

201013 OBITER DICTA: THE CRUELEST MONTH 2010
Steven Alan Samson

Saturday, April 17

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article7094311.ece>

I doubt that the custom of shoe-throwing would be tolerated in Britain if the missiles were hurled at the queen rather than the police.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303828304575179201403587166.html>

The Obama Administration appears to be as adept at foreign policy fumbling in India as it is elsewhere. We will deeply regret letting India drift toward Russia and Iran.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304168004575178791674850652.html>

As a form of narcissism, "Remorse as a Way of Life" is nothing new. Its impersonal expression of regret exonerates its confessant of any real culpability.

A notorious example of *The Politics of Guilt and Pity* was Marlon Brando's boycott of the Academy Awards and his sending of an American Indian actress to read a speech denouncing the treatment of Indians. Of course, Brando was merely following more recent variant - what Roger Scruton calls the "culture of repudiation" - of an older and honorable tradition of cultural criticism that includes, most notably, Montaigne's "Of Cannibals." A century after Montaigne, John Dryden planted the seed of the subsequent Romantic celebration of "the Other:"

I am as free as nature first made man,
Ere the base laws of servitude began,
When wild in woods the noble savage ran.

Today the game consists of making what Thorstein Veblen called "invidious comparisons" in a manner that puts oneself ultimately in the right while denouncing the collective sins of one's own people. For all of its technical brilliance, the story line of James Cameron's *Avatar* is simply a more recent addition to the "noble savage" genre of Romantic primitivism: expiation through the stripping away of the corrupt garments of civilization.

By the late 1960s, guilt-mongering had become a cottage industry. In *The Question of German Guilt*, Karl Jaspers analyzed the different kinds of real guilt acquired by Germans who had lived during the Hitler period. Later his student, Hannah Arendt, remarked on the banality of evil that she witnessed and depicted in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. What Pascal Bruckner here calls the "tyranny of guilt" can be just as readily described as "the banality of remorse."

Tuesday 20

<http://pajamasmedia.com/victordavishanson/a-tour-through-recession-america/?singlepage=true>

Victor Davis Hanson, who has written extensively on the classics and military history, is also a sharp sociologist of the times and mores of his native California. This recent column is the fruit of seven days of bicycling through three very different communities: the Selma area where he owns a farm, Palo Alto where he works at the Hoover Institution, and the shopping centers of Fresno. I am very familiar with the Palo Alto area where Stanford is located, having spent several months of my life there, especially during the last twelve years. Back in the late 1980s I visited Valley Christian University (now long defunct), which was located in one of the Fresno shopping centers. I last visited the city almost a decade ago when I spoke by phone with one of Hanson's *Bonfire of the Humanities* coauthors, Bruce S. Thornton.

Hanson's conclusion is apt: "As I watch this teeming recession-era energy – thousands leaving squalor in Mexico for the life raft of the U.S., thousands in the middle buying as birthright what a few decades ago would be considered the playthings of the aristocracy, and thousands living in a progressive bubble disconnected from the grime and mess that fuels it – I hope there are still enough around to keep all this going. I say that because a new Microsoft program, a better search engine, another recent arrival from Chiapas, and someone out of work and still at Best Buy simply are not going to get us out of this recession, find the energy to keep the country fueled, and create the money to pay off a soon-to-be \$20 trillion debt. In short, from this week's observations, I think our so-called poor need to read a bit more, and our assumed elite to read a bit less." In other words, corporate America needs to do what Robert D. Kaplan also has done so well: Leave its progressive bubble and begin exploring our *Empire Wilderness*.

<http://pajamasmedia.com/richardfernandez/2010/04/12/i-want-my-mtv/>

Things have been so busy of late that I nearly missed this gem by Richard Fernandez, which also led me to Victor Davis Hanson's piece. Fernandez skewers the prevailing psychology of denial which has encased us in what Hanson calls a "progressive bubble." But guess what? That bubble is about to burst. Do we really need a street corner eccentric in sackcloth and sandals or an urgent news bulletin to remind us that "the end is near?" Our president wants to spend billions to deflect an approaching comet while yawning crevasses are fracturing the mantle of our civilization. Our predicament is reminiscent of the ludicrous banter of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* as the two ne'er-do-wells, fleeing for their lives, reach the edge of a cliff and contemplate the long drop to the river below:

Butch Cassidy: You jump first.

The Sundance Kid: No, I said.

Butch Cassidy: What's the matter with you?

The Sundance Kid: I can't swim!

Butch Cassidy: Why you crazy—the fall will probably kill you!

Wednesday 21

<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle East/LD20Ak01.html>

Spengler reviews three of his columns (from 2001 to 2006) in order to show why the Iranians (and al-Qaeda) have long counted upon Western paralysis. He cites one of his chief points from the month after 9/11: "The grand vulnerability of the Western mind is horror. . . . Hitler's tactical advantage lay in his capacity to be more horrible than his opponents could imagine." I would qualify this last point: Hitler was matched in the horror department by Stalin. It was Stalin, for example, that had the officer corps of the Polish cavalry dispatched and buried in the Katyn Forest.

Thursday 22

http://townhall.com/columnists/MichaelBarone/2010/04/22/gangster_government_becomes_a_long-running_series?page=full&comments=true

"My kind of town Chicago is." The city that gave us Al Capone, the St. Valentine's Massacre, and the Daley machine has lately sent its best and brightest to the Nationals. The result? Gangster Government.

Michael Barone starts today's column with the following observation: "Almost a year ago, in a Washington Examiner column on the Chrysler bailout, I reflected on the Obama administration's decision to force bondholders to accept 33 cents on the dollar on secured debts while giving United Auto Worker retirees 50 cents on the dollar on unsecured debts." In that earlier column Barone announced: "We have just seen an episode of Gangster Government. It is likely to be a continuing series."

And "so it goes," to quote Billy Pilgrim's refrain in *Slaughterhouse Five*. A year later, it seems that Bastiat's "legal plunder" remains the main course on the Tidal Basin lunch counter. The latest item on the menu is known as "the Dodd Bill."

"The Obama Democrats portray the Dodd bill as a brave attempt to clamp tougher regulation on Wall Street. They know that polls show voters strongly reject just about all their programs to expand the size and scope of government, with the conspicuous exception of financial regulation."

"Republicans have been accurately attacking the Dodd bill for authorizing bailouts of big Wall Street firms and giving them unfair advantages over small competitors. They might want to add that it authorizes Gangster Government -- the channeling of vast sums from the politically unprotected to the politically connected."

It's still the same old story. Asked why he robbed banks, Willie Sutton is alleged to have said: "Because that's where the money is." Now that the feds hold a controlling share of General Motors, one more piece of European-style corporatism has been snapped into place. Too bad there isn't a "truth in legislating" requirement, but then how would the pork-barrelers keep greasing the wheels? Or is it "greasing the skids?"

The great German economist, Wilhelm Roepke, who was the spiritual father of the postwar German economic miracle, understood the danger of the "pocket money state." After having served as an economic advisor to the Adenauer government, Roepke published a column in the late 1950s entitled "Robbing People to Pay Paul," which was later reprinted in a collection of his articles, *Against the Grain*. I have posted a study guide to the article on my Digital Commons website. What follows is an outline of Roepke's main premise.

- A. GUIDELINES TO ECONOMIC POLICIES (203-05)
 - 1. There Are Certain Things That No One in His Right Mind Regards as Anything Other Than Bad
 - a. Inflation: Any Argument in Favor of a Long-Run, Simmering Inflation Merely Exposes the Bankruptcy of a Certain Brand of Economic Theory and Policy
 - 2. Welfare State: Few Critics Reject All Ideas and Arrangements Associated with This Concept
 - a. The Danger: Once We Accept the Principle of Compulsion, Where Is the Limit?
 - b. Things Get Out of Hand: e.g., Progressive Taxation
 - (1) Predicament of the Sorcerer's Apprentice
 - c. Areas of Compulsion Grow: "More and more areas of compulsory aid keep being discovered; more and more population groups are drawn in; the assistance rendered grows more comprehensive and the projects adopted more elaborate (204)."
 - 3. Modern Welfare State Progresses by Its Own Momentum
 - a. It Provides a Means for Demagogues to Win Votes
 - b. It Is a Favorite Playground of Cheap Moralism
 - c. This Road Leads to the Abyss [If the deal is "my way or the highway", we should take the hint and vote with our feet]
 - (1) Lord Beveridge help create the welfare state, then expressed alarm
 - 4. The Welfare State Is a Powerful Machine without Brakes or a Reverse Gear
 - a. Outside Limits Must Be Imposed
 - b. Need for Rules, Principles, Criteria, and Distinctions

How can we so cheerfully assume that America's skid road to bankruptcy is greased with good intentions? What Roepke called "cheap moralism" merely provides cover ("plausible deniability") for Congress to justify its political scams. Our skid road is really being greased with a combination of tax revenues and a stack of IOUs - debt, debt, and more debt - that appears to be growing exponentially. While the hockey stick graph may or may not depict the current state of global warming, it certainly describes the growth of political intervention into our lives now that the Windy City gang is loosening the purse strings and is spending like there is no tomorrow. For a constitutional republic, "no tomorrow" may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Aesop understood the problem thousands of years ago. As he noted in his fable of the Dog and the Wolf:

A gaunt Wolf was almost dead with hunger when he happened to meet a House-dog who was passing by. "Ah, Cousin," said the Dog. "I knew how it would be; your irregular life will soon be the ruin of you. Why do you not work steadily as I do, and get your food regularly given to you?"

"I would have no objection," said the Wolf, "if I could only get a place."

"I will easily arrange that for you," said the Dog; "come with me to my master and you shall share my work."

So the Wolf and the Dog went towards the town together. On the way there the Wolf noticed that the hair on a certain part of the Dog's neck was very much worn away, so he asked him how that had come about.

"Oh, it is nothing," said the Dog. "That is only the place where the collar is put on at night to keep me chained up; it chafes a bit, but one soon gets used to it."

"Is that all?" said the Wolf. "Then good-bye to you, Master Dog."

"BETTER STARVE FREE THAN BE A FAT SLAVE."

But the modern version of the moral, as may be deduced from Rousseau's general will, is even more to the point: In the long run, we will all starve together.

<http://livefeed.hollywoodreporter.com/2010/04/south-park-censorship-.html>

Now it is the entertainment industry that is taking up the cudgels on behalf of preemptive prostration. The folks at Comedy Central must be spending too much time in Washington, where prostration has gone viral. The self-flagellation bug has become endemic and is extremely difficult to shake. It takes over the natural defenses of our civil body politic before beating it with a stick.

Saturday 24

http://www.americanthinker.com/2010/04/its_the_constitution_thats_rad.html

The most helpful aspect of this piece is its reminder of how the checks and balances system worked, for the most part, prior to ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment. It is certainly desirable to restore the constitutional role of the Senate, but the centralization - indeed the nationalization - of the system following the Civil War was followed by a level of political corruption in which the Senate became known as the millionaire's club. This led to the creation of the civil service and the various Progressive structural changes that followed. So it happened that one constitutional revolution begat another.

Much more than a repeal of the Seventeenth Amendment would be required to begin restoring the federal autonomy of the states and reverse the flow of power to Washington, DC.

http://www.americanthinker.com/2010/04/governments_compulsive_spendin.html

Jeffrey Folks addresses the larger practical problem: the compulsive spending disorder that is bankrupting all levels of our government, all in the name of providing public services. During the Great Depression, states were all too willing to permit the national government to spearhead public works programs and,

then later, to become instruments of national programs under Lyndon Johnson's Great Society banner.

Assuming that the Seventeenth Amendment were to be repealed, the question then becomes whether state legislatures would take steps to dismantle the gigantic social services bureaucracy that is strangling the economy and choking off future generations through a regime of rising taxation and spiraling indebtedness. Repealing unfunded mandates is only a first step. If what Edward S. Corwin called the Constitution of Limitations is to be restored, other layers of bureaucracy must be attacked. Ronald Reagan campaigned in 1980 to dismantle the Department of Energy and the Department of Education. Not only have they expanded their reach since that date, but Reagan's successors saw fit to add new departments under new cabinet-level secretaries.

Perhaps we should study how Greece managed to spend itself into insolvency and then compare its practices with ours.

<http://blogs.the-american-interest.com/wrm/2010/04/21/go-home-mae-west/>

I have used Walter Russell Mead's *Power, Terror, Peace, and War* in class and have posted a study guide on-line. Here Mead turns his attention from international relations to our domestic woes. In order to reverse the spoiled fruits of the century-old Progressive movement, something more wide-ranging, far-sighted, and strategically-focused than a populist reaction is required. The electorate and its representatives will be collectively required to draw on something like Friedrich Hayek's idea of spontaneous order in order to attack, root and branch, the backwash of state power and initiative into the Tidal Basin. A major part of the problem is the role of *Congress as Santa Claus*, as Charles Warren termed it in the days before the New Deal made it the only game in town.

As Mead puts it: "The original Progressives harnessed new techniques of management and information control to create large, professionally-administered government bureaucracies. Today we need to use new techniques and technologies to break those bureaucracies down, to make small units of government more powerful, and to make government at all levels more responsive and more user-friendly. In virtually every case this will involve taking on government employees, reducing their numbers, eliminating their job security and cutting back on unsustainable retirement and other benefit levels."

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703709804575202072055128934.html?mod=WSJ_hpp_sections_opinion

It is heartening to hear that George W. Bush is staying quietly involved with the freedom agenda he pursued as president. In this regard he has been Ronald Reagan's heir.

But what a difference fifteen months makes! The current Administration's change of tone should be evident to all but the tone-deaf.

<http://pajamasmedia.com/victordavishanson/the-remains-of-a-california-day/?singlepage=true>

Victor Davis Hanson offers more vignettes of California: more signs of the times. His general topic, appropriately enough, is the detritus of daily life. Whether it is the unread books and seldom-used databases in an academic library or the garbage thrown onto a rural road -- the kitchen middens of the future, perhaps? - it is evident that we are progressing rapidly into barbarism. More than four decades after the campus turbulence of the late 1960s, the state university library in Fresno has become a glorified student center, shorn of its earlier ambience as a seat of learning. The superfluity of scholarship mustered by earlier generations has become superfluous to a generation of largely passive consumers of commonplace notions.

Russell Kirk observed much the same fifty-two years ago in "Cultural Debris: A Mordant Last Word," which he later collected in *The Portable Conservative Reader*. Indeed, Kirk wrote his last word sixteen years ago this month, as did Richard Nixon and Jackie Kennedy Onassis. As Kirk noted in his article, now more than half a century ago: "When the garment of civilization is worn out, we are confronted by the ugly spectacle of naked power." Ike was in the White House back then and much seemed right with the world. Bipartisanship was not simply an ironic pretense.

Toward the end of the essay, Kirk could well have had in mind scenes similar to those depicted by Hanson: "The end of Roman civilization was as abrupt as its beginning had been slow.

"In material accomplishments, the barbarians never equaled the Romans; nor had they need to. They possessed the will to endure, and in the end the Romans lacked that will. . . .

"Once we put some value upon our Roman heritage, and I hope we may do so again. Among us there are still men and women enough who know what makes life worth living--enough of them to keep out the modern barbarian, if they are resolute. If they are enfeebled, and if they cannot make common cause, the garment of our civilization will slide to the rag bin, and the cultural debris of the twentieth century will drift down the rubbish heaps of the future. Not many years of indulgence, I fancy, remain to us. But--as Henry Adams was fond of saying--the fun is in the process."

Sunday 25

http://townhall.com/columnists/GeorgeWill/2010/04/25/in_praise_of_cheerful_men?page=full&comments=true

George Will opens "In Praise of Cheerful Men" with a pregnant allusion: "Hearing about a shortage of farm laborers in California, the couple who would become Susumu Ito's parents moved from Hiroshima to become sharecroppers near Stockton. Thus began a saga that recently brought Ito, 91, to the Holocaust Memorial Museum here, where he and 119 former comrades in arms were honored, during the annual Days of Remembrance, as liberators of Nazi concentration camps."

Ito was drafted into the army before Pearl Harbor and, before shipping out to Europe, visited his family at an internment camp in Arkansas. Along with Eddie Ichiyama and Nelson Akagi, Ito served with the highly decorated 442nd Regimental

Combat Team that rescued the "lost battalion" and later entered Dachau, where the ovens were still warm.

http://townhall.com/columnists/DavidStokes/2010/04/25/the_most_enduring_legacy_of_nazi_hate?page=full&comments=true

The relentless Nazi propaganda machine is still claiming victims to this day. Irving Roth, a Holocaust survivor, visited campus last week and told his story to an auditorium that was so packed that his listeners flowed down the back stairs and out into the hall. During an earlier classroom session with Roth, I asked a question that permitted him to elaborate upon the role of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the spread of the Nazi ideology through movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and national socialist parties like the Ba'ath in Syria and Iraq. This column on "The Most Enduring Legacy of Nazi Hate" is a reminder of why we must never forget.

http://townhall.com/columnists/KenConnor/2010/04/25/free_to_choose_whats_right?page=full&comments=true

Our constitutional heritage is once again at risk. Either we uphold our free market institutions or we will lose all of our freedoms. When Progressives nearly a century ago drove a wedge between "property rights" and "human rights," they set this country onto the road to socialism and its variant form, fascism, both of which enjoyed wide support within American academic and intellectual circles in the 1920s and 1930s. Under other names, they still do today.

In the first epigraph to Ken Connor's article, "Free to Choose What's Right," the author quotes Wilhelm Roepke to the following effect: "We can breathe the air of liberty only to the extent that we are ready to bear the burden of moral responsibility associated with it."

Roepke well understood the economic damage caused by partisan intellectuals who, instead of freedom, chose to become irresponsible shills for authoritarian ideologies. What Roepke had to say in 1958 in "Robbing Peter to Pay Paul" is still as relevant today as it was then. Here is another part of the outline that is posted at the Liberty University Digital Commons:

- B. PROCEEDING A MINORE AD MAIUS [from the Less to the More Important]
 - 1. The Welfare State Road Carries One-Way Traffic Only
 - a. No Further Step Should Be Taken without the Utmost Care and Extreme Reluctance
 - (1) If in doubt, leave out
 - (2) Before any decision is made, it is best to sleep on it
 - 2. The Heaviest Responsibility Is Borne by Intellectuals Rather Than Practical Politicians
 - a. The Broad Masses Themselves May Not Be So Keen on It
 - b. The Influential Group of People Who Are Out for Prestige and Power Make the Utmost of the Opportunities It Offers for Social Demagogy [cf. Spurius Maelius in ancient Rome]
 - (1) Ideological banner of "Progressivism"
 - c. All the Danger Lies in the Abuse of the Welfare State Principle

- d. Cheap Moralism Is Irresponsible and Nothing Short of Immoral for the Responsible Intellectual
 - (1) The responsible intellectual has the duty to make himself unpopular: "It is safer . . . to err on the side of exaggerating criticism rather than encouragement. . . . The welfare state does not need our kindly help, since it can get along very well without it. But the dignity of the free individual and the good health of society do need our help, because they are jeopardized by the mushrooming welfare state (207)."
- e. Need for the Responsible Statesman, the Social Scientist, and the Leader of Public Opinion to Form an Alliance to Strengthen the Forces of Moderation

John Adams understood the challenge. The Connor article's other epigraph cites Adams's well-known admonition: "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

Connor concludes his case for the free market with a plea for moral self-discipline: "James Madison famously stated that if men were angels, government wouldn't be necessary. Clearly, we're not angels, and government is necessary, as are reasonable laws and regulations. But the necessary conditions for a truly humane economy cannot, and should not, be maintained by government alone; they must be rooted, as John Adams said, in the values of the hearth and the pulpit.

"Conservatives don't want a value-free market place; we want a marketplace that is informed by values like honesty, integrity, transparency and accountability. If Americans are unwilling or unable to live up to this standard of conduct, however, we must be prepared to have our freedoms taken away from us one financial crisis, and one regulatory measure, at a time. The choice is ours."

http://www.americanthinker.com/blog/2010/04/the_next_woman_on_the_lefts_ha.html

Jeannie DeAngelis anticipates "the shape of things to come" that the governor of Arizona, Jan Brewer, faces for the crime of signing a law that makes illegal immigration . . . illegal in Arizona.

"Expect to see Governor Brewer portrayed all over the liberal media as both inarticulate and intellectually challenged. Within days it's likely someone will step forward claiming to have overheard Brewer sharing that from the porch of the Governor's mansion, she can see Mexico."

Katherine Harris was successfully taken by such ridicule down a few years ago. Question: Has anybody in the Republican Party read Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*? Are We the People prepared to permit the media to bag another scapegoat? The media should be reminded that the FCC does not grant hunting licenses, especially to wolf packs. Perhaps we should send in the game wardens.

http://townhall.com/columnists/MichaelBarone/2010/04/26/hold_the_vat_--_taxpayers_may_prefer_spending_cuts?page=full&comments=true

Michael Barone notes that federal spending has been raised from a thirty year average of 21% of gross domestic product to 25% under the current Administration. And it appears that this increase is only for starters. Perhaps it is time for someone to begin planning a sequel to a century-old book I inherited from my grandmother: *Heroes of Insurgency*. The governor of Virginia ("Fighting Bob" McDonnell) and Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey are apt to be featured.

Let's follow Michael Barone's advice and "Hold the VAT."

"Barack Obama's project of turning the United States into something more like Western Europe has stirred strong opposition and generated much less enthusiasm. What's happening in states like Virginia and New Jersey -- and what happened not so long ago in Canada, Sweden and Finland -- suggests that voters may support spending cuts more than most American politicians and pundits have assumed. And much more than a value-added tax."

We the People must say it loud and clear: Hold the pork. It is time to turn Fat City into the fat farm.