.d.), p. 279]

We in today's developed economies are indeed lucky to be able to worry about dangers as distant and as nebulous as global warming.

20 April 2010

Editor, The Wall Street Journal
1211 6th Ave.
New York 10036

To the Editor:

My friend and former professor Gerry O'Driscoll eloquently explains that "crony capitalism" has as much to do with real capitalism as praying mantises have to do with real prayer ("An Economy of Liars," April 20). But I must pick one nit.

Gerry writes that "Thomas Carlyle, the 19th century Victorian essayist, unflatteringly described classical liberalism as 'anarchy plus a constable.' As a romanticist, Carlyle

hated the system - but described it accurately." I disagree that Carlyle's description is accurate.

"Anarchy" means "no law." Capitalism - real capitalism - is infused with law, most of which is self-enforcing. The manufacturer who pays his suppliers late gets poorer credit terms in the future; the retailer who cheats her customers loses business; the customer who doesn't pay his bills can no longer buy on credit.

The chief problem with crony capitalism is precisely that it injects significant amounts of anarchy into the economy, transforming capitalism into something entirely different and dysfunctional. Under crony capitalism, government excuses the politically influential from capitalism's laws. Thus unleashed from the impartial discipline of the invisible hand, the politically influential become criminals who lie, rape, pillage, and plunder. And THAT'S true anarchy.

20 April 2010

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

Dear Editor:

Justifying her support of the F.D.A.'s proposal to forcibly limit the amount of salt that Americans consume, Johns Hopkins epidemiologist Cheryl Anderson declares that "We can't just rely on the individual to do something. Food manufacturers have to reduce the amount of sodium in foods" ("FDA plans to limit amount of salt allowed in processed foods for health reasons," April 20).

The cosmic arrogance of the likes of Dr. Anderson was described by H.L. Mencken: "A certain section of medical opinion, in late years, has succumbed to the messianic delusion. Its spokesmen are not content to deal with the patients who come to them for advice; they conceive it to be their duty to force their advice upon everyone, including especially those who don't want it. That duty is purely imaginary. It is born of vanity, not of public spirit. The impulse behind it is not altruism, but a mere yearning to run things." [H.L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1949 [1982]), p. 343]

19 April 2010

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

Dear Editor:

Dana Milbank ridicules Tea Partiers as malcontents "expressing violent thoughts, peacefully" ("Gun-toting protesters voice violent thoughts peacefully," April 20).

I leave to each reader, and to history, the task of assessing Tea Partiers' propensity for violence. One useful comparison would be with, say, the anti-globalization protestors of a few years back (who likely fancied themselves as expressing peaceful thoughts, violently).

But a more relevant comparison is with the institution that the Tea Partiers protest: Uncle Sam. THAT outfit - government - is the very embodiment of gun-toting force. If I don't buy health insurance, government will threaten violence against me in order to compel me to do so. If I refuse to answer intimate questions from the Census Bureau about my personal life, such as about the number of nights that I sleep away from home, I will be fined - and imprisoned if I refuse

to pay the fine - and violently apprehended if I struggle to avoid imprisonment.

Government cloaks itself in magnificent titles, marble buildings, and majestic ceremonies. Behind this glorious façade, though, is a fusillade of brute, deadly force, ready to be violently unleashed against anyone who disobeys the commands of ruling politicians.

19 April 2010

Friends,

Here's my GMU Econ, and Mercatus Center, colleague Tyler Cowen writing on taxes and spending in yesterday's New York Times:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/18/business/18view.html?ref=business>

...and here's my and Tyler's colleague Dan Klein commenting, at Tyler's and Alex Tabarrok's blog "Marginal Revolution," on Tyler's essay:

"Unless one believes that national bankruptcy would be a good thing, Tyler's post/NYT piece contains much wisdom.

He ends the NYT piece by saying: "How deeply will we dig ourselves in before we create a more mature and more forward-looking political culture?"

Clearly some mechanisms are needed to make politicians more trustworthy and more trusted. They need signals from people other than the political class, the academic class, and leftists, signals telling them that spending, especially entitlements, must be cut very substantially.

Also we need mechanisms for citizens to enlighten and pressure OTHER CITIZENS to favor serious spending cuts.

I have a great idea for advancing such mechanisms.

Let's create a spontaneous, bottom-up network of people who still believe in limited government and free enterprise to organize peaceful rallies around the country, rallies that stand up for just those messages which the political chiefs and other citizens need to hear, and need to see that many of us are so serious about that we are willing to sacrifice our time and energy in organizing and communicating the message.

If we can get many spontaneous gatherings going, politicians will perhaps begin to get the message, will be pressured to get the message. They may, thereby, become more trustworthy and more trusted."

19 April 2010

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

Dear Editor:

John Tkacik writes that "the most unsettling aspect of China's economic power is its manufacturing output. According to the latest figures in the CIA's World Factbook, industry accounts for about 22 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product and about 49 percent of China's" (Letters, April 19). Because he doesn't elaborate, Mr. Tkacik apparently believes that this fact speaks for itself, and that its message for Americans is ominous.

He's mistaken.

Percentages are ratios. Manufacturing's and resource-extraction's share of the U.S. economy is smaller than is their share of the Chinese economy because high-value services are a much larger share of America's economy than of China's. Does Mr. Tkacik think that our economy would be strengthened by policies or trends that force surgeons, software engineers, airline pilots, gourmet chefs, and other service-sector workers back to toiling away, as their parents and grandparents did, in factories and in mines? If his child gets cancer, would Mr. Tkacik prefer an America full of sawmills

and seamstresses, or one
planted thick with doctors,
nurses, and
pharmaceutical
researchers?