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Comment on the Commentary of the Day

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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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29 August 2010

Editor, Washington Examiner

Dear Editor:

David Sirota identifies a benefit - namely, reduced human impact on the environment – and argues that, therefore, people are morally obliged to take steps to achieve that benefit ("A week of living with low impact on the environment," Aug. 29). But because he ignores competing benefits, Mr. Sirota's moralizing fails. Using the very same method of argument employed by Mr. Sirota, I can 'prove' that people should do almost the opposite of what he advocates.

For example, it's beneficial to help others. So I argue that we are morally obliged to do more to help others, regardless of the costs (including any resulting impacts on the environment).

We should spend more time working in factories producing furniture, cars, cell phones, and the countless other products that people enjoy. Because so many Americans enjoy big houses and sprawling lawns, we also should encourage the growth of suburbs so that more people can enjoy McMansions situated on large grassy lots. We should quit protecting endangered species that humans don't consume as food, as protecting such species hurts people by reducing economic output. And we should certainly avoid Mr. Sirota's practice of bicycling to work: because travel by bike takes far more time than does travel by car, bicycle commuters thoughtlessly – nay, irresponsibly! - reduce the time they spend working to help others.

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29 August 2010

Editor, Los Angeles Times

Dear Editor:

Arguing that greater government "redistribution" of income will spark economic growth, Gloria Richards repeats the fable that Henry Ford more than doubled his workers' pay to $5 per hour so that "they themselves could afford to drive his automobiles" (Letters, Aug. 29).

Ford raised workers' wages for two reasons, neither of which had anything to do with raising consumer demand for his automobiles. The first reason was to reduce worker turnover. In 1913, the year before the $5 wage was announced in January 1914, the average Ford employee quit after less than four months on the job. A workforce so unstable and inexperienced prevented his factories from achieving peak efficiency.

Second, because the $5 wage was conditioned upon his workers learning English, as well as their steering clear of alcohol and gambling - conditions monitored by Ford executives visiting workers' homes! - the higher wage was an incentive for workers to be more reliable and productive while on the job.

In short, Ford was something of an early supply-sider. He understood that the key to economic growth is not in giving people stronger incentives to spend but, rather, in giving people stronger incentives to produce.

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28 August 2010

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

To the Editor:

David Sassoon of Harlemville, NY, is a locovore because, in his words, he's "interested in restoring community through the act of eating, rather than swallowing the cold logic of global economics" (Letters, Aug. 28).

I wonder if Mr. Sassoon's refusal to "swallow the cold logic of global economics" goes beyond his dietary choices. Does he promote community by wearing only clothes made from locally grown fibers and woven at a local mill? When he is ill, does he stick to his principle of not swallowing the cold logic of global economics by refusing also to swallow any pharmaceuticals not made locally? Does he drive a locally manufactured automobile? Is the furniture in his home and office made only of materials found in or near Harlemville? And are the novels he reads, the musical composition he listens to, and the movies he watches only those that are produced locally?

Of course not. But he needn't berate himself.

A beautiful consequence of the so-called "cold logic of global economics" is that it knits people from around the world into a kind of community - into a worldwide web of peaceful and productive mutual dependence. Commerce over large geographic areas undermines the nativism and insularity - and poverty - that result when people live in local communities with little or no contact with outsiders.

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27 August 2010

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

To the Editor:

ZBB Energy president Eric Apfelbach argues that government subsidies to his firm are justified because his company has a promising future (Letters, Aug. 27). I don't buy it.

If ZBB Energy's future really is as bright as he says it is, private investors would commit sufficient funds to keep it growing. The fact that private investors aren't doing so is strong evidence that ZBB Energy's future is dimmer than Mr. Apfelbach thinks.

It's true, as Mr. Apfelbach notes, that private investors are now generally staying on the sidelines. But they're doing so for good reasons. As explained elsewhere in your pages today by economists Thomas Cooley and Lee Ohanian, looming tax increases and other burdensome government interventions make the prospects of future profits throughout the economy quite dreary ("FDR and the Lessons of the Depression," Aug. 27). There's no reason to suppose that ZBB Energy is immune to the enterprise-debilitating viruses being injected into the economy by the mad scientists in Washington.

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26 August 2010

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

To the Editor:

Reviewing Julian Cribb's book "The Coming Famine," Mark Bittman approvingly summarizes Cribb's thesis that "we have passed the peaks for water, fertilizer and land, and that we will all soon be made painfully aware that we have passed it for food, as wealthy nations experience shortages and rising prices, and poorer ones starve. Much of 'The Coming Famine' builds an argument that we've jumped off a cliff and that global chaos - a tidal wave of people fleeing their own countries for wherever they can find food - is all but guaranteed" ("Seeing a Time (Soon) When We'll All Be Dieting," August 25).

These apocalyptic, economically uninformed predictions are growing tiresome.

I will bet Mr. Cribb (and/or Mr. Bittman) $5,000 that the percentage of the median family pre-tax income spent in a supermarket on a basket of food in the United States will be lower in 2020 than it is in 2010. I'm happy to negotiate on which items to include in the basket as long as these items are typical foods eaten by middle-class Americans. So the basket might include, for example, a loaf of whole-wheat bread, a dozen eggs, a gallon of milk, a gallon of orange juice, a box of corn flakes, a head of iceberg lettuce, a pound of sliced turkey breast, and a liter bottle of Coca-Cola.

Whatever items are included in the basket, I'm confident enough to stake my money on the prediction that the aggregate price of these items will constitute a lower portion of Americans' pre-tax income ten years from now than it constitutes today. Are Mr. Cribb and Mr. Bittman as confident in their contrary prediction?

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26 August 2010

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

Dear Editor:

Harold Meyerson can learn a valuable lesson from you. Yesterday you published an editorial opposing Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli's effort to regulate abortion clinics more strictly ("The case against stronger abortion regulations in Virginia"). You pointed out that, because there's no strong evidence that these clinics pose undue dangers to women, it's bad policy to strengthen regulations that nevertheless will likely cause some clinics to close.

Unlike you, Mr. Meyerson doesn't understand the necessity of weighing the benefits of regulation against its costs. For Mr. Meyerson, the recall of a half-billion eggs is evidence enough that government must regulate egg producers more strictly ("The many sins of deregulation," August 26). Never mind that only a half-billion of the nearly 78 billion eggs annually produced in America are suspected of possibly being tainted with salmonella. That is, the percentage of annual U.S. egg output now thought to be tainted is 0.6 - less than one percent. I wonder how this percentage compares to the safety record of Virginia abortion clinics.

The puny percentage of recalled eggs is hardly sufficient evidence to support the conclusion that American egg producers are such a danger to the public health that greater regulation is necessary.

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25 August 2010

Editor, Los Angeles Times

Dear Editor:

Arguing against Proposition 19 - the passage of which would liberalize marijuana laws in California - former U.S. "Drug Czars" Gil Kerlikowske, John Walters, Barry McCaffrey, Lee Brown, Bob Martinez, and William Bennett assert that "No country in the world has legalized marijuana to the extent envisioned by Proposition 19" ("Why California should just say no to Prop. 19," August 25).

Not true. Marijuana was perfectly legal throughout the United States until the city of El Paso first outlawed it in 1914, a move that was followed in the same year by national criminalization with the Harrison Act.

The long historical record of legal marijuana in America - a record dating from the 17th century until the lifetimes of many people still alive today - offers no support for the authors' contention that liberalized marijuana laws will result in a slew of terrible problems.

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25 August 2010

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

To the Editor:

Thomas Friedman wants to improve public education in the U.S. by the summoning into action "supermen and superwomen" ("Steal This Movie, Too," August 25).

Relying on the intervention of superheroes is indeed a possible course of action. A far better course, however, is to introduce consumer choice and competition. Although much more mundane than the prospect of altruistic action heroes sweeping in to teach our children, giving parents choice (say, through tuition tax credits) will spark the many ordinary men and women working in K-12 schools to work harder and more creatively to educate their students.

We successfully rely upon competition and consumer choice rather than super heroes to keep the likes of supermarkets, restaurants, and hardware stores ever-dedicated to serving their customers well. Let's do the same with schools.

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24 August 2010

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

To the Editor:

You're correct that the Credit Card Accountability, Responsibility and Disclosure Act of 2009 will discourage lenders from extending credit to households most in need of it by arbitrarily reducing the penalties that lenders may assess against dead-beat and delinquent debtors ("The Politics of Plastic," August 24). Our Leaders, though, cling to their peculiar faith that regulations never create incentives for people to do what Our Leaders would prefer people not to do.

Let's put this faith to a real test: Ask Congress and the White House to reduce penalties assessed by the IRS against dead-beat and delinquent taxpayers - for example, let's reduce fees and interest charges for late payment of taxes, and eliminate jail time as a punishment for tax evasion. If Our Leaders' faith is sound, there will be no increase in tax evasion and delinquencies. Revenue collected by the IRS will be unaffected - thereby exposing those high IRS penalties as being nothing more than unconscionable measures imposed by a giant, unaccountable organization for no purpose other than to suck additional money unjustifiably out of the pockets of hard-working yet hapless Americans.

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24 August 2010

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

To the Editor:

According to Paul Krugman, for government not to raise taxes is for government "to cut checks" to persons whose taxes aren't raised ("Now That's Rich," August 23).

Economists say that money is a "veil" that obscures our view of the economy's underlying reality - namely, the fact that people produce and consume, not money, but real goods and services. So let's recast Mr. Krugman's understanding of taxation in terms of something real.

Suppose that Sue works hard on her land all spring and summer growing 100 bushels of corn, and then successfully resists her Uncle Sam's attempt to grab 40 of those bushels. Would Mr. Krugman describe this situation as one in which Uncle Sam GAVE 40 bushels of corn to Sue? Even if some sort of familial duty obliges nieces to help feed their improvident uncles, surely it would still be grossly misleading to say that Sue's transfer of 30 bushels to Uncle Sam, rather than the 40 bushels that Uncle Sam's friend believes that Uncle Sam "should" receive, means that Uncle Sam GAVE 10 bushels of corn TO Sue.

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23 August 2010

Editor, New York Post

Dear Editor:

In light of China's military modernization, Peter Brookes warns that Uncle Sam should do more to prepare for a possible future war against the Chinese ("The China challenge," August 23).

An even more important task is to AVOID future belligerencies. To this end, Sen. Charles Schumer, Sen. Lindsey Graham, and other protectionists in Washington should stop trying to prevent Americans from buying goods and services from China. The single best hope for continued peace is politically unfettered vibrant commerce between Americans and the Chinese. Economically integrated, mutually dependent peoples have powerful incentives not to destroy each other. Killing one's customers or suppliers is seldom a desirable course of action!

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23 August 2010

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

To the Editor:

Reasonable people can debate whether or not higher taxes are a sound means of funding government spending, but Paul Krugman isn't reasonable ("Now That's Rich," August 23). Instead, he slings mud and insinuates that the proper relationship between Americans and their government is exactly the opposite of what the founders expressly took this relationship to be.

For government not to raise taxes on high-income earners is NOT, contrary to Mr. Krugman's assertion, for government "to cut checks averaging $3 million each to the richest 120,000 people in the country." No checks will be cut and no money will be taken from anyone.

All income is earned by individuals. It originates as THEIR property and not that of any government or of some collective 'us.' Even if this money is deemed necessary to keep Uncle Sam solvent, remember that this government was created to protect individual rights that each of us receive from our "Creator" - that is, rights existing independently of any state. In contrast, according to Mr. Krugman's mystical political dogma, all property (and, hence, each right) originates in government. Government is elevated to the status of Creator, while each individual is thereby reduced to the status of a serf living at the favor and pleasure of government. That belief, if pursued consistently, leads to the greatest tyranny.