

2012 ISSUE

**B>Quest**  
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## Comment on the Commentary of the Day

by

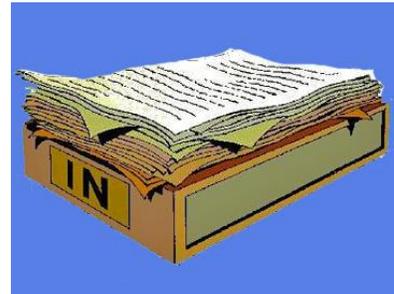
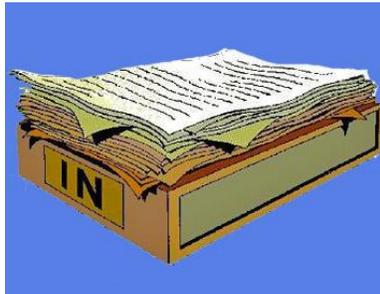
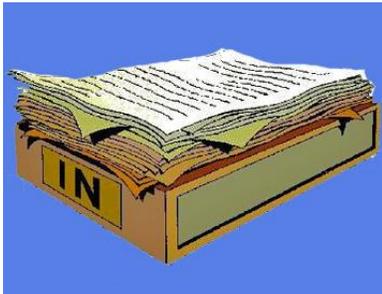
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**Disclaimer:** The following "Letters to the Editor" were sent to the respective publications on the dates indicated. Some were printed, but many were not. The original articles that are being commented on may or may not be available on the internet, and if they are, they may require registration or subscription to access. Some of the articles being commented on are syndicated, therefore, they may also have appeared in other publications.

16 September 2012

Mr. Mitt Romney  
Campaign Trail, USA

Dear Mr. Romney:

In a pre-recorded radio broadcast yesterday you asserted that "In 2008, candidate Obama promised to take China to the mat. But since then he's let China run all over us.... [T]o keep more jobs in America, we [you and V-P Paul Ryan] will label China a currency manipulator."

One can (almost) forgive a campaigning politician for selective use of facts and poor use of reason. A campaign, after all, is not a seminar for discovering truth. It's a verbal wrestling match to get votes by whatever means, regardless of how tawdry or devious.

Less forgivable is a campaign promise to break a campaign promise. Your wish to "label China a currency manipulator" means that you seek a pretext to impose (as your website says\*) "countervailing duties" on imports from China - which is to say, you seek a pretext for raising taxes on Americans who buy goods and services from China. Yet in other episodes of your campaign you promise (as you did here\*\* last month) "I will not raise taxes on the American people. I will not raise taxes on middle-income Americans."

If you keep your promise to impose countervailing duties on imports from China you will thereby break your promise not to raise taxes on the American people. (Americans who buy imports from China are, after all, American people.) But if you keep your promise to not raise taxes on the American people, you must - as I hope you will - break your promise to punitively tax those many Americans who buy imports from China.

Sincerely,  
Donald J. Boudreaux

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13 September 2012

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

Dear Editor:

Edward Sage writes the following: "Charles Koch states that, 'the role of business is to provide products and services that make people's lives better.' Since when? This sounds much more like a liberal take on the role of government. As a liberal I'd be over

the moon if companies cared primarily about making lives better. Instead, this only happens if it's the best way to make money" (Letters, Sept. 13).

Mr. Sage uses the word "only" to imply that it's a mere occasional happenstance that goods and services supplied by businesses improve people's lives. But because no private business (without special privileges granted by government) can force any consumer to buy its products - and because no private business (without special privileges granted by government) can prevent other businesses from competing for consumers' dollars - no private business (without special privileges granted by government) can survive UNLESS it supplies "products and services that make people's lives better" (as judged by consumers themselves, of course, rather than by Mr. Sage and his fellow "liberals").

Businesses do sometimes err. Consumers do sometimes err. But for Mr. Sage not to see that in private markets the profit motive generally drives businesses to seek ceaselessly and frantically for ways to supply outputs that improve people's lives is for him to be blind to one of the most remarkable and transformative facts of the past two centuries.

Sincerely,  
Donald J. Boudreaux

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12 September 2012

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

Dear Editor:

Jim Cooper and Alan Leshner assert that cutting "federal support for basic science" puts science at risk in America ("It's time to get serious about science," Sept. 12). Their essay, though, isn't very scientific.

Messrs. Cooper and Leshner, for example, unscientifically assume that every dollar spent by government on science is a dollar that would not have been spent by the private sector on science (or by the private sector on something else of equal, or of even greater, value). Worse, their claim that "We are already investing a smaller share of our economy in science as compared with seven other countries" reveals their presumption that the only investments in science that "we" undertake are those made by government. But that presumption is invalid: investments in scientific research are

also made by private institutions. Indeed, as The Economist reported recently about the U.S., "private firms have upped their innovation efforts, so that there are lots of businesses ... that will soon spend over \$10 billion on R&D each year."\*

Finally, Messrs. Cooper and Leshner write as if the return to government-funded science research is unambiguously positive. But this presumption is questionable. As B.L.S. economist Leo Sveikaukas found in a review of the literature, "The overall rate of return to R&D is very large.... However, these returns apply only to privately financed R&D in industry. Returns to many forms of publicly financed R&D are near zero."\*\*

Sincerely,  
Donald J. Boudreaux

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12 September 2012

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

11 September 2012

Programming Director, WTOP Radio  
Washington, DC

Dear Sir or Madam:

A listener on your "Talk Back Line" today asserted that "We Americans are too ideological. If we'd spend more time electing competent leaders, government's size wouldn't be so alarming."

I couldn't disagree more with this technocratic take on centralized power. And nor could John Adams. Here's Adams writing in 1776:

"[Alexander] Pope flattered tyrants too much when he said,  
'For forms of government let fools contest,  
That which is best administered is best.'

"Nothing can be more fallacious than this.... Nothing is more certain, from the history of nations and nature of man, than that some forms of government are better fitted for being well administered than others."\*

It is dangerously naive to trust chiefly in the competence and character of government officials while paying little attention to the temptations and complexities that confront such officials - temptations and complexities that grow exponentially with growth in government's powers.

Sincerely,  
Donald J. Boudreaux

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9 September 2012

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

Dear Editor:

The tic to blame all of life's woes on deregulation has become pathological. For evidence, behold this passage from Marilyn Stasio's review of Ginger Strand's book ("Killer on the Road") about murderers on America's highways: "By Strand's reckoning, the road killer was issued his official ticket to ride by the Motor Carrier Act of 1980, which deregulated the trucking industry. As unionized trucking outfits were squeezed off the road and loose regulations led to substandard conditions, a new demographic of the long-haul trucker emerged: 'less educated, less stable, less tied to unions, less rooted in family life,' and more likely to land on the suspect list in a homicide case" ("Haunted Highways," Sept. 9).

Behold also that Stasio reports Strand's speculation as if it were reasonable.

Not only was Ted Bundy, the mass-murderer pictured along with Stasio's review, not a trucker (Bundy picked up many of his victims in a VW Beetle) - and not only did the other murderers featured in Stasio's review not drive a truck (Edmund Kemper worked for the California highway department and Charlie Stalkweather worked in a warehouse) - no evidence is presented that truckers post-1980 are more likely to murder than were truckers pre-1980. No evidence is even presented that truckers are more likely than are, say, mailmen or accountants to commit murder. At a minimum, such an extraordinary assertion about deregulation requires such empirical evidence.

Strand's assertion, and Stasio's acceptance of it, though, are evidence that many opponents of deregulation are guided more by fashionable biases than by evidence.

Sincerely,  
Donald J. Boudreaux

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6 September 2012

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

Dear Editor:

E.J. Dionne praises Elizabeth Warren for "presenting government Wednesday not as an officious meddler in people's lives but as an ally of families determined to help their children rise. Government, Warren said, 'gave the little guys a better chance to compete by preventing the big guys from rigging the markets'" ("Bill Clinton's tutorial on the need for government," Sept. 6).

Ignore here the countless ways that government DOES meddle in people's lives not only officiously but also obnoxiously - actions such as rampant imprisonment of non-violent drug 'offenders,' hiking the cost of food through agricultural tariffs and other farm programs, and abuse of eminent domain to enrich large corporations with property confiscated from middle-class families. Focus instead on the fact that Mr. Dionne's "Progressive" view of government isn't so progressive after all. Its premise was known to, and rejected by, America's founding generation. Here's Thomas Paine: "Almost everything appertaining to the circumstances of a nation, has been absorbed and confounded under the general and mysterious word government. Though it avoids taking to its account the errors it commits, and the mischiefs it occasions, it fails not to arrogate to itself whatever has the appearance of prosperity. It robs industry of its honours, by pedantically making itself the cause of its effects; and purloins from the general character of man, the merits that appertain to him as a social being."\*

Thomas Paine and America's other founders were never so naïve about the essence of government - nor as incognizant about the nature of society - as are Prof. Warren and Mr. Dionne.

Sincerely,  
Donald J. Boudreaux

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