



FRIENDS OF THE MIDDLE **NEWSLETTER #300 — DEC. 31, 2012**

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Fear Is Our Greatest Enemy

(posted by Steven W. Baker / SteveB, Dec. 31, 2012)

We have reached the milestone of the final edition of our *FotM Newsletter*. For me, an epoch is ending and another just beginning. Hopefully, the future will bestow its just rewards.

I need to say a few words in closing. This has been such a labor of love that I have my regrets at the parting, even though I also feel a little relieved. It has been an arduous journey at times...mainly happy, but sometimes a little sad. There was much to learn and do and, sometimes, great victories. And there is always another battle that lies ahead, but I, for one, have learned much and carry forward certain enhanced appreciations and awarenesses.

I believe our enterprise has been a success. I always wanted to have 1000 readers/members and reach some big number of issues, like 300. Our subscribers peaked at over 800, we have had over 100 contributors, produced more than 7,500 pages in 14 eBooks, have a website and blog that will continue as long as my heirs permit, and look—this is *FotM Newsletter #300!*

The best of the best has been that I have made so many new, interesting friends. I thank all of you for reading, for writing, for sometimes pouring out your hearts, for being sincere and open. Thank you for making that extra effort to do what we so often fail to do—communicate. That's really where everything begins and ends. You did that! And I believe it changed the world just a little, tiny bit. I know it changed me. Thank you for not being afraid to be informed, for looking at all sides of the arguments, for teaching me, and, most of all, for speaking out! I hope you will all continue to do so in whatever way you can.

Many of us, I believe, come away from this enterprise with a newly heightened awareness of the quasi-hidden ruling plutocracy in America—money and greed and human nature. So what else is new? Well, maybe you thought you were living in a democracy of the people, by the people, and for the people? Wrong! The system is rigged in favor of the rich, pure and simple. It always has been, but their power waxes and wanes, and lately it has done little but grow and grow. Even our "socialist" President appears to be under their thumb at times. This is just common sense observation of the news, not conspiracy theory.

Meanwhile, we now know with certainty that the GOP has moved so far to the right that they're willing to obstruct government and lose elections rather than bend to the will of the majority of Americans. They are ruled instead by a majority of dollars. They appear to me to be completely unable to explain how they are not anti-women, anti-privacy, anti-minority, anti-middle-class, anti-education, anti-government, anti-small business and jobs, and, therefore, anti-American. And what are they for? They are pro big money! What else? War! Guns! Pollution! Oh ya, pro-life, they say...but, if your life already exists, though they claim to be so much more Christian than the rest of

us heathens, they'll throw you in the trash if you can't carry your own weight and pay the same share of taxes as the billionaires, because that's what's fair to Republicans in 2012. This is all so extremely, well, ugly to me.

But the worst of the worst, for me, has been that there are friends I appear to have lost because of what I consider to be inconsequential political differences. I guess I was the only one who considered them inconsequential. :-) And I will be the first to admit that I don't pull many punches, but I always strive to get at the truth, not the drivel some radio host shouts for monetary reward. I have reread many of the older *FotM Newsletters* to try to determine why communication breaks down and why in such a seemingly permanent way.

I have noticed three kinds of things that happen here in the *FotM Newsletter*—entertainment (which I don't need to deal with here), information (with, let's face it, a little propoganda thrown in), and debate.

Since early 2007, no one can doubt that the evidence of 7,500 pages is nearly exactly the same as the actions of Congress for the same period of time—there has actually been very little or no true debate. FotM progressives have brought thousands of pages of expert testimony and historical and statistical analysis to the table. FotM conservatives have attempted to fool us with lies, media talking points, discredited forwarded emails, and bogus statistics. When that fails to work, they invariably start throwing hate and/or race bombs, calling people names and slandering reputations, acting hurt that any progressives would dare to challenge their God-given conservative assumptions, and, invariably, getting angry, taking their marbles, and going home to mama.

Never has one conservative position been argued positively in any coherent, logical manner in these pages. Such debates apparently are not in the Republican playbook. If conservative opponents don't know why the talking points are true and maybe even handed down from God or Ronald Reagan, then there's no sense talking about it! End of argument.

When all is said and done, the conclusions that can be legitimately drawn from the evidence are pretty apparent. There has been a class war going on in America for a long time and the moneyed class has been winning. Their percentage of the pie has radically increased since Reagan, at the same time their percentage of the burdens of society has declined. In the form of tax law and government spending, this class war is the key conundrum of our times and the reality behind the inability of Congressional Republicans to come to terms with the "fiscal cliff". Well...that and the simple fact that their handlers don't want to pay a penny more of their billions in taxes (at least in the U.S.).

I have yet to find one conservative who even shows an interest in facts. It's like when R0mney's campaign manager told reports that they weren't going to pay any attention to the fact checkers. Why would Republicans be concerned with facts?

Many progressives criticize President Obama and Democrats. Obama is scaring the hell out of me in the current fiscal cliff negotiations. I have to worry about him giving way on Social Security, etc. But you will find hardly one word of criticism of conservative politicians or positions by conservatives, especially here in the *FotM Newsletters*. Not in the talking points.

I find progressives will integrate new information into their world views rather quickly and efficiently. Conservatives run as fast in the opposite direction as they possibly can.

So I asked myself, what is it that conservatives and most Republicans are afraid of? And this question, it seems to me, points to something extremely important. It's obvious, when you look at the evidence and think about it, that they are *afraid!* They are driven by fear!

One of those great fears appears to be the fear that the world might be a very different place than conservatives imagine it to be. I guess they're afraid that anything might be different than they imagine. But if you simply refuse to permit conflicting views to enter your headspace, you'll never have to deal with this fear. Very convenient. This is how conservatives run away from the truth and from the inherent paradoxes in their positions, such as the one that successful people owe society nothing in return for their success, or the illusion that you can build a great nation without investing in the children—their health, food, housing, safety, and their educations.

I am sad that this mode of thinking prevents conservatives from connecting with the real world, but I am made even sadder by the fact that the fear-induced dogmatism of the right is a huge impediment to normal human discourse and relationships. We have certainly seen plenty of evidence of that here at FotM. And I'm sorry that sometimes there's no cure for fear, the fearful are simply too cutoff to reach...they refuse to be reached, refuse to grab a proffered hand of friendship...

How do conservatives get over this fear...this fear, essentially, that they might be wrong? Simple: they must face the truth head-on...while carrying a handgun, if that makes them feel more secure.

Will any of them do it? Well...Art and I did, at least. I hope more and more conservatives will awaken from their long Rip Van Winkle sleep, which must have begun sometime in the 19th Century.

And, as the article below shows, fears have a whole range of levels of reality. (And I'll admit that there are times I'm a little afraid of Oliver Stone too.)

In closing, let me give special thanks to all the FotM contributors, especially to our talented, rational, and intelligent regulars: Pam, Art, SteveG, Dennis, Bill, MarthaH, Ben, Tom, Jim, Charis, Beth, Kim, GaryC, Dale, SteveM, Marci, and many more.

I hope to see at least some of you in our travels next year. Meanwhile, keep emailing me! Have a great New Year's and new year. Let love, truth, and friendship be your guides. Fight against fear! *iAdios, amigos!*

"Oliver Stone: 'US Has Become an Orwellian State'" by RT

Dec. 28, 2012, (<http://rt.com/news/oliver-stone-us-orwellian-022>)

Americans are living in an Orwellian state argue Academy Award-winning director Oliver Stone and historian Peter Kuznick, as they sit down with RT to discuss US foreign policy and the Obama administration's disregard for the rule of law.

Both argue that Obama is a wolf in sheep's clothing and that people have forgiven him a lot because of the "nightmare of the Bush presidency that preceded him."

"He has taken all the Bush changes he basically put them into the establishment, he has codified them," Stone told RT. "It is an Orwellian state. It might not be oppressive on the surface, but there is no place to hide. Some part of you is going to end up in the database somewhere."

According to Kuznick, American citizens live in a fish tank where their government intercepts more than 1.7 billion messages a day. "That is email, telephone calls, other forms of communication."

RT's Abby Martin in the program "Breaking the Set" discusses the Showtime film series and book titled *The Untold History of the United States* co-authored by Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick.

RT: It took both of you almost five years to produce this series. And in it you have a chapter called "Obama: Management of a Wounded Empire". You give a harsh critique of the Obama administration. What in your eyes has been the most troubling aspect of his presidency, Oliver?

Oliver Stone: I think under the disguise of sheep's clothing he has been a wolf. That because of the nightmare of the Bush presidency that preceded him, people forgave him a lot. He was a great hope for change. The color of his skin, the upbringing, the internationalism, the globalism, seemed all evident. And he is an intelligent man. He has taken all the Bush changes he basically put them into the establishment, he has codified them. That is what is sad. So we are going into the second administration that is living outside the law and does not respect the law and foundations of our system and he is a constitutional lawyer, you know. Without the law, it is the law of the jungle. Nuremburg existed for a reason and there was a reason to have trials, there is a reason for due process – 'habeas corpus' as they call it in the United States.

RT: Do you agree Peter?

Peter Kuznick: I agree, if you look at his domestic policy, he did not break with the Bush administration's policies. If you look at his transparency – he claimed to be the transparency president when he was running for office. There has not been transparency. We have been actually classifying more documents under Obama than we did under Bush. All previous presidents between 1970 and 2008 indicted three people total under Espionage Act. Obama has already indicted six people under the Espionage Act. The surveillance has not stopped, the incarceration without bringing people to trial has not stopped. So those policies have continued.

Then there are war policies, militarization policies. We are maintaining that. We are fighting wars now in Yemen, Afghanistan, we are keeping troops in Afghanistan. We have not cut back the things that we all found so odious about the Bush administration and Obama added some of his own. The drones policy – Obama had more drone attack in the first eight months than Bush had his entire presidency. And these have very dubious international legality.

OS: Peter was hopeful that in the second term there will be some more flexibility, we hope so. But, there is a system in place, which is enormous – the Pentagon system.

RT: It almost seems that they took the odious CIA policies and just branded them, so it is now acceptable – the assassinations, the extrajudicial executioner without the due process. It is fascinating.

PK: We complained during Bush years that Bush was actually conducting surveillance without judiciary review. Obama is killing people, targeted assassinations without judiciary review. That to us is obviously much more serious.

RT: You also cover Pearl Harbor, which of course led to the internment of Japanese American citizens. I do not think a lot of people acknowledge that once again underreported aspect of really what that meant. When you look at the surveillance grid in America today it almost seems like it is an open-air internment camp, where they do not need to intern people anymore because we have this grid set up in place. What do you guys think about that?

PK: The US government now intercepts more than 1.7 billion messages a day from American citizens. That is email, telephone calls, other forms of communication. Can you imagine: 1.7 billion? We've got this apparatus set up now with hundreds of thousands of people, over a million of people with top security clearances in this kind of nightmarish state, this 1984 kind of state.

OS: One million top security clearances. That is a pretty heavy number. In other words, we are living in a fish pond and I think the sad part is that the younger people accept that. They are used to the invasion. And that is true, how can we follow the lives of everybody? But the truth is that we are all ultimately watching ourselves. It is an Orwellian state. It might not be oppressive on the surface, but there is no place to hide. Some part of you is going to end up in the database somewhere.

PK: And it can be oppressive on the surface. One of the things we feared after 9/11 was that if there was a second serious attack like 9/11 then the constitution would be gone. The crackdown would be so outrageous at that point. And there is still this obsessive fear. The US fears things, we fear the rest of the world. We spend as much money on our military security intelligence as the rest of the world combined. Do we have enemies that we feel so threatened by? Do we really need this anymore? Is this what our priorities should be? No we think not, we want to turn that around.

RT: The evisceration of the rule of law, especially the National Defense Authorization Act, which eradicates due process – our basic fundamental freedom in this country. I wanted to bring up another interesting point that really struck me in the film series, which are the kamikaze pilots. They were brave, that was the bravest act that you could do and then I can't help but think of suicide bombers today and Bill Maher, he goes out and loses his show for saying these people are brave. And you have people like Ron Paul get up there and talk about blowback as a reality and he is ridiculed. How did we get here, where the discourse is just so tongued down when we can't even acknowledge the truths such as that?

OS: Primitive of course. There has been a blind worship of the military and patriotism. I strongly believe in the strong military, but to defend our country, not to invade other countries and to conquer the world. I think there is a huge difference that has been forgotten: morality. Once you take the laws away, as Einstein once said famously, the country does not obey its laws, the laws would be disrespected. So it seems that the fundamental morality has been lost on us somewhere on the way recently and now it is what is effective. Can we kill Bin Laden without having to bring him to trial, can we just get it done? And that 'get it down' mentality justifies the ends and that is where countries go wrong, and people go wrong. All of our lives are moral equations. Does the end justify the means? No, it never did.

PK: And the other side of what you are asking is about the constraints upon political discourse in this country. Why are people so uninformed? That is what we are to deal with in the series. If people don't understand their history, then they don't have any vision of the future and what is possible. If they think what exists now – the tyranny of now – is all that is possible, then they can't dream about the future. They can't imagine the future that is different from the present. That is what I am saying – people have to understand the past because if you study the past then you can envision a future that is very different.

We came really close on many occasions to going into very different direction in the future. We came very close in 1944-1945 to avoiding atomic bombing and potentially not having the kind of Cold War that we had. We came very close in 1953 upon Stalin's death to ending the Cold War. We came close in 1963 when Kennedy was assassinated to ending the war in Vietnam, to ending the Cold War, to heading into a very different direction. Then there were the Carter years, again a possibility of a different direction. And at the end of the Cold War in 1989 Gorbachev was reaching out to Bush. Did Bush take that olive branch that Gorbachev was giving him? No, very much different. What did we do instead? We applauded the Soviets for not invading when countries were liberating themselves from the Soviet Union and then we immediately go and invade Panama and then we invade Iraq.

So we are saying that "it is great that you are showing restraint, but we are not going to because we are the hegemon." As Madeline Albright, Secretary of State under Bill Clinton, says "if the US uses force it's because we are the United States of America; we are the indispensable nation. We see further and stand taller than other nations." That is the attitude that Oliver and I are challenging. This sense of American exceptionalism that the US is a city on the hill, God's gift to humanity, if we do it, it is right. And that is not acceptable.

OS: It is very funny because the book has been out a few weeks, series have been playing for the fifth week now. We go to TV shows, we sit in these beautiful sets and they are always rushing and rushing. They got news in Gaza, they got Obama. And they ask us what are you talking about? History? What does it have to do with today? What is your point? We sit there very patiently and it is very bizarre to me that they say the past is prologue, that is all happened before and if we are smart you will see it more calmly and won't overreact. We also argue that this kind of media is driven by dollars, the greed. You have a show and it is really not a news show, it is about rating and how you can get that – with a lot of speed, a lot of zoom and a lot of fancy sets and people watch. Goal is to keep it moving, don't think, just keep it moving.

PK: A show like this, we can actually discuss the issues at a little more depth, a little more critically.

RT: If both of you are to make a film about this generation right now, what is one facet that you think is the most underreported or misrepresented?

OS: I don't know about the younger generation, I have three children. I think it is an eternal story in some degree. People no matter what have a similar morality and consciousness, patterns re-emerge again and again. The young men and young women want to make their way into the world. And it is not that far off from what we went through. So I believe in cyclical history and I think my children are going through what I and my father and mother went through. I always look for those patterns first beyond the superficiality.

PK: I find that my students care very passionately about what is going on in the world. They are all doing lots of volunteer work. But what I find in this generation, like Oliver's and my generation, is that they treat the symptoms. They are not asking the questions about the root cause of all of these problems. They care, they try to change things, but it is more superficial.

What we are challenging them to do is look at the patterns. Look at what has happened from the 1890s all the way through to today. Look at the consistency of the wars, interventions, the military expenditures, the paranoia, they fear of outsiders, the oppression. And get it to the root, what is making the system as a whole sick in a certain ways and how can we root out those deeper causes.

Now that we understand that, we can begin to change that. The Occupy movement did some of that there have been times in the 1930s, 1970-80s, 1960s when people were challenging on that scale. We want the country to begin thinking about these big questions again. What is our past, how did we get here, what are the possibilities for the future, what have we done wrong and what can we get right?

RT: Do you think these superficialities in the conventional wisdom that we hear are perpetuated to keep us in a perpetual state of war?

PK: I don't know if it is quite so deliberate, but that seems to be the effect – dumbing down the population to the point where they cannot think critically and then you can pull anything over their eyes. They have a five-minute attention span and a five-minute memory of what happened in the past. We are saying learn your history, study it and think about what the alternatives are, think in utopian ways how different the world could be, how better it could be if we start to organize it rationally in the interest of people, not in the interest of profit, not in the interest of Wall Street, not in the interest of military, in the interest of our common humanity, the six billion of us who occupy this planet.

OS: The model of the series of *The World at War*, which was made by the BBC in the 1970s about WWII. Ours are 10 feature films, cut with care, an hour each, pure narration, music, and sometimes clips of films that make our point or don't make our point. Either way we try to keep it flowing so a young person could enjoy it like a movie, I am glad you did.



Some days I'm terrified of being fearless.

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[That Coca Cola Company is really going downhill! –SteveB]

"Bob Hope and the Persistent Military Presence" by Ken Butigan, NationofChange

Dec. 28, 2012, (<http://www.nationofchange.org/bob-hope-and-persistent-military-presence-1356706871>)



Typically this is a strange week, between Christmas and New Year's, when most of us face the rigors of winter, the chronic stop-and-go commotion that passes for merrymaking, and the nagging remorse for all the things we earnestly committed ourselves to do this year—which, by now, we've sheepishly decided to carry over into 2013 like a cheap bookkeeping trick. These annual existential tremors got an extra jolt last Friday as we faced the prospect of the world coming to an end—first physically, then financially.

Given the peculiarity of this week, I found myself in a holiday mood surfing Netflix and landed on a strange helping of Bob Hope. For those who don't know him, Hope was a mid-century comedian featured in a string of low-budget road pictures, in which he often co-starred with Dorothy Lamour and Bing Crosby. Bob Hope and Christmas? It was probably his long-time collaboration with Crosby, who sang "White Christmas," that induced this neural cross firing. In any case I clicked on what turned out to be the first episode of a short-lived television show called "Bob Hope: The Comedy Hour" and found myself peering into a temporal periscope that zoomed me back in time to the United States of 60 years ago.

Delivered on the blotchy-gray canvas of the precursor of videotape, the program is a cultural snapshot that would allow us to evaluate social progress if, like our children, we subjected our society to a periodic standardized test. And my would-be assessment: America's cozy relationship with the military has both changed and stayed the same.

In this first episode, it is May 1952 and the show is being broadcast live from a makeshift outdoor theater at the Presidio Army Base in San Francisco. The camera pans across the San Francisco Bay, the then-active prison on Alcatraz Island and the gleaming city, until it finally focuses on the stage and the thousands of members of the Armed Forces in the audience. Hope is doing stand-up, spouting one-liners and his own brand of self-deprecating humor. This is years before Johnny Carson—and light-years before David Letterman—but the template for the late-night monologue is here: banter with the bandleader, cracks about the weather (the sun keeps disappearing into the fog), and a string of jokes about the political scene. The presidential election is on, and there is a cascade of gags about the Democrats (Adlai Stevenson would be the party's nominee but Hope's airspace is devoted to Estes Kefauver, the Senator from Tennessee who had made a name for himself by leading a Congressional investigation into organized crime) and Republican Dwight Eisenhower, who would eventually win the fall contest. The show consists of guests, skits and musical numbers.

The humor is fairly genial and safe. The pioneering comedy of Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Mort Sahl and Richard Pryor — let alone today's work by Sarah Silverman, Louie C.K or Margaret Cho—are years off. Their efforts to assert

freedom of speech or to tackle the political and cultural realities of racism, sexism and homophobia will, beginning in the 1960s, seriously challenge both the assumptions about comedy and the society which comedy encodes and reinforces.

Just as future comedians will challenge the world that Hope so confidently projects, so will social movements a decade later begin to challenge a world that assumes the cozy relationship with the military on display here. Hope, who emigrated from Britain in 1908 at five years old, cultivated a strong sense of U.S. patriotism throughout his life. This was not his first show on an army base. Beginning in 1941, he entertained troops throughout World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and right on up to the Persian Gulf War in 1991. His 57 tours were sponsored by the Defense Department, his corporate sponsors and NBC, which often broadcast them as television specials.

This coziness with the military comes through in the references that Hope makes during his monologue to an atomic bomb test that had occurred a few days before at the Nevada Test Site. The aboveground test was filmed and broadcast nationally.

"The other morning," he says, "I went over to Nevada for the atomic broadcast. That was really something. I had quite an honor there. I was selected as the human being to stand closest to the blast. It was a little crowded. I was in a crate with four goats. That was quite an experience, and I must be loaded with electrons, because the other night I got off a streetcar and it followed me up into my porch. What a blast. A drunk was standing in a bar in Las Vegas, and after the building stopped shaking he slapped the bartender on the back and said, 'Atta boy, now you're mixing them the way I like 'em.' And it's changed gambling quite a bit over there. Now they don't shake the dice, they just lay 'em on the table."

In the early 1950s the national security state sought to normalize nuclear weapons. To do this it had to transform something that signified unmanageable terror into a something of manageable fear. It had to establish support for this new weapon system by conveying its awesome power but also its domestication. It was dangerous, but controllable. Hope's bit strikes these chords. Atomic power is clearly hazardous and unpredictable, but its volatility and side effects can be brought down to earth. Most of all, they can provoke laughter—which, like almost all laughter, relieves tension and anxiety. Nothing could provoke tension and anxiety more in 1950s America than the prospect of thermonuclear war. Bob Hope, among others, helped alleviate this fear without removing its cause, something that all-powerful regimes rely on to manage the populace.

Eventually, a series of social movements would challenge this domestication of nuclear arms and the public acquiescence on which it rested. (These movements had some of their roots in San Francisco of 1952, including the then-emerging Beat generation and Allen Ginsberg's percolating poem, "Howl.") With the emergence of people power movements from the 1960s forward, a national broadcast of a nuclear detonation or a comedy show from an Army base would at least provoke critical questions and likely would not be countenanced in the free and easy way that Hope's 1952 program would. Nor would several other aspects of that particular broadcast, including what are now considered—with our post-liberation movement lenses six decades later—to be offensive skits about Chinese-Americans, Italian-Americans and traditional gender roles. The notion of the United Service Organization road show entertaining troops provoked strong criticism during the Vietnam War, which Francis Ford Coppola captured in his vivid depiction of a show going very wrong in Indochina in his film *Apocalypse Now*. And, perhaps most tellingly, the Presidio Army Base—which served as the backdrop of Hope's first episode of the comedy hour—was converted to a national park in the 1990s.

However, the shifts since 1952, while real, have not dislodged the fundamental militarism at the heart of this society. In our own time, the Pentagon seems to have decided that public support is such a given that it can afford to pursue a McLuhanesque "cool" approach to its interface with the population. Yet, "cool" or not, the Pentagon's power is immense and will not hesitate to call on the next Bob Hope to buttress it.

In 1997, I spent several days camping out at the Vietnam Wall. I was considering writing my dissertation about the wall as a site of U.S. pilgrimage, and I wanted to get a sense of how people respond to it. (In the end, I wrote about something else.) Like many others, I was struck by the instantaneous reverence these thousands of pilgrims each day assumed as they approached the wall with over 58,000 names of the U.S. war dead. On the third afternoon, there was an unusual uproar, and then the whirl and clicking of press cameras. A golf cart pulled up — Bob Hope was sitting there. He had just been to the White House, where President Bill Clinton bestowed a national

honor on him. Now he was here, to see the wall. He clambered out of the cart and shambled over to the monument. He simply stared at it. He was 94 years old, and he seemed to be in another world. The reporters tried to get him to touch the wall. In the end he did, but only when they told him that, on this chilly day, it was warm. As he walked back to the cart he straightened up and tried to say something, but it didn't come.

I was thinking about this moment when I watched the 1952 video. I cannot presume to know what he was thinking about this wall dedicated to a war he promoted. Perhaps it simply confirmed something about his life. Perhaps it was a question, tugging at him. Or perhaps he was formulating a question that is there for all of us.

20121229-03	06:51	SteveB	"The Human Casualties of the War on Drugs"
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"The Human Casualties of the War on Drugs" by Andrew Cohen, *The Atlantic*

Dec. 28, 2012, (<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/12/the-human-casualties-of-the-war-on-drugs/266622>)

Let's stop humoring ourselves, says the filmmaker Eugene Jarecki -- America can no longer afford to keep millions of its citizens locked away. Now he's taking his law-and-order documentary on the road.

The year began with a line that was as much a lamentation as it was an astute observation. "The scale and brutality of our prisons are the moral scandal of American life," Adam Gopnik wrote in a trenchant essay in the January 30th issue of the New Yorker. "How did we get here? How is it that our civilization, which rejects hanging and flogging and disemboweling, came to believe that caging vast numbers of people for decades is an acceptably humane condition?"

The year ends with filmmaker Eugene Jarecki touring the country -- visiting prisons, prosecutors' conferences, schools -- showing off his heartbreaking documentary, *The House I Live In*, an acclaimed collection of interlocking stories about the mournful human impact of America's failed war on drugs. Did you know there is a man serving a life sentence in Oklahoma for "trafficking" three ounces of methamphetamine? Did you know that the rise of privately-owned prisons means that there is now a direct financial incentive to incarcerate people?

The 11 months in between these two statements were extraordinarily fruitful ones in this area of law and justice. And almost all of the change seemed to reflect a growing sense of unease, or even disgust, on the part of America's criminal justice community -- lawyers, judges, politicians, prison officials, etc. -- a sense that the status quo is unsustainable, that America can no longer afford, on either financial or moral terms, to keep millions of its citizens locked up. It's too early to label 2012 a turning point in our war against the war on drugs. But it's not too early to see a definitive trend in that direction.

In June, for example, in a case styled *Dorsey v. United States*, the United States Supreme Court endorsed new federal sentencing rules that finally reduced the disparity in minimum sentences between crack and powder cocaine offenders. In a 5-4 ruling, over the objections of the conservative justices, the court declared that the new, more lenient rules applied to defendants who had committed their crimes before the 2010 law came into effect but who were sentenced afterward. The ratio is still too high -- 18-to-1, by Congressional decree -- but the 2010 law and the 2012 ruling were significant advances toward a just cause.

That same week in June, an important new federal civil rights lawsuit was filed in Denver, alleging the mistreatment and abuse of mentally ill prisoners at the nation's most famous prison, the ADX-Florence "Supermax" facility in Colorado. The litigation is still in its nascent stage, but the complaint highlights some of what Gopnik and Jarecki each chronicled. If the courts permit the case to proceed to discovery, and thus force the Bureau of Prisons to answer under oath for the conduct of its prison officials, Congress will have little choice but to intercede, the same way the Obama Administration ultimately was pressured into doing something this year about juvenile rape in prison.

Then, in November, voters in California decided finally to minimize the effects of its "three strikes" law -- which is only partially responsible for the fact that the state's prisons are so dangerously overcrowded that the federal courts

have ordered the release of thousands of prisoners. Voters there also came close to gutting the state's costly, ineffective and unfair death penalty regime -- nearly 6 million California residents voted to end capital punishment, an extraordinary outpouring of support for an idea which is growing in popularity all over the country.

That same month, voters in Colorado and Washington voted to legalize marijuana for recreational use, a dramatic break from both federal law and policy. Why didn't the Obama Administration immediately crack down? Why do conservatives like Pat Robertson want to reduce the nation's prison population by decriminalizing marijuana? As Robertson said in March, "California is spending more money on prisons than it spends on schools." Last month, a federal judge in Iowa, Mark W. Bennett, who appeared in Jarecki's film, wrote a poignant piece in *The Nation*. "If we don't speak up, who will?" he asked.

To his immense credit, Jarecki is speaking up. He says his film is no advocacy piece but rather a movie "driven by real people's stories." But the advocacy is there, in virtually every scene. The "real people" Jarecki shows us are complex individuals, generators of sympathy and empathy, outrage and sorrow, sometimes all at the same time. And in that sense, if no other, they are powerful tribunes for the message he seeks to send: Drug crime is caused by drug addiction, drug addiction is a public health matter, and all of us pay in one manner or another for short-sighted policies that treat drug abuse as a matter for the criminal courts.

Jarecki contends that the "war on drugs" is more warlike than any of us are willing to believe and that it has been waged disproportionately for decades on America's poor. If every lawyer, judge, cop, prison guard, politician, policy maker, and economist in America saw this film, fewer families might be devastated by the "lock-em-up" approach to the problem. And fewer taxpayers would have to foot the bill. Here is my interview with him, conducted by telephone on December 23.

COHEN: Your work touched upon many different components of the failed war on drugs. If you had to choose two sentences to describe the film -- two thesis sentences -- what would they be?

JARECKI: Well, you described it as a failed war on drugs and I'm delighted to hear you refer to it that way. If there are two sentences that my film wants to communicate, it's that the war on drugs has failed and must be thrown on the ash heap of history as a kind of accident from which we must move on. The second sentence is that what was wrong with it from the start must be corrected -- namely, that it took a public health concern, drug abuse, and treated it instead as a criminal matter, and by doing so has made an explosion in our prison population of incarcerating the non-violent as through they were violent.

COHEN: The Holocaust. You went there. Can you share a little bit of your thinking into why you made that analogy toward the end of the film? I can imagine some folks, including people who generally are sympathetic to the movie's message, won't quite get the comparisons. Have you received any blowback?

JARECKI: Almost none, and I think it's because the framing of the message by David Simon, who created *The Wire*, and by Richard Lawrence Miller, the historian who drew his analogy from Raoul Hillberg's analysis of what went on in the Third Reich. All of them work with great surgery to ensure that they are not making some kind of clumsy, ham-fisted analogy that blurs the differences between discrete elements of history.

Anyone with a scalpel involved in that enterprise will find that there are discomfiting patterns that mankind has engaged in, where we have seen groups persecuted by the larger society, often predicated on some habit of the theirs, or practice of theirs, or custom special to a group. As someone who comes out of the Holocaust experience, as the child of survivors, I take any analogy of the Holocaust with great seriousness. But if one is surgical and is learning from that horror that so impacted my family, then history is finally being the educator that it's supposed to be.

COHEN: One of the most powerful components of your film was the use of old footage to show just how bipartisan has been the zeal to wage this war on drugs. Did you go back to some of the politicians whose speeches you cited - like Vice President Joe Biden or Bill Clinton -- and ask them whether and to what extent their views have changed on the failed war on drugs?

JARECKI: No, we didn't in the case of Bill Clinton and Joe Biden. We did in the case of current policy makers because the film was not really designing itself to give a platform for mea culpas or for expressions of regret by former policy makers. My film is dominated, the screen time is dominated, by these individual stories of people whose lives are like directly touched by the war on drugs. It's more a revenge of the voiceless truth than it is a perpetuation of the top-down structure.

COHEN: You talked to a federal judge and police officers and journalists and investigators, and they all were very poignant, each in their own way. But there wasn't a current prosecutor of victims' rights voice, at least none that I can remember. Were these people simply unwilling to involve themselves in the project?

JARECKI: When we approached people who were active prosecutors, they were a little bit more uncomfortable in appearing. And I think the reason is that the war on drugs is very hard to defend these days. Its track record of failure is so vast, and so manifest, that you find greater defensiveness, greater anxiety, about communicating.

But also, interestingly enough, I don't see the prosecutor as the villain in the equation. I think prosecutions in America are villainous but I think it's the laws as written by Congress, namely the mandatory minimum sentencing laws, that have so warped the administration of justice in our courts. That overly empower the prosecutor and disempower judges.

Americans always like a good villain, and one of the reasons they like it is that it makes the world safe for them to be apolitical. So I didn't want to put prosecutors on screen who might have come across as provocative, tough-as-nails, tough on crime. Because if there is a good villain in the movie, then they can just blame that guy.

COHEN: Along the same lines, I like the idea of traveling to prisons to share the film with inmates and prison officials. But what about the idea of taking the film, and your message, to places of political power, like police and prosecutors' conferences? Have you received any invitations to take your show into this hostile territory?

JARECKI: We've done that. We have been at several conferences with law enforcement people, we've been at conferences with DAs, conferences of sheriffs, conferences of judges, conferences of defense lawyers. It's a very fundamental part of our plan, alongside what we do in prisons, churches, schools, and community centers, to people who are on the receiving end of the war on drugs power rather than the enforcement end. We show it to the powerful and the powerless.

COHEN: And what has the reaction been when you've gone to a prosecutors' conference?

JARECKI: We get a very good reaction. It's about what they think about the most, so it's about their world, and they certainly have a great interest in that. I think they believe that the people are treated with great fairness in the movie. All the characters are very textured people. You don't have caricatures walking around; you don't have a cop as a simplistic person made out to look like he's a heartless, tough monster. And you don't have drug dealers made out to be savage monsters who have only the worst interests of society at heart.

In general, and from both ends of the spectrum, what I always find when I go out with a camera is how rich and textured and majestic people are. And I capture that on screen and that's really what I do, my best contribution.

20121229-04	07:57	MarthaH	"The Top 10 Political Quotes of 2012" (w/videos)
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"The Top 10 Political Quotes of 2012" (w/ videos) by Aaron Blake, *The Washington Post*

Dec. 28, 2012, (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2012/12/28/the-top-10-political-quotes-of-2012>)

The year 2012 is in the rearview mirror, and 2013 is just around the corner.

What better time to look at the soundbites that defined the year that was — politically speaking, of course.

Below, we recap the top 10 political quotes of the year, with special deference for quotes that defined the election in some way, shape or form.

10. Gingrich's campaign defined the word "grandiose." The candidate often seemed shocked that his opponents could be beating someone of his intellect. And his plans for a moon colony exemplified the disconnect between Gingrich's own vision of himself and the way the public perceived him. The *National Review* even ran a cover featuring Gingrich's face on Marvin the Martian's body.

By the end of my second term, we will have the first permanent base on the moon, and it will be American.
—Newt Gingrich

9. Bush's admission of his own status as an albatross even four years after his presidency was telling. Republicans struggled to argue that they would be the better stewards of the economy than President Obama, even though he was the incumbent, and much of that struggle has to do with lingering memories that it all started on Bush's watch.

I wish they weren't called the 'Bush tax cuts.' If they're called some other body's tax cuts, they're probably less likely to be raised. —George W. Bush

8. This quote makes our list mostly because it's totally awesome. But it also pretty well sums up the adjustments made by many tea party-backed politicians who were elected in 2010. Many of them proved unconventional, to say the least, and Scott heads that list.

(Florida Gov.) Rick Scott doesn't seem to have any political skills at all. I'd give him a 'B' for governing. I'd give him an 'A' for strangeness. —Former Florida GOP chairman Tom Slade

7. Fehrnstrom's ill-advised metaphor, delivered during a TV interview toward the end of the primary season, once again called into question just how genuine Romney's political evolution over the years had been. Romney-as-flip-flopper wasn't the reason he lost, but it did feed the narrative of a guy who was out of touch and a little slippery.

Well, I think you hit a reset button for the fall campaign. Everything changes. It's almost like an Etch A Sketch. You can kind of shake it up and restart all over again. —Romney adviser Eric Fehrnstrom

6. Romney's awkwardness is hard to sum up in one quote; his campaign was replete with moments like this. But betting another candidate \$10,000 on stage at a debate? He might as well have donned a monocle.

Rick, I'll tell you what. Ten thousand bucks? Ten thousand dollar bet? —Romney

5. We're including the context of Obama's remarks here, but most people never saw them. All they saw was "You didn't build that" — a pithy little soundbite for the GOP to tie Obama to big-government policies.

There are a whole bunch of hardworking people out there. If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business — you didn't build that. —Obama

4. The most bizarre moment of the 2012 campaign was easily Eastwood's speech at the Republican National Convention, in which he engaged in a halting, improvised conversation with an empty chair that was supposed to be Obama. This line got laughs — as did some others — but the fact that this charade took place right before Romney's address made the whole thing awkward to say the least. (Side note: *The Outlaw Josey Wales* is still an amazing film.)

What do you want me to tell Romney? I can't tell him to do that. I can't tell him to do that to himself. You're crazy. You're absolutely crazy. You're getting as bad as Biden. —Clint Eastwood, talking to an empty chair at the GOP convention

3. Akin's odd and offensive theory turned a likely pickup for Senate Republicans into a sure loss on Election Day. And if there's one moment that really seemed to turn the battle for the Senate in Democrats' favor, it was this. Democrats, whose majority was supposed to be in jeopardy, instead *gained* two seats.

It seems to me, first of all, from what I understand from doctors, that's really rare. If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down. —Rep. Todd Akin (R-Mo.)

2. Perhaps no 10-word statement better summed up Obama's reelection than this one. Bin Laden was Obama's big foreign policy success, and the successful auto bailout was both a big success domestically and a big political win, likely delivering Obama key votes in Ohio.

Osama bin Laden is dead, and General Motors is alive. —Vice President Biden

1. This was the most damning quote of the entire election. Romney's campaign was totally knocked off its game when a hidden camera video featuring this quote was released, and it never really recovered. Suddenly, he was a plutocrat dismissing nearly half the country as freeloaders.

There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what. All right, there are 47 percent who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you name it. —Romney

(Sean Sullivan and Chris Cillizza contributed to this report.)

20121229-05	14:26	Tom	"Georgetown Veteran Slain in Vietnam to Receive Medal after 45 Years"
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"Georgetown Veteran Slain in Vietnam to Receive Medal after 45 Years" by Claire Osborn, *American-Statesman*

Dec. 28, 2012, (<http://www.statesman.com/news/news/local-military/georgetown-veteran-slain-in-vietnam-to-receive-med/nThK4>)

(GEORGETOWN, TX) Ben Snowden enlisted in the army in 1954 at age 17 while he was still in Georgetown High School. Twelve years later, he was on his third tour of duty in the Vietnam War when he tried to rescue several soldiers under fire on a patrol in Laos.

The helicopter that he was on had to hover about eight feet from the ground because tree stumps prevented it from landing. Snowden, a member of the special forces who was 6 feet 6 inches tall, reached down to grab a soldier being lifted up by a commander.

He never made contact. An enemy shot him several times in the chest with a machine gun, and Snowden died instantly. It was June 15, 1967.

His family found out this month — 45 years after he died — that he will be awarded the Silver Star for his courage.

"Our family is just thrilled it finally happened," said one of his brothers, John Snowden of Georgetown. Snowden, a Marine, said he didn't find out all the details of his brother's death until 30 years after he died because the information was labeled classified.

He didn't try to get a medal for his brother because his brother was a modest person. "He never cared about medals and thought he was just doing his job and probably if he was alive would have never pushed for it," Snowden said.

The person who did push for the medal was Roger Widdows, a Vietnam veteran who lives in Georgetown and who never knew Ben Snowden. He said he met John Snowden on Memorial Day in 2009 and was struck by the similarities in their lives.

"It turned out that we had both lost our younger brothers in helicopter incidents in Vietnam," Widdows said. "I said to myself if that had been my brother who was not getting any recognition for what he did, I would not feel good about it."

Widdows said he contacted U.S. Sen. John Cornyn's office in 2009 about Ben Snowden but that it took three years to supply all the documents detailing what happened in order to get approval for the medal. "I must have contacted about 75 people, and many wanted to remain anonymous," he said.

Widdows said he read a book called *SOG: The Secret War of American Commandos in Vietnam* by another Vietnam veteran named John Plaster, which provided details of Snowden's last mission. He said Plaster helped him track down one of Ben Snowden's former commanders — Lowell Stevens — who saw the incident. Stevens, who has since died, was able to help supply Widdows with an eyewitness account, Widdows said.

Snowden's helicopter had to crash land in a ditch after Snowden was shot, Stevens wrote in an email he sent in 2004 to Carra Elkins, one of Snowden's sisters. "For reasons I still can't explain, I insisted on counting the bullet holes in the chopper he was on," the email said. "There were 68 holes in the chopper. ... He sacrificed his life in an attempt to help his fellow soldiers."

"Ben was a vital part of our family, and we still miss him every day," Elkins said. "He has always been my hero, but now he is everyone's hero."

Ben Snowden was 29 years old and married with three children when he died. His wife, Betty, never remarried and is recovering from surgery in Tennessee, John Snowden said.

Ben Snowden was the first soldier from Georgetown to die in Vietnam, John Snowden said. Georgetown VFW Post 8587 is named in his honor.

20121229-06	17:06	SteveB	"How Your Cat Is Making You Crazy"
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I told you the mind parasites were coming to get you! If the smell of cat urine drives you crazy...

This stuff is so weird because, if you test positive (and many people do), you probably have an incurable invasion of parasites in your brain that are manipulating things. You are no longer just you. Creepy! I think I want to get tested just so I'll know.

Talk about grand conspiracy theories...this one is more like the mother of all conspiracy facts. We're lucky there aren't more human mind parasites out there. Wait! Maybe there are...

"How Your Cat Is Making You Crazy" by Kathleen McAuliffe, *The Atlantic*

March, 2012, (<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/03/how-your-cat-is-making-you-crazy/308873>)

(Jaroslav Flegr is no kook. And yet, for years, he suspected his mind had been taken over by parasites that had invaded his brain. So the prolific biologist took his science-fiction hunch into the lab. What he's now discovering will startle you. Could tiny organisms carried by house cats be creeping into our brains, causing everything from car wrecks to schizophrenia?)

No one would accuse Jaroslav Flegr of being a conformist. A self-described "sloppy dresser," the 53-year-old Czech scientist has the contemplative air of someone habitually lost in thought, and his still-youthful, square-jawed face is framed by frizzy red hair that encircles his head like a ring of fire.

Certainly Flegr's thinking is jarringly unconventional. Starting in the early 1990s, he began to suspect that a single-celled parasite in the protozoan family was subtly manipulating his personality, causing him to behave in strange,

often self-destructive ways. And if it was messing with his mind, he reasoned, it was probably doing the same to others.

The parasite, which is excreted by cats in their feces, is called *Toxoplasma gondii* (*T. gondii* or *Toxo* for short) and is the microbe that causes toxoplasmosis—the reason pregnant women are told to avoid cats' litter boxes. Since the 1920s, doctors have recognized that a woman who becomes infected during pregnancy can transmit the disease to the fetus, in some cases resulting in severe brain damage or death. *T. gondii* is also a major threat to people with weakened immunity: in the early days of the AIDS epidemic, before good antiretroviral drugs were developed, it was to blame for the dementia that afflicted many patients at the disease's end stage. Healthy children and adults, however, usually experience nothing worse than brief flu-like symptoms before quickly fighting off the protozoan, which thereafter lies dormant inside brain cells—or at least that's the standard medical wisdom.

But if Flegr is right, the "latent" parasite may be quietly tweaking the connections between our neurons, changing our response to frightening situations, our trust in others, how outgoing we are, and even our preference for certain scents. And that's not all. He also believes that the organism contributes to car crashes, suicides, and mental disorders such as schizophrenia. When you add up all the different ways it can harm us, says Flegr, "*Toxoplasma* might even kill as many people as malaria, or at least a million people a year."

An evolutionary biologist at Charles University in Prague, Flegr has pursued this theory for decades in relative obscurity. Because he struggles with English and is not much of a conversationalist even in his native tongue, he rarely travels to scientific conferences. That "may be one of the reasons my theory is not better known," he says. And, he believes, his views may invite deep-seated opposition. "There is strong psychological resistance to the possibility that human behavior can be influenced by some stupid parasite," he says. "Nobody likes to feel like a puppet. Reviewers [of my scientific papers] may have been offended." Another more obvious reason for resistance, of course, is that Flegr's notions sound an awful lot like fringe science, right up there with UFO sightings and claims of dolphins telepathically communicating with humans.

But after years of being ignored or discounted, Flegr is starting to gain respectability. Psychedelic as his claims may sound, many researchers, including such big names in neuroscience as Stanford's Robert Sapolsky, think he could well be onto something. Flegr's "studies are well conducted, and I can see no reason to doubt them," Sapolsky tells me. Indeed, recent findings from Sapolsky's lab and British groups suggest that the parasite is capable of extraordinary shenanigans. *T. gondii*, reports Sapolsky, can turn a rat's strong innate aversion to cats into an attraction, luring it into the jaws of its No. 1 predator. Even more amazing is how it does this: the organism rewires circuits in parts of the brain that deal with such primal emotions as fear, anxiety, and sexual arousal. "Overall," says Sapolsky, "this is wild, bizarre neurobiology." Another academic heavyweight who takes Flegr seriously is the schizophrenia expert E. Fuller Torrey, director of the Stanley Medical Research Institute, in Maryland. "I admire Jaroslav for doing [this research]," he says. "It's obviously not politically correct, in the sense that not many labs are doing it. He's done it mostly on his own, with very little support. I think it bears looking at. I find it completely credible."

What's more, many experts think *T. gondii* may be far from the only microscopic puppeteer capable of pulling our strings. "My guess is that there are scads more examples of this going on in mammals, with parasites we've never even heard of," says Sapolsky.

Familiar to most of us, of course, is the rabies virus. On the verge of killing a dog, bat, or other warm-blooded host, it stirs the animal into a rage while simultaneously migrating from the nervous system to the creature's saliva, ensuring that when the host bites, the virus will live on in a new carrier. But aside from rabies, stories of parasites commandeering the behavior of large-brained mammals are rare. The far more common victims of parasitic mind control—at least the ones we know about—are fish, crustaceans, and legions of insects, according to Janice Moore, a behavioral biologist at Colorado State University. "Flies, ants, caterpillars, wasps, you name it—there are truckloads of them behaving weirdly as a result of parasites," she says.

Consider *Polysphincta gutfreundi*, a parasitic wasp that grabs hold of an orb spider and attaches a tiny egg to its belly. A wormlike larva emerges from the egg, and then releases chemicals that prompt the spider to abandon weaving its familiar spiral web and instead spin its silk thread into a special pattern that will hold the cocoon in

which the larva matures. The “possessed” spider even crochets a specific geometric design in the net, camouflaging the cocoon from the wasp’s predators.

Flegr himself traces his life’s work to another master of mind control. Almost 30 years ago, as he was reading a book by the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, Flegr was captivated by a passage describing how a flatworm turns an ant into its slave by invading the ant’s nervous system. A drop in temperature normally causes ants to head underground, but the infected insect instead climbs to the top of a blade of grass and clamps down on it, becoming easy prey for a grazing sheep. “Its mandibles actually become locked in that position, so there’s nothing the ant can do except hang there in the air,” says Flegr. The sheep grazes on the grass and eats the ant; the worm gains entrance into the ungulate’s gut, which is exactly where it needs to be in order to complete—as the *Lion King* song goes—the circle of life. “It was the first I learned about this kind of manipulation, so it made a big impression on me,” Flegr says.

After he read the book, Flegr began to make a connection that, he readily admits, others might find crazy: his behavior, he noticed, shared similarities with that of the reckless ant. For example, he says, he thought nothing of crossing the street in the middle of dense traffic, “and if cars honked at me, I didn’t jump out of the way.” He also made no effort to hide his scorn for the Communists who ruled Czechoslovakia for most of his early adulthood. “It was very risky to openly speak your mind at that time,” he says. “I was lucky I wasn’t imprisoned.” And during a research stint in eastern Turkey, when the strife-torn region frequently erupted in gunfire, he recalls being “very calm.” In contrast, he says, “my colleagues were terrified. I wondered what was wrong with myself.”

His bewilderment continued until 1990, when he joined the biology faculty of Charles University. As it happened, the 650-year-old institution had long been a world leader in documenting the health effects of *T. gondii*, as well as developing methods for detecting the parasite. In fact, just as Flegr was arriving, his colleagues were searching for infected individuals on whom to test their improved diagnostic kits, which is how he came to be asked one day to roll up his sleeve and donate blood. He discovered that he had the parasite—and just possibly, he thought, the key to his baffling self-destructive streak.

He delved into *T. gondii*’s life cycle. After an infected cat defecates, Flegr learned, the parasite is typically picked up from the soil by scavenging or grazing animals—notably rodents, pigs, and cattle—all of which then harbor it in their brain and other body tissues. Humans, on the other hand, are exposed not only by coming into contact with litter boxes, but also, he found, by drinking water contaminated with cat feces, eating unwashed vegetables, or, especially in Europe, by consuming raw or undercooked meat. Hence the French, according to Flegr, with their love of steak prepared *saignant*—literally, “bleeding”—can have infection rates as high as 55 percent. (Americans will be happy to hear that the parasite resides in far fewer of them, though a still substantial portion: 10 to 20 percent.) Once inside an animal or human host, the parasite then needs to get back into the cat, the only place where it can sexually reproduce—and this is when, Flegr believed, behavioral manipulation might come into play.

Researchers had already observed a few peculiarities about rodents with *T. gondii* that bolstered Flegr’s theory. The infected rodents were much more active in running wheels than uninfected rodents were, suggesting that they would be more-attractive targets for cats, which are drawn to fast-moving objects. They also were less wary of predators in exposed spaces. Little, however, was known about how the latent infection might influence humans, because we and other large mammals were widely presumed to be accidental hosts, or, as scientists are fond of putting it, a “dead end” for the parasite. But even if we were never part of the parasite’s life cycle, Flegr reasoned, mammals from mouse to man share the vast majority of their genes, so we might, in a case of mistaken identity, still be vulnerable to manipulations by the parasite.

In the Soviet-stunted economy, animal studies were way beyond Flegr’s research budget. But fortunately for him, 30 to 40 percent of Czechs had the latent form of the disease, so plenty of students were available “to serve as very cheap experimental animals.” He began by giving them and their parasite-free peers standardized personality tests—an inexpensive, if somewhat crude, method of measuring differences between the groups. In addition, he used a computer-based test to assess the reaction times of participants, who were instructed to press a button as soon as a white square popped up anywhere against the dark background of the monitor.

The subjects who tested positive for the parasite had significantly delayed reaction times. Flegr was especially surprised to learn, though, that the protozoan appeared to cause many sex-specific changes in personality.

Compared with uninfected men, males who had the parasite were more introverted, suspicious, oblivious to other people's opinions of them, and inclined to disregard rules. Infected women, on the other hand, presented in exactly the opposite way: they were more outgoing, trusting, image-conscious, and rule-abiding than uninfected women.

The findings were so bizarre that Flegr initially assumed his data must be flawed. So he tested other groups—civilian and military populations. Again, the same results. Then, in search of more corroborating evidence, he brought subjects in for further observation and a battery of tests, in which they were rated by someone ignorant of their infection status. To assess whether participants valued the opinions of others, the rater judged how well dressed they appeared to be. As a measure of gregariousness, participants were asked about the number of friends they'd interacted with over the past two weeks. To test whether they were prone to being suspicious, they were asked, among other things, to drink an unidentified liquid.

The results meshed well with the questionnaire findings. Compared with uninfected people of the same sex, infected men were more likely to wear rumpled old clothes; infected women tended to be more meticulously attired, many showing up for the study in expensive, designer-brand clothing. Infected men tended to have fewer friends, while infected women tended to have more. And when it came to downing the mystery fluid, reports Flegr, "the infected males were much more hesitant than uninfected men. They wanted to know why they had to do it. Would it harm them?" In contrast, the infected women were the most trusting of all subjects. "They just did what they were told," he says.

Why men and women reacted so differently to the parasite still mystified him. After consulting the psychological literature, he started to suspect that heightened anxiety might be the common denominator underlying their responses. When under emotional strain, he read, women seek solace through social bonding and nurturing. In the lingo of psychologists, they're inclined to "tend and befriend." Anxious men, on the other hand, typically respond by withdrawing and becoming hostile or antisocial. Perhaps he was looking at flip sides of the same coin.

Closer inspection of Flegr's reaction-time results revealed that infected subjects became less attentive and slowed down a minute or so into the test. This suggested to him that *Toxoplasma* might have an adverse impact on driving, where constant vigilance and fast reflexes are critical. He launched two major epidemiological studies in the Czech Republic, one of men and women in the general population and another of mostly male drivers in the military. Those who tested positive for the parasite, both studies showed, were about two and a half times as likely to be in a traffic accident as their uninfected peers.

When I met Flegr for the first time, last September, at his office on the third floor of Charles University's Biological Sciences building, I was expecting something of a wild man. But once you get past the riotous red hair, his style is understated. Thin and slight of build, he's soft-spoken, precise with his facts, and—true to his *Toxo* status—clad in old sneakers, faded bell-bottom jeans, and a loose-fitting button-up shirt. As our conversation proceeds, I discover that his latest findings have become—to quote *Alice in Wonderland*—"curiouser and curiouser," which may explain why his forehead has the deep ruts of a chronic worrier, or someone perpetually perplexed.

He's published some data, he tells me, that suggest infected males might have elevated testosterone levels. Possibly for that reason, women shown photos of these men rate them as more masculine than pictures of uninfected men. "I want to investigate this more closely to see if it's true," he says. "Also, it could be women find infected men more attractive. That's something else we hope to test."

Meanwhile, two Turkish studies have replicated his studies linking *Toxoplasma* to traffic accidents. With up to one-third of the world infected with the parasite, Flegr now calculates that *T. gondii* is a likely factor in several hundred thousand road deaths each year. In addition, reanalysis of his personality-questionnaire data revealed that, just like him, many other people who have the latent infection feel intrepid in dangerous situations. "Maybe," he says, "that's another reason they get into traffic accidents. They don't have a normal fear response."

It's almost impossible to hear about Flegr's research without wondering whether you're infected—especially if, like me, you're a cat owner, favor very rare meat, and identify even a little bit with your *Toxo* sex stereotype. So before coming to Prague, I'd gotten tested for the parasite, but I didn't yet know the results. It seemed a good time to see what his intuition would tell me. "Can you guess from observing someone whether they have the parasite—myself, for example?" I ask.

"No," he says, "the parasite's effects on personality are very subtle." If, as a woman, you were introverted before being infected, he says, the parasite won't turn you into a raving extrovert. It might just make you a little less introverted. "I'm very typical of *Toxoplasma* males," he continues. "But I don't know whether my personality traits have anything to do with the infection. It's impossible to say for any one individual. You usually need about 50 people who are infected and 50 who are not, in order to see a statistically significant difference. The vast majority of people will have no idea they're infected."

Still, he concedes, the parasite could be very bad news for a small percentage of people—and not just those who might be at greater risk for car accidents. Many schizophrenia patients show shrinkage in parts of their cerebral cortex, and Flegr thinks the protozoan may be to blame for that. He hands me a recently published paper on the topic that he co-authored with colleagues at Charles University, including a psychiatrist named Jiri Horacek. Twelve of 44 schizophrenia patients who underwent MRI scans, the team found, had reduced gray matter in the brain—and the decrease occurred almost exclusively in those who tested positive for *T. gondii*. After reading the abstract, I must look stunned, because Flegr smiles and says, "Jiri had the same response. I don't think he believed it could be true." When I later speak with Horacek, he admits to having been skeptical about Flegr's theory at the outset. When they merged the MRI results with the infection data, however, he went from being a doubter to being a believer. "I was amazed at how pronounced the effect was," he says. "To me that suggests the parasite may trigger schizophrenia in genetically susceptible people."

One might be tempted to dismiss the bulk of Flegr's work as hokum—the fanciful imaginings of a lone, eccentric scholar—were it not for the pioneering research of Joanne Webster, a parasitologist at Imperial College London. Just as Flegr was embarking on his human trials, Webster, then a freshly minted Ph.D., was launching studies of *Toxo*-infected rodents, reasoning, just as Flegr did, that as hosts of the parasite, they would be likely targets for behavioral manipulation.

She quickly confirmed, as previous researchers had shown, that infected rats were more active and less cautious in areas where predators lurk. But then, in a simple, elegant experiment, she and her colleagues demonstrated that the parasite did something much more remarkable. They treated one corner of each rat's enclosure with the animal's own odor, a second with water, a third with cat urine, and the last corner with the urine of a rabbit, a creature that does not prey on rodents. "We thought the parasite might reduce the rats' aversion to cat odor," she told me. "Not only did it do that, but it actually increased their attraction. They spent more time in the cat-treated areas." She and other scientists repeated the experiment with the urine of dogs and minks, which also prey on rodents. The effect was so specific to cat urine, she says, that "we call it 'fatal feline attraction.'"

She began tagging the parasite with fluorescent markers and tracking its progress in the rats' bodies. Given the surgically precise way the microbe alters behavior, Webster anticipated that it would end up in localized regions of the brain. But the results defied expectations. "We were quite surprised to find the cysts—the parasite's dormant form—all over the brain in what otherwise appeared to be a happy, healthy rat," she says. Nonetheless, the cysts were most abundant in a part of the brain that deals with pleasure (in human terms, we're talking sex, drugs, and rock and roll) and in another area that's involved in fear and anxiety (post-traumatic stress disorder affects this region of the brain). Perhaps, she thought, *T. gondii* uses a scattershot approach, disseminating cysts far and wide, enabling a few of them to zero in on the right targets.

To gain more clarity on the matter, she sought the aid of the parasitologist Glenn McConkey, whose team at the University of Leeds was probing the protozoan's genome for signs of what it might be doing. The approach brought to light a striking talent of the parasite: it has two genes that allow it to crank up production of the neurotransmitter dopamine in the host brain. "We never cease to be amazed by the sophistication of these parasites," Webster says.

Their findings, reported last summer, created immediate buzz. Dopamine is a critical signaling molecule involved in fear, pleasure, and attention. Furthermore, the neurotransmitter is known to be jacked up in people with schizophrenia—another one of those strange observations about the disease, like its tendency to erode gray matter, that have long puzzled medical researchers. Antipsychotic medicine designed to quell schizophrenic delusions apparently blocks the action of dopamine, which had suggested to Webster that what it might really be doing is thwarting the parasite. Scientists had already shown that adding the medicine to a petri dish where *T. gondii* is happily dividing will stunt the organism's growth. So Webster decided to feed the antipsychotic drug to newly

infected rats to see how they reacted. Lo and behold, they didn't develop fatal feline attraction. Suddenly, attributing behavioral changes to the microbe seemed much more plausible.

As the scientific community digested the British team's dopamine discoveries, Robert Sapolsky's lab at Stanford announced still more attention-grabbing news. The neuroscientist and his colleagues found that *T. gondii* disconnects fear circuits in the brain, which might help to explain why infected rats lose their aversion to cat odor. Just as startling, reports Sapolsky, the parasite simultaneously is "able to hijack some of the circuitry related to sexual arousal" in the male rat—probably, he theorizes, by boosting dopamine levels in the reward-processing part of the brain. So when the animal catches a whiff of cat scent, the fear center fails to fully light up, as it would in a normal rat, and instead the area governing sexual pleasure begins to glow. "In other words," he says, "*Toxo* makes cat odor smell sexy to male rats."

The neurobiologist Ajai Vyas, after working with Sapolsky on this study as a postdoctoral student, decided to inspect infected rats' testicles for signs of cysts. Sure enough, he found them there—as well as in the animals' semen. And when the rat copulates, Vyas discovered, the protozoan moves into the female's womb, typically infecting 60 percent of her pups, before traveling on up to her own brain—creating still more vehicles for ferrying the parasite back into the belly of a cat.

Could *T. gondii* be a sexually transmitted disease in humans too? "That's what we hope to find out," says Vyas, who now works at Nanyang Technological University, in Singapore. The researchers also discovered that infected male rats suddenly become much more attractive to females. "It's a very strong effect," says Vyas. "Seventy-five percent of the females would rather spend time with the infected male."

After I return from Prague, Flegr informs me that he's just had a paper accepted for publication that, he claims, "proves fatal feline attraction in humans." By that he means that infected men like the smell of cat pee—or at least they rank its scent much more favorably than uninfected men do. Displaying the characteristic sex differences that define many *Toxo* traits, infected women have the reverse response, ranking the scent even more offensive than do women free of the parasite. The sniff test was done blind and also included urine collected from a dog, horse, hyena, and tiger. Infection did not affect how subjects rated these other samples.

"Is it possible cat urine may be an aphrodisiac for infected men?," I ask. "Yes. It's possible. Why not?" says Flegr. I think he's smiling at the other end of the phone line, but I'm not sure, which leaves me wondering whether I've stumbled onto a topic ripe for a "Saturday Night Live" skit, or a matter worthy of medical concern. When I ask Sapolsky about Flegr's most recent research, he says the effects Flegr is reporting "are incredibly cool. However, I'm not too worried, in that the effects on humans are not gigantic. If you want to reduce serious car accidents, and you had to choose between curing people of *Toxo* infections versus getting people not to drive drunk or while texting, go for the latter in terms of impact."

In fact, Sapolsky thinks that *Toxo*'s inventiveness might even offer us some benefits. If we can figure out how the parasite makes animals less fearful, he says, it might give us insights into how to devise treatments for people plagued by social-anxiety disorder, phobias, PTSD, and the like. "But frankly," he adds, "this mostly falls into the 'Get a load of this, can you believe what nature has come up with?' category."

Webster is more circumspect, if not downright troubled. "I don't want to cause any panic," she tells me. "In the vast majority of people, there will be no ill effects, and those who are affected will mostly demonstrate subtle shifts of behavior. But in a small number of cases, [*Toxo* infection] may be linked to schizophrenia and other disturbances associated with altered dopamine levels—for example, obsessive-compulsive disorder, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and mood disorders. The rat may live two or three years, while humans can be infected for many decades, which is why we may be seeing these severe side effects in people. We should be cautious of dismissing such a prevalent parasite."

The psychiatrist E. Fuller Torrey agrees—though he came to this viewpoint from a completely different angle than either Webster or Flegr. His opinion stems from decades of research into the root causes of schizophrenia. "Textbooks today still make silly statements that schizophrenia has always been around, it's about the same incidence all over the world, and it's existed since time immemorial," he says. "The epidemiology literature contradicts that completely." In fact, he says, schizophrenia did not rise in prevalence until the latter half of the

18th century, when for the first time people in Paris and London started keeping cats as pets. The so-called cat craze began among “poets and left-wing avant-garde Greenwich Village types,” says Torrey, but the trend spread rapidly—and coinciding with that development, the incidence of schizophrenia soared.

Since the 1950s, he notes, about 70 epidemiology studies have explored a link between schizophrenia and *T. gondii*. When he and his colleague Robert Yolken, a neurovirologist at Johns Hopkins University, surveyed a subset of these papers that met rigorous scientific standards, their conclusion complemented the Prague group’s discovery that schizophrenic patients with *Toxo* are missing gray matter in their brains. Torrey and Yolken found that the mental illness is two to three times as common in people who have the parasite as in controls from the same region.

Human-genome studies, both scientists believe, are also in keeping with that finding—and might explain why schizophrenia runs in families. The most replicated result from that line of investigation, they say, suggests that the genes most commonly associated with schizophrenia relate to the immune system and how it reacts to infectious agents. So in many cases where the disease appears to be hereditary, they theorize, what may in fact be passed down is an aberrant or deficient immune response to invaders like *T. gondii*.

Epstein-Barr virus, mumps, rubella, and other infectious agents, they point out, have also been linked to schizophrenia—and there are probably more as yet unidentified triggers, including many that have nothing to do with pathogens. But for now, they say, *Toxo* remains the strongest environmental factor implicated in the disorder. “If I had to guess,” says Torrey, “I’d say 75 percent of cases of schizophrenia are associated with infectious agents, and *Toxo* would be involved in a significant subset of those.”

Just as worrisome, says Torrey, the parasite may also increase the risk of suicide. In a 2011 study of 20 European countries, the national suicide rate among women increased in direct proportion to the prevalence of the latent *Toxo* infection in each nation’s female population. According to Teodor Postolache, a psychiatrist and the director of the Mood and Anxiety Program at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, a flurry of other studies, several conducted by his own team, offers further support of *T. gondii*’s link to higher rates of suicidal behavior. These include investigations of general populations as well as groups made up of patients with bipolar disorder, severe depression, and schizophrenia, and in places as diverse as Turkey, Germany, and the Baltimore/Washington area. Exactly how the parasite may push vulnerable people over the edge is yet to be determined. Postolache theorizes that what disrupts mood and the ability to control violent impulses may not be the organism per se, but rather neurochemical changes associated with the body’s immune response to it. “As far-fetched as these ideas may sound,” says Postolache, “the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention was willing to put money behind this research.”

Given all the nasty science swirling around this parasite, is it time for cat lovers to switch their allegiance to other animals?

Even Flegr would advise against that. Indoor cats pose no threat, he says, because they don’t carry the parasite. As for outdoor cats, they shed the parasite for only three weeks of their life, typically when they’re young and have just begun hunting. During that brief period, Flegr simply recommends taking care to keep kitchen counters and tables wiped clean. (He practices what he preaches: he and his wife have two school-age children, and two outdoor cats that have free roam of their home.) Much more important for preventing exposure, he says, is to scrub vegetables thoroughly and avoid drinking water that has not been properly purified, especially in the developing world, where infection rates can reach 95 percent in some places. Also, he advises eating meat on the well-done side—or, if that’s not to your taste, freezing it before cooking, to kill the cysts.

As concerns about the latent infection mount, however, experts have begun thinking about more-aggressive steps to counter the parasite’s spread. Inoculating cats or livestock against *T. gondii* might be one way to interrupt its life cycle, offers Johns Hopkins’ Robert Yolken. Moving beyond prevention to treatment is a taller order. Once the parasite becomes deeply ensconced in brain cells, routing it out of the body is virtually impossible: the thick-walled cysts are impregnable to antibiotics. Because *T. gondii* and the malaria protozoan are related, however, Yolken and other researchers are looking among antimalarial agents for more-effective drugs to attack the cysts. But for now, medicine has no therapy to offer people who want to rid themselves of the latent infection; and until solid proof

exists that *Toxo* is as dangerous as some scientists now fear, pharmaceutical companies don't have much incentive to develop anti-*Toxo* drugs.

Yolken hopes that will change. "To explain where we are in *Toxo* research today," he says, "the analogy I always give is the ulcer bacteria. We first needed to find ways of treating the organism and showing that the disease went away when you did that. We will have to show that when we very effectively treat *Toxoplasma*, some portion of psychiatric illness goes away."

But *T. gondii* is just one of an untold number of infectious agents that prey on us. And if the rest of the animal kingdom is anything to go by, says Colorado State University's Janice Moore, plenty of them may be capable of tinkering with our minds. For example, she and Chris Reiber, a biomedical anthropologist at Binghamton University, in New York, strongly suspected that the flu virus might boost our desire to socialize. Why? Because it spreads through close physical contact, often before symptoms emerge—meaning that it must find a new host quickly. To explore this hunch, Moore and Reiber tracked 36 subjects who received a flu vaccine, reasoning that it contains many of the same chemical components as the live virus and would thus cause the subjects' immune systems to react as if they'd encountered the real pathogen.

The difference in the subjects' behavior before and after vaccination was pronounced: the flu shot had the effect of nearly doubling the number of people with whom the participants came in close contact during the brief window when the live virus was maximally contagious. "People who had very limited or simple social lives were suddenly deciding that they needed to go out to bars or parties, or invite a bunch of people over," says Reiber. "This happened with lots of our subjects. It wasn't just one or two outliers."

Reiber has her eye trained on other human pathogens that she thinks may well be playing similar games, if only science could prove it. For example, she says, many people at the end stages of AIDS and syphilis express an intense craving for sex. So, too, do individuals at the beginning of a herpes outbreak. These may just be anecdotal accounts, she concedes, but based on her own findings, she wouldn't be surprised if these urges come from the pathogen making known its will to survive.

"We've found all kinds of excuses for why we do the things we do," observes Moore. "'My genes made me do it.' 'My parents are to blame.' I'm afraid we may have reached the point where parasites may have to be added to the laundry list of excuses."

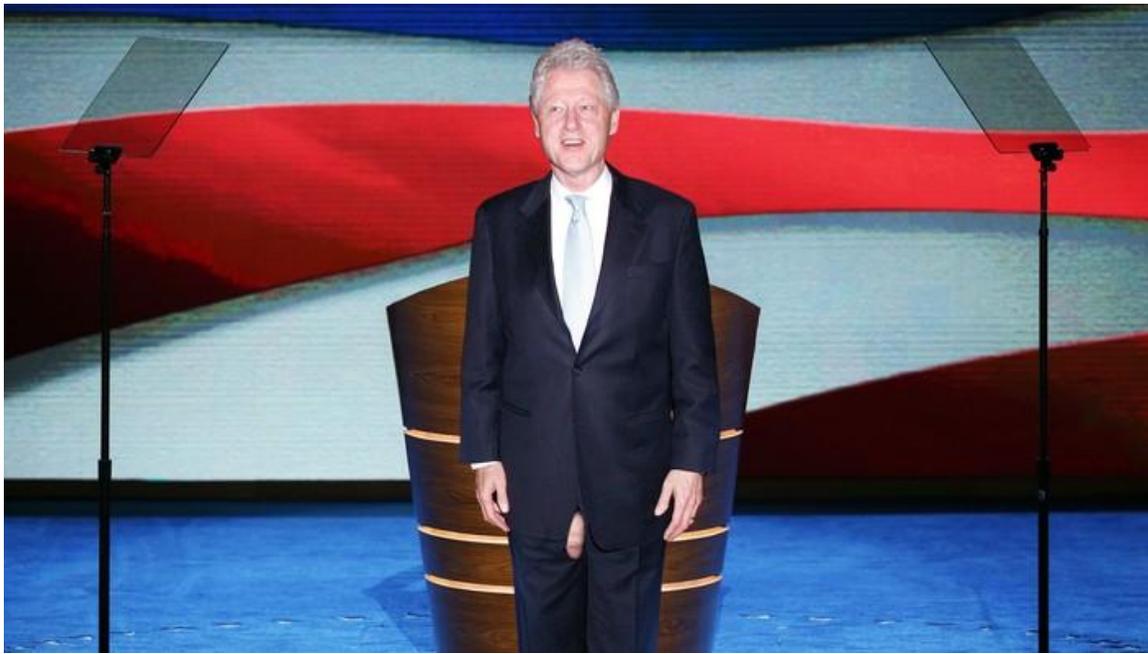
She has a point. In fact, I've been wondering whether *T. gondii* might in some small way be contributing to my extreme extroversion—why I can't resist striking up conversations everywhere I go, even when I'm short of time or with strangers I'll never see again. Then it occurs to me that cysts in my brain might be behind my seesaw moods or even my splurges on expensive clothes. Maybe, I think with mounting conviction, the real me would have displayed better self-control, had I not been forced to swim upstream against the will of an insidious parasite. With my feline pal Pixie on my lap (for the record, she's an outdoor cat), I call to get the results of my *Toxo* test. Negative. I don't have the latent infection.

I call to tell Flegr the good news. Even though I'm relieved, I know my voice sounds flat. "It's strange to admit," I say, "but I think I'm a little disappointed." He laughs. "People who have cats often feel that way, because they think the parasite explains why they behave this way or that," he says. "But," I protest, "you thought the same way." Then it hits me. I may have dodged *T. gondii*, but given our knack for fooling ourselves—plus all those parasites out there that may also be playing tricks on our minds—can anyone really know who's running the show?

Somehow, in all the other pre-election excitement, I missed this at the time it happened...

"Bill Clinton Finally Just Shows America His Penis" by *The Onion*

Sept. 5, 2012, (<http://www.theonion.com/articles/breaking-bill-clinton-finally-just-shows-america-h,29453>)



(CHARLOTTE, NC) During his speech Wednesday evening at the Democratic National Convention in downtown Charlotte, former U.S. president Bill Clinton finally just unzipped his fly and showed the entire country his penis.

Sources at the convention told reporters that shortly after stepping onstage at the Time Warner Cable Arena, the 42nd president of the United States quieted the audience's extended standing ovation with his raised hands and began to speak loudly and confidently.

"My fellow Americans, for the past 20 years you have all, at various points, talked and thought about my penis, or at least heard direct or indirect references to my penis in news reports, in court records, or in the culture at large," the former commander in chief said. "My penis has, in a sense, been a central part of American life for the better part of two decades. And yet, the nation has never seen it. Tonight, I'd like to finally change that."

"So should we just get this over with then?" the president asked the 20,000-member audience, as well as millions watching the nationwide telecast. "Should I show you my penis?"

Immediately after Clinton asked this question, there was reportedly a brief pause, after which a few murmured consents of approval were audible in the crowd, as well as a number of voices clearly shouting "okay" and "sure."

Sources said the sounds of convention attendees shifting in their seats could then be heard as the president stepped forward to the end of the stage.

"Okay, I'm going to show you my penis now," said the former president, his hand reaching for his pants zipper as a dead quiet fell over the arena. "Wow. You know, it's funny, now that it's finally happening, I actually feel a little nervous. I think it's good that I'm doing it, but still... Okay, here goes."

Clinton then slowly unzipped his fly, gingerly reached inside his pants, and retrieved his flaccid penis, which he proceeded to let hang out in the open in clear view.

"There's my penis," the nation's former chief executive said on live television. "There he is."

"I'm just going to leave it out for a while so everybody can get a good look," added Clinton, turning his waist from side to side in order to give everyone in the audience an optimal view. "Can everyone in the back see okay? Make sure the cameras here in the front can get a good close-up of my penis."

After a full five minutes of standing silently with his penis in full view as cameras flashed all around him, the president carefully tucked his penis back into his pants, zipped up his fly, smiled, told the audience, "Thank you, God bless you, and God bless America," and walked off stage.

When reached for comment on the speech, President Obama told reporters, "We are glad to have President Clinton's support."

20121229-08	19:29	SteveB	"Filthy Mitt Romney Delivers Campaign Speech to Audience of Confused Shoppers in Ohio Safeway"
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Look what Obama has turned his rival into! I hope this isn't what Obamacare is going to be like!

"Filthy Mitt Romney Delivers Campaign Speech to Audience of Confused Shoppers in Ohio Safeway" by *The Onion*
Nov. 27, 2012, (<http://www.theonion.com/articles/filthy-mitt-romney-delivers-campaign-speech-to-aud,30522>)



(CANTON, OH) According to eyewitnesses at the scene, an unkempt and thoroughly disheveled Mitt Romney gave an impassioned campaign speech Monday to a group of bewildered shoppers inside a local Safeway.

Sources confirmed the filth-covered former presidential candidate walked into the store unannounced early yesterday evening, went to the store's cereal aisle, and started to play Kid Rock's "Born Free" on a portable boom box, enthusiastically waving and pointing to no one in particular.

As customers began to recognize the 2012 GOP nominee through his scraggly beard and uncombed hair, Romney reportedly picked up a can of Pringles from a nearby shelf, held it near his mouth, and began loudly addressing the growing crowd of confused onlookers.

"How are we feeling out there, friends?" said Romney, who paused briefly as though waiting for applause from the baffled and completely silent supermarket shoppers. "First and foremost, thank you so much for coming out here today and for your continued support throughout the campaign. We're making our voices heard across the country—that's for sure!"

"Together, we're going to bring some real change to Washington!" added Romney, who staggered slightly as he spoke but maintained his balance.

Witnesses told reporters that Romney walked around the store barefoot as he gave his speech, wearing only a pair of dirt-caked jeans and a wrinkled dress shirt covered in food stains.

Safeway patrons also said the former Massachusetts governor gave off an incredibly strong odor and appeared to have gone "days, possibly weeks" without bathing.

"President Obama is trying to distract everyone from his record, because he knows his policies have done nothing to rebuild our economy," said Romney, eating from a large box of croutons he had taken from the salad dressing aisle. "My five-point plan will scale back the job-killing policies of the current administration, promote small business, cut tax burdens, and put Americans back to work again."

Sources said a weeping Ann Romney at one point attempted to pull her husband out of the store by his arm but was angrily rebuffed, with the 65-year-old retired businessman yelling that he was "trying to do [his] job here."

Romney then reportedly climbed atop a checkout counter, rolled up the torn sleeves of his shirt, and started calling on different customers for questions about his tax policy.

"And now, I'd like to welcome on stage the best decision I ever made aside from marrying Ann—the next vice president of the United States, Paul Ryan!" Romney exclaimed as he grabbed the hand of a nearby cashier and attempted to pull her onto the counter to stand alongside him. "From the moment we take office, Paul and I are going to fight for each and every one of you and restore the promise of this great nation."

According to reports, Safeway employees finally called local authorities when Romney attempted to grab an infant from the arms of her mother "for a quick photo op."

After three police officers managed, with some effort, to subdue Romney in the produce section, he could be heard shrieking incoherently at the top of his lungs for several moments before he finally trailed off, muttering about a plan to "create 12 million jobs by the end of [his] first term."

"We're going all the way to the White House!" Romney loudly proclaimed in the parking lot as he was gently guided into the back of a police car. "Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the United States of America!"

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SteveB

"Study Finds Millennial Generation Stays on Phone with Parents Throughout Entire Day"

"Study Finds Millennial Generation Stays on Phone with Parents Throughout Entire Day" by *The Onion*

Dec. 11, 2012, (<http://www.theonion.com/articles/study-finds-millennial-generation-stays-on-phone-w,30725>)

(According to the study, Americans under 30 require near constant parental reassurance over the phone.)

(DURHAM, NC) In a groundbreaking study published this week in the Journal Of Social Psychology, scientists reported that members of the millennial generation typically spend the entirety of their waking lives seeking emotional support from their parents over the phone.

Drawing on extensive field observation, the study found that the vast majority of the nation's 80 million millennials—Americans born between 1982 and 2000—insist on maintaining unbroken verbal contact with their

mothers and fathers from the time they wake up until the time they go to bed, requiring as many as 18 hours of reassurance and validation via telephone each day.

“In contrast to previous generations, millennials are using technology to demand and receive a nearly endless stream of parental affirmations,” said behavioral psychologist George Wright, the study’s lead author. “Like helpless infants, members of this demographic group instinctively seek out the security of their parents the moment they encounter even the slightest hint of unhappiness, and in most cases cannot fall asleep without the soothing sound of their mother or father’s voice flowing directly into their ears.”

“Moreover, because they are incapable of doing anything at all by themselves, millennials need to ask their parents for advice on every single decision they make,” Wright continued. “Remarkably, this even includes judgments as simple as when they should get their hair cut, what foods they should purchase at the supermarket, and how warmly they should dress for the day.”

Wright confirmed that members of this age group all appeared to possess a deep-rooted belief that they were unique and special, which innately drove them to demand their parents’ full attention at all times, even from thousands of miles away. As a result, millennials reportedly forced their mothers and fathers to field dozens of calls per day, both at home and at work, and listen patiently as they explained every aspect of their lives, seemingly under the impression that each minute detail of their existence was worthy of exposition and acknowledgment.

Unlike the preceding Generation X, whose members typically speak to their parents for 30 minutes every one to three weeks, millennials were found to spend an average 6.5 hours talking to one parent from morning to afternoon before asking that the phone be handed to the other parent, with whom they then remained in conversation well into the night.

Moreover, a survey of research participants found that 93 percent spent the entire day in a single uninterrupted conversation with one or both parents, which typically continued when the young adult ate, watched television, drove, attended classes, or went on social outings with friends or on dates.

“What’s interesting is that instead of trying to deal with problems on their own, millennials prefer to vent to their parents in a ceaseless chain of grievances that lasts on average from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily,” said sociologist Rick Winter, noting that participants in the study failed even to attempt such outwardly simple tasks as writing checks or mailing packages by themselves, and only proved capable of performing such actions under explicit parental direction. “What we’re seeing is a whole generation that has reached adulthood without having moved any closer to independence from the generation that raised it. It’s astonishing.”

According to Winter, when experiencing any form of anxiety, millennials were invariably observed seeking immediate assurance that their parents had felt similar insecurities at their age, and appeared to grow agitated and uncomfortable without a near constant stream of verbal confirmation that their parents were proud of them and the life choices they had made.

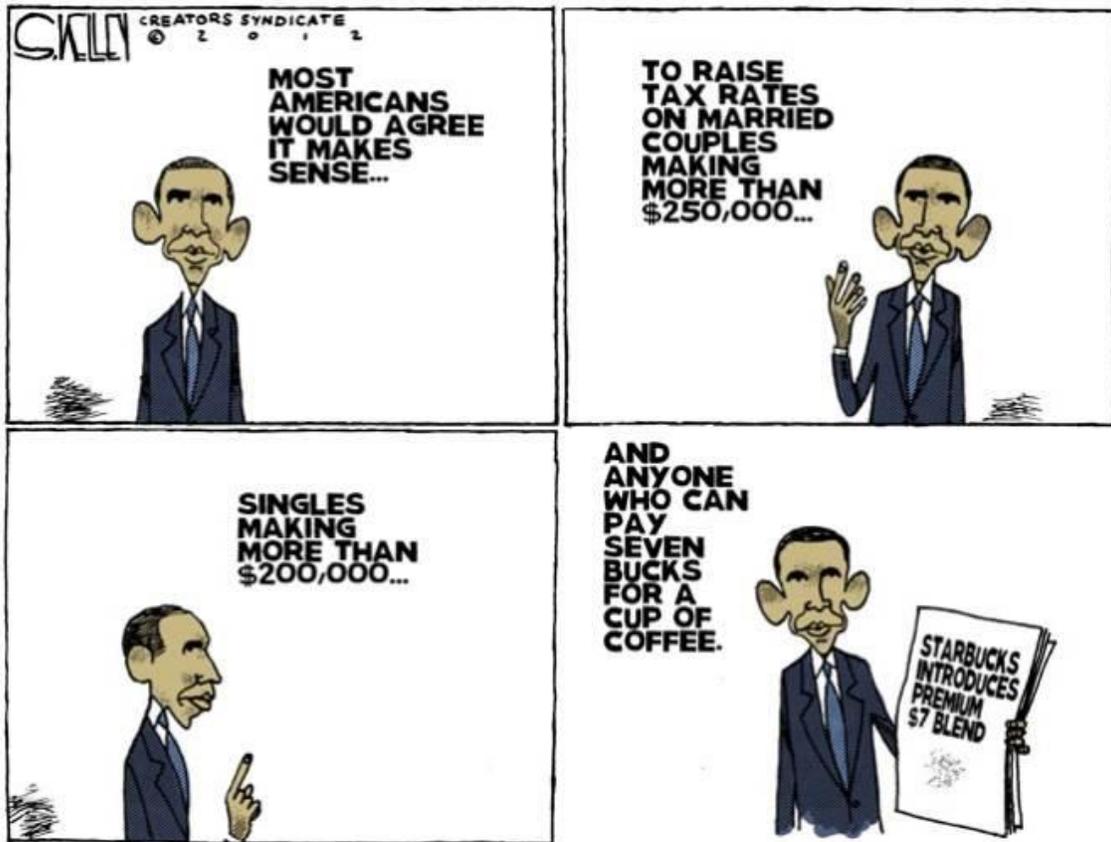
Additionally, participants who were unable to talk with their mothers or fathers via telephone for any longer than five minutes suffered evident mental anguish ranging from mild panic attacks to full-on nervous breakdowns, which they quickly sought to alleviate by contacting their parents via e-mail, text, or online chat services.

“I appreciate that my son cares enough to call home, but it’s getting to be a bit tiring,” said 48-year-old Carol Finn, estimating that she spends 95 hours a week on the phone with her son Keegan, a junior in college. “He called me three times today to ask what the permanent-press setting on the washing machine means and to tell me every last detail about some girl he talked to who works at the campus library. I don’t know how much longer I can deal with this.”

“Oh, jeez,” added Finn, sighing and rolling her eyes as her cell phone began ringing.

[OK, I admit it, I was seduced by *The Onon!* –SteveB]

Cartoons say it all...



WOW! Our history in 2 minutes! It's a final project by a high school student worth watching a couple of times.....excellent.

<http://marcbrecy.perso.neuf.fr/history.html>

"Our Pathetic Congress" by John Avlon, The Daily Beast

Dec. 30, 2012, (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/12/30/our-pathetic-congress.html>)

(On "Meet the Press," David Brooks said, "What's happening in Washington right now is pathetic.")

(Surprised that our lame-duck representatives can't reach a fiscal-cliff deal? You shouldn't be. John Avlon on how our government turned to self-sabotage.)

Welcome back to Washington, House of Representatives. Hope you all had a great vacation. While you were out, your inaction caused markets to tumble, and now America is just hours away from collectively being pushed off the fiscal cliff.

Your colleagues in the Senate—the supposedly responsible body—have been working the last three days, trying to put together some kind of deal your fractious asses can pass by New Year's Eve. The bad news is that as of Sunday morning, they still didn't have a plan to avoid the fiscal cliff. Agreement that 98 percent of Americans shouldn't have their taxes raised isn't enough. And deficit and debt reduction? Forget about it—this is all now a desperate exercise in political pain avoidance.

The fiscal cliff is, of course, the world's most predictable crisis. Congress set this time bomb themselves—and now they can't agree on how to defuse it, despite more than a year of debate and a presidential election largely centered on the subject.

In a surreal twist, Democrats are readying bills for the first days of the new congress to pass the largest middle-class tax cut in American history if they can't get enough Republicans to agree we shouldn't go over the cliff.

The implications are not adequately captured by the catchy visual metaphor. Not only will your taxes be raised, but America's economic recovery could be reversed, with congressional incompetence pushing America back into recession.

Congressional approval now stands at 18 percent. **The real question is why is it so high?**

The current 112th Congress—characterized by Tea Party congressmen elected two years ago—is the least productive since the 1940s. It makes Harry Truman's infamous "Do-Nothing Congress" look like a paragon of speed and efficiency.

The problem of course is that polarization—the decline of competitive swing districts due to the rigged system of redistricting—has made most Republican congressmen terrified of being primaried from the right for being too reasonable. This problem has been compounded by the rise of partisan media, which has dumbed down civic discourse into an angry, idiotic us-against-them exercise. The result is congressional division and dysfunction. Congratulations.

But direct culpability in creating the conditions for this crisis hasn't stopped the professional partisan activist class from arguing that at this pivotal moment, members of Congress should do nothing and just go over the cliff.

FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity have been emailing their supporters to tell them to pressure their congressman not to vote for any tax increases. That might sound impressively principled, until you realize that it's really an insult to their supporters' intelligence—because all taxes will be raised automatically, unless congress votes to keep taxes low on 98 percent of Americans, as our supposedly socialist president has repeatedly proposed.

On the left, the Progressive Change Campaign Committee is also arguing for no compromise, with its cofounder Adam Green emailing supporters: "Democrats need to continue a bright line position: Raise tax rates on those making \$250,000 at least to the Clinton rates and no cuts to Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security benefits. Period." This also ends up being an argument for going over the cliff, because it dooms any hope of even a modest deal as a good-faith basis for future action on the deficit and debt.

If this supposedly liberated lame-duck Congress can't agree on basic outlines of a grand bargain agreement that has been debated in detail for the past two years, why should we believe that the next Congress will have more success? Immigration reform, gun reforms—those more difficult debates will be effectively DOA from day one.

This is self-government committing economic suicide, putting ideological absolutism ahead of solving problems. The idea of a productive lame-duck session after the contentious election has been erased. Hopefully, Senators Reid and McConnell will surprise us with some kind of patchwork compromise by the self-imposed deadline of 3 p.m. today, but they have been keeping rumors of progress to themselves. (Update: they didn't.)

Beyond the looming fiscal abyss, senators have been busy passing a flurry of last-minute legislation that can be categorized as the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. They finally agreed to not be complete grinchers and pass a Hurricane Sandy relief bill, but it seems far from assured from passage in the House. By a lopsided vote of 73 to 23, the Senate also extended Bush-era warrantless wiretapping until 2017; civil libertarians screamed, but not loud

enough. And thanks to an executive order by President Obama, members of Congress will see a modest pay raise in the new year. You know, as a reward for all their good work over the past two years.

This congressional Kabuki is killing us, because it masks a more fundamental problem. Congress seems unable to act unless confronted with a crisis at the last minute—and even then, they can't agree on anything significant or substantive that actually deals with long-term problems. Maybe they should just stay on vacation and spare us the rhetoric. But as the clock ticks to New Year's, they should have a guilty conscience that might inspire a genuine resolution to reform. Because they created this crisis and now seem unable to fix it. We're the ones who will feel the pain. **It is an epic act of self-sabotage.**

[20121230-04](#) 23:57 SteveB Photo: Cats Imitating Art #11 (Mariano Fortuny, *Odalisque*, 1861)



<http://www.great-pictures-of-cats.com/black-cats.html>



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

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