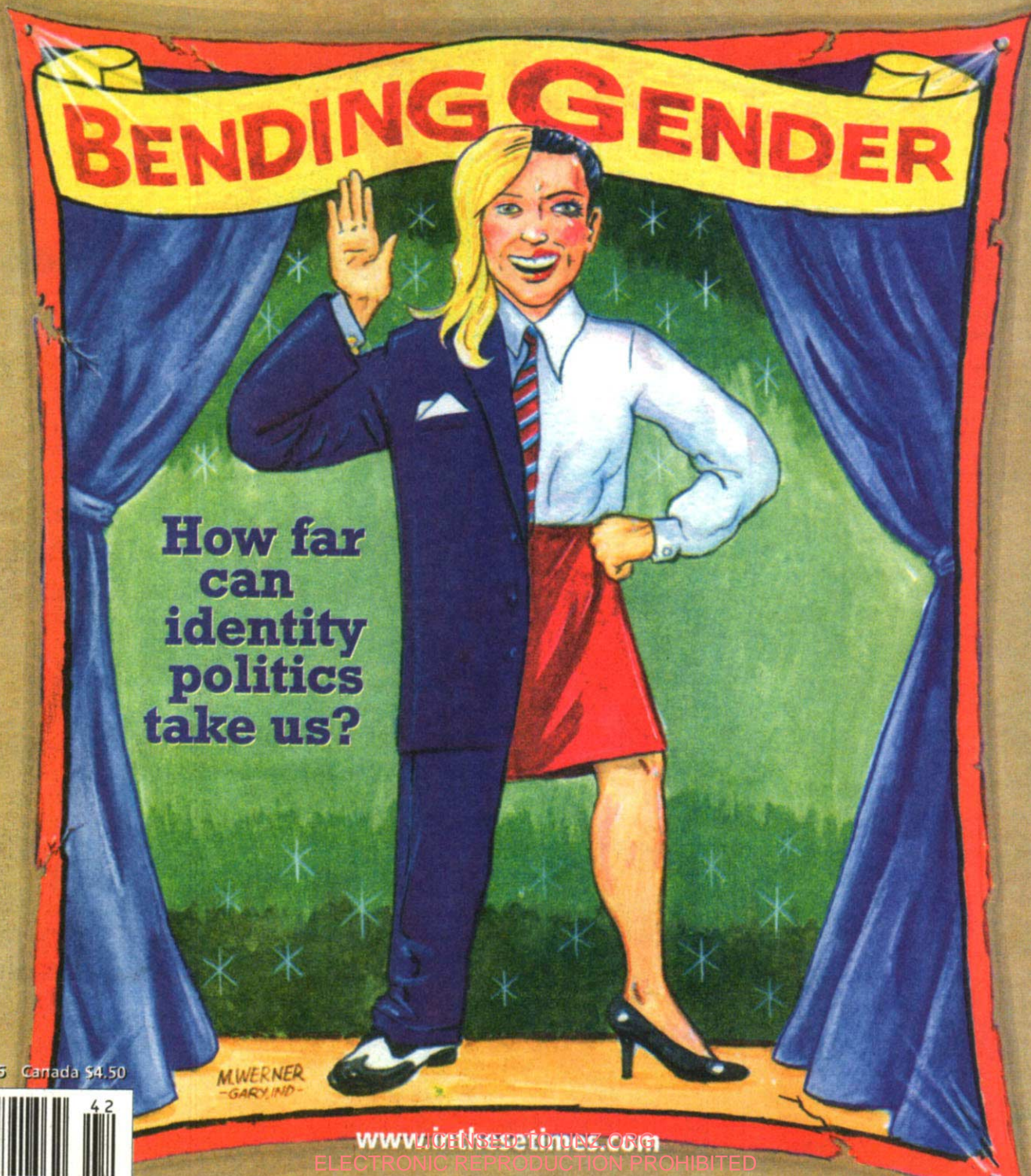


# In These Times

INDEPENDENT NEWS & VIEWS

SEPTEMBER 15, 2003



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# Trading in Terror

What does it take to end a career in public service? Mere treason evidently doesn't cut it, as has been made clear by the gaggle of current administration officials who were co-conspirators in the Iran/Contra scandal, among them retired Adm. John Poindexter.

As President Reagan's national security advisor, Poindexter engineered the secret deal to sell weapons to our avowed mortal enemies, the mullahs of Iran, and then used the proceeds to fund the Contras' bloody rebellion against the elected Sandinista government of Nicaragua. Under George W. Bush, Poindexter's more recent endeavors have included the Total Information Awareness project, an ambitious effort to collect and organize personal data on all Americans that would have rendered any conception of "privacy" quaint at best. That program hit the skids after bipartisan revulsion in Congress.

But it is only Poindexter's latest scheme that finally has sent him away from the public trough. His blandly christened Policy Analysis Market, an online betting parlor for predicting political assassinations, revolutions and terrorist attacks in the Middle East, was quickly denounced in Congress—"unbelievably stupid," as Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-North Dakota) politely put it. In late July, after conferring with the Senate's Armed Services Committee chairman John Warner (R-Virginia), the Pentagon dropped Poindexter's plan for the terror casino, which would have registered investors in August and opened for business in October. And the old admiral, now a liability for Bush, has been asked to walk the plank.

While it's undeniably gratifying to watch Poindexter sink, we should really thank him. Free-market fundamentalism—the superstition that holds that the magic of the market is all we need to solve all our problems—has finally crossed a line. For years, "the market" has defined the terms for mainstream debate in virtually every policy arena—not just trade and foreign affairs, but education, welfare, health care, media deregulation and campaign finance reform. Unsexy technical arguments over trade policy or media ownership rules tend to obscure the fundamental conflict between human and market values, but Poindexter's terror-

trading plan vividly illuminated the clash—and human values won.

So the ideological straitjacket constricting the nation's politics might be coming loose. And that loosening is helped, not hurt, by variously obtuse editorials that have praised the Policy Analysis Market as a "good idea with bad press." These exercises in extreme libertarian amorality, ranging from *Reason* magazine to the *New York Times* business section, echo the sentiment expressed by the Policy Analysis Market's Web site (before it was hastily taken offline), that "markets are extremely efficient, effective and timely aggregators of dispersed and even hidden information." It may not be pretty to see people profit from murder and mayhem, goes this logic, but it just might save lives.

Defenders of the idea point to the Iowa Electronic Markets (sponsored by the business school at the University of Iowa) as an example of another unorthodox "futures market," which has had some success in predicting the outcomes of elections. Indeed, when the rules of the game are laid out in advance with a finite number of variables—as they are in every electoral contest, with a fixed date and a fixed number of

**Thanks to John Poindexter, free-market fundamentalism has finally crossed a line.**

candidates—there's no reason why a futures-market system can't "aggregate" useful information, and be just as valuable as a more conventional opinion poll.

But when we leave fantasy-league baseball and enter the real world—you know, the one where actual terrorists live—market mechanisms will fail lethally. Terrorists, by definition, will not do us the favor of playing by any betting rules. On September 10, 2001, what were the Vegas odds that 19 men were about to hijack four jets and change the world? If the following morning taught anybody anything, it is that history is not an elegantly closed system. No oracle could have helped us then—but old-fashioned intelligence gathering, coupled with a competent chief executive who didn't waste money on charlatans like Poindexter, might have. That much you can bet on.

—Joe Knowles

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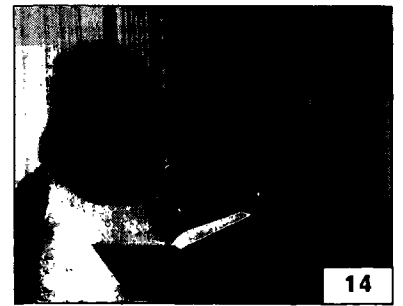
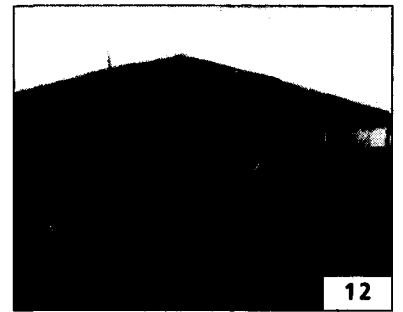
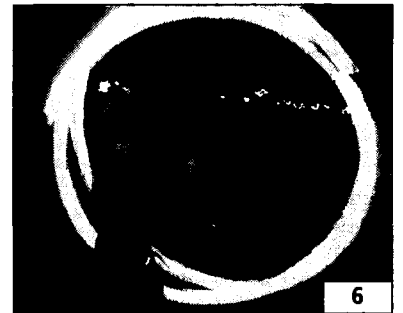
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COVER ILLUSTRATION: MIKE WERNER

**Humanitarian Intervention?**

The dilemma represented in the tandem articles "Against Liberal Intervention" and "Intervene with Caution" (August 11) allows a very, very tedious distraction. The intellectual arguments seem gamey and competitive. What a luxury to quibble philosophically while people suffer! Intervening in violence, especially genocide, is a moral obligation. Period. Diversion and excuses are irresponsible.

**Jan Pesek-Herriges  
Clayton, Wisconsin**

In "Intervene with Caution," Ian Williams could have made an even stronger case that Rwanda should have been subject to intervention: The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide states that "any Contracting Party may call upon the competent organs of the United Nations to take such action under the Charter of the United Nations as they consider appropriate for the prevention and suppression of acts of genocide."

I agree that there should have been intervention in Rwanda, but I don't know why the fact that there wasn't should be chalked up to "Western indifference" any more than to "Eastern indifference." China or Japan, for instance, could have led a drive to intervene. I believe that Vietnam justifiably brought up humanitarian intervention when it invaded Cambodia and ousted Pol Pot in 1979, though Vietnam was also responding to Cambodian attacks. (The United States subsequently voted to continue to seat the Khmer Rouge government in the United Nations.)

There are reasons why many people are suspicious of intervention by the "Western powers," particularly the United States. Washington does not conduct humanitarian intervention. Its interventions are driven by realpolitik corporate interests and market ideology, usually couched in the language of humanitarianism and democracy. Furthermore, the United States (not just George W. Bush) has consistently ignored and undermined the United Nations, even—or especially—when other U.N. members were making a good-faith humanitarian effort. The United States took 37 years to ratify the Genocide Convention.

If the United States cannot treat international organizations such as the United Nations as legitimate entities with legitimate goals, and cannot stop giving military aid to oppressive, violent and potentially genocidal regimes, it is silly to trust it or expect it to engage in disinterested humanitarian intervention. The world will continue to be suspicious, and rightfully so, of any U.S.-led intervention.

**C.D. Lepthien  
Eagle, Colorado**

**Manifest Empire**

Christian Parenti's interesting review of what sounds like a valuable book on FDR's geographer Isaiah Bowman ("The World Was Not Enough," August 11) betrays a commonly found blindness to the long existence of American empire. When he writes, "Save for a few actual colonies like Puerto Rico and the Philippines, the United States has always preferred the low overhead and 'plausible denial' offered by an informal, arm's length empire of client states," Parenti neglects the conquest and colonization of half the North American land mass, the attempt to annex Canadian territory, the annexation of northern Mexico, of Alaska, of Hawaii, the failed attempts to

add Cuba and Central America to the Confederacy, the separation of Panama from Colombia and the more recent re-installation of the U.S. military there.

Long before "Friedrich Ratzel ... first coined the term *Lebensraum*," the founding fathers of the United States invented the concept, embodied in the Monroe Doctrine, the notion of "manifest destiny," and in a Constitution unique in claiming the power to incorporate new territories into the state system it established. The U.S. flag is a kind of map of that expansionism and conquest from 13 seaboard colonies to 50 states stretching into the Arctic and Pacific.

Before geography was geological, it was botanical and agrarian. It is not a coincidence that George Washington was a surveyor, nor that one of the mythic figures of Yankee empire-building was Johnny Appleseed, whose mission was to lay the basis for charting a grid across native lands for subsequent private expropriation and colonization by planting non-native arbors.

The left needs to examine much more deeply its own absorption of the ruling ideas that have created the American empire as it exists today.

**Michael Novick  
Los Angeles**



# Market Up, Jobs Down

## Working people face more hard times

By Dean Baker

When second-quarter economic reports came out at the end of July, President Bush stepped forward to take the credit. "Because this administration has acted firmly, our economy is growing," Bush said at a rare press conference.

Bush's claims were accompanied by reports from the media and opinions from economists that suggested that the economy may finally have turned a corner. "Second-quarter growth, fewer jobless claims renew confidence," headlined the *Akron Beacon-Journal* on August 1.

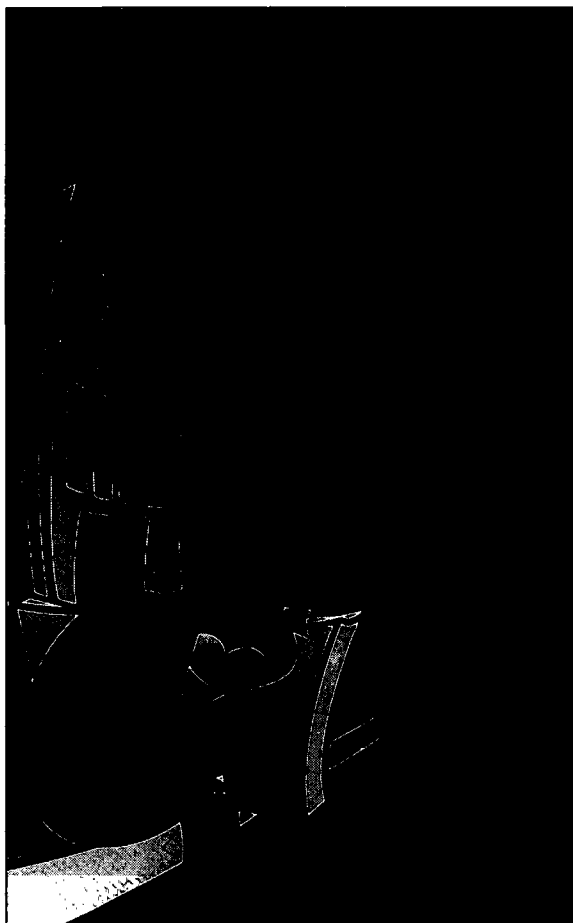
"Meanwhile, the latest weekly figures for initial claims for unemployment benefits may be signaling that conditions in the lackluster U.S. labor market are beginning to improve," summarized the *Washington Post*, citing unidentified "analysts" in another August 1 story.

Unfortunately, for workers in the United States, the reality is nowhere near as positive as the celebration suggests. In fact, like the Bush tax cuts, the good news will mean little or nothing to workers who have lost their jobs or are worried about what comes next.

Even an unemployment rate that has risen to above 6 percent in the last few months, after averaging 4 percent for all of 2000, tells only a small part of the story. In the last two and a half years, there has been a qualitative change in the labor market. The country has gone from a time in which jobs were relatively plentiful and wages were rising for most workers, to one in which workers must struggle to find even the lowest-paying jobs. For most workers, wages are now barely keeping pace with inflation, and with employers reducing or eliminating health coverage, even workers with jobs often find themselves worse off than they were two years ago.

And while the overall unemployment rate has risen by slightly more than two percentage points since 2000, it has risen far more for minorities. The rate for

African-Americans rose by almost four percentage points, from 7.6 percent in 2000, to 11.1 percent in the July employment data. For Hispanics the unemployment rate went from a year-round average of 5.6 percent in 2000 to 8.2 percent in the July data. And, the unemployment rate for African-American teens has risen by close to 12 percentage points, going from 24 percent in 2000 to 36 percent in the most recent data.



In addition to the people counted as unemployed, the number of people who are working part time but would like full-time work has risen by nearly 1.5 million since 2000.

Millions more have simply given up looking for work altogether. The percentage of the population counted as being in the labor force (either working or unemployed) has fallen for nearly every demographic group. In the case of African-American men, the labor force participation rate fell by almost three full percentage points from a peak of 74 per-

cent in February 2000 to 71.3 percent in July. This drop translates into 200,000 black men leaving the labor force. The participation rate for black teens has fallen even farther, from over 41.4 percent in November 2000, to just 32.3 percent in July.

The one exception to this pattern has been workers over age 55. These people have been entering the labor market in large numbers over the last two years, even as overall employment has plunged. The obvious explanation is that many early retirees have been forced back to work, often at McDonald's-type jobs, after their savings plunged with the stock market crash. In many cases, these older workers are displacing teenagers who would otherwise hold these jobs.

The weak labor market has virtually stopped real wage growth. In the second half of the nineties, wages were outpacing inflation by almost two percentage points a year. This was the first sustained period in which real wages were rising since the '60s. However, in the last year, wage growth has slowed to the point where wages are moving at approximately the same rate as inflation. Since the inflation indexes do not pick up additional health care costs that employers pass along to workers, it is likely that most workers' wages are not even keeping pace with their cost of living.

The economy has lost more than 2.6 million jobs in the last two and a half years. Until it starts generating jobs again at a rapid pace, the situation will only get worse for most of the work force. Unfortunately, the bursting bubbles, like the collapse of the stock market, that led to the recent recession have counterparts still to come—the housing bubble is yet to burst. This means that, for working people, the times are likely to get worse before they get better. It appears, too, that those hardships will go unnoticed by the president, unacknowledged by investors, and underreported by the media. ■

## Finally Free One Death Row inmate's uphill battle

By Dave Lindorff

Joseph Amrine, a black Missouri Death Row prisoner freed July 28 by the state's Supreme Court, says that for his first 13 years awaiting execution, he maintained his spirits, confident his innocence of the murder of a fellow prison inmate would be vindicated.

"The low point for me came back in 1998," he says, "when the U.S. Supreme Court refused to consider my case. The trouble was, I had never prepared myself for the idea that the system might actually kill me."

Amrine is now a free man. But along the way, he had to spend more than four years on the edge of execution, as a team of death penalty appeals experts, headed by Sean O'Brien of the University of Missouri Law School, labored mightily to get his case back into federal or state court.

O'Brien and his team battled tough odds—not only were they confronted with a Clinton-backed law, the 1996 Effective Death Penalty Act, that bars felons from receiving more than one round of federal court appeals, but the state's high court was stacked with death penalty advocates appointed by former Gov. John Ashcroft, now the U.S. attorney general.

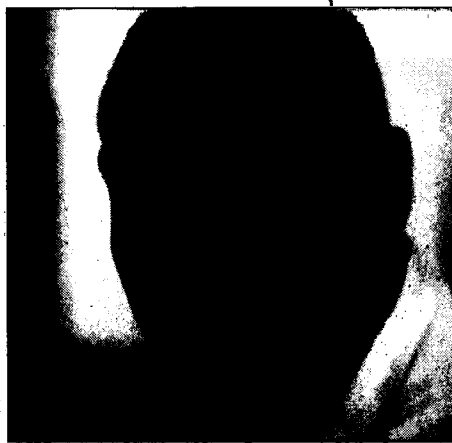
Still, Amrine had good grounds for a rehearing. Sentenced to die in 1986 by an all-white jury for the fatal stabbing of prison inmate Gary Barber while he was finishing up a sentence for robbery and check-kiting, Amrine had been convicted based upon the testimony of three jailhouse snitches who all testified he was the guilty party. This despite the insistence of a prison guard—normally a more credible witness than fellow inmates—that one of the three informers was the killer.

Over time, all three accusers recanted their testimony against him. But state Attorney General Jay Nixon, who was fighting the appeal, was able to convince a federal judge that the recantations weren't credible. The initial thrust of the attorney general's argument was that

although two inmates had recanted their testimony, a third had not. Later, after the last inmate also recanted, Nixon argued that the issue had already been litigated and that, in any case, inmates were not to be trusted.

This seemed curious, given that inmate testimony had been the basis for Amrine's conviction, but Federal District Judge Fernando Gaitan Jr., a Bush appointee to the bench, agreed with Nixon both times and denied Amrine's appeals.

This past year, however, Amrine's luck began to change. His legal team had



Missouri's attorney general wanted to execute Joseph Amrine even though he was innocent.

strong editorial support from the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, other local media, and student activists, but they were still unable to convince the state's conservative Democratic governor, Bob Holden, to issue a pardon. So the team made a last ditch appeal for reconsideration of his case to the state's Supreme Court. By that time, a majority of the high court's seven jurists were no longer Ashcroft appointees.

In a remarkable hearing earlier this spring in Missouri's Supreme Court, Nixon cited the U.S. Supreme Court's 1993 *Herrera* ruling that appellants did not have a constitutional right to a new trial simply based upon evidence of innocence. The decision in *Herrera v. Collins*, a Texas murder case upheld by the high court, states that the only valid grounds for relief are procedural constitutional errors. Nixon told the state judges that according to the *Herrera* standard, even if Amrine were innocent, he should be executed because he had had a fair trial.

Amrine still expresses amazement at this topsy-turvy judicial standard, which even left one Ashcroft-appointed judge dropping his face into his hands on the bench. "How could they say that?" he asks, his voice still sounding incredulous. "Come on, man! This is America, isn't it? Not Saudi Arabia."

While the three Ashcroft appointees on the bench also raised doubts about Amrine's conviction, none was willing to overturn it. Instead, two of them proposed converting Amrine's punishment to life without parole, while a third suggested another hearing on the case in a lower Missouri state court. Meanwhile, the court majority, whose members were appointed by Democratic governors Mel Carnahan and Holden, was having none of it.

As the majority opinion put it, "This case presents the rare circumstance in which no credible evidence remains from the first trial to support the conviction." With no witnesses left to testify against Amrine, the original county prosecutor's office which had tried him was forced to drop the case.

Amrine's defense attorney, O'Brien, says the case "shows the importance of state courts at a time that the federal courts are becoming more conservative." He says that the state court's judges "rebelled at being told by the attorney general that they should have to follow the federal court's *Herrera* ruling."

"It shows how far the pendulum has swung on the courts at the federal level," says David Elliot, a spokesperson for the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, "since we used to rely on them to save people from the state courts." But he sees Amrine's release as a good sign. "It's very important that you had a Missouri state supreme court ignore the U.S. Supreme Court's *Herrera* ruling and say, 'Yes, innocence matters.'"

As for Joe Amrine himself, he says that after 26 years in jail, 17 of them on Death Row, he now feels "confused" at being back in society. He doesn't have any career goals yet, but he says he's got a plan of action: "to do some speaking out against the death penalty." ■

Dave Lindorff is the author of *Killing Time: An Investigation Into the Death Penalty Case of Mumia Abu-Jamal* (Common Courage, 2003).

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# Raving Mad

## New drug law limits gatherings

By Steven Wishnia

BILLINGS, MONTANA—On May 30, a DEA agent walked into the local Eagles Lodge. The agent informed the hall's manager that if anyone used illegal drugs at the night's show, the lodge would be liable for a \$250,000 fine, under the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act of 2003. The show, a benefit for the Montana State University chapters of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws and Students for a Sensible Drug Policy, was cancelled.

"It was a classic violation of the First Amendment," says Harry Williams of the American Civil Liberties Union's drug-law project. "The government targeted an event because it disagreed with the political views of its organizers."

The incident was the first use of the controversial new law, which extends the federal "crackhouse law"—which makes it a felony to "knowingly" and "intentionally" allow property to be used for the purpose of drug dealing, manufacturing, or use—to cover temporary use of property, such as a rave in a rented warehouse. Originally introduced as the "Reducing Americans' Vulnerability to Ecstasy Act" in 2002 by Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Delaware), it stalled that fall after Congress received more than 40,000 letters of opposition. However, it was enacted last April, when Biden tacked it on to the "Amber Alert" child-kidnapping bill, after excising its "RAVE Act" title and rhetoric about "loud, pounding dance music."

Taken literally, the law is so broad that letting people smoke marijuana at a private house party could be a federal felony. However, the furor over the Billings incident may have caused the government to back off somewhat. Biden, who had insisted that the law was merely intended to protect

children from the horrors of Ecstasy and GHB, was not pleased.

On June 17, he wrote a letter expressing his concern to acting DEA administrator William Simpkins. Simpkins responded that while the agent in Montana had wanted to make sure that the Eagles Lodge owners "fully understood" that the NORML benefit was "likely to promote the use of illicit drugs," he had "misinterpreted" the law, and the DEA was issuing new guidelines for enforcing it.

"The law will be used to target unscrupulous promoters who use their event to facilitate drug trafficking, who prey on teenagers and young adults," says DEA spokesperson Will Glaspy. According to a notice the DEA posted on its Web site June 20, it will not apply to private parties or "events where people just happened to use drugs."

"The law sets the bar very high," asserts Biden spokesperson Chip Unruh. It is aimed at promoters personally involved in drug sales, he explains, and is not intended to

### Twelve Inches of Real Man [0.9]

George W. Bush's historic "landing" on the USS *Abraham Lincoln* has been memorialized in a form befitting the commander-in-chief's machismo: a limited edition doll. To quote the toy's ad copy: "This fully poseable figure features a realistic head sculpt, fully detailed cloth flight suit, helmet with oxygen mask, survival vest, g-pants, parachute harness, and much more. The realism and exacting attention to detail demanded by today's 12-inch action figure enthusiast are met and exceeded with this action figure."

A "poseable" Dubya in "g-pants." I'm not sure what that means, and I shudder to think of what today's 12-inch action figure enthusiasts might do with this thing in their homes. They're a rather strange bunch. The Associated Press reports that a 1963 G.I. Joe sold for \$200,000, and the sucker who

bought it thinks he got a deal. I remember playing with G.I. Joe when I was a kid, and who'd have thought some 40 years later I would be buying the actual prototype for this action figure," said the sucker in question, a comic book distributor. "It's just a great coup for me."

### Third Ear [2.1]

An Australian artist by the name of Stelarc plans to transplant a human ear onto his arm, according to the *Guardian*. "I want people to see this extra ear and speculate in a way about alternative interfaces on the body," Stelarc announced, as if the reason he was doing it was unclear to anybody. The ear is not really an ear, but tissue developed from the artist's cartilage and bone-marrow, fashioned in the shape of an ear. Doctors have publicly advised Stelarc not to do his stunt, but art has its own reasons. Stelarc originally was going to install the new

organ on his face but decided against it because such an operation could damage vital nerves.

### Gunning for the Duke [0.8]

Biographer Michael Munn is to be congratulated for ingenuity in promoting his latest opus, *John Wayne: The Man behind the Myth*. Newspapers on five continents have breathlessly reported Munn's startling revelation that Wayne was a target of several assassination attempts ordered by Joseph Stalin. The cinematic ass-kicker, it seems, stood in the way of the evil dictator's bid for worldwide red-overlordship, so he had to be taken out. In one attempt, mounted in 1955 by a remnant mob of Burbank commies, a group of loyal stuntmen came to the Duke's defense and "ran" the

bad men out of town." Later, Munn claims, Chairman Mao got in the game and put a price on the actor's head.

You may wonder about Munn's sources. They seem mainly to be Wayne himself, who regaled the biographer with this chestnut: In 1958, the actor had a private meeting with Stalin's successor, Nikita Krushchev, who was supposedly nutty for the Duke. Krushchev allegedly revealed that he personally rescinded the hit after Stalin died—and thereby struck a blow for freedom.



prosecute club owners for patrons' behavior.

The measure's critics remain uneasy. The federal government has used the crackhouse law against promoters, and mass arrests at electronic dance parties are common. Last November, police in Racine, Wisconsin raided a rave and charged all the 440-odd people there with patronizing a "disorderly house."

"I've talked to a lot of landowners and promoters, and they are not reassured by the DEA's promises," says the ACLU's Williams. "The nationwide chilling effect is very strong."

In addition, recent court decisions make it easier to prosecute club owners and promoters for drug use by patrons, notes Bill Piper of the Drug Policy Alliance. On June 20, the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals held that a ban on glow sticks—an otherwise legal rave-scene accoutrement—at a New Orleans venue was constitutional. The promoters, prosecuted under the crackhouse law, had agreed to the ban as part of a plea bargain.

The law may end up affecting marijuana-culture events more, speculates Dale Gieringer of California NORML, given that the Bush regime "has decided that pot's the most dangerous drug." In the weeks after the Billings incident, an alternative-health fair in Sonoma County, California cancelled plans to have a designated smoking area for medical-marijuana patients. In Seattle, organizers of the annual Hempfest, the nation's largest pot-legalization rally, decided not to let vendors sell pipes at the event. "If we're going to fight on First Amendment grounds, we want to be in the best position we can," says director Vivian McPeak. "This administration is serious about going after our culture."

Adam Jones, the Billings benefit's 21-year-old organizer, says the raid was a good thing, because it "grabbed people's attention" about the law, but he wouldn't want to go through it again. On probation for possession of psilocybin mushrooms, he was jailed the day before the show for violating it—not telling his probation officer that his employer, the Billings YMCA, had transferred him to another branch for the summer. He also ended up losing his job, and says he's withdrawing from activism for now.

"It pains me because if anything, my opinions about the need for drug-law reform are stronger now," he says, "but my probation officer has got the power." ■



FRANCOIS NASCIMBENI / AFP

Glow sticks, too, are a gateway to hard drugs, according to a New Orleans court.

## THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW

AT LAST, THEY CAN BE REVEALED:

### GEORGE BUSH'S TOP FIVE SOURCES OF PRE-WAR INTELLIGENCE

**1. HIS OUIJA BOARD.**  
THERE YOU HAVE IT, SIR. THE SPIRITS SAY THAT SADDAM DEFINITELY POSES AN IMMINENT THREAT!

YOU SURE YOU'RE NOT MOVIN' THAT POINTER THING AROUND, PAUL?

HEAVEN FORFEND, SIR.

**2. HIS DAILY HOROSCOPE.**  
CANCER (June 22-July 22): Go on and resolve that unfinished family business—but don't forget your friends in the process!

OKAY, PUT THE TROOPS ON ALERT--AND GET THOSE RECONSTRUCTION CONTRACTS HANDED OUT!

I'LL CALL HALLIBURTON!

**3. FORTUNE COOKIES.**  
Your talents will be recognized and suitably rewarded.

LOOK AT THIS, FELLAS! SUCCESS IS GUARANTEED!

THAT WOULD CERTAINLY BE MY INTERPRETATION!

UH--YES! MINE TOO!

**4. SUPERMARKET TABLOIDS.**  
HEY, CONDI--WHY DIDN'T THE CIA TELL US ABOUT THIS?

THEY'RE, UM, TOO BUSY POLITICIZING THE INTELLIGENCE, SIR.

NEWS: SADDAM BUYS WMD'S FROM SPACE ALIENS!

WILL LAGI'S BARGAINING THE DEAL?

BILL HAS SET UP WITH ALIENS!

**5. AND, OF COURSE--HIS MAGIC EIGHT BALL.**  
WILL WE FIND A PROVABLE LINK BETWEEN AL QAEDA AND IRAQ?

MY SOURCES SAY YES

I KNEW IT!

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# The Summer of Civil Rights

By Salim Muwakkil

The four major civil rights organizations—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League (NUL), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and Rainbow/PUSH—have each staked out their own turf in the civil rights landscape over the years. This summer, the quartet held their annual conventions, and the media focused on how many of the nine Democratic presidential hopefuls showed up at each, and whether President Bush even acknowledged their existence.

These conventions have become seasonal rites and attract less and less media coverage, as civil rights issues fade further into the background of American concerns. But these gatherings still serve as rallying points for many African-Americans who cut their teeth on the civil rights movement. The social space opened by that movement has allowed many of these erstwhile activists to move into the middle class.

Spawned and perpetuated by noble intentions, the annual confabs are often corporate-sponsored reunions where well-heeled participants come to socialize and chart their relative affluence. While these soirées draw some of America's most attractive and best-dressed black folks, the naked hucksterism on display is not a pretty sight.

On the other hand, they do provide unique opportunities to bring a public focus to African-Americans' specific concerns. And, despite some conventioners' superficial preoccupations and the marketing lust of the corporate sponsors, useful information is usually available.

The territories of the four groups occasionally overlap, but disputes among them are rare. Some observers have speculated that President Bush has sought to spark a dispute between the NAACP and the NUL by snubbing the former and embracing the latter. As the eldest organization, the 94-year-old NAACP traditionally has been the first in line for all the symbolic perks. Bush ignored this tradition by withdrawing the biggest symbol of all—a presidential address—from the NAACP and accepting the NUL's invitation to speak at its Pittsburgh convention.

Bush likely sought to send a message to the NAACP, whose CEO Kweisi Mfume and chairman Julian Bond have been critical of his administration. But Bush wasn't alone in his dismissive treatment of the NAACP; three of the nine candidates for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination had also planned to skip the group's convention in Miami until harangued back into line by Mfume and Bond.



Seven of the nine Democratic candidates also traveled to the Pittsburgh convention of the NUL, which recently selected former New Orleans Mayor Marc Morial as its new president, succeeding Hugh Price. Rainbow/PUSH's 32nd annual convention in late June also pulled seven Democratic candidates; they no doubt were lured to Chicago by the continuing influence of PUSH's president, the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

The SCLC attracted no presidential candidates to its 45th annual convention in Memphis. Although co-founded in 1957 by civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr. and currently headed by his son Martin Luther King III, the SCLC has the lowest public profile of the civil rights quartet and is the least influential of the groups.

As their convention rhetoric reveals, all four groups have similar missions. The NAACP's Mfume said it was "time to marshal our resources to stave off the insidious attacks on affirmative action in education, judicial activism on the Supreme Court, and an economy indifferent to the poor and middle class."

The NUL's Morial outlined a plan for what he called a new empowerment movement that will close the "the equal-

ity gap" in all aspects of American life. "The Urban League must offer solutions, ideas, and action," Morial said. "We cannot simply be doctors who are long on diagnosis and short on prescriptions."

At its convention, Rainbow/PUSH hosted a group from Benton Harbor, Michigan, the economically ravaged town that exploded into group violence earlier this summer. The organization sought to bring a focus to the needs of other communities that are similarly impoverished. Jackson's oratory was predictably insightful and his prescriptions echoed those of Morial and Mfume.

Delegates at the SCLC Memphis convention took expected positions on issues of interest to black Americans. Their well-pedigreed president said the group is poised to attack the triple evils of poverty, racism, and militarism. "We're spending \$4 billion a month occupying Iraq ... so don't tell me we can't afford decent health care for the people of America," King said.

Civil rights organizations are still searching for a unifying thread capable of binding progressive Americans into a

**Civil rights groups are still searching for a common thread to unite progressives in a struggle for racial justice.**

common struggle for racial justice. Erstwhile allies now dispute strategies, like affirmative action, that once garnered wide support. In fact, increasing numbers of Americans are questioning the efficacy of such strategies and the relevance of the civil rights organizations that push them.

I'm not one of those Americans. While I am discomfited by the excesses and pretensions sometimes paraded at these summer conventions, I also treasure the opportunity to meet and exchange views with activists from other parts of the country and address issues usually ignored.

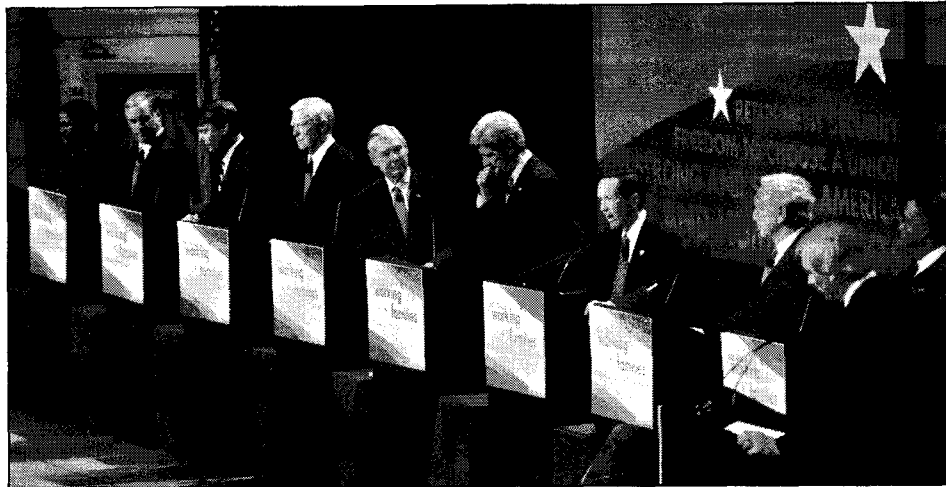
Civil rights organizations may be ideologically adrift and struggling for a lifeline that will keep them afloat in a new era. But until their replacements arrive, they are not irrelevant. ■

**IT WON'T MATTER HOW MANY AMERICANS  
ARE  
IF THE NEXT SUPREME COURT JUSTICE ISN'T.**

Roe v. Wade hangs by a 5-4 thread in the U.S.  
way, the next appointee will be modeled after  
Help sound the alarm now that we won't return  
Don't let them turn back the clock on women's

**1 (888) WeWomen**

# Decisions, Decisions



TASOS MATOPODIS/GETTY

*As labor ponders which Democrat to endorse, it also girds for battle against the GOP in '04*

By David Moberg

**W**hen union leaders think about strategy for next year's elections, one goal overrides everything else. "People are ready to do almost anything in terms of getting George Bush out of the White House," says Gerald McEntee, president of the public employees union AFSCME and chair of the AFL-CIO's political committee. There are disagreements about the best candidate, tactics, organizational turf, and what issues are most important, but the passion to oust Bush is driving unions to work harder than ever before on politics and to smooth over conflicts.

"There is a real unity of purpose among affiliates that we haven't ever seen," says AFL-CIO political director Karen Ackerman. "Bush is making workers see we have to have an alternative." It's not just the loss of jobs—3.2 million from the private sector, the worst record at a comparable point in any administration since Herbert Hoover—but the attacks on workplace protections and on unions as institutions, and the unabashed catering to the rich and big corporations. Bush has been "an unmitigated disaster for working people," says McEntee. AFL-CIO President John Sweeney says, "No previous Republican administration has ever been this malicious on workers' issues and more determined to seek advantage for corporate America." And these are the polite comments.

Since 1995 the labor movement has made a dramatic political comeback—nearly doubling the union household share of the electorate and winning stronger support from union family voters for labor-backed candidates. Starting earlier than ever, the AFL-CIO in this election cycle will coordinate a \$33 million effort to educate, register, and mobilize union voters in the commonly accepted "battleground states." Focusing on economic issues, the campaign will appoint volunteer organizers in at least 5,000 local unions to make one-on-one contact with workers on the job, plus reach them repeatedly with mail and phone calls about critical issues, such as Bush undermining overtime pay.

But without more members, there are limits to how much even an intensified union effort can gain. So unions are starting

new efforts to mobilize sympathetic non-union voters. They are also helping to create new progressive constituency groups that will play much of the role that the Democratic Party filled—at least in theory—before campaign finance reform cut off the flow of soft money to political parties. For example, the AFL-CIO executive council in August authorized creation of Working America, a neighborhood-based membership organization of working people who do not belong to a union but want to work on political and legislative issues.

On a larger scale, the federation and individual unions are putting millions into new organizations, regulated by Section 527 of the tax code. So-called 527 groups can accept soft money for voter registration and grassroots organizing. One of the first was Partnership for America's Families, started by former AFL-CIO political director Steve Rosenthal, which aims to register, educate, and mobilize sympathetic but non-union constituencies, including minorities and working women in targeted areas. McEntee quit the Partnership in May in a disagreement over how to proceed; he founded Voices for Working Families, a new 527 group with a similar mission. The AFL-CIO will support both, and the two groups have pledged to cooperate. Communications Workers President Morton Bahr also co-chairs a 527 group called Grassroots Democrats, dedicated to building state and local organization. Despite the potential for confusion, Rosenthal says: "There's so much work to be done, we're not the least bit concerned. The more organizations working, the better off we'll be, assuming there's coordination."

Two new organizations may help provide that coordination. America Votes was founded in July as a coalition of labor (including the AFL-CIO, AFSCME, and SEIU), environmentalist, civil rights, and community groups; it also includes new groups dedicated to voter education and mobilization, such as Partnership for America's Families and MoveOn.org. Some of the groups in America Votes have in turn formed America Coming Together (ACT), a new political action committee that will develop statewide plans for 17 key states. ACT can raise both regulated hard money for candidate contributions and

unregulated soft money, and it is expected to have a budget of \$75 million. Already it has raised \$30 million, including \$10 million from financier-philanthropist George Soros and \$8 million from labor unions.

Rosenthal, ACT's chief executive, calls it "the largest field operation this country has ever seen." Drawing on the lessons from labor's political efforts, it aims in large part at expanding the likely base for progressive Democratic candidates. "This is in some ways what the party could have been doing and should have been doing," Rosenthal said. "A lot of these voters feel the party and candidates haven't been talking to them."

This new organizational firepower will be available for whomever the Democrats nominate for president, as well as other candidates. For their part, Sweeney, McEntee, and other labor leaders have made it clear that any of the Democratic candidates would be preferable to Bush. "They've all passed the bar on how they address the issues," McEntee said.

Still, many union leaders have clear sympathies and opinions about who can be elected. At the AFL-CIO candidate forum in Chicago in August, both Rep. Dennis Kucinich and Rev. Al Sharpton stirred the crowd of 2,500 with their strong pro-union oratory. Many labor leaders privately applaud Kucinich as, in the words of one, "a working class hero," but neither he nor Sharpton is regarded as a viable candidate. Meanwhile, Sen. Joseph Lieberman, who drew boos at the forum for advocating school vouchers and is widely distrusted by industrial unions on trade issues, is clearly seen by many union leaders as the least compatible candidate ideologically, even though they supported him on the Gore ticket.

Only Rep. Dick Gephardt seems to have any chance of winning an endorsement from the AFL-CIO in the primary. This would require two-thirds of affiliate votes at a federation General Board meeting. By mid-August Gephardt had won endorsements from 11 unions, including the Teamsters, Steelworkers, and Machinists. But his chances for a federation endorsement are iffy:

The AFL-CIO has only endorsed two candidates in the primaries—Walter Mondale in 1984 and Al Gore in 2000—and some leaders are skeptical about making an early endorsement. "In a perfect world, we'd endorse a candidate," SEIU President Stern said, "but this isn't a perfect world."

Gephardt has a long history of friendly ties with organized labor, and for the industrial unions in particular, he has been one of their

strongest advocates of fair trade. He also won plaudits for being first out of the gate with a comprehensive plan for health care, the leading issue for many unions. Although he supported authorization of the war in Iraq, contrary to labor's stand, unions pay much more attention to economic issues. "He's not just labor's guy," Steelworkers President Leo Gerard said while endors-

ing him in August. "He's the heart and soul and conscience of working people."

Gephardt's support is not monolithic. In its survey of its base of political activists, the Steelworkers reported that Gephardt was the first choice in 70 percent of its locals, but he only squeaked ahead of former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean by a few percentage points in the overall tally, and Dean reportedly made a strongly favorable impression when he spoke to the union's executive board.

Time and again, union leaders explained their support for Gephardt in terms of loyalty to a familiar friend, an honorable if rare political value. "I'm a huge Dennis Kucinich fan," Steelworkers district director Jim Robinson explained after the endorsement, "but Dennis is an issues candidate. For the endorsement, Gephardt was absolutely the right choice. He stands for our values and issues and has stood for a long time. With me, loyalty counts, and he's been loyal to working people."

But loyalty may not reveal which is the best candidate. In preparation for a September meeting to consider the candidates, SEIU commissioned young filmmakers to capture each candidate from their viewpoints. It also planned to have each candidate spend an hour with a group of 20 to 30 union members to see if they could pass what Stern calls "the hang test"—relating well personally to union members, not just with labor leaders. "It's important that workers feel the candidate is someone they'd like to have dinner with or go bowling with," Stern said. "Electability is important, but likeability helps with electability, whether a candidate can relate on an everyday level."

Unions have devoted much effort to influencing the candidates' positions and strategies, with some success. Dean, Kucinich, Gephardt, Sen. John Edwards, and Kerry have all explicitly supported keeping employers neutral and recognizing unions simply by checking cards. As a result of union influence, even the candidates who supported NAFTA, the WTO, and permanent normal trade relations with China—with the exception of Lieberman—now talk about including labor and environmental protection in future trade agreements. SEIU has ads in airports and on television in Iowa and New Hampshire urging candidates to propose universal health care plans. Nearly all the candidates have offered broad but differing plans for greater access to insurance.

It isn't clear yet who has the best shot. At this point, Gephardt's campaign has not caught fire, but supporters argue that he is best suited to defeat Bush in crucial Midwestern industrial states. So far there has also been limited popular enthusiasm for Kerry, even though he leads in fundraising. He seems to have more support from non-industrial union strategists who think he might be best suited to contest Bush on national security issues and are least troubled by his free trade voting record. Dean has clearly generated popular excitement, taking the lead recently among likely caucus-goers—including union members—in Iowa, Gephardt's backyard. But despite being impressed with his message, some union leaders see him as an untested, unfamiliar candidate. With the field so fluid, union endorsements could make a difference, as they did in helping save Gore in 2000, but they also risk getting too far ahead of most union members and the dynamics of a still-young campaign, with union leaders backing a loser even among their own members.

In the end, unions don't want anything to distract from their transcendent goal. "We've got to beat Bush," Stern said. "That's the only issue here." ■

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# The USDA and the dying black farmer

By Damien Jackson



STASSI JACKSON

## Grant's Tomb

**T**he finest burial marker in Tillery, North Carolina does not rest in any of the rural African-American town's numerous cemeteries. The prominent marble tomb sits on an open stretch of land 50 yards east of an old farmhouse, and south of a broken-down barn housing an aged tractor.

"They were just as much in love right through their final days together," says a glassy-eyed Gary Grant, hovering at the tomb of his parents. He gently runs his fingertips along the marker's smooth speckled surface before running off a string of the couples' accomplishments. Quintessential pillars of the community, Matthew and Florenza Grant acquired hundreds of acres through farming in the '50s, and by 1964 owned and operated Grant's Barber Shop, Grant's Sinclair Service Station, and Tillery Casket Manufacturers—all while sending six kids to college.

"My parents were visionaries," Grant says. Their land and businesses were a testament to their "vision of freedom and independence."

But Grant's pride is rivaled by his bitterness. "I credit the United States Department of Agriculture with the murder of my mother and father," he says. Although his parents passed on five months apart in 2001 from a variety of illnesses, Grant attributes their declining health in later years to their struggle to protect their land from government foreclosure. "I use the word 'murder' because it is the only term that captures what was done to them," he insists. "I don't think that even we, as their children, realized the stress they endured over the 25-year period they dealt with the USDA."

Matthew Grant originally applied for a loan from the Farm Services Agency (FSA)—the local arm of the USDA formerly known as the Farmers Home Administration—to get through the drought conditions and low crop yields plaguing the South in the

'70s. However, like many black farmers, the elder Grant experienced problems his white peers didn't. Though his application was accepted, Matthew's loan was not processed by FSA agents until after planting season—a costly delay, given the seasonal nature of farming. And despite a strong farming history, substantial collateral, and his ownership of one of the biggest farms in Tillery, Matthew was inexplicably placed on a "supervised" farm account and received inadequate loans with high interest rates.

Such treatment from their local Halifax County FSA was common, says Grant, who heads the Black Farmers & Agriculturalists Association (BFAA), a national advocacy organization. "Black farmers with any kind of status were targeted."

Hampered by problematic loans, mounting debt, and bad weather, Matthew Grant was declared delinquent, and FSA initiated foreclosure. Although the agency customarily allowed three- to five-year deferments on loan repayments in disaster years, Matthew was never given that option. Instead, he was expected to repay farm loans totaling over \$200,000 within a year. "Apparently, [deferment] was made available to the white farmers, since they suffered as much crop loss as the black farmers," stated Matthew, in a 1993 complaint filed with the USDA. "Their operations survived, while black farmers went out of business."

Gary Grant says the government used "terrorist tactics" to evict his parents. One spring day in 1986, FSA agents arrived at the farm accompanied by federal marshals, showing their guns. Agents told his parents they had 30 minutes to collect personal belongings and leave. The officials left only after Matthew signed an agreement giving FSA clearance to sell the land. However, Matthew countered with a discrimination complaint against FSA that temporarily halted any transaction.

Though officials for the North Carolina and federal agriculture departments did not agree to be interviewed by *In These Times*, USDA statistics, settlements, and admissions of discrimination paint a damning picture of national policy toward black farmers. In 1920, 1 million black farmers owned 14 percent of the nation's farms. Today, 18,000 African-American farmers collectively own less than 1 percent of the country's farms. Although this loss of over 13 million acres is partially attributable to the general decline of agriculture, migration trends, and farmers' failure to pay taxes and make wills, the impact of discriminatory policies cannot be underestimated. A 1982 U.S. Civil Rights Commission report stated the USDA acted as a significant "catalyst in the decline of the black farmer." African-American farmers have disappeared at three times the rate of their white peers.

North Carolina has been hit particularly hard. While the total number of the state's farms decreased 5 percent between 1992 and 1997, the decline for black-owned farms was 18 percent. Between 1982 and 1992, North Carolina lost more black-owned farms than any state.

In 1997, black farmers filed a class-action discrimination suit against the USDA. Two years later the government settled, promising the majority of claimants \$50,000 tax-free, some debt relief, and prioritized loans. In the consent decree, Judge Paul Friedman stated that the USDA's long-standing discriminatory practices toward the black farmer were "unacceptable," and the settlement should "deter ... the same conduct in the future."

However, many farmers consider the settlement unacceptable. The amount of compensation—less than the cost of most top of the line tractors—was too little to restore the farms of those who'd lost them. And since the settlement, USDA figures show that 40 percent of claims have been rejected, payments have been made slowly, and, as a result, many farmers have lost additional land.

And some feel USDA intentions are clear. "It's pure racism," says Leonard Cooper, a former USDA county agriculture director from Warrenton, North Carolina. "If you've got land, you've got wealth. They want to keep you from thriving and owning land. This has been their goal—to derail you."

Though not going that far, former USDA Director of Civil Rights Lloyd Wright feels local racism and lack of federal oversight has had a similar effect. "Local officials had no fear of being reprimanded," says the 37-year veteran of the USDA. The Reagan administration dismantled the agency's civil rights division in 1983. The Clinton administration reinstated it in 1997 with Wright as its director. Wright acknowledges "there were many local officials who didn't want" African-Americans to own land, and that national officials "didn't do anything about it."

This was certainly not news to Matthew Grant. Though initially a part of the class-action suit, he was wary of how the government would remedy such a collective claim. He opted for a separate suit. In 1999, after incurring hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt, and struggling with severe health problems and a dysfunctional farm, Matthew was offered a settlement of \$400,000, along with relief from outstanding debts. He refused, considering the offer inadequate. Both he and Florenza died in

2001 without being compensated. The surviving children are still negotiating for a more equitable settlement.

"Back in the '70s, my father was grossing \$80,000 a year from the farm alone," says Grant. "Considering what we've been through, \$400,000 would barely pay the attorney fees and the gas we used running about trying to fight the government."

Government involvement in the town of Tillery wasn't equitable from the start. Initially known as the Tillery Resettlement, this cotton-clad community in northeastern North Carolina was one of 113 new farming projects created by Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, and the largest of eight Negro resettlements. At first the government intended to allocate Tillery's 18,000 acres of fertile soil to white farmers. But "they soon realized the town was set in a flood plain," says Grant. So the government chose Tillery as a place to resettle black farmers.

Despite occasional floods of the nearby Roanoke River, area farmers survived and flourished. By the early '60s, there were more than 300 black-owned farms in the town averaging 50 acres, raising mostly peanuts, cotton, corn, and livestock. "In them days, most everybody was farming," says 95-year-old Lillie Fenner, recalling the former productivity of black farmers in her native Halifax County. Such productivity allowed for a thriving, independent Tillery. Local institutions included seven churches, an auto shop, several social clubs, and two markets for local produce.

Unfortunately, discriminatory policy helped bring much of this to an end. "Now white folks run what farms are left," says Fenner. Few, if any, of the resettlement's 350 black families still farm today. Most of the original resettlement land is still owned by African-

Americans, but the vast majority of it is leased to white farmers.

Though many black farming communities across the country have gone the way of Tillery, they are not giving up without a fight. A number of organizations are seeking protections and compensation for the black farmer, including the Land Loss Prevention Project, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, and the Coordinating Council of Black Farm Groups.

As head of BFAA, Grant has spoken around the country, organized land-loss summits and protests, testi-

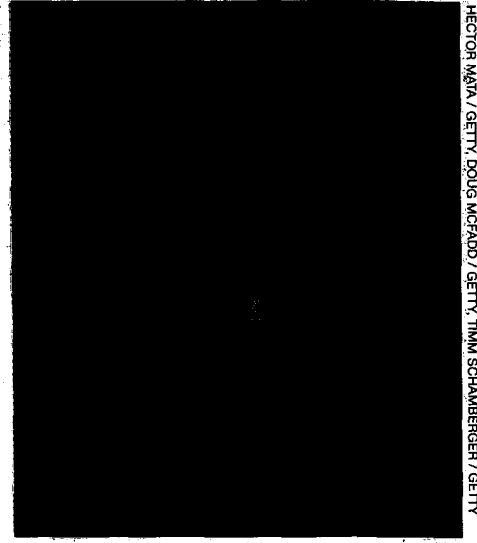
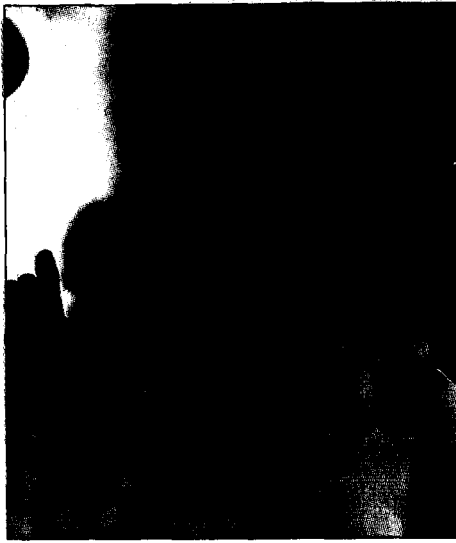
fied before Congress, and met two presidents. "We want reparations," says Grant, whose group's demands include more equitable compensation, full debt relief, and land provisions for affected farmers.

Grant's ongoing struggle has much to do with a command issued by his father 25 years ago. After Matthew lodged a complaint at the Halifax County FSA office, a white agent suggested the family take up a different occupation. Grant remembers his father counseling his children in the FSA parking lot. "We ain't ever going to crawl under no rock just because the white man says so," Matthew said, teary-eyed. "Black folks built this country with a lot of blood and tears."

"You deserve better," Matthew told his family. "Don't stop until you get what you deserve." ■

*Damien Jackson is a 2002 recipient of the George Washington Williams Fellowship for Journalists of Color, a project of the Independent Press Association.*

## **According to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, the USDA was a "catalyst in the decline of the black farmer."**



HECTOR MATA / GETTY, DOUG McFADD / GETTY, TIMM SCHAMBERGER / GETTY

# GENDER TROUBLE

*How far can identity politics really take us?*

The latest evidence of their success is all around us. From the Supreme Court decision on homosexual privacy to the “metrosexual” makeovers of straight guys by the five queens from Bravo’s *Queer Eye*, America is undergoing what *The Daily Show* terms a “gaysplosion.”

And yet, for years, the movements for women’s and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered rights have been experiencing empty nest syndrome. Members of previously oppressed populations have benefited from social reforms, only to turn their backs on the coalitions that won them new freedoms. Too often, shared struggles have disintegrated into shared product tastes and therapeutic constructs.

These movements have also lost momentum by regularly performing their own purges, shedding members that they find ideologically distasteful, and generating ever-more-narrowly defined special interest groups in their wake. Focused on policing their boundaries and warding off bigots, feminists and queer activists have often missed the chance to connect acceptance of a wide range of behaviors and styles to larger struggles for equality and tolerance.

To attract and retain a new generation of activists, progressive movements need to learn to bend with gender—both to serve as a safe haven and to provide a strong platform for those fighting for less-restrictive roles for both men and women.

While homosexuality is one of the most visible gender-bending behaviors, it’s by no means the only route to social disapproval. In the past decade alone, the media has propagated wave after wave of gender panic, reporting on riot grrls and *Fight Club* boys, lesbian and then geek chic, soccer hooligans and moms, trench-coated school bullies, and female high-school hazers. Each of

these media moments picks a point from the continuum of expected behavior for members of each gender and subjects those people who deviate too far from the mean to unflattering scrutiny.

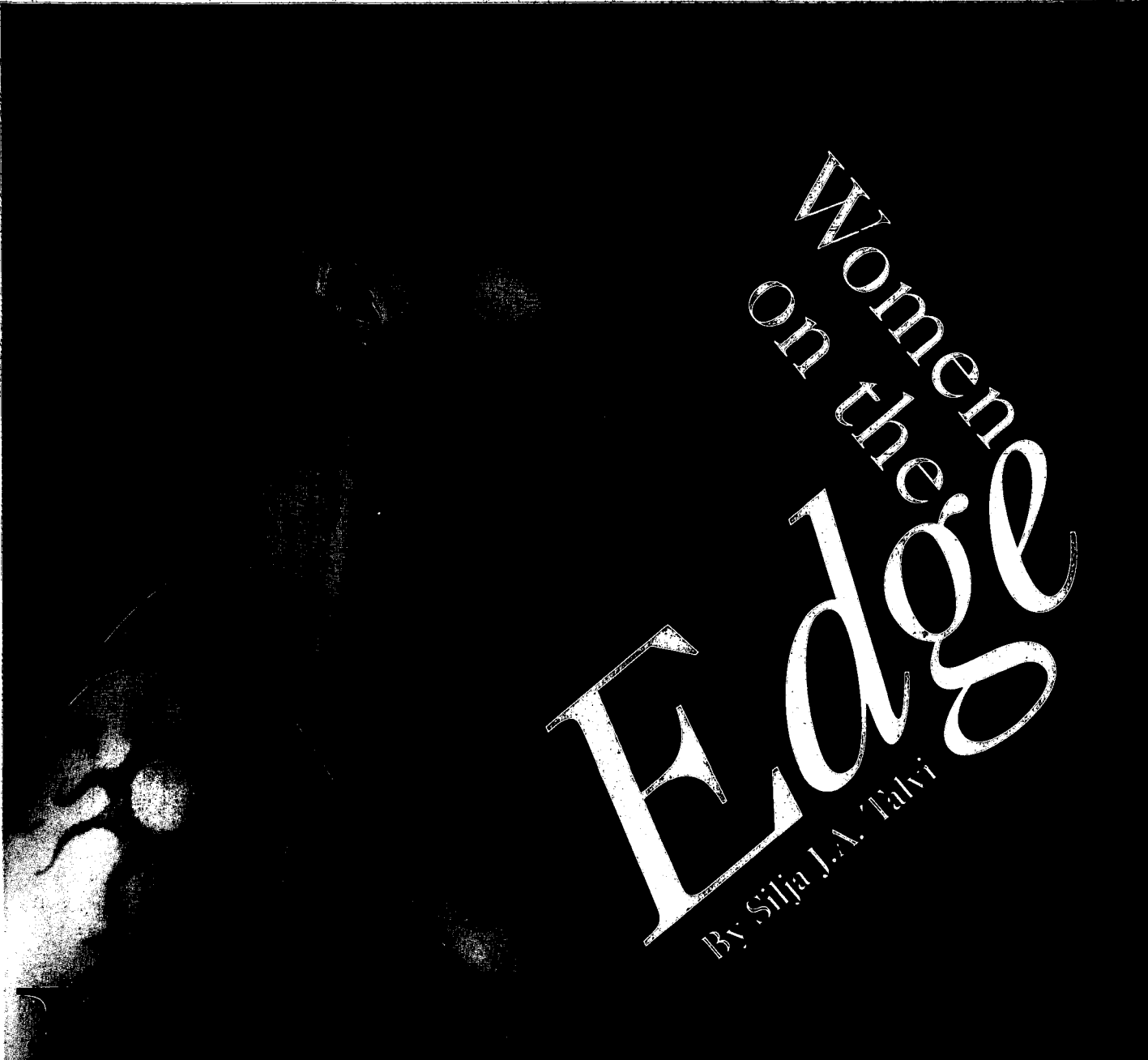
Many campus radicals are ready for a new framework. As Riki Wilchins explains in the recent anthology *GenderQueer*, young transgender activists see the struggle for freedom from gender constraints as the next civil rights battle.

“Gender itself remains invisible as a progressive issue,” Wilchins writes. “Maybe it’s time to acknowledge gender stereotypes as a problem we all share, a central concern, a way to come together: a human rights issue for us all.”

In this issue, we explore some current frontiers for women’s and queer rights activists. Silja J.A. Talvi writes about women who are finding strength in previously-stigmatized identities; Elizabeth Ehrenberg writes about new sex-positive groups on college campuses and Peter Dreier asks when the United States will see openly gay men in Major League Baseball.

But questions remain. Will the gender pioneers who explore and tame these frontiers experience their success as personal victories, rather than political ones? Can “identity politics” motivate and connect those who no longer conceive of themselves as victims? And can progressives find ways to re-engage the country’s political imagination by espousing a new “hetero” politics: an activism that agitates for heterogeneous, not homogenous, communities?

—Jessica Clark



# Women on the Edge

By Silja J.A. Talvi

**I**n the early part of the 21st century, American women find themselves at a powerful, transitional place in the history of gender and sexual identity.

The third wave of feminism is already here, as the brave offspring of the women's liberation struggle of the '60s and '70s. In each permutation, feminism has more broadly represented American women's concerns, with the third wave speaking out most strongly about the inextricable intersections of racism, classism, homophobia, and sexism.

It's no exaggeration to say that we've come a long way. The first wave was centered completely around the educational, employment, property, and voting rights of Euro-American middle-class women in the 19th and early 20th centuries. While Sojourner Truth's outrage at the exclusivity of the suffrage movement, her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech from 1851, still resonates for many women of color, the movement continues to evolve, a dynamic collective effort toward the complete political, social,

and economic equality of all women in society.

As feminism reshapes itself to meet the needs of the women who lay claim to it, increasing numbers of girls and women find themselves exploring their own boundaries—whether by intent, accident, or circumstance.

These are the women "on the edge," pushing and pulling at the inner and outermost definitions of femininity, feminism, and womanhood. In doing so, they are rebelling not just against the dominant culture, but against a feminist culture that can be just as proscriptive in defining what is "normal."

Women exploring their external edges include those who pursue tattooing and body modification, those who embrace sexually "deviant" practices, and those who altogether reject mainstream concepts of beauty, behavior, and desirable body size. Women grappling with their internal edges, on the other hand, include those women who are coping creatively with mental illnesses ranging from depression to bipolar disorders.

**R**ivka Solomon is the editor of *That Takes Ovaries! Bold Females and Their Brazen Acts*. Published in 2002, Solomon's book has generated more than 70 open mics, dramatizations, and readings, around the country. Held by local women, these performances are often fundraisers for local girls' groups and organizations working to end abuses against women.

"Once again, we're surging up to demand change," says Solomon. "But this time [much of] the change is happening on a personal level."

And the personal, to revisit the second wave feminist phrase, is still political. Like many who tell their bold stories in Solomon's *That Takes Ovaries*, these are young women who refuse to allow anything (or anyone) to dictate to them how they should look, act, or think. They are not dropping out from society or tuning out the concept of feminism, but instead continuing to engage with their communities on their own terms.

**I**n recent years, several books have helped to posit new possibilities for what constitutes a "normal" woman's appearance, sexual expression, body size, and even her sanity.



Phyllis Chesler wrote the pioneering 1972 book *Women and Madness*.

Those works have included Paula Kamen's *Her Way: Young Women Remake the Sexual Revolution*, in which the author delves deeply into women's sexual agency and diverging and evolving concepts of sexual satisfaction, and Caroline Knapp's *Appetites: Why Women Want*, which explores tensions between feminism and anorexia. Margot Mifflin's *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* and Ophira Edut's *Body Outlaws: Young Women Write About Body Image and Identity* both posit women's bodies as instruments of rebellion and resistance, whether through skin and body modification, color or hair texture, or the proportions of noses, butts, and bodies.

In the realm of mental illness, it was Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness* in 1972 that broke fresh ground by introducing a new lens through which to view women and insanity. Chesler's work intro-

duced the idea that the psychology of women—from varied class and ethnic backgrounds—had been strongly shaped by patriarchal culture and consciousness. Mental illness, as Chesler argued convincingly (albeit to the outrage of many of her professional peers), could be seen as a manifestation of resistance.

# Sex and the Student Body

By Elizabeth Ehrenberg

My first week of college I enjoyed my first dose of smut. The source? *Squirm: The Art of Campus Sex*, Vassar's erotic magazine, which is replete with salacious prose, poetry, and photography created by and for the student body.

*Squirm* started four years ago when a group of Vassar students decided to create "a project that would start dialogue [and] act as a forum for queer/sex-positive ideas," says editor Chrys Fawley.

Since official school funds were scarce at first, the staff turned to fundraisers such as a sex toy auction and a "masturbate-a-thon," that would simultaneously create sex-positive spaces for student expression. Last year the magazine finally received partial Student Association funding but there is no evidence that such popular events will dwindle.

And *Squirm* is not alone. As Katha Pollitt noted in a recent article for *Le Monde*, "On the university campus today sex-positivity rules."

Swarthmore publishes its own erotic magazine, *Untouchables*. Oberlin throws an annual all campus party called "Safer Sex Night," which includes everything from free condoms

and tube to demonstrations of sex. A group of Smith students started a porn web site called [smithgirls.com](http://smithgirls.com), and [geaskalife.com](http://geaskalife.com), a popular sexual health Q&A forum, originated at Columbia University.

Sex-positive culture has also surfaced at public universities, yet funding at these institutions has become a point of political contention. In response to events at Penn State, which included a lecture by transgendered author Patrick Califia-Rice, State Rep. John A. Lawless tried to block funding and complained that "[these] events shouldn't be occurring."

College campuses have long been positively rife with sex, but what is distinct about sex-positivity is that it grows out of two other movements: the feminist health movement and AIDS education campaigns. In the '60s and '70s the women's movement began pioneering a sexual revolution. The movement emphasized



both women's health and pleasure. By the early '90s, as awareness of AIDS, safer sex education became a mainstay on many college campuses. Contemporary sex-positivity echoes these developments, promoting both sexual pleasure and physical and emotional safety.

Sex-positive groups are fundamentally queer-friendly. The sexual revolution of the women's movement endorsed non-procreative sex such as masturbation and lesbianism while AIDS activism brought

homosexual practices into a more public discourse. Contemporary sex-positive culture also embraces emerging identities like bisexual and transgender.

Many at *Squirm* view the magazine as radical. And it is, considering it was the first of what is still only a handful of campus sex publications. But if it were not for the activism of my parents' generation—the same people who are often shocked by *Squirm's* existence—my own experience would not have been possible. ■

Since *Women and Madness*, books like Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind*, Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, Lizzie Simon's *Detour*, and Caroline Kettlewell's *Skin Game* have illuminated the inner realities of women dealing with bipolar disorders, depression, and self-mutilation.

Although nearly all of these works have revolved around middle- to upper-class Euro-American women, they have nonetheless helped to remove some of the stigma and explain the survival instincts actively underlie self-destructive acts like the cutting of one's own skin.

But since the publication of Chesler's pivotal work, few works authored by psychiatric professionals (with the notable exception of Bruce Levine's *Commonsense Rebellion*) have framed mental illness in the context of resistance and power.

For women like the Seattle-based 34-year-old Maya Hurston\*, rebellion is what it's all about.

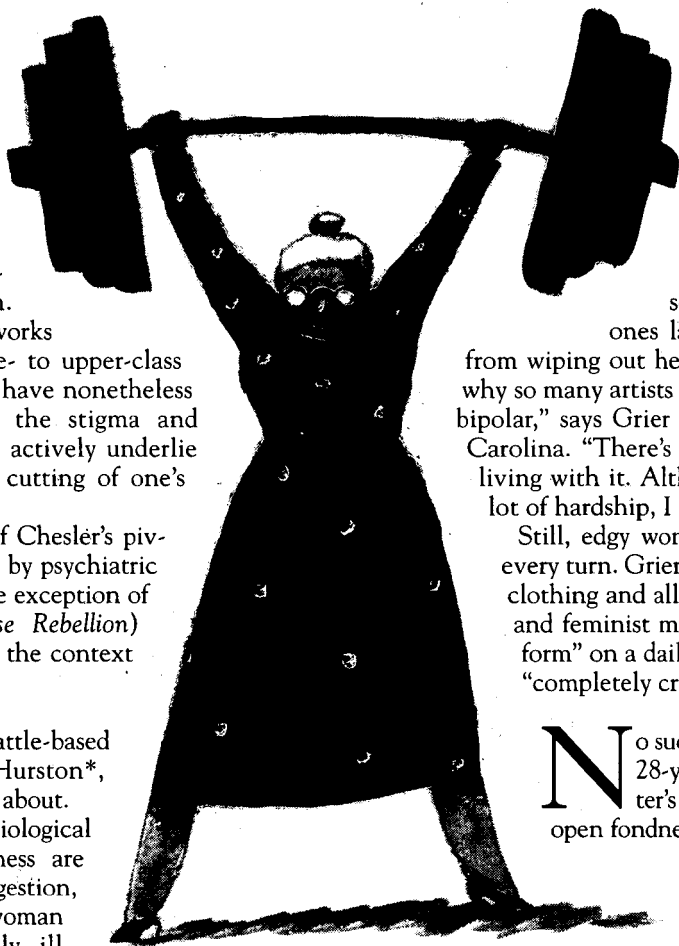
Chemical imbalances and biological predisposition to mental illness are real, but so is the power of suggestion, Hurston says. Tell a girl or a woman that she's crazy or mentally ill enough times, she adds, and she'll eventually start to let the concept define who she is.

Sexually molested from birth by multiple abusers, Hurston began to hear voices as a child. As she explains it, her mind became like "Swiss cheese," with lots of holes into which she could compartmentalize her many life experiences. When she was eventually diagnosed with Multiple Personality Disorder, Hurston's family finally had something to hold onto: She was "crazy."

Hurston ended up a teen mom and drug dealer in a near-decade-long abusive relationship. Like her mother had once done (albeit with different intentions), her husband also told her she was crazy, all the while beating Hurston black and blue.

It took years of therapy—and, in particular, one female therapist telling her that the disassociation had been a way of surviving extreme circumstances—for things to click into place.

"I got strong, and I got tired of being a victim," says Hurston, who now works as a university fellow, racial justice activist, wife, and mother. On the side, Hurston is also a marijuana dealer. Most of her buyers are other professional women. That's the "edge" that she wants in her life, and she'll be damned if anyone calls



her crazy for it. It's Hurston's way of staying real, and thumbing her nose at the war on drugs.

For 26-year-old freelance writer Beth Grier\*, living with her bipolar disorder has also meant defying the odds to make a successful career for herself. For Grier, a very low therapeutic dose of Lithium has prevented her from severe manic episodes (two previous ones landed her in the hospital), but not

from wiping out her creativity. "I think there's a reason why so many artists and thinkers throughout history were bipolar," says Grier from her home in Charlotte, North Carolina. "There's a certain intensity and vividness to living with it. Although being bipolar has caused me a lot of hardship, I wouldn't choose not to be bipolar."

Still, edgy women face challenges and obstacles at every turn. Grier, who prefers to dress in funky vintage clothing and allies herself politically with progressive and feminist movements, feels the "pressure to conform" on a daily basis for fear of being stigmatized as "completely crazy."

No such fears resonate for Renee Klorman, a 28-year-old Brooklyn resident with a master's degree in women's history—and an open fondness for bondage and sexual submission.

Klorman attended an all-women's college and worked for the radical lesbian feminist publication *Off Our Backs* as well as for SEICUS,



'[Woman's] development, her freedom, her independence, must come from and through herself. That is, by trying to learn the meaning and substance of life in all its complexities, by freeing herself from the fear of public opinion and public condemnation.'

*Emma Goldman, 1917*

the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. "My entire resume is feminist," she says.

A series of loving, supportive relationships with women confirmed Klorman's lesbianism, but she initially pushed down her interest in bondage/domination/sadomachism (BDSM) because of widespread disapproval in lesbian and feminist circles.

"I finally realized that being submissive in this one aspect of my life is a total turn-on for me. In my role as a submissive, I define exactly what I'm interested in and articulate that. The privilege that I now have of feeling comfortable engaging in BDSM and not feeling ashamed about it is an amazing thing," says Klorman, who manages the woman-owned sex toy store Toys in Babeland in New York City. "I give major 'props' to the fem-

\* Names have been changed to protect privacy.

inists and advocates of gay rights who have fought for every ounce of change we've gotten."

Klorman's particular edge isn't just enjoying BDSM; it's that she wants to be "dominated" by one specific man. "I only date women, sleep with women," she says. "But I consider it subversive that I'm queer, and I do this with a guy."

BDSM practitioners play—emotionally and physically—with boundaries of gender, power, and dominance. These are, perhaps not so coincidentally, the kinds of concepts that feminists have been analyzing and dissecting for decades. But within the more mainstream feminist movement, BDSM, and particularly sexual submission, is often thought of as a regrettable byproduct of internalized sexism—even as a manifestation of self-hatred.

Why should gay men have a culture that supports access to these kinds of sex play, asks Klorman, while lesbians and feminists are more likely to frown on such expression than to support the pursuit of a woman's sexual satisfaction in whatever form it might arrive?

She finds immense power in submission and the level of trust necessary to make a "scene" safe and mutually pleasurable. The experience is as empowering as it is for her precisely because she has the ability to bend, exaggerate, or trespass existing gender/sex role boundaries.

The intersections of feminism and BDSM are not isolated to these kinds of personal epiphanies. In Seattle, for instance, *The*

*Stranger's* popular dominatrix-feminist columnist, "Mistress Matisse," is organizing an all-female BDSM convention for the fall entitled "Wicked Womyn," and last year's woman-authored film, *Secretary*, brought an intelligent treatment of the complex dynamics of female sexual submission to the screen.

The "edginess" of women has simultaneously generated strong interest in big-budget Hollywood. Just take a look at the plethora of female-empowered television shows in recent years—*Xena*, *Buffy*, *Dark Angel*, and *Alias*—and blockbuster movies like *Charlie's Angels* and *Tomb Raider*.



'When I rummage in my own mind... I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be oneself than anything else.'

*Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, 1929*

"[T]hese women are all ass-kicking," says author Paula Kamen. "But there are limits to this 'movement,' often taking place within a narrow set of boundaries."

Those limits have almost everything to do with appearance and calculated omission of socially progressive themes. To put it another way, small waists, light skin, silky hair, cleavage, and breathy one-liners dripping with sexuality are an easy sell. When today's studios can produce women doing aerial kick flips and utilize scripts and screenplays that skirt to any real political implications, they have no problems packaging femme fatales or busty superheroes.

Kamen says that while mainstream acceptance of edgy women may be slow in coming, she still sees young women making a difference with an "audacious sense of entitlement."

Consider the advent of the new publication *Fierce Magazine*, whose targeted readers are "women who are too bold for boundaries."

"*Fierce* is for all the tattooed and pierced rebels who are unafraid to throw the rules back in the world's face, just as we're for the quiet agitators who fit right in and urge for change with the softness of your voice," reads the magazine's Web site. "*Fierce* is feminist, it's womanist, and it's beyond these words. *Fierce* stands for all women everywhere defining themselves, coming up with new language that moves beyond politics, beyond color, beyond class."

And in this sense, women exploring their internal and external edges constitute a social force to be reckoned with—a nascent cultural and political phenomenon of women who refuse to dull down, suppress, or even medicate themselves into normalcy.

"What's the link between the woman who boldly fights for social justice and one who boldly has fun?" asks Solomon. "Both are acting powerfully, because each is rejecting preconceived notions of how females should behave. Each [woman] is irreverently saying, 'No way I'm accepting limits placed on me.'" ■

Silja J.A. Talvi is an award-winning journalist and essayist based in Seattle. She received her master's degree in Women Studies from San Francisco State University a decade ago, and still thinks about women all the time.

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# Is Baseball Ready for a Gay Jackie Robinson?

By Peter Dreier

**R**ichard Greenberg's *Take Me Out*, which won this year's Tony award for best Broadway play, tells the story of a celebrated New York City baseball hero who announces that he's gay. In reality, no gay major league player has ever publicly acknowledged his homosexuality while still in uniform. How close are we to real life imitating art?

The U.S. Supreme Court's June ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas* is one indication that Americans are increasingly accepting of homosexuals. Out-of-the-closet gays and lesbians have been elected to Congress and are prominent in the entertainment industry, business, journalism, and the clergy. Many big cities and suburbs have openly gay schoolteachers. TV sit-coms have openly gay characters and the *New York Times* now includes same-sex wedding announcements.

Certain spheres of American life, however, have resisted change. The military has infamously clung to its code of "don't ask, don't tell." Professional sports leagues may not enforce such a policy overtly, but in practice its force is equally felt, especially for male athletes.

It is easier for athletes in individual sports—like tennis star Martina Navratilova and diver Greg Louganis—to come out of the closet than players on team sports. According to conventional wisdom, a gay teammate would threaten the macho camaraderie that involves constant butt-slapping and the close physical proximity of the locker room. So while there are no doubt homosexuals currently playing in the National Football League, National Basketball Association, and Major League Baseball, they are deep in the closet.

Three former NFL players have come out after they retired. David Kopay, who hid his homosexuality while playing as an NFL running back for nine years in the '60s and '70s, came out in 1975 and was the first major athlete to do so. Roy Simmons, an offensive guard for the Giants and the Redskins from 1979

to 1983, revealed his sexual orientation during an appearance on *The Phil Donahue Show* in 1992. Esera Tuaolo, a 280-pound defensive lineman who played nine years in the NFL, came out last year, three years after he retired. Revealing his secret on HBO's *Real Sports* and in *ESPN Magazine*, he acknowledged that while playing in the NFL he lived with his partner, with whom he now has two adopted children, but felt compelled to keep it a secret. His teammates routinely told gay jokes in the locker room, he explained. "They made me go further and further into depression, further and further into shame."

Only two gay former major league baseball players, Glenn Burke and Billy Bean (not to be confused with former player and current Oakland A's General Manager Billy Beane), have come out of the closet. Burke, who played for the Dodgers and Oakland A's from 1976 to 1979, came out to family and friends in 1975 but lived in fear that his teammates and managers would discover his sexual orientation.

In his autobiography, *Out at Home*, published posthumously, Burke revealed that the Dodgers' management offered to pay for a luxurious honeymoon if he would agree to a "marriage of convenience" to conceal his homosexuality. When he refused, he was traded to the A's. The A's manager Billy Martin made public statements about not wanting a homosexual in his clubhouse, a clear reference to Burke.

Frustrated, Burke retired and kept his homosexuality secret until he cooperated for a 1982 article in *Inside Sports* magazine. Burke continued to play competitive sports. He won medals in the 100- and 200-meter sprints in the 1982 Gay Games and played basketball in the 1986 Gay Games. Later, Burke struggled with drug abuse, homelessness, and AIDS, from which he eventually died in 1995.

While Bean played for the Tigers, Dodgers, and Padres from 1987 to 1995, he pretended to date women, furtively went to gay bars, and hid his gay lover from teammates and fans. In his recently

published memoir, *Going the Other Way*, Bean recounts how Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda constantly made homophobic jokes, even as Lasorda's gay son was dying from AIDS.

Bean quit when he could no longer stand living a double life. When he came out publicly in 1999, his story made front-page news in the *New York Times*. Like Kopay, since coming out, he has become active in gay rights causes.

In his autobiography, *Behind the Mask*, Dave Pallone—a major league umpire who was quietly fired in 1988 after rumors about his sexual orientation circulated in the baseball world—contends that there are enough gay major league players to create an All Star team. Indeed, because everyone assumes that there are gay ballplayers, the game of trying to identify them sometimes leads to bizarre rumors and denials. Last year, for example, *Details* magazine quoted New York Mets manager Bobby Valentine as saying that professional baseball is “probably ready for an openly gay player,” adding, “the players are diverse enough now that I think they could handle it.”

Then, *New York Post* gossip columnist Neal Travis speculated that Valentine's comments were a “pre-emptory strike” meant to pave the way for one of his players to come out. “There is a persistent rumor around town,” Travis wrote, “that one Mets star who spends a lot of time with pretty models in clubs is actually gay and has started to think about declaring his sexual orientation.”

The rumors focused on the Mets' star catcher Mike Piazza, who felt compelled to hold an impromptu press conference. “I'm not gay,” Piazza announced. “I'm heterosexual.” But he also said he believed that players were ready to accept an openly gay teammate. “In this day and age,” Piazza told reporters, “it's irrelevant. I don't think it would be a problem at all.”

Perhaps not. But at least one team and one player has to be willing to break the barrier, just as the Brooklyn Dodgers and Jackie Robinson did more than 50 years ago.

The breaking of baseball's color line was not simply an act of individual heroism on Robinson's part. As historian Jules Tygiel recounts in *Baseball's Great Experiment*, it took an inter-racial protest movement among liberal and progressive activists, as well as the Negro press, who had agitated for years to integrate major league baseball before Dodgers General Manager Branch Rickey signed Robinson to a contract in 1945, then brought him up to the majors two years later.

Rickey, aware of the many great black ballplayers in the Negro Leagues, believed that the integration of baseball would improve the overall level of play. He also believed—correctly, it turned out—that black baseball fans would flock to Ebbets Field to watch black athletes play on the same field as whites.

Robinson did more than integrate major league baseball. The dignity with which he handled his encounters with racism among fellow players and fans—on the diamond as well as in hotels, restaurants, trains, and other public places—drew public attention to the issue, stirred the consciences of many whites, and gave black Americans a tremendous boost of pride, paving the way for the civil rights movement a decade later. Indeed, Martin Luther King once told pitcher Don Newcombe—who along with Roy Campanella followed Robinson from the Negro Leagues to the Brooklyn Dodgers—“You'll never know what you and Jackie

and Roy did to make it possible for me to do my job.”

Major league sports and the military were two of the first national institutions to be racially integrated, but they are among the last to openly accept gays into their ranks. Some managers, fellow players and sportswriters know the identity of at least a few gay major leaguers, but so far no gay player has been involuntarily outed.

No doubt a few of MLB's gay players have considered coming out publicly while still in uniform. Certainly there are gay players in college or in the minor leagues who fantasize about being the gay Jackie Robinson. But so far they have calculated that the personal or financial costs outweigh the benefits. They fear being ostracized by fellow players, harassed by fans, and perhaps traded—or dropped entirely—by their team's management. There is a strong fundamentalist Christian current within major league baseball, which could make life uncomfortable for the first “out” player. That, in turn, could affect his ability to play to his potential.

And, initially at least, an openly gay player might lose some of his commercial endorsements.

Of course, if several gay ballplayers came out simultaneously, no single player would have to confront the abuse (as well as bask in the cheers) on his own, as Robinson did.

In 1947, Rickey feared that if Robinson turned out to be a bust as a major league player, it would set back the cause of ending baseball apartheid for at least several years. The same may be true today in terms of the first out-of-the-closet ballplayer. A player of All Star stature would make things easier for

everyone who followed.

Asked about the likelihood of a gay player coming out of the closet, Philadelphia Phillies manager Larry Bowa told the Associated Press: “If it was me, I'd probably wait until my career was over. I'm sure it would depend on who the player was. If he hits .340, it probably would be easier than if he hits .220.”

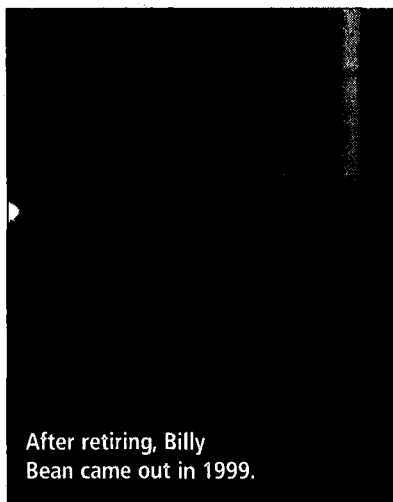
Baseball executives certainly recognize that there are plenty of gay—or otherwise sympathetic—baseball fans who would spin the turnstiles to cheer for a homosexual player. Lesbians now constitute a significant segment of the audience for women's pro basketball.

In 2001, ESPN conducted a poll, asking: “If a player on your favorite professional sports team announced he or she was gay or lesbian, how would this affect your attitude towards that player?” Only 17 percent said they would turn against the player, 63 percent said it would make no difference, and 20 percent said they would become a bigger fan.

Although baseball no longer has the monopoly on fans' affections that it did in Robinson's day, it still plays a central role in our culture. As Robinson showed, once that barrier is shattered, it will have profound ripple effects, not only in sports but in many aspects of American society.

However it happens, expect to see an openly gay major league baseball player by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. ■

*Peter Dreier is a professor of politics and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy program, at Occidental College in Los Angeles. He is the co-author of Place Matters: Metro Politics for the 21st Century (University Press of Kansas, 2001) and of The Next LA: The Struggle for a Livable City, which will be published next year by University of California Press.*



After retiring, Billy Bean came out in 1999.

MARICE JOHN BAND / KRT

# Uneasy Alliance

By Jehangir Pocha  
BOMBAY, INDIA

India's deepening ties with Iran could redraw the political map of Central Asia, even as the Bush administration commences what some say is an attempt at regime change in Tehran.

On May 18, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld warned Iran that it would be "dealt with aggressively" if it continued its alleged support of Islamic extremists in Afghanistan and Iraq. A day later in New Delhi, Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes met with Iranian Ambassador Siavosh Yaghoobi and offered to cooperate with Iran in all strategic areas, including defense. Saying that unilateralism posed a great danger to the world, Fernandes affirmed India's commitment to a strategic and military partnership with Iran.

The move capped a series of quiet diplomatic maneuvers that have complicated security equations in Central and South Asia. Even as Washington has been building military ties with India, which it sees as a natural ally and potential counter to China, New Delhi has been forging a close relationship with Iran, which President Bush has declared a part of the "axis of evil."

On January 26, in the shadow of the then-looming Iraq war, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami was the guest of honor at India's grand Republic Day parade. During the visit the two nations signed a strategic cooperation agreement that set in place energy and military deals valued at more than \$25 billion.

*Jane's Defense Weekly* and *Defense News* reported that India and Iran signed a secret accord that gives India access to Iranian bases in the event of war with Pakistan. Both governments deny there is such a deal, but India is building a new port at Chahbahar, Iran, a project that is being closely watched by foreign powers.

In March, India and Iran conducted their first-ever joint naval exercises. Such close military cooperation between India and Iran is "unprecedented," says Rahul Bedi, New Delhi-based correspondent for *Jane's Defense Weekly*. India and Iran were on opposite sides during the Cold War, and later their relations were compromised by Iran's fraternal ties with Islamic Pakistan.

Iran is "focused on breaking out of the pincer" that the United States' continuing trade embargo and its expanded military presence in the region have created, Bedi says. "Iran is keen to acquire new energy markets," he adds. Militarily, it "is seeking to build up its missile and military software capabilities. It has also acquired four Russian Kilo-class submarines, and, like India, it also has some aging MiGs that need upgrading. Given the common equipment, [the Iranians] are keen to have India support and train them."

But the deepest concern to the U.S. and Pakistani governments is the possibility of Indo-Iranian nuclear cooperation. India and Russia have a long history of nuclear cooperation, and



## Iran and India move closer

Russia is the key player in Iran's controversial bid to expand its German-built light water reactor at Bushehr. According to the CIA, Iran is also operating a heavy water plant at Arak and a uranium enrichment facility at Natanz.

In 1983 India helped Iran restart its nuclear program, and in 1988 New Delhi almost sold Iran a 10-megawatt nuclear reactor for its Ma'alleh Kelayah facility near Qazvin on the Caspian Sea. When that deal fell through, the CIA reported that India helped Iran set up a manufacturing plant for phosphorus pentasulfide, a nerve gas precursor, at the same site. In 1996, the CIA also reported that India had provided Iran with technology that could be used to make biological weapons. When three Indian companies approached German suppliers to buy the equipment needed for the manufacture of Sarin and Tabun nerve agents, German intelligence traced the end-user to Iran.

Anthony H. Cordesman, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and author of the report *Iran and Nuclear Weapons*, writes that Tehran is seeking increased nuclear cooperation with India and other suppliers because the United States has nixed its nuclear cooperation with South Africa, Ukraine, Argentina, and China. Iran's options were further squeezed when Russia supported the Bush administration's call for intrusive inspections of Iran's nuclear facilities.

But even if Indo-Iranian nuclear cooperation seems logical, Bedi argues, it is unlikely. "India is not a proliferating country," he says. "This fact is well established." Indian government officials enjoy pointing out that it was the United States that built

Iran's first nuclear plant at Amirabad, and then turned a Nelson's eye when the Shah initiated a low-grade weapons research program in 1967.

## Shifting sands

Instead Bedi, like many analysts, sees an Indo-Iranian alliance as a stabilizing force in the region and in accord with the long-term interests of the United States.

"India and Iran's cooperation began in Afghanistan, where their support was key in overthrowing the [Pakistan-supported] Taliban," Bedi says. "Their continued cooperation will promote the stabilization and development of Central Asia. Perhaps India can also act as a bridge between Iran and the United States."

For now it is a bridge that the United States is unlikely to cross. Though the administration's initial reaction to burgeoning Indo-Iranian ties was circumspect, and President Bush couched his concerns in soft language, the war in Iraq has changed attitudes.

Anxiety over Iran's alleged attempts to create an Islamic republic in Shia-dominated Iraq has once again flared tensions with Washington. An increased U.S. presence in the region is also making both Iran and India uncomfortable.

In addition to Iran's obvious concerns, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has also voiced unease over the United States' aggressive posture in the region. Speaking at a rally in Kashmir, he pointed to American intervention in Iraq as a reason for India and Pakistan to get serious about settling their dispute over the troubled state.

Syed Geelani, chairman of the Jamaat-e Islami, a separatist political party in Kashmir, says that the driving force behind the recent thaw in Indo-Pak relations "is not the desire to give Kashmiris their rights but the desire to keep the United States from meddling here in the name of terrorism."

Publicly, both Iran and India have been trying to allay U.S. fears over their new relationship. "The text of our agreement clearly states that it is not directed against any other nation," Ambassador Yaghoobi says of the rationale behind India and Iran's strategic cooperation.

India's foreign ministry says it refuses to see international relations as a zero-sum game. "The United States has its relationship with Pakistan, which is separate from our own relationship with them," says Navtej Sarna, the ministry spokesperson. "Our relationship with Iran is peaceful and largely economic. We do not expect that it would affect our continuing good relations with the United States."

Diplomatic and official sources in India agree. They say the Indo-Iranian partnership stems from both nations' longtime allergy toward the Saudi-funded fundamentalism gripping their common neighbor, Pakistan.

"India's new ties with Iran make it more, not less, valuable to Washington," says Stanley Weiss, chairman of Business Executives for National Security, which wants President George W. Bush to "join New Delhi and Tehran in an axis of friendship."

"Both countries played a vital role in creating and sustaining the U.S.-backed government in Kabul, [and] the United States will need Iran to help stabilize a post-Saddam Iraq," Weiss says. "New Delhi will also be an increasing asset to Washington thanks to its military partnership with Israel."

But India and Iran's growing involvement in Afghan politics, along with energy-hungry India's establishment of its first over-

seas military base at Farkhor in Tajikistan, indicate both nations are pursuing their own interests in oil- and gas-rich Central Asia.

There is also a deeper, more profound layer to the relationship between India and Iran. Both nations see themselves as great civilizational forces and are eager to restore their primacy in the world.

As neighboring countries, India and Iran have deep historical ties dating to the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great, which included parts of India. India's latter-day Muslim rulers were of Persian descent, and Urdu, a mix of Hindi and Persian, is widely spoken in India. Iran's Sufi Islam is substantially influenced by Indian thought, and many of India's religious and cultural traditions owe great debts to Iran.

When discussing Indo-Iranian ties officials from both countries often allude to these civilizational bonds. "We are from the same motherland and share deep cultural links," Yaghoobi says. "Though political differences separated us during the Cold War, President Khatami and Prime Minister Vajpayee have brought us back to our natural relationship."

## Pipeline for peace?

Clearly, the public aspects of the Indo-Iranian accord envisage widespread economic and strategic cooperation. Iran will provide India with 5 million tons of liquefied natural gas a year for the next 25 years, giving it much-needed revenue. Significantly, Indian firms will upgrade Iranian oil refineries and be granted concessions in Iranian oil fields. The possibility of constructing a \$4 billion gas pipeline from Iran to India—possibly via Pakistan, if politics permit—is also being pursued.

"In effect, all this means that India is now a member of OPEC," Yaghoobi says.

The January agreement also includes plans for India to construct a new road and rail network in Iran. Both countries will use this as a trade and transit route to get their goods into Russia and Europe.

Since Pakistan's involvement will make both the pipeline and transit route much easier to build and operate, observers on all sides hope these projects will provide a strong incentive for India and Pakistan to resolve their disputes.

"This is a pipeline for peace," Yaghoobi says. In the recent rapprochement with India, he explains, "Pakistan has given emphasis to commercial aspects of their bilateral relations. ... Both need cheap energy, and so we hope this project will help them resolve their issues."

"In the long run we hope for an economic bloc of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and maybe Central Asia," Yaghoobi says. "Currently there is a gap between the Association of South East Asian Nations and the EU. As the only two democracies in the region, India and Iran can start a partnership to fill this gap."

How the United States will accommodate such Indo-Iranian visions of a strategic region rich in energy and linking Europe with Asia is a prime example of what of Kennedy School of Government Dean Joseph Nye calls "the paradox of American power." Even as America is equipped to pursue its interests unilaterally, it needs the cooperation of many nations with diverse, even conflicting, interests to ensure a stable world order. ■

Jehangir Pocha is Asia correspondent for In These Times.

# BIODIVERSITY INC.

Mexico tries a  
new tactic  
against  
Chiapas rebels:  
conservation

By Bill Weinberg

ORIN LANGELE

## LACANDON SELVA RAINFOREST, CHIAPAS, MEXICO

**A**s all eyes remain on the messy aftermath of the Iraq war and the strategic oil resources of the Persian Gulf, war threatens to return again to the United States' own "backyard"—southern Mexico and Central America. Here, as in the Gulf, struggles for control of petroleum and other key resources are at stake.

In this past December's prelude to the anniversary celebrations of their New Year's Day 1994 armed rebellion, the Maya Indian rebels of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Mexico's southern state of Chiapas broke the official silence they had been maintaining since September. The silence, and the breaking off of all dialogue with the government, was an official protest to a Mexican Supreme Court ruling that upheld a series of constitutional reforms on indigenous rights. The constitutional reform package was ostensibly based on the Zapatistas' peace plan, hashed out painstakingly with federal legislators years earlier.

But the rebels charged that the plan was gutted, with binding provisions on control of territory excised by Congress after the fact. The accord was challenged in the courts by the rebels' supporters—including indigenous groups and village municipal governments across Mexico—as failing to meet international standards on self-determination. But the Supreme Court ruled it had no jurisdiction to overturn the so-called Indian Rights Law, sending the peace process with the EZLN back to square one nearly nine years after it was initiated.

In the December 29 communique, the Zapatistas asserted their defense of the indigenous autonomous government in the Chiapas

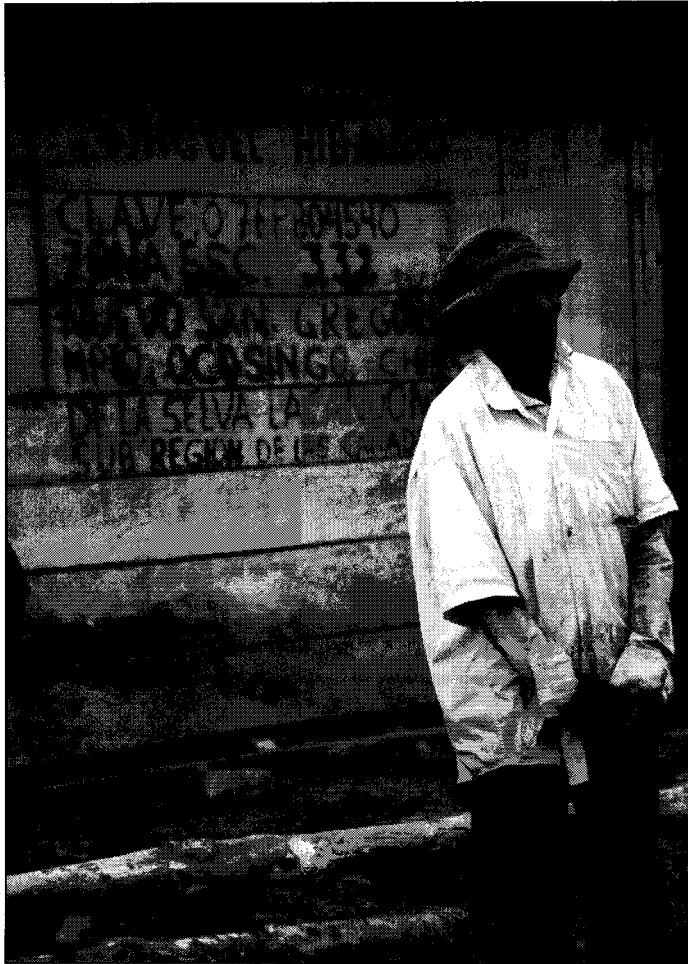
rainforest, the rebel zone of the Lacandon Selva. The EZLN's Subcomandante Marcos pledged that the rebels would resist the government's planned removal of pro-Zapatista peasant communities from the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, in the heart of the Selva. "There will not be a peaceful expulsion," wrote Marcos.

At this moment, army troops are stationed in the area of the biosphere reserve, awaiting government orders to eject the self-governing rebel Indian communities. Since they emerged in the 1994 rebellion, these jungle "autonomous municipalities" have been protected by the cease-fire under which the peace accords were negotiated. Now President Vicente Fox is preparing to move against the settlements in the name of ecology.

**W**hile the Zapatistas say they will refuse to give up their guns until their original peace plan is approved, they have hardly fired a shot in anger since the truce that ended their 1994 uprising. Now, many are growing impatient with the deadlock. On the January 1 anniversary celebrations, 15,000 Zapatistas—masked but unarmed—marched on the Chiapas highlands city of San Cristobal de Las Casas, which the rebels had briefly occupied during the uprising.

Last October 12, hundreds of Zapatista sympathizers marked Dia de la Raza by blocking the entrance to the main Chiapas military base, Rancho Nuevo. They demanded demilitarization of Chiapas and protested Fox's "Plan Puebla-Panama" (PPP), which calls for a series of new superhighways, ocean-to-ocean pipelines and hydro-electric dams across southern Mexico and Central America as arteries for global trade and development.

"These lands belong to the people and we will not abandon them," said one protest leader. "The riches belong to those of us who have lived here for centuries and we will oppose their globalization."



An indigenous elder in Nuevo San Gregorio, a community allied with the autonomous government in Chiapas.

Ironically, just as protecting the biosphere reserve—the embattled and shrinking heart of the rainforest—has become an urgent priority, megadevelopment plans for the Lacandon Selva, put on hold when the Zapatistas seized the jungle in 1994, are now back on track. At the forefront are long-stalled plans for a giant hydro-electric complex on the Usumacinta River, which cuts through the heart of the forest and forms the border with Guatemala. The Inter-American Development Bank has undertaken studies on funding of the project. The oil exploitation plans, which would expand south into the rainforest from the industry's toxic heartland along the Gulf Coast in Tabasco, are also being revived after nine years.

More ironically still, the Zapatistas and their supporters claim that even the conservation imperative in the U.N.-recognized biosphere reserve masks a corporate agenda. The Maya inhabitants of the Selva, the “autonomous municipalities” loyal to the EZLN, say that—contrary to both U.N. guidelines and the peace plan principles—Montes Azules is not being protected for the resident indigenous peoples, but for transnational biotech corporations that hope to profit from the region's vast genetic wealth.

Two years ago, the California firm Diversa signed a three-year “bio-prospecting” deal with the Mexican government. Diversa, which has a similar deal with the U.S. Interior Department for Yellowstone National Park, was granted

access to Mexico's biosphere reserves, with areas like Montes Azules especially targeted. In the deal, the government got \$5,000 to train and equip personnel from the Mexican National Autonomous University who are actually to collect the samples; \$50 per sample; and royalties between 0.3 and 0.5 percent of net sales on products derived. By contrast, the U.S. Interior Department in the Yellowstone deal got \$15,000 in equipment, royalties from 0.5 to 10 percent, and a \$100,000 fee up front.

The University of Georgia and the U.K.-based Molecular Nature Ltd. have signed on for a similar five-year project. This one, dubbed “Drug Discovery and Biodiversity Among the Maya of Mexico”—specifically targets Chiapas. Hoping to tap the vast reservoir of ancient Maya herblore, the program was to receive \$2.5 million from the U.S. International Cooperative Biodiversity Groups (ICBG), a consortium of agencies including the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Agriculture. Researchers hoped to draw on indigenous healers' wealth of knowledge on tens of thousands of curative plants in the region. The researchers would share their data with private pharmaceutical and biotech firms that were commercial partners in the deal.

But last year, a coalition of traditional Maya healers in Chiapas declared victory following the cancellation of the ICBG program. The Chiapas Council of Traditional Indigenous Midwives and Healers (COMPITCH) led the campaign against the program, coordinating Maya communities and international environmental groups, such as Canada's Rural Advancement Foundation International. COMPITCH declared their non-cooperation with the project, and denounced it as “biopiracy,” asserting the impoverished Maya communities would receive little benefit from any patents developed.

Another key player in the privatization of Chiapas biodiversity is Alfonso Romo Garza, an agro-industrialist who has a joint project in the biosphere reserve with Conservation International (of which he is a board member). In 1991, Conservation International brokered a “debt-for-nature” swap, buying a \$4 million chunk of Mexico's debt for the right to establish a genetic research station in Montes Azules. But Romo's interests may lie less in conservation than expanding control over global agribusiness seed stock through his Monterrey-based Grupo Pulsar.

Romo is also an official promoter of Fox's PPP, with its visions of interoceanic rail and highway links, industrial pods, and free-trade zones stretching from the Panama Canal to the Mexican state of Puebla. The Zapatistas decry the PPP as a “counterinsurgency” measure aimed at bringing the restive Indian communities of the Mexican south (and Central America) under industrial control.

There is an uneasy symmetry between this mega-scheme and the paradoxically interlocking plan—backed by Conservation International and the World Bank—to integrate Montes Azules into a “Mesoamerican Biological Corridor,” linking the biosphere reserves and other protected rainforests of the isthmus as far south as Panama. This symmetry raises the vision of these tropical forests surviving only as corporate-administrated genetic colonies in the midst of devastated zones of industrial sprawl. ■

**Bill Weinberg**, who frequently reports from Central and South America, is the author of *Homage to Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggles in Mexico* (Verso).

# In God's Country

By Mark Engler

**E**arly on July 24, 1984, Dan Lafferty, a fundamentalist Mormon living near Provo, Utah, got out of bed, prayed for guidance, and then "felt prompted by the Lord to saw the barrel and stock off a 12-gauge, pump-action shotgun

## Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith

By Jon Krakauer  
Doubleday  
372 pages, \$26

that he had been storing in his mother's house." The absurd revelation would be comical if, later that same day, Lafferty and his older brother Ron had not proceeded to murder a 24-year-old woman and her baby daughter.

The victims of this crime were the wife and child of another Lafferty, Allen, the youngest of five brothers. Each of the brothers were converts to a radical sect that had split from the mainstream Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints over its rejection of religious tenants, most notably polygamy, held dear by the church's founding fathers, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young.

Ron Lafferty, a self-proclaimed prophet, believed that he could communicate directly with God. When his sister-in-law Brenda refused to submit before the brothers' desire to take "plural wives," Ron received a "removal revelation" indicating that she and her 15-month-old daughter were "children of perdition" standing in the way of God's work.

In *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*, Jon Krakauer attempts to understand the history and theological principles that produced this "distinctly American brand of religious extremism." Having grown up around Mormons in Corvallis, Oregon, Krakauer has a per-

sonal "desire to grasp the nature of religious belief," to comprehend the "unfluctuating certainty of faith" that his playmates expressed.

At the same time, the topic of fundamentalism has clear public resonance. During an interview in a maximum-security prison, Krakauer asks Dan Lafferty about what he has in common with the terrorists who destroyed the World Trade Center. "I see the parallel," the still-unrepentant convict admits. "But the difference between those guys and me is, they were following a false prophet, and I'm not."

Krakauer structures his book with chapters that alternately tell the story of the Lafferty brothers and recount pivotal

Famous for writing about mountain climbing, Krakauer cannot be described in conventional terms as a political chronicler. Nonetheless, *Into Thin Air*, his account of a deadly expedition up Mt. Everest that he joined in 1996, showed a mountain covered with discarded oxygen canisters, exploited sherpas, and underexperienced dilettantes willing to pay for their shot at the top. His earlier bestseller, *Into the Wild*, retraced the steps of a young college graduate whose Tolstoy- and Thoreau-inspired individualism compelled him to reject the norms of workaday society, and ultimately led to his death in Alaska's interior.

While Krakauer's self-identified attraction to "extremes" has always invited

strong reactions, his new book's choice of subject ensured that it would be his most contentious yet. Upon its publication, the Latter-day Saints issued a stern condemnation challenging Krakauer's historical scholarship and calling the focus on fundamentalism an unfair smear on their religion. Both Dan and Ron Lafferty were excommunicated by the mainstream Mormons well before their fanaticism grew homicidal, the church points out. But Krakauer argues that the church's cultivation of pious obedience, combined with its unwillingness to openly face the darker points of its idiosyncratic past, has fueled fundamentalist fervor.

Since 1890, when the Latter-day Saints, under heavy pressure from the federal government, disavowed

the practice of polygamy, extremist believers have charged the church with abandoning sacred teachings in its desire to be accepted in American society. Although still a tiny minority when compared to the 11 million Mormons worldwide, the tens of thousands who have joined fundamentalist splinter sects



BRIGHAM YOUNG AND HIS WIVES

Brigham Young had married 56 women by the time he died in 1877.  
Mainstream Mormons later disavowed polygamy.

moments in the development of early Mormonism. The author finds no shortage of colorful material in either strain, and crafts engaging vignettes. But bouncing between "true crime" and Church history can be jarring, sapping the story's momentum. Yet despite feeling disjointed, the book simmers in controversy.

have endowed a handful of purported modern-day prophets with extraordinary power over their cloistered communities.

Describing the prohibition on watching television or reading magazines in a prominent polygamist community in Arizona, Krakauer explains that "life in Colorado City under Rulon Jeffs," the long-ruling patriarch, "bears more than a passing resemblance to life in Kabul under the Taliban. Uncle Rulon's word carries the weight of law. The mayor and every other city employee answers to him, as do the entire police force and the superintendent of public schools." Dan and Ron Lafferty are perhaps the most famous criminals to emerge out of such American theocracies, but they are definitely not the only ones.

It would be too crass an analogy to compare Dan Lafferty's belief that he "was doing God's will" with President Bush's June 24 statement, reported in Israel's *Ha'aretz* newspaper, that "God told me to strike at al-Qaeda and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did." Nevertheless, it would barely be worth considering religious fundamentalism in the United States without making the trip from Utah to Washington, D.C.

In one of his few mentions of the White House, Krakauer reminds us that, "This, after all, is a country led by a born-again Christian ... who characterizes international relations as a biblical clash between forces of good and evil. The highest law officer in the land, Attorney General John Ashcroft, is a dyed-in-the-wool follower of a fundamentalist Christian sect—the Pentecostal Assemblies of God of America— ... and subscribes to a vividly apocalyptic worldview that has much in common with key millenarian beliefs held by the Lafferty brothers and the residents of Colorado City."

Krakauer is not the first to note, in the wake of 9/11, that our country is plenty adept at producing fanatics. Accounting for our Laffertys provides an important means of grasping the malevolence of Osama bin Laden. At the same time, a preoccupation with horrific acts of religiously inspired violence can distract from the more prevalent dangers of religious conservatism. While polygamy earned them scorn and persecution, other extreme views only gained the Mormons an honored place within the

Republican Party.

Today, virulent homophobia, determined anti-feminism, and a continuing legacy of racism hardly disqualify prospective public servants. Krakauer recounts in a footnote how the Latter-day Saints can be credited with single-handedly defeating the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s. And, while official prohibitions on the "dark-skinned" entering the Mormon priesthood were reversed in 1978, the church still shuns miscegenation. With sociologists predicting that there will be some 300 million Mormons worldwide

**Polygamy earned the Mormons scorn and persecution, but after they abolished "plural marriage," other extreme views only gained the church an honored place within the Republican Party.**

by 2080, the American right's already prodigious alliance between stalwart capitalists and religious conservatives may well become more fruitful in the decades to come.

Two years before the murders, when he was still an upstanding member of his local Mormon ward, Ron Lafferty was described by his neighbors as "clean, All-American." It is this respectable, reactionary figure, more than the universally abhorred monster that he would become, that poses the real threat to tolerance in the United States.

For those not lodged in the most politically conservative quadrants of our society, it is no small pleasure to see right-wing Mormons on the defensive. How is it, then, that many readers will finish Krakauer's account feeling sympathetic to the Latter-day Saints' claim that the book does not treat them fairly?

It can be fun to scoff at fundamentalist leaders who, after incorrectly pre-

dicting that Y2K would bring Armageddon, blame their followers' insufficient piety for forestalling the end. Likewise, it is easy to marvel at a woman who, through a complicated series of polygamous intermarriages, becomes her own step-grandmother. But taking note of these sensationalistic details tells us little about ordinary Mormon life. Any given religion, and certainly secular society itself, has its share of kooks and fanatics, pedophiles and murderers. In *Under the Banner of Heaven*, the fundamentalist minority becomes a straw dummy for the author's critical view of faith in general.

Throughout the book, Krakauer depicts religious conviction as essentially irrational and deluded. "Faith is the very antithesis of reason, injudiciousness a crucial component of spiritual devotion," he writes. And in reviving religion and science as mutually exclusive options, he dredges up a long-stale debate that has lately produced few insights into questions of ethics and meaning. Krakauer's own religious search would be more compelling had he not ignored the vast swaths of modern theology that have proposed more subtle accommodations between reason and faith.

His distance from the world of belief also hurts Krakauer's narrative. At least since Orwell, the ability to implicate one's self in the subject at hand, and to sustain a tone of moderate self-impugning, has served as a key mark of the essayist's credibility. Krakauer knows this. Intense personal investment—be it his close identification with the wayward young idealist in *Into the Wild* or his guilt over his inability to save others on his Everest expedition from dying of exposure—is what made his previous books succeed. Holding religion at arm's length, *Under the Banner of Heaven* becomes voyeuristic. It is hard to blame the Mormons for objecting.

In a world situation aptly described as a "clash of fundamentalisms," many have recoiled at siding with either the Taliban's fanaticism or Washington's. It is equally despairing to pick between self-righteous absolutism and the abandonment of faith that Krakauer positions as the alternative. In religion as in politics, we do well to accept neither. ■

Mark Engler is a writer based in New York City.

# The Naked and the Dead

By James Parker

**D**eep in the Babylonian Talmud, heard amid its ancient rustlings and disputings and brain-whorls and coiled insanities, is talk of a very special—perhaps the *most* special—“wild-beast contest”: an elite show to be laid on by the Creator in the Time to Come. For

**Freddy vs. Jason**  
Directed by Ronny Yu

the exclusive diversion of the righteous, who will all be encouraged to take their seats at ringside, Leviathan—dreadest of the dread—will take on Behemoth. What a showdown! Watery chaos hurled screaming against imponderable mass, the teeth of dissolution fastening on density itself; the shit will *truly* hit the fan. Afterwards, it is written, the righteous will be permitted to primly snack on the (kosher) flesh of the mutually-destroyed mega-beasts, like guests at a gallery opening.

No such food for us. Here on the mortal crust, in the fallen present, we who would see monsters join battle must be content with *Freddy vs. Jason*, directed not by God but by Ronny Yu (*The Bride with White Hair*) from a screenplay by Damian Shannon and Mark Swift. Ronny, Damian, Mark? LOVE YOUR WORK, fellas.

Jason Voorhees, it will be remembered, is the hockey-masked psycho-drudge from the *Friday the 13th* movies, always on the job with his old machete; Freddy Krueger is the half-melted childcatcher from *Nightmare on Elm Street*, with the flame-seamed face, the felt hat and the hand with blades for fingers. Both are unkillable—Jason because he is insensate and implacable, Freddy because he has a wraith-like existence in the nightmares of teenagers, from which realm he reaches out with bladed hand to do actual material damage.

Vaulting nimbly over the question of why or how, exactly, these two demons would be conjoined in rampage (something to do with Freddy summoning Jason, needing FEAR for his own re-emergence), Ronny Yu and his writers

leap directly into the thick of it. Scene One: Some kids are partying at a house on Elm Street, exhibiting those special signs of carnality and incuriousness that are the mark of the imminently slaughtered. A long-limbed and baseball-hatted slattern is smoking and drinking and using the f-word. Oh Jason, this is not to be borne. With a lavish reckless movement she flicks her cig-butt into the night air; it bounces sparkily off Jason's mask (he is waiting in the bushes). Within minutes she is having sex—could any call to action be stronger? Nothing makes the almost-dead ember of Jason's brain glow, nothing heats it like the sight (viewed through mask-holes) of a couple of



The hat and the hockey mask: principles in eternal opposition.

teenagers having sex. Up goes the machete! Down it comes!

Elm Street is a slaughterhouse again, and FEAR, Freddy's elixir, is kindled. His name is whispered in terror, and his shrivelled spirit puts on strength. The plan is working! But no it isn't: Jason, slo-mo berserker that he is, cannot be stopped. The bodycount grows too high; he will annihilate all of Elm Street. Freddy must trim his enthusiasm. Let the games begin.

**F**or Freddy and Jason, this film is a first date. Each has recurred through many sequels (an astounding nine, in Jason's case), but never faced the other before. In our last sighting of Jason (at the conclusion of 2002's *Jason X*) he was being propelled *Alien*-style into raw space, blasted

into the void from some rocket-tube or other, there to wheel about with all the other space-garbage. (Was he on fire? Perhaps. In which case, space quenched him.) Freddy has not been seen since 1994's *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*, a twisted piece of cerebration in which screenwriter Craven appears stiffly as himself, complaining of nightmares.

Now the two are brought together in a storm of mythic logic. For this is no mere rubbing-together of franchises; as of avaricious hands in prospect of cash; no sir! Freddy—magic-man, hat-wearer, one-line artist, nimble hallucination, sanity's accuser—*had* to face Jason at some point. Jason, who never speaks. Or moves quickly. Who is appallingly corporeal, a trudging monument of carnage. Who is, above all, *styleless*, a shaggy lump, being nothing but the blank face of unopposable doom. If Jason were to be matched against, for example, Michael Myers, slasher-hero of the *Halloween* series, now that would be a rip-off, a bum fight, two blind sluggers sawing away at each other. But Jason vs. Freddy—sooner or later these two horror-principles had to explode against one another.

The interesting thing about *Freddy vs. Jason* is the sympathy that springs up in us, quite naturally and almost unbidden-for, for Jason. Excitable plebeians in the crowd begin to hoorah for him; as he lies on his back being perforated over and over by Freddy's claw-hand, which smokes like Macbeth's sword “with bloody execution,” they cry out to him: “Jason, get up! You're fine, dude!” He is, after all, a mere *will*, with none of Freddy's glittering malice. He is pitiable; innocent, even. The battered chest rises and falls, the head turns this way and that in brutal confusion. Before water (his Kryptonite) he pauses and starts to quake—a sort of mute, earth-deep terror-sob. The Talmudists would have understood. ■

James Parker is the author of *Turned On: A Biography of Henry Rollins*.

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continued from back cover

Primarily actors, Jensen and Blank first conceived of the project after a conference hosted by Columbia University in 2000, where they heard an Illinois Death Row inmate tell his harrowing story via telephone. They were so moved that they decided to spend that summer navigating the interstate freeway system, conducting interviews and collecting court transcripts from the back roads of Mississippi to downtown Chicago. Every word in *The Exonerated's* script derives from these sources.

Once they edited the heaps of material down to six exonerated characters, Jensen brought the finished script to one of his former stage directors, Bob Balaban. Perhaps known best for his uptight acting roles in Christopher Guest's mockumentary films like *Best in Show*, Balaban embraced the project immediately, agreeing to direct it and circulating it among some of his more famous Hollywood friends. Soon enough Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon, Steve Buscemi, Alec Baldwin and others agreed to play a part in the project.

Discussing the play at a Greenwich Village bistro, the actor-playwrights are quick to point out that their production has drawn both liberal and conservative actors, transcending political divisions to speak to a common humanity. And while certainly engaged in progressive issues, Jensen and Blank wanted the words of the exonerated to speak for themselves, rather than to inject their own viewpoints into the prisoners' narratives.

"The one thing I can share with Republicans is that I don't like being told what to do," says Jensen, whose emphatic tone is often complimented with hand gestures and head shakes. "So why would I break my rule and tell somebody what to think? [*The Exonerated*] is about engaging in a dialogue."

Blank adds, "And yet, we get a lot of people who walk into the play who are die-hard pro-death penalty and they walk out saying that they have to rethink all of it because they didn't know that these things happened."

"Anyway, on either side of the issue, nobody wants to put innocent people to death," Jensen says.

Former Illinois Gov. George Ryan, a Republican, couldn't agree more. In December 2002, the Center for Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University

facilitated a special production of *The Exonerated*, which was attended by Ryan, numerous Illinois state representatives, and 36 people who were nearly put to death because of wrongful convictions. Ryan had been considering commuting the sentences of everyone on Death Row before his term in office ran out.

"It was intense and it was clear at the end of the evening that Gov. Ryan hadn't really made up his mind," recalls Blank. "He was poker-faced, but he stayed and talked to everyone for a very long time."

Weeks later, Ryan commuted all 167 of Illinois' death sentences to life terms and pardoned four Death Row inmates before he left office. While the playwrights do not claim that they directly influenced the former governor's decision, it was clearly rooted in a desire to protect more people from being wrongfully executed.

Since capital punishment was constitutionally reinstated in 1976, 855 people have been put to death and currently there are 3,704 more prisoners awaiting execution. While 111 Death Row inmates have been exonerated since 1973, there is

no precise means of determining how many of the executed were innocent.

As awareness of massive failure in the legal system continues to spread, opinion poll numbers supporting capital punishment have dipped nationally in recent years, and calls for further moratoriums have gained strength, most recently in North Carolina. Since 9/11, however, the Bush administration has hastened efforts to counteract anti-death penalty movements.

Attorney General John Ashcroft persists in commanding federal prosecutors to more aggressively seek the death penalty, and, preceded by the Clinton-backed 1996 Effective Death Penalty Act, anti-terrorism efforts in the current administration also include a proposed bill that would expand convictions punishable by death to nonviolent crimes.

"We've had two tickets on roll call for President Bush and a guest since *The Exonerated* first opened," says Jensen. "He is still welcome to come and see the show." ■


Jermey O'Kasick is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer and arts critic.

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# Free at Last

# The Exonerated

By Jeremy O'Kasick

**A**t center stage, underneath a solitary spotlight, a middle-aged black man tells of how he ended up on Death Row, wrongfully convicted for raping a white teenage girl and murdering her lover.

Watching in the off-Broadway audience at the 45 Bleecker Street Theater sits Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, the former prizefighter who was also imprisoned for a murder he didn't commit. Carter, who now runs a Toronto-based lobbying and resource group for the wrongly convicted, had requested to view *The Exonerated* after he had heard of its raw veracity and growing impact on the national debate over the death penalty.

Culled from 40 extended interviews with actual individuals exonerated from Death Row, *The Exonerated* spotlights six alternating narratives through dramatic readings on a set that amounts to little more than a line of chairs and script stands. With swift tempo, the spotlight jumps between the exonerated as they re-enact court scenes and interrogations and describe how, through racial injustice, coerced confessions, incompetent defense, and mishandled evidence, they came to live next to death's door.

It's bare bones theater at its best, empowered by often deeply disturbing yet transformative stories of people who had to piece together their fractured, broken lives.

"The state of Texas executed me about a thousand times," says one of the exonerated, who was repeatedly raped and brutally abused on Death Row. "And they just keep on doin' it."

At its core, *The Exonerated* explores how individuals survive through such severe persecution and injustice. All of the main characters undergo some degree of spiritual transformation, with the play's central reflective voice spoken through Delbert

Tibbs (portrayed most recently by Bill Marshall and Ben Vereen), an elder radical African-American and one time seminary student.

"We were really careful not to frame Delbert as another wise old black guy without true humanity," says Erik Jensen, who co-wrote *The Exonerated* with his wife, Jessica Blank. "The holy black men in Hollywood movies can be as racist as *Gone with the Wind*."

Since the play was first produced in Los Angeles in 2000, it has been championed not only by New York theater critics but also civil rights groups such as the NAACP. Between its extended runs in Los Angeles and New York, a slew of Hollywood stalwarts have joined the rotating cast, from Richard Dreyfuss and Mia Farrow to Gabriel Byrne and Danny Glover. *The Exonerated* has also been staged for the United Nations and select Washington audiences, and will begin a 14-city tour this fall, reaching such pro-death penalty bastions as Austin, Texas, and Orlando, Florida.

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Playwrights Erik Jensen and Jessica Blank  
with Rubin "Hurricane" Carter.

