



FRIENDS OF THE MIDDLE NEWSLETTER #39 — DEC. 21, 2011

Welcome to always lively political discussion and whatever else comes up.
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Politics: The Biggest Lies of 2011

(posted by SteveG and Steven W. Baker / SteveB, Dec. 21, 2011)

We spend a lot of time and effort working to discover the truth around here. Friends of the Middle is devoted to the truth! Here are just some of the sources we use to help us debunk all the lies being told in the political arena (see past issues for many examples):

For government and political fact-checking:

1. <http://www.factcheck.org/>
2. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker>
3. <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/>

For other Internet “forwards” and “urban legends”:

1. <http://urbanlegends.about.com/>
2. <http://www.hoax-slayer.com/>
3. <http://snopes.com/>

“Fact Check: The Whoppers of 2011” by Brooks Jackson, FactCheck.org

Dec. 20, 2011, (<http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/story/2011-12-20/fact-check-whoppers-2011/52115936/1?loc=interstitialskip>)

Here are the year's worst political deceptions, from both sides. For our full run-down of the worst political whoppers we encountered during the year, please read on . And get ready for more in the presidential election year that is about to begin.

Republican whopper: 'Job-killing' health care law

The truth first: The best economic analysis of the new health care law points to the loss of a "small" number of low-paid jobs — starting in 2014. That's when firms with 50 or more workers will be required either to provide health insurance coverage to their employees or pay a penalty.

The Congressional Budget Office also says that the law will lead to fewer people who want to work — or who will want to work as many hours as they normally would — because they'll be better off financially, or won't feel the need to stay on a job they don't like just to keep their coverage.

But you would never know that if all you listened to was the constant repetition of the phrase "job-killing" by Republicans bent on repealing the law before it can take full effect.

We first wrote about this back in January, when we noted that House Republicans were attaching the misleading "job-killing" label to the law, and offering only misrepresentations of the evidence to back up their slogan. But the bogus claim has been repeated over and over all year. On Dec. 10, Bachmann falsely claimed that a study showed the U.S. will "lose 1.6 million jobs over five years if we keep Obamacare" — referring to a business group's study that did not examine the new law at all, and showed nothing of the sort. And we also found the worst part of former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney's first TV spot wasn't the out-of-context video editing that caused the Obama campaign to label it "dishonest," but instead was the more substantive claim that the new law is "killing jobs."

It may be that the constant repetition of this false claim will make a lot of voters believe it. But repeating a whopper doesn't make it true, it just makes it a bigger whopper. A 'Job-Killing' Law? (Jan. 7), More Baloney at ABC/Yahoo! Debate (Dec. 11), Romney's Ad 'Deceitful & Dishonest'? (Nov. 22).

Democratic whopper: Republicans would 'end Medicare'

First, the truth: The budget plan that Republicans pushed through the House in 2011 would have radically changed Medicare in the future — for workers now under age 55. Starting in the year 2022, the GOP plan called for new Medicare beneficiaries to purchase private insurance with the help of federal subsidies.

But the plan would have continued the present Medicare system indefinitely for those now getting benefits, and also for all those who reach age 65 during the next decade.

But the truth didn't stop Democrats from misrepresenting the proposal shamelessly to scare senior citizens and win election votes. They tested this tactic in a May 26 special House election in New York state, running ads accusing the Republican candidate of endorsing a plan that would "essentially end Medicare" and amount to "cutting benefits for seniors," claims that were far from the truth.

It worked: Democrat Kathy Hochul won in a district that normally leans Republican. So the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee rolled out even more misleading robotic telephone calls in 13 other House districts to soften up the Republican incumbents for 2012. These calls claimed the GOP House members cast a "vote to end Medicare."

One independent liberal group even posted a widely seen Internet video of a man pushing a white-haired woman in a wheelchair (apparently well over age 55) to the edge of a scenic cliff and dumping her over it. It ends by asking, "Is America Beautiful without Medicare?" That bogus claim is being satirized by our new sister site, "FlackCheck.org," which found it to be among the "Worst of the Worst" of 2011.

The truth is that not all Democrats think that changing Medicare in the way Republicans proposed is tantamount to murdering grannie. In fact, Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon joined Republican Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin on Dec. 14 to offer a bipartisan plan that is a modified version of the GOP plan Ryan authored earlier. And the *New York Times* noted Nov. 28 that there is growing support among some Democrats for reining in Medicare costs through a "premium support" system similar to the GOP plan if accompanied by enough safeguards.

But falsely claiming that any such change is an "end" to Medicare has already helped win one election for Democrats. So we suspect this whopper may be making our list again a year from now. Test Market for Spin (May 19), DCCC Dials Wrong Number (June 13).

Republican whopper: 'Job-killing' small business taxes

For years Republicans have been claiming that raising taxes on high-income individuals is equivalent to raising taxes on "small businesses" and thus killing jobs. We first debunked this big exaggeration in 2004, in fact. Boehner's Big Stretch on Small Business (Nov. 9), Keith, Tamara. "GOP Objects To 'Millionaires Surtax'; Millionaires We Found? Not So Much." National Public Radio. 9 Dec 2011.

This year, House Speaker John Boehner carried the idea to a new extreme with a claim that more than half of those who would be hit by a tax increase on "millionaires" are small-business owners: "the very people that we're hoping will reinvest in our economy and create jobs."

That's rubbish. As we pointed out, only 13 percent of those reporting \$1 million or more in income have even one-quarter of their earnings from small-business sources. The truth is that for the vast majority of those making over \$1 million a year — a group that includes hedge-fund managers, corporate CEOs, owners of very *large* businesses and even wealthy coupon-clippers — any small-business income is incidental. Even Boehner's spokesman admitted later that the speaker had, well, misspoken.

National Public Radio reporter Tamara Keith went searching for business owners who would be affected by the "millionaire" tax, but found that both the House and Senate GOP leadership was "unable to produce a single millionaire job creator for us to interview." Undaunted, she asked for help from the business groups that have been lobbying against the surtax, but they couldn't produce any millionaire job creator willing to talk either.

She finally found three who *would* talk — by cleverly posting a notice on Facebook. But none of them said an increase in the personal tax rate would inhibit them from trying to create jobs, contradicting this GOP whopper. One said, "What my business does is based on the contracts that it wins and the demand for its services," and not the tax rate the owner pays on profits.

Democratic whopper: Obama's dying mother

We also discovered in 2011 that one of Obama's favorite personal anecdotes — which he had told any number of times to sell his health-care legislation to the public — was not true. Obama's Untrue Anecdote (July 14), Sweet: Another Stretch By Obama (Sept. 13, 2009), Too Good to Check? (Sept. 19, 2009).

The president told the story often during the 2008 presidential campaign and the many months before he signed the health care law. He said his mother, as she was dying, nearly was denied health insurance coverage due to the fact that her ovarian cancer was considered a preexisting condition. But in 2011, author Janny Scott published a biography, "A Singular Woman: The Untold Story of Barack Obama's Mother." And in it she wrote that Stanley Ann Dunham's health insurance provider did, in fact, cover most of the medical expenses.

The author had access to Dunham's letters to her insurance company and reported that her fight was over disability coverage (which is not affected by the new health care law) and not over medical insurance. The White House did not dispute the account.

This is not the first time Obama has been caught using an embellished anecdote to sell the massive new health care law. In 2009 — in a televised health care address to Congress and the nation, no less — he claimed an insurance company delayed covering an Illinois man's chemotherapy and "he died because of it." But as reporters later pointed out, the man's coverage was reinstated. His treatment resumed, and however badly he was treated, he nevertheless survived another four years. In that case, Obama's speechwriters relied on a mistaken news account and never bothered to check the facts, which had been aired in public hearings before Congress.

Republican presidential whoppers: Bachmann and Cain

We could devote an entire article to the false or misleading claims that Republican presidential candidates are making — about each other, about the president or about liberals in general. But two stand out in our minds as truly memorable whoppers:

- Bachmann's totally groundless claim, based on a story she said a stranger told her, that HPV vaccine somehow causes mental retardation. We found no scientific evidence to support that claim. In fact, 35

million doses of the vaccine have been delivered without a single reported case of mental retardation. Bachmann was taken to task by the American Academy of Pediatrics for her "false statements" about the vaccine. An Antidote for Bachmann's Anecdote (Sept. 14).

- Herman Cain's equally groundless claim — which he repeated on national television — that Planned Parenthood's founder wanted to prevent "black babies from being born," and that the organization built 75 percent of its clinics in black communities. In fact, Margaret Sanger's actual words don't support the twisted interpretation Cain and others have put on them. Furthermore, only 9% of abortion clinics are in predominately black neighborhoods. Cain's False Attack on Planned Parenthood (Nov. 1).

Democratic whopper: Teachers pay higher tax rates than Obama

President Obama went overboard arguing for higher tax rates on high earnings, claiming that he pays a lower tax rate than a teacher making \$50,000 a year. That's not true.

A single taxpayer with \$50,000 of income would have paid less than half the effective rate paid by the Obamas in 2008, 2009 or 2010. And if the \$50,000-a-year teacher was supporting a spouse and two children — like Obama — he or she would have paid no federal income taxes at all. Obama's Teacher Tax Whopper (Sept. 28).

Assorted absurdities

Don't see your favorite tall tale here? You can mine our archives for rich deposits of political spin from 2011. There you'll find (among many other items):

- An exaggerated Democratic National Committee Web video accusing Romney of far more flip-flopping than he really committed. It's a preview of what the general election campaign will see should Romney win the GOP nomination.
- Lots of jobs spin, from all sides. Democratic National Committee Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz wrongly claimed that the U.S. has begun to add "millions of jobs in manufacturing." And the Senate Republican Policy Committee admitted using a grossly over-inflated number of "potential" jobs that supposedly won't materialize due to Obama's oil and gas drilling policies. The Republicans conceded that they had overstated the total by more than half a million.
- Biden's multiple whoppers about rapes in Flint, Mich., following police layoffs. He claimed variously that they went up 152%, tripled and even "quadrupled." But FBI data show the number of rapes in Flint went down by 11% over two years. Michigan State Police figures, which include male victims, show a 9.8% reduction. The city supplied rape statistics to both the state and federal agencies.
- Texas Gov. Rick Perry's Web video claiming the U.S. poverty rate is at an "all-time high," when it's actually 7.3 percentage points lower than it was in 1959.
- And what list of whoppers would be complete without Donald Trump? During his presidential fling, Trump forced Obama to release his long-form birth certificate by making a bushel of whoppers, including these false statements: The president's grandmother revealed Obama was born in Kenya; the official "Certification of Live Birth" that Obama released in 2008 is "not a birth certificate," and there's no signature or certification number on it; "nobody knew" Obama when he was growing up and "nobody ever comes forward" who knew him as a child; and birth announcements that appeared in Hawaii newspapers in 1961 "probably" were put there fraudulently by his now-deceased American grandparents.

And it wasn't just the politicians spreading false information: Lies spread like viruses through carelessly forwarded email messages that were also copied and pasted on personal blogs and social media. We wrote in 2008: "That Chain E-mail Your Friend Sent to You Is (Likely) Bogus. Seriously." And that continued to be true in 2011. Check our "Viral Spiral" page for the most current cyber-whoppers.

Our favorite example from all the delusional nonsense that circulated in 2011 was another claim — circulated by gun fanciers - that liberal billionaire George Soros was behind an investment company that has been buying many companies that make guns and ammunition. In fact, Soros has no connection to the company. Even the National Rifle Association weighed in, calling this e-rumor "completely false and baseless" and adding: "The owners and investors involved are strong supporters of the Second Amendment and are avid hunters and shooters."

Will 2012 bring more honesty and respect for facts? We certainly hope so. But it is an election year after all — so we'll be ready for whatever that brings.

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[Today's lead article. –SteveB]

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/story/2011-12-20/fact-check-whoppers-2011/52115936/1?loc=interstitialskip>

<u>20111220-01</u>	09:48	Pam	Re: Ayn Rand Was a Hypocritical Monster (reply to SteveB, FotM newsletter #38)
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"Whenever you hear politicians or Tea Partiers dividing up the world between 'producers' and 'collectivism,'" he wrote, "just know that those ideas and words more likely than not are derived from the deranged mind of a serial-killer groupie" —Mark Ames

Call me crazy, but I've read a few books on sociopathy (I guess that makes me an expert), and one of the main things I learned is, a sociopath can be anyone—teacher, therapist, parent, boss. There have been many sociopaths who have risen to great power (Kim Jung-Il, Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, Saddam) because they are ready and willing to go to any lengths to further their own self-interest. Another key trait is lack of empathy, along with an ability to mimic natural emotion. They can be charming, intelligent, charismatic even. They are the cobras of human society. When I look at the roster of Republican candidates, I see what to my eye is at least one sociopath. I leave it to you to guess which one.

20111220-02 09:55 Pam

Re: "House Ethics Panel Asked to Probe Discounted Loans to Four Lawmakers" (reply to SteveG, FotM Newsletter #38)

From Pam (Dec. 20, 2011, 9:55 am)—reply to SteveG, Dec. 19, 2011, ref: Corruption in Congress

One more sign of rot. We've got termites in our government.

20111220-03 10:07 Pam

Re: Loss of Our Rights & Freedoms (reply to Dennis, FotM Newsletter #38)

From Pam (Dec. 20, 2011, 10:07 am)—reply to Dennis, Dec. 19, 2011, ref: Loss of Our Rights & Freedoms

Yet again I am reminded of the fall of the Roman Republic. (Art, please correct any mistakes.) The Republic prided itself on its virtues: stoicism, individual pride, good citizenship, manliness, dignity, piety, straightforwardness. When things began going downhill, with corruption and decadence swamping the body politic, Octavian declared himself Emperor for Life and renamed himself Augustus Caesar. He continued to pay homage to the Roman virtues, including pride in working the land, but the Republic itself was hollow, and the Empire began. It's a long history, but I think it has relevance today. The teabaggers pay homage to American virtues, well, all politicians do, but there are an awful lot of cracks in the foundation that are being ignored. Just look at Italy now.

20111220-04 11:53 SteveBA

"Greedy Innkeeper or Generous Capitalist?"

Here is another view of how the real markets work. Something that most people here don't get.

"Greedy Innkeeper or Generous Capitalist?" by First Trust

Dec. 19, 2011, (<http://www.ftportfolios.com/Commentary/EconomicResearch/2011/12/19/greedy-innkeeper-or-generous-capitalist>)

The Bible story of the virgin birth is at the center of much of the holiday cheer at this time of the year. The book of Luke tells us Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem because Caesar Augustus decreed a census should be taken. Mary gave birth after arriving in Bethlehem and placed baby Jesus in a manger because there was "no room for them in the inn."

Over the centuries, people have come to believe that because Jesus was born in a stable, and not in a hotel room, Mary and Joseph must have been mistreated by a greedy innkeeper. This innkeeper only cared about profits and decided the young couple was not "worth" his best accommodations. We have heard this narrative of the Christmas story repeated many times in plays, skits and sermons.

This narrative persists even though the Bible records no complaints at the time and there was apparently no charge for the use of the stable. It may be that the stable was the only place available. Bethlehem, like other small towns, was overflowing with people who were forced to return to their ancestral homes for the census - ordered by the Romans for the purpose of levying a tax.

If there was a problem, it was caused by the unintended consequences of this government policy. But this source of the problem has been ignored in favor of a more palatable complaint, that capitalism and capitalists are greedy, uncaring, and maybe even evil.

But a different narrative makes even more sense. The innkeeper was generous to a fault – a hero even. He was over-booked, but he charitably offered his stable, a facility he built with unknowing foresight. A facility he was able to offer, while the government officials who ordered the census slept in their own beds with little care for the well-being of those who had to travel regardless of their difficult life circumstances.

If you must find “evil” in either one of these narratives, remember that evil is ultimately perpetrated by individuals, not the institutions in which they operate.

And this is why it’s important to favor economic and political systems that limit the use and abuse of power over others. In the story of baby Jesus, a law that requires innkeepers to always have extra rooms, or to take in anyone who asks, would “fix” the problem.

But this new law would also have unintended consequences. It would create fewer hotel rooms because the costs of building would rise. A hotel big enough to handle the rare census, would be way too big in normal times. And who would open a bed and breakfast, if the law could crack down at any time the house became full? With fewer hotel rooms, prices would rise, and innkeepers would once again be called greedy. Government would then try to regulate prices.

This does not mean free markets are perfect or create utopia, they aren’t and they don’t. But, business can’t force you to buy a service or product. You have a choice – even if it’s not exactly what you want. And good business people try to make you happy in creative and industrious ways.

Government doesn’t always care. In fact, if you happen to live in North Korea or Cuba, and are not happy about the way things are going, you can’t leave. And just in case you try, armed guards will help you think things through.

This is why the framers of the US Constitution made sure there were “checks and balances” in the system. We’re now seeing that system operate. So, for example, we still do not know whether the major health care bill passed 21 months ago will ever be fully implemented. In the year ahead, both the Supreme Court and the voters will have their say.

These checks and balances are not like having a true Savior. But they should give us all reason to hope for a better world in the years ahead

2011220-09 14:10 SteveB Re: "Greedy Innkeeper or Generous Capitalist?" (reply to SteveBA)

What’s tough to figure out about how markets work? It’s how I made most of my money. The markets are why I haven’t worked for a long time. The same thing is true of one of my Republican friends. The only problem was the markets weren’t really regulated, so he lost everything in one of the big scams, millions, and had to go back to work and is still working.

Oh, bad Democrats who want to prevent such a thing! Bad Democrats who want to put such crooks in jail!

Funny, Republicans want the law to be highly enforced in the street and in my bedroom, but not in the boardroom or on the trading floor. Why? Crime is crime, is it not? And isn’t a rich banker who steals more guilty and worthy of jail than a beggar who needs food and “liberates” it?

You might want to read FotM Newsletter #37, about how liberals and Democrats are really more supportive of truly free markets than Republicans.

Believe me, we get it! The question is, does Goldman Saks and MF Global? Does Congress?

20111220-05 13:08 SteveG "Prayer Changes Your Brain in 4 Astonishing Ways"

Ad from *The National Memo*:

(<http://view.exacttarget.com/?j=fe5b1574776d017a7712&m=fe6b15707660057f7010&ls=fdfe17727364017e7717717d&l=fe9317717261047e7c&s=fe26137770650478761079&jb=ffcf14&ju=fe2e15767161007e741174&r=0>):

Millions of Americans believe prayer works. Yet the mainstream media tends to avoid the subject altogether. But our Mind Health Report team at Newsmax Health wanted answers to questions like these:

Can modern science explain prayer?

Does praying strengthen your brain and prevent mental decline?

What benefits, if any, does prayer offer you — physically, mentally, and emotionally?

Video ("What Prayer Does to Your Brain"):

http://w3.newsmax.com/newsletters/mhr/prayer_video.cfm?promo_code=DBE8-1.

20111220-06 13:33 Pam Re: "Prayer Changes Your Brain in 4 Astonishing Ways" (reply to SteveG, above)

Meditation, relaxation, laughter—don't think you have to be religious, or even spiritual (whatever that means), to do any of these. I'm sure there is a brain-body connection, and we probably don't know much about it yet. I read Sam Harris's book *The End of Faith* and at the end he says the only religion he has much use for is Buddhism, mostly for its spiritual rigor. Harris says eastern cultures have made much better use of "spirituality" than the West. I'm willing to agree there's something to mind over matter, but I think it comes from "in here," not "out there." My brother, on the other hand, is a believer. We don't discuss religion much, but I sometimes think a religious sensibility is like musical talent or color-blindness. You either have it or you don't. Oliver Sacks is good on the brain too. And, not coincidentally, Sam Harris is a neurologist as well as a philosopher.

20111220-07 13:48 Pam "Christopher Hitchens: A Salute to Intellectual Honesty"

"Christopher Hitchens: A Salute to Intellectual Honesty" by Sharon Waxman, Reuters

Dec. 18, 2011, (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/18/us-christopherhitchens-appreciation-idUSTRE7BH0OW20111218>)

(LOS ANGELES) Nothing sharpened Christopher Hitchens' mind like cancer.

He wrote the best, most piercing, most clarifying prose of his career as he faced down the specter of his own demise.

As he dealt with fatigue and nausea, with the anger, disgust and frustration that must accompany what he knew was a death sentence, Hitch poured it all into words that were as painfully honest as they were hilarious.

"I sympathize afresh with the mighty Voltaire, who, when badgered on his deathbed and urged to renounce the devil, murmured that this was no time to be making enemies," he wrote in September 2010 in *Vanity Fair*, to those who hoped for a last-minute conversion to faith.

His illness was a terrible irony. Hitchens was at the peak of his career. For decades he had toiled in the margins of the intellectual elite, plunging into distant political conflicts that only a few Americans noticed, and hanging with the denizens of British literary journalism and highbrow fiction.

None of this paid very well, and despite Hitch's fancy accent, he did not come from money. But suddenly he got rich and pretty famous.

He was diagnosed with cancer just a few years after writing the 2007 bestseller *God Is Not Great*. It turned out that attacking George Bush, Bill Clinton and Mother Teresa got him nowhere near the notoriety that he won for taking on God. (Or "god," as he always wrote it.)

Hitch became a constant presence on the debate circuit on the topic of atheism, a familiar face on the shows of Jon Stewart and Bill Maher (another vocal atheist) and a sought-after blogger, letter writer and columnist. ("It seems there is no utterance of mine that isn't worthy of publishing," he told me, when I asked him to think about blogging for TheWrap.)

And so: Cancer was very ill-timed.

"Rage would be beside the point," he wrote, on learning of his illness, in one in a series of columns in *Vanity Fair* that won him a national magazine award. "Instead, I am badly oppressed by a gnawing sense of waste. I had real plans for my next decade and felt I'd worked hard enough to earn it. Will I really not live to see my children married? To watch the World Trade Center rise again? To read — if not indeed write — the obituaries of elderly villains like Henry Kissinger and Joseph Ratzinger? But I understand this sort of non-thinking for what it is: sentimentality and self-pity. Of course my book hit the bestseller list on the day that I received the grimdest of news bulletins, and for that matter the last flight I took as a healthy-feeling person (to a fine, big audience at the Chicago Book Fair) was the one that made me a million-miler on United Airlines, with a lifetime of free upgrades to look forward to ... To the dumb question 'Why me?' the cosmos barely bothers to return the reply: Why not?"

WITHSTANDING THE GLOATERS

And of course, his religious detractors found much irony here, much about which to gloat.

But it was here where Hitchens rose to the challenge so few of us could imagine, using humor and a core intellectual honesty to face down the existential challenge that was suddenly of immediate relevance.

He absorbed many horrible insults, including those from observers who called his cancer some kind of divine retribution, something he somehow "deserved."

He responded thusly in September 2010:

The vengeful deity has a sadly depleted arsenal if all he can think of is exactly the cancer that my age and former 'lifestyle' would suggest that I got. Why cancer at all? Almost all men get cancer of the prostate if they live long enough: it's an undignified thing but quite evenly distributed among saints and sinners, believers and unbelievers. If you maintain that god awards the appropriate cancers, you must also account for the numbers of infants who contract leukemia. Devout persons have died young and in pain. Bertrand Russell and Voltaire, by contrast, remained spry until the end, as many psychopathic criminals and tyrants have also done. These visitations, then, seem awfully random. While my so far uncancerous throat, let me rush to assure my Christian correspondent above, is not at all the only organ with which I have blasphemed ... And even if my voice goes before I do, I shall continue to write polemics against religious delusions, at least until it's hello darkness my old friend. In which case, why not cancer of the brain? As a terrified, half-aware imbecile, I might even scream for a priest at the close of business, though I hereby state while I am still lucid that the entity thus humiliating itself would not in fact be 'me.' (Bear this in mind, in case of any later rumors or fabrications.)

I never could decide whether to laugh or cry at this prose. In the end, I could only marvel at Hitch's ability to pierce the heart of his own mortality with such detachment and wit.

He always jumped into the middle of great moral debates. And he never took the side that was easiest to defend. In fact, it was easy to suspect that he liked to take the opposite argument — just because.

This aspect of Hitchens — the gadfly who loved the spotlight — used to annoy me. I first remember seeing him a couple of decades ago on a talk show like "Meet the Press," and he showed up a vision of scruffiness — unshaven, and wearing Birkenstocks. I thought it stunk of anti-establishment grandstanding.

But I watched him over the years, and changed my mind when I got to know him during the release of my last book, "Loot," about stolen antiquities. The fate of the Elgin Marbles — the Parthenon sculptures taken to England a century and a half ago — was another of his thankless causes, rooted in that core of intellectual honesty.

(The sculptures were taken by stealth. They belong in Greece. Not a lot of Brits spent their time saying so. Hitch did.)

He came to debate the topic with me at a New York Times lecture in 2008, and after beating up the British cultural establishment for about an hour, we headed out to a lunch at an empty Italian restaurant. It lasted for four hours, and he drank his way through many whiskeys and regaled the table with tale after ribald tale of his adventures.

It was one of the most memorable afternoons I've spent, ever.

Farewell, Hitch. We salute your brilliant mind, and a moral heartbeat that pulsed so strongly throughout.

And that pen. Oh how we will miss that pen. [What a strange, wonderful man! –SteveB]

20111220-08 14:04 Dennis "If You're So Rich, Why Do You Still Work?"

If the following examples are representative of how the rich think, then why should they object to paying higher taxes?

"If You're So Rich, Why Do You Still Work?" by Dr. Steve Sjuggerud, Daily Wealth

Dec. 20, 2011, (<http://www.dailywealth.com/1934/If-You-re-So-Rich-Why-Do-You-Still-Work->)

I have a few friends who have "silly" wealth – more wealth than they could ever need or spend.

These guys are at retirement age or older... But for some reason, they work harder than just about anyone else I know...

Why are they working so hard? Isn't the dream to "bank" enough money so you don't have to work?

I called a few of these friends yesterday and asked why. The answers were interesting...

One wealthy friend started out with this story to explain it...

I had dinner with an extremely wealthy guy last week who's 71. He just retired to the desert in Palm Springs, supposedly to play some golf. I asked him how it was going...

"Retirement is horrible," he told me. He said, "I do NOT enjoy sitting in the desert doing nothing. I don't have a clue what I'm doing out here. I don't think I can do this. I don't need the money... But I think I'll have to go back to work."

My wealthy friend described the same feeling... "I love what I do," my friend told me. "I don't want to stop."

I asked my friends specifically what it is that keeps them working so hard...

One said, "Nothing in life beats the thrill of coming up with a big idea and making it a reality."

Another said, "I like mentoring younger people... passing on what I do and seeing them succeed at it."

A few more talked about the thrill of a great opportunity and the chance to increase their wealth. "I know there's no economic reason for me to work," one friend told me... "But that doesn't mean I don't like to get paid."

I then asked these friends if they had any advice to help people join them in the "big leagues"...

First, they explained, opportunity doesn't knock. You have to create it. And when opportunity is close by, you have to drop everything and pursue it. The more you make those sacrifices, the better your chances of finding financial success.

Second, if you KNOW MORE than everyone in the room, nobody can take advantage of you... So read a lot. Do more homework than anyone else at the table.

Finally, one friend told me, "Work to the task, not to the reward." Don't wash a car for the \$5 payment, for example... Wash a car because that's the task at hand – and do a fantastic job. Then you'll get noticed for your work and have a chance to move up in the world.

So why do these "silly rich" guys still work? And how can you get there too?

They work because they say it keeps them "alive..."

"If I stop working, I'll die," one of them told me. They believe that finding success is all about recognizing, creating, and seizing opportunities.

You make your own luck, they say, so create opportunities for yourself as best as you can.

If you do that enough times in life, you'll know you're giving yourself a legitimate shot at success... at having the kind of wealth that means you're working because you love to, like my friends, not just working because you have to.

20111220-10 14:18 Art Re: "If You're So Rich, Why Do You Still Work?" (reply to Dennis, above)

Good point. I think many of them don't.

20111220-11 15:31 SteveG Re: "If You're So Rich, Why Do You Still Work?" (reply to Dennis, above)

My dad was not rich by any stretch of the imagination, at least money wise. He owned a dry cleaning business, sold it when he turned 65, signed a non-compete clause for one year. He went back to work on a part time basis at 66 and then quit for good at 78 – He was too busy laughing and dating Norma.

20111220-12 16:28 Pam Re: "If You're So Rich, Why Do You Still Work?" (reply to SteveG, above)

Laughter and love—the perfect combination.

20111220-14 19:32 Mark Fw: Psychology 101

Thought this was appropriate! Merry Christmas!

[Source of original email unknown. –SteveB]

Psychology 101

If you start with a cage containing five monkeys and inside the cage, hang a banana on a string from the top and then place a set of stairs under the banana, before long a monkey will go to the stairs and climb toward the banana.

As soon as he touches the stairs, you spray all the other monkeys with cold water. After a while another monkey makes an attempt with same result ... all the other monkeys are sprayed with cold water. Pretty soon when another monkey tries to climb the stairs, the other monkeys will try to prevent it.

Now, put the cold water away. Remove one monkey from the cage and replace it with a new one. The new monkey sees the banana and attempts to climb the stairs. To his shock, all of the other monkeys beat the crap out of him. After another attempt and attack, he knows that if he tries to climb the stairs he will be assaulted.

Next, remove another of the original five monkeys, replacing it with a new one. The newcomer goes to the stairs and is attacked. The previous newcomer takes part in the punishment... with enthusiasm. Then, replace a third original monkey with a new one, followed by a fourth, then the fifth. Every time the newest monkey takes to the stairs he is attacked. Most of the monkeys that are beating him up have no idea why they were not permitted to climb the stairs. Neither do they know why they are participating in the beating of the newest monkey.

Finally, having replaced all of the original monkeys, none of the remaining monkeys will have ever been sprayed with cold water. Nevertheless, none of the monkeys will try to climb the stairway for the banana.

Why, you ask? Because in their minds...that is the way it has always been!

This, my friends, is how Congress operates and is why, from time to time, ALL of the monkeys need to be REPLACED AT THE SAME TIME.

20111220-13 17:29 SteveG "The Defining Issue: Not Government's Size, But Who It's For"

"The Defining Issue: Not Government's Size, But Who It's For" by Robert Reich, NationOfChange

Dec. 20, 2011, (<http://www.nationofchange.org/defining-issue-not-government-s-size-who-it-s-1324391772>)

The defining political issue of 2012 won't be the government's size. It will be who government is for.

Americans have never much liked government. After all, the nation was conceived in a revolution against government.

But the surge of cynicism now engulfing America isn't about government's size. The cynicism comes from a growing perception that government isn't working for average people. It's for big business, Wall Street, and the very rich instead.

In a recent Pew Foundation poll, 77 percent of respondents said too much power is in the hands of a few rich people and corporations.

That's understandable. To take a few examples:

Wall Street got bailed out but homeowners caught in the fierce downdraft caused by the Street's excesses have got almost nothing.

Big agribusiness continues to rake in hundreds of billions in price supports and ethanol subsidies. Big pharma gets extended patent protection that drives up everyone's drug prices. Big oil gets its own federal subsidy. But small businesses on the Main Streets of America are barely making it.

American Airlines uses bankruptcy to ward off debtors and renegotiate labor contracts. Donald Trump's businesses go bankrupt without impinging on Trump's own personal fortune. But the law won't allow you to use personal bankruptcy to renegotiate your home mortgage.

If you run a giant bank that defrauds millions of small investors of their life savings, the bank might pay a small fine but you won't go to prison. Not a single top Wall Street executive has been prosecuted for Wall Street's mega-fraud. But if you sell an ounce of marijuana you could be put away for a long time.

Not a day goes by without Republicans decrying the budget deficit. But the biggest single reason for the yawning deficit is big money's corruption of Washington.

One of the deficit's biggest drivers — Medicare — would be lower if Medicare could use its bargaining leverage to get drug companies to reduce their prices. Why hasn't it happened? Big Pharma won't allow it.

Medicare's administrative costs are only 3 percent, far below the 10 percent average administrative costs of private insurers. So why not tame rising healthcare costs for all Americans by allowing any family to opt in? That was the idea behind the "public option." Health insurers stopped it in its tracks.

The other big budgetary expense is national defense. America spends more on our military than do China, Russia, Britain, France, Japan, and Germany combined. The basic defense budget (the portion unrelated to the costs of fighting wars) keeps growing, now about 25 percent higher than it was a decade ago, adjusted for inflation.

That's because defense contractors have cultivated sponsors on Capitol Hill and located their plants and facilities in politically important congressional districts.

So we keep spending billions on Cold War weapons systems like nuclear attack submarines, aircraft carriers, and manned combat fighters that pump up the bottom lines of Bechtel, Martin-Marietta, and their ilk, but have nothing to do with 21st-century combat.

Declining tax receipts are also driving the deficit. That's partly because most Americans have less income to tax these days.

Yet the richest Americans are taking home a bigger share of total income than at any time since the 1920s. Their tax payments are down because the Bush tax cuts reduced their top rates to the lowest level in more than half a century, and cut capital gains taxes to 15 percent.

Congress hasn't even closed a loophole that allows mutual-fund and private-equity managers to treat their incomes as capital gains.

So the four hundred richest Americans, whose total wealth exceeds the combined wealth of the bottom 150 Americans put together, pay an average of 17 percent of their income in taxes. That's lower than the tax rates of most day laborers and child-care workers.

Meanwhile, Social Security payroll taxes continue to climb as a share of total tax revenues. Yet the payroll tax is regressive, applying only to yearly income under \$106,800.

And the share of revenues coming from corporations has been dropping. The biggest, like GE, find ways to pay no federal taxes at all. Many shelter their income abroad, and every few years Congress grants them a tax amnesty to bring the money home.

Get it? "Big government" isn't the problem. The problem is big money is taking over government.

Government is doing less of the things most of us want it to do — providing good public schools and affordable access to college, improving our roads and bridges and water systems, and maintaining safety nets to catch average people who fall — and more of the things big corporations, Wall Street, and the wealthy want it to do.

Some conservatives argue we wouldn't have to worry about big money taking over government if we had a smaller government to begin with.

Here's what Congressman Paul Ryan told me Sunday morning when we were debating all this on ABC's "This Week":

If the power and money are going to be here in Washington, that's where the influence is going to go ... that's where the powerful are going to go to influence it.

Ryan has it upside down. A smaller government that's still dominated by money would continue to do the bidding of Wall Street, the pharmaceutical industry, oil companies, big agribusiness, big insurance, military contractors, and rich individuals.

It just wouldn't do anything else.

If we want to get our democracy back we've got to get big money out of politics.

We need real campaign finance reform. [As I have been saying FOREVER! —SteveB]

And a constitutional amendment reversing the Supreme Court's bizarre rulings that under the First Amendment money is speech and corporations are people. [Yes! —SteveB]

20111220-16 21:09 Larry Fw: Have America's Gold Reserves Been Plundered?

I just thought I'd send this but I know nothing about it.

[Source of original email unknown. —SteveB]

From Sandy Franks, Inside Investing Daily (<http://real-forex-news.blogspot.com/2011/12/have-americas-gold-reserves-been.html>):

I recently watched a video presentation that made me angry as hell. I learned more than I wanted to about our nation's gold supplies... mainly that we may not even have a gold supply!

Did you know American people have never been granted a complete, independent audit of our sovereign gold reserves?

Despite the fact that Title 31 of the U.S. Code requires an annual physical inventory, the United States Mint and the Treasury Department have steadfastly refused to allow a legitimate independent audit of Fort Knox.

Why? Seems there might be something to hide. A cover-up for missing inventory, perhaps?

In the 1970s the U.S. Mint and Treasury Departments were forced to admit that a shipment containing 1,762,381 ounces of gold was unaccounted for.

That cost the American people — in today's dollars — nearly \$3 billion.

And it's been rumored that even more is missing.

Are you angry yet?

Editor Andrew Snyder has determined a ruthless cartel of bankers plundered America's gold reserves... this criminal plot could help you fill your own vault.

I urge you to watch this video:

<http://clicks.insideinvestingdaily.com//t/AQ/AAiRow/AAihcQ/AAVkeQ/AQ/A0fRbQ/wwCW>.

[May require subscription. –SteveB]

—Friends of the Middle,
Steven W. Baker (SteveB), Editor/Moderator

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