



FRIENDS OF THE MIDDLE NEWSLETTER #296 — DEC. 21, 2012

Welcome to always lively political discussion and whatever else comes up.
<http://www.FriendsOfTheMiddle.org> FriendsOfTheMiddle@hotmail.com

INDEX: Click here.

Cliff Update

(posted by Steven W. Baker / SteveB, Dec. 21, 2012)

It's like Shakespeare, only real. What a palpable power struggle! Yet why does Mr. Obama never utilize his real power—the people? Where's the "bully pulpit"? Where's the election, barely a month in the past? Leadership!

The next issue of the *FotM Newsletter* will be Dec. 26. MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL!

"And Now for the Republican Freakout..." by Steve Nornacki, Salon

Dec. 19, 2012, (http://www.salon.com/2012/12/19/and_now_for_the_republican_freakout/)



(Credit: AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

(Do House Republicans really believe they can turn back the clock to the summer of 2011?)

Yesterday began with President Obama's base grappling with how to interpret the new concessions he'd offered House Speaker John Boehner in their fiscal cliff negotiations.

There was – and is – serious question over the left's willingness to abide the framework Obama proposed. After demanding that tax rates be restored to their Clinton-era levels on income over \$250,000, the president is now willing to accept a \$400,000 threshold. He's also willing to let the payroll tax holiday expire – at a cost of \$1,000 a year to the average family – and to agree to a modified form of chained-CPI, a less generous method for calculating Social Security benefit payouts. Measured against what would happen if there's no deal at all before January 1, there's good reason for liberals to wonder if Obama is giving away too much in pursuit of a bipartisan accord. There are conflicting signals from leading Democrats about whether the party would go along with this plan.

But all of that may be moot because of what's now playing out on the other side of the aisle. While it appeared that Obama had ceded considerable ground to the GOP, especially relative to the leverage he enjoys, the reaction from Republicans on Monday was jarringly negative.

First came Boehner's declaration that Obama's terms were unacceptable and that he would begin pursuing "Plan B" – a House vote simply on extending the Bush rates for all income under \$1 million. This wouldn't help resolve the standoff, since Senate Democrats say they'd never act on Boehner's plan. There are also doubts about how much support Plan B has among House Republicans, more than two dozen of whom apparently spoke out against it at a GOP conference sessions yesterday.

Not that Republicans are any warmer to Plan A. The Heritage Foundation, which a Tea Party icon recently left the Senate to head up, on Monday ripped into the most recent blueprint Boehner presented to Obama – the one that Obama was working off of when he made his offer to Boehner Sunday night. The framework that was emerging from that back-and-forth is also apparently opposed by influential conservatives on Capitol Hill, most notably Paul Ryan.

There are two ways of looking at what Boehner is now doing with Plan B. It's possible that it's all posturing; that he recognizes how hard it is to sell any compromise to the House GOP and that he really needs to convince conservatives he's exhausted every last means of avoiding giving ground to the president. He could, in other words, just be putting on a show, with the hope that more conservatives will speak up to encourage a deal with Obama as January 1 approaches.

But, as Ezra Klein wrote on Monday, it's also possible that Boehner has simply concluded that he doesn't – and won't – have the latitude he needs to sell the kind of deal he and Obama seemed to be inching toward earlier this week. This wouldn't exactly be unprecedented; it's what blew up the "grand bargain" talks between the speaker and the president last year. The current showdown was supposed to be different, because of Obama's supposedly superior bargaining position, but as Klein points out, conservatives have lately been fixating on the debt ceiling, which we're due to hit in a few months, believing they can use it to counter Obama's leverage.

This complicates Boehner's position. If his members are convinced they can use the debt ceiling to extract major concessions from Obama, then why would they sign off on any deal now that isn't light on tax hikes and heavy on spending cuts, especially to the safety net? And if this is where things stand, it presents the White House with a dilemma: give more ground in pursuit of a deal, or stand firm and go over the cliff if need be? As Paul Krugman notes, if January 1 comes and goes with no deal, Obama could probably then get a tax package more to his (and Democrats') liking than what's on the table now – with no cuts to Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. The flip side is that he probably wouldn't be able to get an extension of unemployment insurance or any additional funding for infrastructure.

So for now, it no longer appears that a deal is imminent. Any accord will ultimately need to pass with real support from both parties, since there were also be large numbers of defections on both sides. This is a particularly tricky issue on the Republican side, given the built-in distrust many conservatives have for Boehner. Obama has a lot more wiggle room with his party than Boehner has with his.

"Republicans Push 'Plan B' as White House Says Fiscal Cliff Talks Have Ceased" by Ewen MacAskill, *The Guardian*

Dec. 20, 2012, (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/dec/20/fiscal-cliff-plan-b-talks-cease>)

(Symbolic passage of 'plan B' comes as White House spokesman says Boehner and Obama have not spoken since Monday.)

House Republicans were preparing to push through a "plan B" bill on the fiscal cliff crisis on Thursday, in a largely symbolic gesture that only served to highlight the extent of the deadlock in Washington.

After days of hopeful talks between Barack Obama and Republican House speaker John Boehner earlier this week, negotiations appear to have reached an impasse. Hopes of a deal before Christmas have almost evaporated.

The White House press spokesman Jay Carney said communications between Obama and Boehner had ceased. The two have not spoken since Monday.

"Time's running short. I'm going to do everything I can to protect as many Americans from an increase in taxes as I can," Boehner said as he vowed to push ahead with a planned vote on his bill on Thursday night.

Carney dismissed the bill, which the Democratic-led Senate said it will not consider and which the White House vowed to veto, as a "multi-day exercise in futility".

Only hours before the vote, Boehner was facing a revolt among some conservatives who were refusing to back a tax-raising bill. About a dozen said emphatically they will not vote for it, while others refused to say or said they still had to make up their minds.

Obama, who had been due to fly to Honolulu this weekend to begin a Christmas and New Year break with his family, is postponing his trip. The Senate announced it is planning to leave Washington on Friday and return to Washington next Thursday, much earlier than planned, in hopes of still reaching a deal before the 1 January deadline.

The Republicans, who hold a solid majority in the House, were preparing to vote on a bill Thursday night that would restrict tax increases due to kick in on 1 January to those earning \$1m a year or more.

The bill is designed primarily to offer the Republicans some cover if every taxpayer sees a rise on that day. While polls suggest the Republicans are likely to be blamed, they will be able to point to the bill, saying that if it had been enacted, it would have prevented rises for more than 99% of the population.

If Obama and Boehner were to suddenly reach an agreement, both the House and Senate would still be in session on Friday and both could return next Thursday in order to get legislation through before 1 January.

Boehner, at a press conference on Capitol Hill, said: "Under current law, tax rates will go up on all taxpayers beginning 1 January unless the Congress acts and the president will sign the bill. Today, we'll vote to protect as many American families and small businesses as possible from the tax hikes that are already scheduled to occur.

"The president has called on the House – again and again – to pass a bill to protect 98% of the American people from a tax hike. Well, today we're going to do better than that. Our bill would protect 99.81% of the American people from an increase in taxes."

But the Democratic leader in the Senate, Harry Reid, at an earlier press conference, said the bill was an empty gesture. "We are not taking up any of the things that they're working on over there now. It's very, very, very unfortunate the Republicans have wasted an entire week on a number of pointless political stunts."

He added: "The bill has no future, if they don't know it now, tell them what I said," he added.

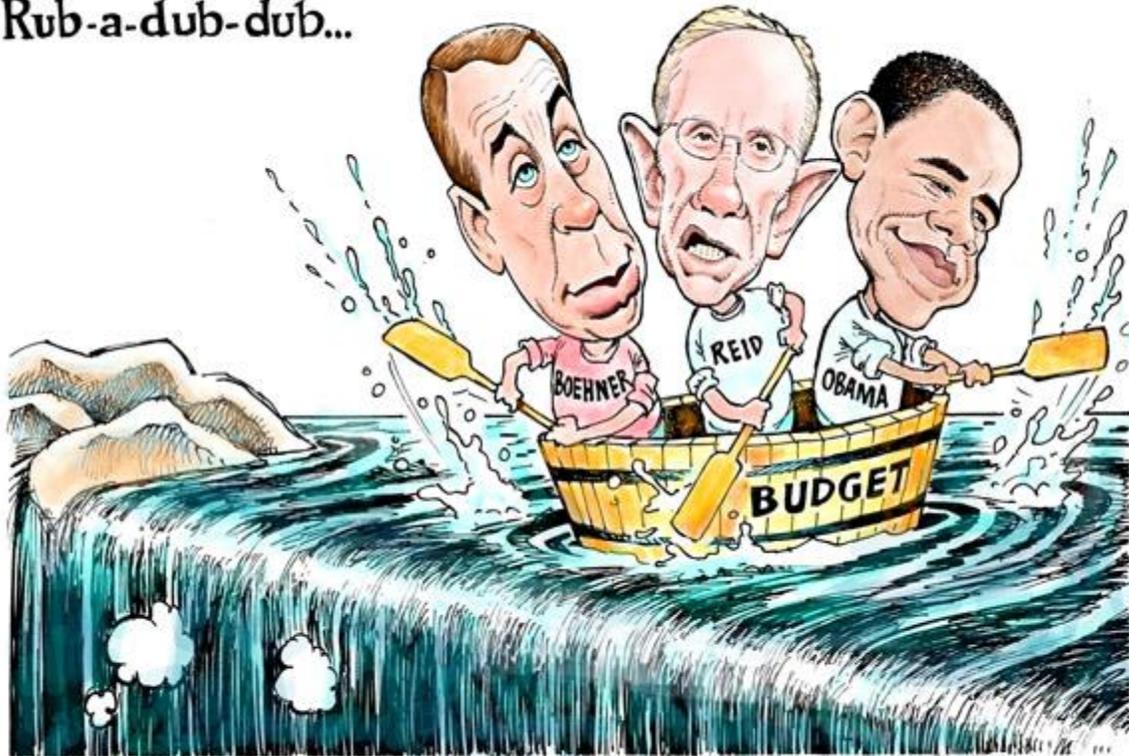
The impasse comes at a time when the differences between Obama and Boehner appear to be minimal, with agreement reached on principle and divided only over the final figures.

Obama wants the tax increases to kick in at \$250,000 rather than \$1 million. He is proposing \$800bn in spending cuts whereas Boehner is looking for \$1.2tn.

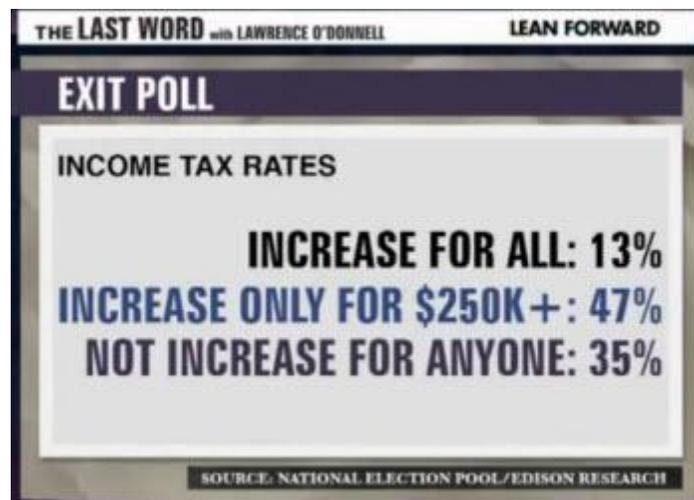
Claiming it was not about the figures, Democrats identified the problem as Boehner being unable to deliver Republicans behind a tax-raising measure, a charge he denied. The Republicans countered that the problem was Obama being unable to sell spending cuts, particularly in entitlement programmes, to his own party.

Boehner said: "I've become convinced," he added, "the president is unwilling to stand up to his own party on the big issues that face our country."

Rub-a-dub-dub...



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20121220-01	08:48	MarthaH	"Even Before Newtown Tragedy, NRA Was Losing Democratic Support"
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"Even Before Newtown Tragedy, NRA Was Losing Democratic Support" by Peter Wallsten and Tom Hamburger, *The Washington Post*

Dec. 19, 2012, (http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/even-before-newtown-tragedy-nra-was-losing-democratic-support/2012/12/19/9b32738a-4952-11e2-ad54-580638ede391_story_2.html)

Months before the massacre in Newtown, Conn., put the National Rifle Association on the defensive, the powerful gun rights group faced an unexpected problem. One of its most loyal Democratic friends in Congress was leading a rebellion against an NRA effort to hold Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. in contempt of Congress, a cause viewed by Democrats as a political sideshow that had nothing to do with gun rights.

"This, my friends, is not a position I relish," Rep. John D. Dingell (Mich.) wrote in an anguished letter urging fellow gun lovers to reject the NRA's position.

Dingell's rare show of defiance was seen by his colleagues as part of a growing estrangement between the NRA and its Democratic allies, who have provided vital support in the past and could be important again next year in what appears to be a coming showdown over gun rights. With public pressure building on Congress to act, the NRA will need Democratic votes to block or weaken legislation, particularly in the Senate.

While the NRA devoted most of its national campaign efforts this year to supporting Republicans and opposing President Obama, the group has historically gained its clout in Washington by nurturing close ties to lawmakers in both parties, particularly those from rural areas who have counted on the NRA's blessing to get elected.

But several recent factors have altered that calculus. And, with the horror of the Newtown school shootings forcing gun control back onto the national agenda, a decline in the NRA's traditional bipartisan strength provides gun-control advocates with what they see as their best prospects in nearly two decades.

For one, many rural Democrats lost their seats in the past two congressional elections. Political battlegrounds have also shifted away from those rural areas to the suburbs, where the NRA holds less sway and there is more appetite for restrictions on guns. And Democrats are looking increasingly at the NRA as an arm of the Republican Party, pointing specifically to the Holder contempt vote this year and the group's 2009 opposition to Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor as key turning points.

"I worry the NRA has become a captive of the Republican Party at a time that it needs Democratic votes," said Rep. Gene Green (D-Tex.), who has had a top rating from the NRA but joined Dingell in opposing the censure of Holder. "In the long run it will be weakened."

Aside from the group's problem with Democrats, it faces a threat to its immense money advantage from billionaire New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg (I), who has started to back candidates who are taking on NRA allies.

Nevertheless, the NRA remains one of Washington's most feared lobbies, with an annual budget of more than \$200 million and the ability to reach millions of people through mail, magazines, broadcasts and a Web-based alert system. Its extensive political scorecards are closely watched by state and federal candidates, who frequently boast in their campaigns if they earn an "A" rating with the group. Democrats, in a strategy designed by then-Rep. Rahm Emanuel (Ill.), retook the House in 2006 in part by recruiting pro-gun centrists to run in conservative districts.

The Fairfax County-based organization, founded in the 19th century to promote marksmanship, expanded after the assassinations of the 1960s and now claims 4 million members. It is the face of the gun rights movement, pushing its agenda in courts, city council chambers and state capitals in addition to Congress.

It has an iconic image, tapping movie star Charlton Heston as its leader in the late 1990s, and has had an eclectic roster on its board, including actor Tom Selleck, basketball star Karl Malone and anti-tax activist Grover Norquist. The most prominent NRA spokesman now is its executive vice president, Wayne La-Pierre, who warned a conservative audience this year that if Obama won reelection, "America as we know it will be on its way to being lost forever." He also described the president's lack of action on gun control in his first term as a "massive Obama conspiracy to deceive voters and hide his true intentions to destroy the Second Amendment during his second term."

The NRA's continued clout could be seen Wednesday, when one of its Democratic friends, Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, toned down comments he made earlier in the week expressing openness to a new assault-weapons ban. Citing a statement Tuesday by the NRA on the Newtown shootings in which the group said it was "prepared to offer meaningful contributions" to the debate, Manchin told a West Virginia radio host that he was "so proud of the NRA and so pleased that they have agreed to be a part of this." He said: "I'm not supporting a ban on anything. I'm supporting a conversation on everything."

NRA officials declined to comment for this article and have remained out of public view since Friday. The Tuesday statement said the group was "shocked, saddened and heartbroken by the news of the horrific and senseless murders in Newtown." NRA officials have a news conference planned for Friday.

The growing partisan divide was evident this week when House Democrats announced a strategy to reach beyond the NRA's Washington leadership to appeal to its members, who polls suggest support some restrictions.

"There will be a growing wedge between the extreme positions and tactics of the Washington-based lobbyists for the NRA and its grass-roots membership," Rep. Chris Van Hollen (Md.) said in an interview after a meeting with his fellow Democrats.

Obama hinted at a news conference Wednesday that he would follow a similar playbook, describing the NRA as "an organization that has members who are mothers and fathers," who would welcome some restrictions.

House Democrats, wary of being portrayed as urban elites who want to strip Americans of their gun rights, looked to one of their few remaining members with some bona fides to lead the effort, tapping Rep. Mike Thompson (Calif.), a hunter and wounded Vietnam War veteran.

Thompson said he has requested a meeting with NRA leaders and has been hearing from avid hunters and some Republicans back home, telling him, "We do not need these assault weapons. What can I do to help you?"

The California Democrat is emblematic of the growing divide between his party and the NRA. His district is becoming more suburban and less rural, and it happens to be in Napa Valley, the heart of California's wine country — hardly representative of Middle America.

As recently as 2010, the NRA and Democrats teamed up to score a major victory. The group and its Blue Dog allies pressured House leaders to carve out a special exemption for the gun group in the Disclose Act, which would have required every corporation and nonprofit group to reveal top donors to broadcast political ad campaigns. As amended, the legislation exempted 501(c)4 organizations with more than 500,000 members. Legislative staffers said the narrow language, requested by the NRA, would apply to only the gun organization and a tiny handful of others.

Democratic leaders initially balked at the exemption but relented after meetings in which the NRA's chief lobbyist, Chris Cox — joined by Dingell and Rep. Heath Shuler (D-N.C.) — warned that without it, the legislation would lose 50 Democratic votes, according to a person familiar with the meetings who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the discussions.

By the time the session was over, Van Hollen, the bill's author, "looked as though he was going to vomit," according to the person familiar with the meetings. The measure passed on a mostly party-line vote in the House but died in the Senate.

This July, as House Republicans moved to censure Holder for his role in withholding information on a botched gunrunning investigation known as "Operation Fast and Furious", some Democratic allies were angered at being told that their NRA election grade would be based in part on the Holder vote.

"I find myself in an unusual position today," Dingell wrote in his June 28 letter to colleagues. "It seems I am at odds with the National Rifle Association, a group with which I have been proud to be associated with throughout my tenure in Congress."

Dingell's actions helped persuade numerous pro-gun-rights Democrats to join him in opposing the Holder resolution. Of the 31 Democrats who signed on to a June letter to Obama expressing "serious concern" about the administration's response to the congressional inquiry into "Fast and Furious", 11 opposed the Holder resolution and four did not vote.

Demographic changes in some districts have given Democratic lawmakers more latitude to buck the NRA.

Rep. Jim Cooper (D-Tenn.), for instance, has for years been viewed as an NRA friend. But that is largely a vestige of his time in the 1980s and 1990s representing a rural district. His district is now based in and around Nashville. Cooper opposed the Holder censure and said this week that he was "willing to consider any proposal that will keep our children safe, regardless of politics."

A similar shift can be seen in Sen. Mark R. Warner (D-Va.), a supporter of gun rights who has criticized the NRA in recent years, perhaps feeling freer as the political power of Virginia has shifted to the more centrist suburbs and exurbs. He blasted the NRA in 2009 for its opposition to Sotomayor and made headlines this week when he told reporters that he had received "A" ratings from the NRA in the past, but "enough is enough."

Money is also a factor. The NRA has historically outspent gun-control advocates in elections, but Bloomberg poured more than \$9 million late in this year's campaign to defeat opponents of gun restrictions.

During the 2012 cycle, the NRA spent about \$20 million on federal races, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, mostly in support of Republican lawmakers.

Rep. Joe Baca (D-Calif.), a longtime gun rights proponent, lost this year after being targeted by Bloomberg. He blames the NRA for failing to bolster his campaign, citing his refusal to support the Holder resolution.

The NRA "left me high and dry, despite my years of strong support for Second Amendment rights," Baca said in an interview.

(Sari Horwitz contributed to this report.)

[20121220-02](#) 10:55 Pam Re: Graphic: Don't (reply to Tom, FotM Newsletter #295)

The graphic with all the "forbidden" signs is ridiculous. I get the implication, and it's simply foolish. The "slippery slope" is a logical fallacy, as any rhetorician or classicist knows. Banning assault weapons is in NO way comparable to banning cigarettes in restaurants or requiring helmets for motorcyclists. Some people are too stupid to look after themselves--or too young. I include the gun apologists in the former. The duty of government is to protect as well as defend.

[20121220-04](#) 11:03 SteveB Re: Graphic: Don't (reply to Pam, above)

I love these duty of government discussions. I think they get us right to the hearts of the problems.

It's funny, you know, America is not a very free country (as we've discussed in relation to Canada, especially)...but, as you know, the worst of the ways it isn't free are a little different than gun freedom and freedom for the people who make \$millions on them, and some of the other stuff in Tom's graphic. For instance...

WE DON'T HAVE:

1. Freedom from hunger.
2. Freedom from a lack of education.
3. Freedom not to be consumed by unnecessary worry because you're alone in the world and not making it at the moment...
4. Freedom from being shot down in cold blood.
5. Freedom, if you are a woman, to deal with pregnancy as she sees fit, with honor cast upon her womanhood and motherhood, regardless of her decision.
6. Freedom from the blatant lies of republican politicians, over and over and over again.
7. Freedom from joblessness.
8. Freedom from homelessness, even for Veterans.
9. Freedom from lack of taxes and regulation on the rich and powerful.
10. Freedom of clean, fair, consistent, verifiable, reasonably long (short), reasonably financed primaries and elections.
11. I never thought I'd be saying it, but the freedom of gays to marry or whatever. What the hay?
12. Freedom from the grand "War on Drugs".
13. Freedom from the Bush-era Patriot Act and policies of totalitarianism initiated then and continued now.
14. Freedom from the "yelling 'FIRE' in a theater" money-making lies of right-wing media.
15. Freedom from the relentless depression of old age. (Just kidding, but not kidding that the old must be cared for in an honorable way. For now, that would have to mean, at the very least, no cuts to Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid whatsoever, just the vast cost savings of a much better approach to the public's health, which is a journey I think we have finally begun, at least and at last.)

I could go on...

THESE ARE THE FREEDOMS I WANT (pretty much).

[20121220-09](#) 12:41 SteveB Re: Graphic: Don't (reply to Pam, above)

And:

16. Freedom from pollution and global warming.
17. Freedom from creationism.
18. Freedom from car alarms and golden retrievers barking all night.

[20121220-05](#) 11:17 Pam Re: Graphic: Don't (reply to SteveB, above)

What is it with this "freedom" fetish anyway? You want to know what it's like to REALLY live without freedom? Spend a little time as a woman in Afghanistan. Or read about life behind the Iron Curtain, when totalitarianism had a strangle hold on millions and controlled not just their actions but their thoughts as well. I lived in Afghanistan as a teenager, and when I returned with my parents to the States, the customs agent greeted me with the words, "Welcome home," and I burst into tears. I learned never to take American freedom for granted, which is why warrantless wire-tapping and indefinite detention are disturbing to me. Not being able to own a militarized weapon whose only purpose is to kill people is not an abrogation of anyone's freedom. You want to know what a country looks like where guns are everywhere? Visit Somalia. Or even Mexico. American weapons are pouring over the Mexican border, while their drugs pour over ours. We simply have to say NO to those who profit from carnage. I understand hunters wanting guns, or target shooters, but I have NEVER heard a single good reason why anyone needs an assault rifle. It's madness.

[20121220-06](#) 11:36 SteveB Re: Graphic: Don't (reply to Pam, above)

If an assault rifle is legal, why not a tank or bazooka, hand grenades, RPG's, mortars, or a small destroyer? Of course the constitution gives the government, state or federal, the right to set a limit.

Instead of being framed as a "give me liberty or give me death" issue, it's really just...

Where do we draw the line that surely we all agree must be drawn somewhere. (I FOR ONE, DO NOT WANT TO SEE THE KOCH BROS. WITH A DESTROYER!) Majority rules. No name calling. That's democracy. End of assault rifles (at least) from now on.

[20121220-08](#) 12:36 Pam Re: Graphic: Don't (reply to SteveB, above)

Amen!!

[20121220-03](#) 10:26 Art FotM Newsletter #295

I'm really going to miss this. It's my daily touch with sanit., with always a few contributors added to remind me of all the morons out there.

[20121220-07](#) 12:12 SteveB Re: FotM Newsletter #295 (reply to Art, above)

Gee, not sure I've ever been called sane before... :-)

But maybe you meant "sanit." as "sanitizing"? No, I'm going to take it as "sane".

Thanks for your words and all you do!

20121220-10

Ben

15:29

Photo: Today's Seafood Lunch at Apple

Delicious Texas Gulf by-catch, over gorgeous carrot purée with potato gratin and arugula salad...



20121220-11

22:22

Tom

Cartoon: 'As Good as It Gets'

I Love Dogs & Golden Retrievers! ;-(

I'll catch more heat for this one:



See what the "Great Disarmer-in-Chief", is causing!

from J&G Sales (<http://www.jgsales.com>), Prescott, AZ:

We at J&G Sales want to wish all of you a Merry Christmas. We hope you have a wonderful time with friends and family and are richly blessed this season.

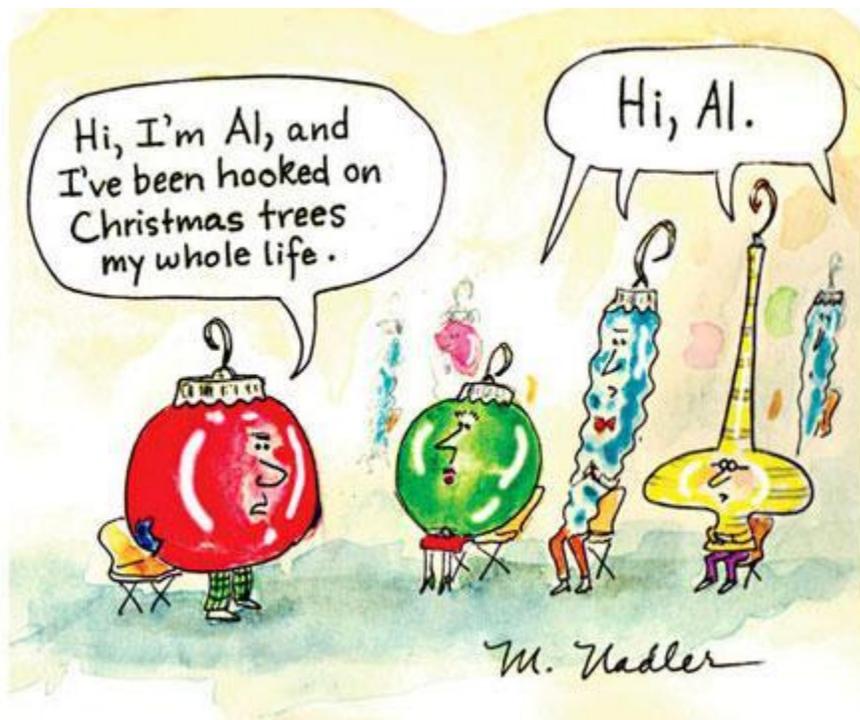
Due to very high order volume we have sold out of many items. Additionally answers to your emails are several days behind, and you will have trouble getting through on the phone. If you placed an order please wait, shipping delays are currently a week or two. If there is a problem we will contact you. We are working through the orders and email questions as fast as we can. We will try to fill all orders that have been received, but certain items are oversold and many orders will be cancelled.

You will notice items being removed from our website as they sell out. They will be added again to the website when more become available. Please keep checking back to see availability of previously sold out items. We are unsure of how many of these items we will be able to restock, and prices to replenish from manufacturers and suppliers are starting to rise as demand increases prices. Thank you for your patience and understanding.

Again we wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Sincerely, The J&G Team





<http://imagescollectionvince.blogspot.com/2010/12/preikestolen-pulpit-rock.html>





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

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