

PART V

SOCIAL ISSUES

Mealy Mouth Media

The British Broadcasting Corporation has made itself look ridiculous by issuing orders that its reporters are not to refer to Saddam Hussein as an ex-dictator. Apparently using the word “dictator” would compromise the BBC’s neutrality and call its objectivity into question.

Unfortunately, the BBC is not alone. In much of the American mainstream media, terrorists are referred to as “militants” or “insurgents.” Rioters are called “demonstrators.”

As American flags went up around the country in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, even the wearing of little American flag lapel pins by TV journalists was banned by some broadcasters, with the notable exception of Fox News.

What makes all this straining for neutrality more than just another passing silliness is that it reveals a serious confusion between neutrality and objectivity. Such verbal posturing has been at its worst in some of the most biased media, such as the BBC.

During World War II, legendary journalist Edward R. Murrow never pretended to be neutral as between the Nazis and the Allies. Yet you would have trouble today finding anyone in the media with anything resembling the stature and integrity of Ed Murrow.

Honesty does not require posturing. In fact, the two things are incompatible. Nor does objectivity require neutrality.

Medical science is no less scientifically objective because it is completely biased in favor of people and against bacteria. Medical researchers are studying cancer cells with scientific objectivity in order to discover what the hard facts are about those cells, regardless of anyone's preconceived beliefs. But they are doing so precisely in order to destroy cancer cells and, if possible, prevent their existence in the first place.

Objectivity refers to an honest seeking of the truth, whatever that truth may turn out to be and regardless of what its implications might be. Neutrality refers to a preconceived "balance," which subordinates the truth to a preconception.

Journalists who reported the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps were not violating canons of objectivity by failing to use such neutral language as calling these places "residential facilities" or those who ran them "hosts."

Nor did the use of the term "dictator" to describe Hitler mean that World War II journalists did not come up to the supposedly high standards of today's media. What does the much-vaunted "public's right to know" mean when mealy mouth words filter out essential facts?

During the Cold War, the confusion between objectivity and neutrality led many journalists to balance negative things said about the Soviet Union with negative things said about the United States. In the circles of the media anointed, a phrase like "the free world" was disdained because it violated this verbal neutrality.

Journalistic sophisticates referred to "the so-called free world." Meanwhile, for decades on end, in countries around the globe, millions of ordinary human beings broke the personal ties of a lifetime, left behind their worldly belongings, and took desperate chances with their lives, and

with the lives of their children—all in order to try to escape to “the so-called free world.”

One of the pious phrases of the mealy mouth media is that “the truth lies somewhere in between.” It may or it may not. Only after you have found the truth do you know where it is.

For years, there were people who denied that there was a famine in the Soviet Union during the 1930s and others who said that millions died during that famine. Did the truth lie somewhere in between?

The leading scholar who argued that millions starved during Stalin’s man-made famine was Robert Conquest of the Hoover Institution, often described in the media as a right-wing think tank. When Mikhail Gorbachev finally opened the official records in the last days of the Soviet Union, it turned out that even more people had died during the famine than Dr. Conquest had estimated.

The truth is where you find it—and you don’t find it with a preconceived “balance” expressed in mealy mouth words.

Achievements and Their Causes

In this age of specialization, experts are said to know more and more about less and less. There are undoubtedly specialists who can tell you more than you ever wanted to know about toenails or toads. However, the grand study of sweeping events has not died out entirely.

What could be more sweeping than a book titled *Human Accomplishment*? It is Charles Murray's latest book and it is dynamite.

The subtitle spells out how sweeping this book is: *The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 B.C. to 1950*. It is more than a historical survey of the landmark figures in many fields from various cultures around the world. It is an analysis of where, why, and how historic advances have been made in some places and not in others.

Just to pose this as a question goes against the grain of today's multiculturalism, in which all cultures are seen as equally valuable, and the non-judgmentalism that is too squeamish to declare some achievements more important than others.

Charles Murray, however, clearly believes that being able to cure fatal diseases is more important than some other things and that Rembrandt was a greater artist than your local sidewalk cartoon sketcher. Most people might regard this as obvious common sense but some of the intelligentsia may be seething with resentment at seeing their pet fetishes ignored.

Once you begin looking at the history of great human

achievements—whether in science or art, mathematics or literature—you discover that they are not random over time or random from one place to another. They cluster in time and in space.

Landmark figures in Western art clustered in the northern half of the Italian peninsula in the 15th to the 17th centuries and on the Channel coast of France and the Netherlands in the 19th through the mid-20th centuries. Landmark figures in literature, science and music have all had their own special concentrations at different times and places.

What never seems to have happened, either in Western or non-Western civilizations, was a random distribution of achievements. Even at the individual level, achievements are skewed.

Among professional golfers, for example, just over half have never won any tournament, anywhere. Even among the relatively small number who have ever won a major golf tournament, more than half have won just one. But Jack Nicklaus won 18.

Cities have been the scene of more than their share of great achievements in many fields. This is not just because many people have been concentrated in cities. Even in proportion to population, cities have turned out far more than their share of leading figures.

Particular groups have also had more than their share of spectacular achievements. In the first half of the 20th century, Jews won 14 percent of all Nobel Prizes in literature and the sciences combined, and in the second half of the century they won 29 percent. In both periods, Jews were less than one percent of the world's population.

Once we understand that achievements are not random and never have been, the question that arises is: What causes

so much more achievement in some places than in others, at some times rather than others, and among some individuals and groups more than others?

Charles Murray's answers to these big question are too long for a newspaper column and can be found in the book. But just to have established a basis for such questions is a major contribution.

Let us not forget that we live in a time when a failure to have a random distribution of individuals and groups in the workplace or on an academic campus is regarded as a sign of bias or discrimination. The very thought that groups might differ among themselves in the required skills, attitudes and performances is anathema to many in academia, the media and even the courts.

This study of landmark achievements is itself a landmark achievement. If it does no more than get people to think about things that have been accepted as social dogmas, that will be a major contribution.

Talkers versus Doers

The big divide in this country is not between Democrats and Republicans, or women and men, but between talkers and doers.

Think about the things that have improved our lives the most over the past century—medical advances, the transportation revolution, huge increases in consumer goods, dramatic improvements in housing, the computer revolution. The people who created these things—the doers—are not popular heroes. Our heroes are the talkers who complain about the doers.

Those who have created nothing have maintained a constant barrage of criticism against those who created something, because that something was considered to be not good enough or the benefits turned out to have costs.

Every time I get on my bicycle and go pedalling down the road, I remember from my childhood that old geezers in their 70s didn't go biking in those days. They sat around on the porch in their rocking chairs.

Partly that was the style of the times but partly it was because old people did not have the energy and vigor that they have today. Much of that has been due to medical advances that not only added years to our lives but life to our years.

Doctors and hospitals have helped but much of the improvement in our health has been due to pharmaceutical drugs that keep us from having to go to hospitals, and have

enabled doctors to head off many serious medical problems with prescriptions.

Yet the people who produce pharmaceutical drugs have been under heated political attack for years—attacks which often do not let the facts get in their way.

During the anthrax scare of 2001, for example, the maker of the leading antidote for anthrax was accused of making “obscene profits” even though (1) the total cost of treatment with their drug was just \$50 and (2) the company actually operated at a loss while they were being denounced for obscene profits.

People who know nothing about advertising, nothing about pharmaceuticals, and nothing about economics have been loudly proclaiming that the drug companies spend too much on advertising—and demanding that the government pass laws based on their ignorance.

Today, we take the automobile so much for granted that it is hard to realize what an expansion of the life of ordinary people it represented. There was a time when most people lived and died within a 50-mile radius of where they were born.

The automobile opened a whole new world to these people. It also enabled those living in overcrowded cities to spread out into suburbs and get some elbow room. Trucks got goods to people more cheaply and ambulances got people to hospitals faster to save their lives.

Yet who among the people who did this are today regarded as being as big a hero as Ralph Nader, who put himself on the map with complaints about cars in general and the Corvair in particular?

Hard data on automobile safety and tests conducted on the Corvair both undermined Nader’s claims. But he will always be a hero to the talkers. So will those who complain

about commerce and industry that have raised our standard of living to levels that our grandparents would not have dreamed of.

Home-ownership is far more widespread among ordinary people today than in the past because of entrepreneurs who have figured out how to produce more, bigger and better houses at prices that more and more people could afford. But can you name any of those entrepreneurs who have been celebrated for their contributions to their fellow human beings?

Probably not. In California, anyone in the business of producing housing is more likely to be demonized as a “developer,” a word that causes hostile reactions among Californians conditioned to respond negatively—and automatically, like Pavlov’s dog.

As for computers, no one made them more usable by more people around the world than Microsoft. And no one has been hit with more or bigger lawsuits as a result.

Why can’t the talkers leave the doers alone? Perhaps it is because that would leave the talkers on the sidelines, with their uselessness being painfully obvious to all, instead of being in the limelight and “making a difference”—even if that difference is usually negative.

Talkers versus Doers: Part II

The fact that benefits have costs means that those who create these benefits are tempting targets for accusations from those who know how to dramatize the costs. This means that the doers are constantly on the defensive when attacked by the talkers.

These attacks are especially effective in a society where most people have not been taught to weigh costs against benefits or to subject hot rhetoric to cold logic.

“Safety” issues are ideal for talkers because nothing is absolutely safe. A vaccine may save the lives of 10,000 children but, if five children die from the vaccine itself, that can set off loud denunciations of “corporate irresponsibility” and “greed” on the part of the companies that produced the vaccine.

Some people die from reactions to peanut butter. If the government banned every food from which some people can die, we would all die of starvation. If they banned every vaccine or drug from which people die, more people would die from diseases.

More than sloppy thinking and runaway rhetoric enables the talkers to harass the doers. The ever-growing jungle of laws and regulations provides a virtually unlimited number of grounds for lawsuits.

The talkers are in their natural habitat in courts where judges allow junk science to be used as evidence and juries are gullible enough to be impressed by glib and clever lawyers. The low cost of attacks and the high cost of defense

tilts the system in favor of the talkers, especially since the talkers need pay no price for having made totally unfounded accusations.

Both the talkers and the doers know this. That is why the doers so often settle out of court, rather than be tied up in endless litigation. This is then taken as proof of guilt.

Anyone who wants to build anything can be hit with costly delays by environmental activists demanding environmental impact reports. It doesn't matter what the facts are, the talkers can always demand more information and object to the analysis.

All this takes time—and more time adds to the costs of borrowed money, on which interest must be paid, no matter whether the building for which it was borrowed is being built or the machines and workers are idled while speculative complaints are being investigated by bureaucrats who are in no hurry.

Not only the legal system and the regulatory bureaucrats enable talkers to impose high costs on the doers at low costs to themselves. So does the talkers' ready access to the media.

Talkers are usually more articulate than doers, since talk is their specialty. Moreover, they can stage demonstrations that the media will not only broadcast but give free air time for the talkers to make their accusations.

Jesse Jackson has made a science—and a lucrative occupation—out of accusations of “racism” against businesses. There is no way to prove that you are not a racist, so the doer's choice is to pay off the talker or face losses of customers from either the bad publicity or an organized boycott.

These kinds of incentives and constraints help explain a strange anomaly that many have noticed—big corporations

contributing much more to left-wing causes than to conservative or libertarian causes.

“For every \$1.00 major corporations gave to conservative and free-market groups, they gave \$4.61 to organizations seeking more government,” according to a study by the Capital Research Center, a Washington think tank.

Why? According to the Capital Research Center: “Many advocacy groups win corporate funding by threatening lawsuits and boycotts and by petitioning government regulatory bodies. Regulatory policies, in particular, give corporations a built-in incentive to pay-off left-wing activists.”

Talkers cultivate an aura of morally lofty goals, while depicting doers as mere selfish money-grubbers. But professional talkers are pretty good at collecting big bucks, some through legalized extortion and others by creating huge windfall gains as their building restrictions cause housing prices to skyrocket.

The talkers’ admirers include people struggling to pay inflated apartment rents and make huge monthly mortgage payments. Even their victims often admire the talkers more than the doers.

Liberals and Class

The new trinity among liberal intellectuals is race, class and gender. Defining any of these terms is not easy, but it is also not difficult for liberals, because they seldom bother to define them at all.

The oldest, and perhaps still the most compelling, of these concerns is class. In the vision of the left, we are born, live, and die in a particular class—unless, of course, we give power to the left to change all that.

The latest statistics seized upon to support this class-ridden view of America and other Western societies show that most people in a given part of the income distribution are the children of other people born into that same part of the income distribution.

Among men born in families in the bottom 25 percent of income earners only 32 percent end up in the top half of the income distribution. And among men born to families in the top 25 percent in income earners, only 34 percent end up down in the bottom half.

How startling is that?

More to the point, does this show that people are trapped in poverty or can coast through life on their parents' wealth? Does it show that "society" denies "access" to the poor?

Could it just possibly show that the kind of values and behavior which lead a family to succeed or fail are also likely to be passed on to their children and lead them to succeed or fail as well? If so, how much can government policy—

liberal or conservative—change that in any fundamental way?

One recent story attempting to show that upward mobility is a “myth” in America today nevertheless noted in passing that many recent immigrants and their children have had “extraordinary upward mobility.”

If this is a class-ridden society denying “access” to upward mobility to those at the bottom, why is it that immigrants can come here at the bottom and then rise to the top?

One obvious reason is that many poor immigrants come here with very different ambitions and values from that of poor Americans born into our welfare state and imbued with notions growing out of attitudes of dependency and resentments of other people’s success.

The fundamental reason that many people do not rise is not that class barriers prevent it but that they do not develop the skills, values and attitudes which cause people to rise.

The liberal welfare state means they don’t have to and liberal multiculturalism says they don’t need to change their values because one culture is just as good as another. In other words, liberalism is not part of the solution, but part of the problem.

Racism is supposed to put insuperable barriers in the path of non-whites anyway, so why knock yourself out trying? This is another deadly message, especially for the young.

But if immigrants from Korea or India, Vietnamese refugees, and others can come here and move right on up the ladder, despite not being white, why are black and white Americans at the bottom more likely to stay at the bottom?

The same counterproductive and self-destructive attitudes toward education, work and ordinary civility found in many of America’s ghettos can also be found in lower-

class British communities. Anyone who doubts it should read British doctor Theodore Dalrymple's book *Life at the Bottom* about the white lower class communities in which he has worked.

These chaotic and violence-prone communities in Britain do not have the excuse of racism or a legacy of slavery. What they do have in common with similar communities in the United States is a similar reliance on the welfare state and a similar set of intellectuals making excuses for their behavior and denouncing anyone who wants them to change their ways.

The latest round of statistics emboldens more intellectuals to blame "society" for the failure of many people at the bottom to rise to the top. Realistically, if nearly a third of people born to families in the bottom quarter of income earners rise into the top half, that is not a bad record.

If more were doing so in the past, that does not necessarily mean that "society" is holding them down more today. It may easily mean that the welfare state and liberal ideology both make it less necessary today for them to change their own behavior.

Liberals and Class: Part II

Someone once defined a social problem as a situation in which the real world differs from the theories of intellectuals. To the intelligentsia, it follows, as the night follows the day, that it is the real world that is wrong and which needs to change.

Having imagined a world in which each individual has the same probability of success as anyone else, intellectuals have been shocked and outraged that the real world is nowhere close to that ideal. Vast amounts of time and resources have been devoted to trying to figure out what is stopping this ideal from being realized—as if there was ever any reason to expect it to be realized.

Despite all the words and numbers thrown around when discussing this situation, the terms used are so sloppy that it is hard even to know what the issues are, much less how to resolve them.

Back in mid-May, both the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* had front-page stories about class differences and class mobility. The *Times*' article was the first in a long series that is still going on a month later. Both papers reached similar conclusions, based on a similar sloppy use of the word “mobility.”

The *Times* referred to “the chance of moving up from one class to another” and the *Wall Street Journal* referred to “the odds that a child born in poverty will climb to wealth.” But the odds or probabilities against something happening are no measure of whether opportunity exists.

Anyone who saw me play basketball and saw Michael Jordan play basketball when we were both youngsters would have given odds of a zillion to one that he was more likely to make the NBA than I was. Does that mean I was denied opportunity or access, that there were barriers put up against me, that the playing field was not level?

Or did it mean that Michael Jordan—and virtually everyone else—played basketball a lot better than I did?

A huge literature on social mobility often pays little or no attention to the fact that different individuals and groups have different skills, desires, attitudes and numerous other factors, including luck. If mobility is defined as being free to move, then we can all have the same mobility, even if some end up moving faster than others and some of the others do not move at all.

A car capable of going 100 miles an hour can sit in a garage all year long without moving. But that does not mean that it has no mobility.

When each individual and each group trails the long shadow of their cultural history, they are unlikely even to want to do the same things, much less be willing to put out the same efforts and make the same sacrifices to achieve the same goals. Many are like the car that is sitting still in the garage, even though it is capable of going 100 mph.

So long as each generation raises its own children, people from different backgrounds are going to be raised with different values and habits. Even in a world with zero barriers to upward mobility, they would move at different speeds and in different directions.

If there is less upward movement today than in the past, that is by no means proof that external barriers are responsible. The welfare state and multiculturalism both reduce the incentives of the poor to adopt new ways of life

that would help them rise up the economic ladder. The last thing the poor need is another dose of such counterproductive liberal medicine.

Many comparisons of “classes” are in fact comparisons of people in different income brackets—but three-quarters of Americans in the lowest 20 percent move up to the highest 40 percent over time. Yet those who are obsessed with classes treat people in different brackets as if they were classes permanently stuck in those brackets.

The *New York Times* series even makes a big deal about disparities in income and lifestyle between the rich and the super-rich. But it is hard to get worked up over the fact that some poor devil has to make do flying his old propeller-driven plane, while someone further up the income scale flies around a mile or two higher in his twin-engine luxury jet.

Only if you have overdosed on disparities are you likely to wax indignant over things like that.

Liberals and Class: Part III

Sometimes it seems as if liberals have a genius for producing an unending stream of ideas that are counterproductive for the poor, whom they claim to be helping. Few of these notions are more counterproductive than the idea of “menial work” or “dead-end jobs.”

Think about it: Why do employers pay people to do “menial” work? Because the work has to be done. What useful purpose is served by stigmatizing work that someone is going to have to do anyway?

Is emptying bed pans in a hospital menial work? What would happen if bed pans didn’t get emptied? Let people stop emptying bed pans for a month and there would be bigger problems than if sociologists stopped working for a year.

Having someone who can come into a home to clean and cook and do minor chores around the house can be a godsend to someone who is an invalid or who is suffering the infirmities of age—and who does not want to be put into an institution. Someone who can be trusted to take care of small children is likewise a treasure.

Many people who do these kinds of jobs do not have the education, skills or experience to do more complex kinds of work. Yet they can make a real contribution to society while earning money that keeps them off welfare.

Many low-level jobs are called “dead-end jobs” by liberal intellectuals because these jobs have no promotions ladder.

But it is superficial beyond words to say that this means that people in such jobs have no prospect of rising economically.

Many people at all levels of society, including the richest, have at some point or other worked at jobs that had no promotions ladder, so-called “dead-end jobs.” The founder of the NBC network began work as a teenager hawking newspapers on the streets. Billionaire Ross Perot began with a paper route.

You don’t get promoted from such jobs. You use the experience, initiative, and discipline that you develop in such work to move on to something else that may be wholly different. People who start out flipping hamburgers at McDonald’s seldom stay there for a full year, much less for life.

Dead-end jobs are the kinds of jobs I have had all my life. But, even though I started out delivering groceries in Harlem, I don’t deliver groceries there any more. I moved on to other jobs—most of which have not had any promotions ladders.

My only official promotion in more than half a century of working was from associate professor to full professor at UCLA. But that was really just a pay increase, rather than a real promotion, because associate professors and full professors do the same work.

Notions of menial jobs and dead-end jobs may be just shallow misconceptions among the intelligentsia but they are a deadly counterproductive message to the poor. Refusing to get on the bottom rung of the ladder usually means losing your chance to move up the ladder.

Welfare can give you money but it cannot give you job experience that will move you ahead economically. Selling drugs on the streets can get you more money than welfare but it cannot give you experience that you can put on a job

application. And if you decide to sell drugs all your life, that life can be very short.

Back around the time of the First World War, a young black man named Paul Williams studied architecture and then accepted a job as an office boy at an architectural firm. He agreed to work for no pay, though after he showed up the company decided to pay him something, after all.

What they paid him would probably be dismissed today as “chump change.” But what Paul Williams wanted from that company was knowledge and experience, more so than money.

He went on to create his own architectural company, designing everything from churches and banks to mansions for movie stars—and contributing to the design of the theme building at Los Angeles International Airport.

The real chumps are those who refuse to start at the bottom for “chump change.” Liberals who encourage such attitudes may think of themselves as friends of the poor but they do more harm than enemies.

The Autism “Spectrum”

When Billy’s mother sees her twelve-year-old son’s popularity with teammates on his baseball team, she thinks back to predictions made when he was a pre-schooler that he would have so much trouble making friends that, among other things, he would probably never be able to get married and have children.

It is a little early for Billy to be getting married, but the predictions have been off by miles so far. Why were such dire predictions made in the first place?

Billy was late in beginning to talk and was supposed to have been autistic. Once that label had been put on him, nothing could change the minds of those who saw him that way.

Contrary evidence from his emotional attachment to a little girl in his pre-school was dismissed, even though the two of them were inseparable on the playground—and even though an inability to form emotional attachments is at the heart of autism.

There is another kind of dogmatism from people who are not going to give up on the “autism” label. That is redefining the word to include a wide range of children who are said to be on the autism “spectrum.” Billy’s mother raised a fundamental question that seems to have eluded many professionals: Would you say that someone who is near-sighted is on the “blindness spectrum”?

What would we gain by such manipulations of words? And what would we lose?

Blindness, like autism, is a major tragedy. When some little toddler doesn't see quite as well as other kids, and may need glasses, what would be the point of alarming his parents by saying that he is on the blindness spectrum?

In the decade that has passed since I organized a support group of parents of late-talking children in September 1993, I have heard from literally hundreds of parents of such children, many of them re-living the anguish they went through when their children were diagnosed as autistic.

With the passage of time, it has become obvious that many of these children are not autistic, any more than Billy is autistic. Parents who are grateful that the hasty diagnoses their children received were wrong are also bitter that such labels were applied so irresponsibly—often by people who never set foot in a medical school or received any comparable training that would qualify them to diagnose autism. But professionals have been wrong as well.

Instead of trying to reduce mistaken diagnoses that inflict needless trauma on parents and often direct children into programs for autistic children that are counterproductive for children who are not autistic, the expansive new concept of an “autism spectrum” provides wiggle room for those who were wrong, so that they can avoid having to admit that they were wrong—and avoid having to stop being wrong.

It is as if people who told you that your little toddler would need a seeing-eye dog are able to get off the hook when the passage of time proved them wrong by saying that, because he now wears glasses, he is still on the blindness spectrum.

There is another aspect of this that affects the public in general and the taxpayers in particular. Time and again over

the past decade, parents have told me that they have been urged to allow their late-talking children to be labeled “autistic” so that they would be eligible to get government money that can be used for speech therapy or whatever else the child might need.

Against that background, consider the widely publicized statistics showing an unbelievable rate of increase in autism in recent years. Is this a real change in the same thing or a redefinition of words? Worse yet, is this the corrupting effect of government money intended for children who are genuinely autistic?

Apparently no one knows the answer. But what is very disturbing is that such questions are not even on the agenda.

Studies of highly intelligent children show them to have many of the characteristics that can get them labeled autistic if they happen to be late in beginning to speak. For example, the book *Gifted Children* by Ellen Winner shows that such children “often play alone and enjoy solitude,” have “almost obsessive interests” and “prodigious memories.”

Such characteristics are an open invitation to false diagnoses of autism by those who are on the irresponsibility spectrum.

The High Cost of Busybodies

It was gratifying news when fans around the country volunteered to donate their kidneys to basketball star Alonzo Mourning, who would otherwise have to cut short his career because of life-threatening medical problems with his own kidneys. However, the head of the New York Organ Donor Network said that it was a shame “that it takes a personal tragedy of someone famous like Alonzo to raise awareness” of a need for organ donations when 17 people on the waiting list die daily.

What is an even bigger shame is that laws block the supply of organs to people who may be dying needlessly as a result.

Take the case of Alonzo Mourning and suppose that not a living soul was willing to give him a kidney. He was going to have to either give up a \$23 million a year career or risk death by subjecting his kidneys to the stresses of playing. Suppose the law allowed him to offer half of that amount to anyone who would sell him a kidney.

Do you doubt that there would be someone willing to part with a kidney for that kind of money? There might well have been even more people willing to part with a kidney than there were.

I happen to know a lady who was born with three kidneys—and in poverty. Do you think she would have minded parting with a spare kidney, in order to have a better life for herself and her children?

With more than 80,000 people on waiting lists for various

organs, and many dying while waiting, why prevent such transactions? One reason is that third parties would be offended.

You know the words and the music: How terrible that the rich can buy other people's body parts—and that the poor are so desperate as to sell.

If you think that you have a right to forbid other people from making such voluntary transactions, then you are saying that your delicate sensibilities are more important than the poverty or even the deaths of other people.

Banning organ sales does nothing to make the poor less poor. Nor do those 80,000+ people on waiting lists have to be rich. Three economists have estimated the cost of buying an organ in a free market at a price well within most people's budgets.

Donors could collect the money while living, in exchange for permission to remove the organ after their death. They could also authorize an organ transplant from a family member already dead.

The trump card of the left is always "the poor." But, if our real concern is the poor, the money to pay for them to receive organ transplants can be paid by others, whether the government or philanthropic individuals or organizations.

Here as in numerous other cases, what it would cost to take care of the poor is a small fraction of what it costs to finance huge programs that cover—and restrict—everybody.

It is not just the political left that stands in the way of allowing more organs to be made available through the free market to those who are dying. An article in the neo-conservative quarterly *The Public Interest* argued that non-profit organizations alone should be allowed to handle any financial transactions if organ sales are permitted.

The fact that some organizations call the money they

make “profits” and others do not seems to impress some people. But one of the biggest non-profit organizations dealing in organ donations today spends no more than half the money it takes in on actual organ donations, according to *Forbes* magazine. This non-profit paragon has even stonewalled the federal government on what they are spending the rest of the money for.

Like other bureaucracies, the organ donation bureaucracy produces arbitrary rules. These rules have kept people from getting organ transplants that were available because they were not available in the particular regions where they happened to live.

The fundamental problem is not simply how to ration the existing shortage of organs. The problem is how to reduce the shortage by getting more organs by lifting the ban on sales.

People who think that they should be the arbiters of other people’s destinies are bad enough when they want to choose winners and losers in industry and commerce. But when they want to choose who lives and who dies, that is a little much.

The High Cost of Busybodies: Part II

A reader wrote recently about his father, who has been a farmer, but is now ready to retire. His father figured on selling his land to get some money for his golden retirement years. But he found that he cannot get anywhere near the land's market value because busybodies have passed laws that destroy most of that value by restricting the sale of farmland.

The rationale for such laws is "preserving farmland." Think about it. Two of our biggest problems today are obesity and agricultural surpluses. The last thing we need to do is keep farmland from being sold to those who want to use it to build housing, businesses or other things.

Even if we accept, for the sake of argument, the notion that farmland needs to be preserved in order to serve some great national interest, the Constitution of the United States says that private property cannot be taken by the government without just compensation.

When the government destroys half the value of someone's property, that is the same thing economically as taking half of that property. But, because the farmer is left owning all his land, judges have let politicians get away with essentially confiscating much of its value without having to pay any compensation at all.

People who lead crusades to preserve farmland usually know little about farming and less about economics. Yet they think that they have a right to prevent other people from

making mutually agreeable transactions, when that goes against the fetishes of third parties.

Busybodies may flatter themselves that they are wiser or nobler than others—which is perhaps the biggest benefit from being a busybody—but the Constitution of the United States says that all citizens are entitled to the equal protection of the laws.

In other words, people who want to wring their hands about farmlands or wetlands, or about some obscure toad or snake, have no more rights than people who don't care two cents about such things. It is hard for those who have presumptions of being the morally anointed to accept that, but that is what the Constitution says.

Unfortunately, too many judges are ready to fudge or fake what the Constitution says because they too share the vision of the anointed. So they downgrade property rights and let third parties impose their pet notions on others, using the power of government to violate the rights of those who do not agree with them.

What makes a lot of the talk about “preserving” or “saving” farmland or other things as phony as a three-dollar bill is that the real agenda is often very different—namely, keeping out people who do not have the income or the inclination to share the lifestyle of the anointed.

The real reason for preventing farmland from being sold to those who might build housing on it is that the people who live in that housing might not be as upscale as those already living nearby. Developers—heaven forbid—might build apartments or townhouses in a community where people live in single-family homes.

In other words, developers might build some of that “affordable housing” that some people talk so much about and do so much to prevent.

The rationale for laws forbidding farmers from selling their land to whoever wants to buy it is that existing residents have a right to “preserve the character” of “our community.” But these lofty words are lying words.

Only sloppy thinking allows sloppy words to pass muster. There is no such thing as “our community.” Nobody owns the whole community. Each individual owns his or her own property—and other individuals have the same right to own or sell their own property.

If the busybodies want to put their money where their mouth is, they can buy up the farmland themselves and then they can legitimately prevent anybody from building anything on it. But verbal sleight-of-hand is no justification for denying others the same rights that they claim for themselves.

If there were some way to add up all the costs imposed by busybodies—on everyone from farmers to people wanting organ transplants—it would probably be greater than the national debt.

The High Cost of Busybodies: Part III

One of the staples of liberal hand-wringing is a need for “affordable housing.” Last year, the standard liberal solution—more government spending—was proposed in a televised speech at the National Press Club in Washington, in a report billed as a “new vision.”

This year, supply and demand made front-page news in the *New York Times* of November 29, 2003: “Apartment Glut Forces Owners to Cut Rents in Much of U.S.” As apartment vacancy rates reached an all-time high of 10 percent nationwide, landlords have been cutting rents, both directly and by such gimmicks as giving gift certificates and allowing so many rent-free months for new tenants.

Buried deep inside the second section of the newspaper are facts that completely undermine the liberal notion that high housing costs are a “national crisis” calling for a “national solution” by the federal government.

Far from being a national crisis of affordable housing, outrageous rents and astronomical home prices are largely confined to a relatively few places along the east and west coasts. Rent per square foot of apartment space in San Francisco is more than double what it is in Denver, Dallas, or Kansas City, and nearly three times as high as in Memphis. Home prices show even greater disparities.

The *Times* story notes that the difference between apartment rents in coastal California and those in the rest of the country is widening. It also refers to cities “where land is abundant but building regulations are not,” where

“housing costs were already among the least expensive of the country’s urban areas.”

Wait a minute. Vacant land is at least as abundant in coastal California as in places with far lower rents and home prices. More than half the land in huge San Mateo County, adjacent to San Francisco, is vacant and is kept that way by law.

The difference is not in the land but in the politics. The long-time dominance of liberal Democrats from San Francisco to Silicon Valley has meant that restrictions on land use have proliferated and the costs of building anything have skyrocketed as a result of environmental red tape, bureaucratic delays, and legal harassment by activists of various sorts.

The *New York Times* story refers gingerly to “many cities on the coasts, where new construction is more difficult” than in the rest of the country. To put it more bluntly, liberals have driven housing prices sky high by forbidding, restricting, and harassing the building of housing.

In turn, this has meant driving people of modest incomes out of the communities where they work. Nurses, teachers and policemen, for example, typically live far away from places like San Francisco or Silicon Valley, and have to commute long distances to and from work.

All the while, liberals wring their hands about a lack of affordable housing, about urban sprawl, and about congested highways. In their puzzlement about the causes of all these things, they never think to look in the mirror.

While the *Times* story noted in passing “the growing gap between the cost of living in the Northeast and parts of California and the cost of living almost anywhere else,” it does not take the next fatal step of connecting the dots.

It is precisely in the places that have been most

dominated by liberals for the longest times that housing costs and other costs of living have been driven up to levels that force many people out of town and even out of state. New York and California are losing more of their native-born populations than any other states and only influxes of immigrants help conceal that fact in gross statistics on population.

It was not always like this. Prior to the 1970s, home prices in California were comparable to those in the rest of the country. Today they are more than three times as high.

What happened during the 1970s was the beginning of the drastic restrictions on building pushed by liberal Democrats in general and environmental extremists in particular.

The High Cost of Busybodies: Part IV

During the gasoline shortage that began in 1979, motorists were often waiting in long lines of cars at filling stations—sometimes for hours—in hopes of reaching the pump before the gas ran out. The ways that Ted Kennedy and Ronald Reagan proposed to deal with this situation speak volumes about the difference between the left and the right.

Senator Kennedy said: “We must adopt a system of gasoline rationing without delay,” in “a way that demands a fair sacrifice from all Americans.”

Ronald Reagan said that we must get rid of price controls on petroleum, so that there won’t be a shortage in the first place. One of his first acts after becoming president was to end federal price controls. Lines at filling stations disappeared.

Despite angry outcries from liberals that gas prices would skyrocket as Big Oil “gouged” the public, in reality prices came down within months and continued falling for years. More taxes were piled onto gasoline by the government but the real cost of the gas itself hit a new low by 1993.

“Fairness” is one of the great mantras of the left. Since everyone has his own definition of fairness, that word is a blank check for the expansion of government power. What “fairness” means in practice is that third parties—busybodies—can prevent mutual accommodations by others.

Busybodies not only prevent farmers from selling their land to people who would build housing on it, they prevent people on waiting lists for organ transplants from paying

someone to donate a kidney or a liver that can be the difference between life and death.

Like Ted Kennedy, the organ donation bureaucracy is preoccupied with imposing their notions of fairness on people who are on waiting lists. And, like Senator Kennedy, they have no interest in freeing people to reduce or eliminate the shortage, which could make fairness in rationing a moot issue.

Such thinking—or lack of thinking—is not new. Back in the 18th century, Adam Smith wrote of politicians who devote “a most unnecessary attention” to things that would work themselves out better in a free market.

What is conventionally called “the free market” is in reality free people making their own mutual accommodations with other free people. It is one of the many tactical mistakes of conservatives to use an impersonal phrase to describe very personal choices and actions by people when they are not hamstrung by third parties.

When the issue is posed as “the free market” versus “compassion for the poor,” which do you think is likely to win out? Our bloated and ever-growing welfare state—from which the poor get a very small share, by the way—answers that question.

The fatal attraction of government is that it allows busybodies to impose decisions on others without paying any price themselves. That enables them to act as if there were no price, even when there are ruinous prices—paid by others.

Millions of people’s lives are made worse in innumerable ways, in order that a relative handful of busybodies can feel important and superior. Artificially high land prices in those places where busybodies reign politically, based on land use

restrictions, make housing costs a crushing burden on people of average incomes.

Some of the busybodies imagine that they are preventing “over-crowding” or “traffic congestion.” But what they are really doing is moving the crowding somewhere else, since people have to live somewhere, regardless.

As for traffic congestion, that is made needlessly worse because of long-distance commuting by those people whose incomes will not permit them to live in the artificially more expensive communities where they work. It is not uncommon in liberal California communities for many commuters to spend 3 or 4 hours a day in their cars, fighting traffic—all for the greater glory of those with the mantra of “open space.”

Because of the innumerable problems caused by busybodies who devote “a most unnecessary attention” to things that would be better without them, the rest of us should devote some very necessary attention to these busybodies and their sloppy arguments.

“Partial Truth” Abortion

Now that a federal judge has ruled that the law banning “partial birth abortion” is unconstitutional, there is certain to be much media coverage of the issue as it makes its way up the appellate chain to the Supreme Court of the United States. How that will turn out legally is anybody’s guess but the process will reveal at least as much about the media as it does about the law.

Many in the media resent any suggestion that they are either politically biased or that journalists’ personal views stop them from doing a good professional job of accurately reporting the news. The way the issue of partial birth abortion has been reported—or not reported—gives the lie to such protests.

Whether you or they are for or against abortion in general or this specific procedure in particular, if the much proclaimed “public’s right to know” means anything, it should mean that the readers and viewers should be told what a partial birth abortion is. Much of the liberal media fails that simple test completely.

Some in the media use only the opaque expression “late-term abortion,” while others refer to the fact that some people call it a late-term abortion and others call it a partial birth abortion. But all this reporting about semantics is not telling the public just what it is that is being discussed in the first place.

Neither the defenders nor the critics are talking about semantics. They are talking about what is actually done—

and that is what a major part of the mainstream media refuses to tell us.

Even a quality news program like *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer* featured a debate earlier this year, with both sides represented—at the end of which the viewer still had no way to learn just what is a partial birth abortion or a “late-term abortion,” as the liberals prefer to call it.

What happens is that a baby who is in the process of being born, with part of his body outside his mother’s body and part still inside, is deliberately killed. One of the methods of doing this is to have his brains sucked out of his head by a device.

Although this is called an abortion, the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan said that it seemed too much like infanticide to him. What keeps it from being murder, as far as the law is concerned, is that part of the baby’s body is still inside the mother, so that this procedure can be classified as an abortion.

The American Medical Association some years ago said that there is no medical necessity for such an unusual procedure. Its purpose is not medical but legal: to keep the doctor and the mother from being indicted for killing a newborn baby.

Whether you are for or against this, you ought to know what you are for or against. But there are newspapers, TV programs, and whole networks that you could watch for years without ever finding out.

They have decided what you can be allowed to know. That is the real problem of media bias. If they report the news straight and let you make up your own mind, then what the journalists themselves do in the voting booth on election day is their own business.

The partial birth abortion issue is just one of those issues

in which major parts of the media filter out facts that might lead you to take a position different from the one the journalists have.

When a white racist commits an atrocity against some black person, that is headline news across the country. But when a black racist does exactly the same thing to some white person, that is not likely to get the same publicity, if it is reported at all.

The liberal view that white racism is a major problem and a major explanation for other social problems is not allowed to be undermined by news which might suggest that racism is a curse of the whole human species. You cannot even assess where this racism is worse when only one kind of it is reported by much of the media.

Similarly, atrocities committed against homosexuals are big news but atrocities committed by homosexuals, including atrocities against children, are unlikely to see the light of day in much of the media. Neither is any statistical information on how homosexuals differ from the general population in life span, diseases or costs to the taxpayers for dealing with their diseases.

Filtering and spinning are not reporting. The public has a right to know that, but that right is too often aborted.

Lying about Yosemite

Yosemite National Park is one of the beauties of nature that has brought me back every year for more than 20 consecutive years. But, in recent years especially, there seem to be two Yosemites—the one discussed in the media and the one I see with my own eyes.

On the first day of my visit this year—June 6, 2004—there appeared one of the standard propaganda pieces on Yosemite in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, illustrated with the standard propaganda photographs.

They say the camera doesn't lie but it can do some serious misleading. A standard lie of the environmental extremists is that Yosemite is "over-crowded" and choked with bumper-to-bumper traffic. True to form, the *San Francisco Chronicle* shows a line of cars and a couple of pedestrians scooting between them.

The pedestrians ought to give a clue as to what is wrong with this picture. The cars are not moving along a street or highway. They are stopped and lining up. Cars get stopped at the entrance to the park to pay a fee to get in and they get stopped by road construction delays inside the park.

My wife and I were among those stopped for about 15 minutes at a road repair site. When traffic is stopped dead in its tracks for 15 minutes, you can collect quite a backup almost anywhere. In Yosemite, you can also collect misleading photographs to be used to advance the political agendas of environmental extremists.

Once past the construction site, the traffic in Yosemite

flowed far more smoothly than it does in San Francisco and parking spaces were far easier to find. For three days in a row, we had lunch at the popular Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite Valley and each time we had our choice of parking spaces in the main parking lot.

If anything, the traffic was somewhat lighter than it has been in some past years. We also had no trouble finding parking spaces at Glacier Point, Curry Village or any other place in the park where we decided to stop.

Why then the campaign of lies?

Groups like the Sierra Club and other environmental zealots have for years been trying to reduce the number of people visiting our national parks. They seem to think that our national parks are their own private property, and that it would be best if the unwashed masses are kept out as much as possible, leaving the backpackers to enjoy these parks in seclusion.

Like other special interest groups, the environmental extremists have a disproportionate influence on government officials, including in this case those who run the National Park Service. One of their coups has been to get the gas station in Yosemite Valley removed. The next nearest gas station is 13 miles outside the park and it charges more than \$3 a gallon.

Was the gas station in Yosemite Valley spoiling some natural scenery? Far from it. It was part of a built-up area that included motel buildings, restaurants, and a gigantic parking lot. That parking lot remains, with something like a hundred cars on it and next to it is a very unattractive tent city.

Esthetics had nothing to do with removing the gas station. The environmental zealots know that the automobile is the key to ordinary people having access to

the national parks. The more hassles are created for people driving automobiles, the more people will be discouraged from coming, advancing the goal of reserving the national parks for environmentalists and for those who live the lifestyle that the environmentalists approve of.

The essence of bigotry is denying other people the same free choices you have. Many of those who call themselves environmentalists could more accurately be called green bigots.

The automobile allows people to see Yosemite in their own ways and at their own pace, which is especially important for the elderly and for families with small children. But the park bureaucrats and the green bigots want to force people out of their cars and regiment them into buses, to be taken when, where and how the bureaucrats decide.

The restrictionists love to talk about the “fragile” environment and “saving” it for “future generations.” No definition of “fragile” is offered. What this amounts to is saying that future generations of green bigots can keep out future generations of ordinary citizens and taxpayers.

Growing Old

Random thoughts about growing old:

Despite the problems that come with aging, I would not be a teenager again for \$1,000 a day plus expenses.

I never really felt old until my younger brother retired.

This is the period of life that Disraeli referred to as “anecdotalage.”

Nothing is more ridiculous than discounts for senior citizens, when people in their sixties have far more wealth than people in their thirties.

These are my declining years. I decline all sorts of invitations and opportunities.

People who talk about “earlier and simpler times” are usually too young to remember those times—and how complicated they were.

An old body is like an old automobile, where the brakes need repairing today, the steering wheel next month and the transmission after that.

Looking at old photographs makes it hard for me to believe that I was ever that thin physically. And remembering some of the things I did in those days makes it hard to believe that I was ever that thin mentally.

You would think that young people, with decades of life ahead of them, would look further ahead and plan for the future more so than older people. But it is just the opposite. The young tend to be oriented to right now, while old timers think about the future of their children and

grandchildren, and worry about where the country is heading in the years ahead.

They say you can't teach an old dog new tricks. But maybe the old dog already knows about tricks that only seem new to the young—and doesn't think much of those tricks.

When I was young, age forty seemed so ancient that I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be forty. Now I can barely remember what it was like to be forty.

Age gives you an excuse for not being very good at things that you were not very good at when you were young.

An old saying is that we are once a man and twice a child. The difference is that we more or less automatically have parents to look after us the first time, but whether we will have someone to show us the same love and care when we are at the other end of life is another story.

It is amazing—and appalling—how many people who are walking with the elderly try to pull them along faster than they want to go, or perhaps faster than they are able to go. What does this accomplish, except to create needless tension and stress? And how urgent is it to save a few seconds here and there?

When someone had to tell me that I was on a topless beach, I knew I was getting old.

Like so many people who are getting on in years, I am fine—so long as I remember that I am not fine.

The old are not really smarter than the young. It is just that we have already made the mistakes that the young are about to make, so we already know that these are mistakes and what the consequences are.

Some people age like fine wine and others just turn into vinegar.

Someone asked a man in his seventies at what age he

started to lose interest in women. "I don't know," he said. "But when it happens, I will tell you."

I urge my fellow old-timers to write their memoirs, just so that "revisionist" historians will not be able to get away with lying about the past.

More than once, after I woke up some morning feeling like I was twenty again, I did something that ended up with me on crutches or otherwise being reminded emphatically by my body that I was definitely not twenty again. Women may lie about their age to other people but men lie about their age to themselves.

When old-time Dodger pitching ace Don Newcombe was near the end of his career, someone asked him if he could still throw as hard as ever. "Yes, I throw the ball as hard as ever," he said. "But it just takes longer to get to the plate."

Oliver Wendell Holmes said it best: "If I could think that I had sent a spark to those who come after I should be ready to say Goodbye."

April Fools' Party

“This is your eyewitness news team, reporting from the big, posh April Fools' Day party at the Dewdrop Inn out at Moot Point, overlooking Dyer Straits. Everybody who is anybody is here.

“There's the karate expert Marshall Artz, timber heiress Lotta Wood, famous meteorologist Cole Winter, the British boxing sensation Battler Hastings, and the gossip columnist N.U. Endo. There's insurance magnate Justin Case, the famous efficiency expert Ben Dunn Wright, and Ivy University's dean of students, N. 'Loco' Prentiss.

“Let's talk with one of the guests. Excuse me, sir, what is your name?”

“Chester Mann.”

“Are you related to that famous social justice advocate?”

“N.V. Mann? Yes.”

“What kind of work do you do?”

“I run an automobile junk yard.”

“What's the name of it? You might as well give it a free plug.”

“Oedipus Wrecks.”

“How are you enjoying the party?”

“Frankly, I am here only because my wife dragged me here.”

“You don't like the party?”

“As Robinson Crusoe said, 'I don't like this atoll.'”

“As Napoleon said, 'What's your beef, Wellington?’”

“Oh, just the food, the drinks, and the people.”

“Well, let me move along. Here’s the famous author I. Wright, whose latest best-seller is a steamy novel about India titled *Whose Sari Now?* Incidentally, you look great in those long, flowing robes. Were you born in India?”

“No, Brooklyn.”

“But I’ll bet you did a lot of research in India?”

“Yes, mostly in the Punjab.”

“What is it like to live in a country completely different from the Western world?”

“Actually Indians are not cut off from the Western world. For example, a friend of mine in the Punjab is obsessed with Western classical music.”

“Likes his Beethoven and Bach, does he?”

“He’s really obsessed with Haydn. He’s a Haydn Sikh.”

“Thank you. Let’s go on to talk with some more guests. Here’s the famous psychiatrist N.D. Nile, that sweet-looking actress Candy Barr and her sister Minnie who, I believe, is involved in hotels.”

“Yes, I am. I have also had some hostel takeovers.”

“Not everyone has been successful, of course. Over there is the well-known architect whose firm just went bankrupt—Frank Lloyd Wrong. Let’s go over and see what he has to say.

“Sir, this is your eyewitness news team, checking up on how you are doing.”

“Terrible! I am suffering from hardening of the arteries, curvature of the spine, cirrhosis of the liver. . .”

“Rumpole of the Bailey?”

“Absolutely.”

“I understand that you are also an artist.”

“Well, architecture is itself an art, as well as a science. But I also paint pictures, if that is what you mean.”

“Yes, I remember a famous painting of yours showing a Rolex sitting on a half-eaten piece of watermelon.”

“Yes, I called it ‘Watch on the Rind.’”

“You are really on the cutting edge. Are all the people in your set like that?”

“No, actually. My uncle’s wife, for example, is the most conservative person I know.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I call her my status quo auntie.”

“How conservative is she?”

“Once I asked her if she believed in gun control and she said: ‘Yes! You’ve got to control those things or else the shot will go wild and miss the guy you are trying to blast!’”

“Over here is the famous weatherman, Cole Winter. He’s usually pretty well informed, since he is on the same program as the news. Cole, what’s the latest news?”

“A leopard was spotted in midtown Manhattan today!”

“That’s not news. Leopards are spotted everywhere. Anyhow, it is time to return you to the studio. Happy April Fools’ Day!”