



## FRIENDS OF THE MIDDLE NEWSLETTER #81 — FEB. 24, 2012

Welcome to always lively political discussion and whatever else comes up.  
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### The Worst Pop Singer of All Time?

(posted by Steven W. Baker / SteveB, Feb. 24, 2012)

We present this article as part of our continuing effort to bring you the unvarnished truth in all realms, even art. Today we delve into one of the greatest mysteries of all—why are some things “good” and others “bad” and how do we discern and define the difference? Is beauty simply “in the eye of the beholder” or is there more to it than that, something more objective?

Regardless of your opinion on our unfortunate example case, I think you’ll enjoy digging into this territory with us. Why is good good and bad bad and some cr\*p just downright awful?

What do you think, dear reader?

“The Worst Pop Singer Ever” by Ron Rosenbaum, Slate

Jan. 23, 2009, ([http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the\\_spectator/2009/01/the\\_worst\\_pop\\_singer\\_ever.single.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_spectator/2009/01/the_worst_pop_singer_ever.single.html))

(Why, exactly, is Billy Joel so bad?)

This may seem an odd moment to bring up the subject of Billy Joel. But the recent death of the painter Andrew Wyeth revived a long-standing debate over whether his art is respectable or merely sentimental schlock. (Say it: good or bad?) It got me to thinking about the question of value in art and whether there are any absolute standards for judging it. It indicates the question is still alive, not relegated to irrelevance by relativism.

And then I picked up *The Art Instinct*, a new book by Denis Dutton, the curator of the Arts & Letters Daily Web site. The book strives valiantly to find a basis for judging the value of art from the perspective of evolutionary psychology; in it, Dutton argues that a certain kind of artistic talent offered a competitive advantage in the Darwinian struggle for survival.

Which brings me to Billy Joel—the Andrew Wyeth of contemporary pop music—and the continuing *irritation* I feel whenever I hear his tunes, whether in the original or in the multitude of elevator-Muzak versions. It is a kind of mystery: Why does his music make my skin crawl in a way that other bad music doesn't? Why is it that so many of us feel it is possible to say Billy Joel is—well—just *bad*, a blight upon pop music, a plague upon the airwaves more contagious than West Nile virus, a dire threat to the peacefulness of any given elevator ride, not rock 'n' roll but schlock 'n' roll?

I'm reluctant to pick on Billy Joel. He's been subject to withering contempt from hipster types for so long that it no longer seems worth the time. Still, the mystery persists: How can he be so bad and yet so popular for so long? He's still *there*. You can't defend yourself with anti-B.J. shields around your brain. He still takes up the space, takes up A&R advances that would otherwise support a score of unrecognized but genuinely talented artists, singers, and songwriters, with his loathsomely insipid simulacrum of rock.

Besides, some people still take Billy seriously. Just the other day I was reading my old friend Jeff Jarvis' BuzzMachine blog, and Jarvis (the Billy Joel of blog theorists) was attacking the *Times'* David Carr. (Talk about an uneven fight.) Carr was speculating about whether newspapers could survive if they adopted the economic model of iTunes. Attempting a snotty put-down of this idea, Jarvis let slip that he's a Joel fan: As an example somehow of his iTunes counter-theory, he wrote: "If I can't get *Allentown*, the original, I'm not likely to settle for a cover." Only the hard-core B.J. for Jeff! ("Allentown" is a particularly shameless selection on Jarvis' part, since it's one of B.J.'s "concern" songs, featuring the plight of laid-off workers, and Jarvis virtually does a *sack dance* of self-congratulatory joy every time he reports on print-media workers getting the ax.)

Plus, there's always the chance we'll see another of those "career re-evaluation" essays that places like the *New York Times* Sunday "Arts & Leisure" section are fond of running about the Barry Manilows of the world. The kind of piece in which we'd discover that Billy's actually "gritty," "unfairly marginalized" by hipsters; that his work is profoundly expressive of late-20th-century alienation ("Captain Jack"); that his hackneyed, misogynist hymns to love are actually filled with sophisticated erotic angst; that his "distillations of disillusion," to use the patois of such pieces, over the artist's role ("Piano Man," "The Entertainer," "Say Goodbye to Hollywood," etc.) are in fact "preternaturally self-conscious," not just shallow, Holden Caulfield-esque denunciations of "phonies," but mentionable in the same breath as works by great artists.

This must be prevented! No career re-evaluations please! No false contrarian rehabilitations! He *was* terrible, he *is* terrible, he always *will be* terrible. Anodyne, sappy, superficial, derivative, fraudulently rebellious. Joel's famous song "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me"? Please. It never *was* rock 'n' roll. Billy Joel's music elevates self-aggrandizing self-pity and contempt for others into its own new and awful genre: "Mock-Rock."

And the badness of really bad art is, I believe, always worth affirming, since it allows us to praise—and to examine why we praise—"good" or "great" art.

Therefore, I decided to make a serious effort to identify the consistent qualities across Joel's "body of work" (it almost hurts to write that) that make it so meretricious, so fraudulent, so pitifully bad. And so, risking humiliation and embarrassment, I ventured to the Barnes & Noble music section and bought a four-disc set of B.J.'s "Greatest Hits," one of which was a full disc of his musings about art and music. I must admit that I also bought a copy of an album I already had—*Return of the Grievous Angel*, covers of Gram Parsons songs by the likes of the Cowboy Junkies and Gillian Welch, whose "Hickory Wind" is just ravishing—so the cashier might think the B.J. box was merely a gift, maybe for someone with no musical taste. Yes, reader. I couldn't bear the sneer, even for your benefit.

And I think I've done it! I think I've identified the qualities in B.J.'s work that distinguish his badness from other kinds of badness: **It exhibits unearned contempt.** Both a self-righteous contempt for others and the self-approbation and self-congratulation that is contempt's backside, so to speak. Most frequently a contempt for the supposed phoniness or inauthenticity of other people as opposed to the rock-solid authenticity of our B.J.

I'm not saying, by the way, that contempt can't make for great art. Dylan's "Positively 4th Street," for example, is one of the most contemptuous songs ever written, but it redeems itself through the joyfulness of its black-humored eloquence and wit. And Springsteen lost something when he lost his contempt and became a love-for-the-common-people would-be Woody Guthrie.

But let's go through the "greatest hits" chronologically and see how this "contempt thesis" works out.

First let's take "Piano Man." You can hear Joel's contempt, both for the losers at the bar he's left behind in his stellar schlock stardom and for the "entertainer-loser" (the proto-B.J.) who plays for them. Even the self-contempt he imputes to the "piano man" rings false.

"Captain Jack": Loser dresses up in poseur clothes and masturbates and shoots up heroin and is an all-around phony in the eyes of the songwriter who is so, so superior to him.

"The Entertainer": Entertainers are phonies! Except exquisitely self-aware entertainers like B.J., who let you in on this secret.

(Compare The Band's beautiful, subtle tribute to Dylan's entertainer insecurities in "Stage Fright." I love the line in that song, "he got caught in the spotlight": such a haunting image of a shy entertainer.)

"Say Goodbye to Hollywood." Hollywood is phony! Who knew? God, doesn't B.J. ever get tired of showing us how phony the phonies of this phony world are? Could someone let B.J. know he's phoning it in with all this phoniness at this point? Isn't there something, well, a bit phony about his hysteria over phoniness?

He can't even celebrate his "New York State of Mind" without displaying his oh-so-rebellious contempt for "the movie stars in their fancy cars and their limousines." You think Billy Joel has really never ridden in a limo?

"The Stranger": This is B.J. lifting that great Beatles line about Eleanor Rigby "wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door."\* You should see the heavy-handed mask featured on the expensive two-disc "legacy" reissue of "The Stranger" album. So deep! Yes, B.J., you've nailed it: We're all phonies hiding our true faces! Everyone wears a mask! Who woulda known it without B.J. to tell us?

"Scenes From an Italian Restaurant": I can't stand it, but at least this is one of B.J.'s tributes to "the little people" that—although it's annoying and clichéd to the max—doesn't completely hold its characters in contempt.

"Anthony's Song"—straight up contempt for lower-middle-class aspirations. B.J.'s down with the authentic stuff in life. This is the one with the line about the "heart attack-ack-ack" where he attack-ack-acks people who work two jobs so they can "trade in their Chevy for a Cadillac"-ack-ack, something B.J. would never do. No phony "movin' up" for him!

"Only the Good Die Young": Contempt for the Catholic religion. I know: It's spirited if anti-spiritual, but, still ... I've heard some Catholic girls opine on its most famous line ("Catholic girls start much too late"), and they ain't buyin' it. B.J. is no James Joyce.

"She's Always a Woman": First, has there ever been a more blatant—or blatantly inept—case of attempted artistic theft than "She's Always a Woman"? It's such a lame imitation of Bob Dylan's "Just Like a Woman." (B.J.'s woman "hides like a child" where Dylan's "breaks just like a little girl.") B.J.'s woman also: is prone to "casual lies," "steals like a thief," "takes care of herself," and "carelessly cuts you and laughs ..." Poor B.J., recycling every misogynist cliché in the book.

At this point, reader, perhaps you have some questions for me about this tirade? Fair enough.

### **What right do you have to criticize such a popular artist? Aren't you just being elitist?**

No, you don't understand: Billy's from my 'hood, mid-Long Island—Hicksville, to be precise (I'm from Bay Shore)—so I'm sensitive to his abuse of our common roots. Once I wrote something about the curse of being from the Guyland. In it I said something heartfelt: New Jersey may have a rep as a toxic dump for mob victims to fester in, but at least it brought forth Bruce Springsteen. The ultimate Guyland humiliation is to be repped to the world by Billy Joel. So I feel entitled to be cruel—may I continue?

### **OK. But isn't there anything you like?**

Fair question. I've always liked "The Longest Time" and "An Innocent Man." May I get back to the contemptible crap?

## **OK, but focus.**

Well, I really can't stand the "man of the people" stuff. Like "Allentown" and "The Downeaster 'Alexa.'" Yeah, he's a real working man, that B.J. Sure, other artists strike that pose, but somehow with B.J. the strain of his pretension is just too much to bear.

## **What else? What if you had to choose one song as the epitome of B.J. badness?**

OK, I think it would have to be "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me."

## **Why?**

It shows how completely, totally clueless Billy Joel is. It suggests he wrote it because he thought people regarded him as an outmoded relic because he doesn't wear the right hip-signifier clothes. That it's a matter of his wide ties vs. New Wave skinny ties, that it's because his car doesn't have white-wall tires or because he doesn't dress "like a Beau Brummell" or hang out with the right crowd or look like Elvis Costello.

He thinks people can't stand him because he *dresses* wrong or doesn't look right.

Billy Joel, they can't stand you because *of your music*, because of your stupid, smug attitude; because of the way you ripped off your betters to produce music that rarely reaches the level even of mediocrity. You could dress completely au courant and people would still loathe your lame lyrics.

It's not that they dislike anything *exterior* about you. They dislike you because of who you really are inside. They dislike you for being you. At a certain point, consistent, aggressive badness justifies profound hostility. They hate you just the way you are.

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<a href="#">20120223-01</a>	07:27	SteveB	The November Whuppin'
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Republicans honestly don't think the "Family Values" party is headed in the wrong direction? Honestly?

What happened to the "economy" as an issue? LOL!

And already the big LIES about President Obama being responsible for world oil demand. Won't work. The real blame belongs on "Free" Trade.

There's gonna be a whuppin' come November. Mark my words.

<a href="#">20120223-02</a> 08:54 SteveG "Super PAC' Leaders Profit from Lack of Oversight"
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### **From SteveG (Feb. 23, 2012, 8:54 am)—Little Oversight of Super PACs**

Supreme Court doing its part to create jobs?

"Super PAC' Leaders Profit from Lack of Oversight" by Melanie Mason and Matea Gold, *LA Times*

Feb. 22, 2012, (<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-superpac-spending-20120223,0,2670939.story>)

(WASHINGTON) The Red White and Blue Fund, a "super PAC" backing the presidential bid of Republican Rick Santorum, paid more than half a million dollars last month to a newly formed direct mail firm.

The owner of that company?

None other than Nick Ryan, a former Santorum aide — and founder of the Red White and Blue Fund.

Ryan's dual roles spotlight how political operatives behind the super PACs can take advantage of the mammoth donations streaming into the funds and the lack of oversight. Of the \$1.5 million that the Red White and Blue Fund spent last month, a third — \$570,000 — went to Global Intermediate.

The connection between Ryan and Global Intermediate, which Ryan established two months ago, is not apparent in corporate and political filings.

Much of the focus on super PACs has been on their ability to raise unlimited sums from a cadre of super-rich donors. Less attention has been paid to how they use their money — and the fact that they do not have to contend with the same kind of internal scrutiny as the candidates and political parties they support.

"People who are raising the money are paying themselves with these funds. I don't think that's appropriate," said Dale Emmons, president of the American Assn. of Political Consultants, which is studying the impact of super PACs on the industry.

"I don't know where the check and balance is, and I have serious concerns about that," added Emmons, a Democratic political strategist based in Kentucky.

Winning Our Future, a group backing former House Speaker Newt Gingrich that has been buoyed by \$11 million in donations from casino mogul Sheldon Adelson and his family, paid its president, Becky Burkett, \$206,000 in January for executive management and fundraising services, according to campaign finance reports filed this week. Gregg Phillips, the Austin-based consultant who serves as the super PAC's managing director, got \$90,000.

Winning Our Future spokesman Rick Tyler said the super PAC pays its staff for "fundraising successes." Tyler said the payments Burkett and Phillips received in January included compensation for work they did in November and December, before the super PAC was launched on Dec 13. He said their salaries were determined by the super PAC's "senior leadership" — which consists of himself, Burkett and Phillips.

Paul Begala, a former Clinton White House aide, made \$200,000 in the last eight months working as the senior advisor to Priorities USA Action, a super PAC backing President Obama. The group has struggled to raise as much as its Republican counterparts, bringing in just under \$59,000 in January and \$4.4 million overall.

Begala said his compensation reflects his exclusive work overseeing the group's strategy, polling and fundraising. He said he did not get a percentage of advertising buys, as many consultants do.

"It's right in line with what I've always charged for campaign work," he said, adding: "We're accountable to our donors, most importantly — the people who are funding us, who are very savvy people."

Since a series of federal court decisions in 2010 led to the creation of super PACs, 330 have been formed, according to the Federal Election Commission. That has meant a bonanza for political consultants and media firms who are free to determine how to expend the war chests. So far, super PACs have spent \$51 million on the presidential campaign, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Art Hackney, a GOP strategist based in Alaska, said most super PACs were careful about how they spent their funds.

"There may be people who take advantage of this system, or any system, but by and large it is self-correcting," said Hackney, who produces advertising for American Crossroads, the Republican super PAC formed in part by Karl Rove.

Several of the major super PACs are being financed by contributions from just a few wealthy donors — as is the case with the Red White and Blue Fund. The pro-Santorum group has raised \$2.8 million, largely from investor Foster Friess and energy executive William J. Doré, who each put in \$1 million.

A large share of that money appears to have gone back to super PAC founder Ryan, a veteran of congressional campaigns in Iowa, through Global Intermediate.

The company got more than \$500,000 for direct mail and phone banks in January, as well as nearly \$60,000 for "strategic and communications consulting," according to FEC filings.

Global Intermediate did not incorporate until mid-December, when it filed paperwork in Delaware through a third-party incorporation service, shielding the identity of the firm's agent. The group's bare-bones website, whose domain was registered on Feb. 13, does not list the name of the firm's principals. The mailing address listed for Global Intermediate on the super PAC's FEC filings turned out to be the location of a UPS store in downtown Washington.

Ryan did not respond to requests for comment.

Red White and Blue Fund spokesman Stuart Roy, when asked about the firm on Tuesday, first said he had "no idea" how to contact Global Intermediate.

On Wednesday afternoon, he acknowledged in an e-mail that the company was run by Ryan, saying it was "no big mystery, they have done our phones and mail programs in multiple states (very effectively, I might add)."

Friess, in an email from northern Peru, where he is on an anniversary trip with his wife, wrote that he has never met Ryan but that he "sounds like an honest guy."

[20120223-03](#)

11:08

Beth

Re: "Santorum: Who Needs Public Education?" (reply to SteveB, FotM Newsletter #80)

I guess they figure that if they can return us to ignorance, shutter the dreaded "liberal media" and "liberal universities"... maybe Republicans would be able to win more elections. LOL --SteveB

I absolutely agree. There is something sinister about this bias against public education and the whole "charter school" movement. Every child in this country has a right to a free education. The United States cannot possibly maintain its place in the world and our standard of living without an educated population. That said, this is not the only scary thing that Rick Santorum says.

[20120223-04](#) 11:12 Art Re: Comments from Way to the Right (reply to Bob, FotM Newsletter #80)

I kinda liked the weather report: "fo' de nearest FEMA office fo yo FREE sh\*t!"

[20120223-10](#) 15:31 Dennis Re: Comments from Way to the Right (reply to SteveB, FotM Newsletter #80)

Yes, Wacko Bob was for real. I exchanged a few e-mails with him and he was one seriously disturbed dude. Since we haven't heard from him in over three years, I can only hope he was devoured by Congolese Driver Ants:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pM2U9Vqy6oQ>.

[20120223-36](#) 23:35 SteveB Re: Comments from Way to the Right (reply to Dennis, above)

I was kinda hoping the "n\*ggers" got him!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgdyhe0OZXw&feature=related>

[20120223-05](#) 11:35 Pam Is This Too Radical? War in Iran/Syria?

I'm beginning to feel the hairs on the back of my neck prickling, just the way they did before the second Iraq war. For the moment, at least, we don't have a reckless President who has personal reasons for involving us in another war, but the kind of talk swirling around about Iran makes me nervous. Israel makes me nervous, and Syria makes me absolutely crazy. But to stick with Iran: what would happen if, instead of imposing sanctions, we provided strategic, abundant aid? Kill 'em with kindness. Embarrass them into cooperating. Give them no excuse for belligerence. Iran's raison d'etre is hatred of The Great Satan (I wonder if it's the same as Santorum's?); all their problems are directly our fault. What if we were demonstrably no threat? Isn't there something we have that they need, the way we need their oil? I know from past experience how often foreign aid goes astray. Despite our best intentions, the lion's share always goes to the top elites and the army. But wouldn't it be better to buy them off than blast them to smithereens? We need to think of something quick, because the techniques and strategies of war are changing. Computers and unmanned drones are going to carve up the 21st century. I think Rumsfeld was a jackass, but he might have been onto something with his faith in the technology of war. This seems to me to open up a whole new world of risk: not mass casualties but targeted removal of key players, ie. scientists and powerful political leaders. We've already set the stage in Afghanistan and with the killing of bin Laden. I'd like to know what you think about this, Art. Are we inching toward war with Iran? And what does the future of warfare hold for us?

[20120223-06](#) 12:06 Art Re: Is This Too Radical? War in Iran/Syria? (reply to Pam, above)

Well your senses are still pretty good.

Syria is a non factor in my opinion. They will continue to beat each other up but the real issue there is Alawites vs. the Sunnis. In the end the Sunnis will win since they are about 75% of the population. It really won't matter much to us.

Iran is another story and it is more Iran/Israel that worries me. Interesting idea about buying them off, as that is what we already do in Saudi and elsewhere in the region. That was part of my job in a prior life. Frankly I don't know how you can "buy off" Iran today. All of their problems are internal and tied up in religious hypocrisy and not sure how you get inside that.

Had lunch the other day with an Israeli friend and we discussed current situation at some length. We both pretty much agreed that there is no way out and probably best to do nothing. Practically I do not think Israel can conventionally bomb Iran's nuclear program out, similar to what they did to Iraq, what 30 years ago. Iran too far away, sites are dug in, protected and scattered and cannot be done with one or two air raids. If they try, all they will do is piss them off and then invite retaliation. A nuclear strike is an option but that sets off a whole new world and even then they may not get them all. The flashback in any case will be tremendous. So I guess, let Iran get nuclear power. Worst case? If they are stupid enough to try something they know they will receive 20 bombs for every one they throw. Iran will become a wasteland overnight, maybe not a bad thing but still a horrible waste.

More likely if Iran does get Nukes. they will bluster and posture etc. etc, and the world will become a bit more dangerous place but in the end that is all. Remember Pakistan has Nukes as does North Korea (talk about wackos) and we are still surviving.

You are right also, war is changing and Rumsfeld was still a jacka\*s. Take a currently outrageously expensive carrier battle group, and yet one \$5000 missile can sink the carrier in a flash. Good investment??

[20120223-07](#) 12:40 SteveB Re: Is This Too Radical? War in Iran/Syria? (reply to Pam, above)

Well. Even Martians love Earth girls and American women. We have a lot of hot, good looking illegal aliens. Maybe they'd like to go to Iran and make peace?

More seriously, you have a good idea, but I think it's too late for them to trust us. Maybe if we withdrew all American troops in the world back to the U.S....I mean, we would still have the aircraft carriers, planes, missiles, satellites, drones, etc. If somebody sinks one of our carriers, it would mean all-out war in either case.

I think America would be safer and more trustworthy with no troops on foreign soil. Period. Not even in Canada, which I would love to occupy.

War with Iran = the river of oil becomes a trickle. Do you think the American people would stand for that, when they can't even stand \$3-\$4/gal. gasoline? What would they think of \$10? \$20? \$50? Oil fields are easy to bomb, tough to rebuild.

What can a rooster like the U.S. do except talk tough? And, like during the cold war, if we just wait long enough, these foul Arab governments will fall. The lives lost in Viet Nam could almost certainly have been avoided, Iraq certainly; perhaps we won't make the same mistake thrice.

We need a President who won't do anything rash, and I think we have him.

Unfortunately, that laughingstock of the entire world, George Bush, didn't leave us many good options, did he?

[20120223-09](#) 13:57 SteveB Fw: Secret Gingrich Letter Revealed

You might recall that John Hinckley was a seriously deranged young man who shot President Reagan in the early 1980s. Hinckley was absolutely obsessed with movie star Jodie Foster, extremely jealous, and in his twisted mind, loved Jodie Foster to the point that to make himself well-known to her, he attempted to assassinate President Reagan. There is speculation Hinckley may soon be released as having been rehabilitated. Consequently, you may appreciate the following letter from Newt Gingrich that the staff at the mental facility, treating Hinckley, reports to have intercepted this past weekend:

To: John Hinckley  
From: Newt and Callista Gingrich

Dear Mr. Hinkley,

My wife and I wanted to drop you a short note to tell you how pleased we are with the great strides you are making in your recovery. In our fine country's spirit of understanding and forgiveness, we want you to know there is a non-partisan consensus of compassion and forgiveness throughout the government.

My wife Callista and I want you to know that no grudge is borne against you for shooting President Reagan. We, above all, are aware of how the mental stress and pain could have driven you to such an act of desperation. We are confident that you will soon make a complete recovery and return to your family to join the world again as a healthy and productive young man.

Best Wishes, Newt and Callista Gingrich

PS: While you have been incarcerated, Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum have been banging Jodie Foster like a screen door in a tornado. Just thought you should know.

20120223-08	13:26	SteveG	Fw: Wolf PAC Action: Attend a Wolf-PAC Meeting in Your Area!
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Wolf PAC is advocating a CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION to be started in every state possible. It is even BETTER THAN AN AMENDMENT to overturn Citizens United vs. the FEC. The Convention takes the issue away from ordinary politics and gives it greater importance.

[I think the Constitutional Convention is very necessary, but it won't exactly be better than a Constitutional Amendment, because that is exactly what the Convention would produce, if successful—one or more Constitutional Amendments. The Convention is our best hope of actually producing one or more very necessary Amendments (see past FotM Newsletters & Archive). –SteveB]

from Wolf-PAC:

Thank you so much for supporting Wolf-PAC in the fight to protect our democracy from being sold to the highest bidder. Right now local Wolf-PAC councils are forming all across the nation and if our vital mission is going to succeed we will need your help joining them and starting your own.

On the weekend of March 3rd we are asking our members to meet up with fellow Wolf-PAC volunteers to form Wolf-PAC councils. To find a meeting near you or to host your own please visit the Wolf-PAC Events Calendar. Event host will be provided with the materials and training that they need to organize a successful event. If you do not see an event near you please set one up.

Thanks again for supporting Wolf-PAC. We are fighting an implacable foe and we need all the help we can get. Remember to sign up today for a Wolf-PAC meeting and if there is not one near you, please host your own! We are counting on you.

Wolf-PAC — We're Coming!

P.S. One of the best ways you can help support Wolf-PAC is by spreading the word. Please reach out to your friends and neighbors through Facebook, Twitter, e-mail, and word of mouth to encourage them to sign up as volunteers and supporters at Wolf-PAC.com.

Wolf-PAC, <http://www.wolf-pac.com/>, 6230 Wilshire Blvd, Box #140, Los Angeles, CA 90048

20120223-11

16:15

SteveG

"The Republican Brain: Why Even Educated Conservatives Deny Science — & Reality"

[Also submitted at 4:22 by Dennis and at 4:46 by SteveB—perhaps a measure of worth. SteveG beat us to it. -- SteveB

"The Republican Brain: Why Even Educated Conservatives Deny Science — and Reality" by Chris Mooney, AlterNet

Feb. 22, 2012, (<http://www.alternet.org/story/154252/>)

(This essay is adapted from Chris Mooney's forthcoming book, *The Republican Brain: The Science of Why They Deny Science—and Reality*, due out in April from Wiley.)

I can still remember when I first realized how naïve I was in thinking—hoping—that laying out the "facts" would suffice to change politicized minds, and especially Republican ones. It was a typically wonkish, liberal revelation: One based on statistics and data. Only this time, the data were showing, rather awkwardly, that people ignore data and evidence—and often, knowledge and education only make the problem worse.

Someone had sent me a 2008 Pew report documenting the intense partisan divide in the U.S. over the reality of global warming.. It's a divide that, maddeningly for scientists, has shown a paradoxical tendency to widen even as the basic facts about global warming have become more firmly established.

Those facts are these: Humans, since the industrial revolution, have been burning more and more fossil fuels to power their societies, and this has led to a steady accumulation of greenhouse gases, and especially carbon dioxide, in the atmosphere. At this point, very simple physics takes over, and you are pretty much doomed, by what scientists refer to as the "radiative" properties of carbon dioxide molecules (which trap infrared heat radiation that would otherwise escape to space), to have a warming planet. Since about 1995, scientists have not only confirmed that this warming is taking place, but have also grown confident that it has, like the gun in a murder mystery, our fingerprint on it. Natural fluctuations, although they exist, can't explain what we're seeing. The only reasonable verdict is that humans did it, in the atmosphere, with their cars and their smokestacks.

Such is what is known to science--what is true (no matter what Rick Santorum might say). But the Pew data showed that humans aren't as predictable as carbon dioxide molecules. Despite a growing scientific consensus about global warming, as of 2008 Democrats and Republicans had cleaved over the facts stated above, like a divorcing couple. One side bought into them, one side didn't—and if anything, knowledge and intelligence seemed to be worsening matters.

Buried in the Pew report was a little chart showing the relationship between one's political party affiliation, one's acceptance that humans are causing global warming, and one's level of education. And here's the mind-blowing surprise: For Republicans, having a college degree didn't appear to make one any more open to what scientists have to say. On the contrary, better-educated Republicans were *more skeptical* of modern climate science than their less educated brethren. Only 19 percent of college-educated Republicans agreed that the planet is warming due to human actions, versus 31 percent of non-college-educated Republicans.

For Democrats and Independents, the opposite was the case. More education correlated with being more accepting of climate science—among Democrats, dramatically so. The difference in acceptance between more and less educated Democrats was 23 percentage points.

This was my first encounter with what I now like to call the "smart idiots" effect: The fact that politically sophisticated or knowledgeable people are often more biased, and less persuadable, than the ignorant. It's a reality that generates endless frustration for many scientists—and indeed, for many well-educated, reasonable people.

And most of all, for many liberals.

Let's face it: We liberals and progressives are absolutely outraged by partisan misinformation. Lies about "death panels." People seriously thinking that President Obama is a Muslim, not born in the United States. Climate-change denial. Debt ceiling denial. These things drive us crazy, in large part because we can't comprehend how such intellectual abominations could possibly exist.

And not only are we enraged by lies and misinformation; we want to refute them—to argue, argue, argue about why we're right and Republicans are wrong. Indeed, we often act as though right-wing misinformation's defeat is nigh, if we could only make people wiser and more educated (just like us) and get them the medicine that is correct information.

No less than President Obama's science adviser John Holdren (a man whom I greatly admire, but disagree with in this instance) has stated, when asked how to get Republicans in Congress to accept our mainstream scientific understanding of climate change, that it's an "education problem."

But the facts, the scientific data, say otherwise.

Indeed, the rapidly growing social scientific literature on the resistance to global warming says so pretty unequivocally. Again and again, Republicans or conservatives who say they know more about the topic, or are more educated, are shown to be more in denial, and often more sure of themselves as well—and are confident they don't need any more information on the issue.

Tea Party members appear to be the worst of all. In a recent survey by Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, they rejected the science of global warming even more strongly than average Republicans did. For instance, considerably more Tea Party members than Republicans incorrectly thought there was a lot of scientific disagreement about global warming (69 percent to 56 percent). Most strikingly, the Tea Party members were very sure of themselves—they considered themselves "very well-informed" about global warming and were more likely than other groups to say they "do not need any more information" to make up their minds on the issue.

But it's not just global warming where the "smart idiot" effect occurs. It also emerges on nonscientific but factually contested issues, like the claim that President Obama is a Muslim. Belief in this falsehood actually increased *more* among better-educated Republicans from 2009 to 2010 than it did among less-educated Republicans, according to research by George Washington University political scientist John Sides.

The same effect has also been captured in relation to the myth that the healthcare reform bill empowered government "death panels." According to research by Dartmouth political scientist Brendan Nyhan, Republicans who thought they knew more about the Obama healthcare plan were "paradoxically more likely to endorse the misperception than those who did not." Well-informed Democrats were the opposite—quite certain there were no "death panels" in the bill.

The Democrats also happened to be right, by the way.

The idealistic, liberal, Enlightenment notion that knowledge will save us, or unite us, was even put to a scientific test last year—and it failed badly.

Yale researcher Dan Kahan and his colleagues set out to study the relationship between political views, scientific knowledge or reasoning abilities, and opinions on contested scientific issues like global warming. In their study, more than 1,500 randomly selected Americans were asked about their political worldviews and their opinions about how dangerous global warming and nuclear power are. But that's not all: They were also asked standard questions to determine their degree of scientific literacy (e.g., "Antibiotics kill viruses as well as bacteria—true or false?") as well as their numeracy or capacity for mathematical reasoning (e.g., "If Person A's chance of getting a disease is 1 in 100 in 10 years, and person B's risk is double that of A, what is B's risk?").

The result was stunning and alarming. The standard view that knowing more science, or being better at mathematical reasoning, ought to make you more accepting of mainstream climate science simply crashed and burned.

Instead, here was the result. If you were already part of a cultural group predisposed to distrust climate science—e.g., a political conservative or “hierarchical-individualist”—then more science knowledge and more skill in mathematical reasoning tended to make you even more dismissive. Precisely the opposite happened with the other group—“egalitarian-communitarians” or liberals—who tended to worry *more* as they knew more science and math. The result was that, overall, more scientific literacy and mathematical ability led to greater political polarization over climate change—which, of course, is precisely what we see in the polls.

So much for education serving as an antidote to politically biased reasoning.

What accounts for the “smart idiot” effect?

For one thing, well-informed or well-educated conservatives probably consume more conservative news and opinion, such as by watching Fox News. Thus, they are more likely to know what they’re supposed to think about the issues—what people like them think—and to be familiar with the arguments or reasons for holding these views. If challenged, they can then recall and reiterate these arguments. They’ve made them a part of their identities, a part of their brains, and in doing so, they’ve drawn a strong emotional connection between certain “facts” or claims, and their deeply held political values. And they’re ready to *argue*.

What this suggests, critically, is that sophisticated conservatives may be very different from unsophisticated or less-informed ones. Paradoxically, we would expect *less* informed conservatives to be *easier* to persuade, and *more* responsive to new and challenging information.

In fact, there is even research suggesting that the most rigid and inflexible breed of conservatives—so-called authoritarians—do not really become their ideological selves until they actually learn something about politics first. A kind of “authoritarian activation” needs to occur, and it happens through the development of political “expertise.” Consuming a lot of political information seems to help authoritarians *feel* who they are—whereupon they become more accepting of inequality, more dogmatically traditionalist, and more resistant to change.

So now the big question: Are liberals also “smart idiots”?

There’s no doubt that more knowledge—or more political engagement—can produce more bias on either side of the aisle. That’s because it forges a stronger bond between our emotions and identities on the one hand, and a particular body of facts on the other.

But there are also reason to think that, with liberals, there is something else going on. Liberals, to quote George Lakoff, subscribe to a view that might be dubbed “Old Enlightenment reason.” They really do seem to like facts; it seems to be part of who they are. And fascinatingly, in Kahan’s study liberals did *not* act like smart idiots when the question posed was about the safety of nuclear power.

Nuclear power is a classic test case for liberal biases—kind of the flipside of the global warming issue—for the following reason. It’s well known that liberals tend to start out distrustful of nuclear energy: There’s a long history of this on the left. But this impulse puts them at odds with the views of the scientific community on the matter (scientists tend to think nuclear power risks are overblown, especially in light of the dangers of other energy sources, like coal).

So are liberals “smart idiots” on nukes? Not in Kahan’s study. As members of the “egalitarian communitarian” group in the study—people with more liberal values—knew more science and math, they did not become more worried, overall, about the risks of nuclear power. Rather, they moved in the *opposite direction* from where these initial impulses would have taken them. They become less worried—and, I might add, closer to the opinion of the scientific community on the matter.

You may or may not support nuclear power personally, but let’s face it: This is not the “smart idiot” effect. It looks a lot more like open-mindedness.

What does all of this mean?

First, these findings are just one small slice an emerging body of science on liberal and conservative psychological differences, which I discuss in detail in my forthcoming book. An overall result is definitely that liberals tend to be more flexible and open to new ideas—so that’s a possible factor lying behind these data. In fact, recent evidence suggests that wanting to explore the world and try new things, as opposed to viewing the world as threatening, may subtly push people towards liberal ideologies (and vice versa).

Politically and strategically, meanwhile, the evidence presented here leaves liberals and progressives in a rather awkward situation. We like evidence—but evidence also suggests that politics doesn’t work in the way we want it to work, or think it should. We may be the children of the Enlightenment—convinced that you need good facts to make good policies—but that doesn’t mean this is equally true for all of humanity, or that it is as true of our political opponents as it is of us.

Nevertheless, this knowledge ought to be welcomed, for it offers a learning opportunity and, frankly, a better way of understanding politics and our opponents alike. For instance, it can help us see through the scientific-sounding arguments of someone like Rick Santorum, who has been talking a lot about climate science lately—if only in order to bash it.

On global warming, Santorum definitely has an argument, and he has “facts” to cite. And he is obviously intelligent and capable—but not, apparently, able to see past his ideological biases. Santorum’s argument ultimately comes down to a dismissal of climate science and climate scientists, and even the embrace of a conspiracy theory, one in which the scientists of the world are conspiring to subvert economic growth (yeah, right).

Viewing all this as an ideologically defensive maneuver not only explains a lot, it helps us realize that refuting Santorum probably serves little purpose. He’d just come up with another argument and response, probably even cleverer than the last, and certainly just as appealing to his audience. We’d be much better concentrating our energies elsewhere, where people are more persuadable.

A more scientific understanding of persuasion, then, should not be seen as threatening. It’s actually an opportunity to do better—to be more effective and politically successful.

Indeed, if we believe in evidence then we should also welcome the evidence showing its limited power to persuade—especially in politicized areas where deep emotions are involved. Before you start off your next argument with a fact, then, first think about what the facts say about that strategy. If you’re a liberal who is emotionally wedded to the idea that rationality wins the day—well, then, it’s high time to listen to reason.

(Chris Mooney is the author of four books, including *The Republican War on Science* (2005). His next book, *The Republican Brain: The Science of Why They Deny Science—and Reality*, is due out in April.)

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<a href="#">20120223-12</a> 16:22 Dennis Re: "The Republican Brain..." (reply to SteveG, above)
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Don't argue, they're in denial.

<a href="#">20120223-14</a> 16:46 SteveB Re: "The Republican Brain..." (reply to SteveG, above)
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This article is another one of those rare “important pieces of the puzzle”—the mystery we grapple with here at FotM—“What the hell is the Right thinking?”

This is too good not to get out there as clearly and as far as possible. Here’s hoping!

**MUST READING!** ESPECIALLY FOR REPUBLICANS WHO HAVE ALREADY MADE UP THEIR MINDS. ^-^

[20120223-16](#) 16:56 Art Re: "The Republican Brain..." (reply to SteveB, above)

I agree, great stuff. Sometimes I feel a little like the guy in the robe with a beard on the corner waving the sign, THE END IS NEAR!!

Trouble is, it is. We need to pass this along.

[20120223-17](#) 17:51 Phil Re: "The Republican Brain..." (reply to all, above)

I was following along pretty much in agreement with the author, thinking he had his facts together until I ran into his statement that Santorum was "obviously intelligent and capable". That's when he lost all credibility with me.

[20120223-18](#) 17:55 SteveG Re: "The Republican Brain..." (reply to Phil, above)

I agree about Santorum, trouble is, compared to the other viable Repubs still in the running, all of them may be smart with education but all are absolutely crazy. You can look into the DSM IV or whatever book psychiatrists are using and find a medical label to place on each of them.

[20120223-19](#) 17:56 Dennis Re: "The Republican Brain..." (reply to Phil, above) & Cartoon: Santorum in Bed with the Pope

Hey Phil, Sanitarium's a friend of the Pope:



[20120223-21](#) 18:13 Pam Re: "The Republican Brain..." (reply to all, above) & Rick Santorum

There just has to be something in Santorum's past that would explain his bizarre beliefs. What kind of family did he come from?

[20120223-24](#) 18:21 SteveG Re: Rick Santorum (reply to Pam, above)

<http://santorumexposed.com/>

<http://www.biography.com/people/rick-santorum-20688005>

[20120223-27](#) 18:30 SteveB Re: Rick Santorum (reply to Pam, above)

There must be something. It's so weird that a Catholic would actually care about religion and be evangelical. The polls seem to show that something like 7% of Catholics come out of church believing what the Church tells them.

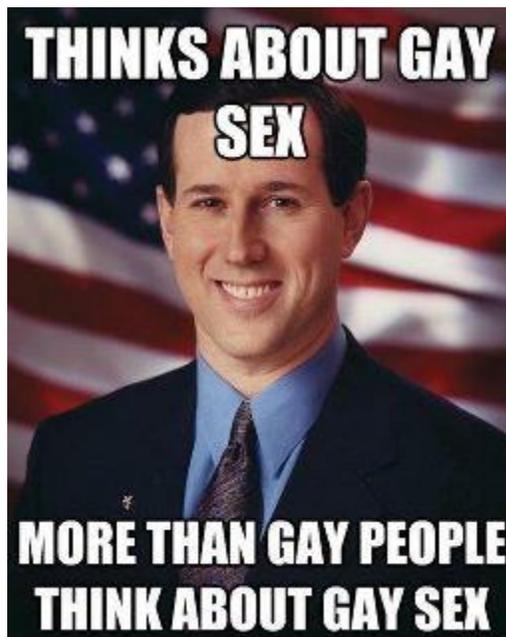
People in Latin America love the Church, love the Pope, and love God, Mary, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, all the Saints, and all the statues of all of the above, and an awfully lot of them lead exemplary, truly Christian lives. But they believe and don't believe what they want of the Church's teachings and think celibacy is the stupidest thing since dinosaurs. They might go to Mass, but they don't get carried away. Yet, for some reason, they get picked-off by evangelical missionaries who come down here like ducks in a row.

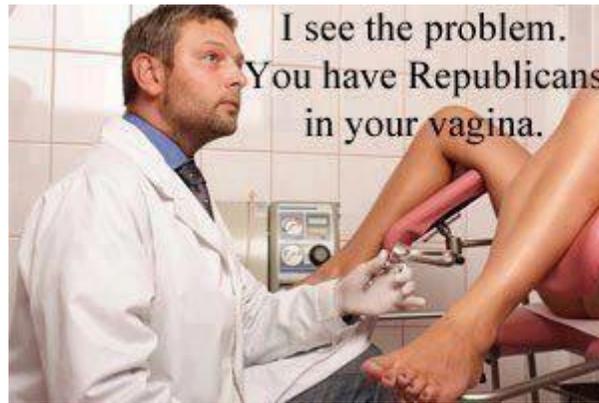
Could that have happened to Santorum without him changing churches? Was he beaten like that little girl in the cartoon in today's Newsletter? I sure hope we don't have to start feeling sorry for him.

[20120223-30](#) 18:41 Pam Re: Rick Santorum (reply to all, above)

His background sounds pretty normal so far. I wonder if his parents are as conservative as he is. Maybe he's rebelling against their comparative liberalism. There's something cramped and fearful about social conservatives. I can understand fiscal conservatism; it at least is rational. But the intense desire to dictate what other people do in their personal lives bespeaks some sort of pathology to my way of thinking. If you don't believe in gay marriage, don't marry a gay person. If you go to church, fine, but don't condemn those who don't. I'm really trying to get a handle on this. WHY is Santorum such a busybody?

[20120223-31](#) 19:22 Dennis Re: Rick Santorum (reply to all, above)





[20120223-32](#) 20:02 Art Re: Rick Santorum (reply to Pam, above)

This is the problem with you liberals. You always try to figure out where they went astray. Sometimes you just have to shoot the Mother@#^!!\*!!.

[20120223-33](#) 20:31 Pam Re: Rick Santorum (reply to Art, above)

That is so funny. I think you have a point, Art.

[20120223-13](#) 16:30 SteveG "Revealed: Romney's Top Funders Made Billions on Auto Bail-Out"

"Revealed: Romney's Top Funders Made Billions on Auto Bail-Out" by Greg Palast, NationofChange

Feb. 23, 2012, (<http://www.nationofchange.org/revealed-romney-s-top-funders-made-billions-auto-bail-out-1330019614>)

Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney called the federal government's 2009 bail-out of the auto industry, "nothing more than crony capitalism, Obama style... a reward for his big donors to his campaign." In fact, the biggest rewards --- a windfall of more than two billion dollars care of U.S. taxpayers ---- went to Romney's two top contributors.

John Paulson of Paulson & Co and Paul Singer of Elliott International, known on Wall Street as "vulture" investors, have each written checks for one million dollars to Restore Our Future, the Super PAC supporting Romney's candidacy.

Gov. Romney last week asserted that the Obama Administration's support for General Motors was a, "payoff for the auto workers union." However, union workers in GM's former auto parts division, Delphi, the unit taken over by Romney's funders, did not fair so well. The speculators eliminated every single union job from the parts factories once manned by 25,200 UAW members.

The two hedge fund operators turned a breathtaking three-thousand percent profit on a relatively negligible investment by using hardball tactics against the U.S. Treasury and their own employees.

Under the control of the speculators, Delphi, which had 45 plants in the U.S. and Canada, is now reduced to just four factories with only 1,500 hourly workers, none of them UAW members, despite the union agreeing to cut contract wages by two thirds.

It wasn't supposed to be quite so bad. The Obama Administration and GM had arranged for a private equity investor to provide half a billion dollars in new capital for Delphi, but that would have cut the pay-out to Singer and Paulson. The speculators blocked the Obama-GM plan, taking the entire government bail-out hostage. Even the

*Wall Street Journal's* "Dealmaker" column was outraged, accusing Paul Singer of treating the auto company, "like a third world country."

But it worked. Singer and Paulson got what they demanded. Using U.S. Treasury funds:

- GM agreed to pay off \$1.1 billion of Delphi's debts.
- Forgave \$2.15 billion owed GM by Delphi (which had been spun off as an independent company).
- Pumped \$1.75 billion into Delphi operations.
- Took over four money-losing plants that the speculators didn't want.

If those plants had been closed, GM factories would have shut down cold for lack of parts.

Then there was the big one: The U.S. government agreed to take over \$6.2 billion in pension benefits due Delphi workers under U.S. labor law.

Governor Romney, while opposing the bail-out of GM, accused Obama of eliminating the pensions of 21,000 non-union employees at Delphi. In fact, it was Romney's funders who wiped out 100% of the pensions and health care accounts of Delphi salaried retirees.

Paulson and Singer paid an average of about 67 cents a share for Delphi. In November, 2011, Paulson sold a chunk of his holdings for \$22 a share. Paulson's gain totals a billion and a half dollars (\$1,499,499,000), and Singer gained nearly a billion (\$899,751,000) — thirty-two times their investment.

One-hundred percent of this gain for the Paulson and Singer hedge funds is accounted for by taxpayer bail-out support.

But, unlike the government loans and worker concessions given to GM, the U.S. Treasury and workers get nothing in return from Delphi.

From GM, the U.S. Treasury got warrants for common stock (similar to options) that have already produced billions in profit.

And Delphi? It's doing well for Paulson and Singer. GM and Chrysler, still in business by the grace of the U.S. Treasury, remain Delphi's main customers, buying parts now made almost entirely in China and other cheap-labor nations.

And exactly who are Paulson and Singer?

Billionaire John Paulson became the first man in history to earn over \$3 billion in a single year — not for his hedge fund, but for himself, personally. At the core of this huge payday was a 2007 scheme by which, via Goldman Sachs, he sold "insurance" on subprime mortgage loans. According to a lawsuit filed by the Securities Exchange Commission, Goldman defrauded European banks by pretending that Paulson was investing in the insurance. In fact, Paulson was, secretly, the beneficiary of the insurance, reaping billions when the mortgage market collapsed.

Goldman paid half a billion dollars in civil fines for the fraud. While the SEC states that Paulson knowingly participated in the scheme, he was not fined and denies he defrauded the banks.

Multi-billionaire Singer is known as Wall Street's toughest "vulture" speculator. Vulture fund financial attacks on the world's poorest nations have been effectively outlawed in much of Europe and excoriated by human rights groups, conduct Britain's former Prime Minister Gordon Brown described as, "morally outrageous."

A guy goes into a bar in Georgia where there's a robot bartender.

The robot says, "What will you have?" The guy says, "Whiskey."

"The robot brings back his drink and says to the man, "What's your IQ?" The guy says, "168."

The robot then proceeds to talk about physics, space exploration and medical technology.

The guy leaves, but he is curious, so he goes back into the bar.

The robot bartender says, "What will you have?" The guy says, "Whiskey."

Again, the robot brings the man his drink and says, "What's your IQ?" The guy says, "100."

The robot then starts to talk about NASCAR, Budweiser, the Braves, and Bulldogs.

The guy leaves, but finds it very interesting, so he thinks he will try it one more time.

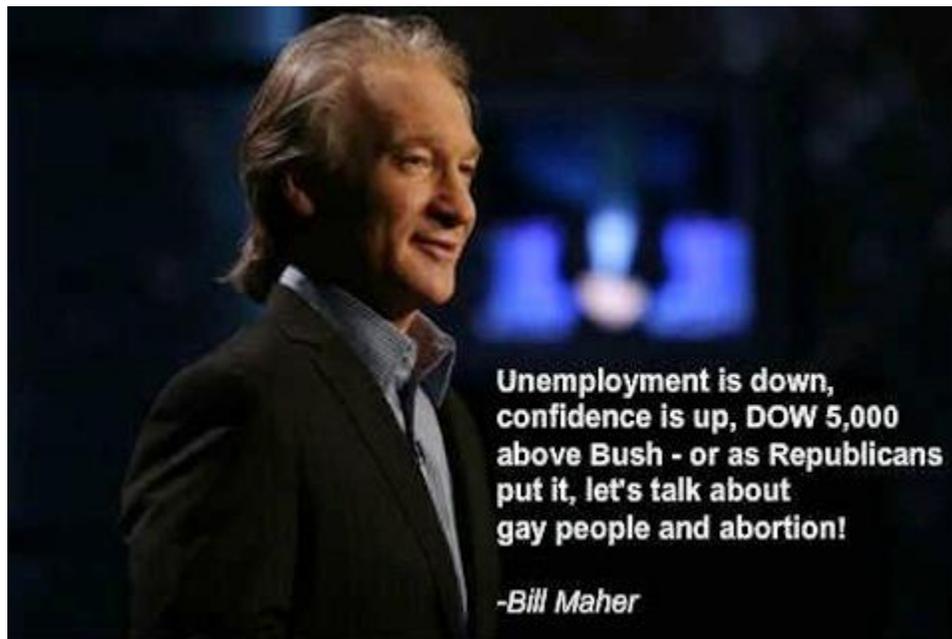
He goes back into the bar.

The robot says, "What will you have?" The guy says, "Whiskey," and the robot brings him his whiskey.

The robot then says, "What's your IQ?" The guy says, "Uh, about 50."

The robot leans in real close and says, "So...what are we going to do about them damned liberals?"

[20120223-22](#) 18:16 SteveG Quote: Bill Maher on Republicans



[20120223-23](#) 18:17 SteveB Re: Quote: Bill Maher on Republicans (reply to SteveG, above)

THIS IS PURE BRILLIANCE! AND SO, SO TRUE, HUH?

[20120223-25](#) 18:27 SteveG Re: Quote: Bill Maher on Republicans (reply to SteveB, above)

If you can't fight the truth, change the subject and lie.

20120223-20

18:12

SteveG

"California Health Insurers to Raise Average Rates 8% to 14%" & Photo:  
Carnaval

This one is for SteveB [Thanks, SteveG! –SteveB]:



This one is for Pam:

"California Health Insurers to Raise Average Rates 8% to 14%" by Chad Terhune, *LA Times*

Feb. 23, 2012, (<http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-0223-health-insurance-rate-hikes-20120223,0,7634380.story>)

(The proposed premium hikes for hundreds of thousands of California consumers with individual coverage would outpace the cost of overall medical care, which has risen just 3.6% in the last year.)

California's largest health insurers are raising average rates by about 8% to 14% for hundreds of thousands of consumers with individual coverage, outpacing the costs of overall medical care.

The cost of goods and services associated with medical care grew just 3.6% over the last 12 months nationally, government figures show. But insurance premiums have kept climbing at a faster pace in California.

Insurers defended their rate hikes, saying they are based on their claims experience with the customers they insure and not just the broader rate of medical inflation. They also say that healthier members dropped out of the individual market as premiums rose and the economy worsened in recent years, leaving behind a group of policyholders who have higher average costs.

"We will continue to examine the fundamental issues at the heart of rising healthcare costs, including the prevention of chronic disease, increasing the quality of care and reducing unnecessary health expenses," said Darrel Ng, spokesman for Anthem Blue Cross, the state's largest for-profit health insurer.

Consumer advocates and others are skeptical, however, questioning whether insurers are doing enough to hold down costs. These latest increases follow years of 20% to 30% rate hikes for families that are at the center of a looming fight between the insurance industry and its critics over a proposed ballot measure seeking tougher rate regulation.

"Consumers should be outraged that premiums continue to grow faster than underlying costs," said Gerald Kominski, director of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. "There's help on the horizon for millions of Californians from health reform, but things may get worse before they get better."

Anthem has proposed raising premiums 9.6% to 13.8% on average, effective May 1 or July 1, for about 700,000 individual policyholders and their family members. The rate increases are under review by state officials.

Nonprofit Kaiser Permanente increased premiums 9% on average for nearly 300,000 customers last month.

Blue Shield of California, also a nonprofit, is boosting average rates by 7.9% for 265,000 members and by 8.9% for 56,000 members, both effective March 1.

Insurers in California must submit proposed rate hikes for review to determine whether they meet certain state requirements, but state officials don't have the authority to reject rate hikes for being unreasonable. But regulators have been challenging insurers' arithmetic in calculating rates.

Officials at the Department of Managed Health Care persuaded Blue Shield to lower a proposed 14.8% increase to the 8.9% boost. The agency said it disagreed with Blue Shield's projection for future medical expenses. The California Department of Insurance convinced Aetna, based in Hartford, Conn., to lower a 13.7% increase to 9.3% for 50,000 members last month.

"Many of the health insurance carriers have projected significant increases in medical costs and utilization, but those projections have not been borne out by experience," said Janice Rocco, the insurance department's deputy commissioner for health policy. "Therefore the rate is higher than it needs to be."

Rocco said some consumers may receive rebates in August. That would occur based on an upcoming state review of 2011 claims to determine whether insurers met a new federal requirement for spending at least 80% of premiums on medical care for individual policies.

Tom Epstein, a spokesman for Blue Shield, said the company consented to the change in its rates sought by managed health care officials because "we want to keep medical care more affordable for our members." In its filings to regulators, Blue Shield said "the cost of hospital services, physician services and prescription drug coverage for our individual members continues to rise."

In recent years, the rising cost of medical care and rate hikes for health insurance have been a major political issue that prompted congressional approval of President Obama's healthcare overhaul, much of which takes effect in 2014, and calls in California for tougher state regulation of health premiums.

Anthem tried to raise rates by up to 39% in 2010, sparking national outrage and helping Obama win support for his healthcare overhaul. The Woodland Hills company, a unit of WellPoint Inc., was forced to back down and accepted maximum rate increases of 20%. Last year, Anthem raised premiums 9% to 16% on average for individual policyholders.

Starting in October 2010, Blue Shield raised premiums by 23% to 35% on average for about 325,000 policyholders, a result of two separate rate hikes that spanned two years. Blue Shield also began issuing credits to customers if its net income exceeded 2% of revenue. The company said it returned about \$450 million to individual policyholders last year as a result, which reduced members' rates by about 7%.

Kerry Abukhalaf, a 37-year-old who owns a small technology services firm with her husband in Alameda, has seen her family's Blue Shield premiums more than double in the last three years to \$544 per month. Her latest increase of 9% "is especially hard for ourselves and others we know due to the hard economy right now," she said. "I feel like my family is being penalized for doing the responsible thing and having insurance."

Last month, Blue Shield notified Tom and Dana Richardson, who run a pool-cleaning business in San Diego, that their premium would rise 15% to \$1,905 per month. The Richardsons chose to nearly triple their deductible to \$11,000 from \$4,000 to cut their monthly premium to \$1,090.

"It's like a kick in the teeth," said Tom Richardson, who's 63. His wife turns 60 next month. Because of their age and medical history, he said, they can't find a cheaper policy.

These increases would affect many of the 2.2 million Californians who buy individual policies, but not the majority of working Californians who are insured through employer group plans.

Businesses and employees covered by group health insurance are seeing premiums rise too. Nationwide, the annual premium for family coverage through an employer increased 9% last year, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

The proposed ballot measure would give the California insurance department the same authority to approve or reject health insurance rate increases that the department now has over property and auto policies. Consumer Watchdog, the Santa Monica group that championed California's Proposition 103 in 1988 that enacted rate controls on auto insurance, is leading the drive to get 505,000 valid signatures by May 1 to qualify the ballot measure for the November election.

Consumer groups have failed to win approval for similar measures in the state Legislature the last five years, encountering intense opposition from the insurance industry and other medical groups.

"In California, nobody can say no to an insurance company, and we're paying the price for it with rate hikes every year," said Doug Heller, executive director of Consumer Watchdog.

The insurance industry says the ballot initiative is unnecessary because health reform has brought extra scrutiny to premiums and company practices.

"Rate regulation might sound appealing," said Steve Shivinsky, a spokesman for Blue Shield. But "it will layer in another complex bureaucratic level of rate review that will gum up the system."

<a href="#">20120223-26</a>	18:28	Pam	Re: "California Health Insurers to Raise Average Rates 8% to 14%" (reply to SteveG, above)
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Aaaaaaargh!! Healthy people opt out of health insurance because the premiums are too high, leaving the oldest, sickest, poorest folks to burden the system, and the well-off get stuck paying exorbitant rates. Everyone loses. To have an affordable system, everyone must be part of it--sick and well, young and old. The individual mandate is simply a bandaid on an open wound. Let's do it the way we do Social Security (and the way the Canadians do it): deduct a percentage of every family's income. What you pay would be based on what you earn. Automatic. Everyone covered. Create a supplemental system for the unemployed that would be equivalent to the average family's coverage. When you begin a job, you fill out paperwork for Social Security. Just add health coverage et voila! I know the insurance companies will squawk, but so do the real estate agents, the contractors, and the auto workers who have been squeezed by a shifting work environment. Big money owns this country. We are as corrupt as any banana republic, and I'm not especially sanguine about the possibility of change. Someone, please, tell me I'm wrong.

<a href="#">20120223-29</a>	18:37	SteveB	Re: "California Health Insurers to Raise Average Rates 8% to 14%" (reply to Pam, above)
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Since we've been talking about religious subjects a lot lately, I'll just say this in response to all Pam says:

**AMEN! HALLELUJAH and PRAISE THE LORD!!!! YES, YES, YES!**

**"AND THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE."**

(If you simply care to listen to it.)

This one will cheer Pam up. There is justice in the world. See below for an entertaining read:

"Arizona Debate: Conservative Chickens Come Home to Roost" by Matt Taibbi, *The Rolling Stone*

Feb. 23, 2012, (<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/blogs/taibblog/arizona-debate-conservative-chickens-come-home-to-roost-20120223>)

How about that race for the Republican nomination? Was last night's debate crazy, or what?

Throughout this entire process, the spectacle of these clowns thrashing each other and continually seizing and then fumbling frontrunner status has left me with an oddly reassuring feeling, one that I haven't quite been able to put my finger on. In my younger days I would have just assumed it was regular old *Schadenfreude* at the sight of people like Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich suffering, but this isn't like that – it's something different than the pleasure of watching A-Rod strike out in the playoffs.

No, it was while watching the debates last night that it finally hit me: This is justice. What we have here are chickens coming home to roost. It's as if all of the American public's bad habits and perverse obsessions are all coming back to haunt Republican voters in this race: The lack of attention span, the constant demand for instant gratification, the abject hunger for negativity, the utter lack of backbone or constancy (we change our loyalties at the drop of a hat, all it takes is a clever TV ad): these things are all major factors in the spiraling Republican disaster.

Most importantly, though, the conservative passion for divisive, partisan, bomb-tossing politics is threatening to permanently cripple the Republican party. They long ago became more about pointing fingers than about ideology, and it's finally ruining them.

Oh, sure, your average conservative will insist his belief system is based upon a passion for the free market and limited government, but that's mostly a cover story. Instead, the vast team-building exercise that has driven the broadcasts of people like Rush and Hannity and the talking heads on Fox for decades now has really been a kind of ongoing Quest for Orthodoxy, in which the team members congregate in front of the TV and the radio and share in the warm feeling of pointing the finger at people who aren't as American as they are, who lack their family values, who don't share their All-American work ethic.

The finger-pointing game is a fun one to play, but it's a little like drugs – you have to keep taking bigger and bigger doses in order to get the same high.

So it starts with a bunch of these people huddling together and saying to themselves, "We're the real good Americans; our problems are caused by all those other people out there who don't share our values." At that stage the real turn-on for the followers is the recognition that there are other like-minded people out there, and they don't need blood orgies and war cries to keep the faith strong – bake sales and church retreats will do.

So they form their local Moral Majority outfits, and they put Ronald Reagan in office, and they sit and wait for the world to revert back to how they remember things used to be, a world where there was one breadwinner in the family, and no teen pregnancy or crime or poor people, and immigrants worked hard and didn't ask for welfare and had the decency to speak English – a world that never existed in reality, of course, but they're waiting for a return to it nonetheless.

Think Ron Paul in the South Carolina debate, when he said that in the '60s, "there was nobody out in the street suffering with no medical care." Paul also recalled that after World War II, 10 million soldiers came home and prospered without any kind of government aid at all – all they needed was a massive cut to the federal budget, and those soldiers just surfed on the resultant wave of economic progress.

"You know what the government did? They cut the budget by 60 percent," he said. "And everybody went back to work again, you didn't need any special programs."

Right – it wasn't like they needed a G.I. Bill or anything. After all, people were different back then: They didn't want or need welfare, or a health care program, or any of those things. At least, that's not the way Paul remembered it.

That's all the early conservative movement was. It was just a heartfelt request that we go back to the good old days of America as these people remembered or imagined it. Of course, the problem was, we couldn't go back, not just because more than half the population (particularly the nonwhite, non-straight, non-male segment of the population) desperately didn't *want* to go back, but also because that America never existed and was therefore impossible to recreate.

And when we didn't go back to the good old days, this crowd got frustrated, and suddenly the message stopped being heartfelt and it got an edge to it.

The message went from, "We're the real Americans; the others are the problem," to, "We're the last line of defense; we hate those other people and they're our enemies." Now it wasn't just that the rest of us weren't getting with the program: Now we were also saboteurs, secretly or perhaps even openly conspiring with America's enemies to prevent her return to the long-desired Days of Glory.

Now, why would us saboteurs do that? Out of jealousy (we resented their faith and their family closeness), out of spite, and because we have gonads instead of morals. In the Clinton years and the early Bush years we started to hear a lot of this stuff, that the people conservatives described as "liberals" were not, as we are in fact, normal people who believe in marriage and family and love their children just as much as conservatives do, but perverts who subscribe to a sort of religion of hedonism.

"Liberals' only remaining big issue is abortion because of their beloved sexual revolution," was the way Ann Coulter put it. "That's their cause – spreading anarchy and polymorphous perversity. Abortion permits that."

So they fought back, and a whole generation of more strident conservative politicians rose to fight the enemy at home, who conveniently during the '90s lived in the White House and occasionally practiced polymorphous perversity there.

Then conservatives managed to elect to the White House a man who was not only a fundamentalist Christian, but a confirmed anti-intellectual who never even thought about visiting Europe until, as president, he was forced to – the perfect champion of all Real Americans!

Surely, things would change now. But they didn't. Life continued to move drearily into a new and scary future, Spanish-speaking people continued to roll over the border in droves, queers paraded around in public and even demanded the right to be married, and America not only didn't go back to the good old days of the single-breadwinner family, but jobs in general dried up and you were lucky if Mom and Dad weren't both working two jobs.

During this time we went to war against the Islamic terrorists responsible for 9/11 by invading an unrelated secular Middle Eastern dictatorship. When people on the other side protested, the rhetoric became even more hysterical. Now those of us outside the circle of Real Americans were not just enemies, but in league with mass-murdering terrorists. In fact, that slowly became the definition of a "liberal" on a lot of these programs – a terrorist.

Sean Hannity's bestseller during this time, for Christ's sake, was subtitled, *Defeating terrorism, despotism, and liberalism*. "He is doing the work of what all people who want big government always do, and that is commit terrorist acts," said Glenn Beck years ago, comparing liberals to Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik.

And when the unthinkable happened, and a black American with a Muslim-sounding name assumed the throne in the White House, now, suddenly, we started to hear that liberals were not only in league with terrorists, but somehow *worse* than terrorists.

"Terrorism? Yes. That's not the big battle," said Minnesota Republican congressional candidate Allan Quist a few years ago. "The big battle is in D.C. with the radicals. They aren't liberals. They are radicals. Obama, Pelosi, Walz: They're not liberals, they're radicals. They are destroying our country."

In *Spinal Tap* terms, the rhetoric by the time Obama got elected already had gone well past eleven. It was at thirteen, fifteen, twenty .... Our tight little core of Real Americans by then had, over a series of decades, decided pretty much the entire rest of the world was shit. Europe we know about. The Middle East? Let's "carpet bomb it until they can't build a transistor radio," as Ann Coulter put it. Africa was full of black terrorists with AIDS, and Asia, too, was a good place to point a finger or two ("I want to go to war with China," is how Rick Santorum put it).

Here at home, all liberals, gays, Hispanic immigrants, atheists, Hollywood actors and/or musicians with political opinions, members of the media, members of congress, TSA officials, animal-lovers, union workers, state employees with pensions, Occupiers and other assorted unorthodox types had already long ago been rolled into the enemies list.

Given the continued troubles and the continued failure to return to good old American values, who else could possibly be to blame? Where else could they possibly point the finger?

There was only one possible answer, and we're seeing it playing out in this race: *At themselves!* And I don't mean they pointed the finger "at themselves" in the psychologically healthy, self-examining, self-doubting sort of way. Instead, I mean they pointed "at themselves" in the sense of, "There are traitors in our ranks. They must be ferreted out and destroyed!"

This is the last stage in any paranoid illness. You start by suspecting that somebody out there is out to get you; in the end, you're sure that even the people who love you the most under your own roof, your own doctors, your parents, your wife and your children, they're in on the plot. To quote Matt Damon in the almost-underrated spy film *The Good Shepherd*, they became convinced that there's "a stranger in the house."

This is where the Republican Party is now. They've run out of foreign enemies to point fingers at. They've already maxed out the rhetoric against us orgiastic, anarchy-loving pansexual liberal terrorists. The only possible remaining explanation for their troubles is that *their own leaders* have failed them. There is a stranger in the house!

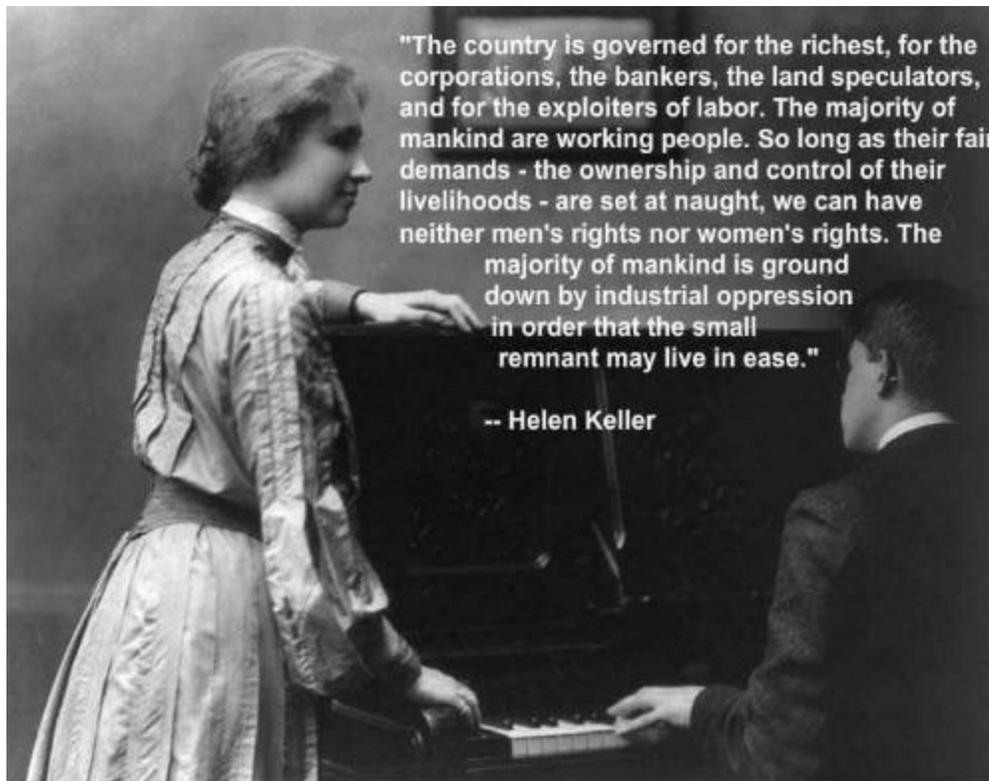
This current race for the presidential nomination has therefore devolved into a kind of Freudian Agatha Christie story, in which the disturbed and highly paranoid voter base by turns tests the orthodoxy of each candidate, trying to figure out which one is the spy, which one is really Barack Obama bin Laden-Marx under the candidate mask!

We expected this when Mitt Romney, a man who foolishly once created a functioning health care program in Massachusetts, was the front-runner. We knew he was going to have to defend his *bona fides* against the priesthood ("I'm not convinced," sneered the sideline-sitting conservative Mme. Defarge, Sarah Palin), that he would have a rough go of it at the CPAC conference, and so on.

But it's gotten so ridiculous that even Santorum, as paranoid and hysterical a finger-pointing politician as this country has ever seen, a man who once insisted with a straight face that there is no such thing as a liberal Christian – he's now being put through the Electric Conservative Paranoia Acid Test, and failing!

"He is a fake," Ron Paul said at the Michigan debate last night, to assorted hoots and cheers. And Santorum, instead of turning around and laying into Paul, immediately panicked and rubbed his arm as if to say, "See? I'm made of the right stuff," and said, "I'm real, Ron, I'm real." These candidates are behaving like Stalinist officials in the late thirties, each one afraid to be the first to stop applauding.

These people have run out of others to blame, run out of bystanders to suspect, run out of decent family people to dismiss as Godless, sex-crazed perverts. They're turning the gun on themselves now. It might be justice, or it might just be sad. Whatever it is, it's remarkable to watch.



"Florida Congressman Upset at Obama for \$70 Fill-Up of His Hummer" by Justin Hyde, Motoramic

Feb. 23, 2012, (<http://autos.yahoo.com/blogs/motoramic/florida-congressman-upset-obama-70-fill-hummer-215636787.html>)

U.S. Rep. Allen West, a Florida Republican, has never been any great fan of President Barack Obama, but took to Facebook today to answer the question of what, if anything, he could praise about the president. His answer included a complaint that thanks to rising gas prices, it now costs \$70 to fill up his 2008 Hummer H3. Is it really a good idea to use your Hummer to argue gas prices are too high?

Here's the complete statement from Rep. West that's drawing some attention:

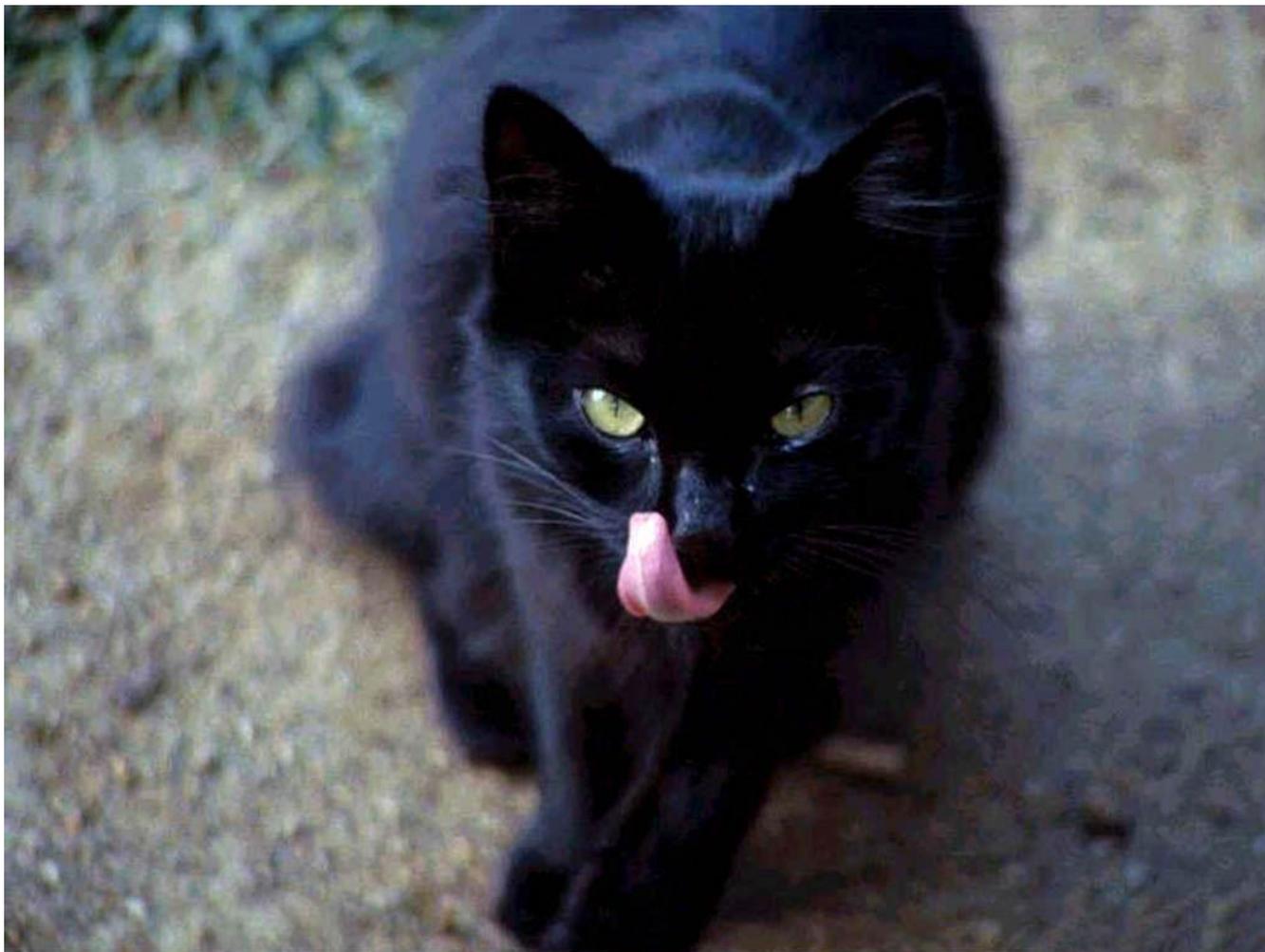
People have asked me before is there any area where I could praise President Obama? Certainly, he has an impeccable penchant for understanding the power of the bully pulpit. President Obama is also very adept at promulgating deceptive language masquerading as policy, actually just insidious political gimmickry. This "tax policy" is an example as well as today's speech on his "energy policy" shall be. Here is the bottom line, last night it took 70 dollars to fill the tank of my 2008 H3 Hummer, what is it costing you? What does it cost the President to fill his gas tank?

Saying gas costs too much based on your H3 -- which sports an average fuel economy of 16 to 18 mpg -- seems akin to arguing Americans have grown too fat at the drive-through window of a Carl Jr.'s. Yet West and other drivers can't be blamed for the current run-up; it's not American demand for gasoline causing its prices to rise, but rather demand from China, Latin America and worries over Iran's actions near the Strait of Hormuz. Last year, fossil fuels were America's biggest export -- partly because of the economic recession and the shift toward vehicles that get 40 mpg instead of 16.

Rep. West may need to brace his pocketbook; that H3 will need \$90 to fill if prices hit \$4 a gallon, as most experts suspect they will soon. Or he could switch into something a little more economical; there's nothing quite as obnoxious as the Hummer on sale, but switching to, say, the 2-liter turbo Ford Explorer would save him at least \$1,400 a year in gas -- and maybe some aggravation.

20120223-37 23:59 SteveB Photo: Black Cat

<http://www.thealmightyguru.com/>



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

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