



## 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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15 May 2011

Editor, Los Angeles Times

Dear Editor:

You uncritically repeat the proposition that the earth today is too "crowded" ("Defusing the population bomb," May 15). The weight of evidence that supports this proposition is precisely zero.

It's true that one billion people today live as poorly (though not more poorly) as did nearly every human being until about 200 years ago. Close to SIX billion people today, however, enjoy material standards of living that are off-the-charts higher than were standards

of living in the past when population was only a fraction (less than 1/7th) of its current level. With multiples more people now enjoying standards of living unimaginable to our ancestors - and with this improvement in living standards occurring simultaneously with the burst in population growth that started about 200 years ago - the burden falls upon those, such as yourself, to argue that humans' living standards are threatened by a growing population.

Of course the future might differ from the past. But merely repeating pop superstitions about population "pressures"

won't do given the magnitude of the above facts AND in light of this observation by Thomas Babington Macaulay, made in response to predictions that Great Britain's economy was on the verge of being overwhelmed - and its people impoverished - by population pressures: "We cannot absolutely prove that those are in error who tell us that society has reached a turning point, that we have seen our best days. But so said all who came before us, and with just as much apparent reason." [Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Southey's Colloquies on Society," (1830), paragraph 95:

<http://www.econlib.org/library/Essays/macS1.html>  
That was 1830.

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13 May 2011

News Director, Politico  
Rosslyn, VA

Dear Sir or Madam:

GOP leaders argue that extending the PATRIOT Act is especially important because the killing of Osama bin Laden will inspire retaliatory terrorist attacks against Americans ("GOP struggles for PATRIOT Act votes," May 12).

Call me cynical, but had Bin Laden not yet been killed or captured, I'm sure that these same GOP leaders would argue that extending the Patriot Act is especially important because Osama bin Laden remains on the loose.

Thus the unique danger of declaring war on "terror": the enemy - being a method rather than an identifiable group of people - is impossible to eradicate completely. And so the power-hungry in coalition with the paranoid have available an inexhaustible supply of superficially plausible excuses for keeping citizens in a perpetual state of fear, war,

surveillance, and suppression.

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12 May 2011

Programming Director,  
WTOP Radio  
Washington, DC

Dear Sir or Madam:

Mark Segraves reports today that Maryland Attorney General Doug Gansler, having received complaints about rising gasoline prices, "sent a letter to [gasoline wholesaler] Empire requesting documentation to justify the spike in prices."

Here's how I hope Empire will respond to Mr. Gansler's letter:

"Mr. Gansler: We're in receipt of your request for us to justify our decision to raise the prices we charge for our products. Because Empire is a private firm with no government-granted protection from competition, our pricing policies are none of your business. But we'll humor you this once: our 'justification' for raising prices is that we believe the market will bear these higher prices.

"Being experienced in this industry (unlike you), we

believe that over the next few days, weeks, or months, gasoline supplies (relative to demand) will be unusually low and, hence, unusually valuable. If our belief is correct, we'll earn profits for helping to bring gasoline prices into line with these prevailing market conditions. The higher prices will give oil producers and gasoline refiners incentives to work extra-hard to bring more supplies to market. These higher prices will also prompt consumers to conserve today on their use of gasoline. You would agree, no doubt, that both of these responses are appropriate when gasoline supplies are tight.

"If our belief is incorrect, however, we'll lose market share - and, hence, lose profits - to rival gasoline wholesalers who are better than we are at reading prevailing conditions in the market.

"Either way, we gain nothing at the expense of consumers who (especially if our assessment of market conditions is correct) are made better off than they would otherwise be over the long-run by having prices rise today so that gasoline will be more abundant tomorrow."

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11 May 2011

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

Dear Editor:

Andy Shallal insists that the opening of Wal-Mart stores in the District would "water down D.C.'s character" (Letters, May 11). He's correct – but not for reasons he understands.

While Mr. Shallal agrees that "our most vulnerable neighborhoods, where the Wal-Mart stores are planned, are desperately underserved," his recipe for addressing this problem is (1) call a company that consistently serves consumers well a "bully"; (2) demand that consumers not be permitted to have such a company operate in their neighborhoods; and (3) offer, as an alternative, a parade of empty if hip gobbledygook ("The solution is multi-tiered and drawn from a sustainable economy: innovative businesses, better tax incentives, improved infrastructure and a more prepared workforce.")

So, yes, Wal-Mart's operation in D.C. would indeed "water down" that

city's characteristic tic of allowing the abstract fancies of economically illiterate elites to trump both the actual entrepreneurial doings of businesses seeking to serve consumers AND the wishes of those consumers themselves.

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11 May 2011

Friends,

The New York Daily News today published a little essay I did defending U.S. oil companies from the scorn heaped on them in recent weeks:

[http://www.nydailynews.com/opinions/2011/05/11/2011-05-11\\_in\\_defense\\_of\\_big\\_oil\\_the\\_truth\\_about\\_those\\_huge\\_hated\\_earnings\\_numbers.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/opinions/2011/05/11/2011-05-11_in_defense_of_big_oil_the_truth_about_those_huge_hated_earnings_numbers.html)

And in this, my latest column in the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, I riff on Deirdre McCloskey's new book to suggest that we westerners are made distinctive and great not by our ability to kill (and to celebrate the killing) of bad guys but, rather, by our celebration (however imperfect; see above) of bourgeois virtues:

[http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/opinion/columnists/boudreaux/s\\_736343.html](http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/opinion/columnists/boudreaux/s_736343.html)

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10 May 2011

Mr. Mark Plotkin, Political Analyst  
WTOP Radio  
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. Plotkin:

Your commentary on WTOP is always enjoyable. But I question your claim that Newt Gingrich brings "cerebral" heft to the field of GOP presidential candidates.

While it's true that everything is relative - compared to Donald Trump, a buzzing gnat sounds like Suetonius - Newt Gingrich's alleged shining intellect seems to be merely a mirage conjured by Gingrich's acting skills.

My sense of Gingrich is the same as H.L. Mencken's sense of a previously famous "cerebral" politician: Woodrow Wilson. Mencken criticized Wilson's 1913 to 1921 run in the nation's premier political theater for "its ideational hollowness, its ludicrous strutting and bombast, its heavy dependence upon greasy and meaningless words, its frequent descents to mere sound and fury, signifying nothing.... Wilson was

their [the pundits who admired him] superior in their own special field - that he accomplished with a great deal more skill than they did themselves the great task of reducing all the difficulties of the hour to a few sonorous and unintelligible phrases, often with theological overtones - that he knew better than they did how to arrest and enchant the boobery with words that were simply words, and nothing else." [H.L. Mencken, "The Archangel Woodrow," reprinted in The Vintage Mencken, Alistair Cooke, ed. (Vintage, 1955), pp. 117-119]

Perhaps you'll reply that Mencken's description of Wilson applies to 99.5573 percent of all successful politicians. And I would agree. But I would not include Gingrich in the 0.4427 percent of politicians whose clarity and honesty protect them from being so described.

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10 May 2011

Editor, Washington Times

Dear Editor:

Robert Lighthizer praises Donald Trump's call to "get tough on China" ("Donald Trump is no liberal on

trade," May 10). Here's the key paragraph:

"On a purely intellectual level, how does allowing China to constantly rig trade in its favor advance the core conservative goal of making markets more efficient? Markets do not run better when manufacturing shifts to China largely because of the actions of its government. Nor do they become more efficient when Chinese companies are given special privileges in global markets, while American companies must struggle to compete with unfairly traded goods."

Inspired by the 19th-century French economist Frederic Bastiat, I reword Mr. Lighthizer's paragraph just a bit:

"On a purely intellectual level, how does allowing God to constantly rig trade in the sun's favor - sending us lots of valuable energy, light, and warmth while unfairly refusing to purchase a single earth-made good in return! - advance the core conservative goal of making markets more efficient? Markets do not run better when energy production is outsourced to celestial bodies largely because of the actions of

God. Nor do they become more efficient when the sun enjoys special, God-created privileges in the solar-system's markets, while American suppliers of electricity, fuel oil, light bulbs, and overcoats must struggle to compete with unfairly traded energy, light, and heat from the sun."

Until the likes of Mr. Lighthizer plausibly explains why foreign-government-subsidized exports of valuable goods and services from places such as China harm Americans while God-subsidized exports of valuable energy and light from places such as the sun do not, his and other protectionists' objections to the supposed scourge of low-priced imports should be taken for what they are: economically uninformed screeds that give intellectual cover to domestic producers seeking nothing more noble than protection from competition.

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9 May 2011

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

Dear Editor:

You're correct that high-school graduates should know more economics ("Va. high school grads should be economically literate," May 9). But so, too, should newspaper columnists such as E.J. Dionne who today writes "Far too little attention has been paid to the success of the government's rescue of the Detroit-based auto companies, and almost no attention has been paid to how completely and utterly wrong bailout opponents were when they insisted it was doomed to failure" ("Rescuing Detroit: No news about government's good news").

Mr. Dionne misses two fundamental economic insights: first, nothing is

free, and, second, that which is unseen is as real as that which even the most myopic pundit manages to spy.

Economically literate opponents of the Detroit bailout never denied that pumping hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars into Detroit automakers would restore those companies to health. Instead, they argued, first, that bailing out Detroit takes resources from other valuable uses. Because he doesn't even recognize that other valuable uses were sacrificed by this bailout, Mr. Dionne offers no reason to think that the value of saving Detroit automakers exceeds the value of what was

sacrificed to do so. No legitimate declaration that the bailout is successful is possible, however, without evidence that the value of what was saved exceeds the value of what was sacrificed.

Second, economically literate bailout opponents argued also that it sets a bad precedent. By signaling to big corporations that government stands ready to pay the tab for their poor decisions, big corporations will more likely make poor decisions in the future. It's far too early for Mr. Dionne to conclude that this prediction is mistaken.